Corralled into troublesome celebrations, Shikamaru learns that Birthdays can do more than bring people together or push people away. Sometimes they can bring people back - pulling the Past with them. Yaoi/het PART 2 of BtB series

Notes

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Timeline: Shippuden. Neji and Shikamaru aged 17-18 (pre-Hidan and Kakuzu arc) Two weeks after the events in Break to Breathe (please note that BtB comes before this fic and is necessary to understanding a lot of the plot here).
Chapter 1

ON THE CUSP

by Okami Rayne

Chapter One

Red clouds swamped around him, thick as a blood mist.

Weird...

Shikamaru waved a hand in front of his face, watching the scarlet vapour stream through his fingers like shredded smoke. Then he realised it was smoke. And it was coming from Asuma's cigarette.

"Asuma-sensei, what the hell are you smoking?"

"They say this stuff will kill me," the Jōnin chuckled, holding up the cigarette and turning it over in his fingers, the ember-end playing dangerously across his skin without burning him. "What do you think?"

Shikamaru squinted through the breaks in the smoke. "I think this is a dream."

"You know what they say about red clouds?"

"No." Shikamaru frowned, waving his hand through the gory mist.

"Red clouds at night are a shepherd's delight." Asuma tipped his head back, exhaling a long, red plume above his head. "But red clouds at morning are a shepherd's warning."


Asuma looked across at him.

The smirk dropped off Shikamaru's face; along with all colour.

His sensei's eyes were as red and bloody as the mist. Two gruesome, cracked rubies set in the place of warm, brandy eyes.

"Sensei…"

Asuma smiled grimly. "Can't stop the clock."

"Can't stop the clock."

Shikamaru's eyes snapped open, his body tightening in a sharp start as the dream burst like a black bubble in the back of his mind. Cold washed over him, his pulse hammering at the base of his throat.

Dream…
Disoriented, he blinked hard, wide eyes falling back to a heavy shutter as he rolled over onto his back, squinting at the clock.

4:00

Shikamaru sighed. "Shit."

Not even a minute off the mark. It was ridiculous, in a subconsciously sadistic way. His sleeping patterns should have adjusted by now.

*It's been two weeks...*

Fourteen 'tomorrows' and none of them a minute either side of 4 AM. Shikamaru scowled at the treacherous numbers. Now he could add one more 'tomorrow' to the list and watch another dawn spill around the cracks in the curtains.

_Great._

Shikamaru blinked hard, wincing at the stab of pain in his head. Crappy sleeping patterns hadn't done his headaches any favours. Untangling his arm from the sheets, he pinched the bridge of his nose until the ache behind his eyes began to ease.

_And what the hell was that dream about?_

He shook off the chills it had left him with, scowling at the stupidity of it. Dreams weren't premonitions. As far as his logic was concerned, they were just mindless regurgitations, removals of excess thought, psychological consolidations and attempts to deal with detached and repressed thoughts.

*Why the hell am I even thinking about this?*

And given the level of text-book detail with which he was thinking about it, it suggested that bothersome psychedelic dreams were becoming something of a habit. Like the stupid 4 AM internal alarm.

_Stop thinking..._

Shikamaru screwed his eyes shut with a growl and rolled onto his stomach, pulling the sheets up over his head to drape over his ponytail like a makeshift tent. It would be a pathetic barrier against the brightening room and the annoying day that would follow it.

_Birthdays are such a drag..._

Groaning, he buried his face into the crook of his arm and hooked his hand up under his pillow, wedging himself into place. He had a few hours left before he was literally _dragged_ into humouring Ino with the celebrations.

_Shit._

It was going to take more than a little effort to contend with whatever the hell she'd been plotting for the past two weeks. With this in mind, Shikamaru felt himself spacing in and out of awareness as he began to drift off again, his breathing evening out.

His mind slipped steadily into the encroaching black...

And then into a dream of opal eyes that had him burning…washing over the dream of red eyes that
"Shikamaru!"

The muffled shout of his name bypassed his bedroom door, broke through the nest of his blankets and blew apart the thick fog of a dream he didn't want to release.

No…

A dull thud against his door and the dream shattered and fell away.

"Shikamaru! Time to get up!"

No way…

His bedroom door flew open, cracking against the wall. The sound punched his brain like a fist and he jolted with a growl, scowling beneath the sheets.

Shit…

Silence painted a picture that Shikamaru didn't have to see to know exactly what it looked like. His mother, standing in the doorway, hands on hips, her sharp eyes taking in the state of utter decimation that was his room.

To be fair, it wasn't entirely his fault.

Stupid bird…

The stomp of feet and the yelp of Yoshino tripping over something ended with the scrape of curtain rings as the drapes were ripped back. Shikamaru wedged his face into the crook of his arm, not willing to suffer the sunlight for anyone's sake.

"No…"

"Up, young man!"

The young Nara groaned, groping blindly with a long arm to tug the blankets higher up over his head. The sunlight leaked in around all the gaps, finding every break in the sheets, the stupid, sadistic, solar star.

"Honestly, Shikamaru," Yoshino scolded, her voice rising and falling in a way that suggested she was ducking down at intervals to pick up items off the floor. "They're going to be here soon and you still need to shower, eat, open your cards and—you still haven't returned this book on avian medicine and bird behaviour!"

Shikamaru sighed.

There was no winning this one.

Sleep was a no-go the second his mother had exploded into the room. He lifted his head and cracked his eyes open, drowsy brown orbs squinting through a bright slot in the rumple of bed sheets. His mother was thumbing through the pages of the book, then flipping open the cover to check the stamp dates.

"That's another library fine coming out of your pocket," she muttered, dropping the book lightly
onto his back. "Get up!" she ordered, hooking his clothes over her arm as she scavenged through the mess. "What on earth happened in here?"

*Stupid. Bird.*

A strong aroma of coffee wafted into the room.

It was followed by the sound of a hoarse, ragged yawn muffled into ceramic.

Shikamaru frowned, squinting across the sun-drenched room towards his door, shifting his arm enough to spy his father through the gap in the covers. Shikaku stood out of the sunlight's reach, lingering like a shadow at the threshold, dark hair raked up into a messy semblance of its jagged ponytail.

He looked about as enthusiastic to be awake as his son.

"Get up, kid," he drawled, voice rusty and thick with sleep.

"Traitor," Shikamaru snorted, pressing himself deeper into the mattress.

Shikaku slanted against the doorframe, his sharp, wiry form wrapped in a black kimono, a swathe of steam wafting across his scarred face as he sipped his coffee, hooded eyes watching quietly.

Shikamaru shook his head, sensing the stare. "I'm not moving."

"Oh you'll be moving alright," Shikaku warned.

"Yeah, moving to lock my goddamned door…"

"Shikamaru!" Yoshino snapped, her head popping up like a gopher from the end of his bed as she snatched up his Chūnin vest. "Watch your language!"

Shikaku smirked from the doorway. "Yeah and move your ass."

"Shikaku, you too!"

Without a hint of remorse, Shikaku's smirk turned lazy and soft as he looked over to his wife. "He needs to get up so we can go back to bed."

Shikamaru arched a brow, his ponytail poking through as he began to worm his way out from under the sheets. "You got woken up for this too, huh?"

"No." Shikaku took a sip of his coffee. "I got interrupted for it."

"Yeah?" Shikamaru flopped onto his back, draping his arm across his eyes. "What the hell were you doing up?"

"Commemorating your conception."

Shikamaru bolted upright, swinging his arm out. "What the hell!"

Yoshino flushed several shades of red in quick procession before settling on the tint of outrage. "Nara Shikaku!"

Shikaku shrugged, his dark, heavy-lidded eyes locked on his wife as he blew a smoky breath across his coffee, scattering steam with a smirk. "The kid asked."
"Lie next time!" Shikamaru shook his head in sharp denial, shuddering as he pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes. "I don't need to know that…ever…"

"Shikamaru!" Yoshino snapped, reflexively slamming her embarrassed indignation onto him. "Up, now. Don't you want to celebrate your birthday?"

Shikamaru slumped back against the headboard, rubbing his eyes. "I was celebrating. In bed."

"So were we," Shikaku lamented into his mug.

Shikamaru shot his father a pained look. "Would you stop?"

"We did."

"Shikaku," Yoshino warned through her teeth, then blinked and turned sharply toward her son. "Wait, what do you mean celebrating in bed? Do you have someone in here with you!"

"What?" Shikamaru's eyes widened, a score of heat flushing his lean cheeks as his father smirked. "No! I meant sleeping in."

Yoshino deflated with an audible whoosh of air, but her eyes scanned the room in a cursory glance for unfamiliar garments, just to make sure. "Good. Now get up before Ino and Chōji get here."

"Troublesome…"

Yoshino's brows drew together and she lodged the bundle of clothes under one arm, stalking over. Shikamaru cringed, waiting for an earful. Instead, his mother leaned down to brush a kiss across the crown of his head.

Shikamaru blinked in surprise, almost nervous.

"Happy Birthday," Yoshino murmured against his hairline, drawing back to smooth her fingers a little awkwardly across the ends of his ponytail, frowning as she looked him over.

She brushed her thumb across the fading scar on his right cheekbone – like it was a smudge of dirt she wanted off his face.

Shikamaru squirmed uncomfortably under the attention, batting her hand away with a frown. "What?"

"Nothing…" Yoshino's voice gentled, at odds with her tight expression. "Try to enjoy yourself this time, Shikamaru."

Shikamaru looked away and shrugged, never sure how to respond to this softer and less predictable side of his mother. "Yeah."

Shikaku watched from the doorway, his sharp eyes taking in everything over the rim of his mug. Shikamaru didn't notice, his attention sliding to the clock as his mother swayed around the bed, weaving her way to the door with his laundry. Shikaku cocked a hip to nudge her as she passed and received a clip upside the back of the head that had his teeth clacking against his mug.

Shikamaru glanced over, unimpressed. "There should be rules against this stuff around your kids."

Shikaku sucked his teeth and shot his son a wry look over the mug, amusement sharp in it. "God help the woman who has to break you in."
"Tch, whatever." Shikamaru made a face, rolled over and jerked the sheets back up over his head, considering the somewhat disturbing number of violent women in his life.

He didn't have time to let his mind start weighing that troublesome figure up against other statistics. Something wrapped around his ankle and dragged him out of the bed with a yelp and tangle of sheets. His attempt to hold on only resulted in him being sandwiched between the floor and the mattress when it folded on top of him.

"Oi!" he snarled, elbowing and kicking his way to freedom, yanking his foot from the shadow-hand locked around it.

Shikaku looked on with veiled amusement, not having moved from his tilt against the doorframe. With a raise of his chin, the shadow-hand shrank into a tendril and snaked back to its master like a charmed cobra.

"That was low!" Shikamaru snapped.

"And that was a great imitation of your kicking and screaming birth," Shikaku drawled, a throaty chuckle spilling around his mug. "You sure took your time with that too."

Propped up on his elbows, Shikamaru glared through the fall of few sharp strands that had escaped his ponytail, bistre eyes narrowed irritably. "I really don't wanna hear about this."

He heard about it pretty much every year.

His mother had no qualms reminding him how all the kicking and screaming in the world paled in comparison to how much of a kicking she'd wanted to give his father for trying to calm her down during a 39 hour labour.

She'd settled with breaking five bones in Shikaku's hand.

Shikaku claimed the doctors had had a tougher time removing Yoshino from him than Shikamaru from his mother.

"But at least you put in the effort when it counted most," Shikaku mused dryly, tapping his thumb against his mug. "Doesn't explain why you hate eggs so much though. You're still a good swimmer, right?"

"I still really don't wanna hear about this," Shikamaru muttered, a little embarrassed as he shoved his mattress back onto the bed, kneeling to wrestle it into position. "Birthdays are supposed to be about getting older, not talking about conception and baby days. There's nothing interesting about babies."

"Yeah." Shikaku shrugged, draining his coffee. "The interesting part is making them."

Shikamaru stopped mid-war with the mattress and smacked his head into it with an exasperated groan. "Seriously, why?"

Shikaku laughed. "Happy Birthday."

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The plan hadn't changed.

As predictable as ever.

Sweets and coffee at Konoha's most underappreciated kissaten.
A tradition.

Every year on Shikamaru's birthday, Ino upheld it religiously. Protesting was futile, but protesting was also part of the tradition. So it was with annual predictability that Shikamaru's scowl slipped into place without effort or effect.

"No."

"Yes."

Ino grinned widely, looping arms with her teammates, assuming an air of command that Shikamaru and Chōji never gave her, but one that neither male had the courage to wrestle away from her.

Too much hassle.

Ino marched them down the sidewalk like a matron. "Wonder if it's changed."

"You say that every year," Shikamaru muttered, slanting away from her as much as he could as he was dragged along. "And it never changes."

Ino tugged on his arm, jerking him back. "Well it's good that some things stay the same."

"This always stays the same."

"You like it," Ino stated with complete confidence.

Shikamaru frowned, wrestling his arm free to shove his hands into the pockets of his black slacks. He wore an equally dark, long-sleeve, crew-neck t-shirt. Not a lick of colour or effort. The thick shards of his hair scraped up into the usual spiky ponytail.

"You could've made a tiny bit of effort you know," Ino chided, shooting a stern glance at him. "You'd think someone had died. Chōji looks more like a birthday boy than you!"

Granted, Chōji sported a brighter look and happier expression. The Akimichi was clad in red and forest brown – autumn personified – his auburn hair dishevelled in a manner that suggested finger-combing. Ino, however, had taken the necessary measures to ensure she was a walking picture.

Shikamaru shot her a subtle glance.

Blonde hair perfectly coiffed, her long bangs fell to frame the slender slant of her jaw-line and throat. The pale golden ends tickled a sharp collarbone revealed by a cowl-necked lilac top slanting off one shoulder; a strategic slip to draw the eye. A black skirt completed the look, mid-thigh and tight enough that Shikamaru knew she'd be making a fuss about tugging it down when they were seated.

Troublesome girl…

Last year she'd worn tights at least. Every year a little more flesh was exposed. Shikamaru wasn't sure what to make of that, merely for the fact that he never stopped to really think about it. He knew it bugged Chōji and that Asuma was always quieter and more observant of male Chūnin and Jōnin around her when she did it.

She's not a kid. She can take care of herself…
"I'm taking you shopping and we're going to do something about your total lack of style," Ino commented airily, looking across to see if she could get a playful rise out of him. "No girl is going to give you a sniff when you look all moody and detached."

"Funny, it worked for Sasuke."

Chōji's chuckle broke off in a yelp as Ino jabbed him in the gut with her elbow.

"That's not funny, Shikamaru," she growled.

"Good, wouldn't wanna ruin my moody and detached image."

Ino shot him sharp look. "What's up with you?" Her eyes narrowed a little as she looked him over. "You still not sleeping?"

Shikamaru's jaw tightened. "Who told you I wasn't sleeping?"

"Duh, you're way crabbier than usual and you've got those zombie dark rings." Ino tapped under her eye, her concern brightening with a solution he knew he didn't want to hear.

"No," he said automatically.

"Dark rings," Ino muttered to herself, shrugging the strap of her shoulder-bag into the crook of her arm. "Hey, I've got something that'll fix that right up!"

"Don't even think about it." Shikamaru shook his head, taking a measured step to avoid being pulled across the street or emasculated by girly products. "Considering where you're dragging us, I'd like to come out of this with my masculinity intact…"

Chōji chuckled, offering no resistance to Ino's manhandling as they crossed over towards the familiar rainbow-coloured coffee place.

Ugh, why…

Despite the reflex cringe the colours provoked, it was amusing to see such an artsy splash of paint along a row of bland, understated shops and restaurants. This kissaten sat at the very end of the sidewalk, somewhat ostracised from the rest of the street. The building's rainbow colours had faded with time, the bright shades dulled to pastel imitations that made it less embarrassing than its original garish look.

But the old coffee place was proud of its namesake.

Shikamaru flicked his gaze up to the wooden sign nailed above the entrance.

"NIJI"

The word for 'rainbow' was hand-lettered in a fashion that looked like a chunky, artsy doodle. The bold text, now chipped and worn, still provoked that faint quirk at the corner of Shikamaru's mouth.

And then it struck him how close 'Niji' was to a name he didn't want to think about.

Shit.

He clenched his eyes shut, taking a moment to push back the thought.
"Hey!" Ino called, craning her neck back. "Hurry it up, slacker!"

"Yeah, settle down…" Shikamaru swung his step up onto the sidewalk, falling into pace with Chōji as Ino led the way inside.

The first thing that hit Shikamaru was the strong, heady aroma of the coffee. Just the rich quality of the smell seemed to slide down his throat as if he'd sampled the brew. He inhaled deep, memories stirring from the whiff of a brand he only had once a year.

No place made coffee like Niji.

The owners had a crazy laboratory-looking setup in the back. It was a family run business. They worked like a clan of alchemists seeking the elixir of life in the deep, dark depths of the coffee bean.

Shikamaru wasn't easily impressed, but damn, Niji's brew was second to none.

Ino planted her hands on her hips, scenting the air with a relishing hum as she looked around. "Oh wow."

"You hate coffee," Shikamaru pointed out, smirking as he stepped up beside her, surveying the familiar interior.

"But you like it," Ino returned, not waiting for his reply as she promenaded down the aisle of tables, hips swaying lazily and eyes scanning, drawing the gaze of every male in the place.

Chōji frowned. "Why does she do that?"

Shikamaru sighed, shaking his head. "Not now."

Not ever.

Confronting Ino about that was likely to result in ballistic head injury. The last time he'd mentioned it, she'd hurled a water pitcher at him. The only time to safely tread that ground was when Asuma was nearby; strictly for human-shield and collateral damage purposes.

Time for that coffee…

Shikamaru followed after Chōji, his gaze tracing the walls of the coffee shop. While most kissaten were credited on originality, Niji didn't just take pride in their coffee, but also their creativity. Fusuma panels served as walls, the paintings illustrating a vast expanse of sky that wrapped around the entire establishment – these panels changed throughout the day in accordance to the time. By late afternoon, it was all sunset hues and flame-painted clouds.

It was the sense of being in a grounded slice of sky that had drawn Shikamaru's eye to Niji in the first place. They'd been Genin at the time and just this little display of interest on his part had been enough for Ino to cement it into her mind.

She'd insisted they make it their haunt.

Both of her teammates had flat-out refused.

Any place decorated on the exterior in rainbow colours just wasn't an option.

Shikamaru knew Asuma would have laughed at the time, if he hadn't walked away very fast in the other direction. Fast enough that Gai had joined him in the 'Youthful power walk'. 
Ino hadn't given up.

It had taken a good two weeks of nagging before she'd manipulated Shikamaru and Chōji into the place, despite both males being hell-bent on avoiding the humiliation.

Her last resort had scored her a victory.

She'd turned on the waterworks in the middle of the street. And Chōji, the big, gullible softie, had buckled like a cheap belt, dragging Shikamaru along with him into the guilt trip that had taken them through Niji's door.

Ino compromised by insisting they only did it once a year.

Chōji had joked about Shikamaru's birthday.

That had sealed the deal.

Shikamaru hadn't agreed, but he hadn't argued either. And it had absolutely everything to do with the fact that Niji served the best damned coffee in Konoha.

"Perfect!" Ino announced, smoothing a hand over the four-sided table they always took, petting it in ritual greeting. "We should carve our names into it."

Shikamaru arched a brow. "You're not carving my name into anything."

"You're no fun."

"Have fun getting thrown out," he grumbled, taking the opposite side to Chōji and sliding down into the same low, worn chair he occupied every time. The comfortable, broken-in leather of the seat moulded around him like a big tan-coloured cloud.

"I bet they'd let us." Ino took her perch on an equally comfy chair, tugging at her skirt as it rode up a little. "Besides, I think their son is a softie. I could butter him up."

Shikamaru's lips turned down in a frown, but he didn't comment. He watched Chōji reach across for one of the cloud-shaped menus as Ino did a quick reconnaissance of the customers.

"Yep. Same old, same old," she commented, brushing her bangs back from her face.

"Told you," Shikamaru muttered, propping an elbow onto the low table, giving the place a lazy scan, taking in the complete lack of change.

It was still a freeze frame of the first time they'd been here. Like time had breezed into the coffee place for a break years ago and had never checked out. It held in a comfortable pattern that would forever belong to the past.

Begrudgingly, Shikamaru realised that Ino was right, though he'd never admit it.

Some things stayed the same.

And it was good.

Asuma woke with a start, knocked from sleep by a smack against his jaw. A groggy second later he realised it was Kurenai's elbow.
Instinctively, his arm tightened around her. "Kurenai?"

The kunoichi pushed away from him, a shockingly strong shove that almost rolled him out the bed as she ripped the sheets back and darted for the bathroom in a swirl of silk and dark hair, slamming the door shut.

_Shit. Not again._

Asuma frowned, on his feet in an instant and rounding the bed in a jog, avoiding a spatter of petals, stems and flower-heads blanketing the floor.

He speared one hand back through his hair, alert and concerned. "Kurenai?"

The blast of the shower sounded from inside the bathroom, not quite loud enough to disguise the choked sound of vomiting. Asuma's eyes rounded, darted to the clock, then swung back to the door.

"Kurenai, open the door."

Nothing.

Asuma tried the doorknob but to no avail. "Kurenai!"

No response.

He glanced down at the handle and got a solid grip, dropping his shoulder in preparation to ram. Then the shower switched off, the tap turned on and the twist of the knob being tried from the other side had him backing up.

The door eased open.

Kurenai peered up at him, her dark mane crumpled around her in a wild, tousled cloud of black. A toothbrush was stuck in her mouth, drawing Asuma's eyes to her lips. They pursed softly and she hummed in query.

Asuma arched a brow, setting his hands at his hips to keep from reaching for her automatically. "Again?"

Kurenai shrugged, one arm banded defensively around her waist as she turned towards the mirror, scraping the toothbrush vigorously around her mouth. She offered nothing else.

"This is the fourth morning this week," Asuma hedged gently, moving to brace a shoulder at the doorframe, not sure how to proceed.

Not sure he wanted to.

_Coward._

He frowned, not liking how much that sounded like his father's voice in the back of his mind. He shifted his weight to lean into the doorframe a little more, trying to pull off a relaxed slant.

His fingers flexed, a clear sign he was itching for a cigarette.

He wasn't stupid. Or well, at least he wasn't stupid on a good day. Yesterday had been a bad day. A bad day that Kakashi had decided to make a little more complicated by helping his brain do the very simple, Genin-level math.
"Every morning? Have you considered the thought that it's not a stomach bug?"

"What else would it be?"

"Asuma, when a man and woman—"

"I'm not hopping on that train of thought, Kakashi."

"Well, I think you're past the 'all aboard' and 'through the tunnel' stage."

"You need to stop reading those books. Those sexual euphemisms are terrible."

"Follow the train a little further, Asuma."

"Or how about you stop being cryptic and—Oh shit…"

"And there we have it. You've arrived."

"Shit."

"A word of advice? Don't say that to her."

"Shit."

"Right."

Asama watched Kurenai cup water to her mouth, sloshing away the grainy mint as she dropped her toothbrush next to his in a monkey-faced cup set by the sink.

"It's just a tummy bug," she dismissed. "It will pass in a few days."

Asuma studied her from beneath heavy lids, assessing her by way of the mirror. "Maybe you should get it checked out."

"It's nothing."

It was one hell of a something.

He'd learned to read her about as well as she read him. And judging by the way her hands lighted in brief flicks on items that didn't need straightening or cleaning, he could tell she was just as tense as he was.

More so than he was.

Kurenai took her time setting everything straight, wiping down the sink and turning the taps firmly even after the water had shut off. With nothing left to fuss over, she scooped a few dark strands behind her ear and turned back to face him, one arm still banded loosely around her waist.

Asama raised his eyes to settle their gazes.

She quickly glanced at the door.

"You were going to do the easy thing and break it, weren't you?" she teased. Her low, rich contralto tickled Asama's instincts in a subtly seductive but powerfully distracting way.

He managed a strained smile, scratching guiltily at the back of his head. He wasn't thinking about the door though. In fact, what her words may have alluded to had his eyes straying away from her
completely.

Kurenai's smile wavered.

She tightened the sash of her robe, inching around him like a cat scenting her way around an unpredictable wolf. Asuma frowned at her reluctance and his stupidity in exacerbating it. She tried to slip past him.

"Hey…" His arm hooked around her, tugging her gently against his side.

She went rigid in his arms.

Asuma sucked in a breath at the horrible feeling this left him with.

It was like delayed pain from a hard kick in the gut.

After a tense beat she relaxed, tucked her head beneath his chin and twined pale arms like vines around his waist, absorbing the warmth as he fitted her strong curves against him.

"You alright?" A stupid question, but the first thing out his mouth.

She hummed.

Not liking the noncommittal response, he stroked his fingers through the wilderness of her dark mane. She didn't lean back or nuzzle into the touch like she normally did.

Okay. Play this smart.

Kurenai held him loosely, occasionally tightening her embrace then quickly slackening it again. "Say Happy Birthday to them for me."

Asuma smiled, brushing a kiss across her hair. "Will do."

"No you won't." Kurenai rested her head against his shoulder. "They'll tease you too much."

"I'll mentally project the thought. Ino might pick up on it."

"They're perceptive enough, aren't they?"

"I swear I can't relax for a second," Asuma grumbled, shaking his head. "They're onto me and it freaks me out how they know so much. I told you, they're like a corroborative stalking unit without actually stalking me. It's making me paranoid."

"Says the man who stalks his students when something's wrong."

"But nothing's wrong, they just like to see me squirm. And I don't stalk. I stealthily observe from an elevated vantage point."

Kurenai tipped her head back, smiling. "You call in ninken and prowl rooftops."

Asuma's lips twisted in a wry little smile. "You know me too well."

Kurenai went quiet at those words. She held herself as if a chill had gone through her. Asuma's fingers traced her spine.

"Kurenai—"
"Maybe you shouldn't stay here while I've got this bug," she cut in.

His hand stilled at the small of her back.

He didn't reply straight away, weighing up his response against the weight in his chest. He opted for a neutral approach and let the words rumble out quietly, hoping to dislodge the discomfort taking up residence inside a part of him that had always been happy to detach and drift away from anything that tied him down.

"You want me to go?"

Kurenai shrugged. "You don't have to stay."

He frowned at that. He knew he didn't have to stay. At the start he never had. The fact that she'd come to accept this about him was the reason he'd begun to.

Well, not the only reason.

*It's not so simple anymore.*

It hadn't been that simple for months.

But Kurenai was doing now what she'd always done; opening the door, giving him an exit which his restless, unattached nature would have taken in a heartbeat several months ago.

Commitment had never been high on his list of wants or needs – or virtues.

He thought this lack of attachment was just in his nature. Hell, he'd left his village hadn't he? The most vital thing he should have felt some obligation towards. He'd sought those proverbial greener pastures beyond what Konoha had offered. And then the only solid commitment he'd ever made had blown up in his face. He'd dedicated himself to an elite group that had cost him more than he'd bargained for.

*Stupid, naïve kid.*

He'd come back to Konoha tired and soul-sick and scarred. The prodigal son of a Hokage father he'd never really understood. He'd slipped back into his old blasé skin after the vicious dissimilation of the Twelve Guardian Ninja. But this skin had never fitted him quite the way it used to.

He'd ignored the discomfort.

He'd smoked it away.

With that buffer in place, he'd signed up for a Genin team and had wasted away his personal life subtly flirting around the ranks of kunoichi. He'd entered into numerous affairs that couldn't really be called relationships – maybe "arrangements" were closer to the mark.

That had suited him just fine.

Until he'd met Kurenai.

The chemistry was electric, the conversation easy and the connection instant. And an unplanned night of wild, reckless post-mission passion between them had hit him *hard*, blowing all his previous arrangements out of the water.
She'd gripped him in a way he couldn't shake.

She'd caught him by holding on like she'd never let him go when he took her and by letting him go and asking him to leave the second it was over. It was complicated and strange and not the kind of arrangement he'd wanted to get tangled up in.

But soon she had become the only arrangement he wanted.

At the start, he'd always leave in the night.

But he'd never stay away longer than a couple of days.

He'd seek her out every time.

He only knew he was in way too deep when he'd begun to wait for her on the days or nights or weeks that he couldn't find her. He'd never gone elsewhere, leaving him with the thought that she might. A thought which had driven him to pace the floors in his apartment like a vicious, lost animal.

"Lust-sick puppy" Genma had joked, quickly amended by Gai to its correct cliché, only to be completely obliterated by the subtle glare Asuma had sent both Jōnin.

Kakashi had been smart enough not to say a word.

Not that he'd had to, the cocky, underhanded bastard. His eye had curved in that masked smile that said more than Asuma wanted to hear, unspoken or otherwise.

He'd gone home and smoked himself into a restless sleep.

When Kurenai had finally come back from that four week mission, he'd hunted her down in the most primal way a man could seek a woman. He'd taken her where he'd found her, in a bed of leaves, shedding lust and turning sex into something infinitely deeper and more complicated.

The emotion had lain between them as naked as their bodies in the afterglow.

Just the thought of it now provoked a fierce throb in his chest.

Asuma leaned back, crooked a knuckle under her chin and tipped her head up. "Do you want me to go, Kurenai?"

Kurenai angled her chin a tad higher, her heart in her eyes. "Do I ever ask you to leave?"

A grim smile flicked up the corners of his mouth. "You never ask me to stay."

Kurenai stiffened and dropped her arms away from him. "That's not fair, Asuma."

"Do you want me to stay?" Asuma pressed, searching her eyes, seeing the answer in them.

Kurenai said nothing, staring up at him with a look that cut him deep, it was torn and hurt and brimming with too much emotion to hold. She looked pale and scared, her eyes as red and raw as two open wounds as she searched his face.

"You can be a real bastard sometimes, Sarutobi," she whispered, her voice as rough as a wildcat's growl. "How dare you ask me that."

Asuma pursed his lips, drawing his head back as if she'd slapped him.
She probably should have. But it wouldn't have stopped him.

His brows drew together, a deep line digging into his forehead. "Ask me why I stopped leaving."

Kurenai squeezed her eyes shut, holding up a palm as she pulled in a shaky breath to still the tremble in her voice. "You're going to be late."

Asuma cupped her shoulders, tightening his grip as she tried to shrug him off, leaning down to murmur against her ear. "Then ask me why I stay."

He heard her sniff sharply, could have sworn he heard her heart thundering. Or maybe that was his. He might have leaned in closer if she hadn't pressed her hands to his chest, threatening a shove.

"Let go of me, Asuma."

He did, but he kept his lips by her ear. "Why can't you ask me?"

She banded her arms defensively across her stomach, but didn't move away. "When have I ever asked anything of you?"

"Never." Asuma hummed, cupping her chin to tip her face up. "That's why I'm telling you to ask me now."

Kurenai slipped her lashes open to pin him with a fierce, almost frightened look, searching his eyes. Asuma took a deep breath, arching his brows in a silent challenge. Kurenai wasn't one to be cowed. The only time she shied away from him – oddly – was when they were doing something domestic together. Their most intimate and playful moments never fazed her, but the mundane and homely rituals always did.

He was still trying to figure that one out.

*Maybe I should grill Kakashi…*

Kurenai continued to scan his face, crimson eyes narrowed, the smudge of masacara making them seem softer than the look she tried to sharpen on him.

"Why now?" she whispered.

He shrugged. "Why not?"

Kurenai closed her eyes. "You're going to be late, Asuma."

It didn't take this completely unrelated statement for him to know the unstable area had become too threatening for her. All things considered, it should have been threatening for him too. He was pushing her to go where he'd once told himself he never would. Not only because of the commitment, but because he never thought he'd survive long enough to get there even if he'd wanted to.

*And that's just it…*

He wanted to.

He shot a look at the monkey-faced mug on the sink, their toothbrushes resting neck to neck. He'd settled into the unstable area months ago; traces of him were all over her home even when he wasn't in it. It was a foundation for something stronger.
He glanced down at her.

"Well I'm usually late when it comes to the important things," Asuma returned quietly, his eyes as soft and heavy as his voice. "But I get there in the end."

"Yes..." Kurenai blinked slowly and cupped his jaw, following the coarse bracket of his beard to his hair, smoothing it back with a tender brush of her fingers. "But maybe that's because you feel obligated to get there."

Asuma forced a smile to cover the pinch of confusion on his face. "You know me better than that. I don't do obligation."

"I know you don't..." Kurenai whispered, shaking her head as she stepped away. "And I would never ask you to."

Asuma caught her nimbly around the waist, pulling her back like a man trying to hold onto a wave in the ocean, not liking how far this tide was likely to pull them apart if he let it slide like he had for the past four days.

"You think I stay with you because I feel obligated to?"

"I don't know why you stay," Kurenai snapped, smacking her hands to his chest and squaring her shoulders to shove him. "But now you need to leave."

Her push forced him back a step into the bedroom, breaking his grip on her. She slipped around him in a whip of dark hair, the silk of her robe lashing her legs as she approached the bed, leaning across to tug on the sheets and straighten them out in sharp, jerky movements.

Asuma watched her quietly.

He waited for her to finish tucking in the sheets, then came up behind her without a word. Kurenai ignored him, slicing her palm roughly over the crimson coverlet to smooth out the creases. Asuma's hands settled at the soft flare of her hips and slid around to her stomach before she could push him away.

His palms rested flat against her belly.

Kurenai froze.

Asuma settled his chin on her shoulder. "You know why I stay. Why I'll keep staying. And it's got nothing to do with obligation."

She stiffened in his arms, so rigid she almost shook. And for a horrible, heart-stopping moment he could envision himself losing the best thing that had happened to him other than the Team he'd trained and still mentored.

*Chalk it up to karma, Sarutobi. You never deserved her...*

And then he felt the soft splash of her tears on the back of his hand. They burned his heart like acid; until the warm lace of her fingers slotted between his, squeezing softly. A swell of relief filled his chest, breaking a smile across his face.

Kurenai turned her head a little.

"Smile for me," he whispered against a tear-stained cheek.
She did, tremulous but true. He kissed her jaw, rocking her to music neither could hear as he eased her into a slow dance around the room, moving backwards.

"Asuma," Kurenai warned, but he could detect a hiccup of amusement in her voice. "You're going to injure yourself."

"I'm a shinobi," he countered with a rogue grin. "I can scent danger."

"Even when it smells like roses?"

On cue, Asuma's foot came down on a rose stem.

The thorns drove right through his heel.

"Shit!" he yelped, skipping along on one foot that turned their dance into a game of hopscotch in which Kurenai burst into giggles.

He waved his foot around. "This is the last time I try to do something romantic."

"You're supposed to take the petals off the stems, you caveman." Kurenai laughed, trying to turn around in his arms only to have him scoop her up bridal style. "Asuma!"

"A caveman would sling you over his shoulder," Asuma pointed out, hopping towards the bed with a grimace, attempting to avoid more treacherous stems. "Right, next time I'll kill a mammoth and bring it home so you can cook it."

Kurenai draped her arm across his back, her laughter sobering. "Home?"

"Yeah, home." Asuma wobbled on the spot like he was on a tightrope, holding her securely. "Like they say, it's where the heart is, right?"

"They say…" Kurenai cupped his jaw and turned his face towards her. "But is it?"

Asuma gazed back quietly for a long moment, setting his foot down until he stood solid and sure. "When I'm with you, I'm home."

Kurenai's eyes widened, a flood of emotion rushing forth in a flurry of fear, hope and tenderness, the rich mix warming and swelling in those wine-red eyes Asuma had been intoxicated by the first time their gazes had hit.

"Even if home comes with thorns and elbows in the morning?" Kurenai teased, but he could sense the double-meaning in her words.

"They also say love hurts."

"What do you say?"

Asuma grinned, ducking his head to touch their noses. "It hurts so good."

She smiled through her tears, gripping his heart with her gaze all over again.

He was definitely going to be late.

"Do you think it's too late to take it back?"
Shikamaru sighed, propping his chin on the heel of his hand. "I told you not to order that."

The coffee was darker than the look Ino was giving it. She dropped a fourth sugar cube into the steaming brew, watching it bob with a scowl.

"Eww. Maybe I could dilute it or something."

"Uh," Chōji made a face. "Just give it to Shikamaru."

"I'm not drinking that."

"Why?" Ino huffed. "It looks the same as yours."

"Only twice the size," Chōji chuckled. "With a load of sugar."

"I'm not drinking that," Shikamaru echoed.

"This is kind of gross." Ino sniffed her cup and reached for some milk. "How do you stomach this stuff, Shikamaru? It's like mud."

Shikamaru shook his head, watching the vigorous spin of the stirrer as Ino attempted to dilute said 'mud'. The brew was as rich as it was expensive and there was just no watering it down no matter how much milk she splashed into it.

"Why the hell did you order it?"

"It's good for me," Ino said, scraping dark droplets off the stirrer.

"But you hate it."

"So? It's a small sacrifice."

Not following the logic, Shikamaru glanced at Chōji; the Akimichi usually had a better grasp on these things, given how much Ino used to nag and lecture him about anything food or drink related.

Chōji hummed, munching on rice crackers as he consulted a mental bank no doubt stashed with Ino's fun food facts. "Uh, apparently it's good for your metabolism."

"Exactly!" Ino chirped, pleased he'd remembered. "Maybe even better than green tea."

Shikamaru lidded his eyes to keep from rolling them. "Are you serious?"

Ino stopped stirring.

Chōji looked over, a kind of warning plea in his eyes. Shikamaru shrugged, his tiredness combining with his headache to make him borderline irritable and just a tad mean. He made no show of hiding his sour expression.

"Troublesome…"

"Don't I know it," Ino sighed, dismissing him with a wave. "It's hard work for a girl to keep herself in shape."

She set a critical glare on the caffeine hit that would apparently negate all the calories she'd ordered on the menu. Not having the energy to keep up with the complicated and nonsensical patterns of her dieting habits, Shikamaru reached for his own thimble-sized cup.
"Whatever," he muttered, taking a sip of the dark liquid, the texture as rich as velvet on his tongue. "You worry way too much about that crap."

Chōji winced as Ino's spine went rigid, her glare fierce enough to curdle the milk in her coffee.

"You're not a girl so you wouldn't know. Which includes the hard work part," she shot back waspishly. "It's none of your business anyway."

Shikamaru snorted. "I still have to hear about it."

Ino pinched her lips hard, something odd flickering in her eyes before she blinked and flashed a bright, brittle smile, fluttering her hands. "Anyway, are you prepared for later?"

Shikamaru arched a brow, his thumb circling the small cup as he looked across at her suspiciously. The mood swing worked in his favour, so he went with the momentum.

"Prepared…?"

Ino snapped a rice cracker in half and popped both pieces into her mouth, rolling her eyes. "Oh come on, Shikamaru, I'll give that big brain of yours its credit. You're not exactly easy to surprise."

"You tackled me into a bush two weeks ago."

"You know what I mean," Ino chided, taking up her coffee cup. "Anyway, all you need to do is show up."

"Show up where?"

"Chōji will bring you, or drag you, or whatever."

That was in no way comforting.

Shikamaru looked across at his friend. Chōji smiled, which only added to the grim possibilities that Shikamaru's brain had begun to churn out. He'd been avoiding the various scenarios, not wanting to put Ino's celebratory conspiracy into something concrete.

"Ino, if this is anything like the last time…"

"Oh relax! It won't be like last year." Ino turned her coffee mug around in her hands, warming her palms. "That was way too noisy." She paused, narrowing her eyes. "Not that you heard anything after you went all comatose."

Shikamaru tapped his cup down twice, frowning. "I wasn't hearing anything before. I had a conversation in mime with three people I didn't know and didn't want to."

"You're such a social retard, Shikamaru."

His face fell flatter than his voice. "Because lip-reading with idiots is my idea of a good time."

"Like you'd know what a good time was," Ino muttered, more sarcastic than spiteful as she nibbled another cracker. "Anyway, how do you know they were idiots if you weren't properly talking to them?"

"One of the girls kept calling him 'Shika'," Chōji snickered.

"It's not funny. And that wasn't a girl."
Chōji exploded into hysterics. Several other customers glanced their way.

"Chōji…" Ino hissed.

Chōji only laughed harder, rocking back in his chair. "That's the best thing ever!"

Pokerfaced, Shikamaru debated whether to kick him under the table or throw something heavy – then estimated the likelihood of missing and the effort it would take to aim.

He let it slide.

Ino rolled her eyes. "Well there were interesting people there too. You were just too lazy to shout."

"Yeah right." Shikamaru glanced between them. "You and Chōji couldn't talk the next day."

"Or hear," Chōji pointed out, struggling to breathe through his laughter, earning himself a narrow look from Ino. "Jeez, Ino. It's true."

Ino huffed, choosing not to concede the point by completely ignoring it. "Anyway, this year will be good, okay? I planned it better. No random Chunin or civilian crashers." She watched Shikamaru out the corner of her eye, assessing his reaction. "Besides, you need some birthday spoiling and so do I."

A quick-fire stream of retorts lined up along Shikamaru's tongue, but he swallowed them back by draining his coffee, the echo of Asuma's words kicking his conscience into a gutter of guilt.

"Give her a break. She took a knock after that Team switch…which I know wasn't your fault, but that doesn't mean you can't compromise and give a little here. She's putting a lot of effort into this."

Stupid guilt.

_Dammit._

Shikamaru sighed and pushed back from the table. "I'm not singing."

Ino choked on the first sip of her coffee, blue eyes rounding in shock. "What? Are you serious? You're not gonna bail on me?"

"Technically I didn't leave the last time."

"Lame," Chōji chuckled around a rice cracker, choking on it when Ino clapped a hand over his mouth to shush him.

"Seriously, Shikamaru! You mean it?" Her eyes lit up like a child's, brightening with giddy expectancy which would have made Shikamaru feel like the worst kind of bastard to crush her hope.

_Dammit…_

If only she knew how much more effective _this_ tactic was than the other means she employed; but maybe that was because this wasn't a tactic.

_Figures._

Turning Ino down was never an option anyway, even if Asuma hadn't thrown guilt into the mix.
Given the sheer amount of energy she'd put into the whole troublesome event, Shikamaru sensed it all tied into that complicated Rubik's Cube of her self-esteem.

*What the hell is up with that?*

He had vague theories he didn't want to think about. Either way, he probably owed her compensation he wasn't aware of. She had a habit of mentally collecting things he and Chōji did, a tally of crimes committed against her, keeping count of which teammate was scoring higher in the game of "You Owe Me".

Shikamaru was pretty sure he was in the lead.

*Shit. Hanegakure, Kotetsu, falling asleep last year…*

Yes. He owed her.

"I'm not singing," Shikamaru reiterated, which was as close to verbally accepting his fate as he was going to get. "I'm not dancing either."

Chōji laughed. "Aw, be a man and show us your moves, *Shika.*"

"Shut up."

"Awesome!" Ino beamed, not paying attention to either of them as she clanked her coffee cup down with a feline grin. "I won't have to mind-move you now. I really wouldn't wanna get lost in your brain."

Shikamaru scowled. "Like you'd do that."

"I totally would." Ino set an elbow on the table and propped her chin on her fist, levelling him with a deep, serious look. "I'd even make you stand up and sing something several octaves higher than you can go."

If it wasn't for the fact that Ino might possibly have been serious, Shikamaru might have snapped something back. As it was, a woman scorned still rated as S-Rank as far as disastrous opponents were concerned.

He squinted at her hesitantly, searching for intent.

Ino smirked, leaning in slowly. "I'd make you sing for me and dance for Chōji…" She paused before adding. "At the same time." Then, in a whisper. "Like a girl."

Shikamaru's eyes narrowed sharply, mouth turned down in annoyance. Chōji sucked in his cheeks to keep from laughing, shoulders shaking as he held in the extreme amusement already lighting his eyes.

Ino nodded slowly, mouthing fatalistically. "Shika."

Shikamaru growled and waved her back. "Lay off, already."

"Ha! You're freaked out now."

"Not even close."

"Hey, come to think of it Shikamaru, I've never heard you sing or seen you dance," Chōji added.
Shikamaru shot his friend a pointed glare. "And you never will."

"You're such an old man," Ino needled, sticking her tongue out playfully.

"So don't invite me."

"Dancing is good for you. Live a little."

"I'll drop dead first," Shikamaru snorted, leaning back as a waitress laid out three plates of sweets on the table.

The woman paused and looked questioningly at Ino, who waved vaguely at Shikamaru, much to the Nara's suspicion. Smiling, the waitress set down a small uriō rice cake in the shape of a cloud, a slim candle set in its centre.

Shikamaru's eyes went wide in a quick flash of surprise.

This wasn't part of the tradition.

Even Chōji looked confused.

The waitress smiled. "Happy Birthday. I'll bring some more coffee."

As the woman moved away to retrieve the drinks, Shikamaru stared at the cake, looking for an explanation to cover his embarrassment. Ino was pretty particular about ritualised celebrations. There was no reason this year should have been any different.

He looked up at his teammates.

Ino ignored him completely, her attention riveted on the sweets laid out. She prodded Chōji with her chopsticks and quizzed him on the various confectionaries, using him as a food taster and snatching up anything he deemed worthy of her selective sweet tooth.

Shikamaru watched them for a long moment, his lip cutting upward at one corner.

"Troublesome girl," he muttered quietly.

Ino smiled without looking across. "You're welcome."

Trouble.

That was the first thought that struck Asuma as he watched his young nephew and fellow Genin team come flying through Konoha's gates on a violent gust of wind. The gravity defying way they sailed through the air, arms and legs flailing to break their fall, might have been amusing if it wasn't a cause for concern.

Asuma upped his jog, reaching for his trench knives. "Shit."

But then Konohamaru sang out midflight. "Asssuuuuma-ojisaaaan!"

The boy's grin had Asuma hesitating.

The young Sarutobi attempted to wave, but hit the ground in a tumble of camping gear, cushioning
the fall for his teammates. Their crash-landing kicked up a mushroom cloud of dust. From the registry post, Kotetsu yawned, waved away the grit and flipped another page of the book he was reading, not bothering to look up.

Izumo, however, had his hands planted to the desk, chair knocked back as he rose abruptly. "What the hell?"

*Good question.*

Asuma's hand redirected from a trench knife, reached into his pocket and flicked out his lighter instead, bringing it to his cigarette as he strolled over. He scanned for the Jōnin who had been in charge of the team, recalling the day the group had headed out.

*Ah, that's right. Hyūga.*

That might explain the mid-air stunt. Asuma had seen the Air Palm in combat; an impressive way to launch people into flight.

"Konohamaru," Asuma called sternly.

The young Sarutobi scrambled his way out from beneath his teammates, scowling and grunting something about scary women. Asuma's shadow fell across the trio of Genin as they untangled themselves from the knot of their landing.

"Oooww."

Asuma arched a brow, smoking curling from his lip as he mumbled. "One way to make an entrance. What did you do?"

Konohamaru wobbled onto his feet, stabbing a finger back towards the gate. "She's one scary lady! Neji-senpai did it on purpose! I don't ever wanna take the Chūnin exams if *she's* a proctor!"

*She?*

A heavy thud drew Asuma's gaze up sharply.

A puff of dust coughed up around the solid, polished steel of a giant fan, the end lodged firmly into the ground. A curvy hip cocked against the folded weapon, the cold steel burnished to the same gleam as the Suna headband.

"Be careful what you whisper, or the winds will change," purred a rich contralto as low and sultry as Kurenai's, only drier. "And next time I'll make sure they do more than blow you away, brat."

Asuma's lips framed an amused smile not seen or returned by the pair of fierce teal eyes that locked warningly on Konohamaru.

Asuma couldn't help but chuckle.

*Ah, Shikamaru. You're in for one hell of a surprise.*

"I hate surprises."

"I know." Chōji forked up a chunk of savoury pancake and chewed thoughtfully. "But I'm still sworn to secrecy."
"I've known you longer."

"Yeah but Ino has the energy to hold a grudge waaaay longer than you ever could."

Shikamaru's eye twitched. "Don't bet on it."

"Aw c'mon." Chōji waved his fork around emphatically like an amateur hypnotist trying to influence Shikamaru's mood and then gave up and pierced another soggy cube of pancake. "But I can tell you that you're gonna like the food."

Shikamaru set his features into a blank stare. "That doesn't make me feel any better about this. And the way she just jumped up and ran off with that scheming look in her eye isn't helping."

Chōji chuckled, slicing through layers of fluffy batter and sauce. "Well at least it got you outta clothes shopping."

"Yeah and where's it gonna get me next?"

"Can't tell you. But I'll drag you."

Shikamaru sighed in defeat.

Funny how one of the many things the shadow-nin admired about Chōji proved to be the current source of trouble for him. Loyalty. The unwavering way Chōji upheld his promises. Too bad Ino always got to the Akimichi first. She never hesitated in securing his allegiance in her war against Shikamaru's attempts to escape the slow death of her social schemings.

_Dammit._

Shikamaru held up a palm in surrender, shrugging. "Alright, whatever. I've got crap I need to do before then."

"Not work, right?" Chōji asked, looking up quizically from his meal. "Asuma took over your duties this morning and divvied up the rest. What's happening?"

Shikamaru sighed, brushing his thumb unconsciously across the faded scar on his cheekbone. "The bird."

"Eh?" It only took a second for Chōji's frown to morph into a knowing grin. "Oh."

"It needs to go." Shikamaru stared blankly at the window for a long moment, shaking his head. "It flew into my room yesterday."

Chōji choked on a lump of pancake, attempting to stifle a laugh. "Oh man, and we teased Naruto about birds. Just wait 'til Kiba hears about this. You can get his net."

Shikamaru didn't share his amusement. "It trashed the place."

Chōji nodded in a sage, understanding kind of way, humming around his fork as he ruminated on the problem. He looked at Shikamaru seriously, dropping his voice a notch. "So...did it crap everywhere?"

Shikamaru stared for a long moment, not a muscle twitching in his face.

"You're such a good friend, Chōji," he deadpanned. "Always helping me out."
"You should look at the funny side!" Chōji encouraged with gusto, spreading his arms to embrace the concept he was promoting. "Laugh about it!"

"It ate one of my Shogi pieces."

Chōji laughed hard, rocking the table. "Man, just the way you say it. Like it's not funny."

"It's not," Shikamaru growled, but the hard line of his mouth almost curved a little. "You know it's gonna crap that piece out somewhere and I'll get my best friend who's always not helping me out to help me look for it."

"And I totally would." Chōji wiped his eyes. "I love that bird. What have you called it?"

"Stupid bird," Shikamaru replied with complete seriousness. "And by the bird-book definition, that bird is not right in the head. It's gonna drive me crazy."

Chōji's face brightened suddenly, amusement switching to awareness. "Oh hey! That reminds me, I bought your present for Ino, that'll make you feel better."

Shikamaru shot him a dry look. "Yeah, sure." He folded an arm atop the table and drummed his fingers in a conclusive rap. "Right. How much do I owe you?"

"These pancakes?" Chōji chuckled, spearing another spongy square.

Shikamaru's eyes rounded in surprise, narrowing a second later. "What? That's it?"

"That's it."

That didn't make sense.

Shikamaru had a reserved spot in his pocket for Ino's picky, pricey, present tendencies. Not that she didn't reciprocate – she did, in spades – but there were only so many shiny, expensive things outside of weaponry that were of any use or interest to the shadow-nin. Half his wardrobe was purchased by the Yamanaka and sometimes there was no occasion to mark the gift-giving. She gave Chōji the same generous treatment.

Weird.

He glanced toward the window, frowning as he polished off another cup of coffee – which tasted like rainwater in comparison to Niji's. He swallowed it down without savouring it, watching shadows fall across the sidewalk as Chōji went on.

"And guess what, it's not even shiny."

"Yeah?" Shikamaru asked distractedly. "What is it?"

"A book."

"A book..." Shikamaru blinked as the word suddenly registered in his drifting thoughts, yanking his attention back. "A book? Are you serious?"

"Yeah. She really wanted it. " Chōji kicked a bag across from under the table, the brown paper crackling noisily in the quiet restaurant. "Check it out."

Shikamaru pushed back from his slouch and leaned to retrieve the bag, dropping it beside him on the bench warily. He shot Chōji a lazy glance as he reached into the bag with one hand.
"So, what did you get her?"

Chōji grinned. "Something shiny."

Shikamaru smiled at that. He curled his fingers around a thick spine and hefted out a sea-green book from the paper bag, dipping his wrist to set it on the table. The cover sported a large Zodiac wheel with a bold question mark in the centre.

Shikamaru tilted his head and flipped open the cover to read the title.

**SIGN LANGUAGE: READ WHAT'S WRITTEN IN YOUR STARS.**

Shikamaru hiked a brow. "You got her a book on Astrology?"

"No. *You* got her a book on Astrology," Chōji corrected, shrugging as he gulped down a glass of water. "She wanted it."

Shikamaru pursed his lips, darting a glance at the back of the book, making a face at the cursive, curly script. "Are you the Sum of your Sign? This is such crap."

"I'm a bull apparently."

Shikamaru smirked, shaking his head. "You actually read it."

"Well I flipped through it to get ideas for Ino. Her sign is scales or something like that." Chōji squinted at the book, bringing his memory back into focus. "Oh hey, you're kind of special…uh…in the middle or stuck between something."

Reluctantly intrigued, Shikamaru tapped the book down, absolutely refusing to open it. He didn't notice someone backtracking as they passed by the window.

Shikamaru arched a brow, a cue for elaboration. "Stuck between something?"

"Yeah." Chōji held his hands apart. "You're stuck between…uh something…" He waved a hand, trying to remember the zodiac names before vaguely shaking the other hand. "And…something else."

Shikamaru pressed his lips to keep from laughing. "Like I said. Crap."

A palm smacked into the window beside Shikamaru's head.

Both Chūnin jolted in their seats, simultaneously jerking away from the window where Kotetsu's fingertip stabbed into the glass as if it could go through it. He pointed at Shikamaru, grinning with a demented, unholy kind of glee as he mouthed "Boo".

**Idiot.**

"Yeah, I'm stuck between a rock and a hard place," Shikamaru muttered beneath his breath, frowning at Kotetsu.

Unfazed, the older Chūnin bobbed his eyebrows and mimed the "I'm watching you" sign, obviously delighted that he'd managed to get the drop on the Nara genius. Shikamaru could only count the fact that Kotetsu didn't know it was his birthday as a small blessing; considering the massive curse that was the other ninja's tendency to harass him.

He watched Kotetsu saunter off and turned his attention back to Chōji.
"You beat them again, right?" Chōji guessed.

Shikamaru nodded, slipping the book back into the bag. "Such a drag."

Their Nijū Shōtai training had already begun and Shikamaru tactically outsmarted Kotetsu and Izumo every time he was pit against them in enemy scenarios. Kotetsu had decided to reward the shadow-nin by publically harassing him every chance he got.

Shikamaru swayed onto his feet with a groan, rolling a shoulder to work the cramp out of the lean muscles knotted there. "Ugh. You're lucky you and Ino got two Jōnin."

"Yeah, but you got Asuma-sensei."

Shikamaru smirked, tugging out the money to cover Chōji's meal and his two crappy coffee hits. "Yeah and he has us training at six thirty in the morning."

Chōji winced. "That's why you're so tired lately, huh?"

Shikamaru smiled grimly, not bothering to flesh out the details on that one. He tucked the bag under his arm and slid out the booth, moving to roll his step into a lazy stroll towards the exit.

"Yeah, I could kill for a lie in."

Chōji chuckled, finishing off his mutilated pancake. "Sucks, right? Can't stop the clock."

Shikamaru jerked as if stabbed.

_Can't stop the clock._

He froze, heart thudding hard against his sternum as those words struck him square in the gut, punching out a short breath that he snatched back a little too sharply.

Chōji looked up curiously. "You okay?"

"Yeah." Shikamaru held up a hand in a lazy, backward wave. "Thanks for the book."

He left the restaurant at an easy pace, trying to shake off the stupidity of his reaction by getting a grip on the stupid simple logic.

_It was just a dream._

It took a brisk walk to fight off the autumn cold; too bad the chill went deeper than his skin.
Chapter 2

Autumn littered the road in bloody hues, painting a fiery path up to Konoha's broad, weather-worn gates. Leaves swamped the broad trail, a carpet of crumpled reds and peppered gold that crunched and crackled beneath the steady steps of two shinobi approaching the village.

Two ninja from different lands united by a common goal.

Peace.

One bore the unmistakable scars of a fighter; scars that marked the expression on his face rather than the skin. A young face hardened and jaded by wars fought too close to home. Something about his walk suggested that aggression rode neck to neck with a fierce temper, both carried just beneath the surface of a wry smile that had begun to reach the guarded grey of his eyes. His hair was a mane of fire, bound in a ponytail at his nape. He carried a massive blade of equal length to his body, jagged and vicious looking.

He wore black and green.

Beside him walked the inverted image of a very different breed of ninja.

This shinobi wore white.

His face was crafted to elegant, sculpted angles. Proud and patrician features, his high cheekbones hollowed down to a sharp but strong jaw. This striking face was defined and dominated by eyes which broadcasted his bloodline as clearly as what lay beneath the steel of his hitai-ate. And his gait, regal and instinctively paced, displayed his blue-blooded heritage more prominently than the elegant garb of his clan's robes.

A clan of power and prestige. Inwardly, he cared for neither, but outwardly, he projected the polished veneer of excellent breeding.

But there was something a little too still about his face.

A stillness that didn't match the way his body moved beneath those robes.

With this ninja, what lay beneath his cool, calm surface threatened far more damage than any weapon he would ever wield. He'd pushed himself to attain a strength held deep and dormant in every delineated muscle. Muscles that roped his body in lean, hard-earned slabs, shot through with sinew strung like steel, all concealed beneath a proud air of serenity and stillness.

Controlled power, draped in grace.

The way Neji moved hadn't changed.

But something in his eyes had.

Two weeks ago they'd been clouded and darkened with the tempest of a rage he was losing control of. But now they were calm and clear, like the storm had finally settled deep in those moonstone eyes, churning with conviction rather than carnage.

He was centred in a way he hadn't been for a long time.

I have direction.
And with direction, came the drive to move forward.

Neji blinked slowly, refocusing his gaze on the current destination.

Home.

High above, a shrill cry pierced the quiet skies, a golden-winged eagle circling in a steady orbit above the travelling pair.

"Big gates," the redhead noted dryly. "That supposed to be intimidating?"

Neji arched a brow and shot the other ninja a pointed look that immediately slid to the massive sword.

The Tsubasa shinobi smirked. "Fair point."

Neji made a noncommittal sound, but amusement hinted at the corner of his mouth, which smoothed back to a calm line as they approached the entrance to the Leaf village. The breeze at their backs was a welcoming, guiding hand, ushering them past the threshold of the wide gates, thrown open like embracing arms.

It hasn't changed.

It occurred to him then that there was no reason Konoha should have felt any different, even though he'd expected it to. He had changed. He was the foreigner on familiar ground.

Embrace it.

Neji let his eyes shutter a little and drew a deep, silent breath, holding it long and lingeringly. He considered the length of his absence, which felt longer than the mere fourteen days that had passed since he'd left.

Walked away...

For the barest fraction of a second, Neji's smooth stride faltered. A slip unnoticed by his mind and almost unfelt by his body. But somewhere deep within the centre of the calm he had created, he felt a fluttering sensation – like a flex of restless wings – a restlessness he'd left Konoha to escape.

Breathe.

He took another deep pull on the crisp breeze, the scent of burning leaves singeing the air. The hint of smoke kindled his senses, threatening to draw his mind to the memory of a warmer, huskier smoke made solid on sound…wrapped in a murmur…a murmur of a voice he hadn't stopped hearing…

A low whistle redirected his attention.

"Big sword," a voice called.

Neji blinked back to the moment and turned towards the two shinobi at the registry post. Kotetsu sat in a relaxed slouch, peering over the top of his feet, which he'd crossed and propped on a stack of paperwork. He seemed to be ignoring the workload as religiously as the frustrated looks his friend kept shooting him.

Izumo glanced over. "Welcome back, Hyūga. You know your Genin team got brought in—"
"—blown in," Kotetsu smirked.

"Brought in by Suna's ambassador?" Izumo corrected, his finger scanning a list for the information. 
"Yeah, much earlier today. Where were you?"

Neji glanced pointedly at the sword-wielding nin beside him. "I was delayed."

The redhead shrugged. "Having a big sword comes with the tendency to swing it at people who threaten kids."

"So you demonstrated, but I trust you'll opt for diplomacy over violence the next time you deal with Suna's ambassador, Hibari." Neji gestured vaguely around the village. "She's a friend to some of our people and she happens to be here on the same business as you."

"Which would be peace negotiations, according to this statement." Izumo eyed the Tsubasa shinobi warily, leafing through papers to search for the mission report.

Kotetsu pretended to glance at the book propped on his lap, watching the newcomer with equal caution. "So you attacked Temari-san?"

Hibari glanced at his sword. "If she's the crazy lady with a big fan, I guess that's accurate."

Neji controlled the urge to roll his eyes. He managed a dignified flicker of his lashes instead. While crossing paths with Temari had come as a surprise, the fight that had sparked off between her and Hibari had come as an outright shock.

_That's the last time I play mediator…_

It hadn't been easy breaking up that fight.

He certainly hadn't expected two peace ambassadors to decide that a weapon's worth was measured by wielding it against anyone who claimed that theirs was bigger.

It had been a childish and unexpected reaction on both their parts.

Given what had set them off, Neji sensed it had more to do with a personal clash of values between Hibari and Temari when it came to how to deal with childish antics – or namely, Konohamaru.

"Big fan alright. Yeah, that would be her." Kotetsu grinned, snapping his book shut with a loud crack. "She had your Genin team whipped, Hyūga. They had a whole load of luggage too. Weirdly enough, I'm pretty sure some of it was chirping."

"That's right." Neji paused, something close to humour hitting his eyes. "I'd have returned with them, but I had to deal with damage control."

Izumo frowned, glancing up sharply from his papers. "Damage control?"

"I swung my sword, she swung her fan, objects got in the way," Hibari detailed without inflection, his grey eyes scanning the sidewalks, automatically surveying the village.

"Objects, huh?" Kotetsu pressed, looking more amused than concerned. "Well she was still swinging that fan at the Genin team, I'll tell you that."

Hibari scowled, grey eyes hardening.

Neji shot Kotetsu a warning glance, a signal to stray away from the mention of children given the
redhead's overprotective tendency towards them.

Izumo caught the look, kicked Kotetsu under the desk and ignored his friend's startled yelp. "No civilians were hurt, right?"

"No one was injured." Neji paused, considering the cost. "Only pride and property."

*Thank the Gods.*

He'd resorted to the Kaiten at the last minute and sent both Jōnin spinning in separate directions only to diplomatically bring them back onto common ground.

"Right, Hanegakure." Izumo rolled open a scroll, the bold script detailing the original outline of the mission, along with Temari's signature confirming the Genin team's escorted return. "You'll need to sign."

Neji stepped over and examined the text with a quick sweep of his gaze. "This will need to be revised."

"Nah." Kotetsu waved a hand dismissively. "Just omit the dirty facts, we won't say anything."

Neji looked insulted. "I'll omit the fact that you just suggested that."

"Yeesh, talk about strait-laced. All work and no play for you Jōnin, huh?" Kotetsu stretched his arms above his head in a yawn, shooting his untouched workload an irritated look. "Well, unless you're Asuma-senpai."

Neji cocked his head in query, taking up the ink quill to sign his name beneath the neat scratch of Temari's signature. "Asuma-senpai?"

Kotetsu sighed in a woebegone fashion, jerking his chin accusingly. "Yeah, you Jōnin just love pulling rank, don't you?" He flicked a glance at Izumo. "Why'd Asuma load all the slacker's work onto us anyway? That's sure as hell not elite training."

"Because it's Shikamaru's birthday," Izumo explained.

Neji froze half-way into setting the quill down.

No one noticed.

"WHAT!" Kotetsu swung his feet from his paperwork prop, upturning a few sheets in the process. "No way! That sly little shit. When the hell did that happen?"

"Seventeen years ago?" Izumo muttered, frowning when he noticed Neji staring sightlessly at the scroll. "Hey, you okay?"

Neji snapped back to himself in an instant, his breath catching hard.

He straightened away from the desk, opal eyes still as placid pools, untouched by the tension rippling along his torso. "Temari-san has an escort?"

Izumo blinked at the odd, unrelated response. "Yeah, that's all taken care of." He dated, then stamped the entry and handed over the scroll.

"Good." Neji slotted the scroll away, turning away from the desk. "Hibari, I have obligations I need to see to, but I'll ensure you have an escort for the duration of your stay."
"Not a problem." Hibari inclined his head and raised his arm when a shrill screech signalled the dive of the large bird haloing the skies.

The golden eagle curved her path towards him, swooping low in a swift descent. The sharp arc of her wings broke the force of her plummet and she eased into a glide, talons stretched ahead, perching on the leather guard clipped onto Hibari's forearm.

Kotetsu smirked, leaning back in his chair. "Big bird."

"The best kind."

"I assume you'll want to keep her with you," Neji guessed, turning his steps away from the registry post and gesturing for Hibari to follow.

The redhead nodded, stroking a knuckle over the eagle's head affectionately. "Yeah, she doesn't do well in cages."

Neji smiled a little, his gaze set ahead to keep his focus from turning inward and onto that restlessness churning in the pit of his stomach. "Understandably. I'll see to it that—"

"HEY!" A hoarse shout exploded across the street, accompanied by the animated swing of an arm waving back and forth.

"Still haven't gotten him a leash," Hibari noted, amusement threaded into his tone, grey eyes set on the shinobi jogging his way towards them.

"Little good it would do," Neji remarked with the barest hint of a smile.

"Hey!" Naruto shouted, still waving. He was clad in khaki pants and an orange t-shirt pulled over a long-sleeved black top. The Jinchūriki's hitai-ate was absent, leaving his sunny spikes to fall free. "Neji!"

The Hyūga slowed to a stop, squinting against the sun's glare. It struck a fuzzy glow around Naruto's head, reflecting off his golden strands in a hazy flash. One might have wondered if it wasn't just the Uzumaki's indomitable light shining through, always exploding outwards, never contained and never conditional. Like Naruto's heart, it spilled untainted into his ready smiles and blazing grins, the sun of his personality always riding high in the swirling blue of his eyes.

*Always in such high spirits.*

Which had Neji wondering at the darkness Naruto had wrestled with in order to come out on top of his own turbulence, buoyant and upbeat to the extent of stirring the best in others everywhere he went.

*How dark was the place you were in, to have reached out to find this unmatched light...against all odds...?*

Despite the depth of introspection playing behind his eyes, the rest of Neji's expression remained perfectly schooled. The unspoken respect which settled in his gaze lasted long enough to be marked by Hibari, but not long enough to be recognised by Naruto as the Uzumaki bounded over.

"Naruto," Neji greeted mildly, adopting the semi-warning tone he'd learned to take with over-affectionate children or animals likely to pounce.

Naruto skidded to a stop along the sidewalk, kicking up a spray of leaves that caught on the breeze
and whipped around him playfully.

"Whoa!" He stabbed his finger at Hibari, his attention switching in an instant from one Jōnin to the other. "Hibari! No way! Tsunade-baachan didn't mention Neji would be bringin' you back!"

Neji shook his head at the uncouth greeting. Normally he'd resist rebuking Naruto, mainly because 1) it was pointless and 2) the Uzumaki's grin often saved him from anything being misconstrued as genuine rudeness. Normally, Neji accepted it was just his "mouth before mind" nature. Unfortunately, two weeks of pulling Konohamaru up on proper decorum had the Hyūga's condescending streak kicking in like a knee-jerk reaction.

Bred into him like a gene, the urge to reproach won out.

Neji drew his head up, long mocha bangs framing his unimpressed expression. "As foreign as the concept of courtesy is to you, Naruto, a civil hello would have sufficed."

Naruto laughed, tossing his head back to parody Neji's lofty look, his eyes tinged with mischief. "Yeah right, next you'll be askin' me to bow low and use a suffix."

Neji arched a brow, his deep tones falling on a dry, depreciating note. "I'm convinced you are both physically and verbally incapable of both. Akamaru has more social propriety than you do."

Naruto puffed out his chest and made a face that was probably supposed to mimic and mock Neji's haughty demeanour before he looked so uncomfortable with the act that he settled with sticking his tongue out.

_How very mature…_

Grinning with unbeatable aplomb, the Uzumaki turned his gaze to Hibari, blue eyes on high beam until they hit on the eagle.

"Gah!" he hopped back a step, waving his palms nervously. "Man, did you have to bring a bird with you?"

Hibari shrugged, hefting the arm his eagle was perched on. "I remember how fond you were of our birds – or vice versa."

The eagle cocked her head towards Naruto, feathers ruffling at the crest of her neck as she responded to his jumpiness with a high, playful screech. Naruto's expression twisted in a grimace. Neji bit down on a smile, watching the Uzumaki shuffle back another step, sky-bright eyes casting around in a paranoid flick.

"Uh, that was the only one you brought with you, right?"

_He obviously hasn't seen Konohamaru yet._

Hibari glanced at Neji, silently communicating a question that read along the lines of 'should-I-tell-him-so-you-can-deal-with-the-hysterical-reaction?'.

Neji blinked quickly and redirected the topic. "Naruto, I need to arrange an escort for Hibari, do you know if any Chūnin are available?"

Naruto kept his eyes on the bird, scratching at his blond spikes. "Uh, well we're all kinda tied up 'cause of Ino's plans and all." He paused here, blinking wide as he whirled on Neji like a cyclone, grinning. "Hey! You guys are gonna be there right?"
Neji arched a brow, playing the part of the ignorant party if only to keep from acknowledging that tightening in his gut. "Where?"

"At the place Ino's hijacked for her joint birthday thing with Shikamaru," Naruto explained, swinging his arm in one direction only to frown and then point the other way. "Uh, I'm pretty sure Sakura said it was one of those fancy ryokans close to the Hot Springs."

Neji's brow quirked at that.

*A ryokan?*

That was unexpected. Those modern accommodations close to the Hot Springs were by no means cheap, much less a place to hold a party – or at least the kind of party that Neji assumed was in the works. From what Shikamaru had once hinted about Ino's festive tastes, it seemed the least likely place for a gregarious creature like the Yamanaka to celebrate.

"A ryokan?" Neji tucked his chin back, looking dubious.

"Weird, huh?" Naruto stuffed his hands into his pockets, shrugging. "Yeah, something about Shikamaru being an old man and needing something low-key and quiet or whatever."

*Of course…*

Neji's lips betrayed the barest ghost of a smile, his gaze straying across towards the Shogi House further along the street.

A silent sigh, sloughing deep in his chest, loosened the tension in his gut.

He Steeleed himself against the embalming warmth that followed it.

It was a perilous slip, likely to pull him into a quick slide the second his focus shifted onto the shadow-nin.

*Not now…*

The instruction did little to stop the instinctive reaction.

Memories stirred in the back of his mind, creeping across the line he'd drawn between two parts of himself. They threatened to remind him of a yearning he hadn't tried to forget, but had needed to control. A yearning that had wrapped around his heart like a vine, thorns digging into places that had never stopped hurting since the day he'd walked away.

*Stop it.*

He closed his eyes, clearing his throat. "Then I'll speak with Tsunade-sama and find someone to take my place."

"Eh?" Naruto blinked. "What?"

Neji tipped his head to Hibari, veering the topic back onto safer ground. "Escort."

"No need to stand on ceremony, Hyūga." Hibari arched a brow, grazing a knuckle across his eagle's head. "I've got all the eyes I need to find my way around."

Naruto made a face at the eagle, but brightened at the prospect of time to spare. "So does that mean you'll drop by later?"
Neji frowned, not sure whether to be amused or aggravated by Naruto's obstinate ability to cling fixedly to a point – or promise – without factoring in the reality surrounding it.

"Hibari is here for peace negotiations, Naruto, not birthday celebrations."

"Well yeah, but peace between our villages is cause for celebrations!" Naruto reasoned, holding out his palms to solicit support from Hibari. "I mean you're not seriously gonna let Neji stick you with Tsunade-baachan and those council oldies the whole time, right?"

"Baachan?" Hibari echoed, glancing at Neji.

Neji shook his head very slowly. Naruto's ability to slaughter a suffix was unmatched. It never ceased to amaze the Hyūga how someone as fiercely devoted to Konoha as Naruto could unabashedly run the village's reputation into the ground by reducing its figureheads to embarrassing caricatures.

"Naruto."

"Yeah?"

"Be quiet."

"Oi!" Naruto took a moment to be offended, then settled back on his heels and crossed his arms, a sly grin working across his face. "Oh I get it, you're just being all stuck-up and socially awkward."

Neji blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

*My social graces are impeccable...*

He frowned at the stupid, defensive thought.

There was absolutely no reason to have reacted to Naruto's words, mentally or otherwise. It was a ridiculous and unfounded statement after all.

Well, mostly.

*Ridiculous.*

Neji's frown knitted tighter until he noticed that Naruto was grinning at him idiotically, revelling in the possibility that he might just get a rise out of the stoic shinobi. Neji quickly pulled his frown taut, his high brow smoothing out beneath the hitai-ate.

Naruto grinned wider, nodding. "Yeah, you totally know I'm right," he laughed. "You need to chill out with us."

"The purpose being?"

"Fun!"

Neji gazed blankly, sampling the taste of the word without reaction. "Fun."

Hibari chuckled beneath his breath. "You know your Uzumaki may have a point where you don't have a clue, Hyūga."

Neji started inside, blinking from his glazed stare, which had somehow, without his knowing, slid over Naruto's shoulder towards the distant Shogi House.
He looked across at Hibari and scoffed. "What?"

"Yeah, what?" Naruto echoed in a slow, suspicious drawl, squinting at Hibari, not sure whether he was being insulted or supported, though apparently it didn't matter because he was smiling again a moment later. "Aww, c'mon Neji."

"Naruto," Neji warned, but his tone failed to penetrate Naruto's insistence.

Naruto clapped his hands together in a childish plea. "C'mon! We never get chances like this. And it'd be cool to have everyone there, you know? It'd be the first time we're all together..." Naruto trailed off suddenly, the light in his eyes sucked out by a shadow Neji recognised in an instant.

_Uchiha._

Understanding softened the glare he intended to pin on the Jinchūriki, curbing his tone into something gentler as he sighed, throwing the ball in Hibari's court.

"There'll be time after the council meeting, if you wish to indulge in this..." he waved a hand vaguely in Naruto's direction, unable to find an adequate word that described the 'fun' the Uzumaki was promoting.

_Perhaps I 'am' clueless when it comes to these...festivities..._

Unbidden, Shikamaru's words came back to him.

"Probably for the best. Don't really give much of a crap about birthdays myself."

"It's not gonna be all wild or anything." Naruto grinned a little, a weak imitation of his beaming smile. "You'll get free food outta it too."

Neji wasn't listening.

Hibari glanced between them, sensing that something was off. Unable to define it, he simply shrugged the tension away. "Wouldn't turn down the chance to surprise your strategist now, would I?"

A grin hooked Naruto's lips, immediately picking up the corners of his slumped spirits and lifting him back to his sunny zenith. "Alright!" He punched the air, tucking his fist back with a winning smile. "So Neji, you're coming too right?"

Neji blinked slowly, distractedly settling his gaze somewhere to the side of Naruto before his expression cleared, arranging itself into a serene but detached stare.

"I have somewhere I need to be."

Naruto's brow lifted with interest then dropped with disappointment, his arms folding as he hunched with a pout, studying Neji's face. "Another mission or something?"

_Or something..._

The Jōnin inclined his head, offering no elaboration.

Thankfully, Naruto didn't ask, so Neji didn't have to lie. Because his destination of _somewhere_ could have been _anywhere_ provided it was south, west or east of that yearning which made Shikamaru a Magnetic North.
Just the thought of the Nara was enough to awaken that deep, gravitational pull.

No.

'No' was a word Neji had told himself repeatedly. He'd also told himself that distance and new direction had weakened the bond that had been tearing him one way as he'd moved in another. In his most convicted moments, he'd assumed the yearning had eased in the two weeks he'd been away.

He'd told himself it had.

And so long as he stayed away, he could pretend to believe it.

*What the hell am I doing?*

Shikamaru wouldn't have believed it, if he hadn't already done it. With that in mind, there was nothing left to do but proceed as planned.

"Stupid bird," Shikamaru muttered, one hand jammed at his hip, the other locked around his current weapon of choice.

A net.

He'd found it stashed at the back of one of the deer pens. He'd briefly considered a sling-shot and a big, fat stone but the falcon had charmed him away from irritability with its playful swoops and dives.

And then another round of getting chased around the forest had almost ensued.

*I need a bigger net...*

Shikamaru scythed the end around in a few experimental dips and curves, examining the large, streaming mesh, though he'd already checked it for holes. He was stalling. And the bird knew it.

Above him in the tree, the falcon cooed mockingly, tipping its head in neurotic little jerks with every wave of the net.

Shikamaru scowled up at it. "Ugh. You're such a pain in the ass."

The falcon preened, fanning out its wings as if it had received the most delightful compliment. Shikamaru had hurled more insults at it than he could be bothered to repeat. But given that he always lost in their games of 'run-and-get-dive-bombed' the bird was king and he was just an idiot with a net.

"Screw it," Shikamaru growled, moving forward with the net held like a blade.

He'd have used his jutsu if he didn't think it would seriously frighten the bird. His hesitation was impractical, considering the fact that he wanted it gone. Frightening it away was the best solution. Too bad that every time he planned out the best way to go about scaring it off, he felt a weird curdling in the pit of his stomach that soured his mood and always had him abandoning the strategy.

He never delved deeper into the reason behind it.

He didn't want to consider the possibility that some part of him had become attached to this crazy bird and its annoying games.
Just treat it like a Genin mission.

No hard feat. Team 10 had done their time saving cats and rescuing animals in D-Rank dramas back in the Genin days. Unlike Ino and Chōji, Shikamaru had never been sympathetic when it came to cats idiotic enough to get stuck in trees or dogs dumb enough to get wedged into places so awkward and impossible that simple physics screamed 'you've got to be kidding me'.

Embarrassingly enough, this exact thought assailed his brain as he began to scale the thorny, troublesome tree the bird had perched in. The boughs were tight-knitted and curved in a tangle that suggested nature had gotten confused at some point.

Yeah, so have I…

Shikamaru tilted his head away from the scratch of branches.

I'm supposed to be smart.

He snorted, managing an impressive contortionist stunt that had his ribs cramping while he attempted to angle the net up through branches, his feet set precariously on a narrow bough.

Real smart.

The falcon let out a soft 'kee' that in Shikamaru's mind carried the impression of amusement.

"Right, you better stay still," he ordered, getting a solid grip on the pole. "I'm not chasing you around like an idiot."

I'll probably fall and break my fucking neck first.

The falcon watched him with infuriating calm, almost curious – possibly condescending. Shikamaru scowled, swiped the net and missed so spectacularly that the falcon gave a little whistle of glee as it hopped along its branch tauntingly.

Shikamaru shot it an exasperated look. "Dammit."

The bird blinked back at him, cocking its head in challenge.

Shikamaru twisted his hips, pivoting very, very slowly. He raised the net with equal deliberateness, keeping every motion calculated and calm, holding the flow of chakra steady at the balls of his feet.

Slowly.

Bored with the shadow-nin's pace and premeditated moves, which seemed doomed to fail, the falcon lost interest and went about examining its feathers, paying Shikamaru no heed as he began to calculate its capture.

Here we go.

Shikamaru braced himself, adjusted his grip on the net and gauged the angle.

This can't fail.

He drew a slow breath, prepared to strike – and froze when a choked sound drifted up from below.

The hell…?
Shikamaru craned his neck back, glanced down and would have blanched if he hadn't flushed in humiliation.

Fuck.

Kiba stood below, one arm hooked on Chōji's shoulder for support. He held a fist to his mouth, cheeks sucking in and puffing out in a desperate, hyperventilating fit as he attempted to hold in his laughter. Chōji was doing a better job handling his amusement, despite grinning so wide his eyes had vanished into two little half-moons.

Shikamaru glared, unable to do much else in his embarrassing position.

And the bastard dog-nin knew it.

Kiba's face had flared to the shade of his tattoos, body shaking with the beginnings of a howling kind of laugh that would startle the bird into flight. And then Kiba did something that made Shikamaru wish the dog-nin had reached for a shuriken rather than the horrible device he'd brought with him.

Kiba reached into his jacket and pulled out a familiar, chunky-looking camera.

Shikamaru's eyes widened.

Oh screw that. No way.

He levelled a narrow, warning glare on the dog-nin, bistre orbs darkening with annoyance, shaking his head.

"NO…" he mouthed darkly.

Kiba creased up, nodding emphatically, his entire face wrinkling with the effort to keep his hysterics contained. He jerked spasmodically on the spot, attempting to work the camera.

Shikamaru considered cracking the pole down on the idiot's head.

He raised the net in warning and mouthed. "I mean it..."

The bird stopped preening.

Everyone froze.

Shikamaru tightened his grip on the net, poised awkwardly with his arms still raised. Taking advantage of the moment, Kiba titled his wrists, aiming the camera up by degrees, his strained expression close to resembling a blowfish ready to burst.

Shikamaru's eye twitched.

I'm gonna burst a vein in a minute...

The falcon ruffled its feathers, cocked its head down at Kiba and Chōji, hopped a little further along its perch and began to preen again.

Warring with his pride and the purpose for sacrificing it, Shikamaru switched his glare onto the bird. He needed to catch it. This was the closest he'd ever got with any kind of item designed to snare it. The bird had got cocky. And now was the best chance to use its lack of guard to his advantage.
And get a snapshot.

He flicked a glance down at Kiba. The dog-nin was still shaking on the spot, trying to hold the camera steady.

How embarrassing.

"No pressure, Nara," Kiba hissed, drumming the camera with his fingertips. "But I'm framing it."

"Shut up," Shikamaru growled beneath his breath, transferring his glare onto Chōji. "I hate you."

Chōji grinned, giving him the thumbs up.

Shikamaru grunted a curse and with painstaking effort, began to twist his body a little more, concentrating chakra to the balls of his feet as he arched, his long torso stretched out to extend his reach.

He heard Kiba snicker.

Ugh.

Well, at least if he fell he could direct his crash landing onto the idiot. A good thing Naruto wasn't around; he'd never live that down. As he began to inch to the very edge of the branch, he slowly curved his arm, preparing to sweep the net in an arc that would give the falcon the least number of exits by caging it against the trunk.

And then the camera flash went off. "Shit!"

The bird let out a shrill screech and shot skyward, the net grazing it's talons in Shikamaru's last ditch effort to capture it. The net caught a tangle of branches instead, forcing Shikamaru to twist sharply to avoid slamming into the trunk. The new position left him half hanging by the pole, teetering on a thin bough with chakra and the net as his only grip.

Fuck!

Another flash went off.

"Dammit, Kiba!"

A howl of laughter exploded from below. "Shikamaru, don't move!"

"No shit!" Shikamaru growled, glaring down between his arms, trying to keep his balance despite several branches prodding him like bony, mocking fingers every time he angled for a better position.

"Nice one, Nara!" Kiba crouched at the base of the tree, camera tilted up, his canines bared in a wild grin. "Oooh man, you're totally screwed!" he laughed, gasping for air. "You move an inch and that tree is gonna have your ass three different ways!"

Shikamaru twisted his head, glancing over the jut of his shoulder-blade towards the protruding boughs and sharp branches all lecherously poised to stab him in the most awkward and private of regions.

Why the hell does this shit have to happen...?

In fact, how the hell did this shit happen? Suddenly making fun of dumb cats didn't seem so simple
now that he was suffering the same disgrace.

Another flash had him jerking his head back, spots dancing in his vision. "Would you stop with the goddamned camera!"

Kiba rocked to his feet, one hand waving the chunky device, the other cupping his ear with a mischievous smirk. "What's the magic word?"

Chōji chuckled, ignoring Shikamaru's murderous glare. The Akimichi rounded the tree and made the sign for his expansion jutsu. Shikamaru took the opportunity to free one hand and deign Kiba with his middle finger.

Kiba took a picture. "It's so cool when you do brilliant, stupid shit, Shikamaru. It just never happens." He waved the camera for emphasis. "But now I've got proof that even a genius can be a dumbass."

"Shikamaru!" Chōji's multi-sized hand reached up like a godly giant offering deliverance from the hell of humiliation. "You can let go, I'll catch you."

Shikamaru shot his friend a deadpan stare. "Oh, so now you wanna help me out?"

Chōji chuckled. "I'm with Kiba on this one, Shikamaru. You never do dumb stuff, so this is kinda surreal and pretty awesome."

"Like the pain medication I'm gonna be on thanks to you two."

"Ne, just let go of the net and I'll catch you."

"Not a chance."

Kiba hopped back, searching for a more embarrassing angle to shoot from. "I think Shikamaru's into a bit of branch bondage!" he called, eyes gleaming with teary amusement.

Shikamaru frowned. "Idiot."

"Tree hugger."

"Shut up."

"C'mon, Shikamaru. You know I won't drop you."

"Is it wrong that I would actually be okay with that?" Shikamaru growled, wondering if a broken neck would hurt less than being caught on camera.

"Hurry it up, I'm waiting!" Kiba called, said camera at the ready.

Shikamaru scowled, weighing up his lack of options as he dangled mid-air. Maybe he could somehow do what he did backwards?

Yeah right…

Toeing his way along the thin bough, the shadow-nin sighed and resigned himself to the inevitable. He adjusted his grip and looked down at the expanded palm hovering beneath him.

And then the falcon swooped with a shrill scream.
"Shit!" Shikamaru released the net on instinct.

Chōji caught him, caging his fingers protectively around his teammate.

But the bird took a helix-spin right past them, straight at Kiba.

"The hell!" The dog-nin bolted to his feet and ducked for cover. The falcon's talons raked through the shaggy muss of his hair. "Hey! Shikamaru! Call off your crazy bird!"

Shikamaru peered through Chōji's fingers, smirking. "What's the magic word?" he called.

"Not funny!" Kiba waved the camera around to ward the falcon off, another flash going off in the process, straight in his own face. "SHIT!"

Shikamaru gave a breathy chuckle. "What an idiot."

The fierce explosion of light sent the bird into a screeching frenzy. Razor talons cracked and hooked into the camera, getting a solid grip on the thick plastic, wrenching it from Kiba's fingers.

"HEY!" the dog-nin yelled, waving a hand around blindly. "Give it back!"

Shikamaru's eyes widened, eyebrows shooting up in surprise and amusement. The bird had just scored itself a strike in his favour.

Even so, better stop this crap before it gets outta hand.

Shikamaru rapped his knuckles against Chōji's palm, prompting the Akimichi to set him down and unfurl his fingers. The shadow-nin strolled off his friend's hand as if it was the norm to be carried around, brushing flakes of bark off his clothes.

"Kiba, quit attacking it and it'll back off."

"Argh! I can't see shit!" Kiba growled, hopping his way around the clearing in an attempt to arrest the stolen camera. "Am I even close to it? All I can see are dots!"

Chōji took up an unhelpful running commentary, directing Kiba with outbursts of "hot, cold, warm, warmer, almost". The bird screeched and flapped, haloing Kiba's head with the device dangling from its claws in taunting proximity, always just out of reach.

"Sonofabitch!" Kiba growled, twisting around in circles. "Shikamaru! C'mon! Call it off!"

"Tch. Even if I could, I wouldn't."

Chōji laughed, clapping Shikamaru's shoulder. "All's forgiven, right? Now aren't you glad I brought him with me?"

Shikamaru pursed his lips, rubbing a hand across his mouth in an attempt to smooth out his smile. "I still hate you."

"And I still love that bird," Chōji laughed, triggering Shikamaru to loosen a chuckle.

A loud bark drew their attention away from Kiba and onto the approach of a great white mutt ready to meddle in the mayhem. Oblivious to the cause of the trouble, Akamaru came bounding between the trees with a wild bay that sent the bird rocketing for the canopies, camera in claws.

"NOOOO!" Kiba howled to the heavens, his hand outstretched and knees bent, like a scene out of
an amateur-dramatic tragedy.

The best part was that it wasn't an act.

Shikamaru laughed, the low, raspy sound followed by a smile that cut sharp and defined across his face. "Yeah, all's forgiven," he chuckled, breaking into another laugh.

Chōji looked askance at him, eyes wide and mouth slightly agape in a surprised, lopsided smile, like he hadn't expected that reaction from his friend.

Shit, has it been that long since I've laughed?

Shikamaru pretended not to notice Chōji's look, focusing instead on Kiba's distraught pose as the dog-nin mourned his loss of blackmail material.

"No, no, no..." Kiba chanted, searching the canopy for any sign of movement.

Akamaru finally caught on to the fact that there was no immediate danger and stopped turning circles around Kiba, cocking his head up, floppy ears arched attentively as he followed his master's gaze towards the treetops.

"Too bad, Inuzuka," Shikamaru drawled, shaking his head.

"Arrrgh! Dammit!" Kiba turned a tight circle and carved his fingers through his hair, grabbing coarse, tawny strands in frustration. "It took it." His mouth dropped open and snapped shut repeatedly as he stared up at the canopies, looking crushed, like the bird had torn his heart out. "It took the fucking camera!"

"Yeah, well observed." Shikamaru cocked a hip against a tree, his voice husky with laughter as his gaze fell to something on Kiba's shoulder, eyes brightening with fresh humour. "Guess even dumb geniuses have fallback plans."

Kiba shook his head, gazing forlornly at the trees until Shikamaru's words registered. He shot the shadow-nin a sidelong glare. "Hey, shut up. You didn't plan that."

Shikamaru pressed his lips, his stomach tightening against the raw flurry of laughter building inside him. "Yeah..."

Kiba's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "That's bullshit."

Shikamaru shrugged, his smile threatening to break through. "More like birdshit."

Chōji guffawed loudly, throwing his head back. "You have the worst luck, Kiba."

"What?" Kiba frowned, until a dawning realisation had his eyes flying wide. He turned his head in a jerk, his gaze hitting on the source of their amusement. "Oh you're shitting me! NO!"

Chōji chuckled, squinting at the thick, chunky smear streaked across Kiba's jacket. "Oh hey, Shikamaru, I think that's your Shogi piece."

Shikamaru cocked his head, narrowing his eyes to bring the crap-caked lump on Kiba's shoulder into focus, his lips tugging into a smirk.

"Checkmate."

Kiba's feral howl startled the Nara deer into a skittish bolt, but the immediate sound that followed it
had one stag turning back and raising its head, ears pricked high as it caught the stirring and much missed sound.

Shikamaru's laughter.

It carried huskily over Kiba's roar, rolling warm and relaxed into the canopies and between the trees, chasing away a ghost of aching sadness which had haunted the forest for days.

An aura of silence hung heavy in the heart of the Hyūga residence.

Like an unsung dirge frozen in cold lungs.

_Breathe_…

Neji drew a sharp breath. He felt his stomach clench against a belated tremor as he crossed the threshold into the courtyard, immediately picking up on the odd mood.

*What has happened here?*

A thick, oppressive static seemed to be clinging to every molecule of air, thickening his breath as he dragged it in. The odd sense of tension sucked out the calm like a parasite, excreting an ominous chill that crawled along the walls and across his skin, raising hairs and tightening nerves.

_{Chakra…}_

Neji could sense it and automatically activated his Byakugan, scanning the courtyard. His eerily defined pupils tapered to sharp pinpoints, tracking the chakra that came into focus; flares, flurries and a flood of blue-white aura bleeding into his monochrome radar.

_{So much chakra…}_

The courtyard was bloated with it. A cool, stagnant pool of expended energy, arcing out in places to form the dome-shape structures of the Kaiten and the less solid formations of jutsu patterns he was unfamiliar with.

"Neji-niisan."

Neji blinked, the pinched surface of his eyes smoothing back to their flawless, opalescent stone. The Byakugan veins contracted as he turned, setting his calm gaze on his youngest cousin. She stood beyond the sun's reach, her face obscured by one long shadow falling sharp across her face, a slot of shade bisecting her figure.

Neji bowed his head. "Hanabi-sama."

She stood on the porch close to the training room, hair pulled back in a tight braid that began its elegant weave at the crown of her head, trailing down between her shoulder blades. She wore the standard ninja-mesh beneath a pale and sleeveless v-neck with matching white pants.

Despite acknowledging her, she didn't respond straight away.

She didn't come forward either.

She remained lodged against the side of one of the porch posts, keeping to the chill of the shade. Neji tried not to focus on the prickle across his skin and moved a pace to his right so the afternoon sun struck his face, painting his high cheeks in golden brush strokes.
The warmth barely penetrated the chakra haze.

Neji glanced around, then set his gaze on her shadowed face. "What happened here, Hanabi-sama?"

"Welcome home," Hanabi greeted, her voice hollow and quiet.

She said nothing more, watching him almost warily.

Strange.

Neji dipped his shoulder, letting his ninja bag slide to the crook of his arm as he stepped forward, muscles tensing and flexing against the claustrophobic press of chakra.

"Thank you," he returned neutrally, catching a glint of steel. Hanabi turned over a set of shuriken in her slim fingers, shuffling them like cards.

What the hell is going on?

Neji hesitated a moment before modulating the deep velvet of his voice to its most soothing tenor. "Is Hiashi-sama in council?"

"No." Hanabi wrapped an arm around the post in an abrupt flick, quick as a cat's tail, dragging the shuriken against the wood like a small feline sharpening her claws.

Neji observed the odd behaviour with the barest pinch at the corners of his eyes.

And then the sun struck the shuriken.

A glint of fractured light hit her face.

It flashed like a thin spotlight across the vicious burn that painted the pale slant of her jaw and scraped like red chalk along her neck.

Neji remained perfectly still, but a rush of cold flooded along his spine, drawing his posture more rigid than his face. "What happened to you?"

Hanabi stood silently, regarding him with an unreadable flatness that looked oddly haunting. What was worse was that he recognised it. He'd once lived with the same ghost inside him, staring back at him through eyes that had once belonged to his father. Eyes he had inherited; and a haunting he'd inherited. One that spoke of transience between destiny and decision – or the dreaded state of limbo that came from being caught in-between them.

He took a step closer, frowning now. "What happened to you, Hanabi-sama?"

Only the jerky scratch of the shuriken told him that she'd heard. But there was something he wasn't seeing – until she looked him in the eye. And then it occurred to him so fast that the cold unease creeping along his spine hit his eyes in a flash.

He drew his head up sharply, his tone taking a deep plummet. "Where is Hinata-sama?"

Hanabi's fingernails dug into the post, the shuriken cutting into her palms. "Do you think I'm weak, cousin?"

Neji blinked, only vaguely thrown by the question. His focus was elsewhere, eyes flicking in a sharp dart around the courtyard, searching for the elder sister. "I do not think you are weak."
"No. You do not think of me at all, do you?"

*What?*

Neji snapped his gaze back to the younger Hyūga, the angles of his face drawn tight with practiced calm, thinly layering his concern. "Where is your sister?"

Hanabi's eyes flashed like two icy jewels, cool and crisp and much too hard.

Neji, unfazed by the look, could have shattered it in an instant if he'd chosen to return it. Instead, he faced her more directly, the sunlight slashing a fierce gleam across his headband – a glow that paled in comparison to what threatened to flash dangerously across his eyes.

"What happened here?" he pressed.

The faint prick of tears crowded at the very corners of Hanabi's eyes. She blinked them away, raising her chin a notch, withdrawing her arm back around the post to score small, claw-like grooves in the wood.

Neji tried a different method, dropping the terse square of his shoulders to adopt a less austere approach.

His eyes softened and his tone gentled. "Hanabi, what happened to you?"

"*You* taught her how to do it," Hanabi spat the 'you' like poison, her voice tremulous beneath her hurt. "So really, you should know."

Neji's eyes widened, his tongue recoiling in sharp curve as he set his teeth on edge, hissing a breath.

*Those bastards.*

No sooner had the thought struck him than he felt a keen chill chase back up his spine and settle at his nape. He turned his head on instinct, canting his jaw to glance through his bangs across the courtyard.

His gaze hit on the stern white eyes of two Main House elders watching him.

Neji pressed his lips to keep them from curling in a sneer.

This breed of the Main House took the lion's share of Hyūga pride. But to Neji, they were a flock of vultures on the sidelines. Raptors of tradition that decorated themselves in pristine plumes; plumes that hid their scavenging need to watch the cruel, twisted game play out amongst Hyūga siblings and cousins pit in a vicious war of survival of the fittest.

Neji turned his head a little more.

One Hyūga elder raised his chin, pale eyes deeply scarred by crow's-feet, the lines of his wrinkled brow arched in expectancy. But it was the younger of the men who held Neji's gaze like a fixed beam, unwavering and cold. Condescending, commanding…

*Controlling…*

Hyūga Hitaro.

Hiashi's cousin.
Hitaro raised his broad jaw, a dark brow arched in one of countless unspoken commands that Neji knew as well as any Branch member. Sometimes just the barest movement was the Main House's nonverbal cues. Neji was fluent in these voiceless expectations. And this one spoke five words without a sound.

"You will bow to me."

Neji steeled his jaw, every fibre inside him coming alive like vipers wanting to strike – but those vipers might as well have been chains, leashing him down in futility. Holding Hitaro's gaze, Neji weighed the consequences of defiance.

Then he set his attention on Hanabi.

She stared up at him through hurt and hardening eyes. But her look was also speaking wordless whispers. An accusation without a sound.

"You're supposed to protect me."

Gods if that didn't hit him in a place still too tender to take a blow.

He closed his eyes, bowed low to Hanabi, offered nothing but his back to Hitaro and simply walked away.

Fourteen days.

For Shikamaru, it had been a test of time for many reasons. And most of them related to establishing a big enough gap between the past and present so that he could detach and compartmentalise his thoughts. In his mind, the past wasn't happening now so there was no point in letting it impact the present.

It saved him from guilt, grief and regret.

Sometimes it saved him from remembering…

Unfortunately, no one ever appreciated this brilliant evasive tactic.

And no one was more obstinate about defying it than his mother.

So it shouldn't have surprised him that when he attempted to enter his house, he was met with an uncooperative shoji door and a couple of splinters after applying the automatic 'force will find a way' tactic.

It also shouldn't have surprised him that this tactic failed.

Shikamaru was pretty sure it was because his mother – and possibly most women – defined and epitomised the question "what happens when an unmoveable object hits an unstoppable force?"

She wins. That's what happens. Dammit.

Yoshino had locked down the house.

Again.

"Troublesome woman."
"What's up?" Chōji queried, peering over Shikamaru's shoulder.

"Nothing," Shikamaru sighed and dropped his forehead against the chipped screen. He banged the side of his fist in a dull thump against the doorframe. "Mom!"

"Uh, Shikamaru…" Kiba called.

"What?"

"That crazy bird…you brought it back from Hanegakure, right?"

"Yeah."

"Huh, right." Standing further along the porch, the dog-nin had his hands tucked under his arms, scowling and shivering on the spot as he glared towards the Nara forest. He'd shucked his ruined jacket, nose wrinkled against the amplified reek of bird crap and the damp, misty scent of distant rain.

"That explains it, you know," Kiba said.

Chōji looked between them. "Explains what?"

"It's possessed."

"It's not possessed," Shikamaru dismissed a little too vehemently, especially considering the fact that Kiba might actually have a point. "You just pissed it off."

Kiba made a sound that could have been indigestion, or an insult beneath his breath. Shikamaru couldn't blame him really. All things considered, Kiba had a justified reason to be spooked.

The falcon had returned for a second round.

And it hadn't been looking to play.

To the Nara's alarm, it had launched into an outright attack, going straight for the dog-nin. It had clawed the Inuzuka's top to ribbons, lacerating the fabric into a state that looked like Kiba had been caught in the crossfire of kunai and shuriken. He stood in a stringy semblance of what had once been a fawn-coloured top, his jeans scuffed with dirt and claw-marks, exposed skin prickled against the cold rolling in with the clouds.

"I hate your bird."

"It's not my bird," Shikamaru grumbled, banging his fist against the door again. "I told you not to piss it off."

"You were swingin' a friggin' net at it and it didn't attack you!"

"I'm lucky. You're not."

"Oh you think?" Kiba drawled with exaggerated surprise, making a sweeping gesture that encompassed his rough appearance from head to toe. "I got crapped on, attacked and it took my camera!"

"That's not your camera," Chōji pointed out.

"That's not the point."
"And it's not my problem," Shikamaru growled, trying to work the door again. "Shit."

"She was expecting you back, right?" Chōji asked.

"Yeah…"

"You sure?" Kiba frowned, abandoning his tirade only because this delay would mean standing even longer in the cold. He moved over in a bouncing lope, trying to keep warm. "So why's the place locked up?"

Shikamaru pursed his lips, his fist tightening against the doorframe. If he ignored the question, it would beat lying. It was too much effort to fabricate a story around a truth he sometimes doubted ever happened.

It was like a fragmented, surreal nightmare he'd tried to forget.

The memory of that night always came to him in flashes.

Like strobe flickers, bright and brutal as the lightning had been the evening that Neji had come at him like an executioner, hell-bent on a violent retribution.

Shikamaru pressed his brow against the door and sighed.

Chōji frowned and pulled out some barbecue potato chips to munch on, the crackle of the packet drowned out by the rustle of leaves as Shikamaru crouched down to scrape them away from the bottom of the door.

"Uh, Shikamaru, what are you doing?"

"Breaking into my own home," he uttered, only half-sarcastic, glancing over his shoulder. "Kiba, move out the way, you're blocking the light."

Kiba shuffled aside with a grumble and Akamaru whined, cocking his head up and batting his tail against the Inuzuka's legs in a lazy 'there, there' pat, sharing warmth as he nuzzled close.

Shikamaru dropped a knee and flicked his fingers in two quick seals. "Kage Nui no Jutsu."

A black tendril snaked away from his shadow, flattening out into a spatula-like shape that slipped under the crack in the door. Shikamaru closed his eyes, bringing the map of his home to the forefront of his mind. He directed the shadow tendril accordingly, concentrating chakra enough to taper the end and keep the point of contact with the door fixed and flat.

Almost.

The lock clicked before he could reach it.

Crap.

The door tore back.

Shikamaru ducked and rolled on instinct, narrowly missing the swing of a katana blade. It hit the porch in a whistling crack that sent tiny shards of wood splintering in all directions.

Chōji's mouth fell open, his crisp packet sailing to the ground.

Kiba, however, had to snap his jaw shut to keep from laughing, utterly unfazed by the violent
reaction from a fierce - possibly crazed - mother.

"Mom!" Shikamaru barked, flipping back onto his feet and holding a palm out. "What the hell, it's me!"

Yoshino poked her head around and Shikamaru caught the briefest flash of a fearful kind of ferocity he hadn't seen in her eyes before.

It was gone the second she set her gaze on him, shaking it off. "Honestly, why didn't you try the front door?"

"I did." Shikamaru dropped his palm, but kept his tone even. "It was locked. Like every other door and window around the house."

Yoshino sniffed, her eyes hitting on his cheek before she tugged the blade, dislodging it from the porch and sighing at the ugly groove it had left. "Now I have to seal that up and sand it down."

Shikamaru stared for a long moment, eyes pinched in disbelief. "That could have been my head."

"Well you're lucky you have your father's reflexes, aren't you?" Yoshino dismissed, her eyes calming when they hit on Chōji's nervous face. "Is my boy giving you trouble, Chōji-kun?"

The Akimichi grinned sheepishly, patting Shikamaru on the shoulder as the shadow-nin shot his mother an incredulous glare, hands jammed at his hips as he cocked a leg, jaw set.

Chōji smiled disarmingly. "Kiba and I are handling him, Nara-san."

Shikamaru threw a withering glance over his shoulder as Kiba coughed loudly enough to both disguise his chuckle and draw attention. The second Yoshino looked over he instantly morphed his expression to the look of a kicked puppy.

"Kami, Kiba-kun, what happened to your clothes?" Yoshino asked, equal parts concern and suspicion.

Kiba smoothed a hand over his shredded top, shaking his head. "Shikamaru tried to warn me, Nara-san."

"Repeatedly," Shikamaru added.

"Repeatedly," Kiba agreed a little too obligingly. "But I just couldn't do it. I just couldn't let that dog maul him."

Shikamaru choked on a snort.

*Oh you've got to be jokesing...*

Sadly, not the case.

And while Shikamaru knew that Kiba could never and _would_ never outsmart him on anything that required strategic thinking, there was _one_ thing the dog-nin understood better than he did.

Women.

Yoshino squinted sceptically, her gaze flicking in rapid snaps between each teenager, searching for a ploy.
Shikamaru didn't get a chance to open his mouth.

Kiba switched tactic and no sooner had he cupped his side than Akamaru whined low and loud, nuzzling at his flank with a wet, worried nose. Kiba played the part flawlessly, wincing at the contact as if it actually hurt.

"I'm okay, boy..." He petted his canine's head indulgently. "You did good too, protecting Shikamaru while I fought it off."

Chōji swayed behind Shikamaru to hide his grin.

Shikamaru looked about ready to oblige Kiba with some genuine injuries.

But Yoshino, to her son's shock, melted at the sight of the mutt fussing over the Inuzuka. Shikamaru made a bold mental note of the animal tactic and its results. It probably explained why his father always coaxed her towards the deer on days when she was oddly quiet.

It occurred to him then how quiet she'd been after the night Neji had attacked him.

For three days she'd been like more of a stranger in her house than the nameless face that had violated her home and attacked her son. Hence the dramatic lockdown on the Nara residence. Shikaku indulged her and insisted that Shikamaru do the same, but to the young shadow-nin it was nothing more than an irritating, bothersome overreaction.

I'm fine. She should get over what happened already.

It was nothing compared to what his damned life portended day-in and day-out.

Every mission carried the possibility of never coming home.

But for some reason, this had hit his mother hard and his father wasn't offering up any clues, cryptic or otherwise, as to why.

Weird.

He blinked back from his thoughts when Yoshino called Kiba into the house, ordering that Shikamaru find appropriate clothes for his 'brave friend' who had saved him from a rabid dog twice the size of Akamaru.

Yeah right.

Kiba limped over, developing injuries on the way which Akamaru supported with plaintive whines and concerned nudges.

Unbelievable...

The dog-nin shot Shikamaru a sly grin as he hobbled past.

Shikamaru's mouth bent down in a frown. "I can't believe she fell for that."

Chōji laughed. "Watch and learn, buddy. Another thing I never get the chance to say to you." He sighed contently, round cheeks dimpling in a grin. "Yep, this day is going great."

"For you maybe," Shikamaru grumbled, shaking his head. "Something tells me I'm gonna be in tears by the time its over."
Shikamaru walked the path like a prisoner on a long road to a slow death. And Chōji walked right beside him with a bounce in his step, all that was missing was a heel-click and a random burst of song.

"Great," Shikamaru sighed and jammed one hand into the pockets of his black slacks, shooting Chōji a half-hearted glare. "You're really enjoying this…"

"More than," Chōji grinned, eyes crinkled with mirth. "I get to be in a position where I know exactly what's going on and you're clueless. It's awesome."

Shikamaru's lip kicked up at one corner. "Sure."

True, he may have been ignorant to Ino's scheming, but he wasn't clueless by a long shot.

Even now, halfway on the road to wherever this 'surprise' was supposed to be taking place, he already had a pretty good indication of what the options were narrowing down to. There were several places he'd pinned Ino's predictability on. Soon enough the possibilities would whittle down to one point.

Yeah, purgatory.

And he was sure the Gods were laughing. He just hoped that the hell from last year would win him some universal favours with the powers that be this time around.

_I won't even get to sleep through this one…_

With that in mind, his current lack of proper sleep was really starting to take its toll. Even if he wasn't someone who naturally enjoyed and craved sleep as much as he did, the fact remained that he needed it. He needed the mindless blackout for his damned sanity given the rate at which his brain churned.

_I'm gonna do my time, then crawl into a bed…_

Chōji chuckled again, indulging in his friend's private suffering as if reading Shikamaru's mind. "You're freaking out, aren't you?"

Shikamaru smirked, flexing his fingers to work some blood back into the numb digits. They were hooked around the strap of a drawstring bag slung over his shoulder, carrying the cargo of Ino's gifts. He hefted the weight of the baggage and felt one corner of a wrapped present dig into his spine.

"I'm committing this day to memory. Just so you know."

Chōji countered the dry comment with a grin. "You'll forgive me."

"Don't bet on it."

A petty scoreboard had drawn itself up in the shadow-nin's mind – embarrassingly close to the kind Ino kept on him and Chōji. However, rather than a game of "You Owe Me", Shikamaru had decided on a defensive counter. He'd begun keeping a tally on all the reasons why he'd have a valid excuse not to owe anyone a damn thing in the near future.
This game was called "I'll Remember This".

And just as he was about to enlighten his friend to the ground rules, a fierce shout ricocheted down the sidewalk in a pitch that grazed Shikamaru's brain like a shuriken skimming across the inside of his skull.

"SHIKAMARU!"

The shadow-nin paused, hearing the sharp crack of high-heeled sandals echoing off the stone. He glanced up and a flurry of purple drew his eye to the approaching figure wrapped in indigo and lilac. He kept his face a blank canvas despite the grunt of amusement that caught low in his throat.

*What the hell is she doing?*

Waving around a long ribbon of what looked like a scarf or obi sash, Ino streamlined her way towards them, the flaxen whip of her high ponytail lashing on the breeze. Shikamaru blinked, taking a moment to admire the fact that she could actually run in shoes probably designed for crippling women.

*Torture and Interrogation could use those...*

Ino hobbled the last few paces with a scowl.

"That was stupid," Shikamaru noted.

"Argh! I can't believe you!" Ino threw out a hand to Chōji's arm to steady herself, knees bent, balancing on one leg at a time to take the weight off each abused foot as she glared up from under her bangs at the shadow-nin. "I spent ages finding those and you treat them like hand-me-downs! Which they aren't because you've *never* worn them!"

Shikamaru glanced at her feet, frowning at the grooves the thin straps had cut into the skin across the high arch of her foot. "Am I supposed to know what the hell you're talking about?"

Ino snapped her fingers to draw his attention back up, wobbling on one leg. "Kiba. He's wearing your clothes."

"I know."

"The ones I picked out for you."

Shikamaru stared at her blankly, not sure whether opening his mouth was wise at this point. He silently assessed the look on her face. For some inane reason, unknown to the workings of his male mind, she was bringing this up for a purpose other than to be troublesome.

Rolling a shoulder, Shikamaru sighed, settling a straight-faced look on her.

Ino's mouth dropped open a little at his lack of response and she tightened her grip on Chōji's arm as she straightened up indignantly, her nails curling into the fabric of his sleeve a little too aggressively.

"Well fine, be a jerk." She snapped her foot back down with a sharp click of the heel. "No one values anything I get them anyway."

Shikamaru arched a brow at that.

Where the hell had that come from? Before he could let the question hook him into a deadlock
with her, Chōji came between them in words.

"Almost thought you weren't gonna make it, Ino." Chōji nudged her lightly.

Ino took a moment to respond, her eyes sharp as razors on Shikamaru, looking to cut a guilty expression into the unconcerned canvas of his face. Then she blinked – and the fuse of glowing hurt in her eyes cut out in an instant, replaced by a softer spark as she snapped back from her irritation with a slow smile.

"Oh come on." Ino waved a hand airily, batting away the tension. "Like I'd let him figure it out."

Shikamaru squinted in confusion, thrown by this dramatic pendulum swing. He searched her face uncertainly for a moment before taking the easy route and accepting the exit offered.

"Figure it out?" he echoed, hopping onto the topic-shift.

Ino smiled a saccharine grin, the kind Shikamaru knew well enough to have him backing up a pace as she waved around the long purple sash in her hand. She wrapped the ends around her fists, pulling the fabric taut in a threatening snap.

"You owe me."

Shikamaru levelled a dubious glare on the sash in her hands. Ino arched a winged brow, lips parted and tongue poised at the tip of an argument she'd no doubt win. He heard the challenge in the silence. She was daring him to give her an excuse to list-off all the reasons just why he owed her. All the little events she'd been gathering like precious little shuriken, sharp and sure and ready to let fly.

Shit.

Shikamaru resigned himself by slotting one hand back into his pocket, slouching away from her with a sigh. "Whatever."

The second he closed his eyes, his guard dropped.

In that same second, Ino pounced.

Instinctively, Neji knew where to look.

Intuition guided him to a place he hadn't visited in months.

She will be here…

The sinuous lines of the pathway turned in smooth but controlled curves throughout the meditative gardens of the Hyūga residence. Neji glided along the pale stone with the same slow, effortless grace as the highbred koi fish, a rainbow school of pureblood carp that circled the shallow and serene ponds in figure eights.

Some of these fish were older than the most seasoned Hyūga elders.

In these gardens, time felt less temporal and transient than it did within the cold, high walls of the Hyūga compound and the busy village beyond its walls. Even the path Neji walked suffered few cracks, lightly scuffed by the sweep of sandaled feet.

He'd walked it barefoot as a child; trying to find the imprints of his father's footsteps.
A dull ache pulled across his chest.

The irony wasn't lost on him, but it felt less bitter than it had two weeks ago. The ghost he'd chased after as a child served as a stern warning now. He would not walk his father's path. He'd tread on hot coals, walk wires and trample trails littered with thorns before he pressed the soles of his feet into the ghost of Hizashi's shoes.

*I will find the freedom you yearned for…but I will do it my way…*

Neji blinked slowly, breathing deep against the sorrow that had finally subsided from a sharp, abrasive hurt into a dulled and heavy sadness held deep in his chest. It's where he kept and guarded the memory of his father, precious and private and beyond the reach of the rage that had once tainted it.

Now it was a lonely ache of loss, but one he'd rather have felt than denied.

Neji raised a hand, fingertips skimming the hitai-ate across his brow.

His father's headband, the only thing he'd rescued at 4 AM fourteen years ago.

Hizashi had left little behind.

*Just me…*

The hollow tap of a bamboo dripper drew Neji's gaze back from the past and across to one of the many stone water basins stationed along the path. Large stone lanterns stood like age-old sentinels, guarding the pavilion up ahead. It was surrounded by a bamboo grove and Neji wove between the thick, durable culms like a lion between yellowed cage bars.

He didn't need his Byakugan to locate who he was looking for.

She'd probably sensed him already.

Exhaling a quiet sigh, Neji stepped up onto the porch of the pavilion, shifting his weight to keep the old wood from creaking as he approached the shoji door, pressing his palm flat to the panel.

He let a pause signal his presence before sliding it back.

Lavender eyes turned up towards him through the fall of long blue-black strands.

Neji's jaw tensed. He remained standing at the threshold, afternoon sunlight filtering over his shoulder, turning motes of dust to silver and gold sparks that drifted idly in the old room like tiny fireflies.

"I didn't know where to go…" the kunoichi whispered quietly, lowering her eyes to her hands, folded neatly atop her lap. "It's quiet here."

She knelt formally in the empty room, in counsel with her conscience. She wasn't the only one. Neji's conscience was already turning about the situation in uncomfortable circles.

*How am I supposed to protect both of you…and from each other?*

Neji let out a long breath through his nose. "Hinata-sama…"

"I did it…" Hinata's fingers twisted and twined on her lap, then settled rigidly into a tight grip. "I finally…I held it together…"
Neji remained silent, watching the nervous, conflicted fidgeting, concern pinching the very corners of his eyes as his focus settled on her hands. They were thinly bandaged, the skin at the backs of her fingers raw from chakra burn.

"I don't ever want to do it again."

He had suspected such words from her, but the tone in which they were delivered trembled in a bitter, shaking whisper. He stepped out of his sandals and stepped into the room. Hinata kept her eyes on her hands; it was only when Neji crouched down in front of her that she raised her palms to cup her eyes.

"No," Neji said.

She corrected herself quickly, looping strands of black behind her ears instead. But her chin remained several notches below the mark Neji had instructed her to hold it at.

"Raise your head, Hinata-sama."

"She is my sister…" Hinata breathed the words out furtively, as if the information were forbidden and the sentiment frowned upon. "I didn't mean to hurt her...I just...she wouldn't stop…"

"Raise your head," Neji echoed tonelessly.

Hinata's fingers clenched into fists, the heels of her hands pressed hard against her thighs, elbows locked and arms tense enough to snap. "I hurt her…"

"Raise your head."

She did. Her chin came up as quickly as her eyes, lavender-hued pools brimming with hurt and shame. "I hurt her and they were proud…"

Neji drew his shoulders back, holding them rigid. The muscles at the hinge of his jaw bunched in a quick flex as he controlled his expression. "I know."

Hinata flinched, wounded by his curt reply. "You said I needed the will to protect people…"

"Sibling rivalry is inevitable in our clan. The will to protect has nothing to do with it." He paused here, pushing back the ghost of his father's image as it flickered in his mind's eye before guttering out like a dead flame. "It is about the will to survive. You must accept this. Hanabi accepted it years ago."

"But I can't."

"You'll have to."

Hinata shook her head, her eyes firing up with a rare flash of conviction and unshakeable determination. "I want to change it."

Neji pressed his lips to smother a grim smile.

_Naruto's lasting impression…_

And with the thought of lasting impressions, came the memory of one carved raw into the tender muscle of his heart. A beat later it hit his head, Shikamaru's words drawling out in a rough murmur in his memories.
"Your 'lasting' impression. More like a parting gift at this point."

"I will change it, Neji..." Hinata whispered.

Neji's eyes hardened from their momentary glaze, his focus swinging back onto his cousin as he slammed a mental door on the memory, finding his voice after swallowing hard.

"You are not in the position to change anything." Neji reminded, his voice gaining an edge to cut through her reluctance to listen. "When you are in the position to defy the elders, then you can seek to bring about these changes, until then your hands are tied. Accept it."

"You didn't," she whispered.

Neji blinked, pulling his head back a fraction.

Hinata resolutely held his stare.

Neji didn't answer for a long moment and the silence betrayed the tension he managed to keep from his guarded face. He smoothed his voice to the same neutral stillness.

"That is entirely different, Hinata-sama."

Hinata smiled weakly. It was the kind of sad, wry smile she'd settled on him during the Chūnin exams. The kind she wore when she appealed to one of her greatest strengths – her empathy. Unfortunately, Neji had no use for a strength that would expose a weakness and right now he needed her to be strong.

"Understand this," Neji warned, leaning in without aggression. "You hold the keys to the cage of our clan's destructive traditions. You are the Branch House's hope."

"But you are—"

"No," he cut her off with a stern look. "I am nothing more than a paper tiger in this clan. You cannot afford to take the same risks that I do."

"It's more than taking risks," Hinata challenged without raising her voice or changing her tone, watching him with that earnest concern that filled her eyes with sincerity so severe he had to look away for a moment. "Hitaro-sama and our grandfather...they're watching you and—"

"You do not need to worry about me," Neji interjected flatly. "I know what I'm doing."

Hinata's response was more effective than any words could have been. She simply tracked her gaze to his chest, her eyes lingering meaningfully on key nodes in his tenketsu before she glanced back up again.

Her subtle point didn't stop it from being sharp.

Neji sucked in a tight breath. "Regardless of whatever I may have done in the past, it doesn't change what I must do now. Or what you must do."

Hinata regarded him quietly, a mix of childlike fragility and budding strength warring over her face. "And what must I do?"

Neji's lips framed a sad smile, a strange, almost reflective opacity touching his eyes as he breathed out his reply. "Whatever is necessary."
"How exactly is this necessary?"

"It is, be quiet."

"I'll remember this…" Shikamaru growled, his face pinching in discomfort as he squinted beneath the sash banded across his eyes. "Troublesome."

"I can't believe you're still wearing black," Ino scolded, turning a circle around him to tug the edges of the fabric down firmly over the bridge of his nose. "This sash is the only colour on you."

"It's bright purple," Shikamaru growled.

Chōji chuckled. "And it's shiny."

Shikamaru smacked Ino's hands away, scowling at the scratch of the wiry, glittery fibres threaded into the weave, prickling against his lashes and eyelids. He hooked his thumbs under the hem to loosen its cinch around his head.

A palm clipped his shoulder in a slap. "Stop peeking!"

"Are you joking?" Shikamaru turned in the direction of Ino's voice, stabbing a finger to the blindfold banded around his skull. "You wrapped this stupid thing around my head three times. I can't see a damn thing."

"That's gotta be true." Chōji's hand clamped on the shadow-nin's shoulder and turned him a few degrees to his left until he was facing Ino. "There you go, buddy."

Shikamaru turned his head back towards Chōji, his expression inscrutable beneath the sash—not that he needed a half-masked scowl to translate how unimpressed he was with the entire situation and his best friend's part in it. Again.

"It almost suits you, Shika," Chōji laughed.

Shikamaru bristled like a cactus, the spiky ends of his hair shuddering as he prickled at the abbreviation of his name. "Seriously, don't call me that."

Ino giggled, crooning in Shikamaru's ear. "Aww, is the grumpy, zombie-eyed Shikamaru blushing under there? Red goes well with purple."

"Don't even try it. You both cut team and I'm gonna remember it."

He heard Chōji heft the bag he'd taken off the shadow-nin. "Uh, we're all part of the same team."

"I'm starting my own team and neither of you are in it."

"Oh relax, slacker. Okay, Chōji!" A loud smack signalled Ino clapping her hands. "Spin him!"

Shikamaru turned his head sharply. "Wait. What?"

"Just go with the flow!" Ino encouraged.

Shikamaru didn't have a chance to fight the flow before it hit him. Chōji whacked a hand onto his shoulder and twirled him on the spot like a spinning top.

"Hey!" Shikamaru threw his arms out to steady himself, staggering sideways into Ino.
The kunoichi huffed in annoyance, grabbed the ends of the sash wrapped around his head and didn't give him a chance to catch his balance. She turned him around a few more times like a dog on a lead.

"Keep spinning!"

Like he really had a choice.

Surrendering to the stupidity of the moment, Shikamaru sighed and allowed her to rotate him a few more times, each turn getting faster and faster until he couldn't distinguish one loop from another. And to his sudden surprise, the dizzying sensation of losing all sense of direction and equilibrium felt unexpectedly…good.

Very good.

Even his headache gave up the game because it momentarily stopped pounding, leaving his mind semi-weightless.

Perspective vanished.

For a crazy, uncontrolled moment, the thoughts stopped cramming in his skull and washed out into a fuzzy blur he had no hope of focusing on. Everything became an indistinct, unintelligible rush without an anchor to ground him or a thread of stability to latch onto.

And in this harmless kid's-play spin, his immaculate grip on his thoughts slipped.

And that's when it happened.

Sudden, inexplicable fear reared up inside him.

It kicked his gut so hard that bile hit the back of his throat.

Fuck…

"Knock it off!" he growled suddenly, throwing his arms out to push Ino away, almost landing on his ass in the process.

A large hand gripped his shoulder, holding him steady even as the black void continued to spin around his skull, feeling like the world he couldn't see was still rotating in a vicious orbit as he swayed blindly on the spot.

Ino snickered. "So, any idea which way you're facing?"

"Am I even standing up?" Shikamaru grumbled shakily, gripping his head to keep his focus on his brain rather than the unexpected boom of his heart, adrenaline subsiding along with the fear as he came back to his senses.

Luckily, neither Chōji nor Ino picked up on anything.

*Because there's nothing to pick up on. Settle down, get a grip, idiot.*

Shikamaru curbed the adrenaline jittering through his limbs by channelling it into irritation, scratching at the high ridge of his cheek, focusing on the chafing itch of the material banded across his eyes.

"Now you're set for the surprise." Ino pressed her hands to his back, shoving him in a direction he
couldn't name, the sharp rap of her heels drilling into his head. "Have fun guessing."

Shikamaru snorted, more concerned with putting one foot in front of the other and not falling flat on his face. "Now I'm not sure I wanna know."

He had a feeling Ino and Chōji were exchanging glances, maybe even high-fiving. Unable to fight the urge to smile, Shikamaru sighed, slouching back into the push of the troublesome hands steering him along the road – exerting minimal effort.

Ino tugged the sash around his head. "Lazy."

"I'm relaxing while I can."

"Good plan, genius," Ino said with mock warning, shoving him hard onto Chōji who took over steering their blindfolded friend. "Chōji's supposed to be dragging you, not me."

Not possessing the energy to fight the inevitable, Shikamaru stuck his hands in his pockets and trusted Chōji not to walk him into a lamppost.

_Hn. Go with the flow…_

A black cat crossed Asuma's path.

While he'd never been prone to superstition, he couldn't help but pause and take stock when Kakashi's ninken loped past him, wandering after the feline without chasing it. The dog's stalk was lazy, it's head ducked down, ears forward and its thin tail waving around like an antenna looking for a signal.

And then the dog tuned into something more interesting.

It drew up short to scent the air and glance across the street. Asuma followed the animal's gaze over to the two Jōnin standing just outside one of the Shogi Houses.

_Perfect._

His lips cut up in a smirk around his cigarette.

Kakashi leaned to one side, shoulder propped against one of the paint-flecked pillars supporting the awning of the porch. The copy-nin's gaze had settled just to the side of the green-clad ninja gesticulating at him with gusto, pontificating prose about honourable rivalry and the perennial spirit of Youth.

Kakashi nodded listlessly, his visible eye drooped in a pained kind of patience.

Asuma chuckled quietly, walking over to the ninken to scratch the sharp triangle of its ear. The dog leaned into the attention with a pleased squint, thumping it's tail. Kakashi turned his head a little at the movement and the lazy grey of his iris slid sharply to the corner of his eye, locking onto Asuma.

The Sarutobi winked.

Kakashi's eye remained as deadpan as could be. Then the masked-nin raised the side of his palm to his temple in greeting, effectively knocking Gai's attention onto Asuma.

"Asuma!" Gai beamed, swivelling dramatically to flick a thumb's up. "I've thrown down the
gauntlet at my rival's feet! And it's all thanks to you, my wily adviser!"

Asuma's eyes widened.

Kakashi lowered his hand, his visible eyebrow sketching upward oh-so-slowly.

"Oh? All thanks to you, is it?" The silver-haired Jōnin queried, voice lazy and gaze fierce.

"A shogi game seemed like a good idea," Asuma defended with open palms, waving a hand towards the poster still pinned to the glass. "You might even get some money out of it."

Kakashi cocked his head, the wild shock of silver-hair canting even more to one side. "Because I'm sure you were thinking of my good fortune when you suggested it."

Asuma bit down hard on his cigarette to keep from grinning. "Of course I was."

"Of course," Kakashi drawled, his easy tones lilted with that airy, musical timbre that always contained a knife's edge of sarcasm.

Asuma smirked, cocked a leg and gave a mocking half bow.

Kakashi rolled his eye, but the corner crinkled a little in amusement.

Fortunately, their shared sense of humour had solidified an understated and easy friendship between them, one that had held strong since the first time they'd met. It had also helped keep things steady when the rivalry between Sakura and Ino had been at its most contentious.

Gai, oblivious to their subtle repartee, sliced his palm flat across the air as if rolling out a scroll for Kakashi to sign in blood. "What do you say, Kakashi? Are you up for the challenge?"

"Of course he is," Asuma assured, still scratching the ninken's ear. "Just look at his face, he's thrilled."

Kakashi's expression flattened to a slit-eyed stare.

Gai leaned in, examining his rival's lidded eye with a pout of suspicion.

Asuma chuckled, smoke curling from the corners of his mouth to exaggerate the stretch of his grin. "That's his poker face, just watch out for it during the game."

"Of course! Always so hip and cool!" Gai clapped Kakashi hard on the back.

Kakashi rolled his shoulder with a grunt.

Asuma laughed, the rumble of amusement earning him a sedate glare from the copy-nin as Kakashi shook his head. Taking pity on the Hatake, Asuma feigned a look of sudden remembrance.

"By the way." He turned to Gai. "I think Hyūga's back from that mission in Hanegakure."

"He is?" Gai switched gears in an instant, thick brows jumping up like excited caterpillars. "Of course he is. That's the timely manner of my excellent student. Duty calls, gentlemen!"

Gai's predictability had Asuma puffing out his chest to contain a laugh. Kakashi was less amused, his exasperation betraying itself in a twitch of his eye when the green-clad Jōnin smacked a copy of the competition leaflet to his chest.
"No need to pencil it in! The date's indelible, my friend. Name the time and we'll battle it out 'til our brains sweat!" Gai roared with competitive gumption.

Kakashi looked at him without comment and with possible concern – as if seriously considering the chance that Gai's Youthful Spirit was just a smokescreen for a psychological condition that was probably hard to pronounce.

Asuma smacked his lips to keep from laughing again.

"He'll be there," he assured. "Kakashi never backs out."

"As expected of my rival." Gai grinned with that freaky flash of enamel before he proceeded to leap across the street, startling villagers as he launched his way to the rooftops via handstand springs and impressive acrobatics that looked so exhausting Asuma had to light up another cigarette.

"Your work's done for the day, I take it?" Kakashi sighed with exaggerated pique, crumpling the competition leaflet in his palm.

Asuma pulled in the tobacco like fresh air, sighing with content satisfaction at the mess he'd landed the copy-nin in. "My best day got better. Thanks."

Kakashi watched him quietly through his droopy lid, lazily rubbing his knuckles along his ninken's head as the dog trotted over and sat at his feet. "Best?"

Asuma nodded, watching as Kakashi balanced the crumpled paper on his ninja hound's nose. The dog knocked it back into the copy-nin's palm, repeating the process like ball game when Kakashi bounced it back again.

"I take it that means you decided on what you're going to do?" Kakashi asked casually, looking disinterested, his attention on the dog, but Asuma had learned enough to know that Kakashi didn't ask questions he didn't care to know the answers to.

For a long moment, Asuma watched the crumpled paper flick back and forth.

"I did," he said at length. "I have."

Kakashi caught the crumpled ball in his palm, holding it for a beat. "And?"

Asuma plucked his cigarette from his lips, crushing it out against the adjacent pillar with a warm, almost disbelieving smile. "This is the chance I never thought I'd get, Kakashi."

Kakashi watched him with detached curiosity, the dark grey of his eye as sharp as the red one hidden beneath his hitai-ate. "You're going to take it."

"With both hands."

"Good."

"Yeah, though it freaks me out how you knew before I did."

Kakashi blinked innocently, his head tilting. "Did I?"

"Yeah, both at the start and at the finish, you smug bastard."

"Well…" Kakashi's eye curved a little, the fabric of his mask hinting at the chisel of a smile as he
hummed. "It's the simple math of life, Asuma."

Asuma chuckled, arching his brows. "Simple, huh? Is that why you're lost on Life's path or whatever you say?"

Kakashi glanced off to the side as if mulling the words over. Then he cut short his ball game, tossed the paper up and caught it in a tight fist, crushing the ruined leaflet into an even smaller knot.

With a flick of his wrist, it sailed through the air and dropped into a nearby trashcan with a tinny echo.

"Aren't we all?" the masked-nin murmured.

Kakashi's ninken cocked its head up at him, its soulful eyes fixed on the silver-haired shinobi with a look so close to concern it surprised Asuma.

*Odd…*

The Sarutobi frowned, glancing between master and mutt for any hint of what the dog was picking up on. Before he could call the copy-nin up on it, Kakashi turned his head with a jovial hum. His pewter eye brightened with that peculiar cheer that Asuma always thought happened a little too quickly for it to be anything other than just another of the copy-nin's practiced masks.

"Speaking of life," Kakashi began, making sure he had redirected Asuma's attention, "If Naruto's increased hyperactivity is anything to go by, I'm sure you have a couple of birthdays to celebrate today."

"Where the hell does the time go?" His words betrayed no overt sentiment for his students, but he knew it carried in his voice either way.

Kakashi watched him, the half-moon crescent of his eye softening a little. "One can forget how young they are."

Asuma frowned a little, not wanting to think about that. "Well, one thing hasn't changed. They're still a pricey pack, especially Ino and Chōji."

"You were the one who decided on the foolhardy tactic of "rewarding them gets results"."

Asuma snorted, wondering why and how he'd ever decided that would be a brilliant idea. Kakashi's silence positively rang with 'I-told-you-so'.

Conceding the point, he shot the copy-nin a sideways glance. "Alright then smartass, what do you use to pull rank with your lot? Porn?"

Kakashi tipped his head in mock consideration. "Well, best never to rule out a dramatic, shock tactic. Though I have Chidori for that."

"Yeah, and as a result your hair is a dramatic, shock tactic." Asuma glanced at the silvery, standing-on-end strands. "I think the static from all the lightning has done some damage."

Kakashi smiled beneath the mask, genuine laughter brightening his eye. "Says the man who's growing a bush on his face. Does Kurenai prune it for you? How romantic."

Asuma flushed then laughed hoarsely, rolling his eyes as he scratched at his jaw. "Right. Hair
growth aside, I've lost all credibility as an intimidating sensei."

Kakashi patted his Jōnin vest without expression. "My heart bleeds for you, Asuma."

"Well thanks for the support," Asuma drawled.

"You don't need it."

Asuma shrugged, examining the end of his cigarette before his eyes slid to the poster on the window. "I might need that cash prize by the end of the day."

"Yeah." Kakashi's mask puffed with a breathy chuckle. "Too bad you suck at Shogi."

The fact that Shikamaru hadn't seen it coming had little to do with the blindfold.

The second Chōji stopped steering him and hit the breaks on their little journey the shadow-nin braced himself for whatever was coming next. But when Ino's fingers hooked into the sash, loosening the knot and unwinding the material from around his head, he had a feeling he'd miscalculated her predictability.

*It's too quiet…*

Except for the babble and bubble of what sounded like water.

The air felt humid.

*The Hot Springs?*

When the fabric fell away from his face he scrunched his nose against the lingering tickle and then cracked his eyes open.

They flew wide in surprise.

"Ta da!" Ino swept her arm towards the ornate, latticed entrance to one of Konoha's most expensive ryokans.

'HOTARU'

Meaning 'firefly', the name of the luxury inn was accentuated by tiny little bulbs that twinkled delicately in the trees planted outside the entrance. The courtyard was filled with blood red Japanese maples and their sharp, star-like leaves rustled in welcome, scarlet bodies shivering in the breeze.

Shikamaru stared, unable to process a response as he dissected all the reasons why 1) Ino would have selected this place 2) how the hell she could afford it and 3) why he felt uncomfortable at the thought that she'd done it out of consideration for his crappy mood over the past two weeks.

Ino angled her head around his shoulder, grinning. "Well?"

The shadow-nin blinked once, then again, slower. "A ryokan."

"A luxury ryokan," Ino amended, her grin turning a little crooked, almost uncertain.

Shikamaru looked across at her. "Why?"
"I told you. You needed some birthday spoiling."

"But this is—"

"Quiet, peaceful, relaxing, boring," Ino enumerated on her fingers, sighing dramatically as she hung off his arm like a tortured soul. "However will you handle this year's torture?"

Shikamaru smiled a little, shrugging her off. "More like however will you handle it?"

Ino scoffed, waving a hand and using the same motion to drape the sash around her neck. "I guess I'll just get my ungrateful friend to book me in for a massage or spar session, because arranging this was soooo stressful and all."

Shikamaru smirked, having suspected as much. "Right."

Chōji chuckled, herding both of them with a light push. "Come on, I'm starving. I wasn't lying about the good food."

"Oh yeah? How do you know?"

"Ino had me approve the menu."

Shikamaru chuckled quietly. "Figures."

Stepping inside the entrance, they were immediately received by a group of elegantly dressed women, wrapped in silks of purple and red. One was noticeably older than the others. The manager, Shikamaru assumed. The greeting was a courteous bow, but there was something relaxed about the formality.

"Ino-chan, Ino-chan," the old woman greeted, taking Ino's hand with familiarity and fondness, squeezing the kunoichi's fingers. "Thank you so much."

Ino blinked quickly, her blue eyes tensing before she gave a high little laugh that both Chōji and Shikamaru recognised as the nervous prelude to her forced airs and graces. The shadow-nin arched a brow, suddenly a little more suspicious as to what Ino had done to win such high favour with the old woman. Favour that he soon learned included three superior tatami suites and catered meals with enough courses to have Chōji starry-eyed with anticipation. Added to this special treatment was the news that the ryokan had fully catered for a list of guests that Ino had drawn up earlier in the week.

How the hell did she pull this off?

As two attendants led him and Chōji into the lobby area, Shikamaru did a quick scan of the elegant, traditional furnishings. The interior design prided itself on mahogany colours with rich ebonies, deep reds and hints of royal purple that created a molasses-like sunset feel, which would deepen mysteriously and magnetically in the evening.

"Pretty amazing, huh?" Chōji said, taking it in with a smile. "She went all out."

Shikamaru tipped his head.

No kidding...

Interspersed with the rich feel of lavishness were the subtle, delicate hints of fireflies scattered about, whether in symbols, paintings, tiny glass and mosaic pieces that caught the light or intricate
carvings in the wood.

_Hn. Shiny._

There was no doubt about the luxury of the place or the excellent quality of service. No sooner had Shikamaru taken a seat than tea was being poured and sweets served up.

It was awkward only because it was foreign.

The attendants were friendly enough to indicate that there was no pressure to adhere to the etiquette the place demanded. Shikamaru wasn't sure whether that was Ino tipping the scales in their favour or whether the staff were always this obliging to guests.

_Weird._

"Thank you." He inclined his head to the attendant and looked across at Chōji, lowering his voice. "How the hell can she afford this?"

Chōji shrugged, smiling as he reached for a dumpling stick. "We all chipped in."

Shikamaru arched a brow. "Even if you did, it's not enough to cover the kind of accommodation she's booked up in this place."

"Jeez would you relax?" Chōji sighed, frowning a little. "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, you know?"

Shikamaru leaned back a little, chastened by the look on Chōji's face. "That's not what I'm doing. I just don't see how—"

"Oh quit trying to figure things out," Ino's voice whistled across his head as she leaned over to steal a star-shaped sweet off his plate, popping it into her mouth. "Relax, lazybones."

Shikamaru hooked his thumb around the small tea cup, but made no move to take a sip, his eyes scanning around again as Ino flopped down onto one of the large zabuton cushions. Koto music drifted in the background, the delicate strings plucking out traditional melodies to soothe and soften the atmosphere.

"Wait until you see the rooms," Ino began, tugging off her shoes. "If you can't sleep here, Shikamaru, you won't sleep anywhere ever again. The views are so pretty."

"Pretty…" Shikamaru echoed dryly.

"Well they are," Ino insisted. "They look out onto the gardens and they have the best beds. Futons like clouds. You'll sleep like a baby."

The shadow-nin hesitated then glanced back at her. "You know that old lady?"

Ino examined the red welts her sandal straps had sawed into her feet, ignoring the question. "I can't wait to soak in the onsen." She looked up quickly, flicking her hair back. "Don't freak out Shikamaru, they have private open-aired baths in the rooms too."

Torn between her neat evasion and her unrelated statement, Shikamaru frowned. Chōji beat him to a question he wasn't going to ask and had hoped neither of his teammates would bother with.

"Why would you freak out in an onsen?" the Akimichi asked, chomping on a dumpling.
Shikamaru's chest took a dent as he pulled in a silent but sharp breath.

He glanced away, shrugging. "She's just talking crap."

Ino snorted and looked at both of them as if they were dense. "Uh, hello? You tell me, Chōji. When was the last time Shikamaru stepped into an onsen?"

Chōji tilted his head to one side, pausing mid-chew. "Oh hey, that's a good point. It's been ages. And you used to like going too."

"Yeah, so what happened?" Ino asked, scanning the sweets.

"Nothing happened," Shikamaru replied offhandedly.

He kept his gaze fixed across the room, pretending to admire the garden views through the open shoji doors. His refusal to acknowledge the topic or Ino's curious look was misread as embarrassment.

"Aww." Ino snickered. "I didn't know you were so shy, Shikamaru."

Shyness had nothing to do with it.

Shikamaru's jaw tightened imperceptibly, discomfort churning in the pit of his stomach like a viper. He took a quick sip of the tea, not bothering to cool it with a breath as he swallowed it down, letting it scald along his tongue and down his throat to distract from the nausea in his gut.

"You invited the others here too?" he croaked, swallowing to soothe the burn.

Ino nodded, massaging her foot with a wince. "For the meal, all relaxed and chummy. It's a fifteen course dinner." She shot him a look. "You better be hungry."

Shikamaru was pretty sure he'd lost his appetite altogether.

*Get over it, stop acting like a kid.*

The shadow-nin set his chin in his palm, elbow pressed to the table as he managed a lopsided smile. "Well I didn't get fed this morning thanks to you."

Ino stuck her tongue out. "Your mom is great. I'll say it again, shall I? I think she loves me and Chōji more than you."

"I think you're right," Shikamaru replied, almost serious but for the amusement in his eyes. "She almost decapitated me today."

Chōji laughed. "That was pretty hilarious despite being scary. No offense."

Shikamaru waved away the comment. "If this place has a bed like a cloud, you're almost forgiven."

"Does that mean you like it here?" Ino fished, watching him through her lashes. She made a face. "Not that you'd ever say it."

Shikamaru shrugged, but his lazy smile said what he wouldn't. It was enough for Ino and she went back to cooing at her abused feet, promising them a pedicure and loving treatment after the upcoming abuse of more shoe torture.

Shikamaru and Chōji exchanged bemused glances.
They didn't have time to poke fun at her before an attendant approached them, bowing with a smile. "We're ready now."

Ino twisted in her seat quickly. "Do you know if erm…the packages arrived okay?"

The attendant looked confused.

Shikamaru quirked a brow, setting his teacup down before it reached his mouth. "What packages?"

Chōji froze, coughed, panicked and shoved Shikamaru out of his seat.

"Chōji!"

Distracted, Shikamaru didn't notice Ino making some weird gesture to the baffled attendant, who must have made sense of whatever the blonde was miming because she gave a little chuckle and a quick nod.

Shikamaru smacked a palm onto the table and glared at Chōji over the low edge. "What the hell was that?"

The Akimichi winced. "Sorry, reflex."

"Reflex my ass," Shikamaru snapped, grabbing the edge and pulling himself back into his seat with a growl.

He didn't get a chance to settle before Ino was looping arms with him and pulling him back up. "Oh quit whining, it was a birthday punch. Don't guys do that?"

"I would never punch Shikamaru," Chōji growled, offended by the thought.

"I'd punch you."

Chōji showed just how unconvinced he was by smiling. "I'd never seriously hurt you, you know that."

Shikamaru's jaw dropped open a little. "No, but you'll shove me out my chair, laugh at my expense and conspire against me with this one," he flicked Ino on the head, effectively freeing his arm but earning himself a punch from her. "Ugh. Troublesome."

Ino gave a smug grin then skipped on ahead, pausing to pull on her shoes in little hops across the floor. "Hurry up you two!"

Shikamaru buried his face into his palm. "I don't have the energy for this."

Chōji patted him on the back, steering him after the Yamanaka. "Hey, come on. She's trying to make this special."

Shikamaru pinched the bridge of his nose, the tips of his fingers digging in hard. "I never asked her to."

"Well yeah, you didn't have to. Isn't that the point?"

Shikamaru hesitated at that, looking across at his friend through the slots in his fingers before he dropped his hand away, sliding it into his pocket. "Yeah."

Chōji smiled, dark eyes earnest with a concern Shikamaru pretended not to notice. "We want you to
have a good time. You've been all tired lately. Your brain is working overtime and it's like...I don't know, Shikamaru...it's like you didn't stop after the mission in Hanegakure ended."

Shikamaru immediately stopped walking.

Chōji stopped right beside him, resolute.

_Dammit._

The shadow-nin turned on his heel and levelled his friend with a steady gaze, setting his free hand on the Akimichi's shoulder with a firm flex of his fingers. "Don't get all paranoid on me, alright?"

Chōji's brows tugged together sharply. "Shikamaru."

Shikamaru let his lip curve in a lazy mimic of his usual smirk. "I'm fine. Seriously, it's the lack of sleep. I just need a few straight hours of blackout. Hell, you have my permission to punch my lights out by the end of the night, alright?"

Chōji frowned again. "Yeah right."

Shikamaru's smirk softened into a smile. "It's my birthday, so apparently it's expected and it's allowed."

Thankfully, the humour vanquished the tension and there was only the barest falter in Chōji's face before this cheeks dimpled in a grin. "Not like Ino needs an excuse to hit you though."

Shikamaru rolled his eyes with a groan, lazing back into a walk, following after the troublesome Yamanaka as she ran on ahead, slipped into a room further along the broad corridor and slotted the door shut.

Shikamaru arched a brow. "What's the rush?"

Chōji followed behind, chuckling in a foretelling kind of way. "Freaking out yet?"

Shikamaru crossed the tatami flooring with a drag of his feet, glancing over his shoulder as he reached for the sliding door Ino had vanished behind. "Oh great, is that a head's up?"

The door whipped aside without warning.

Shikamaru caught himself against the frame only to be smacked in the face by a party horn that unravelled like a snake's tongue, feathering against his forehead with a noisy trumpeting that sounded like someone blowing their nose.

"SURPRISE!"

The chorus of rowdy cheers was punctuated by another smack in the forehead as Naruto blew out the party horn again, hitting Shikamaru straight on the bull's-eye of the small line furrowed into his brow. The paper tongue curled back in a snap, the mouthpiece pinched between Naruto's teeth as he grinned.

"Happy Birthday!" he muffled around the noisemaker.

"Don't expect special treatment!" Kiba shouted across the room. "I'm just here for the food!"

"Kiba-kun!" Hinata gasped, feeling his shame for him.
Shikamaru barely registered the teasing words flitting about. His attention had abruptly fixed itself onto the ridiculous thing Naruto was wearing on his head.

"Is there a reason you're wearing a road cone?"

Naruto laughed loudly and his whiskered cheeks warmed with good-humoured embarrassment before he jerked his thumb over his shoulder towards the large table.

"Ino kinda insisted."

Shikamaru flicked a glance towards the seated Chūnin, scanning the multi-coloured madness. "You've got to be joking."

Ino caught his gaze and held up one of the ridiculous hats which Sakura framed with her palms like a prize on auction. Both girls grinned tellingly.

Shikamaru chuckled low in his throat, shaking his head. "Not a chance in hell."

The limits of power – at its most sadistic – stretched as far as the imagination.

At least this was Neji's impression, because if the brain possessed no pain receptors or nerve endings, then the Hyūga clan had defied more than just blood with their curse seal – they'd defied biology.

Neji knew this pain.

What started as the barest twinge at his temple shot through into a knifing agony the second he stopped walking. And while the human body had a way of purging itself of the memory of most pains, this was one Neji had never forgotten.

NO...

Before he could pitch into the wall, he slammed the side of his fist into the smooth wood.

NO.

A shudder ran the length of his arm, but he refused to drop as he braced himself against the hot, white flash of agony. But before it could burn into a pit of bubbling lava in his head, the pain stopped.

Gone.

As quickly as it had struck, it vanished like a searing poker pulled out from his skull. Only a phantom pain remained. Sucking in a breath, Neji glanced up through the shiver of his bangs as he panted hard, a cold sweat sheeting across his face. Then his eyes frosted with something colder and his breath rattled in a hiss between his teeth.

Bastard.

Across the courtyard, Hyūga Hitaro stood, two fingers held straight and pressed serenely to his stern, perpetually down-turned mouth. The hand seal was unmistakeable. Neji's eyes flashed, but then Hitaro mockingly curled a finger to leave a single digit pressed to his lips in a gesture of silence.

Neji's eyes narrowed as he straightened up.
He knew the lesson here wasn't about suffering in silence; he'd learned that long before.

This was far more menacing.

This was a reminder.

Hitaro's eyes bore into the young Jōnin and the bleached, bloodless white of the elder's stare turned colder as he watched, waited, warned.

Damn you to hell.

The sinews in Neji's hands pulled as taut as wire, fingers flexing and furling into fists.

If only I could send you there.

His dignity roared out its defiance, claws of fury gouging the inside of his chest, wanting to rip out and riot. Wanting to rage and rule against this chain of control twisting tighter and tauter around him.

No. Not now.

Neji breathed deep, pulling in the air until the rage rippled away. For a moment he became so still he seemed to have calcified on the spot.

Frozen over – until he moved to bow.

And the second he did, something deep inside him cracked a little – as it did every time – invisible beneath the armour of an expressionless mask.

One day, I will trade this mask for another.

And as he bowed to Hitaro, he cauterized the wound in his chest with the conviction of that vow, letting it brand him deeper than the curse seal ever would.

I will break these chains.

Somehow, the chance in hell had happened.

Shikamaru pinned the outcome on the players. They'd all come together to crown him into their stupid ranks and now he sat to one side of the table, his head ducked slightly under the weight of the supersized party hat balanced on the long spikes of his ponytail.

"It's an interesting look for you."

Shikamaru glanced up without raising his head. "Here for the food too, huh?"

"You bet." Asuma looked down at him, head cocked to one side as he hooked his lip over an unlit cigarette, which tilted upwards in a jerk as his smirk turned sharper. "But seeing this is worth it, even if I wasn't here to eat."

Asuma was staring at the hat.

Shikamaru's lashes drooped. "You're supposed to be on my side."

"I am," Asuma assured, taking his seat beside the shadow-nin, smiling at the balloons tied to
"Shikamaru's chair. "If I wasn't I'd have told you how stupid you look instead."

"Right." Shikamaru straightened up, almost popping the balloons with the point of his hat. He smacked both palms to the table resolutely. "Ino, it's coming off."

"Noooo!" Ino rocked her seat into his, wrapping her arms around his hat to keep it planted on his head.

"Ino, get off. I'm gonna lose it."

"No way! After the trouble I went to?" Ino called in reinforcements. "Chōji!"

Chōji, without even looking over, extended a multi-sized hand across the table to pin his fingers on Shikamaru's shoulders, holding him still. "Ne, we're all suffering together here."

Shikamaru slumped in defeat and smacked his forehead onto the table with a dull thud – leaving Ino to catch his hat so it didn't fall off its ponytail perch.

"Why…?" he groaned.

Asuma blinked lazily, ribbons of smoke curling upwards from his cigarette as he set the pack down, chuckling. "Ah, there's the teamwork I applaud."

Shikamaru slid his hand under his chin to prop his head up, eyeing the cigarette packet.

Asuma slid it out of reach. "Don't even think about it."

"I hate smoking."

"Keep it that way."

"Hypocrite."

Asuma exhaled a thin plume, smirking. "Wearing that hat, I can't take anything you say seriously."

"This sucks."

"Shikamaru," Ino growled, twisting the hat around his ponytail as if she could screw it on and into place. "Quit being a killjoy."

"I'm not feeling the joy."

"Liar," Ino snickered, batting the balloons, which Naruto had decorated by scribbling faces onto them. "You're enjoying the food."

True.

Shikamaru set his elbows on the table and allowed her to manhandle his hat back into place, shaking his head marginally just to be difficult. Despite the irksome accessory, he couldn't deny that the relaxed meal was just the kind of distraction he'd needed – it certainly didn't hurt that the food was every bit the taste-bud treat that Chōji had promised. Everyone was digging in and the dishes kept on coming.

All of the Rookie Nine were present – bar of course, Sasuke.

Gai's team had yet to show.
Shikamaru blinked hard and veered his attention away from where that thought was likely to lead.

He set his focus on those gathered.

The teams sat sporadically, cushioned on comfy chairs that flanked the long table, occasionally swapping seats for new conversation or to orbit the table and reach the different dishes laid out. The dining room's lighting held like honey, the soft amber of late afternoon sunlight tinted through the shoji doors. Music played unobtrusively and the atmosphere remained easy and informal, lilting with banter, laughter and the occasional rise in noise level - usually when Naruto and Kiba decided to go a verbal round several decibels louder than was polite or necessary to be heard.

On cue, Kiba piped up a little further down the table. "Hey Ino, what's up with these hats?"

Ino waved her chopsticks at Shikamaru. "I knew Shikamaru wouldn't take his stupid hair down, so I had to get measurements and find something that would fit."

Kiba munched on tempura, arching a brow. "You customized the hats because of Shikamaru? But not everyone has stupid hair."

Shikamaru arched a brow. "Who invited you again?"

Kiba chomped his jaws and grinned. Akamaru took the chance to mooch some food off the dog-nin's plate, ducking back down under the table to hide.

Ino rolled her eyes, adjusting her hat. "There was a mistake with the order and the whole bunch ended up like this."

"No bad thing!" Naruto leaned across Ino to flick Shikamaru's hat. "You could always pretend it's for your big brain, Shikamaru."

Kiba snickered. "Yeah, but not everyone has a big brain, do they, Naruto?"

"Shut up, crap-magnet." Naruto's growl morphed into a grin. "Chōji told me what happened!"

"Oh and did he tell you that Shikamaru's pet is frickin' psychotic!" Kiba squawked, stabbing a finger at the shadow-nin, tears almost springing to his eyes at the injustice of it all. "Screw the crapping part, it drew my blood!"

Shino caught Kiba's flailing limb before it could smack him in the face and dislodge his glasses. "If you were behaving like this, that's understandable."

"I wasn't doing anything. It was unprovoked. Shikamaru's bird is messed up."

"You have a bird?" Asuma queried, blowing a smoke ring onto the point of Shikamaru's hat in a hoop game.

"It's not my bird," Shikamaru growled, waving away the smoke. "Passive smoking still counts you know."

Asuma tried to look guilty and failed. "Sorry, I'm really trying, but I still can't take you seriously."

"Dammit," Shikamaru muttered, inching his fingers toward the hat.

"Stop it!" Ino slapped his hand, then beamed suddenly. "Asuma-sensei!" She ducked down to dig around under the table. "I have your hat somewhere!"
Asuma stopped smirking and held up a palm. "No, no. I'm good."

Shikamaru chuckled, shaking his head. "Coward."

"Clever," Asuma corrected, tapping his temple. "I'm not going to be stupid just because you look it. I'll feel sorry for you, not with you."

Shikamaru laughed quietly, making a languid stretch to reach for a fresh pair of chopsticks and some diced sushi. "Good thing I don't give a crap about my image, right?"

Asuma's eyes followed the lazy movement, then strayed further across the room and hit on something that had his response breaking into a deep chuckle.

Shikamaru frowned, propping his elbow on the table as he chewed. "What?"

Asuma smirked and cocked his head in the direction he was looking, bringing his cigarette to his lips with a chuckle. "You sure about that?"

Shikamaru frowned, glanced over the droop of his wrist and stopped chewing.

The sushi caught in his throat.

As sleek as a panther, a woman slipped between two attendants to stand in the doorway. Ebony fabric hugged the strong, generous curves of the kunoichi's body, spilling smooth as ink over long, dancer's legs barely visible through the two slits running either side of her robe.

Shikamaru flicked his eyes up.

His dark, bistre orbs locked with a pair of fierce teal eyes, fringed by thick, flaxen lashes that beat like wings as she shuttered her gaze to the same half-mast as his own.

A spark caught in the air, subtle as a firefly flitting between them.

Smirking, the woman cocked a flared hip against the doorframe and planted a slender hand at the deep curve of her cinched waist, banded with a crimson sash that matched the blood-red varnish on her nails.

Shikamaru filed the details without a word.

His features remained inscrutable, almost bored, but his eyes were engaged, clocking everything.

The woman's smirk cut deeper and her voice purred out low and throaty, amusement rich in it. "Well, I see the slacker-clown finally got a hat." She eyed the length of the jutting cone with a snort. "Awfully symbolic for such a fragile man."

Shikamaru's brow arched lazily. "And there's that mouth, woman, as abrasive as ever."

Temari's hair shimmered as she laughed and the rich but dry sound of her chuckle tickled something at the base of Shikamaru's spine, little grains of attraction that swirled like warm sand tickling his skin.

It forced him to straighten in his seat.

Looking skyward, he let out a longsuffering sigh.

*How troublesome...*
Chapter 4

Something was off.

Shikamaru sensed it like a sour turn in a too-sweet smile.

Not that Temari was smiling, exactly. She was watching him with a slim smirk, aquamarine eyes scintillating in a distinctly scheming way.

*Not good.*

And then her lips curled further in a vicious, cat-like smile, every bit the crouching feline, biding her time, claws at the ready, waiting to catch the cream and kill the canary in one swipe.

*She's still pissed.*

Shikamaru straightened in his chair, unaware that Asuma was glancing between them like a spectator at a game. The shadow-nin wasn't in the mood to play, but he sensed the games commencing as Temari smoothly paced towards the table, chin high, lips still tilted in that shrewd smirk.

*Here we go.*

Shikamaru's brain began to shift modes, calculating as he watched the Suna kunoichi approach – until Naruto accosted her halfway, all grins and greetings and eager for news about Gaara. Temari indulged him, hand still propped on her hip, body curved in a fixed 's' that naturally accentuated her curves without intention or effort.

Shikamaru's eyes traced the flare of her hip.

Asuma cleared his throat, the sound rattling like a chuckle.

It drew Shikamaru's gaze across in a lazy slide. "What?"

"Nothing," Asuma teased, tapping ash into an empty side plate.

Shikamaru scowled and glanced back at Temari. He knocked the ends of his chopsticks in a rhythmic click that matched the steady tick and turn of the gears in his mind. While it was possible she'd pounced on a chance to get even with him, he guessed her agenda in Konoha included bigger fish.

*The peace negotiations, that's got to be it.*

Ino nudged him in the ribs, drawing a muted hiss from him.

"Oi," he growled.

"I can practically *feel* your stupid brain buzzing," she sniped, leaning in to flick him on the temple. "Don't make me come in there."

Shikamaru stabbed her with his chopsticks when she reached to adjust his hat. "Worse than my nagging mother."

Ino stuck her tongue out then sipped her drink, squinting hard over the rim of her cup as she
narrowed a fierce look on him, carrying the threat of an earful. Predicting the level of flak he was about to take, Shikamaru glanced at Asuma for support, only to find his sensei's eyes fixed across the room.

Both students noticed and looked across at the same time.

Ino choked on her drink, cupping her mouth quickly.

Shikamaru zeroed in on the troublesome reason for her fluster and barely curbed the urge to roll his eyes.

*Of course...*

Standing in the doorway, obstinate enough to be built into the frame, stood a broad-shouldered young man barely willing to budge out of the way of the attendants flitting in and out the room.

Shikamaru arched a brow.

The guy was working a failed attempt at a casual look, his thumb hooked stiffly into the belt of his yukata as he cocked an awkward slant, making Shikamaru wonder if he hadn't practiced in front of a mirror, selecting the smarmiest pose at his disposal.

*What an idiot.*

Taking in the total package of moronic self-inflation, Shikamaru noted the brazen stare the guy had fixed on Ino. Brazen enough to prickle an instant dislike and irritation in the shadow-nin – more for the fact that Ino was likely to respond to this dumbass.

Only she didn't.

To Shikamaru's surprise, Ino sat stiffly in her seat. No preening, no hair flicks, no subtle dips of her shoulder or sidelong, sultry glances. If anything, she actually looked embarrassed, the corners of her mouth twisting in a grimace.

Shikamaru noted the odd reaction, but Asuma responded to it.

And all he did was shift position. A subtle roll of muscle and the Jōnin turned a little in his seat, setting the heel of his hand to the very edge of the table, cigarette perched and smoking between his fingers.

A deliberate and dangerous pause – the warning kind.

Shikamaru could detect the signal. It rang sharper than the clang of the thick, metal bracelet haloing his sensei's wrist as Asuma leaned into the press of his hand. Just one push was all it would take for the Sarutobi to vault the table in a heartbeat.

"Ino," Asuma said casually, not taking his eyes off the stranger for a second. "Friend of yours?"

Ino gave a little squeak of surprise, caught off guard before she smiled tightly. "Oh, he's just the son of the manager."

Taking the clinical observation technique, Shikamaru leaned back a little, weighing up the different signals firing off from his sensei, his teammate and the manager's son dubbed 'Moron' in his mind.

And judging from the signals, something was getting lost in translation.
Sure, the guy was leering, but Ino had the tendency to draw those kinds of base looks from men, given the signals she sent out. But the odd nervousness she was emitting like a sonic wave had obviously hit Asuma in a place Shikamaru didn't understand.

*She's not a kid. She could kick this guy's ass into next week…*

Which didn't explain why she was looking flighty.

*Weird.*

Shikamaru frowned, glancing between his sensei, Ino and Moron by the door. The man clearly wasn't a shinobi if the guy's radar for danger – or lack thereof – was any hint.

*Brawn over brain.*

It took another few seconds of ogling Ino before the idiot sensed Asuma's fixed stare knifing across the room. The second Moron sensed the warning, he straightened up from his misaligned pose, but like a dumb dog not getting the hierarchy, he shifted quickly into annoyed alpha-wannabe mode. His leer curdled into a sneer. He even went so far as to prove how much of an idiot he was by arching a brow at the Jōnin – a challenge.

Shikamaru glanced at Asuma.

Asuma smirked without amusement and very slowly crushed out his cigarette.

*Moron is screwed.*

Before Asuma could rise, Ino beat him to it.

She bolted to her feet with a high little laugh and a flamboyant circling and waving of her wrists, like she was swatting flies or trying to shoo away the tension.

"I'll be right back!" she announced, abandoning her hat and squeezing her way around the other end of the table to avoid crossing Asuma.

Shikamaru watched this all through his lashes, brow arched like the dark curve of a question mark on his face.

*Weird just got weirder.*

The blonde trotted her way across the room in her heels, transforming her approach to a hip-swinging strut halfway to the door, like some bizarre jutsu in the works. Asuma kept his gaze on Ino until she vanished with Moron out the door, then his expression flatlined as he reached across to take up his cigarettes.

"Relax, Shikamaru."

"Are you serious? You're the one handing out the death glares." Shikamaru lowered his voice. "Why?"

"It's your birthday, you've got an excuse to take off your thinking cap." He shot Shikamaru's hat a look, lightening his words with a lame joke. "Literally."

Ignoring the chatter and laughter still drifting around the table, Shikamaru failed to respond to the humour, his eyes narrowing in question.
Asuma, just as evasive as his student, ignored the scrutinising look, pocketed his smokes and pushed up from the table. "Have a good one. I'll stop by tomorrow."

"Yeah…" Shikamaru cocked his head up, the stupid hat tilting to one side as he frowned.

"Try to get into the spirit of things," Asuma teased, slipping a cigarette between his lips, eyes on the door as he rounded the table. "That doesn't mean alcohol, by the way."

Shikamaru scoffed, offering a lazy smirk. "That's the image of you have of me, huh? Nice."

"Hey now, you don't care about your image, remember?" Asuma chuckled, pausing long enough to shoot a pointed look in Temari's direction. "Then again…"

Shikamaru shook his head, expression flat as he looked away. Asuma chuckled at his embarrassment, offered a distracted half-wave, half-salute and headed for the exit, weaving between attendants bringing the next course of food.

Shikamaru stared after the trail of his sensei's smoke, which tangled and vanished into the swathe of steam wafting from the sizzling dishes being brought into the room.

"Where'd Asuma-sensei go?" Chōji called across, glancing down the length of the table.

Shikamaru waved off the question. "Had something to take care of."

What's up with that?

It didn't make sense. Ino had laid enough idiots on their asses to prove she was quite capable of handling herself. However, while Shikamaru's brain churned around all the evidence weighing in favour of that belief, there was still the niggling question mark hanging on his conscience. He looked at her discarded hat.

Troublesome girl...

His eyes pinched with a concern he tried to push away. Fortunately, the shift in chatter and change of chairs drew Shikamaru's attention back to the table. People had begun switching seats again, rotating their way to new dishes and gravitating into a tighter knit around the table.

Like a game of musical chairs.

Shikamaru refused to move.

He reached across the table in a minimal-effort slant and brushed fingers with Temari as she beat him to the chopsticks. Snatching them up, she whipped them over her knuckles like a set of senbons as she took a seat opposite him.

"Too much effort to move a little faster, Shikamaru?" she purred teasingly. "I keep waiting for you to surprise me."

Shikamaru withdrew his hand, setting his chin in his palm. "My lack of usual chauvinism isn't enough?"

"Oh?"

He glanced at the apprehended chopsticks. "Ladies first," he drawled.

Temari smirked, batting her lashes with phony girlishness that did little to distract Shikamaru from
the fact that she'd always carried herself like a woman. As a Genin he'd pinned it on her annoying, overconfident, overdeveloped sense of maturity and the condescending manner with which she regarded most men.

As lesser creatures.

Add her opinion of men to Shikamaru's less than flattering view of women at the time and it had made for some interesting exchanges between them. Even so, back in the early days enduring a conversation with Temari had been aggravating and troublesome more for her tendency to speak in a way that was at once innocent yet shrewdly designed to draw blood.

Her sharp edges were a little too sharp.

Until the day he'd cut her back.

And then their dynamics had changed.

Verbal blows had eased into banter. Occasionally egos got bruised, but no blood was drawn.

As a Chūnin, he'd come to see other sides of her, like facets of a jewel that had been cut hard and abrasive from life's tough lessons. Occasionally, he'd catch a glimpse of something beneath the sass and sarcasm, which he sensed she used to keep people at arms length. Even now, she made a subconscious effort not to angle herself too close, one arm pressed flat across the edge of the table, guarding her torso. For a woman who had no trouble handing out threats, she seemed to constantly feel threatened.

Shikamaru watched her idly, taking up Asuma's unused chopsticks. "Hope you weren't looking for an escort."

Temari arched a neat, golden brow, lips twisting into a smirk around the piece of tofu she brought to her lips. "Just a rematch, but beating you on your birthday wouldn't be very polite."

"How t—"

"Troublesome…" Temari finished.

"Typical," Shikamaru corrected, wearing a half-smile as he reached up to take off his 'road cone' hat. He set it on Ino's seat. "I'm blown away by your consideration."

"Well, considering the trouble you caused me, I have every right to blow you away, Nara," Temari pointed out, a coarse fibre working into the rich texture of her voice. "And you know what I'm talking about."

Yeah, still pissed.

Shikamaru snorted, flicking a glance at her. "You're joking. That was months ago."

"Well remembered," Temari praised sarcastically, teeth bared in a smile. "Do you remember that the first time you pulled that shit I warned you not to do it again?"

Hesitating, Shikamaru felt his habit to immediately recall the time shot down by the severe urge not to remember. Like a strobe flicker, the memories flashed in and out, controlled by a rapid shift in his thoughts as he focused on something else, looking across the table.

"Hn." He shrugged, reaching for a fresh pair of chopsticks. "Get over it. I ran out of parlour tricks
"I'll get over it when you grow up," Temari returned, her voice hardening. "You left me in the deep end covering your lazy, insolent ass. Powerful people don't like losing face."

"Losing face?" Shikamaru smirked bitterly, his eyes shifting constantly for a distraction as his gut tightened. "They don't like losing. Period."

"And what? It's your place to teach them a lesson?" Temari scoffed, fingering her chopsticks like thin blades. "You need to watch it, Nara. Just because you're smart, it doesn't make you superior."

Those words stopped him cold.

His dark eyes ceased their scanning, freezing in a blank stare.

*It doesn't make you superior…*

Shikamaru's blood chilled and his knuckles blanched as he gripped the chopsticks just shy of snapping the wood. Like splinters of ice, those words sliced into a place he thought he'd numbed over time.

"*Smart-alecky little shit, you think you're superior?*

The memory struck him so suddenly and unexpectedly the air thinned and his throat constricted. He swallowed against the grip of an unseen hand. Then he felt it, the blackness of a long subdued feeling smouldering low and fierce in his gut, turning rocks of heavy emotion into a glow of hot, hissing coals.

*Stop.*

The heat of his anger almost hit his eyes.

*Calm down.*

He blinked hard.

*Change the thought. Now.*

 Automatically, with a speed he'd perfected over time, he immediately rewired his brain before he could latch onto the memories, drawing a slow breath through his nose as he eased his grip on the chopsticks.

Temari watched him, teal eyes shaded by a look he couldn't place and didn't want to.

Aiming to knock her off the mark, Shikamaru shot her a sharp look from under his lashes, his voice a little rough. "You go ahead and hide a knife behind a pretty smile, but get off my damn back about it. I'm not into political bullshit."

Temari gazed at him quietly for a moment. "Why so bitter?"

Shikamaru recovered smoothly, his lips lacing a smirk. "Because power games are troublesome."

"Not just for you," Temari pointed out. "We're allies, in case you've forgotten, and it doesn't put Suna in a good position when you act like a disrespectful brat on *my* turf."

Her words didn't carry, but the edge in her voice did. Chōji and Kiba looked across the table, the
latter picking up on the tension as if scenting it. Under the table, Akamaru shifted at the dog-nin's feet, grumbling.

Shikamaru leaned forward, dropping his voice below earshot. "Your turf or anyone else's, I don't appreciate being headhunted like some highest-bidder prize catch. I'm not gonna play their games, Temari."

Temari leaned in sharply, never one to back down when it came to asserting her will over anyone bold enough to challenge her – but it wasn't anger flicking in her eyes as she glared back. "When it affects how other villages see Suna, Shikamaru, it's never a game."

"It's always a game," Shikamaru growled out, his breath scattering steam from the sizzling dish set between them. "Trading players and taking pawns. What did you expect?"

"Be worried about what I suspect."

"What?"

A flicker of suspicion and awareness danced behind Temari's eyes. "You're not fooling me, slacker-clown. Maybe once, three years ago, but not twice. You've got a real problem with one of the Daimyos. Why?"

"Whatever," Shikamaru returned, a muscle twitching in his jaw. He speared a piece of food, feigning an appetite. "Did you seriously come here to kill the mood and henpeck me about work and power-hungry dignitaries?"

Temari leaned back in her seat. Her quick retort didn't come and a brief silence hinted at her own calculation as she measured up his words and his expression, dissecting them shrewdly and cross-referencing them coolly before she let the topic slide – somewhat.

She slowly plucked a steaming piece of tofu from the sizzling dish.

"No, not here for work. This is all about pleasure for me." Temari hummed, savouring the morsel of food less than the look on his face. "Besides, there are kinder ways to get even."

Shikamaru stopped chewing, arching a brow. "Even, huh?"

"Hell hath no fury, Nara." And if the flash of wicked, scheming humour in her eyes hadn't shone with promise, he might have seriously hoped that hell's fury was figurative.

No such luck...

But as Asuma had always told him, luck was a lady.

---

Murder was simple.

Whether the method would be, was always questionable.

Dismemberment, for instance, was a messy business. But Asuma couldn't deny that he was seriously considering it as he fought the urge to cut off every finger and every limb attached to the sonofabitch currently stroking his knuckles along his student's cheek with a leer.

That hand is the first thing to go.

The man had cornered Ino in a display room overlooking one of the gardens. And while she wasn't
putting up a fight, her discomfort would have been blatant to any male without his brain between his legs. She feigned a hair-flick to escape the hand grazing her cheek, laughing a little too tremulously at whatever the bastard murmured in her ear.

"I don't th—" Her reply cut off in a tight gasp as he pressed her into the wall, still running a commentary into her ear; one that Asuma was glad he didn't hear if Ino's wide-eyed expression was any indication of the context.

That's it.

Asuma reached for a trench knife.

Ino's palm slid up and set itself firmly against the man's chest, giving a push that she softened with a shaken little giggle. "Very funny, Yori-san."

Yori dropped a hand to her hip. "Not joking. Call this practice."

Ino's brows tugged low, blue eyes flashing as she swallowed quickly. "No."

"No? You teasing me?" The young male drew back to look her in the eye. "I know a bad girl from a good one," he simpered with a chuckle. "Besides, 'hard to get' is always a turn on."

"Can't imagine how excited you must get over the word 'no'," Asuma drawled, his voice startling the man into jerking his head up, snatching his hands back from Ino as if she'd suddenly become toxic.

Asuma smirked, stepping out of the shadows by the threshold. "If a simple word like that is 'hard to get', it must make everyday conversation a hormonal riot for a piece of shit like you."

Ino tugged her skirt down from where it had ridden up her bare thighs and froze against the wall, mortified. Asuma didn't look at her, his eyes on the man currently glancing between them like a slack-jawed idiot searching for a clue.

Then the prick decided to attempt to grow a pair of balls and squared his shoulders tersely. "Who the fuck are you? Her daddy?"

Asuma blinked very slowly and slotted a cigarette between his lips. "Ino. Leave."

Ino straightened against the wall, sniffing to pull up her composure and any salt of humiliation threatening to escape her eyes. "Sensei, I—"

"Leave."

She did, pivoting on a high heel to exit the room in quick, short strides.

Asuma waited until he heard the rap of her heels quieten along the hallway, then he lit his cigarette, deliberate and slow, watching the sweat bead at Yori's forehead.

"What? She's needs a permission slip from her teacher?" the guy snarled, pacing back, then forward, then back again, like one of those puny breeds of dog that was all bark and no bite. "Get real."

Asuma exhaled twin jets of smoke from his nose, just watching, waiting and exuding a lethal vibe without having to say a word or make a move. Yet.

The sweat on Yori's face turned cold. He held up a damp palm in warning. "This is assault. You
can't touch me, ninja. I'm unarmed. Shinobi have codes…and…rules…!

"Sure we do." Asuma began to circle the younger man slowly, moving in by degrees. "In fact, we have a special rule where trash like you is concerned. Want to know what it is?"

The man turned in jerky movements, aiming to keep Asuma in front of him. His fingers twitched nervously. "This is bullshit," he snarled.

Asuma hummed casually, closing distance in quarter turns. "The rule's not all that 'hard to get', even by idiot standards, but I won't put it past you to get a kick out of it. I know I sure will."

Yori blanched, skin as white as the flash of his teeth as he bared them in a growl, hissing now. "She came onto me. You can all get the hell out of my ryokan! Get out!"

"You're talking too much." Asuma shook his head in mock disappointment, sighing loud and long. "And now I'm not feeling heard. That really pisses me off."

"Fuck you!" Yori hollered, deciding in a moment of moronic machismo that offense was the best defence.

He threw a punch that was so far from connecting Asuma had time to take another drag of his smoke as he ducked under the swing and came up behind the idiot. He grabbed Yori's hand, broke the wrist in a snap, twisted the arm up behind the bastard's back and rammed him face first into the wall. Tooth enamel went flying and the satisfying crunch of bone and muffled scream of pain only served to tickle the itch of Asuma's fury rather than scratch it.

"The rule is simple." His voice rumbled at the man's ear, clouding the air with smoke and threat. "When it comes to scum like you, there are no rules."

"FUCK!" Yori dragged in a watery, bloody gasp, sobbing. "You broke…You can't do—"

"You really don't want to know what I can do and will do if you so much as breathe in her direction again." Asuma pulled a tad harder on the twisted arm, forcing the man onto the tips of his toes. "I'll cut you into so many pieces they won't have a limb left to bury when they're done mopping you up."

Yori went deadly still, blood bubbles fizzing at his nose. The strong reek of urine played just beneath the sour stench of sweat.

"Need it simpler, kid?" Asuma smirked, pushing the twisted limb higher to wring a yelp out of the bastard, exerting pressure by leaning in. "Are you getting this?"

"Yes! I get it, I get it!" Yori squealed, face squished against the wall.

"Good. Get this too. If you make trouble for any of the kids here, today or tomorrow, I'll take that as you not having heard me." He paused here, angling his jaw to look down at the mess of the man's face. "And as we've established. That doesn't make me very happy. Does it?"

"No." Yori choked out a shaky breath, globs of blood smearing the wall. "No…"

"No. Getting a better grasp of that word now? Or should I have your old lady come in here and explain it to you?"

"NO!" Yori twisted his head with a garbled cry. "Please! No."
“That’s what I thought.” Asuma gave another little push that almost cracked more bone before he stepped back and dusted off his hands on his flak jacket. "Tch."

Yori slumped in a heap, one hand cupping his caved nose and broken teeth, the other cradled to his chest as he curled foetal-like on the floor. Without so much as a blink, Asuma left the idiot to his misery, slotting the door shut behind him. He paused outside only long enough to close his eyes and recite a Buddhist mantra in his mind, stilling the thunder in his blood, waiting for the anger to abate before opening his eyes.

He glanced along the amber-hued corridor half-swathed with shadow until the light hit a mane of pale hair, burnished gold in the glow, drawing his gaze across to his student. Ino stood slouched against the wall, worrying a thumbnail between her teeth, luminous blue orbs wide and wet and staring at the floor.

Asuma sighed, his eyes softening.

For a moment, she was twelve years old again, slouched against the wall, kicking herself for screwing up or falling short of the crazy competitive standards she set herself. Watching her now, a memory of a conversation they’d once had blindsided him.

"No one's interested in the flower's roots sensei, just its pretty petals. No one likes an ugly flower. See, isn't this one pretty?"

"Sure…won't last long without its roots though."

"No one cares about that. They don't buy flowers to look after them, they just like the pretty petals while they last."

"Yeah?"

"Mmn hmn. And when the flower wilts even a little, they just throw it away. Like this one here. See?"

"And what about this one?"

"That's not ready yet. I have to cut it."

"Why not let it keep its roots? Won't have to throw it away then because it'll bloom again."

"…No one sticks around that long, sensei."

Asuma pulled himself back from the memory and slotted it away as carefully as a pressed flower in the mental file he kept on each of his students. Letting his initial unease pass, he gathered a deep breath and made no effort to disguise his approach.

Shit. How do I handle this one?

Ino snapped from her glazed stare the second she heard the thud of his footsteps.

She straightened up quickly, brushed her thumbs under her eyes then dropped her hands, lips drawn in a tight line to keep her expression in check.

Asuma pressed his back into the wall beside her, lit up another cigarette, sucked in a lungful of tar and nicotine and tipped his head up, blowing a thin trail towards the ceiling.

He didn't get a chance to start.
"It's not what you think," Ino whispered quickly, staring at the wall ahead, face hidden behind her bangs. "And I…I could have handled it fine."

"I know you could have," Asuma agreed, watching the smoke dissipate.

"I would have too," Ino insisted, but she shrank back into the wall a little. "I'm a kunoichi, not some helpless, useless geisha."

Asuma arched a brow at the comparison. "Geisha?"

"I…" Ino squeezed her eyes shut and twisted her fingers into the hem of her cowl-necked top. "Doesn't hurt to test out a few tricks. Kunoichi learn those things, you know."

Yeah, I wish they didn't…

A stupid, selfish thought that was completely impractical.

Kunoichi were often twice as deadly for their ability to charm and seduce.

Kurenai had prepped him on the kind of training Ino would undergo outside of his mentorship and unfortunately outside of his control. All kunoichi learned the basics of using their feminine wiles as weapons. But the fundamentals were just the foundation for a far more intense kind of training.

Asuma frowned at the thought.

Mitarashi Anko oversaw the intense stages, reserved for special candidates. The ninja art of Seduction. While it pained Asuma to admit it, Ino had the tendency to work her wiles a little too fulsomely and had drawn Anko's eye. The young Yamanaka had set herself up as a ripe pick. Anko had noticed the young Yamanaka's 'potential' right away and she'd had no problem confronting Asuma and the Godaime about her plans to recruit.

"She's got the potential. Add her potential to her advanced knowledge of poisons, plus her excellent test scores at the academy and we've got brains and beauty. She'll be an excellent candidate."

"No."

"Why? She has the confidence and the inclination."

"You don't know a damn thing about my students. Go sink your fangs into someone else."

"Oh get over your protective, surrogate father bullshit, Sarutobi."

"Little bitter about Orochimaru?"

"Asuma, watch it."

"Hokage-sama, as her sensei, I'm completely against this. And I'm sure Inoichi-san will skin Anko alive for even considering it."

"She's a woman, not a little girl."

"She's fourteen years old."

"If she's old enough to fight and die, she's old enough to learn how to fu—"

"Finish that sentence, Mitarashi, I dare you."
"Anko, Asuma, that's enough. The decision will rest with her when the time comes."

So Asuma had waited for that time.

And the second he'd seen that time coming, he'd stepped in to make sure it never happened.

He'd signed her up for the Nijū Shōtai.

"It all went to plan anyway. He fell for it," Ino said suddenly, drawing him back from his musings. "Two nights and a party free of charge."

"Oh really?" Asuma challenged, looking down at her out the corner of his eye. "He seemed to be looking for payment."

Ino blushed fiercely and folded her arms across her torso, turning her head away. "Well he got it wrong. I told his mom I'd be his escort for a seal-the-deal business date. I...I just had to hang off his arm and look pretty, it's no big deal."

"Ino. He wanted you to be his **escort**..." Asuma dropped the last word with a grave turn in his voice and his expression. "You're smart enough to know what that means to idiots like that."

"I'm not a naïve little girl." She flicked her wrist, sniffing as she stared down the corridor. "Men are easy to play anyway. I'd have handled it fine."

Asuma's brow tightened. "You're sixteen years old, Ino. And you're playing with hormonal boys, not men."

"He was twenty and I'm seventeen tomorrow," Ino pointed out quite irrelevantly and irritably, quickly adding weight to her argument, "Besides, men don't grow up or out of the 'hormonal boy stage' anyway."

Asuma snorted at that, rubbing his thumb at the corner of his mouth to smooth out his smile. He turned to brace his shoulder against the wall, looking down at her as she kept her head bowed and her gaze averted.

Then he waited.

Ino turned her shoulder into the wall, facing away.

**Any minute now...**

Her fingertips dug into her upper arms, which banded tighter around her stiff frame. "The loser wasn't even a ninja," she growled, a quiver in her voice.

Asuma didn't respond, just watched her quietly.

**Any. Minute.**

A tense, torturous silence passed.

Asuma waited it out.

And then Ino sniffed, her shoulders jerking once.

**There.**
"Don't tell Shikamaru or Chōji…" she whispered miserably, pressing into the wall.

Asuma winced, feeling awkward and oversized; like a giant holding a fragile glass flower. While fragile wasn't a word anyone else might associate with her, he'd come to learn that Ino was every bit a combination of the fragile and fierce flowers she worked with.

She came with sharp thorns, pretty petals and trembling roots.

Unfortunately, she pruned herself ruthlessly, without the gentle care and respect that she handled her flowers with. She flourished under the sunlight of attention and affection but wilted painfully hard in the shadow of an unexplainable insecurity and inadequacy.

*Where'd that confident girl go?*

Iruka's reports on her as an academy student only matched *some* of the facets she chose to let bloom and flower now. Others she'd viciously uprooted like weeds or simply let wither with neglect.

*Why?*

The minute she'd hit her teens, her bubbling motivation had begun to turn like a leaf in autumn until the fire had bled out and she'd wilted in places she used to stand strong. And beneath the fickle front she put up for everyone around her, Asuma sensed a tender vulnerability at the core. One nettled by a self-inflicted kind of angst he wasn't sure he was qualified to handle.

*Shit. What if I can't?*

As with each of his students, it didn't stop him from wanting to try. His initial urge was to tell her to 'pause' as he sprinted to Kurenai's, educated himself on how to proceed and then sprinted back again, reciting mental notes.

Kurenai had said something about other female influences in her life.

*If that's the case, then why does she keep looking to men for approval and acceptance?*

And from the worst kind of men.

As far as he knew, Inoichi had always doted on her, so it didn't really make sense.

*Shikamaru's right. It's one hell of a Rubik's Cube.*

And he'd have to figure it out – or get the lazy genius and Chōji to.

*They need to stand together again. They've begun to forget to rely on each other.*

Ino sniffed, scrubbing the heel of her hand across each cheekbone in a sharp swipe to erase the tears. "Promise you won't say anything."

Asuma set a hand on her shoulder, squeezing lightly. "Not a word."

"Cross your heart?" Ino teased weakly, looking over her shoulder.

Asuma tapped a fist to his chest. "I swear on my cigarettes."

Ino giggled a little, twisting around to straighten up and smooth her hands over several imaginary creases in her clothes. "Good. So can I get on with my mission now?" She forced a smile.
"Mission?"

Ino rolled her eyes, brushing her thumbs across her lashes to sweep away the tears impaled on the dark spikes. "Duh, Shikamaru is a mission. Getting him to chill lately is like pulling teeth."

No lie…

Asuma hummed, scratching at his jaw. "What you're doing for him. I'm proud of you."

Ino froze for a moment, then waved her hands around in that butterfly flutter of nervousness. "Oh come on, it's no big deal."

"Yeah. It is. You're a thoughtful girl." A statement of fact rather than flattery. The acknowledgement in his voice had Ino quietening instantly.

She picked at the fabric of her top with a sad little smile. "Yeah? Tell that to him."

"He knows," Asuma assured, tilting his head to glance down the hallway. "Just has trouble showing it."

"Don't I know it," Ino snorted, but at least she was smiling now. "Boys."

"You should avoid them at all costs," Asuma warned mockingly. "Off you go, birthday girl, before they wonder where you are."

He turned on his heel, but she caught his sleeve with a quick little tug, retreating behind her bangs when he glanced over his shoulder.

"Asuma-sensei?"

"Hmn?"

Ino ducked her head, voice small. "Thank you."

Asuma nodded gently.

Embarrassed, Ino threw in a dose of humour to lighten the mood, cooing. "We got the best and most badass sensei."

Asuma reddened, laughed and looked at his feet, fanning his fingers through the dark strands at the back of his head as he grumbled something unintelligible that had Ino giggling. Deciding that the transference of embarrassment was worth it, he chuckled gruffly and quickly lit up another cigarette.

"Go torture that slacker instead of me."

Ino's giggle bloomed into a grin. "Like you even had to suggest it." She twirled on a heel and called over her shoulder. "It's my mission!"

The Memorial Stone.

Konoha's shared tombstone for ninja killed in action. For bodies never brought home. Its stone bosom was where the living came to hang their hearts, heavy and hurting from memories of the
dead.

*But you have no resting place…*

Neji traced his eyes across the cut of names engraved into the stone, the grooves deep and black. The sunset emblazoned the kunai-shaped structure, throwing its shadow far beyond...a shadow of death, pointing out a path only ghosts could follow.

*Did they bury you? Burn you? Leave you to rot?*

Neji closed his eyes slowly, swallowing hard.

*The clan offer nothing to remember you...while you gave up everything...*

He focused on the gentle 'shush' of the leaves, soothing his grief in a rustle as the wind played through his hair, stroking the mocha strands away from his face. The faint ache at his temples and brow eased a little, nothing compared to the ache in his chest.

*It has become so hard to rest, father...are you resting, wherever you are?*

No answer came, just the cool caress of the breeze.

And then the faintest flare of chakra.

Neji's eyes drifted open, his gaze settling on the shadow that cast itself across the stone slabs haloing the monument. A silhouette with scarecrow-like hair canted to one side and accentuated by the pull of the sunset.

Kakashi tipped his head a little. "Neji."

"Good evening, Kakashi-senpai."

The sound of a book clapping shut illustrated itself in the copy-nin's shadow. "Mn."

Neji turned his head slightly, his profile cut in a dying glow of gold that slid down into the hollow beneath one moonstone eye and bathed the high rise of his cheek. He watched the copy-nin closely.

Kakashi's left side faced him, leaving Neji to assume that the other ninja was gazing at the names in the Stone. "Gai was looking for you."

Neji turned his head back, hitai-ate flashing. "I've spoken with him, thank you."

Kakashi nodded. He said nothing more.

The grass around the monument rippled in the breeze, shifting shades like a reversible cloak. Somewhere above, an eagle screeched. The air began to cool as the light began to change. For a long while both Jōnin stood in the silence, ensconced in their thoughts and finding peace in the privacy of prayers unspoken. Paying divided respects to whomever they'd lost.

And then Kakashi spoke, his voice as easy as the breeze. "It's a tough path."

Neji blinked, the only sign that he was taken aback by the sudden words.

"Is it?" he queried, not sure he was in the mood for a cryptic riddle, though for some reason he seemed to sense an underlying directness.
Kakashi tilted a little, his movements exaggerated by his shadow as he cocked a hip, shifting his weight and the gravity in his voice. "And every time you wear the mask, it becomes harder to take it off."

Neji looked across. "Forgive my need for clarity, senpai, but you're a shinobi who has always masked his face. Your riddle is obscure."

Kakashi turned his head, dark eye curved in a smile. "Obscurity is the purpose of a good riddle. But I think you know the mask I'm referring to."

ANBU…

Glancing away, Neji settled his gaze on the stone, following the script of names without reading them. "Chains are harder to be free of than masks, Kakashi-senpai."

Kakashi nodded. "Both come at a price."

Neji's lip twitched in a weak quirk as he hummed. "And as one who'd know, you think it's wise to warn me of the cost?"

"Hmn. I'll tell you what I think and what I know," Kakashi tilted his chin up, gazing just beyond the dulled tip of the Memorial Stone. "I think you think you know what the cost might be, yet I know that what you think you know isn't what you'll wish you had known before you thought you knew what you did, just to realise that you didn't know until you really knew. That's what I think. You know?"

Neji blinked.

What?

Completely thrown by the cerebral twist and turn in words, Neji froze, both brain and body, trying to keep his balance as he scrambled blindly for a moment.

*That made absolutely no sense…or did it? Wait…no…but I…damn it…*

Kakashi's eye crinkled again. "Now you have no idea, do you?"

Neji's jaw twitched and he glanced across blankly. "I imagine Gai-sensei might think that psychological trick is 'hip and cool', but I'd rather you were direct."

"Nothing." Kakashi said – and the cold, detached way he said it turned his relaxed and lilting timbre into something taut and toneless.

It set Neji on edge.

The Hyūga turned a little more. "What do you mean 'nothing'?"

"It costs nothing. Because you have nothing." Kakashi kept his grey eye on the Memorial Stone, his voice as blunt as its worn edges. "You take that path when you have nothing to lose."

Direct.

Like a punch in the gut.

Neji's stomach tightened.
Kakashi raised his jaw, indicating that he was looking skyward briefly. "Nothing left. Nothing to surrender. Nothing and no one to give up. When everything has been taken away or lost and there's nothing worth holding on to. That's when you do it. You give up what you don't have, to give something back to this village and the people in it."

Neji frowned, searching Kakashi's profile as the light began to shift into the preternatural hues of twilight, the last traces of gold vanishing into deepening purples and inky folds.

"If your words are designed to sway me, you're wasting your time," Neji said quietly, looking away. "I have something to gain, rather than nothing to lose."

Kakashi hummed, the sound pitched in query before he dropped his chin, looking back to the Stone. "Riding on the devil's back to get where you think you need to go, doesn't guarantee you anything."

And if I'm in hell already? What's the difference?

"Is that what ANBU is?" Neji asked, finding it difficult to make that kind of morbid comparison, given that no matter how dark the zone, it still operated to serve the village. "You make it sound like a curse, rather than a choice a shinobi makes."

Kakashi's mask rippled a little, the faint shift in the fabric the only giveaway that he'd sighed at all. His eyes remained glued to the Memorial Stone. "It has less to do with what ANBU is and everything to do with what ANBU does to those who go in under an illusion of elitism or escapism."

Escape...

That word was like a blade across his heart. Neji steeled himself against it, giving nothing away behind the closed, cool veneer of a mask as trademark to his face as Kakashi's own.

"Who says I'm under an illusion?" Neji returned coolly, voice calmer than the quiver of his nerves. He felt them tightening against the pluck of Kakashi's words, which seemed designed to trigger doubt.

Is he testing me?

That wasn't a possibility to be ruled out. If he was to pass any form of psychological evaluation, it would make sense that someone like Kakashi might give him a prep-screening.

Neji raised his chin and dropped his tone. "I would not make a decision based on a whim or a childish ideal. And I'm not interested in elitism or escape."

Kakashi looked across. "Then what are your motives?"

Motives...

Like a phantom stealing cold across his mind, a memory resurrected itself, hitting Neji's brain in a rush of words he'd spoken not so long ago – yet somehow feeling as if it came from a lifetime long past.

"Did you ever stop to think that your motives would mean absolutely nothing to me, Shikamaru! Actions are what matter! What you do, not what you intend!"

Neji blinked slowly, his lashes hovering low to shield his eyes from the grey one fixed on him.
"What are my motives?"

"Necessity," he murmured.

"Necessity," Kakashi spoke the word back to him, without inflection.

It was spoken like an echo.

Gods, maybe it was an echo.

Neji wasn't sure.

Whether it was Kakashi's or his own voice that had shaped the word last, it didn't matter... because as it bounced around in Neji's mind, the letters scrambled, swapped, shivered and slipped until they fell out of his head, dropping his focus hard onto his heart.

And the second his focus shifted, so did the word.

_Necessity._

_Need._

"Maybe I needed you."

_Nara._

Neji pulled in a ragged breath. The soft sound tore like a rip on the air, catching hoarse and low in his throat. He barely noticed when Kakashi turned and walked away, leaving him to face what was aching through the muscle and bone of his chest, searching for his heart.

_Need._

The last thing he had left to lose.
Chapter 5

At the time of defeat, Shikamaru's terms had been simple.

No dancing and no singing.

These were his conditions of surrender. But while Ino may have ceased fire on her attempts to drag him into the spotlight, the shadow-nin learned that others were waiting in the wings and on the front lines, ready to usurp her and take command of his torture.

Kiba was the first to launch an assault.

And it came flying across the table like a cannonball.

Shikamaru's reflexes saved him.

Twisting, he caught the object between his palms, the force jolting his wrists. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Dive-bombing you with a present," the dog-nin snickered, teeth gnashing into a barbecue rib. "It won't crap on you or draw your blood though."

"Just break my skull," Shikamaru scowled, staring at the sphere-shaped present wrapped so badly it had sharp edges.

"Open it, already!" Naruto encouraged, rapping his chopsticks on his plate like a drum roll. "I wanna know what crap-magnet got you."

Belatedly, Shikamaru realised that all chatter had ceased and the spotlight had swung his way the second he'd caught the gift. He awkwardly passed the item between his palms, not enjoying the lick of limelight Kiba had struck him with.

"It's not gonna explode," Kiba assured, though he looked like he might, amusement lit like a fuse behind his eyes. "Open it."

Shikamaru's eyebrow twitched upward. "You got me a ball, huh?"

Kiba rolled his eyes, gnawing on the rib with a lazy grin. "You're not seriously gonna predict the presents, are you? Just open the damn thing."

Shikamaru set his elbow on the table and held the sphere-shaped gift in one palm, testing the weight with a limp tip and roll of his wrist. "It's a Magic 8 Ball."

"No way…" Kiba's mouth dropped open, rib forgotten and snatched up by Akamaru when it hit the floor. "You freak. How the hell do you do that?"

"You have a predictable sense of humour," Shikamaru drawled, hooking his thumb into the wrapping to tear the paper back, just enough to spy the shiny black plastic and the curve of the number "8" painted onto it. "Nice."

Kiba grinned, canines flashing. "You need to live on the wild side, Shikamaru. Leave a few things up to chance."

"Oh yeah?" Shikamaru rolled his wrist, waving the ball around. "Fine. I'm gonna use this the next
time we're on a mission. Leave how dead we get up to chance."

"That might actually be funny. Well, before we die anyway," Naruto laughed, throwing out a hand to Shikamaru with twitching fingers.

The shadow-nin rolled the gift across the table to him, the sharp-ends of the wrapping making its journey a little wayward as it wobbled into Naruto's possession.

"Whoa, who wrapped this?"

"Kiba." Shino shook his head fractionally. "I suggested that Hinata wrap it, but he refused. Why? Because it would mean he'd have actually listened to me."

"Shino-kun…" Hinata pleaded.

"Hey, shut up," Kiba snapped, glaring at the insect-handler over Hinata's head. "Besides, I did it on purpose to throw Shikamaru off the guessing game."

"And you did such a good job," Shino deadpanned.

Kiba scowled, considered arguing, but played the sympathy-stroke-sarcastic card. "I got carved up by Shikamaru's psychotic bird, alright? He deserved a present with some sharp edges."

"I'd'a killed to see Shikamaru stuck in a tree," Naruto laughed. "Too bad his bird stole the evidence."

Shikamaru sighed. "It's not my bir—"

"Magic ball!" Naruto shouted, shaking it with all the enthusiasm of a gambler hoping to roll a winning dice. "Is Kiba a crap-magnet?"

"Shut it!" the dog-nin growled, reaching across to swipe at him.

Naruto swayed in his chair, taking refuge behind Sai, who looked on with blank interest at the curious game and Kiba's animated reaction. "Crap-magnet? I don't understand."

"Probably for the best," Shikamaru muttered between his fingers, chin set in his palm as he watched Naruto shaking the ball either side of his head, drawing out the wait just to taunt the dog-nin.

"A fitting gift for you, slacker-clown." Temari's chuckle spilt like rich wine across the table, the sound chasing along his spine and flooding back down again in a ripple.

He reached back to rub his nape. "Yeah?"

"Of course," she said. "Less of a 'drag' not having to take responsibility for the outcome. Kind of like with the Chūnin exams, hmn?"

The barb snagged Shikamaru's attention and he looked across at her. "What do you wanna bet the "magic" ball agrees with me that you're more troublesome than me any damn day of the week?"

Temari's eyes flickered with playful intrigue. "A gamble, Nara?"

"Like I said, it's always a game."

She held his gaze through the steam wafting from her tea, a red thumbnail catching the light as she
stroked the ceramic. "Fine. What do I get if I win?"

The confidence in her tone hooked his interest, rousing him from his slouch to sit back a little. "Odds are in my favour here. Ten out of twenty answers are affirmative."

"Then I'll hedge my bets on the non-committal and negative outcomes," Temari returned, leaning back to mirror him. "If I win, you'll owe me a favour."

Shikamaru's eyes twitched with suspicion. "Too vague."

Temari shrugged. "Afraid to be indebted to a woman, Nara?"

The corner of Shikamaru's mouth twisted upward. "Naruto?"

"Yeah?"

"Pass it here."

"Once sec…" Naruto stopped shaking the ball and waited for the dice inside to float to the surface. He shoved it under Kiba's nose with a triumphant "HA!" when the answer revealed itself as "MOST LIKELY".

"Just wait 'til it's my turn." Kiba snatched it away and tossed it over to Shikamaru in an overhead throw.

The Nara caught it, shook it once and set it on the table in front of Temari. "If I win, you quit harassing me about what happened."

"Spoil my fun, why don't you?" Temari sighed with phony disappointment, dropping her eyes down to trace the sinews in his hand as he cupped the ball, hiding the answer.

Shikamaru's fingers flexed. "Deal?"

Temari folded her arms atop the table and nodded stiffly, waiting.

Shikamaru drew a breath, removed his hand and cocked his head to read the upside down text that had floated to the surface.

_Ah shit._

"MY SOURCES SAY NO"

Temari let out a short breath, her smile flashing like a blade across her face, sharp and fierce. "Well look at that. I'm less troublesome. How surprising."

Shikamaru blew out his cheeks with a quiet chuckle, unable to keep from shaking his head at the outcome. "Well, let's consider the source. It's a stupid ball."

"It's only stupid because you lost." Temari tapped the tips of her fingers to the sphere, spinning it around to face him. "Read it and weep, Shikamaru. You lose."

He ignored the smug click of her nails across the plastic and reached for one of the drinks steaming across the table. "Figures. Never had the best of luck at the worst of times."

She smiled at that. "No wonder you're so reluctant to leave things up to chance."
Hesitating, Shikamaru redirected his hand and reached for the Magic 8 Ball instead.

"Something like that…" He gripped the ball between his long fingers, shot her a guarded look from under the dark line of his brow and rolled the gift back to Naruto.

Temari's smile slipped away.

"Something." she murmured.

Shikamaru frowned at that, but let it slide.

"So," he began, trying to gauge her intentions. "What do you want then?"

Temari's eyes gleamed knowingly in the muted light. "I'll tell you what I want when I want it."

That odd sensation close to a flutter stirred in the pit of Shikamaru's stomach, but he ignored it in favour of keeping his expression carefully blank. Temari reached for her tea, challenging his look by returning it.

"Fair enough," he murmured, watching her lips tuck up into a smile around her drink, clearly pleased with herself.

She had every right to be, given the damned carte blanche he'd just handed her. Stupid move, especially if she was still pissed beneath her pretty smiles. He'd ditched her in the deep end twice, leaving her to deal with dignitaries clamouring for him in a dirty, highest-bidder race in order to score powerful, political points in a game he wanted no part in.

*God damned Chūnin exams…*

Twice a year, they pulled in the major players from all villages and all countries; Daimyo's and Kage's mounting in a cutthroat sport of snatching up the best candidates. Candidates that were positioned and played on a board encompassing all the lands put together. And given the prices of power at stake, the game was as corrupt and sordid as any soul-selling sport. He'd learned that the hard way.

"*The Fire Daimyo may have his eye on you now, but our Daimyo's offer will fit you like a glove. Remember what I told you. You're cut from the same cloth, Shikamaru.*"

Shikamaru closed his eyes at the memory, swallowing hard.

*That's not what I am…*

God, maybe he was something worse.

His fingers curled on the tabletop, knuckles blanching as he tightened his fist.

Temari watched him quietly, frowning.

He didn't notice, his focus wavering at the borderline of the massive "do not pass go" sign he'd nailed into the inside of his skull when he was fourteen…

*Fifteen…*

His mind corrected, robotically supplying the information.

*Just turned fifteen.*
Shikamaru frowned and shoved the fact back behind the borderline in his brain. All memories the other side of it were strictly off limits. Or at least they had been until Tsunade had kicked him back into the warzone a few months ago, making him a proctor at the Chūnin exams in Suna. That had forced him so close to the edge that he'd risked tipping over into the territory he'd boarded up and cordoned off inside of himself.

*Change track, Nara.*

He mentally skipped onto another train of thought, which derailed into a mental wall when Temari spoke, guessing at his introspection. "It still gets me how someone as smart as you, could behave so stupidly."

"And here come those backhanded compliments," he muttered, lashes hovering at half-mast. "I don't want to talk about this."

"Of course you don't, that might actually be embarrassing for you."

"Temari..."

Temari tipped her chin up. "Then apologise for the trouble you caused me."

"No."

"Then you're going to be very sorry by the end of this night."

Shikamaru snorted. "Do your worst."

*Fucking stupid.*

He shouldn't have said it, but it was out his mouth before he could even register he'd issued the brainless challenge. As if she really needed the encouragement. Sensing his freeze-frame moment of "shit, shit, shit" Temari smirked slowly, leaning back in her seat – as if to get comfortable for the upcoming round.

*Great, this is gonna be painful.*

An excited squeal across the table startled them both.

No sooner had Shikamaru looked over than Ino had begun waving around a familiar looking book, bouncing on the balls of her feet with a grin.

"Shikamaru!" She hugged the astrology book to her chest. "This is perfect!"

The shadow-nin's mouth pulled into a small smile, which he turned onto Chōji, tipping his head gratefully. The Akimichi saluted with his chopsticks, almost choking on his mouthful when Ino ruffled his auburn hair until the spikes stood on end. She let out a soft little squee, complimenting something shiny that Sakura fastened at her nape.

*Chōji's shiny surprise, huh?*

Shikamaru smiled and watched Ino set the rest of the presents to one side, Hinata offering to help sort the shadow-nin's gifts from the Yamanaka's.

Shikamaru's expression sobered as he watched. He didn't entirely understand why anyone had bothered with him. He wasn't into birthdays and if not for Ino, he'd probably have slept through the day. The Yamanaka, however, was enjoying the chance to indulge herself and her current treat was
the weird book she'd wanted. She flitted around the table with it, flipping it open to relevant pages, taking down dates of birth and dishing out destinies according to the text.

*At least she's enjoying herself…*

Shikamaru's eyes strayed to the door, narrowing.

Asuma hadn't come back. When Ino had, her smile had been a little too bright, her readiness to put her focus onto anything and everything a little too eager.

*What the hell happened?*

She hadn't even bugged him about his dumb hat until she'd almost sat on it. Without thinking, he nudged it a little further under the table. Akamaru nudged it back with a grumble and nipped his ankle.

Shikamaru jolted and cracked his knee into the table.

Temari looked across suspiciously. "Getting flighty, Nara?"

"Tch." Shikamaru scowled down at the muzzle peeking out from under the table, sniffing for treats. "Troublesome."

Akamaru ducked out of sight just as attendants swept in to clear away dishes and make room for desserts. As the table cloth changed colour so did the lights, tinting to warm, honey hues to keep an illusion of sunset in the bosom of the room.

*Sunset…*

The thought gave Shikamaru pause for thought. But then it brought to mind the memory of a burning sunset two weeks ago and the following dawn that had left him cold. Pale eyes flashed in his minds eye, forcing him to slam a door on the memory.

*Not now...be here…*

Bringing his focus onto 'being in the moment', it occurred to him suddenly that he actually had no idea what time it was.

That hadn't happened in weeks.

Two weeks…

"Two weeks away and he wants another mission. What do you think?"

What did he think?

Now, there was a query that always had Kakashi's visible eye drifting off to the corner, seeking something just to the side of the question. His lashes came down a little, then pressed shut as he smiled on the surface, lips set tight beneath his mask.

"I'm not sure I'm qualified to answer that."

"No one is more qualified than you," Tsunade argued, smacking the backs of her fingers atop the scroll spread across her desk. "Hyūga's up to his Byakugan eyeballs in missions. He's snapping up the A-ranks left, right and centre."
"He's driven," Kakashi supplied, hooking his right index finger into the top of his mask to scratch the bridge of his nose. "Ask Gai."

"I'm asking you."

"I'm not his sensei."

"But you were ANBU."

Kakashi stopped scratching and slid his finger along the seam of his mask until it hit his lopsided hitai-ate. He gripped the metal plate, tilting it until the steel caught the light, gleaming brighter than a newsflash.

"Not anymore," he stated quietly.

Tsunade let out a long rush of air through her nose. "Kakashi."

Oh, he knew that tone. It was the drop in octave that Tsunade took when she curved her temper as hard as a shepherd's hook, ready to herd the black sheep back to the flock.

Said black sheep blinked his grey eye at her impassively.

Tsunade sighed again, her frustration carrying into the rigid tap of her fingers as she looked back at the scroll. She swept her gaze over the prioritised A-Rank missions, all listed with Hyūga Neji's name beside them.

Kakashi's eye narrowed a little.

Hmn. He's certainly collecting his credits…

Or at least, to the untrained eye, it appeared that way. However, Kakashi's eyes were anything but untrained. Beneath his hitai-ate, his eyelashes flickered and the skin tensed around his Sharingan orb. It wasn't always about what one could physically see. Where ANBU was concerned, it was always about what lay beneath the surface.

The unknown and the unseen, the unspoken and the unheard.

The underneath.

This was ANBU's forte.

In the Black Ops nothing was to be taken at face value. The masks were a clear enough sign of that. Kakashi sure as hell knew a mask when he saw one and Neji's wasn't fooling him for a second.

You're not ready, Hyūga.

"Maybe I hedged my bets too soon, all things considered," Tsunade said suddenly, drawing the copy-nin from his musings. "I don't think he's ready."

"Perhaps you should ask Shikamaru," he said.

Tsunade looked up sharply, bisecting the diamond on her forehead with a dark line as she frowned. "You know I can't do that. You're not even supposed to know about any of this."

Kakashi shrugged, tipping his head against the angled fall of his hair. It's not as if he'd asked to be
in on the secret, if that's what it was. He'd honestly wanted no part in the conspiracy.

Shikamaru was Asuma's student.

Neji was already a Jōnin.

The math was simple, the answer obvious.

*This has absolutely nothing to do with me. And it should stay that way.*

However, the idiot-proof logic hadn't stopped Tsunade from asking him to solve some puzzles he considered way beyond his Jōnin jurisdiction. When she'd called him into her confidence two weeks ago, he'd prepared himself for anything within Naruto's sphere.

He certainly hadn't foreseen anything to do with some recent mission in Hanegakure.

Or Hyūga.

That had hooked Kakashi's interest, mostly because he hadn't seen it coming.

Neji had always been on the periphery of Naruto's world, striking Kakashi as somewhat of a distant planet, unreachable and cold with few signs of life behind guarded, haunted eyes. But then, the Hyūga's world was alien to the other Chūnin. He was the only Jōnin among them and he kept a very broad orbit, unlike those close to Naruto.

Kakashi's eye glazed with consideration, softening a little.

The Jinchūriki had become a source of warmth and light for those drawn to him. He remained as constant and giving as the sun, always promising to rise again, no matter how dark or hopeless the night seemed.

*I'm waxing lyrical about my student…god, I'm sounding like Gai…*

And shit, if that wasn't one *hell* of a disturbing thought.

Kakashi might have shuddered if his spine hadn't tightened at the sound of approaching footsteps. Judging by the pace and the easy roll of the step, he knew who it was seconds before the knock came.

Tsunade quickly furled up the scroll, her eyes flitting from the door to Kakashi. "I want you to keep any eye on him."

"Both eyes, or just the one?" He cocked his head innocently.

Tsunade shot him an exasperated look, then shouted toward the door. "Come in!"

Kakashi glanced over his shoulder as the knob turned. The door creaked open just enough to reveal the shinobi who'd bumped it open using his hip. The man's hands were occupied, lighting up a cigarette.

The smoke drifted into the room, but Asuma made no move to step inside.

Kakashi twisted his torso around, simultaneously granting Tsunade a better view of the bearded Jōnin leaning in the doorway.

"Asuma," she said. "What is it?"
Kakashi already knew his business wasn't with Tsunade; just the way Asuma was standing was enough to translate the lack of urgency. But when those bronze eyes turned towards him, the copy-nin sensed something tense beneath the relaxed surface.

"Need to borrow Kakashi. Hope I'm not interrupting."

"We're done," Tsunade said, finalising the words by firmly shutting the drawer of her desk. "Kakashi, I'm counting on you."

Kakashi nodded, looking to Tsunade out the far corner of his eye. "I understand."

And I don't like it...

He had no desire to step on Asuma or Gai's toes as far as their students were concerned. He wasn't overly concerned about Gai - Asuma however, was anything but predictable when it came to his Team. It was a curious quirk that only Kurenai could tease the Sarutobi about; anyone else risked severance of balls by trench knife.

Becoming a eunuch was **not** on Kakashi's 'things-to-do-before-I-croak' list.

On that morbid thought, he approached the doorway. "Borrow me?"

"Your brain," Asuma tipped his head toward Kakashi's hitai-ate, smiling. "Not my fault the rest of you comes with it."

"No, that's just your good fortune." Kakashi closed the door behind him and paused to adjust his hitai-ate over his Sharingan eye, trying to ignore the sharp twinge in the optic nerve.

Asuma made note of the unnecessary adjustment, guessing at the source. "Paining you again, huh?"

Kakashi dismissed it with a shrug, his tone changing to something cooler. "It comes and goes."

The flat drop in his voice was enough for Asuma to take the hint. The Sarutobi headed the conversation down a different path using the easiest vehicle – humour.

"Yeah? When will the time come when the Ninja Cyclops look goes?" Asuma teased, indicating Kakashi's mask with a brush of his fingers along his bearded jaw. "One of these days, Hatake…"

Kakashi's grey eye glinted with amusement. "It won't happen in your lifetime."

Asuma laughed, lazing into a walk beside the other Jōnin as they headed down the corridor towards the mansion's exit. "Too bad for you I plan on sticking around until you're too ugly to bother hiding it anyway."

Kakashi chuckled, the sound playing through the thin fibres of his mask as they stepped out into the cold night air, the bite of frost like a blade across skin. They paused at the top of the walkway, both leaning into the railing as they surveyed the village and took in the view.

Stars held like raindrops in the darkness, shimmering.

Peace rained instead; a quiet, companionable silence, broken only by the drizzle of sound carrying from the village below.

Kakashi only turned his head when ash and embers dusted the air, flaking off like dying sparks from Asuma's cigarette as the Sarutobi moved to hang his forearms over the railing. His smoke was
followed by the waft of both their breaths, drifting away into nothingness.

"So…" Asuma began, trailing off awkwardly, his voice gruff and uncertain.

"So…” Kakashi echoed.

There was silence for a moment.


"I think we'll need a drink for this," Asuma decided.

Okay…

Kakashi turned his back to the village, bracing his elbows on the railing as he looked across, assessing Asuma out the corner of his eye.

"That bad?" he asked, casual as ever.

A long pause and a stream of smoke later, Asuma hummed.

"Well…there's a strong possibility that in about 9 months, I'm going to become a mass murder," he said. "And I'm going to need your help burying some bodies."

Kakashi blinked, staring ahead for a long moment. "Drinks. You're buying."

The hats were back.

Kiba, Chōji and Naruto had donned the stupid things to commence a game of Pop the Balloons via head-butts. Shikamaru had managed to escape the madness by playing umpire with Temari. He'd lost track of who was in the lead, his attention drifting and dividing itself between conversation with the Suna kunoichi and Ino's current fixation with Shino.

The shadow-nin's features hinted at a smirk.

Ino was deep in the fortune-telling throes of enlightening the insect-handler to all elements of his altruistic Aquarian nature. To Shikamaru's amusement, the Aburame actually seemed interested in what the Yamanaka was saying, offering his circumlocutory replies with actual gestures instead of robotic nods.

Shikamaru had to smile at that.

Ino sat like a queen, crowned with her purple-striped hat, holding court not only with Shino, but with some of the attendants who she'd also offered to interpret signs for. In the background, Shikamaru spied Sakura and Hinata dipping in and out of the room, the latter sporting a smudge of flour across her chin.

*If there's a cake, I'm not singing.*

Temari followed his gaze, then looked back to the balloon game going on. "How's your mother?"

The query had him glancing across warily. "Loud. Violent. Like most women I know."

Temari smirked, her eyes on the balloons.
Not wanting to know what had prompted that question from her, Shikamaru took the opportunity to push back from the table and cup his side, pretending to stretch. A wince pulled at the corners of his eyes as his ribs gave a faint twinge.

 Damn.

Several intense treatments of curative chakra had healed the fractures in under a week, leaving only a tender ache behind. Sometimes, in his weakest moments, he wondered if it wasn't behind his ribs that he was feeling the pain. Every time he woke at 4AM he'd graze his fingers over the scar, his mind on a different wound altogether.

Change the thought.

Distraction came with desserts.

Servers swept around the table, offloading plates, all stacked and balanced expertly on wrists, forearms and fingertips. The array of confectionary was as colourful as the party hats Ino had commissioned. A rainbow assortment of delicacies that immediately made the shadow-nin crave a coffee blacker than the look he sent Akamaru when the dog came crawling over to him under the table looking for a handout.

"No," Shikamaru crossed his arms atop the table, trying to ignore the whining puppy-eyed look. "Go bug Kiba."

Fortunately, Ino tempted the mutt away with a rice cake, taking her seat beside the shadow-nin, zodiac book cradled in her hands like some holy tome. "Your turn, Shikamaru!"

Shikamaru winced, sensing attention beginning to shift as everyone began to group closer around the table, ready to get in on the desserts. He waited for the majority of focus to shift solidity onto the food as Ino flicked through her book.

He shook his head. "I'll pass on the fortune telling, thanks."

"No way," Ino thumbed through the pages, flicking forward then back again before smacking the book down on her lap. "Trust you to be a special case. You're on the cusp, lazybones. Know what that means?"

Shikamaru searched the table for coffee. "I'm sure you'll tell me."

"It means you have a mix of both signs either side of your birthday," the kunoichi explained, popping a sweet into her mouth and dusting her fingers together to rub away the sugar-powder. "Virgo and Libra."

"That was it!" Chōji shouted, pointing across with sudden comprehension.

Amused, Shikamaru glanced between them, smiling uncertainly.

"Virgo and Libra..." he echoed with as much disinterest as he could muster, trying to mask his vague sense of curiosity about the stupid book and the crap he imagined was in it. "So what?"

"So wait a second and I'll tell you," Ino muttered as she began speed-reading, thumbnail sailing across lines of text, feeding her excitement as she digested the information. She then began listing traits as she went. "Shrewd and analytical, check. Critical of others, check. Addictive tendencies, hmmn..." Ino trailed off for a moment, searching for something more interesting. "Ooh! It says if you've got a bit of Libra in you it means you must have a romantic side!"
Shikamaru's eyes rolled upward then drifted shut.

Of all the troublesome, uncomfortable, awkward things to bring up.

*Stupid book.*

Temari's gaze flicked across, a delicate chuckle tumbling into her teacup as she took a quick sip to muffle her amusement. Shikamaru scowled, panicked internally and immediately reached for something – anything – to press to his mouth before it could turn down in a frown. He reached for the nearest tray of drinks, grabbing warm ceramic and snatching it up so fast that he almost spilt the contents.

*Slow down.*

"Shikamaruuuu," Ino cooed.

Frowning, the shadow-nin slanted away from her. "No."

"Yes. So, you have a romantic side…" she began, trailing off in a way that suggested she wanted him to complete the sentence.

*Screw that.*

Shikamaru snorted, sipping something hot and sweet that had his nose wrinkling and his stomach churning. "I don't," he croaked, shoving the drink towards her. "You'll like this."

Ino clapped the book shut, set it down and eyed him intently, looking severe and concerned, ignoring the drink. "So tell me."

"Tell you…?" he licked his lips, tasting honey.

*Ugh.*

"This romantic side," Ino pressed, adopting a playful, dreamy tone as she rested her cheek in her hand, elbow propped on the book. "Anyone special ever brought it out?"

Shikamaru cringed inside, more for the reason that he could feel Temari flexing her fingers like claws across the table, ready to sink her nails and teeth into this topic just to see him squirm. He searched for another distraction until his gaze hit on what looked like green tea.

Tasteless and clear, with a hint of something bitter.

*How appropriate.*

Hinata noticed his look and filled a cup, passing it across to him.

He took it with a tight smile. "Thanks."

Ino prodded him in the ribs again. "Well?" she wheedled.

"Drop it," he muttered. "I'm not a girl, you're not gonna get some sappy confession."

Ino pouted, looking at him with something close to pity. "Aaaw, no romance? But you have had…" she trailed off, lowering her voice with a slow smirk. "Well…you know?"

Shikamaru froze, fingers tightly gripping the cup. "Ino…" he warned.
"Aaw, come on. You can't be a 'virgo' Virgo," she whispered.

"What the hell is a 'virgo' Virgo?" Shikamaru growled, uncomfortable as hell and cursing himself for even asking.

"A virgin," Temari chirped, smiling sweetly.

Shikamaru barked a flat, humourless laugh that hurt his lungs it was so forced. "We're not talking about this." He quickly took up the tea. "Change the topic."

"Shikamaru…" Ino whispered, staring at him like a kid in the middle of a suspense story, hanging off every word he wasn't saying. "Does that mean you've…you know?"

Shikamaru stared into his teacup, shaking his head. How the hell had the conversation swung onto this territory without him fielding the landmine way before it got the chance to blow up in his face? He sat stiffly, tense and tormented for the full five seconds it took for Temari to supply another answer.

"Oh sure he has," she confirmed in a velvety tone.

"Temari," he dropped his voice a dangerous notch, face drawn with discomfort.

"I'm doing my worst, Nara, just like you said."

*Shit.*

"Wait…" Ino gasped, her finger swinging between them. "No way! You! And you!"

Shikamaru sighed, scattering steam into his own face as he clanked his teeth to his cup, almost biting down on the rim. If only the tea was toxic. Poison would be a quicker death than the slow one playing out now.

"Oh please, nothing like that," Temari assured, watching him as she addressed Ino. "I suppose I'm just the matchmaker."

"How about you don't help me out *ever* again?" Shikamaru muttered, letting the bitter taste of the tea dance along his tongue.

"Oh I don't think I needed to, did I?" Temari simpered, drawing out the words more to hook Ino in than to catch Shikamaru out — clearly enjoying her part in making him suffer. "If I recall, you helped yourself like a kid in a candy store."

He looked away from her with a derisive snort, heat rising to his cheeks. "This conversation isn't gonna happen."

"Shikamaru!" Ino smacked him with the back of her hand. "Have you been seeing someone in Suna?"

Temari hummed, another calculated sound. "Oh he gave someone a good 'seeing' to."

Kiba looked up, catching onto the four key words "a good seeing to" and doing his own male maths without effort. "Oi, Shikamaru!" he grinned. "What's this?"

*Fuck.*

Shikamaru shot Temari an incredulous glare, his brain halting for a moment as he processed the
dirty game she was playing. "You better not go there."

She ignored the grit in his tone, scraping him back with a tongue as dry as sand, letting grains of tension fill the space between them. "Let's see if Shikamaru can remember her name."

_God dammit._

Ignoring the warm tendrils of a blush cresting his neck and crawling hotter across his lean cheeks, he shot Ino a narrow glare.

"Ino. Move on," he warned.

"But!"

"Move. On."

Temari moved _in_ instead, stroking her fingertips across the rim of her cup in slow circles, a look of remembrance etching into her face, designed to exaggerate the moment.

"Don't be so shy, Shikamaru. There were no complaints, if that's what you're worried about."

"Shikamaru!" Kiba barked, smacking his fist on the table and dragging his butt across three seats without standing, inviting himself into the conversation. "You did the dirty with someone in Suna!"

Shikamaru closed his eyes like a man in deep, physical pain. "Thanks. Maybe you wanna raise your voice a little louder and broadcast it to the entire village."

Ino smacked him hard enough to jolt his eyes open. "You can't even remember her name!"

"Don't be so hard on him," Temari defended, then added, "he had a few names to remember."

Shikamaru closed his eyes again.

*I fucking knew this would come back to bite me in the ass…*

Kiba whistled. "No way!"

"Shikamaru!" Ino gasped, smacking him again. "More than one!"

"Would you quit hitting me?" he growled, wanting nothing more than to hit something himself – ideally, a bottle of strong saké.

Kiba laughed, appraising Shikamaru with blooming respect – the kind that came from one male acknowledging another's prowess on the battlefield of the bedroom.

"Well shit, Nara. You got your own _harem_ or something?"

Shikamaru rubbed a hand across his face, not even bothering to respond to that. He looked across at Temari with slit-eyed irritation. She was going to milk this moment for all it was worth and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it.

"Happy?" he growled wearily.

Temari hummed and gave a little shiver. "Tingly."

"Shit!" Kiba snapped his fingers, his voice gaining volume enough to begin attracting more

Shikamaru kept his eyes on Temari. "Is this your payback?"

Temari hummed again, a long, savoury sound. "Absolutely."

"Payback?" Sakura asked, turning in her seat as she caught onto the vibe buzzing around Shikamaru's end of the table. "Payback for what?"

_Screwing up. Literally…_

Kiba set an elbow down and leaned in, eyebrows bobbing. "How many, Nara?"

"How many what?" Naruto chimed.

"Shikamaru's got a harem back in Suna."

Temari frowned. "Do you mind? I happen to know those sisters."

Ino gasped, mouth dropping open wider than the hole Shikamaru wished would open up beneath his chair. It didn't help that Kiba was shaking his head and staring at the shadow-nin with a reverent kind of amazement so close to hero-worship it was traumatising to watch. He gaped at Shikamaru as if seeing him in a new light.

"How the _hell_ can a lazy ass like you handle more than _one_?"

"At the same time," Temari added.

"And SISTERS!" Ino wailed in his ear.

Shikamaru jerked his shoulder. "Why the hell are you yelling? I'm _right here_!"

"I can't _believe_ you!" She smacked him as he reached for his tea, sloshing some over the table. "Handling more than one girl at one time!"

"Like his drinks," Temari went on conversationally. "Although he handled the women better, if I recall."

Shikamaru clapped his teacup down hard. "I can handle my drink just fine…" he cut off here, quickly backtracking. "If I was drinking…which…I wasn't…" he trailed off lamely.

"Because that would be illegal," Sai added unhelpfully. "So is prostitution in many countries."

Shikamaru stared at Sai with a look that screamed "the fuck?" and just shook his head.

"What the hell?" Kiba laughed. "Where'd that come from?"

"My book," Sai explained, hefting up a bag he'd brought with him. "I have several."

"On prostitution?" Kiba couldn't resist shooting Shikamaru a razzing grin. "Might come in handy with your harem, Shikamaru."

"Harem…" Sai echoed, looking to Shikamaru. "Is harem a euphemism for prostitution?"

Shikamaru pressed a fist to his mouth and pleaded for the strength not to injure someone before he sensed Temari's eyes tracing over his exasperated face.
She chuckled wickedly. "Does it hurt?"

"Want me to grab the body bag so you can zip me up while you're at it?" Shikamaru growled, gesturing around the table to indicate the spectators witnessing his humiliation and torture. "You can stop now. The damage is done."

"But they haven't finished digging your grave yet." Temari reached across to pick up a glazed chestnut between her fingertips. "I just gave them the shovel."

"Yeah," he drawled, watching her bite into the roasted nut. "Your hands are totally clean."

"Mmn." Temari brushed flecks of honey from her lips and sucked each fingertip, shrugging. "Well next time you'll think twice about being a brat and running off to do naughty, scandalous things, won't you, genius?"

Shikamaru tensed at her rich chuckle, the sound vexing him further due to the irritating stir that it tickled low and hot in his stomach – in no way helped by the flick of her tongue across her fingertips, cat-like and curling.

He looked away.

_This sucks in so many ways._

Add to this moment all the fractured memories of the night coming back to haunt him – and the girls he'd spent it with. He had vague recollections of dark, tumbling hair and pale, olive-green eyes – times two.

_Sisters? Shit...maybe I was seeing double and it was just the one..._

"Shikamaru, I really hope Temari's joking." Ino slumped in her chair, cupping her cheeks as if to hold her head straight while she tried to weed fact from fiction, weighing up the dirt dished out on his disreputable behaviour. "Were you actually drunk?"

Horribly, horribly drunk.

The shadow-nin cringed, not even wanting to think about that night and his non-existent morals at the time. He sure as hell hadn't been thinking clearly _before_ he'd hit the saké bottles – hard. Being thrust back into the deep end with Daimyo's hunting and circling him like sharks had done it. His mind had taken a dangerous twist that almost turned into a tailspin.

_Yeah, so you drank yourself into a coma...and two girls...sisters...god..._

The hangover hadn't been fun, especially playing proctor the next day.

_Idiot._

Another violent nudge brought him back from his thoughts and he gazed longingly at the exit, estimating how many ways he could reach it without being tackled by Ino or bulldozed by Chōji.

_Someone kill me..._

"Well? Were you drunk?" Ino pressed. "Because if you were—"

"I wasn't drunk," he lied.

_I was plastered all over the damned floor._
"So does sand really get in all the wrong places?" Naruto joked, scrunching his face to one side in preparation for a hit when Sakura raised a fist threateningly.

"Man, I think you learned fast about all the right places," Kiba laughed.

"And just how many places?" Ino growled, snapping back from whatever calculations she was doing. "Let me get this straight in my mind. You got drunk and then you—!


Temari snorted.

"Yeah, you got lucky instead!" Naruto shouted, highlighting the most significant point to every male on the table – though Sai looked confused.

Kiba reached across to clap the shadow-nin on the shoulder. "Gotta hand it to you Shikamaru, you've proved yourself. Getting drunk and doing the dirty with a duo. You're more of a dog than I am."

"Duo? What about the rest of the harem?" Naruto snickered, guarding his face with his arms when Sakura tried to get a hit in.

"Oh yeah, just how many was it again?"

Shikamaru sighed as he was jostled from side to side by random punches and smacks on the shoulder.

He shot Temari a withering glance from beneath his lashes. "Thanks for the complete character assassination. Are you done yet?"

Temari looked around at the shocked or smirking faces and blushing or glaring women, taking in the full measure of the shit storm she'd blown his way. "Mmn. Pretty much. I'm so glad I introduced those girls to you." She raised her cup in a toast. "Happy Birthday."

"So it's true! I can't believe you!" Ino slugged him hard. "Next you'll tell me you're doing drugs!"

"I'm not doing drugs."

Kiba laughed. "Man, who cares? He's doing half of Suna."

"Be careful dog-boy," Temari growled.

Kiba rolled his eyes. "What, he's doing you too?"

Silence.

Shikamaru very slowly pressed his face into his palm, sinking deeper into his chair with a sigh. Temari, just as slowly, pivoted in her seat until her gaze hit on Kiba as hot and hellacious as a building sandstorm.

"What did you say to me?" she hissed.

As everyone shifted their attention onto Kiba's imminent castration, Shikamaru quietly shifted his attention towards the door. He leaned back, lifted his hips and began to shimmy across the seats, aiming to slink away.
Ino hooked his arm and yanked him back. "Oooh no you don't! No sneaking off! So now you have to tell me – who was your first kiss?"

Naruto jerked a thumb at Temari. "Not Temari that's for sure."

Temari transferred the threat of castration onto Naruto with a flick of her gaze. "Unless you want your first kiss to be from mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, you'll shut up."

Naruto gulped, leaning across to Shikamaru. "Scary."

"Told you," Shikamaru reminded, yanking his arm back from Ino.

"Too late anyway," Kiba updated. "Naruto's first kiss was a guy."

Temari's brow cut upward, slicing the anger from her face. "Really, now?"

"W-what! No!" Naruto spluttered, waving his hands around in defence. "That was a mistake!"

Kiba shook his head and mouthed. "He loved it."

While Sakura restrained Naruto from vaulting across the table, Ino anchored Shikamaru back into his seat with a firm tug on his arm. "So spill it, deviant one. First kiss. When was it?"

"Back off already," Shikamaru grumbled, dropping his elbows onto the table in a thud, resignation dissolving any real flare in his temper. "I'm not grilling you about your private life."

"What!" Ino smacked a hand to her chest, face darkening with affront. "I tell you everything!"

Shikamaru offered a lopsided smirk. "And we never agreed that was a good thing." He set his temple to his fist and fixed a knowing look on her. "And that's not true."

Ino blinked quickly and looked away, scanning the sweets on the table. "Fine, what do you want to know?"

"I don't want to know," he replied, shuttering his chocolate orbs sleepily.

"Well I do!" she argued.

Shikamaru squeezed his eyes shut. "Kill me."

"Ne, Shikamaru, relax," Chōji chuckled, munching a rice cake.

"Chōji!" Ino beamed, looking over her shoulder. "You must know who Shikamaru's first kiss was!"

Shikamaru cracked an eye open. "Don't even think about it, seriously."

Chōji nodded solemnly mid-chew. "I won't say anything."

"Chōji!" Ino bristled hotly. "That's not fair! We're a Team!"

"Ino…" Shikamaru sighed, rubbing his eyes.

"Was it in Suna?" she pressed, peeking up under his hand.

"Don't bet on it," Temari scoffed.

Ino bolted upright in her seat. "Oh my god before? Was this when you were a Genin?"
Shikamaru chuckled quietly and turned his face into his palm to smother the sound, rubbing his lips. Maybe the absurdity of everything had finally sunk in, or maybe he was just too tired to get angry.

"I'm not gonna tell you, so you can quit asking."

Ino squinted at him critically, flicking him on the cheek. "I'll get you drunk and then you'll spill the beans."

"Bribe him with drugs," Kiba suggested. "He'd go for that."

"For the last time, idiot, I'm not doing drugs."

"Just half of Suna."

Shikamaru's head never made it to the table.

"YOOOOOSH!"

The scream was followed by a blur of green that shot across the room in a dynamic entry launch that took out one of the balloons above Shikamaru's head in a loud 'BANG'. This explosion didn't have shit on Lee's voice when it went off at twice the volume in Shikamaru's ear.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY, SHIKAMARU-KUN! AS OF THIS DAY YOU HAVE BURNED WITH THE FLAME OF 6,205 SUNS!"

Suns-uns-uns-uns…

Shikamaru sat rigid, eyes squeezed shut as he strained to hear beyond the exploding echo of the last word rolling around in his eardrum, followed by the high-pitched ring of his brain tuning back into the laughter in the background.

He vaguely registered Tenten shouting something across the room.

When he cracked his eye open, Lee's thumb was staring him in the face. Cross-eyed, Shikamaru glared at the curved digit and swatted it away with the back of his hand, exposing his eyeballs to the ping of light bouncing off Lee's teeth.

"Lee!" Ino squealed, grinning. "You and Tenten made it for desserts!"

Shikamaru jerked back as Lee vaulted over him to reach the blonde, shoving a bouquet of flowers under her nose with a deep bow. Shikamaru sagged onto his elbows with a grunt.

Great…she gets flowers and I get a fucking perforated eardrum…

Pressing a finger to the hinge of his jawbone, Shikamaru jiggled his chin around, working his jaw against the ringing in his ear. He paused, however, when Naruto's scream went off like a siren, wailing high and low in alternating sonic waves as he ducked and dived around the room like a maniac.

"NOOOOO!"

"Naruto, what the hell is your pro—!" Kiba cut off into a burst of hysterics, stabbing his finger at the orange blur zipping around after the Uzumaki like a super-sized wasp. "No freakin' WAY! It's your LOVEBIRD!"
"GET IT OFF!"

Stunned, Shikamaru dropped his hand away from his jaw, eyes flying wide. "How the hell…?"

Abruptly, his stomach dropped, his chest seized and his attention snapped to the doorway.

His gaze hit on a pair of eyes he sure as hell hadn't expected.

But they weren't the moonstone orbs that had haunted his dreams. No, these eyes were grey and narrower, glinting with suppressed mirth.

"What's wrong with you?" Temari asked, then looked over her shoulder.

Shikamaru blinked hard, his lungs like lead.

Fuck, get a grip…

His chest seized in a jump-start and the air left him in a whoosh, tapering off in a quiet shake from his lips. His mind quickly scrambled for a way to recover. Fortunately, he looked surprised enough to distract from whatever had gripped his expression seconds before he'd realised it wasn't a pale-eyed phantom from his dreams looking back at him.

In an instant, his blasé mask was back.

He dropped back in his chair, lopsidedly slouched. He offered a half-smile, shaking his head as he looked past Temari's shoulder. "You've got to be joking."

The redhead smirked from across the room, raising a hand. "Glad to be the punchline, Nara."

Across the table, Ino and Sakura choked on their drinks at the same time – but for entirely different reasons.

"Hello man meat," Ino purred beneath her breath, eyeing up the muscular protein on display.

Shikamaru scowled, looking across without turning his head. "Ino…” he growled.

With a whip of flaxen strands, Ino dipped a shoulder and swayed her head, exposing the slender curve of neck and shoulder. Shikamaru frowned, watching as her gaze roved over the approaching redhead like the guy was some prize horse she wanted to saddle up with her charms and take for a ride.

This shit has got to stop…

Shikamaru scowled, angled his leg and kicked her under the table. "Grow up."

"Ouch!" she hissed through her teeth, smile still plastered in place. "You jackass."

She tilted delicately, lifted her knee and brought the heel of her shoe down on his foot with all the sadistic power of a sledge hammer.

Pain shot up Shikamaru's instep in a hot rush.

He flinched hard, the chords in his throat locked against a yelp.

 Fucking, god damn OW!
Eye twitching and jaw set, Shikamaru calmly set his elbow on the table and pressed a fist to his mouth, knuckles bleached white. Ino snickered as he let out a tight groan against his hand, sucking in a breath to control his reaction.

"Serves you right, you jerk. I hope it hurts."

"It will when I get the feeling back," Shikamaru growled beneath his breath.

Temari glanced at Shikamaru as Hibari moved over. "From your pained expression, I take it you're acquainted with this reckless hothead?"

The Nara wondered at the derisive look she shot Hibari, which seemed to bounce off the redhead straight back at her. "So are you," Shikamaru noted, amused despite his crippled foot.

*I can't actually feel it...that can't be good...*

He glanced under the table briefly and tried to flex his toes. Akamaru watched him with interest, thumping his tail and whining in sympathy.

The shadow-nin looked up as Hibari moved over.

"Tsubasa," Temari acknowledged shortly.

"Child beater," Hibari returned, tilting his torso in a mock bow.

Shikamaru looked between them, then sat forward and raised up a little, extending his palm at the same time as Hibari to shake hands once over Temari's head.

"Good to see you."

"You too."

"Brought a friend?" Shikamaru glanced at the bird sparring with Naruto as the Uzumaki fenced it's beak with a chopstick.

"Couldn't resist."

"Here for negotiations, huh?"

Hibari nodded. "That's one plan. Might have another in the works."

"Right." Shikamaru arched a brow mentally, but when Hibari's attention shifted across the table, he already knew who the Tsubasa was looking for.

The man was on a deliberate hunt even as he greeted familiar faces. And Shikamaru knew the second Hibari had cornered his prey because Sakura flushed, folded her arms across her body and struggled between a glare and an exasperated huff.

Hibari's smile hit his eyes.

And then came the disastrous moment Shikamaru had predicted.

Ino frowned at the lack of attention she was attracting, then followed Hibari's gaze – straight to Sakura.

The blonde went very still in her seat.
Shit.

Shikamaru sighed, bracketing his brow between thumb and forefinger.

This is gonna be a long night...
Birthday's had a rule of thumb when it came to surprises.

The rule was simple; expect the unexpected.

For Shikamaru, unpredicted company and unwanted topics of conversation were just two examples on a long list belonging to a long night. In fact, he'd resigned himself to an even simpler logic.

Expect and accept the unexpected.

He could do this and accept it because these unexpected things were out of his control. However, he sure as hell didn't expect to be caught unawares by something he'd always kept under the strictest supervision.

His mind.

And the unexpected slip happened so fast that he missed it.

He was in the middle of listening to Kiba and Naruto regale Temari and Ino with the exaggerated tale of their mission in Hanegakure when the shift took hold of him.

Normally, he'd always catch it in time.

Normally, he'd sense a warning 'ping' on his mental radar and immediately bring up psychological borders before the fear could break through into a physical response. Normally, the fear would bounce off the barricades in his mind and deflect back into the shadows of his subconscious.

He'd catch it in time, every time.

But not this time.

It struck him like a rush of cold sweat on the inside. And then his heartbeat hit his throat so hard he froze altogether.

What the hell?

Shikamaru blinked hard, trying to focus on what Kiba was saying. He stared at the dog-nin's mouth to try to follow the words but another icy flash had him shifting position, straightening up and dropping one hand to his thigh, gripping hard.

His palms were sweating.

This is crazy...calm down...

Shikamaru swallowed hard.

"So then Shikamaru put together this crazy-ass game plan," Kiba was explaining to the girls, engrossed in fleshing out the intensity of the mission. "Designed to rearrange my face."

"Yeah, Kiba had about five nosebleeds, the Wuss," Naruto added, stuffing his face with dangos.

"Oh shut up, I had to drill through rock. All you had to do was run around like a birdbrain with your little orange buddies – and I'm not talkin' about your clones."
"I kicked more ass than you did."

"Bull. Shikamaru, back me up!" Kiba implored, barely looking over, assuming he had the shadow-nin's full attention.

"Yeah..." Shikamaru answered mindlessly, trying to get his brain to slip into the appropriate gears to control his body.

_Calm down. Breathe._

"So the whole thing was about mind-transference," Ino cut in, her gaze fixed on Sakura and Hibari, blue eyes cooler than a she-wolf's as she watched the redhead tease playful threats out of her pink-haired rival.

"Hell yeah, the whole thing," Naruto agreed around a mouthful. "But they branded kids and stuff, it was messed up."

As conversation continued, Shikamaru blinked distractedly from the dialogue, painfully aware that his mouth felt drier than a sand pit, his tongue a useless, thick wad of cotton. His lips felt dry enough to crack if he moved them.

He thought to reach for water only to find that he already had.

His fingers were curled so hard around the glass that the tendons in his hand were drawn taut and white, fingertips bleached by his grip.

His eyes widened a fraction, alarm cutting off his breath.

His rigid arm and hand looked like they belonged to a rigor mortis corpse.

_Fuck...how?_

Condensation beaded from the glass and dripped colder than his sweat over ashen fingers. With effort, Shikamaru flexed his hand. The twitch broke the tension in his arm, setting off a tremble that quickly rippled into a fresh flood of adrenaline, heightening the roar of his pulse.

He sucked in a tight breath.

Across from him, Temari leaned her cheek into her hand, stroking her earlobe between thumb and forefinger with a subtle glance in his direction, teal eyes narrowed questioningly.

Oblivious, Shikamaru took a strong gulp of water, the muscles of his throat working hard as he sucked another breath through his nose. The sharp sound was drowned out by Naruto's voice husking out a laugh about something that bypassed Shikamaru completely. He set the glass down, tightening his fingers around it again.

_This is so stupid...I'm not under attack...I'm not in danger...breathe..._

The logic wouldn't penetrate the building pressure in his head.

Temari watched him, turning a little more in her seat, careful not to draw attention from the others.

"Shikamaru," she dropped her tone to mirror her mild look of concern.

"Relax," he rasped, his voice a hoarse croak as he pushed to his feet, slipping as casually as he could manage around the table.
Get out. Move.

The hum of conversation and gentle stream of music seemed to dim into a distance buzz in the back of his head, drowned out by the roar of his pulse, each heartbeat amplified by the rapid steps he took towards the restroom.

This is fucking stupid...I know what this is...

His logic immediately identified the cause.

Anxiety.

Usually the cure was simple, he'd neutralise the problem by switching his focus onto something else.

Stupid simple.

Then why the HELL isn't it working?

He threw open the door to the men's room and moved straight to the sink, fingers moving fast to slam on the cold water. He ducked his head low, letting the spray wash over his lips before he cupped the icy flow in his palm, splashing his nape and rubbing hard.


He knew how to do this. Given the amount of practice he'd had, he should have perfected it by now. He looked down at the water swirling down the plug hole and splashed his brow, letting the cool droplets trace the sharp angles of his face as he tipped his head back.

A shaky laugh caught in his throat at the absurdity of it.

So stupid...

Gripping the edges of the sink, he hung his head with a rattled sigh, drawing in deep breaths and holding them for a beat of five, trying to get his heart rate under control.

Who'd have thought I'd be the one needing to breathe...after everything I told you to do...

He shook his head at the thought, trying hard to veer away from the memory of pale, opalescent eyes pinched in panic and pain. He blinked slowly and stared at his reflection instead.

Shit. I need to sleep...

The dark smudges under his eyes were even more pronounced in the muted light, the lean shadows under his cheeks even darker. He leaned in until he felt his breath misting the glass, fanning out warm against the mirror.

Breathe...slow...

Slowly, his body began to respond, the adrenaline and palpitations easing into a tight throb at the base of his throat. A few breaths later, the nervous, nauseating flutter in his sternum settled back to a steady beat.

He pressed his brow to the mirror with a sigh. "Shit..."

As his body settled, his mind raced.
It must have been the sleep deprivation that had finally done it. Exhaustion always led to hazy breaks in his mental border-control. Thoughts slipped through unwanted and the reaction fired off before he could arrest the cause then and there.

*That's got to be it...but what the hell triggered it?*

As far as his conscious mind was concerned, he'd been focused on Naruto and Kiba, he hadn't been aware of his thoughts drifting. Granted, Temari bringing up the Chūnin exams and the Daimyos hadn't helped, but he should have had a grip on those reactions by now. Since his stupid drunken escapade, he'd sharpened his mind to the likeness of a knife when it came to cutting off unwanted thoughts and memories.

Clearly, tiredness had dulled the blade.

*I'm just sleep-deprived...that's all this is...it doesn't mean anything...*

It's not like the past was happening now.

*Don't go there. Be here.*

Nodding once to confirm he was comfortable with this conclusion, he drew his face back from the mirror and stared himself in the face. The deep, dark sienna of his eyes stared back at him, the pupils shrinking and swelling in the dim light. Shadows seeming to swirl around the irises.

He blinked slowly, hooding his gaze.

And then he spoke to part of himself he hadn't addressed in two years.

*You belong in the shadows. Stay there.*

She wasn't crying, but Neji could sense the tears.

They were just beneath the surface of her opal eyes, a damp sheen like water behind glass.

"Look up," Neji instructed gently.

Hanabi raised her chin, sniffing against the sting in her nose. "I don't need your pity."

Neji ignored the petulant snap, his focus on the damage along his younger cousin's jaw and neck. Thankfully, she'd avoided a third-degree burn. The skin hadn't blackened or split, but blisters had formed along the underside of her jaw.

*If Hinata didn't have such excellent chakra control, this could have been worse.*

Neji twisted the cap on a salve pot, the scent of aloe hitting the cool air. Hanabi squirmed at the edge of the porch, digging her toes into the dust that had settled around the courtyard.

She watched him warily as he adjusted his crouch. "She forgave you for what you did to her when you were a Genin."

Dropping a knee to keep his balance, Neji set the pot to one side, coating his thumb with the salve. "Your sister has a name."

"Do you expect me to forgive her like she forgave you?" Hanabi demanded, her tone taking on an edge that pricked the Jōnin's conscience like a senbon.
"I don't expect anything," Neji responded neutrally, hooking a finger under her to chin to lift it higher. "Stay still."

He smoothed the aloe along the blisters carefully, ignoring her hiss of discomfort. Keeping his focus, he examined the skin by light of the lanterns set around the courtyard, throwing soupy shadows into a warped and wobbling dance.

Twilight had begun to blacken; matching Hanabi's dark look as she watched him.

"I won't be a Branch pet too," she bit out.

Neji's thumb paused mid-sweep at her throat. Staring at the pale column of her neck, he realised how frighteningly easy it would be to snap it.

"If you have something to say to me, then speak plainly," Neji returned, his deep tones unerringly calm. "You are angry that I have trained with Hinata-sama."

Hanabi grabbed his wrist, her small fingers clutching hard but barely making an impression. "She did this to me. You taught her how to do it."

Neji rolled his wrist, the slight movement sharp enough to break her clutch on him. Hanabi snapped her hand back, gripping the post beside her instead, nails digging into the flaked wood. He imagined she'd rather have imbedded those nails in his skin, scratched out his eyes and hissed her hurt.

"You taught her," Hanabi seethed again.

"Yes," Neji admitted, leaning across to replace the cap on the pot, fingers twisting the lid into place. "And what has Hiashi-sama taught you?"

"So that's it, cousin? You pity her because father trains with me?" Hanabi accused, digging her toes deeper into the dust. "You'll teach her to beat me, because father picked me over her?"

"No."

"Then why?" she hissed between clenched teeth. "If I had been born first would it have made a difference?"

Neji closed his eyes in a rigid snap.

Damn those words and their ability to sink into him like fangs through skin he normally kept tougher than hide. He'd hardened the edges of his mask, but the guard around his heart was taking longer to reconstruct, given who had collapsed his defences weeks ago.

Not now.

Neji drew a breath then slipped his eyes open. "Making a difference is the reason I am doing it."

"You can't change anything!" Hanabi growled, a stinging contempt disguising the tremor in her voice. "How can you, niisan? How can she? The strongest wins!" Hanabi shot to her feet in front of him, dust swirling around her ankles as she balled her fists. "The weakest will be branded worthless! Worthless and unwanted!"

Neji gazed up at her, allowing her this small advantage of height. She panted against the weight of emotion holding watery and wild in her eyes, her anger orchestrating her motions like a puppet.
"You don't care what happens to me! Why should you?"

"That's not true."

"Yes it is! Well go ahead and teach her! I don't need a protector. I'll get stronger on my own!"

"Hanabi…"

"Because I won't be thrown away by father! I won't be disowned!" Tears rolled like tiny diamonds down her cheeks, struck amber in the lantern light. "I won't…I won't…"

Neji gazed up serenely, wrestling her anger into a submissive pause with silence and patience. He waited until the sound of her enraged pants began to hitch in her chest. It was this sound that drew him wordlessly to his feet, a ripple of white robes and shadows.

Hanabi stared up at him, pale orbs shining. "I won't be thrown away…I won't let father leave me behind."

Neji tilted his head, something stronger and older than sadness weighing in the depths of his eyes, deepening his voice into a hoarse rumble in his throat. "You will not be left behind."

"Liar!" She shook her head, scattering teardrops, a grimace betraying her fear. "One of us will be thrown aside and there's nothing you can do! You can't protect me!"

A muscle pulsed in Neji's jaw, his eyes casting over her as if studying a broken reflection of himself. Instantly, he recognised a shard of his past still buried deep and bloody in his chest. One of the many fragments he'd been broken into weeks before.

He knew the look in Hanabi's eyes.

He knew her fear, her frustration and that agonising sense of futility and fate. He knew exactly what it did. How it combined in a fist of emotion that grew fiercer and firmer with every repressed clench. More than this, he knew the kind of fury that could be borne from those dangerous feelings.

That is why I cannot train you…I would turn you into something worse than I ever allowed myself to become…

If he had almost killed Hinata in his rage, the thought of what Hanabi might do to her sister whilst fighting for the right to exist and survive was deeply disturbing.

I understand you better than you know.

"I will protect you," he said quietly.

Hanabi's legs locked to keep from folding, her fists drawing tighter and closer to her sides. "You can't change things…" she repeated on a whisper. "You can't make it better. You can't protect us both."

Neji stared at her shaking fists, a fleeting pain playing across his eyes, lost behind the harder look that replaced it. "I can try."

The cake wasn't the cloud Shikamaru had been expecting.

It was a stag and a rose.
Hinata had crafted the presentation to aesthetic perfection, everything from the deer's antlers to the rose's thorns. The detail was intense, leading Shikamaru to believe she had some kind of a culinary calling in her cards. She'd themed the cake's design on the Nara and Yamanaka affinities. She'd even accounted for Ino's purple obsession by binding the base with a lilac ribbon.

It was almost tragic to cut the damn thing.

But after the candles were blown and the cake sectioned, people dug in with gusto. Shikamaru feigned an appetite, not wanting to insult Hinata's time and effort, which was a hell of a lot more than he'd have put in when it came to exerting his gastronomic skills beyond making tea.

"Women belong in the kitchen, hmn?" Temari teased, nibbling on one of the cake's rose petals.

"That's right," Shikamaru replied, linking into the familiar sexist banter. It was better than the sharp looks Temari had been shooting him since he'd sat his ass back down.

Thankfully, the room had dimmed to a smoky mauve offset by red lamps and flickering candles. It made expressions harder to gauge in the deceptive light and clinging shadows. Music still trickled on in the background, gentle and cordial, mixing easy melodies into the mood.

A flash of blonde drew Shikamaru's attention askance as Ino gulped down her drink, curling her feet up beneath her, having abandoned her evil heels. "Shikamaru…"

"Mn?" The Nara looked over, sweeping his thumb across the corner of his mouth to catch a flake of chocolate.

"What did you wish for?"

"What?"

"Wish for," Ino repeated, dissecting her cake with the edge of her fork in a messy and uncoordinated fashion that was somewhat disturbing for a medic-nin. "When you blew out the candles."

Shikamaru watched her mutilate the cake, arching a brow. "Are you serious?"

Ino set her fork down and looked at him. She wasn't smiling.

Okay…

"You're supposed to make a wish on your birthday," she said severely.

"What, is that in your book too?" Shikamaru jerked his chin toward the zodiac book Chōji had apprehended, reading through it with Tenten.

Ino rolled her eyes and reached for her glass, a drink which had mysteriously appeared in Shikamaru's absence and kept getting refilled by one of the attendants as if Ino had him catering to her on psychic summons.

"Fine, whatever. Don't make a wish," she said petulantly, turning her attention away from him and onto Lee, gulping at her drink again.

Shikamaru arched a brow, looking to Temari as if she'd understand the undercurrents of the mood swing.

Temari smirked, waving a slender hand in casual dismissal. "Oh don't look at me like that. You dig
"Yeah, when you're not the one handing out the shovels," Shikamaru returned, scraping his teeth along his fork to catch some of the dark chocolate flakes stuck between the tines.

Temari dropped her eyes to his mouth, her own curling upward at one corner. "You're not the only one who can play dirty," she drew out the last word into a scathing purr.

Shikamaru looked away, shaking his head. "Subtle."

"You too," Temari murmured, her silky tone carrying a knowing edge.

Without looking back at her, Shikamaru set his focus across the room, watching the shadows wobble in the corners. He ran his tongue along the roof of his mouth and caught melted traces of dark chocolate.

He savoured the bitter taste underlying the sugar.

Out the corner of his eye, he caught Temari's hair rippling as she shook her head with a dry, sultry chuckle. The sound drew his focus, but before he could examine the nature of her amusement she was leaning across under the pretence of reaching for another slice of cake.

The sudden movement forced Shikamaru to lean back, but not before her breath brushed his ear. "You're not fooling me."

Shikamaru exhaled a rough chuckle, barely controlling the flash of alarm that threatened his eyes. He leaned back in his chair, half of his body coalescing into the shadows draped over their end of the table.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Temari plucked one of the rice-paper thorns from the rose section of the cake, her eyes on him the entire time.

"Playing the dumb card doesn't suit you."

"You want me to play something else?" he returned coolly, his eyes a degree warmer than his voice.

Temari smirked, a touch of surprise hitting her eyes. "Don't you have to be drunk to play those big boy games, Shikamaru?"

"I never stop playing." He leaned back further in his seat, bracing the heel of his hand at the edge of the table - confirming the solid barrier between them. "But in this case, it's a game over. You've had your payback."

"Have I? You still have to apologise."

His eyes darkened. "I don't have to do anything."

Temari quirked a brow, fixing him with a razor look. "You're not fooling me," she said again.

"Thanks for the concern," he drawled, annoyance biting into his tone. "Now drop it."

Temari treated him to a sly drop of her lashes, her movements subtle and quiet enough to attract no attention. She let her fingers skim over glasses and cups to disguise her closeness to him as no more
than searching the table for a misplaced drink.

"It's not concern, Shikamaru."

"Yeah?" Shikamaru murmured, his smoky voice automatically deepening and darkening the longer they held eye contact. "Well then thanks for the warning."

Temari measured the distance between them, like a player checking positions on a board.

Then she drew away slowly, like a cat slinking back, one shoulder at a time.

He knew it wasn't a retreat.

Her voice lulled to a smug purr. "You still owe me a favour. Consider that your warning, Nara."

Letting those words hang in challenge, she flicked her wrist, nails flashing like blood drops. The rice-paper thorn landed by his hand like an assassin's parting gift. She shot him a cunning look and rose to her feet. With the exotic sway of a dancer, she curved around her chair and exited the room in smooth, confident strides.

Shikamaru watched her go and his bistre eyes thinned to flickering slits.

A muscle worked in his jaw.

_Calm down…_

His fingers twitched at the edge of the table.

_Calm down._

They flexed and folded and furled into a fist.

_Fuck it._

He crushed the thorn beneath his palm, pushed up from his seat and followed behind her.

"It's going to happen…I can see it…in graphic detail…"

Kakashi regarded the slumped Jōnin next to him with well-concealed amusement, his hitai-ate catching the glow of Asuma's lighter as the Sarutobi attempted to hold the flame with a uncooperative thumb.

"If she has a girl," Asuma announced for the third time, "then people will die…heads…heads will roll…if she has a boy…he's gonna end up like me…and that's…god that's terrible…"

"I was waiting for this delayed reaction," Kakashi replied as he reached across, took the lighter from Asuma and lit his friend's cigarette.

The ashtray was overflowing with dog-ends and a dusting of cinders peppered the counter, which the bartender had given up on cleaning. Asuma was on a chain-smoking roll and his hand-to-ashtray coordination had become somewhat impaired. Kakashi's mask wasn't doing much to filter out the smoke, but thankfully the pall granted a bubble of impenetrable privacy that not even the bartender was willing to venture into.

"I'm not delayed…" was Asuma's delayed response.
"Of course you're not."
"I'm calculated…"
"Of course you are."
"I'm a badass…"
"The 'baddest' there is."
"Ino's seventeen tomorrow."
"Yes she is."
"I'm gonna murder that prick. He pissed his pants."
"Thank you for the repeated update."
"Update…date…she's old enough to date you know."
"I know."
"It's not good…"

Kakashi smirked, marginally impressed with the Sarutobi's ability to speak while simultaneously and interchangeably having something attached to his mouth.

A cigarette or a saké bottle.

Asuma's plan to destroy his liver as well as his lungs was fully in the works. It had taken a good few drinks before the Sarutobi's tongue loosened enough for him to start rambling around the topic he had yet to directly address. He was playing the avoidance game more avidly than he'd accused his student of doing two weeks ago.

_You learned from the best, Shikamaru._

Kakashi watched Asuma shake his head at nothing and smiled beneath his mask.

For his part, he'd kept his brain booze-free. He was nursing the same drink he'd ordered two hours ago.

"You thinking I'm joking, Hatake…but…I coulda killed that bastard."

"I know," Kakashi assured. He slipped the lighter into Asuma's flak-jacket and patted the vest pocket. "I'd have helped you bury the body."

Asuma laughed loudly, stabbing his cigarette at Kakashi, raining ash all over the counter. "You're funny when you joke…"

"That's usually the aim."

"Because you're a Smartass…and I'm a Badass…a good team…"

"I'm sure."

"Team Ass…Gai could be Kickass." Asuma laughed, throwing his arms wide as he looked around the bar, eager to recruit. "We just need a Dumbass."
Kakashi shook his head. "Keep drinking, Asuma and you'll demote yourself."

"Smartass has spoken," Asuma nodded solemnly, toasting the air with his cigarette instead of his bottle. And then as quickly as he'd inflated, he slouched forward onto the counter, eyes dimming. "Shikamaru... he's so smart."

Kakashi nodded, amused at the randomness. "Yes, he is."

"I'm gonna kill him too..."

That certainly had Kakashi's mind doing a 'stop' and 'rewind'.

The copy-nin blinked. "What?"

"I'm gonna kill him. Kill him dead."

"Shikamaru?"

"No." Asuma scowled, shaking his head emphatically enough to almost dislodge his cigarette, clamping his lips hard as he growled. "He's why I'm gonna kill him."

"And who might this 'him' be?"

"I have no fucking idea," Asuma admitted to the bottle in front of him, watching it with fierce concentration that suggested he was looking through it at the warped shapes on the other side. "Damn kid didn't tell me. So I'm telling you I'm gonna find out who He is and then I'm gonna kill him..."

Now, Kakashi's mind often worked in an eccentrically brilliant kind of way and he could normally take loose threads and tie them together. But pronouns without placement were dangerous things, given that they had a tendency to attach themselves to faceless people, which often created an ugly knot of complications. And not one for attaching himself to anything, much less people and complications, Kakashi wasn't sure whether to encourage this broken-down train of thought, or follow it further.

He asked me here for my brain, didn't he? I suppose that leaves me playing train driver while he drinks himself under the tracks...

Heaving a sigh, Kakashi considered his glass for a moment, but placed his palm flat across the top, sliding it away. Keeping a level head was imperative in an unstable conversation.

"Someone did something to Shikamaru?" Kakashi took an intelligent guess.

Asuma's scowl darkened, his mouth drawn tight. "I don't know. It's like the last time... I couldn't do anything. Useless. Never knew... because he didn't say a thing..."

"The last time?" Kakashi prodded, turning a little on his stool.

"The last time..." Asuma echoed, his jaw twitching. "That should have stayed the last time... but now there's something else." He placed his hands flat on the counter, thumbs touching before he slid his palms apart. "He pulls away... why do they do that? I can't protect them when they do that. Pull that far away... that means pulling them back... and if I can't... shit..."

Kakashi might have thought of Sasuke in that moment, he might even have let himself consider the part he had or hadn't played in pulling the Uchiha away from the path of vengeance. There had
been opportunities; countless times he could have tried harder. Countless times he could have tried to mimic in true copy-nin fashion the kind of attachment Asuma had developed for each of his students.

But more than those countless chances were the countless reminders why he couldn't.

He'd lost his chances years ago.

He blinked his grey eye slowly, the charcoal flecks glinting as he looked up to the dim light of the bar, scanning the rows of aging bottles. "You're still worried about Shikamaru."

Asuma gave a brittle laugh, shaking his head. "That doesn't stop…it still gets me…three...two...two years on…"

"Two years?"

"Two years."

"Something happened when he was fifteen?"

"And it stills gets me…and now it's getting me all over again…get that, huh? It's a mess."

Kakashi reached for his drink again, tracing the rim with his thumb, paying more attention than he appeared to be. "I see…"

And he's worried about becoming a father…there's no Jōnin better suited to it than him…

Asuma tapped his fingers against the lip of his saké bottle, gripping the neck to twirl the end in an idle roll across the counter. "Maybe I'm not right for this…"

"For what exactly?"

Asuma waved his hand around.

Kakashi followed the movement, arching a brow. "That explains everything."

"You know those kids and Kurenai…they're my second chance."

"Yes. You said."

"Lucky. I'm a lucky bastard." Asuma's brows furrowed in a deep, brooding frown. "I keep expecting the other shoe to drop."

Kakashi hummed quietly at the confession, glancing across. He watched Asuma roll the bottle a few more times, cigarette dangling at one corner of his mouth.

"You were a by-the-book kid," the Sarutobi added disjointedly. "Pre-porn books that is."

"I followed the rules, if that's what you mean," Kakashi admitted, brushing his thumb over the sweating glass in his hand, waiting for an elaboration.

"Yeah. A good kid, right?" Asuma rocked the bottle precariously back into position, exhaling smoke in a snort. "God, I was such a stupid kid…"

"You were far from stupid, Asuma," Kakashi returned, mildly reproachful but more amused. "You became an elite guardian."
"And in flash, it all went to shit." Asuma smacked his palm down on the table. To illustrate said 'flash' he swiped his hand across in a jerk that Kakashi avoided by robotically lifting his glass and setting it down again, repeating the motion when Asuma drew his hand back. "There and back…all fucked up…that takes stupidity…"

"We all make mistakes," Kakashi mitigated, his sole eye taking in the emotions playing across Asuma's face. "Those mistakes don't make us stupid. Unless you repeat them. Repeatedly."

"Yeah. Guess my old man's a little too dead to differ." Asuma slouched against the counter, a gruff, strained laugh rumbling out of him in a swathe of smoke. "They say the dead don't talk back. But we never talked…and when we did…" He trailed off for a moment, bronze eyes clouding over with something stronger than inebriation until he suddenly looked tired and drawn. "Hell…he never heard a damn thing anyway. Was that my fault? Or his? Fathers can really screw you up."

Kakashi offered no response to that.

He calmly turned his glass around in his hand.

Family dynamics were not his forte, especially when it came to parental relationships. He slanted his gaze towards the far corner of the bar, feeling a phantom ache in a part of himself that he hadn't given much attention to over the years.

I know better than to do that.

It was a part of him that had become so jaded with acceptance and resignation and lack of attachment that it rarely reacted to anything or anyone. But occasionally the pain came quick and sharp, like the slice of a blade across a vein too rusted to bleed.

Sensing the odd deepness of his silence, Asuma looked over.

Kakashi corrected himself automatically, his eye shaping that little half-moon smile.

Asuma squinted. "Crap. If I can tell that's a lie…I'm getting sober too fast."

"You always sober up fast."

Asuma took a quick swig of saké and tapped the end of the bottle against Kakashi's untouched glass. "Here's to impending tragedy and mass murder."

Kakashi's eye softened a little, his voice seeping into the smoky air with an edge of calm sobriety. "You're going to be a good father, Asuma."

Asuma's jaw tightened, his fingers straying back and forth over the row of bottles lined up in front of him. The lazy motion didn't fool Kakashi. He could sense the sober shift in the Sarutobi's mood as his mind disengaged from its drunken musings, forcing a more lucid expression.

Even so, he looked ready to grab another bottle.

Asuma reached for one, then redirected his hand and took up his cigarette instead, pressing it back between his lips as they curved. "Because I'm such a good role model? Gotta face it. Being a super cool adult just isn't my thing…"

Kakashi said nothing.

Instead, he allowed Asuma to sink into a brooding pool of self-derisive silence, his dark brows
drawn low in a look of morbid contemplation.

Kakashi almost felt guilty for finding it amusing.

Asuma was waiting for him to throw in a lifebuoy via humour.

Kakashi let the drowning tension build, somewhat sadistically. And then Asuma surfaced from his depressed head-dunk with a dry smirk, exhaling a long, thin stream from the corner of his curled mouth.

"And this is why I don't do deep conversations…" Asuma chuckled despite himself. "I try to take myself seriously and it's a joke…"

"Asuma."

"Yeah?"

"You're an idiot."

Asuma saluted vaguely and reached for a bottle. "I'll drink to that."

Kakashi caught his wrist – hard.

_Time to cut to the chase._

Asuma's brow flicked up, bronze eyes narrowed against the glare bouncing off the metal plate attached to Kakashi's glove. And then Kakashi poised a question that had the Sarutobi's eyes flashing brighter and harder than the steel.

"When the Sandaime died, where were you?"

"What?" Asuma almost choked on the word, a forced half-smile playing across his lips to distract from the look of confusion stealing over his shock. "What the hell kind of question is that?"

"Where were you?" Kakashi asked again, his grip as steady as his voice.

Asuma pulled his wrist back, the heavy metal of his bracelet hitting the counter in a dangerous clang. He turned on Kakashi slowly, his eyes glittering dangerously. Even if the anger hadn't hit his eyes, Kakashi would have sensed it in the aggressive shift of chakra, like a hum beneath the surface of Asuma's normally relaxed and easy aura.

_Well, I suppose I should have seen this coming._

Kakashi offered no reaction to the look that would have had any sane man backing off from the Sarutobi. While Kakashi's sanity might have been in question, his instincts seldom were.

Asuma was angry, yes, but he was also addled.

Kakashi might have counted on the latter state to neutralise the former. But mostly, he was counting on their friendship to hold off a fight that would turn very ugly, very fast.

Asuma seemed to be factoring in damage control, sobering up with every measured second.

"Where the hell are you going with this?"

"Answer my question and you'll see exactly where it leads."
Asuma looked Kakashi dead in the eye, searching the grey orb for some explanation to the deeply personal attack the question threatened to become if he let his guard down enough to answer it.

"I think I've let you run around in drunken circles long enough," Kakashi explained, setting his elbow on the counter to swirl the contents of his drink in a hypnotic slosh around the glass. "And I know that isn't why you wanted to borrow my brain, is it?"

Asuma frowned, snatching his cigarette from his lips. He began to tap ash into the tray only to crush out the smoke altogether in a sharp jab and twist.

"What does my father's death have to do with anything?" he asked darkly.

"Everything," Kakashi answered quietly, managing to soften his tone without being any less direct. "The rest of the Jōnin were fighting off the Sunagakure ninja when the Sandaime fought Orochimaru. Where were you?"

Asuma glanced down at the ashes in the tray, shaking his head irritably at what he felt was an irrelevant question. "I went after Shikamaru."

Kakashi watched him quietly, waiting for the importance of those words to sink into Asuma's brain as sharply as the point he was trying to make. But Asuma continued to stare numbly at the ashtray, the alcohol having addled his brain's ability to catch on at the normal speed. Deciding to help the other Jōnin along, Kakashi cocked his head, drawing Asuma's gaze.

"You went after Shikamaru."

"Yeah, I just said that."

"And why did you go after him?" the copy-nin prodded.

"Why? What do you mean, why? Because…" Asuma trailed off with a scowl, waving a hand around again.

"Exactly." Kakashi's mask pulled across his cheekbones as he smiled, accentuating the sharp line of his jaw. "Some things just are. You already are what you think you can't be."

One angry and confused crease at a time, the hard 'V' of Asuma's brow smoothed out, softening with his eyes until a weak chuckle broke from his lips. "Right, so in your genius brain, me being a crappy son but an overprotective sensei cancel each other out and somehow add up again to make me a potentially good father?"

"You put Shikamaru's life before the lives of countless citizens and the Hokage. Your own father. That tells me what I already know. So what do you think?"

"I think borrowing your brain was a stupid idea."

Kakashi shrugged, lifting and setting his glass down in a contemplative tap. "Deny it all you want but your actions – and your drunken mouth – tell a different tale about your parental capability. There's more fact ruining your attempts at fiction Asuma."

"What, you think you can read me, Hatake?"

"Like a book."

Asuma's lip curled a little sourly. "Well here's a fun fact for the record, Kakashi and it's not
exclusive. I keep an eye on my students and make sure they don't end up dead or in stupid, unnecessary danger." He looked away, studying the ash stains on the counter, snorting. "Shit. It's what I'm supposed to do, isn't it?"

Kakashi levelled a long, hard stare on the other man. "Asuma, you just went into graphic detail about wanting to dismember a man who Ino could very well have handled without your interference."

Asuma shrugged. "I was in a bad mood."

"Two weeks ago you had one of my ninken hunt Shikamaru down within the walls of our own village."

"So?"

"So?" Kakashi echoed, incredulous. Without hesitation, he played his trump card. "So you said it yourself tonight. You've never gotten over the 'last time' he pulled away from you."

Silence.

Asuma's jaw hardened to the likeness of granite, his entire frame tensing against the counter. An aura of seriousness settled around him like a force field. Kakashi let it hold for a little longer before speaking into the tense sphere of silence, untouched by the general din floating around the bar.

"When you came to me asking for a ninken to track him down, there was fear in your eyes."

Kakashi's voice gentled a little. "Do you honestly think Nara Shikaku and your father didn't account for the kind of mentor a child and teenager like Shikamaru would need? They chose you for a reason."

"Give me a break, Kakashi." Asuma snorted, but something uneasy played beneath his flat tone. "I'm not drunk enough for this."

"You wanted my brain to do your math for you, well here's the result. Call it your fiction or call it your front, either way your attempts to fool your way out of your virtues by appealing to your flaws are a joke."

"Are you shitting me?" Asuma chuckled blackly, fingering the neck of one of the saké bottles and spinning it in sharp little twists. "I'm not that deep to play a shell game with my personality. What you see is what you get."

Kakashi dropped his eyelid until his lashes cast a shadow over the crest of his cheek, hiding the frustrated flicker in his grey orb. "You just told me that your Team and Kurenai were the best things that could have happened to you."

"They were." An instant reply. "They are."

"So I'll say it again, it happened to you for a reason, Asuma. It has nothing to do with luck."

Kakashi sighed, a tired coarseness roughing the edges of his voice. "You're not the uncommitted bastard you seem to think you are."

Asuma digested these words quietly, looking across after a moment. Sensing the wary glance, Kakashi tapped his hitai-ate, indicating the red eye lurking beneath the surface.

"I see all," he added dryly.
Asuma laughed a little, leaning away. "Yeah, alright Mr. Insight. Guess I asked for all this 'beneath the surface' shit."

"Yes, you did." Kakashi added a meaningful glance to this statement. "Hopefully I didn't just waste two hours of my night."

"Alright, alright." Raising a guilty hand, Asuma ducked his head sheepishly. "I wasn't supposed to be sobering up by the time we got to the point. I was supposed to be drunk enough to forget I even wanted to talk about this."

"But you did," Kakashi pointed out.

Asuma sighed, slouching onto his elbows as he contemplated the contents of the bottles lined up in front of him. It took another few moments of studying the stale remains before he drummed his fingers and reached for a cigarette.

"If I get this worked up over my students, what the hell am I going to be like with my own kid?"

"You'll be as you are."

Asuma looked across, hooking his lip over his cigarette with a slow shake of his head, but his eyes were glinting with humour. "Please tell me you're being profound, because that's a fucking terrible answer."

Kakashi smirked, knocking his glass against one of Asuma's empty bottles. "And I haven't even started drinking yet."

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Two shadows.

They streaked like ghosts across the delicate paper walls of the corridor. Floor lamps bathed the fusuma panels, throwing up a dim, buttery light that cast silhouettes clearer than shadow-puppets.

On the walls the shadows touched, but the ones that cast them never did.

She sensed it coming.

He knew she would.

Temari spun in a ripple of honey and black, knocking aside the hand that moved to grab her. Shikamaru twisted his arm, a sharp turn that rolled his wrist over hers. It dislodged the grip she tried to get on him, resulting in a deadlock of fierce chocolate orbs boring into a flash of darkening teal.

"You sure know how to push it," he growled, the shadows slicing along his cheekbones like knives, accentuating the look of sharp, calculated anger cutting into his face.

"That's rich," Temari snapped back. "This is coming from the idiot who pushed all sorts of buttons during those Chūnin exams. Why?"

*God dammit, she's just not gonna let this go.*

He really needed her to.

"What the hell do you want? Your damn apology?"
"No."

"Then what?"

"What you owe me," she snapped, fists balled at the strong flare of her hips, glaring up at him. "An explanation."

Shikamaru's brow shot up, but on the inside he felt his gut drop and curdle. The acid of a sickening tension ate along his veins, drawing tendons taut. He jammed his hands at his hips to keep from gnarling his fingers into her arms. She ignored the hard look, turning it back on him.

"If you're going to flip out like that in the future, I'd like to be prepared the next time," Temari bit out.

He said nothing, just glared from beneath the coal sweep of his lashes.

Little did she know, he was trying to assert some control over a black, oily feeling slipping into his blood. Something foreign and foul that felt highly flammable under the kind of heat and pressure he normally avoided coming into contact with. It was a sensation that crawled through his veins, looking for flames in his anger but leaving him cold. Cold with the fear of what it might do to him if he followed the black stream back to its origins. The last time he'd felt it, he'd been thrashing beneath Neji in a state of blood and broken bones.

The chords in his neck strung themselves like wire.

*Stop. You're over-reacting. Calm down.*

Unfortunately Temari took his silence as even more of a challenge, something she never failed to meet head-on and headstrong. "So what is it? Stressed over all the bigwigs that are after your blood? Or was getting drunk out of your mind some celebratory climax? God knows you went out with a literal 'bang'. *Twice*."

Shikamaru's jaw tightened, eyes dark and deep as polished mahogany. But beneath their hard surface they smouldered, irises blackening around the edges with anger so well contained it was barely discernable.

A poisonous, itchy silence settled between them, contaminating the air.

"Is it the pressure?" Temari whispered cattishly, cocking her hip with a sassy smirk designed to rile him. "Are you cracking up, Nara? Because if you are then you need to get your head fixed."

Shikamaru smirked, the corners of his mouth cutting upward in a bitter, abject imitation of a smile. "Well sure, because if *that* goes to hell then I'm damaged goods, aren't I?"

Temari blinked hard, taken aback by the venom in his voice. "So was that it? You thought that behaving like an idiot would make them think you were less of a 'prize catch'?"

"No such luck."

"Then just what the hell were you playing at?" She shook her head incredulously, her anger flickering and flashing like an overcharged fuse behind her eyes. "Half of those Daimyos were there to see you, never mind the Genin brats. You put Gaara and me in a position of covering your ass because you couldn't take the heat." She lowered her voice a deadly notch. "And then you insulted them with your smartass remarks."
"It's called rejection."

"You might as well have told them to get bent. Do you know what tact is?"

Shikamaru shot her a dry look. "Can you even spell it?"

"You ignorant bastard." She balled a fist just shy of throwing a punch. "Do have any idea how dangerous those men can be? Do you have any idea what you could have done!"

"Yes."

Temari snapped her mouth shut, not having expected the quiet but direct reply.

Something in his voice stopped her short of tearing into him again.

"Yes?" She echoed, pulling her head back a fraction in something close to shock. "Then why?"

The muscles in Shikamaru's jaw flexed and bunched as he stared her down, but his eyes remained disturbingly blank and cut-off from the rest of his face. "You think you know me. But you're way out of your depth, Temari."

"I really don't think I'm the one in deep water, Shikamaru."

Shikamaru leaned in very slowly and Temari stiffened as his gaze drew level with hers, head tilted down.

Their noses almost touched.

"Well you know what they say about drowning men, don't you? They tend to pull you under with them." He dropped his focus to her lips. "At the rate you run your mouth off, I doubt you could hold your breath that long."

Temari's shoulders canted back and her head tilted up, a low, throaty laugh tumbling out against his lips. "Now there's the snarky bastard your friends don't get to see."

_They shouldn't have to. Not like this._

Shikamaru blinked slowly, swallowing hard.

She was playing him like a damned piano and the discordant notes firing off inside him were going to give away more than he could ever hope to drag back into the shadows.

"Leave, Temari," he murmured.

She didn't move, her eyes glued to his face, searching. "Why? Am I close, Shikamaru?"

"Yeah, close to pissing me off."

She smirked at that, head tilting cat-like. "At least that's something. Maybe you've got a little impulse in you after all."

His eyes narrowed, slicing his irises into two burning crescents. "Guess there's worse things I could have inside me."

Temari fell quiet at those words, staring at the grooves in his cheeks and the rings under his eyes.
"Stupid kid. You should talk to someone."

"Careful, you're sounding concerned."

"I mean it," she growled, matching him glare for glare. "You're too dangerous to become unhinged."

Of all the things he could've predicted out of her mouth, that sure as hell hadn't been one of them. Shikamaru drew his chin back, arching a brow as he scanned her face for some sign of sarcasm or hint of humour. He found neither.

"Dangerous?" He tilted his brow. "Maybe you haven't noticed, but I got the brains, not the brawn."

"Which makes you twice as dangerous," Temari uttered beneath her breath. "Don't kid yourself, Shikamaru. Daimyos would kill for the level of strategic intelligence you can produce at a minute's notice, even less when you're feeling cooperative. You'll need to start watching your back more than any elite shinobi with twice your level of chakra."

"You're not watching your back. Or maybe you wanted someone to get behind you."

Shikamaru stiffened at the memory, feeling that icy flash wash through him. He controlled it quickly by focusing on Temari's mouth, following the downward turn of her lips.

"Compliments and concern?" He shook his head sarcastically. "This must be physically painful for you."

Temari didn't fall for it, her expression retaining its grave edge as she watched him, passing up the chance to bite back. "You can't run from it, Shikamaru. You're a major player in this big, bad game of political bullshit whether you like it or not."

He managed a weak smirk, his voice flat. "Thanks for the heads up. I'll try not to sell my soul to the highest bidder."

Temari pinned him with a look, eyes glowing. "Don't joke about something like that."

"Hn. You really think I'd do that?"

Her lips tightened with the barest hesitation before she spoke. "Your avoidance tactic of 'bottles and bedrooms' might prove to be child's play compared to how you cope with the pressure you'll come up against in the future."

"Predicting my mind and my moves, Temari?"

"If I'm so far out of my depth, Shikamaru, then I won't predict anything. Not your mind and not your moves." She blinked quickly, wary enough not to take her eyes off him for a fraction of a second. "I honestly don't know what you might do if you were pushed further than you can run or think ahead."

Neither do I…

The realisation struck him cold.

And like an icy, skeletal hand clutching at his vitals, he felt that nauseous shift inside him, his pulse picking up as a door in the back of his mind creaked and groaned under the weight of unwanted memories and repressed fears.
Don't go there.

The urge to escape pushed up inside him like a flood of adrenaline through his veins. It rushed through him so fast it forced out a ragged breath that he barely snatched back before Temari leaned up, gripped the back of his head and pressed her lips to his.

Shikamaru tensed, his shoulders drawing up in shock.

His eyes flew wide.

Confusion smashed against the grain of his adrenaline, tumbling through him in a tangle of sensation. This tangle coiled like a chain, holding him rigidly on the spot, hands still jammed at his waist, hip cocked and torso tilted in the slant he'd taken when he'd leaned in to threaten her space.

Temari had obliterated space altogether.

She held the contact steady, lips settled softly against his.

Softly?

That wasn't a word he'd ever have associated with her. He'd imagined she'd have sharp edges even in her intimacy. That kissing her would come with teeth and split lips and catty, caustic comments. A passion that packed a punch and rattled teeth. Something troublesome and tetchy and way too tough for a man to want to hold.

Not this...

The softness of the kiss threw him. And at the same time, it wrenched open a door to a want he'd been tamping down. It wasn't the Need that Temari reached. That was buried too damn deep, bleeding out and burning up like a wound. She couldn't touch that. But she touched a part of him aching for something to ease the hurt that wouldn't heal.

What the hell wouldn't he give to take the edge off that kind of pain?

What the hell wouldn't he use? Be it something – or someone.

Shikamaru swallowed hard, the sound audible.

He felt her smile against his mouth. "That's what I wanted."

"A kiss, huh?" Shikamaru rasped, unmoving.

"To rattle you," she corrected, drawing back a fraction to level their gazes.

He stared at her for a long moment, eyes hooded. "Congratulations."

Temari chuckled, honey strands shimmering. But then her laughter quietened in her throat, leaving a charged silence between them. It hummed with invitation. He only knew it was extended beyond the realms of possibility when Temari made no move to break the eye contact or move away.

Great. There go my morals – and I'm not even drunk this time.

He read her signal at the same time he returned it.

His gaze dropped to her lips.
Their mouths nudged slowly, sliding together again.

Heat tingled along his spine, the hard planes of his chest tensing. He felt her palm flatten against the lean slabs of his stomach, her nails scratching along the fabric of his top, tracing out the squares of delineated muscle.

He almost bit down on her lip, teeth stopping just short of sinking in.

In that moment, he wouldn't have cared if she'd reached up under his clothes, dug those blood red nails into his flesh and clawed her way into his chest. Clawed out the Need killing him in a place he couldn't reach; killing him in a way he couldn't stop.

Fuck…

Shikamaru stilled his lips against hers and drew his head back.

Temari made no move to follow, watching silently.

He returned her look through shuttered eyes. "Why?"

"Maybe I just want to use you," she whispered, her voice coloured with the same sultry amusement as her eyes. "How's that for your male ego?"

Shikamaru arched a brow. "My male ego really doesn't care."

"Then why ask?"

He considered the question, his eyes not holding the humour of his answer. "Isn't that the chivalrous thing to do?"

"Chivalrous?" Temari echoed, rolling the word around like a sour sweet in her mouth. "I don't believe in white knights, Nara."

Shikamaru arched a brow at the caustic reply. But there was something off-key in her normally smooth contralto, knocking the sass from her eyes and the smirk from her mouth. He couldn't quite place what it was.

Resignation? Regret? A hint of vulnerability behind the vixen's smile?

Temari raised a delicate brow, daring him to comment.

Shikamaru held back on offering any response, trying to resurrect his senses and his scruples without insulting her. Not that he imagined he could at this stage – she looked way too satisfied to care. She knew she'd got a rise out of him; in more ways than one.

How troublesome.

If he hadn't known she was attracted to him, it might have been embarrassing as hell. They watched each other in silence, leaving them in the crossfire of various signals all unspoken but blaringly clear.

Temari blinked slowly, a small and reluctant smile tugging at the corner of her mouth as she hummed. "Young," she murmured.

Shikamaru frowned, not understanding.
She shook her head. "I'm not sure whether to be impressed or disappointed."

"Don't short-change me on the insults," Shikamaru returned quietly. "You were doing so well."

"Snarky brat," she muttered, her full lips picking up their sassy curve. "I always do well."

Shikamaru smiled a little. "Humility, Temari, look it up."

"Honesty, Shikamaru," Temari replied, gliding her hand against his chest, pushing hard above the beating heart. "Try it."

Shikamaru canted his weight onto his right hip, pulling his shoulder back to take the pressure off her touch.

"Troublesome."

"Try it," she challenged again.

Shikamaru's jaw ticked. His hands remained rigid at his hips, fingers gnarled. She'd slyly maneuvered him into a corner with those words. But he knew enough about cutting corners to manipulate words into moves.

Temari's fingers pressed harder. "I dare you."

His eyes sparkled like onyx, dark and fathomless in the dim corridor.

"Can't drag a shadow into the light," he murmured.

Temari frowned at the cryptic response.

The tension changed and thickened between them.

He didn't budge under the scrutiny of her look and returned it neutrally.

And then the heel of her hand rubbed up, dragging the dark material of his top into creases and folds that pulled softly, arousingly, across his skin. His gaze remained fixed on the teal orbs tracking his reaction, observing the inky stir in his shuttered eyes.

"You're afraid," she said.

He drew a slow breath through his nose to keep from acting on baser instincts. "If you say so."

Temari paused. And then her taunting touch feathered back down to the centre of his chest, fingers flexing before falling away altogether.

"Hell's paradise when you're the devil, Shikamaru," Temari said, edging towards a warning. "Don't stay too long in those shadows of yours. You might begin to get a taste for something darker."

His lip cut upward mirthlessly. "I am my shadows."

"Which might make your darkness far more dangerous than anyone else's if you let yourself fall."

His eyes pinched hard at those words, the air swelling painfully in his lungs before he expelled it in a dismissive snort. "Dramatic, aren't you?"

"No." Temari looked up into the deep opacity of his eyes, frowning. "Honest."
And her honesty was every bit the dangerous light. Shikamaru recoiled from it like a shadow, subconsciously shrinking and closing off parts of himself, shrouding them as murky and dark as his eyes turned in that moment. Like two black stones, reflecting nothing back.

"Spare me," he breathed the words through his teeth.

"Spare yourself, Shikamaru."

He never heard her words.

Black spilt across his mind like ink across a canvas, swallowing sound, blotting out his vision.

He didn't hear the deepening pant of his breaths or the roar of his pulse.

For a moment, there was nothingness.

Even the call of his name didn't penetrate the thickening black.

But the next sound did.

A burst of laughter carried down the corridor, an intrusive fist that punched through the dome of tension holding around him and inside him. It shattered through his mind, breaking the dark aura so suddenly he jolted.

Shit!

"Shikamaru?"

He went rigid for a moment and blinked in rapid snaps, orienting himself. It felt like he'd slipped out of his body and got slammed back in again. He rolled his shoulders with a shuddering breath, coming back to himself, almost dizzy.

Temari had moved forward, head ducked to catch his gaze. "Shikamaru, answer me!"

Answer her? Had she even spoken?

"What?" he whispered.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he replied raggedly, dragging his fingers along his scalp. "I'm fine."

Bullshit. He was pretty sure he'd just blacked out without physically blacking out.

There was an odd sensation of a void having opened up somewhere in his brain, like he'd just been sucked into a black hole. He slid his fingers to his nape, staring blankly, looking dazed. Like he'd come out of a deep state of trance or had been hit by a genjutsu.

What the hell just happened?

Temari's look mirrored the thought. She made no move to touch him, though her stare was so fixed and fierce it might as well have been concrete the way it dragged over his face, her own expression cemented with a sharp frown.

"Shikamaru…"
He rubbed at his eyes, shaking his head. "I just need to sleep."

No lie and logical enough.

That's all he could pin it down to; too much brain work and not enough time to recharge. He was running on empty and it was taking its toll. He needed to shut up and shut down. If he was on the cusp of anything, it would be a damned migraine or madness if he didn't get some sleep.

*That's it...I don't give a crap. I'm getting myself a big fucking bottle, gluing it to my face and I'm blacking out for real...I'm sick of this insomniac shit...it's turning me into a fucking wreck.*

As he consolidated this plan in his mind, he didn't sense Temari's gaze tracing over him slowly. There was something in her eyes that hadn't touched them in three years. A look that she'd carried as a child. It had stolen the light from her eyes, turning curious wonder into a bleak knowing. A look that had wiped away innocence, leaving behind something defensive and desolate.

A look of deep concern and grave wariness all wrapped into one haunting stare.

A stare that up until now, she'd only ever set on Gaara.
Chapter 7

"Where's Tricky?"

"He could not come with me."

"But I have cookies for him."

"I'll be sure to give them to him."

"I made this for you."

"...Thank you."

"That's you and that's Tricky! He has funny hair. You're sleeping. You slept really long."

"I did."

"It's okay! He's looking after you. See? He's sad."

"Sad?"

"Yup. He was sad when you were sleeping."

Neji blinked slowly, brushing his thumb over the edge of the drawing framed between his hands. Maki had crayoned in the details with a childish tendency to see the world in brighter, bolder shades. Exaggerated colours and proportions, giving life, memories and the moment she'd captured a sense of significance and sentiment.

Everything was a splash of colour and wonder in children's eyes.

Perhaps their palettes were broader, the brush of their imagination untainted.

Neji's perceptions had long faded to grey. Even as a child any rich stroke of imagination and hope had been watered down into the clear, colourless black and white of reality.

He traced his gaze over Maki's drawing.

Thinking back on the moment she'd captured here, he wondered why the world hadn't seemed brighter to him when he'd pulled through from that dangerous black 'sleep'.

Isn't that what happens when you get another chance at life?

Should he have seen things differently? Developed a deeper appreciation for the breaths he'd been forgetting to take? Should he have taken time to re-discover those shades and hues that had been bleached by the acidity of what had almost killed him?

Does it matter? I'm alive.

He'd cheated death enough times. And yet, every time he did, every time he returned from that brink of non-existence, the world lost a little colour.

One day, it will be different.

Neji hummed quietly. He was more alive than he'd been in months – maybe years. He had purpose,
direction and control over the rage that had been pushing him closer to that edge.

*Never again.*

He placed the crayon sketch between two sheets of parchment and slipped it into the lockable compartment of the tansu chest set to one corner of his room. Elegantly crafted, the chest possessed an intricate leaf design etched into the pale grain of kiri wood. Hiashi had had the tansu commissioned for his twin. It was the only thing Neji now possessed that contained anything of worth. Pieces of the past were preserved here; pieces that came together to bring a little colour to his world, in the moments when memories became faded and washed out.

His fingertips brushed a slip of paper. It was slotted as a bookmark into a volume of haiku poems his father used to read. He plucked the paper free, glimpsed the scrawl of Shikamaru's handwriting and quickly tucked it back.

He slid the drawer shut.

It felt like a futile attempt to close a mental door on a memory – and all the ones attached to it.

*To him.*

Neji dragged his gaze across the room, milky orbs lingering on his futon. He focused on the package set at the end of the bedroll. He'd brought it with him from Hanegakure. Maki's cookies. He'd completely forgotten to offload the gift onto Hibari and have the redhead pass it on to Shikamaru.

"*He's looking after you.*"

Neji stared at the coarse string tied around the brown paper wrapping, following the turns in the knots and feeling a curious symmetry in his heartstrings.

"*He was sad.*"

Neji closed his eyes and turned away from the futon, gripping the edges of the chest. He felt the metalwork biting into his palms from the tansu's iron frame. He tried to work a similar iron around the tender edges of his heart.

He couldn't.

*And that is why I need to stay away.*

Countless tiny lights.

They glittered around the grounds like trapped stars.

HOTARU’s stroll-through gardens captured the theme of the firefly with the same devotion as the ryokan's interior. Small tea lights floated on the surface of shallow ponds, the waters rippling with the sinuous glide of carp. A series of lanterns hung from the slender arms of manicured trees. They were plotted and pruned along a walkway paved with large, flat stones.

The moon glowed down, but silver-linings were gold in the lantern light, the silvery pall of mist shredded by the breeze.

Shikamaru shook off the thought of a red fog.
Beside him, Temari slowed her pace.

The shadow-nin matched her steps as they crossed the stone pathway onto a wooden bridge, its elegant structure arched low across a lily pond. Semi-submerged rock formations rose from the shallow waters, lantern light playing off the glistening stone.

The chill nipped Shikamaru's skin, gnawing deep.

He draped his arms over the bridge's wooden railing, clasping his hands in a rigid squeeze that pulsed feeling back into his numb fingers. Temari stopped beside him but he didn't turn. He gazed down at the pond and studied the faintest play of ripples, trying to keep centred.

Red maples rustled in the cold breeze.

Temari shivered once. "The winds are always warm."

Shikamaru turned his head fractionally, glancing across. Temari had cocked her hip against the bridge, one elbow propped on the railing. She banded an arm across her chest, rubbing at her opposite shoulder.

"Suna," she said quietly. "Dry, warm."

She stared up at a copper rain chain designed to channel droplets down its centre, the rusty hues struck bronze in the lantern light. Shikamaru watched her out the corner of his eye.

"You leave tomorrow," he said quietly, pitching his intonation somewhere between a statement and a question.

Temari continued to study the rain chain, her features obscured in the sooty hues of shadow and flame. "Konoha's Peace with Hanegakure has become Suna's too. It's a good thing to inherit allies. You did well on that mission."

Shikamaru frowned, the muscles at the hinge of his jaw bunching.

He looked away as Temari turned, catching the flash of those crimson nails as she crossed her arms atop the railing. "About time you got that promotion."

Shikamaru sighed, resisting the urge to hang his head between his arms. He really didn't want to think, let alone talk about that.

"Not interested."

"No," Temari agreed quietly. "You're really not. But then, you're safe enough to turn down offers bluntly on your own turf."

Shikamaru smirked bitterly, the twist of his lips barely discernable. As if his level of interest or his attempts to avoid a position of responsibility really mattered. Tsunade still moved him about as if he possessed the rank already. An official title wouldn't have made a damn bit of difference.

"However," Temari continued, her voice dipping into a warning. "If you ever put Gaara in a position like that again, I promise I won't hesitate."

Shikamaru pressed his lips, squeezing his hands until the knuckles in his fingers grinded hard enough to hurt.

"Hesitate to what?" he baited, sounding bored.
She shot him a narrow glare.

One corner of Shikamaru's lips tugged upwards.

Temari's nails dug into the prickled flesh of her arms as she straightened away from the railing. "Do you really want to bait me?"

Shikamaru let the question hang, his expression closed, dark eyes hooded by his lashes as he gazed down at the pond...at the broken mirror of its surface.

"Not sure you should be asking me what I want right now," he directed the words to his own reflection, watching the sharp angles of his face warp into ripples.

He caught the peripheral gleam of Temari's headband and closed his eyes against the flash of a different hitai-ate in his mind's eye. With that flash came the memory of cool steel and the distinct moment when the leaf emblem fogged over with his ragged pants.

And then the flash of deep, opal irises gauging every shift in his body.

"Give in to me, Shikamaru..."

Shikamaru snapped his eyes open, swallowing roughly.

Temari was watching him.

"Why's that?" she murmured.

He could have laughed darkly at that.

Why? Because right now all he really wanted was the quickest exit he could find. The quickest means to anesthetise the pain of the Need, to outthink the random misfire of his own thoughts and to move beyond the ghost of a past that shouldn't have been rising from the grave he'd buried it in two years ago. How the hell it had begun to stir up inside him now was beyond his ability to understand; at least at the moment. He didn't have a chance in hell of working it out when he was nearing his limit as far as sleep deprivation went.

How the hell did your 4AM crap become my problem? You're gone and it doesn't fucking stop. 'You' don't stop...

He stared blankly at the water, feeling the breeze pull apart his breath as it misted away. His jaw tightened, teeth grinding.

"NARA!"

Shikamaru started at the shout, jerking his head up to look across the bridge.

Like some disembodied head floating in the mist, Kotetsu's face hovered over one of the lanterns, casting his features in a freakish, skull-like light. He was wearing one of the road-cone party hats.

"Boo," he whispered.

Shikamaru frowned and straightened up in a languid sway. "Troublesome."

Kotetsu's face split into a grin, teeth flashing in the darkness. "You hurt me bad, Nara. We're a team and everything."
"Team?" Temari queried, a golden brow arched.

Shikamaru shot her a half-assed look that wearily and wordlessly spelled out 'don't make me explain, it's a drag'. She shrugged, folding her arms with a curious glance in Kotetsu's direction as the Chūnin swaggered his way across the bridge.

"Not interrupting am I?" he posed with a smarmy bob of his eyebrows.

"No," Shikamaru and Temari chorused, both glancing at each other awkwardly before looking away again.

Kotetsu glanced between them critically, hands on hips.

Then he snorted, eyes dancing playfully. "Suuure."

Shikamaru scowled. "Don't recall your name on the guest list."

Kotetsu clapped a hand above his heart. "Broken."

"Idiot," Shikamaru sighed, rubbing at his eyes.

"They insisted on letting me in. Is it my fault I'm irresistible to the ladies?" Kotetsu shrugged, pretending to heft the burden of his self-proclaimed irresistibility between each shoulder.

"Did a lady put your nose out of joint?" Temari queried, raising her chin to indicate the bandage taped across Kotetsu's nose.

The Chūnin laughed, stroking his thumb along the white strip. "Now there's one hell of a story behind this."

"Have fun regaling her," Shikamaru muttered, slotting his hands into his pockets to begin drifting back across the bridge.

"I was regaling Ino before she shamelessly used me," Kotetsu sighed, glancing warily at Temari. "Women."

Temari arched a brow. Shikamaru, however, stopped walking, dropped all semblance of an expression and cast an unreadable look over his shoulder at the other Chūnin.

"Used you?"

"Yeah!" Kotetsu spun on his heel, road-cone hat tilting to one side as he tapped his temple in sharp little jabs. "She went all creepy possession in my head. I paid for two bottles against my will!"

Kotetsu paused here. "Man, that's like mind rape. I blacked out and everything."

"Blacked out?" Shikamaru's brows drew together sharply.

"Yeah, get that, huh?" Kotetsu snorted. "And she's the one who's drunk. That jutsu should have failed."

"Which doesn't say much about you," Temari concluded airily, but her eyes remained set on Shikamaru, gauging his reaction curiously.

Ignoring Kotetsu's indignant yet playful defence, Shikamaru fought the urge to drag his fingers angrily along his scalp. Although, he felt more like scraping his damn fingers around the inside of his skull to grab at any lingering traces of a possible invasion he hadn't seen coming.
Anger and tension rising to a red zone in his blood, he cursed mentally and was already crossing
the bridge by the time Kotetsu called after him.

"Oi! Where are you going?"

To kill Ino.

A blonde and lilac spectacle caught Shikamaru's eye the second he strode back into the dining
room.

A game of 'Pop the Balloons with the Stupid Hats' was in play.

Naruto and Hinata vs. Kiba and Ino.

However, Ino seemed to have confused the purpose of the game. Rather than supporting Kiba in
the playing field, Kiba seemed to be supporting Ino on her two left feet.

In fact, Ino looked more like she was dancing with Kiba.

Or rather, dancing on Kiba.

She had one arm hooked around his neck like a long-time lover, hips swaying to and fro as she
jiggled on her heels in an attempt to head-but balloons. In her free hand she cradled a bulbous
glass sloshing crimson liquid over the rim.

Her glazed blue eyes kept flashing back towards Sakura and Hibari at the table.

While Kiba was laughing, he seemed more concerned about keeping Ino upright than allowing
himself to respond to the attention she was physically lathering onto him like a bitch in heat.

Shikamaru's eyes narrowed.

Stupid, reckless, troublesome girl.

He began to cross the distance in long strides and as pokerfaced as he kept his expression, it didn't
stop something from leaking through.

Kiba caught on instantly.

His nostrils flared in a quick sniff, scenting what could only be the shit hitting the fan.

He stopped laughing at whatever Ino slurred at Naruto and veered his attention onto Shikamaru.
Hinata followed the dog-nin's gaze and quickly snatched down the balloon floating about,
confusing Naruto, who didn't seem to pick up on anything other than the fact that the game had
been cut short.

"Hey, what gives?"

Kiba tried to extricate himself from Ino without knocking her balance, the dark slits of his irises
pinching tighter as Shikamaru drew nearer.

Thankfully, Ino pounced before either male could react.
"There you aaarre!"

She abandoned Kiba like a bored child and flung her arms around Shikamaru's neck, turning them in a circle that matched the slosh of her drink. It swirled in a ruby wash around the glass, red as the anger that threatened to spill into Shikamaru's rigid expression.

He couldn't confront her here.

"You didn't bail on me!" Ino grinned.

Shikamaru grimaced at the fruity breath that fired into his face. He had to hook an arm around her waist to keep her standing as she wobbled on her thin heels. Kiba quit the scene in a dash, loping back towards the table with Naruto and Hinata to get in on cake and avoid the icing of tension layering across Shikamaru's face.

"Ino, get off me," the shadow-nin snarled.

"Why? Kiba likes me." Ino followed the dog-nin's movements with hooded eyes, grinning as she dipped in Shikamaru's arms, forcing him to plant a foot back to keep them both balanced.

"Someone likes me."

Shikamaru jerked her upright.

Ino yelped and clutched her drink to her chest. "Oooww!" she whined.

He hissed in her ear. "Get a grip and stand up."

"I am standing up, you...you ssstupid ass hat!" she slurred.

Shikamaru dug deep for patience and blinked twice. "Did you use your jutsu on Kotetsu?"

Ino nodded emphatically, looping her arm around his shoulders for support. "Where's he gone?"

"Did you use it on me?"

Ino wasn't listening. "Where's Temariiii?"

Shikamaru adjusted his grip on her and steered her back towards the far end of the table, trying to avoid the stomp of her heels. "Shut up and sit down."

Ino pouted. "Aww, she thinks she's too good for my Shikamaru?" Ino giggled, her voice a slurring sing-song in his ear. "Hey, what do you look for in a girl anyway?"

"Distance," he snapped, depositing her on one of the chairs and pushing her away when she tried to drape her arms over his shoulders. "Don't."

"Aww, don't be like that!" Ino circled her hand around in loopy wrist rolls, sloshing more red over the bowl of the glass and along her fingers. "You have a harem, Shika!"

Shikamaru scowled, grabbed her wrist and plucked the glass out of her sticky fingers, setting the drink on the table. He smacked away her hands when they reached for him again.

"Knock it off," he dropped his voice. "You're behaving like an idiot and it's starting to piss me off."

Ino pulled her head back, hurt registering on her face seconds before an irrational and wild flicker picked up in the intoxicated swirl of her blue eyes. "Oh? Am I embarrassing you?" she snapped
hotly. "Am I making you *look* bad, Missster Sissster Screwer?"

Shikamaru's jaw hardened. "Nice. Real nice."

Ino smirked sourly, pawing the table for her drink, eyes still fixed on him. "Go on!" She waved him off with a haughty little flick of her wrist. "Go get into Temari's panties. That's all...that's all you guys want anyway."

Shikamaru frowned, his dark eyes scanning her face. He could sense the recklessness rolling off her in waves. Add her recklessness to his anger and even a Magic 8 ball could predict that outcome.

_Calm down._

Drawing a slow breath through his nose he smoothed out his brow and levelled her with a cool stare, fielding her histrionics by not reacting. Hopefully the tactic would quieten her down.

"You're drunk."

Ino gave a derisive sniff and smacked a hand to his shoulder to shove him away. "I'm not drunk. I'm _happy._"

Shikamaru caught her wrist and pinned it to the side of her chair beneath the table, all the while trying not to draw attention their way.

"And you can kiss my pretty ass." Ino tried to angle a kick at his shin and missed completely.

Shikamaru crouched down and leaned in, his voice hardened to the same steel of his grip as he kept her wrist pinned, predicting a pending slap if he released her. "If you don't settle down and shut up, I'm gonna shadow-possess your obnoxious, annoying ass and drag you out of here."

Ino blinked owlishly, cheeks flushed, lips parted in shock.

She stared at him like a wounded, wide-eyed child for the full few moments it took for his words to penetrate her hazy mind. Then she burst into laughter loud enough to draw eyes and turn heads. Shikamaru cringed inwardly and released her, a scowl prominent on his face as he slid into the chair beside her, slipping out of view.

"Ino," he warned quietly, to no avail.

"You want to manhandle me!" She laughed, shoving him playfully, all traces of her anger flung aside for amusement. "You man handler!"

"Man handler?" Sai asked from across the table. "Are women not your preference, Shikamaru-kun?"

A devastating hush settled around the table.

Silence – except, of course, for Ino. She began to giggle uncontrollably into her arms, flaxen ponytail quivering with her laughter. Shikamaru worked his jaw against the tension but took the opportunity to shift his focus.

He shot Sai a flat, sideways glance. "It must hurt to be you."
"Sai!" Naruto elbowed his teammate. "What the hell? You can't just come out with stuff like that!"

"That's what they call it," Sai replied, rubbing at his ribs. "Coming out."

Kiba looked up from under the table, speaking around a mouthful of cake he'd been halving with Akamaru. "Who's coming out?"

Naruto scowled. "Kiba man, don't encourage him."

Sai fished around in his bag and set a book down on the table, flipping to dog-eared pages. "It says it is an empowering journey."

"Coming out the closet?" Kiba chuckled, rising ass first from under the table to sit down again.

"Closet?" Sai frowned.

"My closet is purple!" Ino announced, waving around a drink stirrer. She ran it across her bee-stung lips and shot Kiba a sultry look. "So are the lacy things I keep in it."

Kiba choked on his tongue at the same time as Naruto.

Shikamaru considered the penalty of murdering his teammate and let his lashes fall shut behind his palm. His urge to strangle Ino didn't distract from the fact that he needed to get her away from any male in the vicinity before she disgraced herself completely.

*Where the hell is Chōji? He's the one who should be doing this.*

Shikamaru rubbed at his eyes only to snap them open in wide-eyed shock when Ino began to brush her fingers across his hairline in a feathering stroke.

"Aww, its okay, Shikamaru." She petted him gently. "I'll find you a nice girl or boy."

He jerked his head away, smacking her hand off him. "Get off."

Ino pressed her lips in a pitying little smile. "You can cry. I won't judge you."

Shikamaru's eyes zeroed in on her mouth, noticing the stain her drink had left before his gaze hit on the glass he'd taken off her. "What have you been drinking?"

Ino grinned brightly. "Something with fruit!"

Across the table, Sai flipped pages. "It says in this book that fruit can mean homosexual."

Shikamaru scanned for a bottle and considered whether attaching it to his mouth would feel better than cracking it over Sai’s head. Naruto reacted for the whole table. His jaw dropped, road-cone hat canting to one side in a 'wrong turn' spin as he jerked around in his seat, staring aghast at his teammate.

"Sai!"

Kiba just nodded sagely. "I think we all look pretty fruity with these stupid hats."

"Kiba!"

Sai looked up curiously at Kiba's hat. "Is it fruity to wear hats?"
"Sai, would you shut up!" Naruto snatched the book out of his teammate's hands, throwing it across the room like a bomb set to detonate. "Why the hell are you reading that!"

"I think Naruto's scared you'll out him," Kiba explained to the chalk-faced and deeply confused Sai.

Naruto wheeled on Kiba, the rim of his hat obscuring his vision as he stabbed his fork at Shino instead. "Take that back!"

Kiba laughed wolfishly, snapping his teeth. "Make me, lovebird."

"Lovebird?" Sai queried.

"It's their lovers pet name," Sakura chirped from across the table, stroking the little orange bird dozing on Hibari's shoulder.

Sai blinked. "Really?"

"NO!" Kiba and Naruto barked in unison.

"Yes!" Ino piped up, perching her high-heels at the edge of her seat as she swivelled around, slapping Shikamaru in the face with her hair.

Ugh.

The night was turning into something surreal enough to have the shadow-nin wondering whether someone had spiked his coffee. Too bad they hadn't. That at least might have made sense. He leaned away from Ino's grooming fingers when she bent her arms and head back to coo an apology at him upside-down.

He stared at the door and prayed for Chōji to walk through it.

Naruto was busy shaking his fist under Sai's nose. "I don't bat for that team, idiot!"

"I don't think you have a team, Naruto," Sakura teased.

Shockingly, Shino raised his voice from the muffled obscurity of his coat, letting his words carry across the table. "You may be inclined to both teams, Naruto. Why? Because you have a tendency to display exaggerated and defensive homophobic qualities."

"True." Kiba clapped Shino on the shoulder.

The Aburame nodded once. "Add to that the fact that your overreactions are usually unfounded. So I ask, what does that suggest?"

"The obvious." Tenten looked up from the zodiac book, flipping knives and forks over her knuckles like kunai. "The lady doth protest too much."

Naruto blinked, drawing up shortly in his seat. "Whoa, what did you just call me?"

"A lady dog!" Ino giggled, throwing her arms up like a cheerleader, narrowly avoiding Shikamaru's jaw as he ducked.

He stretched across her, apprehending her drink and the bottle it had come from, sliding them away without her noticing.
"LADY WHAT?" Naruto slammed his hands on the table, pushing up in red-faced offence, nostrils flaring. "I'm no one's bitc—!

"Lady doth," Lee corrected, holding up his pointer finger. "It's archaic, Naruto."

"Lee called you an old lady, Naruto," Kiba jeered, his grin made sharper by the point of his canines. "'Cause you fight like one."

Naruto hopped up onto his chair, fists balled and tucked back. "BRING IT!"

Ino clapped her hands in an excited little pat. "Ooh, dogfight!" She reached for her glass and grasped air, swaying in her seat. "Heeey where's my drink?"

"Gone," Shikamaru growled, his eyes on the exit. "Like I'm gonna be in five seconds."

Ino's eyes widened and she twisted around to dig her fingers into his sleeve. Shikamaru kept his eyes on the door.

"Please don't go." She puffed a breath upwards to blow her bangs away from her eyes, squinting around the room. "Where's my Chōji? I want my boys together!"

"Eh?" Naruto paused in his exaggerated display of male posturing and looked down at Ino in horror. "You want what?"

"Her boys together," Sai echoed quietly, flipping through another book. "I think she is referring to a popular genre in girl's fiction called—"

"Will you give it a rest already!" Naruto yelled and swung his fist, knocking Sai's hat into a balloon with a loud BANG.

Shikamaru flinched, pushing up out of his chair. "That's it."

Ino latched onto his wrist. "Don't ditch me, it's my birthday! It's ooourr birthday. You promised."

"Ino…" he seethed, but the snarl fractured at the watery flash in her eyes. "Oh don't even try it."

Ino sniffed, biting her lip hard enough that Shikamaru realised she wasn't faking the waterworks. Her blue orbs began to film over, brimming with a sheen that threatened to spill into a small stream over the spiky barrier of her lashes.

"Ino," he sighed through his teeth.

Ino sank back in her chair, staring at his vacant seat forlornly. "I just want the Team together."

Like a gutted child, she sagged forward onto her arms with a hiccup and made those small jerky movements that indicated to Shikamaru that her emotional dam was closer to caving than his sanity at this point.

_God dammit…_

He cursed quietly, scanned the room in a futile search for Chōji, caught Sakura's eye instead and gestured her over with a lift of his chin and a pointed glance at Ino. The pink-haired kunoichi skirted around the table towards him, shooting Ino a look riddled with awkward apology.

"She's really had it."
"No kidding," Shikamaru sighed. "Do you know where Chōji is?"

Sakura gestured toward the door. "I think he was helping Hinata earlier in the kitchen."

That explains it.

Shikamaru shook his head, a small smile tugging at one corner of his mouth. "Right. Thanks."

Sakura nodded and watched the shadow-nin slant himself over a whimpering Ino, hands hovering awkwardly at her shoulders, looking for the best angle to grab her from.

"Shikamaru…" Sakura looked on uncertainly, trying hard to offer support with a grim smile rapidly sliding into a grimace. "Maybe you shouldn't…"

Sage advice. Damn right he shouldn't.

This is going to hurt.

He was already predicting the outcome, which weighed heavily on Ino's tendency to get obnoxiously violent when she strayed this far into the troublesome corner of her inner Rubik's Cube. Add to that the fact that she was more than a little over-served.

Testing the waters, he flicked her on the head. "Time to go, Princess."

Ino stiffened at the abhorred nickname and growled into the crook of her arm.

"I hate you!" she snapped, throwing out a hand to flail in his general direction, her voice shaky and thick with tears. "Go away!"

"I wish," he growled, grabbing her waving arm and hauling her up. "Move it."

"You're such a jerk!" Ino balled a fist and brought it down on his chest, only to drop her forehead there as she groaned, swaying forward. "I hate you."

Shikamaru sighed and met Sakura's gaze over the blonde arc of Ino's ponytail. Sakura's lips pressed into a tense little smile, concern playing in her eyes.

"Not the smartest idea, Shikamaru."

Shikamaru forced out a weak laugh that barked into a cough as Ino smacked him hard in the chest. Her fist came down again and again as she thudded out her frustration, weakening the blow each time.

Sakura winced. "Need some help?"

"Yeah, in the morning when I'm black and blue," he joked weakly, looping a long arm around Ino's waist to keep her from sliding back into her chair. "Would you send Chōji over?"

Sakura saluted with the tips of her fingers, nodding. "Sure. I'll go find him now."

"Thanks."

"I could have had him if I wanted," Ino whimpered and followed it up with a half-growl, half-giggle. "Where's Chōji? Chōji loves me."

Shikamaru angled her with a confused look. "Yeah, he's gonna be thrilled to see you acting like an
idiot."

Ino tried to shove him. "I hate you."

"Thanks." Shikamaru set his gaze on the door and pulled in a determined breath that almost left him in a gush as Ino pounded out another round against his chest. "Stop hitting me or I'm—"

Ino keened something high-pitched and pitiful that sounded like a crying animal.

Shikamaru sighed into her hair.

*How troublesome.*

"*How the hell do you do it? How the hell do you push this down?*"

The words still haunted him.

They were as insistent as the foolish compulsion driving him now.

Neji knew that, but even the knowing couldn't stop the yearning.

*I still can't push it down.*

It pulled like an undulating rise and fall inside of him, pushing him forward and dragging him away all in the same movement. Grains of reason slipped back and forth as an ache beached itself in the centre of his chest.

*I will walk away. One of us has to.*

Neji veered right and changed direction for the seventh time. His mind fired out a scolding stream.

*You promised you would walk away. You did. Now stay away.*

That beached pain sank a little deeper into his chest.

He leapt to a higher level as if to escape it, walking along the edge of a building close to the Academy. He dropped down onto an open rooftop. While mostly vacant, it was dominated by a large, square seating area, sheltered and shaded by a roof.

*Who'd have thought...?*

He hadn't plotted a course, which had made his progress across the village somewhat sporadic, resulting in several stops and starts. But then, he didn't intend to reach his destination, just orbit around it like a feather caught in the grips of an unshakeable current.

Neji breathed out a soft stream of air, watching it chase away on the wind.

Tomorrow he'd find a way to catch the next cold wind out of Konoha. Another mission, another means to an end, another step closer to his final goal. One more mission always meant one more chance to find the pieces pulled roughly from the board he'd had turned on its head weeks ago.

*No clean slates, just a repositioning of pieces...isn't that right, Nara?*

Neji felt traces of a smile twitch the numb sting from his lips.

He moved deeper into the shadows, a dark swathe across the wooden square. He knew this spot.
Knew that Shikamaru frequented it for a purpose Neji had once never understood.

But a burning sunset and a cold sunrise two weeks ago had changed that.

Shrugging off the chill of the air and the grip of the memory, he moved to sit, laying back on the broad wood to gaze up at the sky. His moonstone eyes traced the clouds, illuminated in eerie wisps against a backdrop of endless black, scattered with stars.

He'd wait for the sunrise.

"Sunrise huh? Guess I can take one more crappy hello…"

Neji blinked slowly, fighting not to close his eyes.

*Could you take another goodbye?*

He watched a cloud drift across the moon and smiled sadly.

*Happy Birthday, Shikamaru.*

"Take them off."

"No."

"Take them off."

"No!" Ino yelled from her graceless slump on the floor, tear-stained cheeks reddened in fury. She glared up at the harassed shadow-nin hovering over her. "Jerk!"

Shikamaru ducked a slap as he crouched down. "If you don't take them off, I'm gonna leave you here."

"OooOoh!" She drew back with a mock expression of exaggerated fear, sniffing up tears as she waved him off. "Go on then! Leave. You're good at disappearing!"

Shikamaru set his jaw and gnarled his fingers into the space either side of Ino's throat to keep from wrapping his hands around her neck. She slouched back against the wall, sticking her tongue out. Opting for distance over the temptation to choke, Shikamaru bumped his fists into the wall and pushed to his feet.

"Go on," she taunted. "Gooo."

He stepped back and stared down through the bored half-mast of his lashes.

"Take them off," he repeated, droning the words tiredly.

Ino tucked her leg back and kicked at his shin. Shikamaru easily swayed out of harms way, watching the evil spike of her heel stab the air and crack loudly onto the polished wooden floors. She'd nailed him several times in the instep already and one abused foot was about as much as he was willing to suffer.

"Whoa, what's happening?" a voice called down the corridors.

"Chōji!" Ino waved her arm back and forth like a damsel trying to hail a hero. "You're here! You're not an ass hat! You're my *bestest* friend!"
"Uh, yeah? Ino, why are you on the floor?" The Akimichi upped his pace, searching Shikamaru's face for some explanation. "What's going on?"

Shikamaru flicked a hand at Ino irritably and dropped it back to his hip, canting his weight away from another sharp kick. "You mean the foaming at the mouth drama isn't enough to clue you in?"

Ino snarled and lunged for him.

Chōji came between them, one hand clamped on Ino's shoulder and the other turned up to hold off Shikamaru – or rather the shadow-nin's cutting words. "Hey, don't make it worse."

Shikamaru chuckled throatily, shaking his head. "Like I need to."

Ino tried unsuccessfully to climb over Chōji rather than attempt to get around him, clawing at his back with lilac-lacquered nails looking to imbed themselves in Shikamaru's smirking face.

"You're such a bastard!" Ino hissed at him.

Shikamaru hesitated at that, his gut tightening.

"There's the snarky bastard your friends don't get to see..."

If any hint of emotion showed on his face, it was only fractional, lost again behind his chameleon shift into an unbothered, lazy expression. He shook his head, his lack of response only vexing Ino further until Chōji locked her in a bear hug to keep her in place.

"Come on, Ino, calm down," the Akimichi said gently, shooting Shikamaru a frustrated glance. "Jeez, would you quit riling her up?"

Shikamaru feigned innocence with a quirk of his brow.

Ino screamed something unintelligible and bicycled her feet in a series of kicks that Shikamaru watched with irritation, then with calculation. Timing her thrashing, the shadow-nin grabbed her ankle, dislodging one of her shoes as the sharp heel of the other nicked across the back of his hand.

Chōji winced. "Ow."

Shikamaru grunted something that translated as "no shit" before using the same method to confiscate Ino's other shoe. Hooking the straps into his fingers he stepped back, dangling them like a victory prize.

"Was that really so painful for you?" he taunted.

Ino panted in mounting fury, face mottled red and stained with mascara trails, an unbridled urge to maim twisting her expression into that she-wolf fierceness she'd set on Sakura earlier.

"I HATE YOU!"

Shikamaru blinked slowly. "I got that part."

Letting out a banshee scream, she launched into another series of futile kicks, each one jostling Chōji on the spot. The Akimichi tilted back until her feet were no longer touching the floor, giving her less leverage to struggle.

"Uh, where should we put her?" Chōji asked.
"PUT ME DOWN!" Ino screeched, the pitch of her scream like nails across an eardrum, never mind a chalkboard.

Shikamaru worked his jaw against the earache and flipped out a set of room keys, glancing at the symbol etched into the tag. "Follow the fireflies."

And they did, moving along the corridors with Shikamaru taking the lead several lazy paces ahead. They passed rooms set far enough apart to hint at the luxury size behind each door, all marked with different firefly symbols painted red or purple into the grain. Shikamaru flicked his eyes over the tag in his palm and kept his focus drifting between doors, trying to locate Ino's room.

Six doors down the corridor, Ino stopped wailing and started singing.

She'd given up the kicking game, but Chōji continued to carry her, given that her spatial awareness remained as challenged as her ability to hold a tune, let alone the lyrics. Her drunken song bubbled away in the background.

Shikamaru ignored it for the most part as he stopped at one of the doors.

The painting matched the tag. He flipped the keys over his knuckles, frowning at the ache in his head, which had less to do with Ino's singing and more with his own flood of mental chatter. His focus divided itself in rough, uneven segments between a rapid influx of thought; a rush of various moments, memories and mental notes all vying for his attention.

Fuck. Just shut up…

He tapped his head against the door, squeezing his eyes shut before exhaling shakily. Chōji was too distracted with an armful of Ino to notice.

"Uh, that our room?" the Akimichi asked, hope ringing in his voice.

"Roooom," Ino cooed the word into her song.

Shikamaru nodded as he turned the key. "Yeah."

He eased the door open with his shoulder, toeing off his shoes to kick them on ahead into the foyer, tossing Ino's heels behind them. He moved in and to one side, allowing for Chōji to carry Ino past the threshold and further into the main guest room.

"…have all the flowers gone…?" Ino sang.

Shikamaru brushed his fingers along the wall, searching for the light switch. His thumb stuck true. A dim pulse of tiny, cat-eye lights glowed around the room, the retro-reflective glass picking up on the main amber hued bulbs fitted behind shoji screens and fusuma panels. It was the same honeyed light that they'd used in the restaurant.

The little cat-eye additions kept with the firefly theme.

Figures…

Shikamaru flicked his gaze around the luxury room, taking in the interior's elements, all influenced by reds and purples wrapped up in a somewhat modern structure. But it exuded a traditional sense of ambience, prominent in the wall scrolls, ornamental alcove and even the flower arrangement.

"Ino, just sit here okay?"
Shikamaru looked over at his teammates.

Chōji plopped Ino down on one of the long, low couches, the ends of the seating curving up like bulls horns. An elegant and graceful design that Ino sprawled across without shame, stretching cat-like. Chōji tugged her skirt down, trying to get her to sit up. Instead, she dangled her arms off one end of the couch, hung her head and abruptly burst into tears.

Shikamaru looked at Chōji.

Chōji looked back helplessly.

Ino let out a sound that Shikamaru had never heard before. It classed somewhere between a sob, scream and strangled cough. Both males shifted uncomfortably on the spot.

Shikamaru rubbed at the back of his head. "Troublesome…"

"What do you mean, troublesome?" Chōji waved a hand at her. "What happened?"

Shikamaru shrugged, spinning the loop of the keys around his finger. The flash of the metal didn't distract from the glistening of Ino's tears. They smeared shiny black along her forearms, mascara smudged like runny paint.

_Dammit._

Shikamaru continued to ignore the building tension until Chōji began to frown at him with something stronger than expectancy. Shikamaru stopped spinning the keys and caught them in a loud rattle against his palm.

"What?" he snapped defensively.

Chōji sighed and flinched at a particularly heart-wrenching sob from Ino. "I'm gonna find her some tissues."

Shikamaru closed his fingers hard around the keys. "Tissues…"

"For the tears, in case you didn't notice," Chōji elaborated sarcastically, moving across the room to make good on his hunt. "Man, what's up with you two?"

Shikamaru blinked hard, choking on his breath. "What the hell do you mean, you _two_?"

Ino jerked her head up. "It's not his fault!"

Shocked at the unexpected defence, Shikamaru looked at her suspiciously out the corner of his eye. "It's not?"

Ino shook her head from side to side, scattering teardrops before she curled into a ball against the deep maroon of the couch, weeping into its plush fibres.

"It's all me," she cried. "It's always me!"

_Oh god…it's the Rubik's Cube…_

Shikamaru could feel its sharp, pointy, complicated edges poking into his brain, demanding that he solve the great, troublesome mystery that was Yamanaka Ino. He looked to Chōji in a sudden panic, turning on his heel quickly to remove himself from the scene. He started towards the sliding doors at the furthest side of the room.
"I'll get the tissues, you deal with the drama."

"No," Chōji stepped into his path and stabbed a firm finger towards him. "You deal with it."

Shikamaru fell back a step as if that finger had shoved him. "You're joking. She's crying."

Chōji rolled his eyes. "Kind of noticed."

"Then maybe you'll 'kind of notice' the roles." Shikamaru half-turned with an all-encompassing sweep of his arm towards Ino, like someone drawing back a curtain on a destroyed stage set. "You're the 'bestest' friend right now and I'm the bastard."

"Yeah, you are," Chōji said quietly. "When exactly did that happen?"

Shikamaru rocked his head back as if he'd taken a blow.

He made to answer, found that he couldn't, and snapped his mouth shut.

A thick silence gripped his throat, harder than the look Chōji levelled on him. It was a glower of angry confusion so rare to the Akimichi's face that it took Shikamaru a moment to register he'd lost control of his own expression. He stared at his oldest friend, dark eyes pinched against the emotion he'd tried to hide from Ino earlier.

He could hear her sobbing softly in the background.

Chōji didn't break the stare.

Shikamaru couldn't hold it.

Not without his eyes threatening to give away more than he was willing to let show.

He dropped his gaze.

He didn't see Chōji's glower soften sadly. But the Akimichi didn't say anything to take the edge off the tension. Instead, he let it hang heavy over Shikamaru's head, turning towards the door the shadow-nin had sought to make an exit.

It slid shut behind him.

Shikamaru let the quiet click of the wood signal a release in his expression. His eyes pressed shut then flickered open, fixing on the square patches of the tatami flooring. He mindlessly traced the shadow cast from the low table in the centre of the room.

There wasn't much that he truly hated.

But fighting with Chōji was something he despised.

For Shikamaru, Chōji was the only person he couldn't ever see himself coming to serious blows with, verbal or otherwise. Whenever the risk of it happened, it always rocked him on the spot, inside and out – as if they'd already gone a round and got bloody in the process.

Ino mumbled something.

Shikamaru started at the sound, swallowed tightly and turned towards her.

The soles of his feet brushed softly across the mats.
His approaching steps were drowned out by her sniffles. She was attempting to ensconce herself into one corner of the couch with much effort but no effect. Shikamaru wasn't sure how she was managing to breathe, but her ragged sobs continued to carry from behind a matted tangle of blonde strands and folded arms.

"Ino," he called quietly.

Ino shook her head, or at least that's what it looked like. Shikamaru sighed and crouched down, feeling wretched and tired and…

Guilty.

He was pretty sure he hated that word with the full power of his 6,205 suns.

He hooked his arm over the curved end of the couch, the tips of his fingers hovering near the top of Ino's head. He sighed heavily – again – and offered an awkward little scratch to the top of her ponytail.

"Will you stop crying?"

"No," she muffled into the couch.

Shikamaru tried again, tapping her head with a bounce of his fingers. "You're troublesome."

Ino sniffed and turned her head, squinting through puffy, panda eyes and the plastering of her hair across her face. "You're a jerk," she slurred.

He shrugged, offering a crooked smile. "Yeah, probably."

"I love you."

Shikamaru stopped smiling.

It should have been funny to hear those words, given her vehement declarations of hatred a half hour before. He hummed a low 'hn' of amusement in the back of his throat, shaking his head.

"I love you a lot," Ino added.

"You're drunk," Shikamaru returned quietly, not knowing what else to say – not wanting to think about it.

Ino smiled goofily and then grimaced against the onslaught of more tears. "I want to go dancing."

Shikamaru arched a brow. "No more dancing."

"Did I go dancing?"

"Yeah. All over my foot."

And Kiba.

He frowned at the thought, leaving out the mental postscript.

Ino sniffled and pressed her cheek into the couch, peeking over the edge to try and glimpse said foot. "Did I hurt you?"
"My walk will never be the same again," he said dryly, trying to provoke a giggle to keep the tears at bay.

Ino grinned, but fat droplets leaked from the corner of her shining eyes. They glistened wetly across the bridge of her nose and pooled in a dark little puddle against the crimson seat. Shikamaru frowned, hooking a knuckle to follow the trail, awkwardly brushing away tears and flyaway strands still stuck to her face.

"Why are you crying anyway?" he muttered, trying to sound annoyed.

Ino scrunched her nose and sank her teeth into her bottom lip, worrying it viciously as her eyes began to fill again. "Because no one wants me…just me…for me…"

Shikamaru blinked rapidly. "What?"

Ino stared over his shoulder, glazed eyes focused on something he knew he wouldn't have seen even if he'd turned to look. He couldn't read her mind, but he knew she was digging around the corners of her inner Rubik's Cube.

"Mom was right," she whispered bitterly. "No one wants me…"

Shikamaru's eyes rounded. "Your mom told you that?"

Ino closed her eyes and turned her face into the crook of her arm. Shikamaru frowned, steering his focus out of its mental chug of exhaustion and onto whatever was left of his alertness. He wouldn't get this opportunity again.

Yamanaka-san. Ino's mother.

Think.

Like a profile lodged in some cerebral cabinet, he drew out whatever data his brain had stored on Ino's mother, mentally speed-reading the details.


Well, Shikaku was a little more tactful about that. Yoshino, however, had no trouble enumerating the woman's lesser qualities of self-absorption. Yoshino's thumbnail sketch of Ino's mother was that the woman was shallow as a lily pond and wore rocks on her fingers large enough to choke babies. Added to that tally was the fact that she didn't seem to eat anything that overflowed an eggcup and scorned anyone who did – which didn't cast her in the most favourable light with the Akimichi's.

Shikaku's only complaint was more of an amused observation. One that he took great pleasure in needling Inoichi about. This centred on Ino's mother harbouring an unshakeable yet unfounded suspicion that her husband plotted and executed brilliant plans of infidelity behind her back every chance he got.

Considering it now, Shikamaru recalled a random conversation between his parents nine years ago; one that his young brain had automatically filed away into the Yamanaka mental cabinet.

"She honestly thinks he's straying, again?"

"Again."
"It's not funny, Shikaku. That woman."

"Inoichi's always flirted and she's always been paranoid. It's bound to happen." 

"But that's nonsense, he's never been anything but dedicated from what you've told me and... Shikamaru, stop staring and eat your eggs."

"I don't like them."

"Eat them. That poor man. Inoichi should have up and left before he... before the stalk came."

"I know what that means, mom."

"Eat your eggs."

"He loves her, Yoshino."

"Why, because she looks gorgeous hanging off his arm?"

"No."

"Well regardless, imagine what she'll do to Ino. That poor girl."

Shikamaru blinked from the memory.

Immediately, one row in Ino's inner Rubik's Cube lined up. In one 'click', the colourful complications slid into place, allowing Shikamaru to follow the logic in an instant.

Why the hell didn't I figure this out earlier?

On the tail end of that question came the answer.

Because you didn't want to know.

Shikamaru ground his teeth against the guilty twist in his gut. He belatedly realised that Ino's gaze had drifted back to him, watery orbs squinting to bring him into focus.

Ino sniffed. "You're just the same... you think... I'm useless..."

"No. I don't," Shikamaru replied, ignoring the smudge of mascara on his fingers as he offered her his sleeve.

She grabbed his entire hand, tugging him forward to bury her head into the crook of his arm, sobbing again. "It's not fair... you have Chōji... I have... no one..."

"That's not true."

"My best friend... left me... for a boy... mom said she would... said I was... just competition... always a competition... she was right... about everything."

Shikamaru frowned, watching her quietly for a moment. "Sakura."

Ino went still, breath hitching in her throat.

"What do you know?" she hissed.

"More than I want to," he admitted, trying to ignore the soggy warmth of her tears soaking into his
sleeve. "Not that you make much sense half the time."

Ino snapped her head up, glaring at him. "You…you're…so...ARGH!"

Shikamaru stared blankly.

"You don't get it! You…don't know…" She dropped her head and hissed the last word until her breath broke through the fibres of his top, almost searing his arm before she began to cry again.

Shikamaru frowned, trying to pull his arm back. Ino clutched hard enough to cut off his blood circulation.

Okay, that's not happening.

He gave up the attempt to draw back and shifted position instead, kneeling down. He leaned into the couch, not comfortable, but not cramping up just yet.

"No one understands…"

"I'm trying," he said very quietly. "You women are so damned complicated…"

Ino hiccupped, shaking her head. "Men are stupid."

Shikamaru smirked weakly at that. "Highly probable."

"You're supposed to be smart…" Ino charged, her voice shaking and still thick with tears.

"Apparently." He glanced sidelong at her. "Can I have my arm back now?"

Ino shook her head, salty streaks still streaming from her eyes. It was getting pretty painful to watch. More for the fact that Shikamaru knew she'd hate herself for it in the morning. He hoped she wouldn't remember. Judging by the glazed, aching, slightly confused stare she set on the floor, it was likely she'd forget.

But he wouldn't.

Got the cause for what's messed her up. Guess we can try to fix it now…

"I feel sick…" Ino mumbled.

Shikamaru immediately rocked away onto the balls of his feet. "If you throw up on me, I'll screw."

Ino giggled dopily. "Screw…"

Shikamaru ignored the echo, tugging his arm back to get a grip on her shoulders, levering her gently onto her feet. "Come on."

"Everything you're saying sounds dirty…"

Embarrassed, Shikamaru cleared his throat. "That's because your mind is twisted."

"Yours is twisteder…"

"That's not even a word."

"Is too," Ino scolded, wobbling unsteadily on her feet, looping her arms around his neck for balance. "Everything's spinning…"
"I'll bet." Shikamaru began to backpedal slowly, wincing when she stumbled into him and her knees buckled. "Shit!"

"Don't drop me, stupid." Giggles bubbled up inside her, riding over her tears before she sobered suddenly. "You always drop me…" she whispered.

Shikamaru froze for the split second it took his brain to put that into context. He shook his head, hefting her back up with a weak growl.

"It's not like that."

Ino stopped suddenly, lifted onto her toes and tightened her arms around his neck.

For a long awkward moment, Shikamaru just stood there.

Then, rather than shove her off, he begrudgingly set his hands at his hips, tilting forward to take the pressure off his spine as she hung off him like an albatross around his neck. Seriously, the drunken mood swings were even more troublesome to gauge than the typical pendulum shifts in her behaviour.

"I'm sorry, Shikamaru…"

Shikamaru went very still at the quiet apology. Those were always dangerous words in his mind, but it was the way she said it, in that small, contrite whisper.

He looked down at the top of her head, frowning. "Sorry?"

She nodded, tickling his face with her hair. "I'm sorry."

He shook his head, wincing audibly as her arms tightened around his neck. "Okay, now there's pain…"

For some obscure reason, these words were like a knife through Ino's heart and she began to cry again. At a complete loss of how to deal with the situation, Shikamaru dropped his head back to stare up at the ceiling, managing a tired, incredulous chuckle.

She bawled harder into his chest.

"Ino…" Shikamaru craned his neck back to escape the worst of the plaintive sounds, feeling increasingly bothered by the tears and his inability to work out why exactly they wouldn't stop.

*Please stop crying…*

Of their own volition his hands came up to settle on her shaking shoulders. Worse than her building sobs was the grinding sensation deep in his chest. Ino's sadness was starting to shift tender gears inside him, gears that he'd spent two weeks keeping slammed in reverse.

He ground his jaw, panic bolting through him.

*I can't do this…*

He caught movement out the corner of his eye.

Chōji stood at the other end of the room, a pile of gifts loaded into the cradle of his arms. "Your stuff is in your room down the hall."
Shikamaru gaped for a moment. "You left?"

Chōji grinned a little. "Yeah, only for a second. Sakura and Kiba brought the gifts up. How's she doing?"

Shikamaru widened his eyes imploringly, darting a glance at Ino's head. Chōji just smiled and tilted his brow towards the corridor beyond the tokonoma alcove.

"I turned her bed down," he said.

Shikamaru shot him a flat look. "Real helpful. Now how exactly do we…" he trailed off, jerking his head at Ino then towards the direction of the bedroom.

Chōji blinked, weighing up the options with a look of grave consideration. Then he hefted the gifts in his arms, hugged them closer to his chest and nodded. Shikamaru stared blankly, not following. Chōji repeated the little bounce and brace of his arms. Shikamaru caught on with wide eyes and chuckled raggedly, shaking his head.

"Nice suggestion. Count me out. You're doing it."

"But you're doing so well," Chōji praised teasingly, flicking his gaze between them.

Ino was still hanging off Shikamaru like he was her lifeline, her sobs interspersed with woozy groans and little hiccups that had her arms tightening like a noose.

Shikamaru's eyes narrowed. "If I lift her, she's gonna throw up all over me," he hissed through his teeth. "There's no recovering from that. It's not happening."

"You'll thank me for this," Chōji assured.

"Before or after she throws up all over me?"

"Ne, she's not that drunk."

Shikamaru glared, nudged Ino with his hip and almost sent her sprawling before he caught her around the waist. He shot Chōji a pointed look.

"Oh no, she's completely in control," he drawled sarcastically.

"Why did you do that?" Ino blubbered, looking like he'd just stomped over all the pieces of the heart she was crying out. "Why? You're so mean…"

Chōji chuckled. "So mean. I think you should carry her because you're such a mean jerk."

"Love the logic," Shikamaru smirked, inwardly relieved to have Chōji joking with him again – even if it was at his expense.

"Love you all…I love you, Chōji," Ino wept, overwhelmed by the profound love she'd suddenly developed for everyone. "I love you, Shikamaru."

Shikamaru sighed. "Don't say things like that."

Chōji laughed, peeking around the presents. "Why? It's cute."

"It's not cute," Shikamaru growled, not sure what the hell he truly felt about those three words being directed at him, no matter how platonic.
He bent at the knees very carefully and tried to work out the best way to pick Ino up.

*This is so stupid…*

Drawing a breath, he went for the band-aid method of haste over hesitation, hoping it would hurt less. With a swift drop of his shoulder he knocked Ino's balance, caught her under the knees and hefted her up bridal style, wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

Ino let out a little squeak of surprise, banded her arms around her stomach and groaned, dropping her head against his shoulder. "I don't feel well."

Shikamaru shot Chōji a meaningful glare. "Should I thank you yet?"

Chōji leaned into the wall for support as he laughed. "That won't stop projectile vomit, but you'll feel less mean."

"If its projectile, I'm aiming her at you." Shikamaru illustrated the threat by turning in Chōji's direction.

Chōji ducked behind the presents, laughter bubbling over his makeshift shield. Shikamaru couldn't contain the quiet chuckle that tumbled out of him, rolling his eyes at the stupidity of the situation.

Ino's head lollled and she nuzzled against his neck. "I'm tired now."

"Not surprised," Shikamaru muttered gently, tipping his head back as she mumbled soppy affections against his jaw, turning towards the bedroom in a careful pivot. "Lights out for you."

The sallow glow of gas lamps illuminated the darkness, a sulphuric wash of yellow that seemed to rot before his eyes the deeper he stared into the room.

*I know this place…*

The lamps circled a wide pit, throwing stale light into a crude square. It had been dug into the centre of a large underground cellar.

Yes, he knew this place.

*No…*

The pit was deep and boarded at its circumference by planks of mouldy wood, the cracks splitting wide and dripping red.

So much red.

*It's not real.*

Shikamaru blinked against the sting of smoke.

A haze hung above the pit, thick and tainted.

Mildew, Shikamaru could smell it, underling various stenches. All of them crowding his nose and clogging in his throat. The sour stink of sweat, both animal and human, mixed with a whiff of alcohol and something chemical, all saturated into a heady pall of smoke.

His eyes burned, his lungs swelling with the stale, rancid air.
He tried to move but couldn't.

Then he was in the pit.

*Fuck...*

And something was pressing in against his legs, scratching at his skin. He tried to shift and something squelched and cracked and popped beneath his feet.

*It's not real.*

He looked down.

His eyes widened and his throat closed.

He was up to his knees in corpses.

The mangled bodies of rats and dogs and cats...jaws locked in ugly grimaces, fangs bared, gums black, tongues lolling, bodies warped and twisted at broken angles...maggots crawling...tufts of fur clumped in bloody clots...entrails scattered like thick, bloated worms...shrivelled carcasses bleeding out...

"We add brodifacoum...wrings them dry..."

He froze at the sound of that voice.

Everything inside him locked...only the panic moved...the pressure rising in the back of his throat...

*This isn't real...*

Canines and claws were sinking into his shins...

*This isn't real.*

Tails and bodies wrapping around his ankles...

*Past...it's not real...*

Above him, shadows danced, faces passed in and out of yellowed smoke, grotesque and distorted in the sickly light. Hands moved, ryo passed back and forth between thick, greedy fingers, bets were on and wagers were rising, voices began to build into a din.

The corpses began to move.

**THIS ISN'T REAL!**

Human teeth scraped against his ear. "Still game, kid?"

**WAKE UP!**

He did.

Shikamaru tore from the nightmare on a choked cry, rolling sharply onto his side. He gripped the edge of the bed, ducking his head down as if to retch. Nothing rode up or out of his throat but a juddering breath.
His heart beat like thunder.

Sweat dripped down his nose.

Sharp strands of black hung in his eyes, having escaped the mess of his ponytail. Had he been turning that much in his sleep? His stomach roiled, forcing him to squeeze his eyes shut. He held himself at the edge of the bed, dragging in air before shakily pushing upright. He ran his fingers through the hanging shards of his hair, slicking them back from his face.

 Fuck…

He was shaking, inside anyway.

Dream…stupid fucking dream…not real…don't go there…it's not real…

He scanned the shadows, watched the phosphorescent streams of moonlight pool at the end of the guest bed.

Guest bed…Ryokan…Ino…Chōji…

He smoothed a hand over the futon's silk coverlet, his sweaty palm hitching the sheets.

Dream…

Shikamaru stripped off his damp t-shirt as he rose, the muscles of his torso rippling, ribs heaving as he panted. He set his feet firmly beneath him, flexing his toes on the plush carpet.

Should have gone to my own room…

He was just fortunate the luxury suites included a spare quarter for guests. Ignoring the chill of his cooling skin, Shikamaru rounded the futon and searched the cupboard for a yukata. He pulled out one of two burgundy robes, trying not to equate the bloody colour with anything from his dream.

Nightmare…

One he hadn't had in two years.

Securing the yukata, he slipped out of the guest quarter, passing along the corridor back into the main room. He could hear the gentle drone of the television, the abrasive glow from the screen the only light to guide his movements. Keeping to the shadows of the threshold, the young Nara braced his shoulder against the sliding frame, dark eyes settled on his teammates.

Chōji and Ino were sat on the couch.

Ino's head was tucked against the Akimichi's shoulder, legs curled beneath her and a dark blanket wrapped about her shoulders, flowing down over the edge of the couch along with her loose flaxen mane.

She seemed to be dozing.

Chōji however, remained alert, engaged by the staccato flashes going off on the screen, casting his fascinated expression in sharp relief. He was munching on a bowl of animal crackers set in Ino's lap. The Yamanaka muttered something. Chōji offered her a cracker and she turned her head into his shoulder with a groan.

Shikamaru smiled a little, moving out of the shadows.
Something moved with him.

It pulled against the fabric of his yukata, an odd static-sensation across his skin. Almost like chakra. He glanced down, frowning. The shadows seemed to swell and shrink back again, like black waters trying to draw him in.

Or was that a trick of the TV light? Or his mind?

Shaking off the sensation, he paced across the floor towards the couch. Ino lifted her head and blinked sleepily, looking up at him through puffy, red eyes.

"You're supposed to be sleeping," she scolded, still a little slurry.

Shikamaru arched a brow, his voice sleep-hoarse. "You too."

Ino leaned into Chōji, smiling. "Chōji's my pillow."

Chōji tilted his head up without taking his eyes off the screen. "Thought you'd blacked out," he teased.

Shikamaru shook his head, trying to ignore the images his mind kept trying to regurgitate. He slammed a mental door on it, bolting it down as best he could.

Distraction, that's what he needed right now.

He moved to sit on the floor, drawing one heel up to drape his forearm across his knee. Letting his focus settle on the screen, he began to try and focus on the film. Ino shifted behind him and he leaned forward to avoid a kicking as she readjusted her legs.

Then he felt her hand on his shoulder. "Your hair's come out."

Shikamaru shrugged her off. "Mn."

"Can I put it up for you?"

Chōji snorted. "No one touches the pineapple."

"Shut up," Shikamaru sighed, but his lips quirked a little.

Ino flicked some of the thick, sharp strands hanging by his jaw. Shikamaru tucked his shoulder to his ear defensively, scowling at the touch.

"Don't, Ino," he murmured.

"We used to stay up late as Genin and watch scary movies..." she said.

Shikamaru lowered his shoulder a degree, a fond look of remembrance flitting across his face. "Yeah."

"And you slept through them," Chōji pointed out, chuckling. "Even all the screaming. I was impressed."

"They all end the same," Shikamaru argued, reaching a long arm back to locate the bowl of crackers, needing something to stop the curdling in his gut.

Ino knocked his fingers away, sorted out all the deer-shaped crackers and placed them in his hand.
"Your harem," she giggled.

Shikamaru snorted. "Witty. But these aren't hinds."

Ino pouted, forcing Chōji to save the bowl of crackers as she leaned forward to peer over Shikamaru's shoulder at the crackers in his palm. "Hinds?"

"Yeah, they're not does," the shadow-nin explained, tracing out the detail of antlers on the crackers with a brush of his finger. "See? Stags."

"Oooh."

Shikamaru smiled, offering her the cracker to examine.

"Daaw, it's a little shika."

Chōji hushed them. "Hey, hey, guy with a freaky mask, here comes the best part."

Surrendering another 'stag' to Ino for inspection, Shikamaru walked a cracker over the knuckles of his fingers like a coin, back and forth, back and forth.

He continued this way as he stared blankly at the screen.

For a full ten minutes he managed to follow the script, locked in that zoned out trance of lazy focus…focus that began to slide…until he was watching the actors move but paying no attention to the story or the dialogue. His eyes glazed over and the figures began to blur until the screen became a fuzzy haze on his periphery.

And then a different scene began to roll in his head.

One he'd spooled in the back of his mind and had kept on 'pause' for years.

Two years.

And suddenly it was a movie in motion, a reel of faded tape gaining definition.

No.

Flashes of the nightmare, phantoms from the past.

It's not real anymore.

Inverted images, the colours once drained…now bleeding back in again.

Stop.

He tried to hit 'pause' on his brain, struggling to rewind what was playing out. He knew the cerebral technique of disassociation. He'd learned it, executed it and perfected it within two weeks when he was fifteen.

Do it again. You know how to do this…

Shikamaru began to turn the cracker faster along his knuckles, his breathing picking up into a light pant, jaw locked, eyes losing focus.

Fuck…I can't…
"Shikamaru…"

Shikamaru jumped.

The cracker snapped between his knuckles.

The memories shrunk to black in his mind, like the power cutting out.

Ino's fingertips planted spider-like on his head, shoving him a little to the left to get a better view of the TV as she adjusted her position.

"Scoot, Shikaaaa."

Too rattled to notice the abbreviation of his name, he leaned away and pushed to his feet, the little deer crackers slipping through his fingers.

"You okay?" Chōji asked, looking up.

"Yeah," Shikamaru nodded, sliding his fingers to his nape as he turned towards the doors leading out onto the veranda. "Just need some air."

Padding across the room, he pulled the paper doors back and slipped outside, sliding them shut behind him. The wind hit his skin like tiny needles, hooking the crossing hem of his yukata, pulling aside the fabric like cold fingers seeking his chest.

He didn't bother to tug the yukata back into place.

Stepping up to the edge of the balcony, he braced his forearms on the wooden balustrade and ducked his head low, reaching back to lace his fingers at his nape. He squeezed once, drawing and exhaling a long, slow breath through his nose.

Take it easy…

Lowering his hands, he straightened up a little.

Breathe…

As he coaxed his heart rate down, he surveyed the lantern lit gardens he and Temari had strolled through earlier, tracing the stone path with shuttered eyes. He followed the paving stones up and down with his gaze, finding distraction in their ordered placement but no peace. And then his gaze tracked skyward, inevitably drawn to the glowing sphere whitewashing the world below.

The moon wasn't quite full, a slim shadow cradling one side of it.

Shikamaru sucked a breath against the pang in his chest, fighting it back.

"Gods, you make me want to stop fighting…"

He clenched his eyes shut as the memory of that deep, sonorous voice rolled across his mind, aching through him.

"You make me crave a rest I cannot allow myself to need, Shikamaru."

Need. He felt it. Stirring up like embers, searing and stinging the raw organ beating heavy and hurting hard in his chest.
The sound of the doors sliding back tore him from the memory.

His lashes flickered open.

"I brought you tea," Ino announced, still sounding giddy.

He turned a little, tilting his jaw away from the waft of steam as she propped her arm on his shoulder, thrusting the teacup under his nose. The fragrant scent of jasmine carried in the vapour. Reaching up, he took the offered drink, the warm china thawing the chill from his fingers.

"Thanks," he croaked, raising it to his lips.

He didn't get a chance to take a sip. His teeth smacked against the rim as Ino slumped against his back, keeping her arm hooked over his right shoulder in a half-hug, the long bell sleeves of her purple yukata flapping on the breeze.

He didn't have the energy to shrug her off, too raw to get irritated, too tired to fight against an easy and uncomplicated affection, however unwarranted. He set his gaze out on the gardens.

"Can't sleep again?" Ino muttered against his shoulder.

Shikamaru pressed his lips. "Yeah…"

"Poor Shikamaru…you're gonna look horrible tomorrow…"

He smirked a little. "Thanks."

"It's your big brain…"

Shikamaru's breathing faltered for a moment, shivering the steam from his cup. "Ino…"

"Mmnhmm?"

He set his gaze on one of the lanterns below, guessing that now was the best time to ask her again. He'd be able to detect a lie easily enough and she'd have a harder time trying to think of one in her current state.

"Did you try to read me earlier?"

"You don't believe in signs…" she sighed.

"That's not what I mean. Did you try to probe my mind?"

"Pfft." Ino's snort stretched into a yawn. "I don't ever wanna get lost in your brain…"

He detected no lie - but garnered no answers.

_Dammit._

Shikamaru stared unseeingly at the silhouette of a maple tree, ruthlessly pushing aside any immediate thoughts other than the cold facts, keeping his reaction to a minimum and responding only to the rational conclusions.

_I'm tired. I hit my limit. I lost control. I've read enough about this crap to know._

He'd learned the lessons, understood how to apply the knowledge. The techniques that had worked
time and again for the past two years had become subconscious and automatic. He just needed to rerun the methods through his mind on loop and ensure the patterns were ingrained deeper this time.

*That's all I need to do.*

Stupid. Simple.

As some of his tension slid away, he didn't hear the shoji doors sliding open. He didn't even see the semi-supersized hand until it was hovering beside him with a shabby camera perched between the large fingers. The plastic was cracked and scratched but the lens had survived.

Shikamaru slid his gaze across, shaking his head marginally. "Well I'll be damned."

"I occasionally amaze myself," Chōji's voice muffled through the shoji doors. "This angle kind of sucks though."

Shikamaru smiled, arching a brow as he studied the camera, raising his voice to carry over his shoulder. "How'd you get it?"

"The bird likes me," Chōji said.

"Troublesome."

"So come on. Just one shot of the birthday buddies."

"I want one," Ino mumbled drowsily.

Shikamaru arched a brow, glancing at her out the far corner of his eye.

The camera went off in a flash.

By the time the dots cleared from Shikamaru's vision, Chōji was retreating victoriously, laughing something that sounded curiously like 'one for the book'.

*Book?*

Ino yawned. "Happy Birthday, Shikamaru." She gave him a squeeze.

He grunted in response but didn't pull away.

An easy quiet settled, pulling sadness to Shikamaru's eyes that Ino couldn't see.

"You too," he eventually said.
Chapter 8

The phantom smell of rain clung heavy in the air.

Neji passed like a spectre in the mist, seeming to drift through the fog that blanketed Konoha's rooftops. The Hyūga's damp robes moulded along the strong contours of his body, sticking like a wet slap against his back, pressing a chill along his spine.

He barely felt it.

The ends of his hair still dripped, the sharp, wet points of his sleeves beading with droplets that fell in pinprick splashes.

The rain had come heavy in the early hours and the fog had rolled down from the Hokage Mountain, passing in a pale cascade over the faces of the figureheads carved into the ageless rock.

Neji’s Byakugan eyes charted the obscured rooftops, allowing him to coast along the ledge he’d been walking for the past hour. Back and forth, back and forth like a panther pulled into a restless pace.

Above the smell of rain, he could detect the rock-salt scent of the Hot Springs.

He'd come too close.

He'd spent the night under a blanket of stars, watching the distant sparks until unbidden, a yawning emptiness had opened up inside him. He'd attributed it to a lot of things, the fact that he hadn't eaten, the uncertainty of his future, or the tiredness inside him amplifying the urge to just stop and rest for a while. The thought of rest had turned to moments framed in his memory, fragments hanging on his heart.

"You make me crave a rest I cannot allow myself to need, Shikamaru."

"Yeah...and I'm not sorry."

Those words had haunted him until the last star passed beneath the dark clouds rolling in over the village. Dawn had brought the rain, but rather than return to the Hyūga residence, he'd drawn closer to the place he was supposed to be keeping a wide, wide berth from.

He'd had no conscious understanding of where he was heading.

He'd just let the impulse lead him.

His mind had warned him with every step to turn back.

But every step had become harder to coordinate with that logical part. He'd wrestled with his reason by ignoring it, tackling its warnings with countless denials that drove countless steps.

He hadn't had a destination so it hadn't mattered where he was walking.

Or at least it hadn't mattered until his steps sped him along awnings and up and over the elegant slopes of ryokan rooftops until he'd realised just where the hell he felt himself being pulled.

STOP.
A failsafe had engaged in the back of his mind and he'd slammed to a stop, turned a circle of confusion and retraced his steps, lunging to the opposite building.

That had led him here.

To this moment.

And for the past hour he'd been here, pacing slowly.

*I cannot stay here…*

It was shocking to know that despite having a whole village to wander aimlessly until the next mission, he'd been unconsciously driven to the one place, to the one thing, to the one *person* he needed to stay away from.

*I need to leave…again…and again…until this stops…*

Suddenly, Neji stopped pacing.

He paused mid-turn, the ball of his foot braced on the ledge, heel lifted.

He held himself steady, head cocked – listening.

Then he heard it again.

The soft scratch and click of nails on brick.

His Byakugan eyes lowered and narrowed, scanning the rooftop, piercing through the fog. He saw the approaching animal and relaxed, turning toward the small dog just as the patter of paws resolved itself into Kakashi's smallest ninke.

"Pakkun," Neji greeted, the veins around his eyes shrinking and smoothing out.

The pug's short-muzzled nose twitched in a quick sniff, wrinkled face turning up towards Neji. "Hyūga. You smell toxic."

Neji arched a brow at that. "I beg your pardon?"

"I tracked you by that smell alone." The dog's eyes drooped, the creases between the crinkled brows folding even more as he sniffed the air again. "Show me your hand."

Neji crouched down to the animal's level, bracing one arm across the locked muscle of his thigh, extending his other hand, palm down. Pakkun padded closer, his paws finding traction on the slippery edge of the building without effort.

A wet nose tapped Neji's fingertips and the dog's muzzle twitched again.

Then the pug bit him.

Neji hissed and snapped his hand back, glaring. "And the point of that?"

Pakkun shook himself off with a growl, the shudder running all the way across his small body to the end of his tail, saggy lips turned down in an expression that was as close to a scowl as a dog could get. His tongue lolled and licked at the air, then around his chops, trying to banish the taste of Neji's blood.
"Uck. You've got poison in you, kid."

"I know," Neji replied curtly, watching his blood dribble along the webbing between thumb and forefinger. "Brodifacoum. It will be a little longer before it completely leaves my system."

Pakkun hacked out a barking cough. "Tastes worse than it smells."

"Charming," Neji muttered, brushing the trickle of red away on the black apron of his robes. At least his blood was beginning to clot normally again.

"My bite's worse than my bark," Pakkun admitted, hitai-ate flashing as he cocked his head up. "You've been summoned. Let's go."

"Summoned?" Neji frowned and looked askance at the dog. "The Godaime or Kakashi-senpai?"

Pakkun blinked lazily then turned to pad away. "Hurry up."

---

Pain.

Angry, aching, troublesome pain.

Shikamaru's back filed the complaint to his brain. His brain rolled over like a dog playing dead. He tried to follow suit but his neck cramped, his spine locked and the spasm shot under his shoulder blade like a hot knife.

*Dammit…*

He growled a croaky groan, the sound muffled into the plush fibres of the couch he'd wedged himself into.

Not the best place to take a nap.

He dug his knee into the backrest and tried to lodge himself at a different angle, aiming to stretch out the kinks in his back. The awkward position offered him no room to budge so he rolled his shoulder and hissed against the protesting crunch of muscle.

Too bad it wasn't the only place he was hurting.

His foot felt like a nail had gone through it – courtesy of Ino's heels. His calf muscle had seized up and the arm trapped under him appeared to have lost feeling.

*Nice.*

Cataloguing all the troublesome cramps, Shikamaru stretched his free arm behind him, groping blindly for the edge of the couch to avoid rolling off it as he turned. He settled on his other side, lashes drooping low as he scanned around the ryokan suite through bleary eyes.

*What time is it?*

A sooty, dusky light held like powered charcoal in the room; a poor indication of the time but a good forecast of the weather. Shikamaru glanced toward the shoji doors leading onto the veranda.

*Still overcast…*

Rain had hit hard during the early, Stupid o'clock hours, pelting onto the veranda harder than hail.
Despite his exhaustion, Shikamaru had stayed up with his teammates.

They'd watched a random film involving a lot of screaming with intervals of Ino's stop-and-start trips to the bathroom – which had resulted in Shikamaru holding her hair back as she'd emptied the contents of her stomach. Chōji had left the shadow-nin to deal with her by refusing to deal with her himself. Wholly unlike the Akimichi, Shikamaru suspected it was all part of his friend's game plan.

He wondered if Asuma had put him up to it.

After Ino's projectile vomit episodes were over, they'd settled in to watch another film that got put on mute fifteen minutes into the storyline.

They'd talked instead.

And they'd laughed. They'd laughed in a way they hadn't for a long time.

It had felt good, familiar.

He'd missed it. And in realising he'd missed it, he realised it wasn't the only thing missing. It was the same cruel realisation he'd come to when he'd been trying to 'fix' Neji. The bitter truth that maybe he had missing pieces too.

*Crazy*...

Two weeks after Neji had walked one way and he'd walked another, Shikamaru thought he'd buried the past parts of himself that had been shaken loose. He thought he'd dragged them back into the shadows.

But he couldn't maintain that control in his dreams.

*And now my damned waking hours*...

The thought of the anxiety attack which had hit him in the middle of the party had his gut cramping worse than his stiff muscles. For everything he'd tried to fix in Neji, it felt like some sadistic, subconscious urge was digging around in his head, forcing him to consider the holes in his own heart.

*No.*

Shikamaru felt an ache swelling at the base of his throat.

*Fixing you wasn't about trying to fix something in me...*

Hell, how could it have been? Neji had broken him up all over again.

*Again...*

He shook off the thought by reaching up to knead his arm, easing the prickle of pins-and-needles to keep his mind off the deeper pains he couldn't reach.

*Like it matters. It's done.*

He closed his eyes.

The past was over. It didn't matter. It *couldn't* matter.
Because I dealt with it.

It was one thing for him to know this, another entirely for him to believe it.

"Asuma…"

The call of his name rolled around Asuma's brain like a heavy stone, snowballing in volume as he began to stir. His head throbbed. It felt like a mallet was swinging from one temple to the other, playing pendulum. He was pretty sure his liver was churning out blood rather than bile.

Super cool adult, my ass…

A hand settled on his bare back, cool against his hot skin.

He twitched on the bed, groaning.

That hand skimmed up his spine, soft fingertips tracing out a large, jagged scar that zigzagged under his shoulder blade. He felt a brush of hair tickle across his back and then warm lips pressed against his temple.

"Asuma, it's time to wake up," Kurenai whispered, draping her arm over him in a squeeze as he groaned again. "A shame because it was hard enough getting you into the bed last night."

"That's a lie…" Asuma muttered, wincing. The gruff rumble of his own voice rejuvenated the hangover he'd been fighting off for the past couple of hours.

"You fell in through the window, Asuma…"

"I did?" He grunted. "How the hell did I get to the window?"

"Creatively," Kurenai guessed, offering a patronising little stroke across his head. "You brought me gifts and serenaded me too."

Asuma cracked his eye open a little, going still. "Oh god…" he croaked.

"It was terrible," Kurenai admitted. "But very sweet."

"I can't sing."

"My neighbour's dog agreed."

Asuma grimaced and turned his face into the pillow with a loud sigh, shaking his head. As his ego furled into a foetal position, he considered smothering himself. When the need for air won out, he raised his jaw and pressed his cheek into the pillow, growling.

"Kakashi is a dead man…"

"Feeling a little delicate this morning?" Kurenai teased, blowing a cool, minty breath along his hairline.

The smell of toothpaste prompted Asuma to drag his tongue across the film coating his own teeth. His mouth tasted like ash and stale saké. He swallowed a yawn and groped behind him to hook Kurenai's knee, drawing her leg over the strong dip of his back.

"You're impossible," Kurenai scolded, making a half-hearted attempt to pull away.
Asuma smirked, tugging her back. "Don't leave me alone with myself…"

She surprised him by straddling his hips and flopping onto his back, forcing the air out of his lungs in a hot rush from his nose.

"Ah…be gentle…" Asuma choked out, trying not to grin.

Kurenai kissed between his shoulders and chuckled, kneading his lower back with practiced fingers. "You need to get up…"

Asuma cracked an eye open, grinning. "I'm getting up alright."

Kurenai arched a brow and dug her fingers into his ribs.

Asuma's eyes flew wide. "NO!" he yelped out a strangled laugh, twisting about on his stomach in a futile attempt to avoid the tickling fingers, embarrassed that he could be disarmed and tortured by something so silly.

Kurenai offered no mercy.

Asuma was at the least desirable angle to fight back against her onslaught. His little quirks never ceased to amuse the kunoichi. No amount of his muscle, macho, masculinity or might could combat this attack. For Kurenai, it was endearing and hilarious to think that someone so physically powerful could be reduced to a pile of flailing limbs by such a childish tactic.

"Kurenai!"

Kurenai laughed, letting him suffer under her hands for another torturous round that ended with him shaking in laughter against the sheets, tears in his eyes. He didn't see Kurenai's crimson orbs glistening, filling with emotion she chalked up to hormones.

It wasn't.

She combed her fingers through the thick, dark muss of his hair, leaning down to nuzzle his flushed skin, peppering his shoulder with kisses.

Asuma hummed deeply at the affection. "That's right. Tend to the wounded…"

Kurenai poked him in the ribs, but the threat turned into a tender sweep of her hands as she scooped her palms under his body to wedge between his chest and the bed, pressing closer to him.

They stayed this way for a few minutes.

Asuma relaxed, vaguely aware of the routine activity carrying beyond the apartment walls. Despite the miserable day, respectable Konoha folk were up and tackling the morning, industrious and indomitable.

Responsible.

Asuma didn't even remember leaving the bar last night. He could have gone anywhere, done anything.

Wonder if I killed that little shit at the ryokan…either way, I'm gonna kill Kakashi…

While he had no memory of saying goodbye to the copy-nin, he recalled the silver-haired ninja inviting Genma into the drinking fest. The last thing Asuma remembered other than a lot of
laughter and some deep, searching stares into his saké cup was the urge to get home.

*Home.*

Some slice of sobriety had directed him to Kurenai's. It might have been dawn when he'd stumbled in through the window. He had no idea. He slipped his eyes open and cast a speculative look at the drapes. A thin slot in the curtains allowed for a dreary sliver of light, casting the room in rumpled, shadowy hues.

"What time did I fall through the window?" His voice startled her.

Kurenai drew a breath as if to speak, but held it instead.

Asuma's gaze strayed over his shoulder, watching her out the corner of his eye. "Mn?"

Kurenai hesitated, then hunched herself closer to his warmth, her face just visible as she turned her cheek against his shoulder blade. "Early hours."

"Shit…I woke you?"

"I'm glad you did."

She said nothing more, leaving the silence to talk instead. It pressed in around them until Asuma sensed it wasn't hanging with unspoken words, but rather with words he couldn't remember.

He eyed her for a moment, fighting with himself. "I didn't just sing to you, did I?"

Kurenai blinked a little too fast, fastening a smile onto her lips. "You dripped rainwater all over my carpet too."

Asuma frowned, drew his elbows beneath him and made to twist around. Kurenai knelt back, allowing him to sit up against the headboard.

Her lips tucked into a little smile. "So, Team Ass needs a Sweetass does it?"

Asuma blinked wide.

Team Ass?

That rang some embarrassingly loud bells in the back of his brain. He had no idea why, but managed to retain a relaxed expression. His hand automatically strayed to the bedside table for his cigarettes. Kurenai watched him, not saying a word, her own hand fluttering to her stomach. Asuma immediately redirected his touch, reaching up to scratch at his jaw.

"So I said some stuff between the singing, huh?"

She smiled, a deep affection softening her voice and gentling the look in her eyes. "You said a lot of things."

A grimace pulled at the corners of Asuma's mouth. "Such as?"

Kurenai bit her lip then shuffled forward to settle in his lap. He wrapped an arm around her waist, tilting his head back as she speared her fingers through his hair, pulling dark strands away from his eyes.

She settled a searching stare on him, shaking her head. "You're a good man, Asuma."
The Sarutobi's eyes pinched with reflexive guilt.

What the hell had he said to deserve *that* tick on his character checklist?

He turned her words around to examine the most likely context. Whatever he'd said to warrant the compliment was a score in his favour he wasn't sure he deserved. However, Kurenai's eyes held that soft, tender glow. A glow which produced an uncomfortable ache in the pit of Asuma's stomach...like he could feel whatever wound must have opened up for him to undoubtedly spill his emotional guts.

"Ah shit, don't tell me I cried," he teased, trying to take the edge off his unease.

She didn't smile at his words, continuing to run her fingers through his hair soothingly. That soothing touch was what bothered him the most. He didn't need comforting, did he? Shit, *had* he?

Asuma winced. "Tell me I cried with more grace than I sang."

Kurenai shook her head. "You didn't cry."

*Thank you, God.*

"But I know it's hurting you," Kurenai added.

For reasons Asuma would rather not have named, he tensed against the sudden urge to erase whatever evidence she had in support of that statement. Instead, he reached up to curl his fingers around her wrists, stilling her combing motions.

"Hurting me?" he echoed, playing down his discomfort with an awkward smile, looking confused.

Kurenai nodded and cupped his cheeks, locking their gazes. "You didn't fail anyone."

The smile dropped off Asuma's face.

He frowned, tugging his head back to rest on the headboard, brandy-coloured eyes fixed on her face. Kurenai brushed her thumbs across his knuckles.

*Fail anyone...?*

Aside from his father, there was only one other person he ever felt he'd truly failed.

*Shit.*

An indrawn breath and suddenly Asuma couldn't stop the question as it spilled out of him.

"What did I say to you?"

Kurenai smiled sadly. "What you need to say to Shikamaru."

"You need to take it easy, Hyūga."

"Easy...?"

In his peripheral vision, Neji registered Kakashi brushing his fingertips across his masked mouth. *I'm glad someone finds this so amusing.*
Staring at the Godaime, the look on Neji’s face broadcasted his thoughts about her statement better than any returning words. His elegant eyebrows arrowed in, lips thinning as the skin across his high-boned cheeks drew taut as the line of his jaw.

“You just got back from Hanegakure,” Tsunade pointed out.

"On an envoy mission. Hardly strenuous."

"You're still in a state of medical recovery," Tsunade argued. "Added to that is this," she tipped her head down at the scroll on her desk. "You've immediately signed on for six new A-rank missions, including two that take you too far afield."

"I'm recovered enough to operate at the level I always have. And these missions are in neighbouring lands," Neji reasoned.

Tsunade arched a delicate brow. "That doesn't make them any less further away. Although I get the feeling that wouldn't bother you, would it?"

Neji stared at her, stone-faced.

Tsunade clicked her nails atop the scroll rolled out on her desk, indicating the mission listings and the neat script of his name beside them. Neji kept his eyes on her, not willing to concede even a fraction of his focus onto what she was trying to get him to agree too.

No. I cannot stay here.

"Recuperation is important, Hyūga."

"If I were still injured," Neji countered, matching his tone with a deadpan look. "I'm not."

"But you were. For this very reason of pushing too hard," Tsunade reminded, elbows set at the edge of her desk. "And now you're straight back in the game. If it was anyone else I'd be impressed at their enthusiasm. But in your case it's a cause for concern."

A sliver of panic slid like a needle into Neji's heart.

Do not take this away from me.

He needed to keep moving forward, striving for more. If he didn't prove he was stable and capable enough to wear ANBU's mask it would be taken away from him. Standing still was not an option. He prided so much of who he was on the determination that had gotten him this far.

"Hyūga? Are you listening to me?"

Neji inclined his head, just enough to indicate that he'd heard, but not that he agreed.

Tsunade frowned and looked to Kakashi. The briefest of smiles registered on Kakashi's face beneath his mask, gone in an instant. Tsunade rolled her eyes to the ceiling, shaking her head. When her gaze dropped back, it was weighted by a long, meaningful pause.

"You're pushing too hard, Neji."

Neji glanced just to the side of Tsunade's head to avoid her eyes, drawing a measured breath, pulling it in slow and steady through his nose to keep from snorting.

I've always pushed this hard.
He couldn't afford *not* to push this hard.

Exhausting himself *doing* what was necessary was far preferable to lying around just thinking about what needed to be done. Tsunade seemed to be following his line of thought because she emptied her lungs in a long sigh, watching him over the lace of her fingers.

The silence held for a tense beat.

"What are your motives, Hyūga?" she finally asked.

The words jarred Neji on the inside.

_Again with that blasted question!_

Outwardly his expression didn't change, but the direction of his gaze did. He shot Kakashi a sharp glance out the corner of his eye. The copy-nin shifted his stance by one of the large apertures, resting his hip against the sill with a bored glance out the window.

"My motives are as they've always been," Neji replied, pitching his voice to reach Kakashi, adding a pointed look.

The copy-nin's grey eye observed him in the glass, but the silver-haired shinobi didn't turn his head. Neji slid his gaze back to Tsunade. She was looking between them, trying to decipher whatever signals were being telegraphed and what to do with the information being gathered.

She frowned. "Clarify."

Neji lowered his gaze to the scroll on her desk. "To serve the village to the best of my ability, Tsunade-sama."

"To serve to the best of your ability, hmn?" Kakashi poised in an airy tone, with just a hint of condescending amusement. "I thought it had more to do with necessity."

Neji bristled at the nonchalant way the other Jōnin brushed off his words or twisted them around – like this entire situation was some adolescent game won only by yielding to the wisdom of his elders.

He'd been controlled by the 'wisdom' of his elders all his life.

"They are correlated objectives, senpai."

"Are they?" Kakashi tipped his head back, casting a mock-meditative glance towards the top of the window. "Necessity is an ideological concept associated with survival rather than servitude."

Neji ground his teeth, the cadence of his speech changing into something curt and clipped. "I didn't realise there was a set ideological script I was supposed to be following."

"Oh I think that your idea of necessity has less to do with you following a set script, Neji," Kakashi caught his gaze in the glass. "And everything to do with you changing your *set role* in it."

*Clever.*

Two weeks ago, he might have reacted to that. Explosively. But given the sense of calm and understanding he'd gathered under the guidance of the Temple monk, he was able to still the ripples of rage before they broke outwards. His features lost their tense edge, smoothing into something calmer, but colder.
Kakashi's gaze held his in the glass. "You honestly believe that ANBU will bring out the best in you?"

Neji inclined his head. "Clearly it failed to do that for you, senpai,"

"Neji," Tsunade warned.

Kakashi's eye crinkled in a smile, still observing by way of the glass. "He's not wrong."

"Regardless, that's enough talk about ANBU," Tsunade growled. "That topic isn't open for discussion until you provide the necessary proof that you're on solid ground rather than toeing a dangerous edge, Hyūga."

Neji closed his eyes and bowed his head. "I understand. Grant me the chance to complete the missions I've enrolled for and I will provide you and Kakashi-senpai with all the proof you require."

Tsunade's eyebrows went up and she loosened a quiet chuckle behind her hands, turning to reach for her tea. "Oh, it's not me or Kakashi you'll need to convince, Hyūga."

Neji's eyes snapped open, his gaze flicking up. "What?"

Kakashi looked over, the picture of jaded disinterest as he raised his shoulder in a half-shrug. "Don't be fooled. This has nothing to do with me – reluctant consultant that I am."

Tsunade scoffed into her tea cup, rolling her eyes.

"Consultant…" Neji echoed blandly, not liking the taste of the word or what it implied.

*What the hell is this? Some inquisition into my mental health?*

Kakashi's eye creased in a smile. "Who you need to convince outranks me."

Neji arched a brow. "And who would that be?"

No sooner had he asked then a shadow fell across Tsunade's desk from outside and behind her. A lean, wiry figure swayed to brace his forearm along the upper ledge of the open window. The shinobi's head ducked down a notch, allowing him to peer up from under his arm through shuttered eyes.

Neji's pale orbs rounded, his lips parting on a tight intake of breath.

The ninja's scarred face fell half in shadow, the visible side of his mouth curving upward ever so slightly. But there was no amusement in those sharp, unblinking eyes.

"That would be me," Shikaku drawled.

The cold woke him this time.

A chill which nicked sharper than a razor's edge, prickling his skin.

Shikamaru's lashes flickered open, frigid limbs tensing as he pressed his head into the curved armrest of the couch, massaging the side of his aching skull.

A square of bright light drew his lidded gaze across the room.
The T.V was on, but Chōji had hit the mute.

The Akimichi was sat on the floor, munching something that didn't crunch. Shikamaru folded his arms, squinting against the light as he rolled a little more onto his side.

"Hey," Chōji greeted, gaze fixed on the screen.

Shikamaru hummed, his voice too hoarse to rise above a grunt. He'd have to lift his head for that and there was no way in hell his neck was willing to cooperate. It cramped up tighter than his expression when he tried.

Argh…

Dropping his head back against the armrest, his drowsy eyes drifted around the room, taking in something that hadn't been there the last time he'd woken up. Bits of wrapping paper trailed across the tatami flooring, strips of lilac and indigo. It looked like some purple snake had shed its skin across the floor.

His lazy scan followed the trail up to a thick nest of blankets.

Ino was curled up on a futon Chōji had dragged into the middle of the room, hugging her stomach like she was trying to keep her insides from spilling out. She was sleeping.

"Why?" Shikamaru croaked, voice thick and gravelly.

"Huh?"

Shikamaru flicked a brow up, kneading his arm. "Ino…"

"She opened the rest of her presents while you were in a coma," Chōji answered, not looking away from the dramatic moment playing out on the screen. "Then she passed out. You both ditched me. Oh yeah, she said you're not allowed to open that other gift until she's awake."

Shikamaru glanced across at the wrapped item set on the table, large and rectangular like a shoe box. "Why?"

"Saving the best 'til last," Chōji explained, rustling packets.

Shikamaru was pretty sure the best gift had been the last one.

And it hadn't been an object.

While Magic 8 Balls, pineapples, pillows and a random book on narcolepsy had been balanced out by useful ninja tools and a stunning sunset painting by Sai, nothing material had marked the occasion for the shadow-nin. True, he wasn't the kind to make grand declarations about how happy he felt or how great a time he was having, but there was a way to tell when he was.

He'd close his eyes when he laughed.

And when he'd open them again, his chocolate orbs would still be smiling.

That was the giveaway. Because forced smiles and laugher were easy to come by, but Shikamaru could never force the natural look that came over him when he was genuinely happy. He seldom offered watered down smiles anyway. It was just too much effort to force a lack of genuine feeling. Smirks sufficed.
His laughter was a rare sound, but a telling one.

What was also telling was his presence. He'd been present last night. That was probably the best gift Chōji and Ino could have given him; keeping him out of his own damned head – and having him laugh in the process.

He slipped his eyes open a little more, glancing between his teammates.

No matter how detached he'd become in the past two weeks, he was losing the battle in keeping them at arm's length. They were doing what Asuma had been relentlessly trying to do.

They were trying to reach him.

And every time they tried, it left Shikamaru knotted up with a rusty ball of guilt; one that scraped around inside him like a metal scourer.

It tore him up in a place he was trying to let heal without anyone probing the wound.

He didn't want to talk about it.

He wanted to forget it.

Two weeks had passed, but time had offered nothing. And he had nothing left to offer in return. Nothing left in a place inside him that had gone dormant, detaching itself.

Don't wake me…

It had happened the second Neji's fingers had ghosted across his eyes to close them two weeks ago. Part of him had slipped away into a comatose state he couldn't shake himself free from. Asuma, Chōji and Ino were trying to wake him up. But he wanted nothing more than to let that part of himself fall into a deep, untouched slumber.

"It's the only way I can do this, Shikamaru…"

I know…

Veering away from the memory, Shikamaru craned his neck back with a wince, gazing at the shoji door that had been pulled back a little. He glimpsed thick banks of grey beyond the veranda, not a slice of blue in the sky. The wan light robbed all colour from the world, tinting everything in ashen hues.

Shikamaru squeezed his eyes shut until colours fizzed in his vision. "What time is it?"

"Around four?" Chōji set down whatever he was eating, finally looking across. "You sleep okay?"

Shikamaru was glad for the chill in the air, allowing him to pass off his shiver as nothing more than the cold. "Yeah."

"Why'd you crash on the couch? Ino was right, you know? The futons are seriously like clouds. You'da slept better."

Shikamaru tucked his chin down, grunting again without answering.

For the first time in two years, the thought of sleep unnerved him; especially if it meant being locked in something like the nightmare from last night. A prisoner trapped in the workings of his own mind.
It’s not real…

A loud knock on the door startled him.

Breaking from his thoughts, Shikamaru raised his head, lifting his chin to glance over Chōji's head towards the foyer. The knock came again, louder. Ino didn't stir and Chōji made no move to budge from his setup on the floor. A halo of snacks surrounded him like he was in the midst of a ritual.

Which leaves yours truly…

"What a drag…" Shikamaru sighed.

Chōji grinned. "Your birthday treatment stops today. It's Ino's turn now."

Unfolding the knot of his limbs, Shikamaru crawled off the couch and tugged the red yukata half-hanging off his body back into place. He crossed the room in long strides, stretching his calves as he stepped into the foyer and pulled the door back.

Blood-shot bronze eyes looked down at him.

For just a moment, Shikamaru went rigid against the doorframe, breath catching hard in his throat. And in the same moment, he imagined the red in those eyes eclipsing the warm irises completely.

"Alright, I know I look like shit warmed up," Asuma grunted, cigarette dangling from his lip. "But you can quit staring at me like it's contagious."

Shikamaru stared blankly, marshalling his brain and mouth into responding. "You're early…"

"Yeah, figured if I couldn't stop the clock then I'd beat it before I lost at Shogi."

"Can't stop the clock."

Shikamaru blinked hard, startled by the echo of that dream; the one of red clouds swamped around his crimson-eyed sensei like a blood-thick mist. He started when Asuma shoved a Shogi board at his chest and rattled a pouch with the pieces.

"Now you'd better be awake for this, because I dragged myself away from pain medication and a lie in." Asuma cocked his head, his crooked grin swivelling the cigarette upward. "You game?"

Shikamaru arched a brow, managing a small smile that knocked the spooked look from his eyes. "Always."

Chakra flashed like lightning in the cold, stone belly of the Hyūga compound, twin shouts ricocheting off the high walls.

"KAITEN!"

Two glowing rips tore into the damp, open air of the courtyard, exploding outwards until the helix of energy pulled into two domes of blue-white chakra.

Both steady, both strong.

Hinata's was steadier.

But Hanabi's was stronger.
Neji squinted, Byakugan orbs narrowing against the flare and spiral of energy as he watched it expand, pushing itself like a thick, bright miasma around the two sparring siblings as they drew closer...closer...

Their Kaiten shields crashed.

Wet grit flew up like an illuminated corona and whipped into the spin of two spheres going against each other. Dangerous, giant gears slammed in opposite directions. Chakra sparks flew, fizzled out and flared up again, brighter, hotter.

Neji's jaw twitched.

He kept his limbs stiff beneath the loose drape of his robes, the white folds flapping in the breeze that fanned around the courtyard, expelled by the force of the Kaiten ninjutsu.

The domes held, neither giving up an inch of ground for a full two minutes.

And then Hinata's began to thin.

Hanabi drove forward, pushing her sister back.

Neji tightened the muscles of his thighs to keep from stepping forward to the edge of the porch. His breaths misted out in streams, the sodden, late afternoon air thickened from chakra. The rain was holding off but the clouds remained low and dark.

The Kaiten domes flared brighter.

Neji raised his chin, the veins around his eyes tightening. He watched the two spheres move back and forth along an unseen line, the diameter of the circle they'd been fighting in. Until now, he'd never witnessed a spar between the two sisters.

*Just the aftershocks...*

Right now, it was the intense distraction he needed.

Seeing Nara Shikaku had drawn every nerve into a bowstring of tension. He'd forgotten to breathe for the full few moments it had taken him to absorb his situation and how much more complicated it had become.

*How blind could I be, to think it would be so simple?*

He'd spent his entire life striving for his rank, his progress tantamount to a comet shot into the sun. He'd soared. But he'd also bled, breathed and broken himself into the necessary parts to attain the physical power and the mental aptitude needed to achieve Jōnin.

He'd aimed to do the same thing with ANBU because it had seemed *that* simple.

They'd recruited. He'd accepted. All that was left was to pass the necessary evaluations.

*So ignorant to assume it would be that easy.*

He'd miscalculated terribly.

*Why did I never think to consider the Jōnin Commander's say in all this?*

A vital player he'd completely failed to piece into the puzzle his future had become. He'd been
slotting all the shards into order, accounting for any breaks but completely forgetting the possibility that he risked serious conflict outside of the Main House elders. The pressure of tripwires and traps rigged by his own damned clan was difficult enough – and now he had eyes just as sharp as any Hyūga’s watching him.

*Nara Shikaku. Of all the shinobi I’d need to convince…Gods drowning…*

Neji squeezed his eyes shut.

*Why hasn't he barred my path completely, after what I did to Shikamaru?*

One of the many, many questions swirling in his mind like a maelstrom. He pressed his eyes shut against the pressure in his head and in his chest.

"*You're pushing too hard.*"

Perhaps there was truth in that, despite his reluctance to admit it. He wasn't completely healed, but he'd spent enough time redefining his limits to know when to stop pushing beyond the point of no return. Did the Hokage assume he’d push himself back to that edge?

*Ridiculous.*

That would mean moving backwards. He just didn't operate in reverse. He'd always been driven in one direction. Forward. He never turned back on himself.

*I will not let my mistakes cost me my freedom.*

And if he had to push himself past the point of Shikaku's approval and acceptance to gain admittance to ANBU, then he would.

He had to.

His clan was dragging him under like an anchor in high seas. He was always treading water. If he stopped now he'd go under just like every Branch member before him.

*Never.*

A burst of light played across his closed lids. He snapped his eyes open, attention caught by another spin of the Kaiten domes.

*Focus.*

He reactivated his dōjutsu, defined pupils centring on the sparring sisters.

Hiashi wasn't present, but other Main House members were. Neji took a moment to scan the periphery of the courtyard. Hyūga elders stood under the awning that covered the surrounding porch, their backs straight, arms folded under the drape of long, pale sleeves; formal spectators at a sport.

Their white eyes looked on impassively, lustreless as clouded glass.

*Slaves to tradition as much as any Branch Member…*

Neji’s orbs rippled with an emotion he clamped down on the second one of those stoic forms detached itself from the group, moving towards him. He didn't have to turn his head to sense Hitaro. His Byakugan eyes easily tracked the older man's movements as the elder rounded the
porch in slow, pre-meditated steps.

In the courtyard, the Kaiten domes tore apart.

His cousins launched into taijutsu.

Neji kept his eyes on them, exuding a calm, focused aura as Hitaro moved to stand beside him. A lack of acknowledgement always boiled down to a lack of respect with this man, so when Neji didn't turn to bow, Hitaro drew even closer, encroaching on the Jōnin's space.

Neji kept his eyes fixed ahead.

Hitaro was a tall man, passing six feet, with broad shoulders and a wide chest, his body tapering down into a narrow waist and slim hips. Like an inverted triangle. His face was flat, his jaw square. His mouth communicated everything even when he wasn't speaking. Right now those thick lips were downturned again, in that sneer of disapproval he'd set on Neji all his life.

"You have trained Hinata-sama well," Hitaro remarked in his low, somewhat stilted voice.

Neji blinked once, offering no response. It was a rhetorical enough statement – although somewhat loaded. Hitaro didn't give compliments. He gave calculated preludes. A sadistic, pontificating bastard in love with the leeway his position granted him. Just to prove it, he moved closer so that his shadow fell across Neji.

"It must irk you so," Hitaro began, his gaze directed on the sparring siblings, "given that you never had the opportunity to fight for a place other than the one you were born into."

A muscle in Neji's jaw ticked. How many more times did he need to be reminded today? As if a lifetime of being reminded every time he looked in the mirror wasn't enough.

Hitaro's lips pursed in mock regret. "It's all rather unfair, isn't it? Even Hizashi didn't have the chance Hanabi has now."

Neji's expression didn't waver, but the sinews in his hands flexed, fingers gnarling against his palm until his blunt nails drew blood. Hitaro's venom was the last thing he needed dripping in his ear.

Focus.

Across the courtyard, Hanabi's heel cracked into Hinata's jaw. The elder sister skidded back, dragging her wrist across her face. Blood dripped from the side of her mouth.

Hitaro drew his tongue across his top lip. "And if Hizashi had had his chance, who's to say that Hiashi wouldn't have been the one to fall? All that rage might have won out in the end."

Neji's nails bit deeper, his eyes taking on the cold look of polished steel. He forced himself to keep his gaze on the sisters, to watch the blurred dance of their arms as they swung and struck, so fast and swift they moved in rapid concert – a ferocious pace threatening to drive their battle beyond a mere spar.

Hitaro dropped his voice. "But you know all about rage, don't you, Neji?"

Neji didn't bother to refute this claim. Neither did he respond to it. His attention was riveted on the fight, following the ugly turn it was beginning to take.

Hinata was losing control of distance.
Hanabi was losing control of herself.

The younger sister let six kunai fly and launched herself in the shadow of her attack, all sharp jabs and angled kicks. It was impossible to gauge her strategic repertoire; she kept changing form. No fluidity. No sense of formula to her attack. Just ferocious reaction.

Neji frowned.

Hinata had a hard time responding, trying to cleave to the traditional teachings of the Hyūga technique. Martial philosophy was imperative in their style of taijutsu. It kept balance, just like the symbol of yin and yang so vital to the clan. Even the separate Houses, however cruel the dynamic, represented two halves of the Hyūga whole.

Balance within a divide.

Unfortunately, the balance in this fight was beginning to slide.

Neji estimated two minutes before the outcome weighed heavily on Hinata's ability to step up her game and either break into ninjutsu or start pulling back. Distance was the best defence against a close-quarter Hyūga assault. Without distance, one had to rely solely on speed to defend or drive one's opponent back – and while Hinata was fast, she just wasn't fierce enough.

Fight back.

There were still chances to turn the direction of the fight. Hanabi began to leave herself open, but Hinata wouldn't move to disable her.

"One has to wonder if she's trying at all," Hitaro remarked, arching a brow.

Neji cursed inwardly.

Damn you. Fight back, Hinata.

Hinata stumbled away, strands of her midnight hair fluttering as Hanabi sheered a kunai towards her throat, slicing away a few thick locks from the elder sister's mane.

Neji's eyes narrowed, his body tilting forward a fraction.

Fight back!

"Do you know what best secures our survival, Neji?" Hitaro droned ominously. "Fear. You know a little something about that too, don't you?"

Neji cut a narrow glare at the elder, the muscles of his throat chording tight.

Bastard.

"It's either a matter of one's desire for survival or their desperation for it." Hitaro smirked, lashes drooping. "What do you think your father feared losing most? God knows it wasn't you."

Neji's eyes drifted shut against the pain.

He's trying to rile you, let it go.

He began to breathe through it.
Hitaro pause for effect. "Desire or desperation? What drove him?"

In the fraction of a second it took for Neji to force his eyes open, Hinata took another blow. She went down on one knee and the backlash caught her across the face, Hanabi's kunai slicing a gash from chin to cheek, splitting her skin like paper. The force of the blow spun her and she struck the ground hard, spraying rainwater as she skidded on the slick dirt.

Neji cursed silently, face pinching in a wince.

Hanabi straightened up, panting hard.

*It's over.*

Or so he thought.

Hanabi's leg drew back, a flick of her wrist drawing another kunai from the holster, not giving Hinata a chance to regain her feet. The younger's foot came up, a straight kick into her sister's sternum that sent Hinata crashing back.

 Damn it.

Neji scowled and made to step forward but Hitaro's palm pressed to his chest, pushing him back a step. "Desire or desperation, Neji? Which is it that drives any Hyūga Branch pet?"

Neji sucked in a breath, teeth set on edge, eyes pinned on his cousins.

Hinata rolled onto her side, spitting blood. Hanabi, face twisting with a grotesque sneer, delivered another kick that knocked Hinata onto her back. Around the courtyard, no elder made to intervene.

*Bastards. That's enough!*

Neji moved forward again but Hitaro blocked him, his entire arm thrust out this time.

"You will not interfere."

Neji's eyes flashed. "The fight is over."

"Is it?" Hitaro countered.

Abruptly, Hanabi lifted the knife and grabbed hold of Hinata's hair, winding the blue-black mane around her fist. Hinata cried out, squeezing her eyes shut against the pain of having her head jerked at an unnatural angle

Hanabi's eyes were wild, wide, without control.

Neji knew that look.

He watched in mounting dread as Hanabi braced the kunai at Hinata's nape, ready to shear her sister's hair off at the base of her skull.

"Ah yes," Hitaro chuckled low in his throat, a hard, stilted sound. "Desperation."

*NO!*

Neji knocked aside Hitaro's arm and lunged.
Hanabi poised the blade, but never got the chance to use it.

Like two viper heads, Neji's cupped palms struck before she could react. They whipped under Hanabi's arms, one closing around her throat and the other locking around her wrist. His thumb dug into the fine bones of her hand, biting in until her fingers twitched in a spasm, jarring the kunai from her grip.

The weapon struck the ground.

Hanabi screamed her fury.

Neji simply pulled her arm out to the side, released her throat and cupped her jaw. He drew her head back in a firm tug, mirroring her grip on her sister, the position painful enough to draw a wince.

He set his lips at her ear. "The fight is over. Release your sister."

Hanabi choked out a watery breath, glaring at the sky.

She made no move to obey.

Neji straightened his left leg out behind him, bending his right knee to twist his body at an angle, using his entire frame to bow Hanabi beneath him, still holding her arm up and out. The dip granted Hinata the leeway to move her head.

Hanabi tried to struggle.

Neji bowed her lower, his hair spilling over her shoulder. "Release your sister."

"Liar," Hanabi coughed, her arm shaking, held aloft in Neji's grip. "Protector…only to her…"

"And to you…although I have greater cause to protect you from yourself rather than your sister."

Neji applied the barest outward pressure to the inside of Hanabi's wrist, taking her balance even more until he bowed her low enough so that her cheek became level with her sister's over Hinata's shoulder.

Hanabi flinched and closed her eyes. "Stop…"

"No. Look at her. You have drawn your sister's blood and now her tears, what more do you want?" Neji uttered in her ear. "Her dignity?"

Hinata looked sidelong at her sister, blood streaming from the gash across her face, eyes gleaming. "Let her go, Neji-niisan…"

Neji ignored Hinata, speaking directly into Hanabi's ear. "Look at her."

Hanabi's eyes flickered open, drawn to the wound she'd torn into her sister's face. "I…"

Hinata turned her head a little more. "Hanabi…"

The second their gazes hit, Hanabi's expression grew slack and frightened, as if it had just occurred to her that she had caused the damage. She began to shake, her breath shivering.

Neji's face softened, thawing the chill in his eyes.
"Let her go, Hanabi-sama," he whispered, fingers adjusting their grip at her wrist.

Hanabi snapped her fingers out as if she'd taken a shock.

Hinata's hair slipped free and she twisted around on her knees, staring up into her younger sister's flushed face, tears pooling in her eyes.

"I'm sorry…" Hanabi whispered quickly, a breathless sound, shocked to her core. "I'm sorry…I'm sorry…"

"Breathe," Neji instructed.

Hanabi tried, gulping and hitching her breaths until she was shaking too much to support herself. Releasing a slow sigh, Neji gently curled Hanabi's arm down and inward, leading with his own, folding his arm across her in an embracing movement to draw her back against his chest.

"Hanabi-sama." He squeezed her once, the long white of his sleeve wrapped around her like a wing. "The shame you feel. Be glad for it. It's how you know that this is not who you are."

Hanabi let out a sob and sagged.

Neji released her into Hinata's outstretched arms, which held Hanabi with a fierceness she hadn't put into her fight.

_The will to protect…_

Neji straightened up, his sandals scraping on the wet ground in a whisper. He watched Hinata set her torn cheek to Hanabi's brow, heedless of her own pain, rocking her sister like a child.

_She 'is' a child…_

Neji drew back a pace, letting out a long breath.

He didn't sense the presence drawing up behind him until Hinata's eyes snapped up.

Neji turned.

Hitaro backhanded him across the face so hard the blow whipped his head to one side.

"Hitaro-sama!" Hinata cried, tightening her arms around Hanabi.

Hitaro pinned her with a look so thick with contempt it startled her into silence. On the porch, gathered Branch Members stiffened while those from the Main House simply looked on in silence.

Neji, head still turned away, worked his jaw from side to side, his features veiled by the streak of his bangs across his face. The blow had caught him at an angle just shy of dislocating his jaw. He drew his tongue across his lips, catching blood as it beaded at the corner of his mouth.

Hitaro snorted. "Do turn the other cheek, Neji. I'm inclined to balance this insolent head of yours."

Neji gritted his teeth and the pain flared until he felt the sting of a burn like hot ash across his jaw line.

Hitaro's fist had been gloved in chakra.

_Bastard._
The hinge of Neji's jaw tightened, muscles bunched fiercer than the snap of his fingers into two rigid fists. He drew a slow breath, holding it deep until the rage calmed. His fingers unfurled, a digit at a time – a mental countdown. Gathering his control, he blinked and turned his head back, eyes deadly calm; yet they were bleached whiter and colder than the combined ice of all the Hyūga eyes trained on him.

He only returned one of those stares.

Hitaro arched a brow, glaring down.

Neji stared back, his bangs still plastered across his face, lining the sharp angles of his cheekbone and jaw. Hitaro paused, reading the unspoken 'fuck you' with a twitching at his nose, hinting at a sneer. He dragged his gaze over Neji's defiant countenance, setting his focus on the Jōnin's feet before swinging his glare back up to bore into the frosty eyes.

"Of course," Hitaro spat, lips curving down. "The same as when you were a child, wanting nothing more than to protect something you could never hope to save."

Neji didn't blink, his expression masked by impenetrable ice. But on the inside, he took a nasty fracture. A memory bled between the break, the echo of his father's voice…

"Who did this to you?"

"Hitaro-sama said I must protect the Main House."

"Why did he strike you?"

"Because I said I would protect you first."

Like a blow to the heart, cobweb cracks broke out pain across Neji's chest. Despite this, his mask held strong, keeping his features set in stubborn stone. He would be damned twice over before he bowed to this bastard again.

On the ground, Hinata's voice whispered out.

"Neji…" she pleaded, begging him to concede to his place - to keep from being put in it.

Truth to tell, he couldn't afford injury or insolence right now. His future was too fragile. His fate hanging by threads he couldn't afford to let slip through his fingers.

And even knowing this, Neji raised his chin and slanted his jaw.

Hinata squeezed her eyes shut.

Amusement crawled into the downward bow of Hitaro's mouth, curling it upwards at the corners in a twist far too ugly and menacing to be called a smile. "I was so hoping you'd defy me."

"What happened to you going easy on me?"

"I am."

Well great, that's embarrassing.

Asuma grunted, scratching at the back of his head. "Just how easy?"
Shikamaru smirked, chin set in one palm as he flipped his Shogi piece, promoting his Knight to Gold. "Stupid simple easy."

Asuma snorted, assessing the board as he tapped ash into a teacup. "And you wanted to subject me to the public humiliation."

Shikamaru shrugged, smiling behind his fingers. "Nah, I just wanted the ryo reward."

"Gambling addict in the making, what the hell am I encouraging?"

Shikamaru laughed quietly, scanning the board.

Asuma watched him through a waft of smoke, sensing his student was calculating all the available moves without the intention to win but rather to estimate the best ways to make the game last longer. He was pretty sure Shikamaru could have had him in checkmate about six moves back.

A fond and knowing smile hit Asuma's eyes, warming the brandy orbs.

They'd moved from Ino's suite into the one she'd booked for the shadow-nin. It was almost identical in its interior bar the flower arrangement and wall hanging in the alcove. They'd left one of the shoji doors open and a cold breeze snaked in from the veranda, more to banish Asuma's smoke than to allow for any light. Sunset was about an hour away, but they wouldn't see it through the cloud cover. Instead, floor lamps cast up an amber and custardy glow across the fusuma panels in the room, patches of bright caramel on the parchment.

Asuma slid his Knight one step to the left. "Enjoy the party?"

"It was interesting." Rather than capture one of Asuma's pieces, Shikamaru made a move to the right of the board.

"Not troublesome then?"

"Never said that."

"You actually didn't. Which brings the total of times you've never said it in these situations to a grand score of one," Asuma pointed out, his smile faint. "Must be a blue moon tonight."

The shadow-nin arched a brow. "Technically it's not over yet, although Ino's the one who's slept through it this year. How's that for irony?"

"Karma," Asuma chuckled gruffly, taking a drag of his cigarette, holding the smoke for a long beat. "Speaking of sleep. Managing to catch some shut-eye between the training?"

Shikamaru's mouth twitched in a barely-there smile, his eyes on the board. "Right. Funny."

Asuma hummed, taking in the dark rings under his student's eyes and the deeper grooves cutting under his cheekbones. "Not really."

Shikamaru's smile slipped away. His fingers hesitated above his Shogi piece, hovering for a moment before they pressed down firmly, sliding a Rook vertically across the board.

"You know me. Sleep's never a problem."

"Yeah, I know you well enough to know that a lack of sleep is."

Shikamaru glanced up, eyes sharp and searching. "Ino said something to you, huh?"
Asuma dropped his gaze down to the Shogi board, pretending to tax his brain for the next move.

What a joke; he wasn't putting in the effort to attempt to win at all.

All he could think about were Kurenai’s words to him – and the words he didn't remember saying to her. Not that he needed the mental transcript. He knew the words by heart deep down. He'd known them and held them in for two years. And he'd spent the past two weeks remembering them and holding them in all over again.

"What's wrong?" Shikamaru asked, going very still.

I should really be the one asking you that question, even though I won't get an answer...I should have kept asking two years ago...until I did...

Asuma shook his head, tracing the point of his beard with his thumb, smoke misting from his lips. One method would have been to get drunk again. Pouring in the saké might lead to pouring out what needed to be said without worrying about Shikamaru up and bolting.

Only so many ninkeN I can borrow if he pulls an avoidance stunt again.

Shikamaru sat up a little straighter. "Asuma-sensei…"

The Jōnin braced the heel of his hand at the edge of the Shogi board, cigarette perched between his fingers. He held his silence long enough that ash began to shrivel and pile along the smoking stick. He felt Shikamaru's gaze boring into him.

Always on the ball.

Opting for the indirect route, he pitched his next words almost nonchalantly. "You're aware of the recent attacks in neighbouring lands, aren't you?"

"Yeah…" Shikamaru frowned. "By a two-man shinobi team, right?"

Asuma nodded slowly, watching the ash gather along his cigarette, calculating the best way to steer the conversation. Beneath the screen of his lashes, he could sense Shikamaru scrutinising his face, gathering whatever data he could to predict the relevancy of the topic and where it was likely to lead.

You're not gonna want to go there. And the fact that you don't gets me worse than the thought of making you.

Asuma reached across with his free hand, making a move that would advance his Knight. "Kakashi suspects it's just a matter of time before they target the Land of Fire."

"Looks that way," Shikamaru agreed, his tone just this side of wary.

"Could very likely be Akatsuki."

"That explains the slave-driving with the Nijū Shōtai," Shikamaru's humour barely held in his voice.

Normally, Asuma would have latched onto the thread of humour, however frail, and laced it into his approach. But he just couldn't find it in him to make light of something that weighed too damn heavy on his heart. When he didn't reply, Shikamaru's fingers froze above the Shogi piece he'd
been about to move. Asuma noticed and smiled almost regretfully.

Shikamaru was still watching him, concern cutting into the confused knot of his brow. "Asuma...?"

Mildly desperate, it occurred to Asuma to try the "Kakashi method". A method which would involve a lot of twists and turns that would lead Shikamaru down several mental trails in a red herring kind of chase before Asuma blindsided him with the actual problem.

*God, I hate this psychological mind-game bullshit.*

How the hell he'd get that technique to work on Shikamaru was laughable.

*And wrong.*

He'd never played those psychological games with the young Nara precisely for the fact that it was never Shikamaru's mind he needed to appeal to, but the part of the shadow-nin that suffered *because* of his intellect.

*What the hell am I thinking, using his head against him?*

He'd sworn off the thought of ever employing those calculated shrink techniques. Just the fact that he'd even considered it hit his gut with a brick of guilt he could barely stomach. Completely *unable* to stomach it, his next words spilled out before he could register his mouth was moving.

"I'm sorry."

Like a hiccup – sudden, unplanned, uncalculated, uncontrollable.

Shikamaru's eyes widened a fraction. "What?"

Asuma stared at his cigarette. It had burned right down to the end.

"I wasn't there. For whatever reason. For whatever happened. And I'm sorry."

Shikamaru said nothing, but his eyes got wider.

Asuma drew a breath, shaking his head. "You must have felt like I just didn't try. Letting it slide. Letting you slide like that. I had no idea how the hell to reach you...and I was too late in figuring out what I should have done. By then you'd already pulled yourself back. But you did that alone. And you shouldn't have had to."

Silence.

Asuma glanced up.

The colour had drained from Shikamaru's face, leaving him grey and drawn, the whites of his eyes visible all around the irises as he stared like a startled animal.

It was painful to watch.

The concern hit Asuma harder than the guilt and he forced himself to go on. "Sending a ninken after you two weeks ago? I should have done that two years ago. I should have sent a whole fucking pack and a cavalry charge but I didn't."

Shikamaru stared vacantly at Asuma's chest, eyes fixed and unblinking.
"I didn't," Asuma repeated. "I'm sorry."

On the last word, Shikamaru's eyes screwed shut. Asuma kept his gaze on his face, afraid to look away. Afraid that if he did, something would slip through and he'd miss it.

"I told you that was the toughest test I've ever had as your sensei," Asuma murmured, his deep timbre ragged with regret. "That's because I failed it. I failed you."

The shadow-nin said nothing, made no sound whatsoever and Asuma felt the weight of every silent second pressing down on him, squeezing harder than the clench of Shikamaru's eyes.

And then the shadow-nin shook his head.

"You never failed me, sensei," Shikamaru whispered, his voice scraping hoarse and shaky in his throat. "Not once."

Asuma clenched his jaw against the surge of pain for his student. Looking at Shikamaru he didn't see the seventeen-year-old Chūnin advanced way beyond his years - instead, he saw the scared, twelve-year-old kid he'd once had to establish trust with.

"Then why, now, two years on, can you still not tell me?" Asuma asked gently, straightening up to keep from reaching forward, not wanting to push it and hoping against hope for an answer.

It was a long, torturous moment before Shikamaru slipped his eyes open a little, the dark, wet lashes hiding the liquid obsidian of his eyes.

"Because you'll hear me," he rasped.

Those vital words. The cornerstone of the trust and the bond that they'd created.

Asuma shook his head, concern etched deep into his brow. "Shikamaru."

Shikamaru pressed his eyes shut again, fighting back whatever was close to breaking through. Unable to do more than hope, Asuma sat still and quiet, watching, waiting and wishing on anything that he could do something.

But all he could do was be there.

After a moment the shadow-nin's fingers grazed a Shogi piece and continued the game, keeping his eyes away from Asuma the whole time.

In the silence that followed, Shikamaru made no move to rise and leave like he had when he was a Genin.

Not that he had to.

He didn't have to leave for Asuma to sense that a part of him was gone.

Sunset bled like a dark bruise beneath the rumpled clouds. Thunder growled farther back, rolling in over the Hokage Mountain.

And a heartbeat behind it, the restlessness inside of Neji howled.

He responded to the call.
It pushed him out of the Hyūga compound, urging him back to a place where he'd often played out his demons, embracing the part of the caged creature he'd always considered himself to be.

My role. My place. My prison.

The stage was always the same.

The bamboo groves.

In the growing darkness, the ambience of the Hyūga gardens shifted, like a theatre stage transforming. Neji never wore a mask on this stage. He just went through the motions of a scene he always found himself repeating. He fell into the role with a seamlessness that came from knowing how it began, where it led and how it ended.

And so he moved; in and out between the rows of bamboo culms.

It was a dance of slipping through unseen bars.

He saw them every time.

Because the bamboo always looked like bars in the moonlight, the yellowed hues ripped away as the world became a white-washed mockery of peace. A cage by another name.

Like ANBU…

Neji snarled and upped his pace, hips shifting, shoulders sliding at sharp, smooth angles as he cut a zigzag path along the rows, back and forth, left and right, fast and fluid as he chased his own restlessness.

He ignored the pain flaring in his back.

How can I protect them both, if I am on a leash with no leeway?

He tensed his jaw and a hot burst of pain sang along the sharp, bruised slant all the way around the orbital region of his eyes up to his temples and down along his cheekbone.

Have I created another chain, playing protector?

He turned a vicious loop, weaving faster between the culms. The words playing across his conscience regarding Hinata and Hanabi were like shouts from graves. Countless faces of Hyūga cousins and siblings cast aside. Branch members that died in their cages, wrapped in the hollow comfort of familiar chains no one had thought to break.

I will not join the ranks of those who never found their freedom…

Neji turned too sharply, jarring his shoulder against one of the culms.

The pain in his spine rocketed to the base of his skull.

His eyes flashed.

He turned with a snarl and smashed his fist into the unyielding cane. The impact jarred along his arm. The bamboo didn't shatter, but it cracked. He wanted it to splinter, break, explode into needles.

Enough. Calm down.
Neji pulled in a deep, steady breath and let the anger seep out before it could set in. He'd learned how to let it go. But knowledge was useless without application. He exhaled a gentle stream of vapour into the cold air, slipping his eyes open.

The rage eased, leaving behind a tense throb.

Breathing slowly, he flexed his fingers and flattened his palm against the fractured bamboo. The split skin of his knuckles drew his eye.

His blood welled black in the moonlight.

Black as shadows…

Neji tilted his wrist and watched the blood trickle along the back of his hand.

The memory of shadow tendrils curling around his wrist flickered in his mind's eye like a flame. It scattered a lick of heat across his skin and at the same time, it slipped around the restlessness pacing inside him. And then came the whisper of a voice locked in memories.

"Just let go…"

Neji breathed deep.

He breathed deep enough until he felt it; a weak imitation of the peace that he ached for as strongly as his freedom.

The peace urging him to find rest.

I can't…

Because the 'rest' had become a yearning wrapped up in dark sienna eyes and a voice that slipped like smoke around the edges of lazy smiles.

Damn you, Nara.

The yearning settled deep inside the breaks Neji couldn't fix, leaving him with the pieces that had only ever made sense when they were in one ninja's hands.

He foolishly remembered those hands.

And for the briefest of moments, rest came to him. But behind the rest, came the sadness of knowing it wasn't real enough. Seeing those hands in his mind's eye wasn't the same as feeling them…remembering the feel of them...

Neji shuddered, teeth grit hard.

And then came the hurt…and the heat…

The need.

The second Neji began to move, he knew he was walking a dangerous line.

So long as I don't cross it.

It didn't occur to him that he already had.
Chapter 9

The clouds pulled their swollen hordes together, turning the twilight sky into one broad, black belly hanging low over Konoha, eager to open up. Thunder rumbled deep in its bowels, hungry for a storm.

As always, the Nara deer could sense it.

The taste and smell of rain clung in the air, making every breath feel laboured and heavy on the lungs. But it did little to interfere with the crepuscular habits of the deer. Does gathered in nervous ranks, haunches quivering, large eyes and long lashes blinking fast and wide in the dim light.

Beneath the angry skies, a clash and crack of antlers filled the Nara forest.

Thick streams of vapour gushed in geysers from the nostrils of two fighting stags. Nature had fashioned their arena – an open clearing.

The harts battled it out in a brutal charge and crash.

Blood streaked across the rich coat of one buck, its sleek hide torn by the antlers of its larger rival; a royal stag which bore down on it with the full fury of its twelve-pointer tines.

Rikumaru dropped his huge head and butted forward.

The warring males crashed and locked.

Solid muscles shook and rippled beneath sweating pelts. They pushed backwards and forwards, heads lifting and falling until Rikumaru disengaged, lashed out and caught the younger stag just below the throat, opening a gash that forced the buck to backpedal.

Rikumaru scythed his antlers in a finishing blow.

His tines tore across his rival's flank.

Blood sprayed.

The buck crashed into the loam, letting out a strangled bark.

The fight was over.

Rikumaru stamped a violent victory, the thick cuff of his hooves and accompanying sway of his antlers warning other stags to reconsider the wisdom of challenging him. He rose up on his back legs, front hooves boxing in bone-crunching kicks. The hinds started and quivered nervously as Rikumaru let out a deep, dark bellow.

Shikaku stepped out from the trees.

"Rikumaru..." he rolled the stag's name quietly.

Instantly the boxing stopped.

Those powerful legs dropped and locked, shaking with adrenalin. The deer swung its head level with Shikaku, nostrils flaring, body set to charge. Without batting an eye, Shikaku raised his hand; a subtle signal that the deer responded to by stretching his muzzle out to sniff and snort against the
Shikaku nodded, set his hand between the stag's brow tines and pushed.

Rikumaru reversed, backing off.

That done, Shikaku turned to the fallen buck. Shadows snaked after him like obedient serpents, twining around his body then out across the foliage in a rush and slither of tendrils. They wrapped around the kicking legs of the fallen stag, pinning the animal down.

"Easy now," Shikaku soothed, his rusty voice tickling the stag's ears into an anxious twist.

It tried to turn its head, antlers angling towards him in threat.

Shikaku's lips twitched. "None of that."

The Nara crouched down beside the panting animal, passing his hand over the slick, coppery coat frothed with blood and sweat. The buck's eyes rolled in distress, nostrils wide and quivering.

It bellowed its pain.

Shikaku hummed and stroked his hand across the ruined pelt, assessing through narrowed eyes. He shook his head at the feel of a hot, wet torrent spurting too fast between his fingers.

Damn.

His palm came away soaked in red.

He sighed softly, reaching for the tantō behind his back.

He hated this part.

The blood washed off the blade faster than Shikaku's skin.

He worked the pump-action faucet, soaped off the final traces of death and towelled his hands dry.

By lantern light and shadows, erasing the evidence of it had become habitual.

Dropping the cloth, he took a silent inventory of the cabin. It consisted of one large room sectioned for various purposes, open shelves lined with canisters and stacked with containers. The wooden shelter had once served as a teahouse, ensconced in high grasses at the edge of the Nara forest. Eventually, Shikaku had taken practicality over the original purpose and had turned the teahouse into a storage facility for veterinary supplies and deer horn.

_Three stags this month…_

On cue with that thought, Shikaku reached for the bloody sack dropped by his feet. Hefting it over one shoulder, he shrugged against the dig of an antler into his back and moved over to a large trunk dominating one side of the room.

The deer horn would be powered down for use in the Nara laboratory.

Even the pelt, hooves and bones would be used.

Nothing went to waste.
Unfortunately, it wouldn't be the last death among the herds this autumn. While the Nara clan tried to limit the fatalities during the rutting season, there was only so much they could do without meddling in nature's affairs. Sometimes all one could do was help a suffering stag along, or patch it up when its life was salvageable.

Something scraped across the cabin window.

Shikaku turned his head, catching a flash of wings in his peripheral vision. He spotted a falcon perched on the sill outside, watching him. This bird wasn't native to the forest, which identified it immediately as the one his son had been tending to.

Shikaku arched a brow and straightened up, gazing back.

The bird cocked its head.

Shikaku smiled a little. "Stick around."

The falcon let out a soft kee and took off before he could say anything more.

Outside, thunder juddered in the distance.

Shikaku stashed the antlers, locked up the cabin and headed home.

The ledge served as the line.

Do not cross it.

Neji drilled the words into his steps, walking along the same open rooftop he'd stalked earlier in the morning. A clear, concrete boundary. He toed this self-defined line at a meditative pace.

Focus.

He'd been walking this way for several minutes, his gaze scanning the ryokan opposite – searching.

There.

Neji stopped pacing.

Using his dōjutsu, he cut through the density of a darkness made thicker by the pending storm and found what he'd been searching for. But the second his focus hit on the figures playing Shogi, a mental command urged him back a pace.

Walk away.

One step back was all he could take.

His knees folded and he sank to a crouch, perched on the edge of the building, cradled in the shadows beneath a large awning. Activity played out in other areas of the ryokan, with other figures and other faces – adjacent, above, below – but Neji saw none of them. Not even the delicate, winking bulbs of HOTARU's exterior distracted him.

Nothing could.

He was too absorbed in scanning every angle of Shikamaru's profile. He used his dōjutsu to zoom closer until he could see the way the fabric of the shadow-nin's yukata folded into the crook of his
elbow or pulled across his chest when he stretched his arm further across the game board.

But even this wasn't close enough.

Neji let his gaze reach beyond the line he wouldn't cross, stretching and honing his dōjutsu so keenly that he could detect even the subtlest shift of the sinews in Shikamaru's hand every time his fingers flexed above a Shogi piece. Neji took a moment to examine the long fingers, the hard and knotted knuckles, the callused tips brushing an innocent, idle stroke across a Shogi piece.

Shikamaru's thumb tapped twice, calculating.

Neji missed nothing. But in clocking everything he began to notice a pattern of movements he hadn't experienced in the few times he'd played Shogi with Shikamaru. The shadow-nin was avoiding every opportunity to end or advance the game.

Strange.

Reluctantly, Neji flicked his gaze to Asuma, assessing.

The bearded Jōnin paused between drags on his cigarette, casting Shikamaru glances made heavier by the grave looks of concern accompanying them. The weight of unease in Asuma's expression had Neji's gut dropping.

What's happened?

The Hyūga's spine straightened and he canted forward, the muscles in his thighs tensing, ready to launch him forwards. Then it occurred to him what the hell he was thinking – or how he wasn't thinking at all.

Damn this.

The emotions that compelled him were obviously still too foreign to decipher, even after two weeks of trying to come to terms with them. Easier done when he was away from the source of what had provoked them in the first place.

You 'are' still away provided you keep distance. Stay away. You said you would.

Unable to make a move, Neji did nothing but stare.

He gazed unblinking at Shikamaru's profile, a tender concern edging into the corners of his eyes. The Nara might have looked different to the last time Neji had seen him, but distance made it difficult to determine. Even Neji's eyes, for all their enhanced ability, were still limited by a subjective interpretation of what they saw.

Blinkered by my rage, you always saw more than I did...

A weak smile died at the corner of Neji's mouth before it could shape his lips.

You're still that elusive shadow in the dark, Nara...

Shikamaru was never without his own masks – in the past, the shadow-nin had changed faces too subtly and too quickly for Neji to completely catch him out.

The Hyūga had only managed to do that once.

And what did you do? His mind taunted.
Neji swallowed, his eyes straying down to Shikamaru's hand.

The memory of what he'd done once he'd caught Shikamaru with his defences down still ate like acid around the edges of the Hyūga's heart. He still recalled the echo of his own words, his voice deepened and darkened by a wrath he scarcely recognised.

"You enjoy tearing open my wounds, don't you, Nara? I think it's time I tear open some of yours."

And he had. He'd ripped right into Shikamaru's wound. But he hadn't stayed to see the damage. He'd walked away before he could cause more. The Nara's wound had become just one more of the countless unsaid, unhealed and unexamined things swirling like ash between them.

*We went up in flames, didn't we?*

Several times. But then, it had never taken much for their ashes to become embers when they were close to each other. Whether it was anger, desire, pleasure or pain, something would always begin to burn between them.

*It's always there…*

Neji's jaw tightened and his breathing deepened as he watched Shikamaru's fingers flex and fold and feather across the Shogi board.

Neji almost felt the nearness of that hand rather than saw it.

*And when I see you…though I can't feel you…it always starts again…*

The yearning pulled across his chest and a hot coil tightened in his stomach.

He pressed his eyes shut.

He didn't see Asuma crush out his cigarette. And he didn't see Shikamaru's fingers shake before making a move that ended the Shogi game.

The sky was rumbling and crackling by the time Shikaku stepped up onto the porch, splashes of rain beginning to dot the garden stones and ripple the shallow pond.

Distant whistles and barks of deer calls quietened.

Moments later the skies opened up completely.

Shikaku stared, watching the forest beyond the garden disappear. It vanished behind opaque sheets of rain, which shattered and smashed against the world like glass, kicking up a fine haze over the ground.

The world looked like it was breaking.

Shikaku stood there for a long, lingering moment, then finally turned to go inside. He didn't expect the door to slide when he tried it, but the shoji panel slid back without resistance.

He paused at the threshold – listening.

The lights were off but Yoshino was home.

He knew this immediately, instinctively.
He slid the door shut behind him, locked it, kicked off his shoes and went through into the house, moving toward the only source of light he could detect. It slotted from under their bedroom door, soft and grainy.

Pacing with a twist and tilt at his hips, Shikaku led with his right shoulder, the other dropped a little behind him. It was automatic for Nara men to 'flow' at angles when they moved. To the ignorant, it looked like lazy posture or awkward slouches. In reality, Nara shinobi commanded one of the most nimble styles of nagare or 'flow' in their most unconscious of movements.

"Oh yeah?" Inoichi had once teased. "Tell that to a Hyūga, Shikaku."

Shikaku had – and then he'd proved it.

Hizashi had challenged him to a rematch.

"I'll take you down, Nara."

"Next time around, Hyūga?"

Hizashi had laughed. "And every time after that, Shikaku."

Too bad they'd never know.

Shikaku shook off the thought. His fingers grazed the bedroom door, easing it open with a deliberate creak, pooling light into the corridor. No response. He moved to stand in the doorway and slouched against the frame.

Yoshino didn't turn her head.

She stood by the window, limed in golden hues from the lamp. Her hair hung loose from its usual tie, spilling down the curve of her back in a lustrous stream. She said nothing, but he knew she'd heard him.

Seconds slipped by.

The rain shattered against the glass, glittering in rivulets.

Something flashed in Yoshino's hands. A neat, glossy square. She held a photograph, framed by the firm grip of her fingers. Shikaku watched her from beneath his lashes – waiting. Yoshino sensed his gaze stroking over her and shook her head. Her hair swished across her back and like a ripple across the room Shikaku instantly smelt the fragrance of ferns and lilies.

"Yoshino," he called.

His voice abraded the air, caused her to shiver, raised the gooseflesh on her arms. But she didn't look at him, her large, dark eyes fixed on the picture.

"I left the door open," she said, her voice very quiet.

Shikaku watched her brush a thumb across the photo, the edge of her nail tracing out some detail in the image. She sucked her lip hard, frowning.

"Did you lock it?" she asked.

He didn't answer. He went to her instead, crossing the room in a whisper of movement that had her skin prickling again. She felt his proximity before they could touch and took a quick step to the
left, avoiding what might have been the circle of his arms, or maybe his shadows.

She tugged open a drawer, making to slip the picture away.

Shikaku's touch stopped her cold.

His fingers stroked along her forearm, paralysing her movements like a shadow-possession, his long, rough digits tracing the veins in her wrist. Of its own volition her hand turned, displaying the picture.

It was a photograph she'd taken years ago; one of father and son.

The photo had captured them at sunset. Shikaku lay on his stomach in hay stocked for the deer, holding his 9 month old son upright while Shikamaru dozed, already in the early stages of mastering the art of falling asleep while sitting upright.

Shikaku smiled, tracing his eyes over the image of his son.

The memory remained as clear as the snapshot in his mind.

He remembered supporting his child's back with both hands, paranoid that if he slackened his grip, Shikamaru would topple backwards. In the picture, Shikaku's mouth was open in mid-murmur as he gazed with tender affection at his drowsy son.

He remembered exactly what he'd said too.

Shikaku's eyes drifted shut, an imperceptible tightness tugging at his brows.

"Did you lock the door?" Yoshino asked again.

He said nothing.

Yoshino stiffened when his fingers closed around her wrist, thumb rubbing circles at the heel of her hand, pressing along her palm until it hit the edge of the photograph, dislodging it from her grip.

It dropped onto the top of the dresser.

"You need to lock it," she ordered, her voice hushed but harsh.

Shikaku's thumb rolled across her nails, his fingers ghosting over knuckles and along the pale skin at the back of her hand. When his lips grazed the edge of her jaw, he felt her shiver again.

Then she went rigid.

Finally.

Shikaku's eyes slipped open a nanosecond before she whirled on him.

He caught the hand that slashed toward his face, stopping the slap just shy of impact.

He could feel the heat of her hand against his cheek – nothing compared to the heat in her eyes. Yoshino's dark orbs blazed, her face cast half in light and the rest in shadow, gold and black dipping into the dells of her bone-structure to draw out the fierceness.

Shikaku studied the ferocious, frighteningly beautiful look through hooded eyes.
He'd been waiting for this violent outburst for two weeks.

"Tell me," he murmured, hooking his thumb into the veins at her wrist, feeling the rapid throb of her pulse. "You've been wanting to for weeks."

Yoshino's fingers clawed, nails grazing his left cheek without a scratch. She carved unseen wounds to match the scars that slashed the opposite side of his face.

"You tell me, Shikaku," she uttered back, mahogany strands fluttering by her lips. "Tell me you never see him this way."

Shikaku blinked slowly, drawing his head back.

"This way..." he echoed, his voice like mist, pulled apart and drowned out by the angry stagger of Yoshino's breaths.

She clapped her free hand above the photograph, impressing it like a precious flower between her skin and the polished wood of the dresser.

Shikaku arched a brow. "What way?"

Perfume bottles rattled when her hand came down again – hard.

"This way."

Shikaku didn't spare the picture a glance. "No. I don't."

His wife's eyes rounded, a moist sheen flickering across them. "You don't..."

"I can't," Shikaku murmured.

An incredulous laugh caught in Yoshino's throat. She pressed her lips to smother the sound, shaking her head in disbelief.

Tearing her wrist free, she made to strike again – but didn't. "Tell me, Shikaku."

"You know what I see."

"Remind me." Plush lips drew tight, but her voice trembled. "Remind me what you saw when he came back from that mission. Remind me what you saw when we came home to find him hurt and bleeding in his room! What did you fucking see, because I saw this child!" she jerked her chin towards the photograph, eyes on him. "My child! Your SON, Shikaku!"

Shikaku's head angled in a warning.

Yoshino stood her ground. She always did.

"Remind me," she spat out. "If you'll let yourself remember."

Shikaku's jaw tightened and the lamplight struck the edges of his scars, burnishing them gold – like taut, barbed wire. But the lines that cut into the corners of his eyes were sharper.

"Don't you dare look at me that way," Yoshino hissed, her own expression god-awfully fierce, teeth bared. "Out there I can't protect him! Out there I force myself to remember he's a shinobi but HERE he is my SON! OUR SON!"
She jerked her hand up, balled a fist and crashed it hard above Shikaku's chest, hard enough to feel the muscles tighten on a rough exhale. She hoped it hit his heart with twice the impact, hoped it rattled something loose that would dispel the shadows in his steady gaze.

But Shikaku didn't baulk, didn't budge, didn't blink.

He simply gazed down at her with those dark, fathomless eyes; his lashes shuttered just enough for him to see without being seen in return.

But Yoshino held nothing back from him.

She glared up through large, almond eyes shining with angry tears and condemnation. The pain in her gaze pulled Shikaku forward a step. Yoshino drew back, folding her arms around herself as if fighting off a chill...fighting off the hurt. Gods but she was hurting.

Hurting for the pain Shikaku hid behind the shadows in his eyes.

Hurting for the choice he'd made long ago to hide that pain from their son.

Hurting for the choice he was making right now to hide it from her too.

Hurting more than all of this because she knew why he had to hide it.

He did it every day; just to get through the days when she couldn't hide it too.

Shikamaru was too sharp to miss it if they let it slip. That slip would lead to too many questions, too many possible regrets. Too much to ever take back. Too much to ever make right.

"This is his home..." She squeezed her eyes shut to keep from looking at Shikaku, to keep from going to him, to keep from reaching for him. "I'm supposed to make it safe for him here. God, never. He should never be afraid here."

Shikaku levelled her with a long, lidded stare. "I know."

"No, Shikaku, you can't possibly know. You're not his mother."

Shikaku curled his tongue behind his teeth. Years ago he might have stirred from his passive-aggressive nature long enough to follow those words into an argument and – if pushed – even further into the kind of heart-tearing confrontation he knew she wanted.

But that would only drive them apart.

Or tear them asunder.

At best, she would shout and he would stare her down or wait it out, armed with an arsenal of patience. At the very worst, the limits of his patience might stretch beyond the clear point that marked its dangerous end.

No.

He never again wanted to test his ability to control what happened after he allowed himself to be pushed beyond that point. It had almost been a one-way road in the past. The return trip from that part of himself had garnered him scars far deeper and lasting than the ones across his face.

Never again.
"I'm his mother," Yoshino uttered again, softer this time. "Forget to remember anything else, Shikaku, but don't you dare forget that. I am his mother."

"Seventeen years ago and 39 hours into biologically proving that point, you broke five bones in my hand." Shikaku hooked his knuckle to skim her mouth, searching for a smile. "I don't think I'm ever likely to forget, Yoshino."

Yoshino might have smiled, but it wobbled and fled her lips too fast for him to be certain. He closed the distance between them and she ran a hand across his chest and clutched the black fabric of his turtleneck, gnarling her fingers – as if to squeeze his heart.

"Everyday I wonder if we did it right…" she whispered, fisting his top until the fibres bunched into a knot. "If I did it right…"

"Yoshino…"

"I push him so hard. To the point of driving him out of my arms when all I…" she trailed off with a tremulous whisper. "When all I want is to hold him again…"

Shikaku reached for her then, drawing her to him. His shadow swallowed hers when she moved into the circle of his arms, mouth open against the tendons of his neck as she exhaled a long, shaking sigh.

"It scares me every day…"

Shikaku's throat bobbed against her lips as he swallowed, the only hint that he'd reacted to her confession. Those words from his wife were unfamiliar, foreign sounds. He settled a hand at the back of her head, caressing her silken mane.

"Scares you?"

"I don't think he'd ever let me hold him again, Shikaku…and what scares me more than that is knowing that if he ever did…I don't think I could let him go…" she choked off on a watery breath, shaking her head.

Shikaku's eyes softened then drifted shut.

"So let this go instead. Cry and let it out," he breathed into her hair.

He felt her hands claw up his back, fingers digging in at his shoulder blades so hard he could feel every individual nail biting through the fabric into his flesh. He felt the demand in the clutch, the desperation to have him fall with her. To let out what she didn't want to suffer alone. Sure enough, her nails dug deeper.

"I need you to let it out, Shikaku…" she whispered.

He leaned back enough to scour rough palms across her cheeks, guiding her head up, trying to capture her gaze. "You know why I can't do that."

If the hoarse scrape of his voice wasn't enough, the tender stroke of his lips across her cheek urged her to face him – urged her to let the tears build. Her lashes fluttered open and glittering, dark pools stared up at him.

"You leave me so alone in this…"
Shikaku's brows pinched, but he controlled the look that threatened his eyes. Yoshino's vulnerability gouged him deeper than her anger ever could. He slipped his fingers across her flushed, damp cheek, stealing around towards the baby-fine hair at her nape.

"You're never alone in this."

"Shikaku—"

He lowered his head and kissed her, silenced and seduced her mouth into softening and responding. She opened to him with a surrendering gasp, reaching up to cup his scarred cheek.

He kissed her harder, pulled her closer, moulded her against him.

Without a fight, Yoshino melted into an exquisite gentleness no one would have thought her capable of. It was the same gentleness she'd used to save Shikaku from a darkness no one would have thought him capable of, years before.

"Very impressive. Who taught you to play?"

"My sensei."

"And did he teach you to think like this too?"

"Like what?"

"Like a King, rather than a pawn."

"It's just tactics."

"Yes and you just beat my best tactician, forty years your senior."

"I'm just playing the game."

"To win."

"That's the point of the game, isn't it?"

"Absolutely, Shikamaru. Sadly, most minds lack the capability to move in sync with the game at large. But clearly, you're not like most minds, are you?"

The Shogi piece slipped from his fingers, hit the board and shattered it. Rows and columns exploded, squares flew in all directions, divided, collided like cosmic bangs and scattered outwards, blew up and multiplied into universes of possibilities.

He couldn't predict them all.

Stop…

It didn't stop, it sped up. Multiplying too fast, too many, too many figures, too many fractured pieces raining down, striking his brain like hail, over and over and…

STOP!

He tried to raise his hands to grip his skull but his movements dragged, limbs pulling through the air as if through water. Steam filled his lungs, stinging his face and the sweat began building and
beading on his skin, submerging his body, pulling him into hot waters.

The onsen.

No…

All the squares of the fractured board were floating on the surface, Shogi pawns sinking, Kings floating, Rooks, Knights, Bishops swirling.

Swirling like the tongue dipping into the hollow of his throat.

"You still taste like fire…"

Neji?

A dark head lifted, hair slipping off the scalp as the figure shed Neji’s skin, grew wavy black strands. Hyūga-pale orbs blackening into slits, cold and sharp as flint – sharp as the smirk twisting a mouth that foamed and frothed with blood, saliva, poison…

"Game on, kid."

NO!

Shikamaru jack-knifed awake, dark eyes wide and wild.

He lashed out but struck nothing.

Nothing…

Gasping, he jerked forward on the futon, gripping the sheets.

Rain slashed into the windows, reflecting in streams, painting his skin and the futon in rivulets. His body was damp with sweat, robbed of heat, yukata soaked through.

He sucked a long breath through his nose and exhaled in a shiver.

Calm down.

He jumped as thunder rattled the glass, boomed across the sky in a violent roll. Sound and sight penetrated his head in bursts.

Dream...memories...dream... a dream.

Shikamaru closed his eyes and dropped onto his back, dragging a hand across his face, almost clawing skin. Blunt nails digging into his scalp, he focused on cramming every strobe flicker of the nightmare into one freeze-frame.

Fade...please...fade...

He focused on shrinking this freeze-frame, draining it of colour and definition until his mental screen went blessedly blank.

Breathe.

He dropped his hand with a shudder, blinking up at the slither of rain reflected on the ceiling, listening to it wash against the glass, hammering off the veranda like tiny stones.
His heart slowed its angry pound against his sternum.

Breathing became easier, easy enough for him to hold his breath and release it slowly, counting the seconds. Focus, inhale, hold it, exhale, repeat the process. He carried on this way until he calmed enough to shift his focus to the damp chill on his body.

It prompted him to move.

He rolled off the bed, orienting himself in the darkness. Flickers of lightning illuminated a path out of the bedroom and Shikamaru touched each pillar as he moved through to the suite's central room.

The shadows prevailed here, swallowing up the atmosphere.

He made no effort to search for the light switch, comfortable in the darkness.

He'd kept the shoji doors open after Asuma had left, displaying the large, wide windows. The panoramic view of the garden was lost in the rain, just a velvet backdrop broken up by the glimmer of an endless torrent.

Shikamaru padded towards the window, seeking distraction.

He stared out into the shivering opacity and dropped his brow against the cold glass. His breath ghosted across the pane; misted, faded, misted, faded. Eventually, his attention slid toward an adjacent room that branched out onto the veranda.

Hn…

Ino hadn't been joking.

"Don't freak out Shikamaru, they have private open-air baths in the rooms too."

Sure enough, the suite contained a rotenburo. An open-air bath that served as a mini-onsen for those guests less inclined to bathe publically. Sheltered by a large awning, with glass walls and shoji panels for privacy, the room would grant a fantastic view of HOTARU's private grounds on a clear day.

Not that the shadow-nin would seriously consider submerging himself.

Not on a clear day or on a crappy one…

Shikamaru turned a little and frowned at the tightness in his body.

Despite all resistance, the urge to purge himself crept over his skin, layering itself thicker than the cold sweat he'd woken up in. Unfortunately, the image of sinking into warm waters left him with a chill. A hot shower, sure. But serene, steaming waters were a deep end for his psyche no matter how shallow or safe the tub or onsen.

He didn't realise he'd balled his fists until his nails bit into his palms.

Get over it.

He had. Hadn't he? Staring at the large bath, he recalled the last time he'd sunk into waters that warm and cleansing. He'd been at the Temple retreat on the return trip from Hanegakure.

Yeah, but I wasn't having fucking blasts from the past at the time…
No, he'd just been scared shitless over Neji's condition instead. Automatically, he carried the thought of the Hyūga from the past into the present, holding it heavy in his mind, feeling it sink into his chest.

*Shit, when will this start to get easier? Just a little easier...*

Shikamaru's brow creased, pain pulling at the corners of his eyes until he had to close them. Damn, what he wouldn't give to just sleep and not dream. That's what his body needed anyway. What his *mind* needed was distraction or detachment; both, ideally.

The Shogi game with Asuma had brought him peace, only to have it violently shattered by mention of something Shikamaru had no idea how to react or respond to. He hadn't been able to.

"*I'm sorry.*"

He shook his head against the glass, tapping his fists to the panes.

The weight of Asuma's words only added to the guilt sitting heavy in his chest, grinding away until he felt it sliding into his stomach like a chiselled rock.

He'd tried to remain focused on the game, tried to appear unreachable.

A weak disguise.

Asuma had soon seen through it, as he always did and always had.

But the Sarutobi had accepted the act, the façade that Shikamaru tried to keep up, pretending he could continue the game as if nothing had happened. Asuma accepted the bullshit, the lies, the avoidance. As always, it was this *acceptance* from Asuma that brought the curtain crashing down. Having sensed his student's defences crumbling, Asuma had stubbed out his cigarette. But Shikamaru had ended the game— and any chance of a conversation, or a confession.

He just couldn't go there.

*Because it's not real anymore. It's not happening now. It's finished.*

Then why the hell was it haunting him? Now? After two years of staying buried?

*I'll drag it back...I've done it before.*

Slipping his eyes open, he stared at his reflection, seeing for just a fraction of a second the part of himself he'd sent to the bottomless depths of his soul – wrapped in the shackles of his darkest shadows.

Yes, he'd done it before.

*And I'll do it again.*

Neji hadn't moved. He should have. Backwards, not forwards.

*Don't cross the line.*

The words pulsed through Neji's brain, keeping him frozen just behind the ledge, watching the concrete line shiver, shatter and spit out rain in a spray.
"I think the only line you walk is the one between sadist and masochist."

Balancing on an inner tightrope of conflict, Neji had to wonder if there wasn't some truth in Shikamaru's words. They fit all sorts of complicated contexts inside of the Hyūga, but maybe that had something to do with his threshold for pain – or some deep-seated belief that he could no longer feel it.

*The greatest lie I've ever let myself believe...*

It was this arrogant assumption of self-control that had almost cost him his life.

It didn't surprise him to discover that it was costing him all over again.

*And even knowing this I'm still standing here, paying for a sin I cannot afford...*

Perhaps there were several sins playing out in what he was doing. Given how long he'd been watching Shikamaru, he could probably add voyeuristic stalker to his list of vices. There *must* have been something distinctly masochistic in all this. Bringing himself *this* close to the source of something that brought him as much pain as it did peace was...insane...

*Insane enough to risk my last chance at attaining ANBU. What am I thinking? Losing focus is the last thing I need.*

Neji frowned, cutting short his mental diatribe before it could start.

*Need...*

Strange how that word used to run parallel with Necessity in his mind, only to veer into a violent, perpendicular angle the second it had come into contact with Shikamaru.

There was no logical explanation for that.

There never would be.

*You changed the very chemistry of my nature...*

Neji smiled slightly, moonstone eyes still fixed on the inverted figure of the shadow-nin across the distance. Swathed in a shroud of steam, Shikamaru had his head tipped back against the edge of the open-air bath he'd slipped into about half an hour ago. His eyes were closed, his hair loose from its high bind. He hadn't moved much, which, Neji supposed, wasn't really unusual for the Nara.

*He'd better not fall asleep in there...*

The Hyūga tilted his head, Byakugan vision cutting through the steam like a knife.

He traced out the angles of Shikamaru's greyscale face, keeping his Byakugan stare fixed above the surface of the water. He convinced himself it was an attempt at integrity – not wanting to admit that integrity had less to do with it than the urge to control his impulses.

*And this need.*

With Shikamaru, the word 'Need' had taken on an entirely different meaning. And Neji had created this meaning in a place outside of his mind.

"This isn't a thinking thing..."
Neji couldn't deny that. He'd stopped trying to weeks ago. Because whenever he added 'Nara' to the neat equation of "Need + Necessity" something got subtracted and another thing multiplied. The formula changed so inexplicably that it didn't fit with Neji's logic – which pushed the equation out of his head and into his heart.

The ache tightened in his chest.

He didn't have the strength to analyse that part of himself, searching for a clue he knew he wouldn't find. Shikamaru might have been rooted there, but it wasn't the only place that Neji felt him.

*You're in my veins, after all...*

But unlike the brodifacoum poison still coursing through him, he knew he'd never get Shikamaru out of his system. He'd already accepted that the ache was something he'd just have to learn to live with.

*I wouldn't have survived without it...*

And there was fate's sadistic sense of irony. He'd been healed, but to retain the humanity Shikamaru had carved into him he'd always wear a wound across his heart.

*Time will toughen the scar...*

He allowed himself to believe this, almost let himself consider all the ways he could try and speed the process.

The train of thought never started.

Everything inside him stopped, along with his heart, the second Shikamaru's head vanished under the water.

The water pulsed around him as if it was sentient.

Submerged, Shikamaru let the base of his skull tap the bottom of the tub.

His body hummed from the heat enfoldling him like a second skin. Small bubbles escaped his nose, which twitched against the tickle of the thick, silky shards of his hair. He could feel the dark strands drifting, held suspended as if by watery fingers.

His own fingers curled hard against the base of the tub.

*Here we go...*

He focused on remaining under – wasn't ready to surface just yet.

*Not yet.*

He kept his eyes shut, water like hot oil against his eyelids. But his lungs began to burn hotter than his skin. The ridges of his stomach caved, the muscles rippled, chest arching, desperate for air.

He held himself under.

The heat saturated his skin, not deep enough to scorch his blood or char his bones. Only one thing, one person, had ever managed to do that. A flicker of opal eyes touched his mind, the memory
carried away on vapours as thick as the steam rising fast from the surface of the water.

He didn't rise with it.

Not yet...

He bowed his spine to keep from jerking up and searching for air.

Not yet!

Like a gross mutation in his chest, he could have sworn his lungs were shrinking and swelling,
filling with something other than air. He felt the panic building in his throat, tightening his spine.
He forced his body not to spasm, not to kick or jerk.

He was searching for something just beyond the panic.

Something buried deep.

He tried to grab this 'something'.

Almost.

And then something grabbed his arms.

The hell!

Panic punched through every cell inside him, blew apart his control, driving a flurry of bubbles
from his nose. Fear boiled bile-like in his throat. He tried to lash out, tried to kick. And then the
grip shifted and the grasp tightened, like an elemental force had taken hold of him, a tsunami of
strength tearing his body upward.

GET OFF ME!

He broke the surface of the water on a ragged, barking cough; disoriented, shaken, gasping for air,
choking on it. Water sloshed in hot waves. Shikamaru's eyes snapped open but he couldn't see
through the steam, or through the mist filling his head with memories.

FUCK!

All he could feel was the grip of fingers digging into his arms hard enough to pulverize his panic,
waking up something else buried deep in his mind.

A flash-flood of violence exploded through him.

The brown of Shikamaru's eyes burned black around the edges.

Through the steam, he felt the pressure of something solid. Snarling, the shadow-nin broke the grip
on his biceps with a practiced circle and downward jab of his elbows, driving forward in the same
motion.

His shoulder crashed into his opponent's, a solid slam of muscle and bone.

Water gushed over the edge of the tub.

Shikamaru tried to lunge again but his forehead struck steel.
His teeth snapped together painfully, white bursting across his vision.

A hand lashed up, fisted the wet ink of his hair and yanked his head back, levelling his face directly with his attacker's.

Breath hotter than the steam fired against his mouth.

"Stop it, Nara!"

The deep voice exploded in his head, blew apart the fog in his mind.

Shikamaru froze.

His insides turned to water, rippling shock through every muscle.

No way…

His eyes grew impossibly large, staring into the ghostly-white irises glaring back at him; they burned like two opals, set in a face crafted more exquisitely than the stone.

Neji…

Shikamaru blinked, his breath catching hard in his throat.

How…?

His mind scrawbled wildly, unable to form a coherent thought. He just stared at the phantom passing in and out of the steam in front of him; high cheeks and a strong jaw framed by mocha bangs, the wet chunks hanging sharper than blades.

Shikamaru blinked again. "Neji…"

The muscles of Neji's face flexed, eyes clenching shut. Then his fingers dropped to Shikamaru's nape, gripping hard, forcing the shadow-nin to hiss at the pressure.

"What the hell are you doing, Shikamaru!"

The dulcet blast of that voice hit Shikamaru like a hammer between the eyes, knocking his head back a fraction.

The shocked expression cracked, falling from his face.

He jerked away from Neji, sending a rush of water to batter between them, pushing them apart. The sudden movement aggravated a delayed throb in his head.

Ugh…

Dizziness swam through him and his brow knotted from the pain.

"Shit," Shikamaru whispered, pressing back against the far end of the tub. "Again with the head trauma…"

Neji stared at him, lunar eyes disturbingly intense.

And so hauntingly real…

Just as fierce as they'd been in Shikamaru's dreams…
The Nara swallowed, trying to work his throat. He couldn't. The wild sensations firing off in his blood caught him mentally flatfooted, short-circuiting his brain.

*Is this real? It can't be…*

"Shikamaru?"

The shadow-nin looked away, drawing a tight breath.

God *damn* that voice – and what it did to him.

Shikamaru shook his head, trying to drag his scattered mind back together, trying to remember to breathe.

*Breathe.*

Pain rocketed through his skull. He latched onto it, something concrete, not as crazy and confusing as this impossible moment playing out. He passed shaking fingers over his brow and pressed at his forehead, wincing.

*Well one thing's for sure – the pain is real…*

He checked the heel of his hand for blood.

"What the hell are you doing, Neji?" he croaked.

Opal eyes widened incredulously. "What am I...? Just what the hell were you doing, Nara!"

Shikamaru smiled a little despite himself, feeling dizzy from the shock, or the blow to the head – maybe both. "Right now I'm hearing an echo. Doesn't look like either one of us is gonna answer that question, does it?"

Neji scoffed, the stubborn sound equal parts peeved and proper. So controlled, so condescending, so infuriatingly *Hyūga.*

Shikamaru's heart throbbed.

Shuttering his eyes, he ran a hand back through the choppy cut of his hair, pulling soaked strands away from his face, rubbing his brow.

From under the hood of his hand, he flicked his gaze over Neji.

*This can't be real.*

He took in the drenched robes plastered across the Hyūga's strong shoulders, hanging heavy. Wet fabric delineated every muscle, clung and creased against every powerful contour.

Then Shikamaru made the mistake of raising his eyes higher.

Their gazes locked.

Both of them sucked in a breath, bodies tensing against the instantaneous pull towards each other.

*Fuck. Distance. Now.*

Looking away, Shikamaru draped a long arm over the tub, groping around for a towel. He steeled
himself against the spotlight sensation of Neji's eyes following his every move.

The whole situation felt imaginary, like some bizarre conjuring of his mind.

Maybe he'd deprived his brain of too much oxygen with that little stunt.

But then he heard Neji move.

Water lapped against his chest and steam rippled away, allowing the shadow-nin to glimpse the Hyūga out the corner of his eye. Neji rocked onto his feet and rose up out of the water in slow motion – disturbingly slow – as if weighed down by something heavier than the drag of his soaking robes.

He looked ridiculous, hilarious and horribly dangerous all at the same time.

For the briefest of moments, Shikamaru recalled the day Neji had attempted to get the drop on him, only to end up soaked to the bone, courtesy of a rigged trap involving a large bucket of water.

This really isn't the same thing...

Shikamaru's fingers grazed the towel.

He twisted around to get a grip on the tub – then froze. His gaze hit on the decimated remains of a shoji door. Wood and glass lay sprayed across the floor in shards, shanks and splinters. He noticed, belatedly, the wind and rain that whipped and whistled into the room, snatching away steam and chilling the air.

Guess that explains how he got in.

Shikamaru paused mid-twist, turning back.

Neji stood with his arms held out in a hangman position, the soggy sleeves of his robe spread like dripping wings. He scowled, stock-still in the centre of the large bath, incredulous, incensed and incredibly pissed behind the steely mien.

Tension radiated off him.

Shikamaru gave him a wry look. "Gee, that was dramatic."

"Shut up, Nara."

"Thought I told you not to leap and bound into any deep ends."

"Gods, I could murder you," Neji cut back, glaring down. "Though you seemed to have that covered."

"What?" Shikamaru made a face, amused, anxious, angry and too many other emotions to consciously process without his head throbbing again.

"Tch!" Neji snarled, wading to the other end of the bath. "Did you leave a note, Nara? That's your tendency before you do something phenomenally stupid, isn't it?"

"What? Like try to drown myself? Are you joking?"

"Am I laughing?" Neji queried in that icy tone he'd taken with Shikamaru in the past.
God but the past was having a field day with his head. Now it wanted to screw with his heart too?

Stop…

Forcing himself not to react, Shikamaru went about quitting the scene rather than adding to the drama. He rose in a fluid shift, turning his back to Neji and wrapping the towel about his hips all in the same movement, shards of hair hanging forward to curtain his face.

It should have felt awkward.

It didn't.

All it felt was abstract, surreal, like he was watching it play out from a distance. He felt disembodied, removed somehow from the reality. He still wasn't so sure it was reality; he wouldn't have put it past his mind to screw him over in his exhaustion.

I've lost it…

He must have lost something in his head, because there was no way he'd just found Neji outside of it. That possibility only existed in his dreams, literally.

Technically, he found me…

The rational, inner dialogue felt safe, keeping a barrier up. The bath helped with that too, even the steam and wind whipping between them made the distance clear, defined.

He didn't have to look across.

It was safer not to.

It was smarter not to.

And then like some glutton for pain, Shikamaru shot a glance at Neji and like two blades glancing off each other their gazes hit hard, sparking a mutual flicker in both their eyes.

The contact held, the distance dissolved in a single look.

Neither shinobi spoke.

Quiet held for a long moment, only the storm talked, rolling loud.

Try as he might, Shikamaru couldn't tear his eyes away. He soaked everything in like a sponge, not able to process meaning in his present state of shock. He filed away the details subconsciously; like the bruising along Neji’s jaw, the altered way he held himself and how something about his eyes seemed different. They were calmer, even in their anger.

Not like in my dreams…

He'd lain awake for fourteen nights aching to see what he was gazing at now. Aching to see what his mind had granted him only in a cruel, ephemeral haunting. But the dreams were nothing compared to the reality – and even that hadn't hit home yet.

He could see Neji.

But it didn't feel real.
It can't be.

Shocked dumb, Shikamaru searched for something – anything – to say.

"I wasn't trying to kill myself," he managed to articulate, scowling at the thought and how stupid the words sounded.

So fucking stupid.

Neji arched a brow, glancing pointedly between Shikamaru and the bath.

The shadow-nin snorted.

"I might like to take things slow, but I take exception to dying that way," Shikamaru muttered dryly, challenging his anger into sarcasm. "Drowning? Way too troublesome."

Neji's expression didn't change.

Shikamaru's scowl cut deeper. "You seriously think I'm stupid enough to consider something like that?"

Neji kept his hands planted at his waist, dripping all over the floor, gazing intently – searchingly – at Shikamaru's face. "Are you?"

"What?" Shikamaru gaped, one hand gripping the knot of the towel around his waist, the other holding his hair out of his eyes. "Give me some damned credit, Hyūga. I still think shit through before I do it."

Neji's brows pulled down, but his bruised jaw raised a notch.

Another familiar gesture.

Shikamaru's anger dissolved in an instant, his lips framing the barest of smiles.

"Can't say the same for you," the shadow-nin drawled. "Nailing me in the head…" he hesitated, his voice falling quieter. "Again."

Neji's expression softened around the edges, just a little. "If it makes you feel better, I still don't plan it," he murmured. "Though I don't disappoint, do I?"

More familiar words, pulling up more familiar feelings.

Feelings Shikamaru had been trying to forget.

Fuck, I can't do this…

He crushed the ache in his chest and forced a smirk, tilting his head to indicate the ruined shoji door. "Dramatic as ever, Hyūga. I really shouldn't be surprised."

Neji's lips twisted and pressed together, fighting off a smile. He couldn't keep it from his eyes though. "I suppose a surprise is appropriate, however unplanned and dramatic."

"Appropriate?" Shikamaru echoed, sounding hoarse. "How'd you figure?"

Neji's face arched with amusement and the warm, teasing glint in his ivory eyes struck Shikamaru hard, causing the air to exit the shadow-nin's lungs in a shiver.
Don't let this be real…

The ache pulled up from his chest right into his throat.

I can't do this again…

Whatever breath he tried to find was lost the second Neji smiled.

"Happy Birthday, Nara."
Leave. Walk away. Go.

The words trickled through Neji in rivulets, streaking cold as the rain across his reflection in the glass. The downpour mirrored the conflict hammering against every nerve inside him, eroding the edges of his resolve.

Priding himself on control had never felt so hypocritical.

At least when he'd been blocking his tenketsu, he'd had the excuse of believing it was the right thing to do, considering his goal.

There is nothing 'right' about me being here…

Neji tightened the chord of the black yukata Shikamaru had given him and gazed past the ghost of his own face, staring into the lightning-slashed sky. He contemplated all the reasons why sliding back the glass doors and vanishing into the rain would be safer, smarter and saner than staying here – in the eye of a far more dangerous storm.

The aroma of coffee hooked his nose, drawing his gaze away from the rain.

Neji's eyes refocused on the glass.

He stiffened in surprise.

Shikamaru's reflection played in a shimmer against the panes, an amber-limed silhouette comprised of familiar angles. Neji re-emblazoned them in his mind, tracing out every contour –jagged as the shards of the spiky ponytail.

How long had Shikamaru been standing there?

And more importantly, why hadn't Neji sensed him?

Making no move to turn, Neji watched the Nara by way of the glass, trying to gauge the other ninja's countenance in the meagre light. Thunder rattled the broad panes, punching with elemental knuckles. Lightning lashed back, a violent burst that flashed off Neji's hitai-ate, its metal hanging like a collar at his throat.

"Branch pet."

The steel gleamed, the glow catching in his eyes.

Neji reached up to replace the headband across his brow, a slow roll of his wrists wrapping the fabric ends around his knuckles. With a whispering glide of material, he pulled the knot tight beneath the long, damp sheet of his hair.

He could feel Shikamaru's gaze on him, awareness tingling at the base of his skull.

But one thing he couldn't feel was the shadow-nin's chakra.

Impossible…

Neji forced his expression to remain neutral and tried to trace what should have been instantly
detectable to him. But the languid, smoky tendrils of energy that Neji remembered so precisely… they were gone.

_How?_

Neji's gaze sharpened, pressure knotting at his temples. He fought back the urge to use his dōjutsu – not that he should have needed the Byakugan to detect Shikamaru's chakra.

_There's no way he could mask that from me._

Or any Hyūga…could he?

Neji wracked his senses, searching again for some trace of the other ninja's chakra.

Unperturbed, Shikamaru slanted against the doorframe leading into a small kitchenette. Cradling a cup of coffee in one hand, he dropped his chin so that the steam rolled over his face, ghosting across sharp, lidded eyes. The shadows were thick and black behind him – just two steps back and the darkness would swallow him completely.

He offered up nothing into the silence.

Neji's search for chakra was futile. Rather than allow this to frustrate him, he switched his focus onto Shikamaru's face. An ache of concern roiled in his chest. He might not have been able to _sense_ Shikamaru, but he could _see_ him.

And the shadow-nin looked thinner, noticeably so.

 Somehow, a fortnight had managed to whet and whittle Shikamaru's body into something sharper and harder – but also something worn. His cheekbones were a little more prominent, the hollows beneath them deeper. Neji couldn't see his eyes, just the shadows beneath them; the chocolate orbs remained hidden beneath a hood of dark lashes and shuttered lids.

_Impossible to read…_

Neji willed those eyes to open wider, just for a moment.

They didn't.

Seconds slipped between them and the tension grew heavy and weighed.

Beyond the window, rain hammered down in a tinny shatter, keeping them from a completely oppressive silence. All the while they studied each other, Neji staring directly while Shikamaru gazed from beneath his lashes, both taking in two weeks worth of absence and the impact it had created.

"What happened to your face?" Shikamaru eventually asked, breaking the silence on a murmur.

Neji turned his head a little, looking askance in non-verbal query.

Shikamaru arched a brow and grazed a thumb along the edge of his jaw to indicate the deep, yellow and purple bruising across Neji's face. The Hyūga had all but forgotten about his earlier penalty at Hitaro's hand. As with most punishments in his clan, the brunt of the damage was beneath the surface, usually internal bleeding or bruising – there might have been something morbidly poetic in that.

Shikamaru opened his mouth, hesitated, then drew his tongue across his lips, pressing them together after a beat. "Right."

More like a "yeah, right" that Neji didn't need to hear to sense it was implied; it plucked one of the many strings of tension pulling tighter and tighter between them.

*So make this easier. Turn and walk away.*

He managed to accomplish the first instruction and turned – inadvertently – towards the shadow-nin. The second he did, Shikamaru's body angled away, leaning further into the kitchenette until he straddled the threshold.

Neji paused, raising a mental eyebrow at the skittish reaction.

Half-wrapped in shadow, Shikamaru recovered his slouch and sipped at his coffee, slipping back into an image of lazy, unaffected avoidance. Or at least he might have looked that way, had Neji not seen those long fingers tighten around the steaming mug.

"This isn't how I imagined seeing you again, Shikamaru…"

A faint smile kicked at the visible corner of Shikamaru's mouth. "Yeah. A mission would've been less troublesome."

Neji inclined his head in acknowledgement rather than agreement. A mission may have given them roles they understood, a set script to adhere to, a safe stage to interact on – but it didn't account for what went on behind their masks.

*And you always saw beneath mine…*

Neji traced his eyes over the fold of the burgundy yukata drawn unevenly across Shikamaru's chest. He followed the bared "V" of olive skin up to the jut of a collarbone, then across to Shikamaru's throat, rising back up to the chiselled profile.

The Nara didn't look at him. "Minus the bruising…you look well…"

"You don't," Neji returned, realising too late how blunt he sounded.

"Thanks, Hyūga." Shikamaru's lips flicked up weakly behind the coffee cup. "Too bad you missed my road-cone hat. You woulda had a field day on the verbal abuse front."

The lazy drawl spiralled through Neji, smoking out feelings he'd pushed deep into his chest. He could think of nothing to say that wouldn't betray him and nothing to do that wouldn't betray them both.

Never short on quick-thinking to avoid slow torture, Shikamaru spared them the pain of another silence. "How'd the peace negotiations go?"

An irrelevant but safe enough question; better than anything Neji might have said. He suspected a mass of tripwires outside of this secure work-related zone.

Neji shifted forward, needing to move. "Peacefully enough, all things considered."

Shikamaru hummed, tensing up in a barely discernible shift when Neji stepped away from the glass doors. "Got Gaara's stamp of approval, right? Temari mentioned inheriting allies."

"The incestuous world of politics," Neji concluded dryly, inclining his head. "Yes, the Kazekage is
"In accord…” Shikamaru drawled, poking fun at the formality.

There was something infuriating and achingly familiar about that.

Neji had to admit – albeit begrudgingly and silently – that his refined air was nothing short of ridiculous in this situation. Here they were, exchanging debriefing details like they were no more than newly acquainted comrades.

*That IS all you are...comrades...*

It's not like they were ever friends. Not really. Friendship? They'd done one hell of a leap and bound over that personal touchstone and all its social hallmarks.

Neji paused by the takonama alcove, prepared to measure the reaction to his next words. "You're not sleeping."

You're having nightmares, is what he wanted to say.

Shikamaru smirked, gazing into his mug, his stare vacant. "Nijū Shōtai's got me keyed-up. Lee would love it. Makes Gai-sensei's workouts seem like warm-ups."

"I doubt Asuma-senpai would let your training compromise your health."

As suspected, Shikamaru's brows drew together at the mention of Asuma and the shadow-nin raised his mug to his lips, blowing steam off the top. Neji filed away the reaction.

"You got back yesterday?" Shikamaru asked, steering the focus back onto Neji.

"Yes." Neji hesitated before adding, "I will be leaving again."

Shikamaru spent a moment digesting that, then nodded. "Mission?"

"That remains to be seen," Neji replied, certain that Shikamaru would deduce the hidden meaning in his words: I'll seize whatever opportunity I can to keep distance between us, mission or no mission.

Which didn't explain why he was still here.

"A-ranks are aplenty, Hyūga." Shikamaru's eyes lidded in a lazy blink but his knuckles flashed bone-white against the mug's ceramic. "Whatever comes up – take it."

Neji didn't react to the bite in those words. He knew he deserved them and told himself it was better this way. Better that Shikamaru's hurt and anger created distance between them rather than close it. Or so he told himself.

Shikamaru took a sip of his coffee, the muscles of his throat working once. "So how's Hanegakure?"

"Healing," Neji replied. "There are still scars on the minds of the people. Hibari has a long way to go in washing the blood off his clan's name."

"Yeah, guess that's to be expected. And the caster kids?"

Neji hesitated, his face carefully blank as the image of Maki's crayon sketch and heart-shaped
cookies came to mind, accompanied by visions of children revived from their former ghost-like shells; boys and girls baring toothy grins, dimpled cheeks and bright, hopeful eyes.

Hope for a future without tradition's chains and cages.

Blinking slowly, Neji glanced at the wall scroll in the alcove: an image of a crane taking flight, white wings stretched against sunset skies.

His lips softened in a fleeting, barely-there smile. "They're free."

Shikamaru's head turned.

Neji sensed his gaze, but didn't return it. There was no guarantee that another lock of their eyes wouldn't trigger a landmine on this precarious territory. One digression might lead into that grey area they'd both sworn off.

*Stay focused.*

Searching for anything to distract from the silence, Neji let out a quiet breath. "Speaking of the children, it would appear you've garnered yourself a couple of fangirls, Shikamaru."

Shikamaru's mug froze mid-way to his mouth. "What?"

"Surely you remember," the Hyūga admonished. "They dubbed you 'Tricky'."

Shikamaru jerked his head a little, then let out a quiet chuckle against the rim of his mug. "Right, the limpets."

"Limpets…?" Neji echoed blankly.

"They attach."

Neji looked over, nonplussed.

Sensing the lack of comprehension on Neji's face without having to see it, Shikamaru rolled his eyes and lazily swayed a hand back and forth across his waist, indicating imaginary arms wrapped around his torso.

"They attach and they cling," he said, making another half-assed gesture. "Limpets."

"I see." Amusement flickered in Neji's eyes. "I should have asked them to demonstrate why they call you Tricky."

Smiling a little, Shikamaru ducked his head and scratched at the bridge of his nose, the embarrassment picking up in his voice. "Yeah well, I guess the stupid name makes sense."

"Of course." Neji smirked. "If you were a well-trained dog."

Shikamaru let out a soft, breathy laugh.

Neji closed his eyes at the sound, a light crease forming between his brows.

"I wish," the Nara muttered, a roll of his wrist sent steam wafting. "A dog's life is easy. Give me a heart-shaped cookie and I'll have an excuse to roll over and play dead."

Neji scoffed, unable to resist a playful jibe. "I doubt you need an excuse for that trick, Nara, let
alone a food prompt."

"No kidding." Shikamaru tipped his head against the doorframe, glancing out the corner of his eye. "Never catch a Hyūga playing possum, huh?"

"No." Neji forced his lashes open, fighting a smile. "It's not dramatic enough for a Hyūga."

Another quiet chuckle. "Yeah, 'cause you never do things by halves, right?"

"You should know."

"Not likely to forget even if I wanted to."

_Do you want to?_

The question struck Neji's brain like a flash bomb, startling him. He almost asked, but refrained, managing to cling to the thread of humour, hoping to hold the moment together rather than shatter it.

"Permanence, Nara. That's the effect of a dramatic, lasting impression."

"Not so sure about that. You keep impressing your hitai-ate into my skull and I'm gonna dramatically and permanently start forgetting shit."

They laughed at the same time, both looking across in an ill-timed heartbeat.

That was all it took.

The second their gazes locked, an incendiary spark struck deep in the pit of Neji's stomach, throwing an ember into that grey, colourless territory of ashes and dust, licking fire up into the ghostly white of his eyes.

Instantaneous heat.

Shikamaru's dark orbs flashed wide with it.

And then Neji felt it.

The Need itching beneath his skin, aching to burn.

Shikamaru's lips parted, snatching a breath that had the hollow of his throat darkening and deepening.

Neji turned to face him – and the air turned with him.

Immediately, the room felt charged, electric and humming with the static of a thousand unfinished, unresolved tensions. Everything condensed into a hair-raising friction. Delicious and dark, it crawled through blood and over skin, stretched itself across bodies holding back and holding in.

And then Shikamaru snapped his eyes shut.

It severed the connection so abruptly that Neji almost jolted.

The vital chord of that bond pulled too tight and snapped back like a whip, cracking across his heart.
"Leave," Shikamaru rasped, shaking his head. "You need to leave."

Neji blinked slowly, his breath tapering off.

He made no move to indicate that he'd heard, or that he'd comply even if he had.

Shikamaru's lips framed a snarl. He made a sudden retreat into the kitchenette, underscored by the loud clack of his mug hitting a lacquered counter.

It snapped Neji from his daze.

Moonstone eyes refocused on the black square of the kitchenette's doorway, searching for movement he didn't suspect would happen.

But this wasn't an avoidance act.

No sooner had Shikamaru vanished into the kitchenette then he was moving out from the darkness back into the amber hues and patchy shadows of the main room.

The second he crossed Neji, his expression closed off.

The anger sucked out of his face and seeped into the room, leaving a different charge in the air.

Neji inhaled deeply, trying to calm the cinders in his blood. "Shikamaru…"

The Nara shook his head, pacing the room in an agitated stop and start, heading eventually towards the glass doors, keeping distance at all times, raking his fingers along his scalp.

Neji remained calcified on the spot, the fight inside him bordering on futile.

Fight.

He knew how to fight – at least he knew how to fight anything else. He wasn't so sure he could win this battle this time around.

"Neji...stop fighting."

The air turned to lead in his lungs. Gods but fate was a fickle, fractious mistress, forcing him to wage a war against the only part of himself that he'd ever allowed to stop fighting – at least for a little while.

While I was with you...

He watched Shikamaru press his brow against the glass doors, clouding the rain-streaked surface with his breath.

The shadow-nin chuckled darkly. "Damn, I hate irony."

Neji tensed at the hollow laugh – and the clairvoyant nature of the words – a coil of unease winding in his stomach.

"Irony?" he echoed.

Shikamaru exhaled another rough, mirthless laugh, fogging up the glass, twisting his forehead against the cool pane. "I really, really, hate irony."
"You think this is ironic." Neji didn't pitch it as a question. Maybe he already considered it an answer. One he immediately cast aside.

"What the hell else can this be?" Shikamaru whispered, more to himself. "Unless I haven't woken up."

Neji tilted his head. "Woken up?"

Shikamaru pressed his eyes shut. He smoothed his palms along the doors and leaned in slowly only to push back, elbows locked, fingers splayed against the glass. He stayed this way for a few tense seconds, his arms braced. Then they dropped, one hand jamming at his hip, the other passing across his mouth to frame his jaw.

Neji gazed wordlessly, taking a kinaesthetic approach.

His mind still held the language of Shikamaru's body – its translation locked in memories. Memories locked in silence and symbols. A script he'd traced out with his tongue, branding Shikamaru's skin in a searing brail he had only to run his fingers over to remember once again.

In place of his hands, he ran his gaze over Shikamaru instead.

Eventually, the shadow-nin slipped his eyes open, staring blankly at his reflection. "Quit giving me the onceover, Hyūga."

Neji's eyes sharpened to the same tightness as his mouth. "Then give me some answers so I don't have to search for them."

"Damn..." Shikamaru smirked. "You feeling the irony yet?"

Neji's expression flattened and frosted. He had no idea what the hell he was feeling, only that he needed to fight it – and fast. "No."

"Figures. This hypocritical kind of crap always comes back to bite me in the ass."

_Hypocritical? What the hell are you talking about?_

Frustrated now, Neji clamped his jaw, pulling in a slow breath to keep from pushing forward. But stepping back wasn't an option either, so he did the only thing he could, which was stand his stubborn ground whilst respecting the distance Shikamaru had put between them.

"Confused, huh?" Shikamaru tipped his head back, staring at the top of the glass doors with a slim smirk. "Keep up, Hyūga. This might actually be funny when you're on the same page..."

Recognising the tactic, Neji's frustration guttered out, his frown dissolving. "You always did channel your anger into sarcasm."

"Sorry to be predictable. I better up my game."

"Is that what you're doing here, Shikamaru? Playing games again?"

Shikamaru barked a hoarse, harsh laugh. Pivoting on his heel, he cut straight past Neji, his steps building in an aggressive, inner crescendo.

"Isn't the more pressing question what the hell you're doing here, Neji?"

Panic kicked Neji's pulse into a canter.
Any truth he might have uttered was shot down by a belated flash of self-preservation. There was absolutely no way he could provide Shikamaru with an answer without pulling up a hundred other buried questions.

That wasn't why he was here.

_Gods, why AM I here?_

Another deeply buried question, with an answer clawing its way to the surface of his face. Threatened by the risk of unearthing these unspoken and unresolved truths, the armour came up around Neji's expression in an instant.

He raised his chin and dropped his voice, deep tones limed with ice. "Be careful, Nara. Given your aquatic adventure in the tub, I doubt you'll want to go another round with _that_ question. I'll only return it and I don't think you're game."

Shikamaru froze mid-stride, stopped cold in his tracks.

Neji frowned, not having predicted that reaction. It was as unexpected as every detail he'd witnessed up until this moment; from Shikamaru's vicious waking hours before, to his idiotic stunt under the water, to the change in his features and the shadows carved into them.

"Gods, what's happened to you?" Neji breathed out, not so sure he wanted the answer, already feeling accountable.

Neji stepped forward.

Shikamaru's shoulders drew up.

"Shikamaru…"

The shadow-nin gave a quick turnabout and paused just as fast, angling his body half in light and half in shadow. He shot Neji a wide-eyed look edged with a strange, wild emotion the Hyūga had never seen in those mahogany orbs before this night.

Neji blinked, drawing his head back in confusion.

_What could have possibly happened in two weeks to have caused this?_

The look in Shikamaru's eyes was impossible to place. It wasn't quite fear…or anger. Maybe something bred from both.

Neji's voice gentled to a murmur. "Shikamaru."

At the shift in his tone, Shikamaru's glare faltered, softened, stroked over Neji's face and then – as if sensing his gaze was betraying him – he snapped up a hand to rub at his eyes and across his brow.

"Shit…” A rough sigh sloughed through his nose. "I used to be good at stopping things before they started…at least the stuff that isn't happening now."

"What isn't happening now?"

"Detach and delete. I'm good at that…"

Neji cocked his head, waiting for clarity. It never came. Shikamaru blew out a long, shaky breath,
dropping his hand to his hip, staring hard at Neji's throat without raising his eyes.

"But not this…" he added after a long moment. "This always happens."

Resisting the urge to frown, the muscles in Neji's jaw pulsed. "What happens?"

"You happen!" Shikamaru snarled, throwing a hand up. "Every damned night! Not sleeping? I fucking wish."

A sharp, indrawn breath.

Neji went abruptly still, a weak attempt to stop what rattled through him on the inside.

Shikamaru's eyes flicked over his face in quick, calculated darts, searching for a reaction, something to latch onto.

Neji's expression didn't change.

Shikamaru's lips pulled back, teeth bared in a brief, angry flash. "Before you decided to play lifeguard you were watching me." His eyes sliced thinner, dark orbs glittering. "Why?"

Neji cursed inwardly.

Damn.

"You're so good at reading people, Shikamaru, so you tell me," Neji replied, the chill in his voice not matching his eyes at all.

Shikamaru's eyebrow cut upward. "Weak, Hyūga."

Weak.

The word hit Neji's pride dead-on centre, prompting a dangerous ripple of muscle before his spine tightened. He fought for control and arranged his body back into some semblance of calm, his countenance instantly composed.

"I didn't intend to come here tonight," he said quietly. "Or for this to happen."

"No?" Shikamaru rocked his head to one side, jaw tight. "Funny that, but then it's not like you're big on intentions. Action is your credo, right?"

The corners of Neji's eyes pinched hard.

God...he remembers everything...

And what pained Neji more than those words being thrown back in his face was the thought that Shikamaru had probably spent two weeks trying to forget them – and had failed miserably.

"What you do." Shikamaru paused here, swallowing down a ragged chuckle. "Or maybe it's more about what you don't do."

The punctuation of the last two words dug like kunai into Neji's sternum. But the usual urge to defend or attack didn't come. He lacked the anger needed to do either of those things.

For one tender second, the guard dropped around his eyes.
Then his face wiped clean of all expression and he closed the distance in sudden, steady steps.

Blindsided by this unexpected reaction and the accompanying movement, Shikamaru's head drew back – but the rest of him didn't. His fists balled, nostrils flared, aggression locking into the fierce square of his shoulders.

Unfazed, Neji met the Nara head-on.

He only halted just shy of drawing toe-to-toe.

Time slowed and reality narrowed down to the charged space between them, blurring lines into indistinct smudges in Neji's mind. His focus sharpened on Shikamaru's eyes, which hooded immediately; but the shadow-nin wasn't fast enough to disguise the deepening black of dilated pupils.

Neji's blood stirred.

Ignoring the primal line between aggression and arousal, he forced a practiced calm through every tingling nerve, flooding it into his muscles like chakra.

"And what don't I do, Shikamaru?" Neji asked at length, his voice deep and low.

Shikamaru's eyes tapered to slits, tensing in struggle.

The sight of it drove that razor pain a little deeper into Neji's chest.

Battling with himself, the Jōnin gazed without expression, willing an answer with his eyes, searching for it in Shikamaru's face. For a fraction of a second, he almost caught that answer etching into the centre of the shadow-nin's brow and the far corners of his dark eyes.

But it was gone in an instant.

"It doesn't matter," Shikamaru murmured, barely pulling off a half-shrug. "Not to sound all schoolyard, but it's not like you started it."

A muscle in Neji's jaw ticked. "I started it tonight."

"Like you could," Shikamaru returned, trying for a bitter smile. "You can't."

Neji's stony gaze knocked the twist off Shikamaru's lips but rather than recover his smirk, the shadow-nin's face softened in the barest betrayal of what his eyes had given away earlier.

"Because how the hell can it start…when it never stopped?"

If anything stopped, it was Neji's heart.

Stopped…

Just for a moment.

Then lurching, it picked up its beat in an erratic throb he had to swallow against just to draw air. Pain and need washed through him and the sudden surge of feeling was almost impossible to fight, impossible to control.

*Control*…
Neji almost slipped up, but he curbed the urge to reach forward by reaching deeper inside himself. God, surely if there was anything he could do and could do well, it was control.

Shikamaru salvaged a smirk, eyes hooding. "And you can't even humour me by laughing at the irony. Thanks, Hyūga, you're still an uptight pain in the ass."

Any irritation or anger that Neji might have felt was eclipsed by something he hadn't stopped feeling since the day he'd walked away. And for a fleeting moment, the feeling stole into his face and across his pale orbs, transforming his gaze into a look he'd never set on anyone else and instinctively knew he never would.

Not like this...

Shikamaru startled at the sight of it and closed his eyes.

Neji made to step forward.

Dark eyes snapped open and Shikamaru stiffened, body braced to bolt.

The reaction stopped Neji immediately. If only it had surprised him. Of all the memories that haunted him, the violence he'd unleashed on Shikamaru two weeks ago topped the list of indelible regrets no stretch of time could ever erase.

Perhaps that was for the best. If he forgot it, he risked repeating it.

That lesson didn't include the 'letting go' part.

Stayed by this understanding, the move Neji might have made never came. He fell back a step instead, not needing to be pushed or prompted by anything other than the Nara's reaction to him.

Wary, Shikamaru remained rigid, dissecting and deliberating Neji's move like a pause in a game before his voice scraped out. "Who'd have thought you'd use your head this time around."

"And who'd have thought you'd be the one holding your breath..." Neji returned quietly. "If that's the irony, Shikamaru, forgive me for failing to see the humour in it."

"That's too bad, Hyūga," Shikamaru murmured, his smile more weary than wry. "Takes the edge off the past just long enough to make you think you can forget it."

Forget...

The word dug its bitter sting scorpion-like into Neji's chest, flooding venom in a hot rush of anger that cooled and tempered into the steely angles of his face, hardening his eyes to keep them guarded.

Forget...?

Hadn't Shikamaru told him not to? And even if he hadn't, it's not like any part of Neji had a hope in hell of erasing the memories. It didn't matter that the memories were broken or bruised or bloody. Because deep, deep down, where no one could touch them, or taint them, or take them away from him, he risked the pain just to find the peace that lay scattered amongst all the pieces.

He needed that peace.

Because when the nights were beyond long and bordering on endless and when the days bled together with a monotony of duty and goals of distant destinations it was the memories he returned
They were all he had left in a part of himself he'd almost lost.

_I can't forget._

Shikamaru spoke then, his voice drifting out in a floating, faraway murmur. "It's one hell of a placebo if you can convince yourself."

"To forget…" Neji clarified, a profound sense of loss threatening to open up inside him.

"Yeah," the shadow-nin whispered. "To forget…"

Neji gave him a long, searching look, pulling every muscle taut to keep from making the move he'd only just avoided. "And have you?"

"Convinced myself?" The shadow-nin said, deliberately evasive. "You'd think that trying to would make two weeks of damage control a little easier."

Neji frowned, seriously doubting that "easier" fitted into any context ever created by the paradoxical worlds of chaos and calm they'd woken up inside each other. As for damage control – isn't that why he'd walked away?

"Is it any easier?" he asked softly.

"No…” Shikamaru husked, barely keeping his voice level.

Neji remained silent, eyes fixed on Shikamaru, every fibre inside him focused on trying to find the faintest tendrils of the shadow-nin's chakra. He could almost feel it again, a hairsbreadth beyond reach.

The silence dragged on.

And then Shikamaru closed his eyes, swallowed with difficulty and shuddered out a gust of pent-up breath. "No…” he repeated roughly. "And one more memory of trying to fix you…only to break us both…is about as much as I can take…”

Neji's throat constricted, crushing his breath. "Shikamaru…”

"Don't." Shikamaru rasped, raising his hands with palms held outward, backing away and shifting into that chameleon skin Neji had sensed was coming. "I've done the damage, Hyūga…I trust you can handle the control part."

Even if Neji had possessed the ability to work his throat and croak out a reply, Shikamaru didn't wait on his answer. Without a backward glance, the Nara melted into the shadows of the corridor, leaving Neji to a silence broken only by the rain.

_It can't be real._

Everything inside him knew that it was.

Shikamaru sat on the bedroom floor, elbows propped on his knees, back against the wall. The sleeves of his yukata hung in deep, dark triangles at the crooks of his bare arms, olive skin prickled against the chill biting into the room.
"I started it tonight."

_Every night…this might as well be one more dream…_

Too bad his intelligence tended to sabotage his capacity for imagination. If it didn't, he might've been able to convince himself that everything that had just happened _was_ just another dream playing out in his head.

That it was all fantasy.

That Neji wasn't real...just some figment as fleeting as the smoke.

Shikamaru inhaled it passively, not reaching for a drag just yet. He'd lit it for the haze, for the obscurity and for the comfort of the familiar smell. It steadied his nerves in place of Asuma's presence.

Given his state of mind, he could have used his sensei's grounding company right now.

Fortunately, it helped just knowing that Asuma was near. Always just around the corners that Shikamaru wedged himself into when he withdrew. It made it possible for him to run without ever worrying about losing his way.

_Can't run from this…_

Shikamaru swallowed, watching ash eat along the cigarette. It dangled between the knuckles of his long, lax fingers, streaming its life in ribbons. The smoke drifted like white ink in black water, waiting to be scried. But there was nothing to be augured, no nebulous answers or sage advice – or if there was, Shikamaru couldn't see it.

It's not like he believed in divination, destiny or dreams.

_It's not rational. It's not real._

Thunder boomed like canon fire.

The cigarette's thin paper flashed blue-white in the lightning glow.

Shikamaru didn't blink, his vacant stare fixed on the smoke spiralling off the end, swirling in a draught carrying from under the door. The chill was a far cry from the sensation eating through the shadow-nin on the inside, hungry as the burn steadily turning the cigarette to ash.

_That's what you do to me…_

The Need had fangs this time around, gnawed deeper than it ever did in his dreams. And he couldn't fight it. And he couldn't block out the low rumble of Asuma's voice reverberating through his mind.

_"Then you do the only thing you can with a need like that."_

Shikamaru eyes stung but it wasn't the smoke.

He rolled the dangling cigarette from his knuckles into a secure pinch between his fingers and thumb. He pressed it to dry lips, dark glassy eyes fixed ahead. A long drag pulled the tobacco deep into his lungs, the urge to cough adding to the pressure building in a moist burn behind his eyes.

_Oil on fire, gasoline on flames – that's what it felt like under his skin._
"You live with it, Shikamaru."

The smoke left his nose in a gush and crushing out the cigarette, he turned his gaze toward the door. The haze cleared from his eyes, leaving them shining but sharp. Ignoring the dusting of ash on the carpet, Shikamaru pushed to his feet.

*Live with it…?*

He'd live with it until there was nothing left to burn.

The ryokan suite took on a cavernous quality in the dark. Doorways gaped like open mouths, exhaling a chill breath through the main room. Shadows clung to the walls and dipped into the alcove, the amber floor lamps now dormant at the feet of fusama panels. Rain reflected off everything, making the floors, pillars, glass and shoji screens seem like they were shedding watery skins.

Shikamaru idled through the dark, not bothering with a light switch.

He'd clocked the suite's layout the second he'd entered earlier in the evening.

Passing by the low, lacquered table, he took a beeline towards the glass doors, subconsciously picking the safest, most strategic position to observe from. It allowed him to monitor everything behind him as if on a screen. There was an odd, one-way mirror quality about it that made detachment seem easier.

He'd need that security, even if it was a lie.

Because he needed no conscious cuing to know he wasn't alone.

"You're still here…" he whispered, his voice rusty.

For a long moment, the only sound Shikamaru could detect was the crash of the rain on the veranda and the throb of his own heartbeat filling his ears, crowding his head with pressure.

Movement sounded across the room.

A rustle of fabric brushed in a soft sweep against the wall, giving away the unseen presence. Shikamaru read the nonverbal response: I'm still here.

Nerves knotting at the base of his skull, Shikamaru swallowed thickly. "You never go…"

Rain dribbled along the panes, coiled in runny question marks and chased each other in confusion. Shikamaru touched his fingertips to the cool glass, watching it fog around the edges of his skin.

"I see you every night…" He flattened his palm, smeared the condensation of his breath and watched it fade. "So maybe this is one more dream."

More silence.

Rain fell, filled and flooded over the veranda.

And then Neji's deep, melodious voice spilled into the quiet like wine over silk. "Maybe that's all it ever could be, Shikamaru. All it ever was."

Shikamaru ground his teeth as that voice stroked over him. The pulse at the base of his throat beat.
A dream…

If that's all it ever was then he'd never opened his eyes after Neji had closed them two weeks ago. The day the Hyūga had walked away a part of Shikamaru had walked away too. It had wandered, lain down and never got up again. Now it was lost someplace he couldn't reach. And something else had woken up instead.

The past…

He breathed slowly, fogging up the glass again. "Why are you still here?"

"I'm humouring your sense of irony, Shikamaru."

"Then you should be running away. That's what I'd do."

"Only you never did, did you?"

Shikamaru's throat tightened. "And what? You think that makes this right? Makes us even?"

"I didn't realise we were ever keeping score."

We weren't…

Maybe they had been in the beginning, when it had been about pride and priorities and pushing for excuses. Excuses to justify why they'd started playing this dangerous game in the first place.

Game…

Shikamaru's head came up, his unfocused gaze sliding across the glass, following the past as it played out in his mind.

That's not why I did it…

No, because regardless of the lies at the beginning he'd known the truth long before the end: it had never been a game. And even if it had been then they were never the players, just the pieces. Because there's no way he'd ever have let it play out the way it did. Rational thinking would have forbidden it.

Rational thinking: fat lot of good it had done him lately.

Shikamaru sighed, the shudder of his breath going bone-deep. It shivered into the air, stirring Neji from the shadows. Shikamaru caught the movement in the glass, but didn't follow it.

He couldn't.

If he did then he'd no longer be on the outside looking in. He'd be thrust into the moment; into the here and now. And if he was in the here and now, then there would be no running from it. No way to pretend that Neji was a mirage. A dream. An illusion. He'd no longer shatter or slip away if Shikamaru turned to take, touch, taste and make him tangible.

Make him real.

Just one touch would do it.
Maybe even one breath.

He heard Neji change direction; a brush of bare feet across the square tatami mats, conjuring an image in Shikamaru's mind of a Shogi piece sliding diagonally across a board. Come to think of it, the floor looked like a board, its design simple, squared, defined, clear-cut.

Something he could follow, classify and understand.

He found his voice with effort. "Wanna know what else is ironic?"

"Tell me," Neji urged gently.

The Jōnin's tone threw Shikamaru – threw him hard. He hesitated, almost shooting a glance at the ghost standing in the glass. He focused on working his throat, shaping words in a husky rush.

"I can play one hell of a game with the truth. I can lie and make it convincing enough for others to believe it. But I can never convince myself. I can't do make-believe." He shook his head, watching patterns form in the raindrops. "Not even as a kid."

"Why?"

"Didn't see the point in pretending that things which weren't real actually existed…"

"And yet you do this all the time when you strategize."

Shikamaru smiled bitterly, noting in some detached corner of his mind that this was turning into a conversation. They never had conversations in his dreams. Not the talking kind.

God, he'd missed their conversations…

Forcing himself to latch back onto the words, his eyes refocused on the glass.

"That's not what I do. I account for possibilities and probabilities. That's calculation, not creativity. They're not make-believe scenarios, they're possible outcomes." He cocked his head, watching the raindrops dribble, marveling not at their patterns but at their possibilities. "Realistic, logical, viable outcomes."

"And how is any of that ironic?"

"The irony is that I could always work it the other way around."

"What do you mean?"

"Work it the other way around," Shikamaru repeated, tapping a fist to the window, tracing raindrops against the grain of their direction with a drag of his knuckles. "I can't make the imaginary real, but I can make the real imaginary. I can make something that happened something that's not happening now and move on. Make it some meaningless dream I woke up from."

"Does that include the nightmares, Shikamaru?"

The question dropped straight into Shikamaru's gut.

His fist froze against the glass.

He blinked hard, rasping. "What?"
"I always wondered at that…” Neji began, his voice taking on a resonant quality that made it impossible to gauge which direction it was coming from – it seemed to roll off the walls. "Wondered how you knew exactly what to do when I woke up at 4AM. How every time, whether you consciously realised it or not, you knew exactly how to respond to my panic."

Shikamaru's tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth, throat dry and hot.

Lighting blazed outside, casting his profile in silver, the burst of light white-washing his brain with a flicker of memories, brief as a camera flash.

"Practice makes perfect," he drawled, blinking fast. "Know what beats damage control, Hyūga? Border control." He raised a hand, tapping at his temple. "Keep this straight, the rest falls into place. Fail to do that and it all falls apart. Told you before that I fuck up when I stop thinking."

He'd learned that the hard way. Learned early on that thought – including memory – triggered emotion. A fact of the fucked-up human brain: it was all in the neural wiring. Shikamaru had re-wired his brain at fifteen so he didn't have to deal with that shit. He'd turned days of numbing, post-traumatic shock into a period of autistic but accelerated learning. He'd worked on autopilot to master the mental techniques needed to stitch himself up inside before the apathy wore off.

He'd never let that pain take root.

In his mind this wasn't denial – it was detachment.

Shikamaru's panacea was simple: detach, disassociate, diagnose and delete.

Easy avoidance, quick results, all gain with no pain.

He wasn't like Neji.

He couldn't push emotions down into deep ugly wounds that never healed. He'd seen enough people do that to know how it ended. Their pain either delivered them from their darkness or it destroyed them. He didn't want to know if he fell into the latter category. He dealt enough in shadows as it was.

"Which might make your darkness far more dangerous than anyone else's if you let yourself fall."

He shook off Temari's warning: a stupid, presumptuous, unnecessary warning.

The past was over. No more than a fading scar across his mind.

Then why is it haunting me?

And if it had faded, then how had Neji seen it, ripped into it and made it real? Why now, after two years, did that scar crack and tear and bleed when Asuma mentioned it?

"I wasn't there. For whatever reason. For whatever happened. And I'm sorry."

Emotion burned like acid in Shikamaru's throat and behind his eyes.

I'm not…I'm not sorry…

The fear crawled cold up and down his spine and Shikamaru drew in a sharp breath through his nose. He flayed his brain with mental whips, a futile effort to stop his mouth from moving.

"Some things belong in the shadows…” he murmured to his reflection.
"Is that where you're hiding, Shikamaru? In your shadows?"

"I'm not hiding."

"Aren't you?"

When Neji moved again Shikamaru felt it rather than saw it this time. Gravitational laws they'd created weeks ago began to pull and grind between them. It felt real enough, but logically, so did the recent dreams when he was having them.

They're not real…

And yet he'd still wake up burning with a fever, or frozen inside with a fear he didn't want to think about. Maybe it made sense that he couldn't control that. Neji had woken up the fear. And everything that Neji had ever woken up inside him never responded to logic anyway.

Because it's not in my head…

A broken laugh rattled out of him, teeth snapping shut.

Fuck…I'm such a hypocrite...

He clenched his jaw against a judder, muscles bunching at the hinges.

"Shikamaru…" Neji's voice fell in a rumble, answered by a belly-growl of thunder beyond the windows.

But Shikamaru felt a different reverberation rattling through him; his every fibre picking up on the presence drawing closer behind him. Every sense heightened, tuning in to the shiver of vibration, energy, static. Reacting to the nearness. But it was just out of reach. Just short of being real.

And then Shikamaru felt it: the sultry heat of Neji's breath.

A damp, devastating caress against his nape that raised shorthairs, tightened skin and sent a rough friction tearing up and down his spine, pulsing hot ripples through every tensing muscle. The tendons in Shikamaru's throat pulled tight, his neck almost arching back.

And that was just Neji's breath on his skin.

Not even a touch.

Fuck...

Recovering with a hiss, Shikamaru's lashes flickered heavily and his gaze cast up in a damning second of weakness. And that second sealed his fate; fixed it in one look.

One look into ivory eyes and he was lost.

Neji...

Neji's eyes hung like moons in the glass: pale, lunar orbs emanating that gravitational pull which tugged through Shikamaru until he felt his body burning from the strain of holding back.

His eyes glazed to keep from focusing, the moist sting making it easier. "What do you want, Neji?" He tried for a smile, failing miserably, his voice so hoarse it fell below a whisper. "One more memory to try and forget?"
Neji tilted his head, lashes lowering until those moonstone orbs were no more than crescents. A slow blink later they waxed again, wide and searching. Shikamaru stared back, blinking through the blur of his vision, clueless as to what Neji was looking for – not wanting to know.

*I can't…*

He couldn't look away either.

Impaled and distracted by the intensity of those eyes, he almost jumped when the Hyūga's palms pressed into the glass either side of him, caging him between the strong and solid bars of Neji's arms.

Shikamaru froze, eyes wide, chakra beginning to blister and singe inside him, crawling over nerve-endings, catching on fire. "Neji…"

Neji's breath hitched against his nape. "There you are…" he whispered.

Shikamaru didn't have time to make sense of that. Neji's chakra washed over him in a thick, satin wave, flooding drug-like into his system, dimming his vision, knocking the air out of his lungs. Shocked, Shikamaru slammed his palms against the glass beside Neji's splayed hands, struggling for purchase.

He choked out a breath. "FUCK!"

Instantly, the rush of Neji's chakra eased its hot flood into a cool flow: ebbing, folding and kneading. It moulded around the smoky tendrils of Shikamaru's chakra, lacing patterns in places his body couldn't follow and his brain couldn't find.

"Right here…" Neji murmured.

The words were lost on Shikamaru, lost beneath the harsh pant that tore out of his throat. His heart lost its rhythm, picking up a beat that his blood began to scream to. Tenketsu throbbed in tiny flares. Dizzy, he dropped his brow against the glass to keep his head from dropping back, a tremor running through his thighs, fingers gnarled against the glass.

"Ngh! Shit..." he hissed. "W-what're you...doing..."

"Trust me…"

Shikamaru might have snarled at that if he wasn't mildly incoherent.

Another sudden pulse of Neji's chakra and Shikamaru felt his palms burning, the soles of his feet scorching as if he were standing on hot coals. Sweat broke out across his body but a chill chased right behind it, a crazy cycle he couldn't make sense of – hot and cold playing through him in a fever.

*What the HELL is he doing to me…?*

Shikamaru had barely constructed the thought before the intensity of energy running through him gentled and slowed. Easing off, it lapped in a soft, lazy current around the edges of Shikamaru's chakra, turning the heady rush into a hazy ripple.

Soothing, sensual, swirling south…

Shikamaru groaned.
He felt the bracket of Neji's arms tighten, just shy of touching his shoulders: supporting him without touching him. He shuddered, the scant space between his back and the Hyūga's chest crackling with something stronger than chakra, filling with an intensity that robbed him of his ability to breathe.

And then Neji's voice whispered tenderly at his ear, stopping his breath altogether. "I'm not here for a memory, Shikamaru…just a moment…"
"I'm not here for a memory, Shikamaru…just a moment…"

*A moment*…?

It took more than a moment for Shikamaru to process those words. His brain had gone into lockdown, the border-control around his mind refusing to allow *any* rational thought to pass through.

Logic? Out of-commission.

Fallback plan? Not happening.

This left him at the mercy of his body and the tremors wracking through it. It felt like corpuscles of chakra drifting in his blood. Tiny charged motes that followed the ley-lines of his body, tracing through the chakra pathways intersecting every organ and muscle, tickling tenketsu into pulsing flares and turning every nerve-ending into a conductor.

Shikamaru's teeth ground together, fingers crabbing against the glass.

"Let…go…" he choked out.

The squeak of Neji's palms startled him. His dazed, lidded eyes struggled to focus, coffee-coloured hues squinting until his peripheral vision sharpened on the flex of those strong, slender hands. They slid until the Hyūga's palms flattened against the glass beside Shikamaru's fingers – close, but not touching.

The panes misted from the heat radiating off their skin.

"Let go? I'm not holding on, Shikamaru, you're holding back," Neji murmured, his deep voice gliding over Shikamaru's nerves like hot steel wrapped in cool, black satin. "You're hiding behind your shadows."

Shikamaru's forehead twisted against the glass. "No," he snarled.

"I don't know how you learned to mask your chakra this way, but it won't keep me from finding you."

Shikamaru frowned, struggling to cut through the thick sensation clouding up his head, struggling to focus just long enough to grasp those words.

*Mask my chakra?*

His eyes widened, but he lost his grip on the disturbing thought the second Neji's thumbs dipped and traced along his wrists. The barely-there touch sent static crackling along the underside of his arms. He jolted as if shocked, fingers flinching hard, teeth clenched around a hiss.

"Dammit…stop…"

Neji's lips grazed the shell of his ear. "Let me find you, Shikamaru…"

Shikamaru's eyes flickered wide, then pressed shut against the damp sting rising to the surface. Emotion, confused and heavy, twisted its vines inside him, crushing his breath into a hoarse knot in
his throat.

"Why?" he rasped. "It's not like I ever found you."

Neji stiffened, his arms going rigid either side of Shikamaru. "What?"

The shadow-nin shook his head, the ball in his throat burning harder and hotter until his breath all but vaporised.

"Not once..." he whispered, brushing his lips across the ghost in the glass, misting up Neji's reflection. "And every night...I lose you all over again..."

The flow of Neji's chakra cut out in a jolt.

Gasping, Shikamaru slumped against the glass, shuddering from the aftershocks. The warm breath at his nape ceased, leaving a chill behind.

Gone...

Panting, Shikamaru squeezed his eyes shut.

Fuck...it's over...let it be over...

It was time to wake up.

Wake up...

Rain slivered down the panes, cold as the dread dripping down his spine.

Wake up...

Shikamaru swallowed hard, feeling Neji's nearness as no more than a phantom presence now that he couldn't hear or feel the Hyūga's breath. Their bodies were a twitch away from touching – but neither of them moved. Neither of them breathed.

The dream would end...any second now...

Wake up...

The illusion dragged on sadistically. Heat continued to build against Shikamaru's back, sweat beading at the same time his skin pebbled in a shiver, a familiar sense of cold and loss stealing over him.

God, let me wake up...

Waiting to wake was worse than chasing after ghosts. Waiting was the limbo between the heaven and hell of his dreams. Waiting was purgatory. Waiting was fucking torture.

His fists slammed against the glass.

WAKE UP!

Warm palms skimmed over his knuckles.

Shikamaru's eyes snapped open, wide and wild. He froze, stomach tucking in as his chest seized. Transfixed, he watched Neji's long, pale digits slot between his own rigid fingers, lacing olive and
ivory skin in a slow fold.

Shikamaru's lips parted, his stare fixed in shock.

He watched Neji's fingers tighten around his, clenching until strings of sinew striped the backs of the Hyūga's hands. The pressure increased. A spasm of pain twitched from their grinding bones.

_Pain…real…_

Neji's thumbs arced and folded over the shadow-nin's.

_Real…_

Real enough that a slim scar shone silver on the back of Neji's right hand, a neat slash from the middle knuckle down to the back of his wrist.

Shikamaru's eyes widened.

There was _never_ this kind of detail in his dreams.

His dreams were stripped of the human imperfections of flesh and feeling, leaving hazy outlines defined by blazing opal eyes. In the dreams, Neji was never real enough. Never rough enough around the edges to be anything other than a polished memory, fragile as porcelain. Knowing that fragility, Shikamaru handled the dreams with care, never looking for the cracks, knowing everything would shatter if he found them.

Why look? Why search for more reasons to doubt it was real?

The dreams were as real as it would ever get. Even if they were a constant lie he had to wake up from.

_This isn't a lie…_

Shikamaru continued to study the backs of Neji's hands, his gaze tracing over the valleys and creases in the blanched knuckles, at the zigzag pattern of their locked fingers down to the hard angular bones of the Hyūga's wrists.

_No dream…_

It was so far from a dream it was crazy. Crazier still to have thought he could convince himself it wasn't real. There was no chance of that now. Any need he had to turn this into something imaginary, just to make it less painful to let go of, was lost behind a stronger need.

The wild, bewildered gleam left Shikamaru's eyes.

His expression softened, slackened and saddened into something he wouldn't have recognised if he'd caught his own reflection in the glass.

Unable to find his voice, he squeezed his fingers experimentally.

The barest of hesitations and then Neji returned the grip – hard – grinding their knuckles until their hands shook. Shikamaru's lashes flickered at the flash of pain, his senses feeding off it. The ache in his fingers set off sparks along his arms, a fresh wave of heat tightening his skin.

_Real…_
Ice touched the back of his nape.

He flinched, shoulders drawing up only to relax when he registered the familiar bite of steel. Neji’s hitai-ate. The cool metal rested like the flat of a blade, giving Shikamaru a darker perspective of the dangerous position they were in.

One push in the wrong direction and he'd lose his head completely.

*If I haven't already…*

He squeezed his fingers around Neji’s, his voice so quiet it was just a shadow of sound past his lips. "Troublesome Hyūga…"

Shikamaru felt the cold steel at his nape press harder. Before he could think to turn his head, Neji moved. The Hyūga's wrists angled outwards, pushing their linked hands into a slow skate across the glass. Shikamaru relaxed the tension in his arms, not trying to follow or control the movement, just letting it happen…just letting himself drift on the current of something stronger…like a cloud on a warm wind…

*Just a moment…*

His eyes slipped shut completely, brow tapping against the glass.

Outside, the storm shook the world.

Inside the room, the stillness was absolute.

And for a stolen moment, the stillness settled on Shikamaru like snow. Quiet, gentle and melting into those parts of him that needed the calm. And when it reached those tired, tender parts, the stillness turned to peace.

A stolen peace…but peace nonetheless…

A peace that stole across the insignificance of years, easing the ever-increasing weight of age that Shikamaru had carried inside him since he was a kid – a weight that had tripled when he'd hit fifteen. It had branded him with a cynical weariness of heart and jadedness of spirit that ninja in the late winter of their years hoped never to carry.

Until now, he hadn't even known he'd been carrying it; thought he'd put it down two years back.

But the peace took away the past trying to resurrect itself inside him. The peace overpowered the nightmares and surmounted the fear.

And just for a moment he pretended it would last.

It lasted as long as the glide of their hands, which eventually stillled beside Shikamaru's head, bringing the peace to a gentle close. With a soft exhale, Neji flattened the shadow-nin's hands beneath his palms, slotting their fingers together again.

"Tell me," Neji rumbled, his hot breath seeping through the fibres of Shikamaru's yukata to tease the skin beneath. "Tell me what's wrong."

The words stroked over Shikamaru's mind, but dragged a blade of fear along those scars buried deep inside him. Pinpricks of emotion welled up like blood. He had no intention of tearing back the scabs.
"Shikamaru, tell me what's wrong…"

Shikamaru flexed his fingers in a gentle squeeze. "This."

Neji hummed, the deep sound reverberating down Shikamaru's spine, forcing the shadow-nin's calves to go taut. "I know…" Neji whispered. "I'd apologise…if I regretted it."

"Don't." Shikamaru's lashes slipped open and he stared without focus at his own reflection. "I hate that word…"

"Regret?"

"No. Sorry."

Neji's head came up a notch. "Why?"

Shikamaru pulled in a sharp breath.

Why?

Now there was a question he dodged as vehemently as the word itself: sorry. Sorry, regret, remorse, guilt. Useless, worthless, impractical words attached to useless, worthless, impractical emotions. Guilt solved nothing, regret changed nothing and remorse threw a pity-party. But sorry was the big black hole that would suck every synonym of 'sorry' and every meaning attached to it into a one-way void he'd never escape if he let himself fall.

Not a chance.

Shikamaru let out a slow breath, his voice taking on the same disturbing blankness as his face. "I'm not sorry…"

Considering the countless contexts those words could apply to, he didn't expect Neji to grasp the meaning. He hoped the Jōnin wouldn't search for it either. In response, Neji grasped in the only way he could, which was to tighten his grip until Shikamaru's fingers were forced flat against the glass again.

"Would you rather I wasn't sorry either?" Neji said.

Shikamaru frowned. "What?"

The cold steel vanished from his nape, replaced by the warmth of Neji's words caressing his skin. "That night…what I did to you…"

Shikamaru's fingers flinched, muscles tightening. "Forget it."

"I can't forget it."

"You should. I have."

"Have you?" Neji returned, his lips skimming just behind Shikamaru's jaw. "Nightmares don't just —"

"No they don't, but that's not it," Shikamaru cut in, shaking his head, trying to focus on the words and not the heat of Neji's breath. "That's not it."

That I could deal with…
The night Neji was referring to, while occasionally returning in nightmarish flashes, never haunted Shikamaru to the degree it probably should have. It scared the hell out of him sometimes to think back on it, to consider all the outcomes that could have played out. But there was no point in calculating "what if's". His dreams of Neji never included the violence and vengeance of that night – if they had, it might've made it easier to force himself to forget.

"It's not you," Shikamaru muttered. "Though that'd make sense at least…"

The only thing Shikamaru knew for sure was that while Neji might have woken up the nightmares, the Hyūga wasn't part of them. For the past couple of nights, it had been the nightmares, not Neji, pulling Shikamaru into a waking state of panic. Neji had been the trigger, not the trap. The trap was the past. And right now its iron jaws were clamped around Shikamaru's brain like a vice.

*I just need to re-wire it…get my head straight…*

Honestly, he should have been trying to do that now.

Right now.

Neji's palms felt too warm against his skin, his breath too hot against the tense line of Shikamaru's jaw. And while they still weren't touching back to chest, the scant space between them felt like a magnetic wall pushing at his body and pulling at his blood.

*Crazy…*

Just the heat radiating off Neji's skin threatened to burn away the cool and rational thoughts struggling to get a toehold in Shikamaru's head. He could feel his mind slipping, feel the stirring of a deep, primal need like a reverse current inside him. With every heartbeat it picked up a dangerous voltage and a spine-tingling tension.

*So crazy…*

He shook his head, speaking aloud without realising it. "Guess sense never applied."

"No…" Neji agreed gently. "As you once told me, not all our senses are rational."

"Yeah. You're not exactly helping me with that."

Neji's fingers played across his knuckles, pulling his heartbeat into a rhythm he tried to fight. Damn those hands…and their ability to fine-tune him like some instrument that responded to every string that Neji pulled without even having to try.

As if sensing his thoughts, Neji's lips settled at his shoulder, the Jōnin's deep tones lilted with the barest trace of humour. "For a mind like yours, that must be maddening. Do I leave you senseless, Nara?"

*You leave me fucking useless, Hyūga, that's what you do…*

"Not sure you've mastered the leave part," Shikamaru growled instead.

Neji went quiet.

His fingers froze against Shikamaru's hands, chilled into stillness.

Startled by the sudden silence, Shikamaru lifted his gaze to glass – and jolted. It wasn't the ice in Neji's face that struck him – it was the intensity of what was smouldering in his eyes. A storm of
opal fire, burning raw and blistering violently with emotion…but it was emotion so painfully
controlled…emotion destined to remain deep and distant…like the heat in the hearts of dying stars. It was a look so full of futile feeling, so full of knowing sadness it ripped Shikamaru's breath from his chest.

And then Neji's smile almost ripped his heart out. "There are worse things I could fail to master when I'm near you, Shikamaru."

"God, don't," Shikamaru husked, shaking inside. "Don't you fucking dare, Neji."

"It's true."

"DAMN YOU, HYÜGA!" Shikamaru roared, whipping his hands back and twisting around to shove Neji away from him, scared that the burn in those eyes would blaze straight through him. "Get the FUCK away from me!"

Staring back, Neji didn't retreat, recoil or react. He simply recovered his calm. And he recovered it with that damming, hateful grace that put him just that bit further out of reach without him having to leave.

Sadness pulled at Shikamaru, tearing him down the centre like a jagged knife.

His lip curled in a snarl. "Get out!"

"Get angrier," Neji countered quietly. "You never had the chance before. Maybe that's what you need."

Shikamaru's eyes rounded, enraged, incredulous. "Need?" he echoed.

Neji gazed back, utterly calm. "Is that what you need, Nara?"

The question snapped something in Shikamaru's mind.

In the span of a heartbeat he lost his footing on the mental wires he'd been walking. In a red flash, the cables short-circuited and the border-control in his head flipped the switch from 'brain' to 'body'.

Intellect stepped back.

Impulse surged forward – straight into his fist.

"You sadistic, selfish sonovaBITCH!" he roared.

Opal eyes flashed wide.

Neji threw his weight back to avoid the punch, his spine bowing like a limbo dancer's, bending from the knees without losing his footing. He caught himself on his right hand, left leg snapping out towards the shadow-nin's inner thigh.

Shikamaru's reflexes saved him.

He tucked his feet up in a neat jump, fist drawing back the instant his body came down again. He felt the rough crack of his knee hit the ground, impacted by the slam of his fist into the space Neji's head had been just seconds before.

"DAMMIT!" he shouted.
Shikamaru twisted around.

Neji's palm shot towards his face, the heel thrust up and out.

Throwing his head back, he felt the Hyūga's wrist graze along his throat, clipping his chin. Following momentum, Shikamaru flowed into a backward roll that set him on the balls of his feet, granting him purchase enough to spring.

He launched forward.

Neji met him a quarter-way into the lunge.

Their hits connected but cancelled each other out, pushing Shikamaru into a series of sharp jabs, each one deflected seamlessly by curves and dips of Neji's hands, the Hyūga's wrists rolling over Shikamaru's in an effortless, nimble dance.

"Does this feel better than running away, Nara?"

"Tch!" Frustrated, Shikamaru kicked off the lacquered table, swinging his leg in a round-house kick.

Neji ducked, flowed right and came up fast, lashing out. The blow whistled through the air near Shikamaru's jaw but he was already rolling away from it. He came up in a crouch, dark eyes scanning for Neji's ebon and ivory figure, watching the black ends of the yukata flowing in concert with the Hyūga's hair as he slunk panther-like in a circle.

"Two weeks ago you should have fought me this way," Neji said. "Finally, you have the sense to come at me like you actually mean it."

"Shut up!" Shikamaru growled, sharp eyes slicing through the dark.

"Then you'd best talk instead, hadn't you? Although this role-reversal game better suits your sense of irony, doesn't it?"

Shikamaru's eyes narrowed, the words slicing deep into his heart, snapping like barbed whips inside him. "Well sure, thanks to you I've got 4AM nightmares down to a fucking art. Give me a control complex and I'll work on the coughing up blood part."

"Good. Give me that anger."

"Anger?" Shikamaru seethed, tense and trembling, one arm stretched out behind him for balance. "Yeah, I'll bet you get off on that."

Neji halted close to the alcove, ice-white eyes glittering dangerously. "You think your pain pleases me?"

"Asks the closet sadist."

A quiet chuckle. "I've missed your sharp tongue, Shikamaru."

And yet all his sharp tongue seemed to be doing was cutting away at his own heart, chipping at scabs and scars one hateful word at a time. Shikamaru bit down on his tongue, tasted the coppery tang of blood.

"I'm done talking."
"Well bodies talk too. And they never lie." Neji stopped circling, turned sideways with his arm held out, fingers curving in invitation. "So, let's have an honest conversation, Nara."

"I'm gonna break your fucking jaw, Hyūga..." the shadow-nin snarled.

"Really now? That's a high threat," Neji smirked, goading with that same infuriating calm. "Let's see if you can back it up. Surely the Nijū Shōtai taught you something."

Shikamaru didn't get a chance to respond.

Neji launched off his right leg, driving forward in an aerial scissor kick.

Cursing, Shikamaru skipped forward a pace, dipped under the kick and spun into a butterfly twist over the lacquered table. Landing in a crouch, he felt Neji's foot graze his spine and shoot past his shoulder, a hairsbreadth from his cheek.

Shit!

Twisting his head, Shikamaru cut a glare along Neji's taut leg, stretched like a blade across the table, hard as granite, muscles locked. Yet he looked calmer than a monk doing a kata.

"Hn." Neji raised his chin, looking down through his lashes over the stretch of his leg, arching a brow. "Can't break my jaw all the way over there, Shikamaru."

"Just your knee," Shikamaru spat, twisting onto his back to slam his feet into the table, aiming to take out Neji's planted leg.

Neji was off the ground before the hit could connect. As the table shot past, Neji smacked his palm onto its zooming surface, his entire body arcing in a one-handed cartwheel that carried him right over Shikamaru, straight back onto one foot.

The other leg lashed back.

Shikamaru deflected the hit and drew back on his haunches, shoulder-blades jutting like hackles, palms up and ahead, ready for the next strike. Neji's kicks struck rapid-fire, the same foot lashing out at a stellar speed that Shikamaru countered with elbow, forearm, wrist and hand.

Their movements were lightning-lit blurs in the darkness, staccato flickers.

The kicks came faster.

Shikamaru cursed, felt sweat stinging his skin.

Neji didn't make a sound, wasn't even exerted.

One blow impacted harder than the others, glancing off Shikamaru's crossed arms, thrusting him back on his knees across the tatami flooring in a harsh skid. Breathing hard, he glared up at Neji's turned back.

With eerie deliberateness, Neji slanted his head a degree, glancing over his shoulder through one Byakugan-veined eye. Limned in the lightning glow, he took on that ghost-like visage that almost caused Shikamaru to second-guess the entire reality playing out in front of him.

"You're faster than before," Neji noted, his voice completely neutral. "Though I doubt Asuma-senpai taught you to fight without focus. Where's your strategy? And more importantly, where's your chakra?"
Growling, Shikamaru leapt for the couch, riding on instinct alone. He swung his leg high, the heel coming down in an axe-kick toward Neji's skull, realising too late the lack of support from the cushions.

His kick lost momentum.

Deftly, without appearing to try at all, Neji caught the kick between the cross of his wrists. "No closer to breaking my jaw than your own leg, Nara."

"Fuck you," Shikamaru growled, jumping off his braced foot in a lean ripple of muscle, careening his knee toward Neji's face.

But Neji was already in motion and Shikamaru felt the world dip in a nauseating whoosh, throwing him completely. He flew head first over Neji's shoulder and landed on his back with the wind knocked out of him, gasping hard.

He didn't have time to catch his breath.

Neji bore down on top of him, pale fingers snaking around his wrists.

Shikamaru bucked hard. "GET OFF ME!"

Neji tugged his head back to avoid a broken nose. "If you're going to fight me mindlessly then hedge your bets on your chakra, Shikamaru, not your luck. You're fresh out."

Shikamaru froze, ice flooding through him in a wash of memory.

"You're all out of chakra, Shika-kun, and shit out of luck."

Panic rippled across Shikamaru's eyes, black crawling into his vision.

No…

Deep inside him, his chakra slid like oil, darkening and thickening along the ley-lines of his chakra network, pooling into tenketsu like ink filling potholes, spilling over, spreading further, slipping out of control.

Neji stiffened and drew back, Byakugan eyes wide, head cocked to one side.

Shikamaru stared up but didn't see a thing, didn't sense the lunar eyes scanning his body or the cold hands framing his head – didn't even hear the words Neji breathed against his mouth.

"I'll fight you to find you if I have to."

"Didn't think I'd find you in my old man's onsen, Shika. Can't say I'm disappointed."

Shikamaru's heart thundered.

Lightning white-washed the room, tearing away the black.

Neji's eyes flashed in the glow. "Fight me, not yourself!"

Shikamaru snapped back to himself, shaking. He didn't have time to react. Neji hauled him off the ground and shoved him back, granting him distance enough to regain his focus but not time enough to solidify it. He couldn't get a grip. Focus slipped and slid from his mind.
He looked up and Neji was a blur, driving forward again.

Against everything he'd been taught, Shikamaru didn't move.

His training fled his mind completely.

Had he used his mind to choreograph and calculate the next stage of the fight, he'd have switched to the taijutsu tactic of 'balance breaking'. Had his brain been piloting his body, he'd have sought to use speed, distance and angling to manoeuvre Neji into a position that would knock his equilibrium. This tactic gave him the safest, smartest and most successful shot at winning. He'd have done it immediately and automatically if his head had been directing him.

But his head was out of the game.

This left Shikamaru doing the stupidest thing he could have possibly done when faced with a charging, close-quarter fighter. He launched straight into the oncoming attack like a missile set to detonate, damn the cost.

Neji's eyes flashed wide seconds before impact.

Thankfully, seconds was all the Hyūga needed to slant his body.

They crashed just off-centre, their shoulders jarring hard.

The collision snapped Shikamaru's teeth together, the impact jolting along his arm and up his neck. They slammed, spun and slammed again, forearms locking like blades, both shoving back and forth, looking for purchase and power, pushing for pain and position.

Lightning blazed outside.

Shikamaru changed the angle of his shove, forcing Neji to twist. And by some blinding stroke of luck, Neji's strength faltered. In the barest flicker of a moment, pain tugged at the corners of his pale eyes and he arched with a gasp, like he'd taken a hit from behind.

His right leg buckled.

Shikamaru didn't stop to wonder what the hell had happened, he just reacted. He took the opening and drove forward with a snarl, shoving Neji back, knocking the Hyūga's balance. He followed through with a ram, catching the Jōnin square in the sternum.

Neji's back hit the wall with a violent crack.

Shikamaru stepped in, arm drawn back, ready to drive home the hurt with a fist.

He swung just as their gazes locked.

Something changed.

Shikamaru's fist crashed into the fusuma panel beside Neji's head, tearing through the paper, smashing past the wood, shattering the lattice and colliding with a bone-jarring thud into the wall beyond. Pain exploded in a hot rush, riding along Shikamaru's arm with the same force as the sound tearing up his throat.

He couldn't contain it…

Couldn't control it…
He squeezed his eyes shut, let his mouth fall open against Neji's neck…and screamed.

The sound of Shikamaru's cry went through Neji like a blade.

It cut upwards through his sternum and tore into his heart with twice the impact of Shikamaru's fist through the wall. The sound shattered him, shocked him, stopped him cold. His fingers dug into the panel at his back, body like stone.

The hoarse scream exploded in his head, over and over.

Stunned, Neji stared sightlessly over Shikamaru's shoulder, Byakugan eyes wide.

The violent pain in his kidney – courtesy of Hitaro – was gone. He felt none of it. All he felt was the percussive boom of his pulse beneath the shadow-nin's mouth, the rasp of chapped lips against his neck and the hot roar aching out like fire. And it burned straight through Neji, incinerated his breath into a ball of ash in his throat.

For a horrible moment he couldn't breathe, couldn't think.

Until another blue-white flash flickered beyond the windows. Thunder cracked and rolled, drowning out the echo of Shikamaru's roar. It was enough to break Neji from the shock, pull him from the alarm clouding his focus.

FOCUS!

The air came back to him in a jolt.

Blinking fast, he flicked his gaze across to Shikamaru's arm. The whole of the Nara's hand and wrist were embedded in the shattered panel. Veins protruded along the lean muscles of his forearm and biceps, olive skin slick with sweat, dappled with blood, twitching and shaking.

Neji blinked again.

Gods burning…

He pulled in a slow, steady breath, working against the immediate need to rage and react. The calm came fast, dousing the fire in his blood, easing the violent circuit of his chakra.

Chakra…

The veins around his eyes tightened, Byakugan pupils swelling and shrinking as he scanned Shikamaru's body. The black network he'd glimpsed spilling out of control and into chaos along Shikamaru's chakra pathways had all but vanished, returning back to its lazy meander.

What the hell was that? He didn't even seem conscious of it.

And Neji had never seen chakra coagulate so strangely only to liquefy back into a state of idle circulation. It confounded him. But stronger than his confusion was his concern.

Think clearly. Respond, don't react.

Every logical response instructed him to push Shikamaru back. He braced himself to do just that only to find that he couldn't. The orders to create distance wouldn't compute and he hovered in a state of paralysis until, by some instinctive volition, he raised a hand and let it hover at the base of Shikamaru's spine.
Hesitating, he breathed a cool stream across the Nara's temple. "Shikamaru…"

Shikamaru flinched and let out a tight, choked sound, the tendons in his neck stark and straining. The muscles in his arm tightened to a violent bulge. Neji flicked his gaze down to the scant space between them. Shikamaru's yukata had caught and slanted to one side, bearing a segment of heaving chest and trembling torso that glinted in borrowed light. His ragged pants shattered out against Neji's throat, louder than the rain against the glass.

"I'm not…" he rasped, over and over. "I'm not…I'm not…"

*Not? Not what?*

Something told Neji that now wasn't the time to voice that question – or any question for that matter. An interrogation spelled disaster. He'd done enough damage just by pushing an avoidant personality like Shikamaru into a confrontation he thought he could control.

*A stroke of arrogant genius, wasn't it?* Neji's mind taunted. *Kami, you fool.*

Evicting the self-derisive thoughts, he drew from a deep reservoir of calm. But he didn't have to wait long. Shikamaru's breaths steadied fast, the quiet chant of his words tapering into mouthed whispers against Neji's throat.

*I'm not…'*

Slowly, with infinite care, Neji stroked his palm up Shikamaru's back, following the groove of the Nara's spine, dragging over blood red fabric, skimming over a bared shoulder-blade until he reached Shikamaru's nape.

He squeezed gently. "Shikamaru…"

Shikamaru's body slackened at the touch, the air gushing from his mouth in another hot rush. His shoulders pulled up defensively but he didn't struggle. Instead, he smacked his other hand into the wall beside Neji's head, shuddering once, putting all his weight onto his arms, keeping their hips apart.

However unconscious, that was probably a smart move.

Neji frowned, hearing the grind of wood and crackle of paper. He shot a glance at the still-buried hand. He needed Shikamaru to take the pressure off it.

Neji pressed the shadow-nin's nape again. "Lean into me…” he said quietly.

Shikamaru dropped his brow to the crook of Neji's neck, sucking in a long, deep breath through his nose. He didn't press forward any further, but he didn't pull back either. It left Neji at the knife's edge of a decision he didn't want to make; a choice of whether to take control or let everything unfold unpredictably, one agonising ripple at a time.

Instinct screamed at him to take control.

*Control.*

Gods, he'd lost it completely by coming here, by remaining here and by letting Need overrule Necessity. It went against every rule he'd needed to put into place. But even the most hard-wired and deep-seated of his needs were overruled by something stronger.
The need to 'stay in control' taken over by the need to just…

Stay…

Neji squeezed his eyes shut, trying to fight off all the fears that word inspired. Clenching his teeth, he turned his mouth against the familiar zigzag hairline, his fingers stealing up from Shikamaru's nape to caress the Nara's head.

*Enough thinking. Do something.*

Do what? Push Shikamaru to the same edge that the shadow-nin had pulled *him* back from?

*Leave him alone. That's what you need to do. Let him forget…*

What a cruel punchline to the irony – walking away again not because he'd stopped caring, but because he cared too much.

*Far too much…more than I –*

"Shit…" Shikamaru whispered suddenly, startling Neji out of his thoughts.

He ducked his head to show he'd heard, nudging Shikamaru's cheek in an attempt to draw the Nara's chin up. "Talk to me, Shikamaru."

Nothing.

Neji held his breath, ears ringing as he strained to catch a reply that wasn't going to come.

*Damn.*

Fingers of tension gnarled in his stomach. Predicting silence, Neji jolted when Shikamaru let out a broken, shaking chuckle, following it up with a belated wince and a reflex twitch of his arm. Wood groaned and clattered beyond the panel.

Shikamaru grunted. "How troublesome…"

Stunned, Neji let out a sudden breath at the soft catchphrase. But the cold grip in his gut didn't leave him; because despite Shikamaru's fractured attempt at humour, Neji could feel the flex and flinch of every muscle bunching in the shadow-nin's jaw.

*Bodies don't lie.*

Neji's eyes softened. *This* much at least was predictable about Shikamaru. He was trying to recover his chameleon act, regroup his senses.

*Regain control.*

Had Neji not understood the nature of control and the need to defend and cover oneself from every possible angle, he might have felt at a loss. But all he felt was an overwhelming compulsion to protect. And it had nothing to do obligation, orders or objective thought. It felt instinctive, innate, inescapable.

*That's not my right, or my role.*

His role right now was damage control.
Searching for the fastest way to secure the situation, Neji followed Shikamaru's lead, latching onto the lifeline of humour. He touched his mouth to the Nara's ear, measuring his words before speaking quietly.

"Not your smartest move."

"No shit," Shikamaru muttered, his voice muffled against Neji's shoulder. "Add this to the vandalism tally…"

Neji arched a brow, then recalled his earlier 'breaking and entering' tactic. Honestly, he couldn't care less about the property or reimbursement costs. That was a matter easily fixed – there were worse things damaged here.

The scrape of smashed agarwood sounded louder beyond the ruined panel, grinding with the movement of Shikamaru's fist as he flexed his fingers experimentally.

"Yeah…" Shikamaru winced. "That's all kinds of broken…"

"Your hand?"

"That too."

The dry response didn't distract Neji from the shake in Shikamaru's voice; like his body was still reeling from the scream he'd let out. Neji knew he'd be hearing its echo for weeks to come – along with all the words attached to its pain.

"Some things belong in the shadows…"

What things? What was he hiding from? The questions brought back the image of Shikamaru thrashing in the water, ripped up with fear yet holding himself under all the same.

Why?

Neji had seen the Nara's heart racing, had seen through skin and muscle to the panicked, beating core.

What the hell is haunting you, Shikamaru? And why now?

The questions sent chills crawling along Neji's spine, provoking an even more disturbing thought. Had the brutal exorcism of his own past and its demons resulted in the resurrection of Shikamaru's?

"Thanks to you I've got 4AM nightmares down to a fucking art…"

The air swelled in Neji's lungs, holding tight. He almost jumped when he felt the gentle pressure of Shikamaru's hand at his hip, followed by the soft tap of the shadow-nin's thumb, beating out a familiar rhythm.

Neji translated the message in the touch: breathe.

Sadness and the weight of memory crashed through him and the tightness in his chest reached his throat. He felt Shikamaru's lips skim along his jaw, settling at the pulse-point.

"Troublesome…"
Neji swallowed roughly, his pale eyes drifting shut. "Very."

---

*Keep looking...*

Neji scoured the kitchenette, searching shelves by the light of a single wall-lamp. The ambient but annoyingly dim glow had frustrated his efforts, or at least he'd blamed it on this, rather than the influx of thoughts and warnings distracting him, snatching away his focus.

*Leave. Leave now.*

Shaking his head, he kept up the manual method of searching, refusing to use his dōjutsu. Delaying gave him time to think, time to assess.

*Time to focus.*

His fingers closed around a neat box tucked behind a bag of animal crackers. He tugged it free, glancing over the first-aid label. Mission accomplished, he turned to follow the sound of cursing and the scent of coffee, all the while preparing himself to assess the damage on the other side of the bedroom door.

Sliding back the panel he came to stand in the doorway.

Shikamaru sat on the futon, staring down into his coffee cup with a troubled expression. A few dark strands had escaped his high ponytail, framing the tense slant of his jaw like sharp, black brushstrokes. His yukata slanted haphazardly across his chest, baring a rigid clavicle and slice of bare chest, which rose and fell in a controlled rhythm.

His injured hand rested on his thigh.

Neji's eyes followed the drape of the yukata robe, tracing over the sculpted lines of thigh and knee, lower down to the taut calf, the muscle flexing in an agitated twitch.

*Focus.*

Neji blinked from the distracting direction of his thoughts and concerned himself with the matter at hand – literally. His attention switched to Shikamaru's injury.

*Get this done fast.*

It began with a mindless, moronic question that came out so automatically he congratulated himself on the ability to ask it without making a face.

"Are you in much pain?"

Shikamaru shot him a flat, hooded look. "No, Hyūga, it feels really good."

Neji stared back, refusing to feel foolish. "On a scale of one to ten."

Shikamaru's brow arched. "One being really good?"

The smile that threatened Neji's lips died at the corner of his mouth, a faint twitch that went unseen in the dim light. Both shinobi went on staring for a moment longer. Then Shikamaru blinked, breaking contact in the same way he had earlier.

He averted his gaze back to his coffee.
The original question went unanswered, leaving Neji to draw his own conclusions. He guessed the pain was either tolerable or too troublesome for Shikamaru to get expressive about without involving a third party. Shikamaru had ruled out the option of waking up Ino for a quick-fix.

Too troublesome, he'd said.

Neji guessed he was referring to the interrogation he'd receive in lieu of a no-questions-asked treatment. Shaking his head, the Hyūga slid the door shut and closed distance, ignoring the tic in Shikamaru's jaw, focusing instead on the shadow-nin's current state of monoplegia.

"Hold it up," Neji instructed, crouching down and setting the medic-kit on the bed.

Shikamaru propped his elbow on his knee and raised his injured hand without glancing up. Neji gripped the Nara's wrist with care, Byakugan veins creasing his milky eyes. He scanned the injured hand in a slow track. He'd already hypothesized a fracture or two, but no nerve injury.

He was lucky.

For all Shikamaru's grumbling about expensive damaged property it was thanks to the reinforced lacquer and limber of the agarwood that the shadow-nin had dodged the risk of injuring a nerve from smaller, more sinister splinters.

"Your nerves are fine, as are the phalanges. No sunken knuckles."

"Good to know."

"You have hairline fractures on the third and forth metacarpal bones."

"Great."

Neji brushed his thumb over Shikamaru's wrist, a completely innocent and inadvertent touch. He felt the pulse jump and sensed Shikamaru's fingers tightening around the mug he held in his other hand.

"I'll need you to make a fist."

Shikamaru flexed his fingers out with a frown then folded them into a loose ball. Neji watched the bones work and checked that the fingers curled correctly without overlapping. No problem there.

"Its fine," Shikamaru muttered, lidded eyes straying up when Neji's fingers traced the bones at the back of his hand. "I'll get Ino or Sakura to glow green on me in the morning."

Neji blinked, the pinched skin around his eyes smoothing out again. He set about binding the shadow-nin's hand, a task he did with mindless precision, having done it countless times in the past with his own hands.

Shikamaru sipped at his coffee, taking intense interest in the black contents. The aroma wafted between them, warm and heady. But it didn't disguise the smell that Neji had caught earlier.

"You've been smoking again."

Shikamaru shrugged, swirling his coffee. "Asuma."

Neji raised a mental eyebrow, not believing it for a second. He finished binding the Nara's hand and set down the medical kit. The 'click' of the case sounded intrusively loud in the quiet room.
Shikamaru set his hand on his thigh, flexing his thumb with a scowl.

Neji studied the annoyed look and his lips twitched without carrying the smile he'd intended for his next words. "If it's any consolation, I'm certain you'd have dislocated my jaw."

Shikamaru paused and looked up. "Too bad I can't take consolation from knowing someone else almost did."

Neji's face tightened.

The comment struck a too-tender nerve.

He tried to ignore the meaningful glance Shikamaru set on his bruised jaw. Refusing to react, an expressionless mask settled across Neji's features. But his mind pounced on the reminder of his earlier defiance with Hitaro and what it had cost him. The pain he'd been ignoring gave a sudden warning twinge in his lower back. His kidneys ached and nausea rippled through him. Nothing registered on his face, features smooth and controlled.

Shikamaru hummed, the nonchalance in his voice cancelled out by the calculation in his eyes. "Who were you sparring with?"

Neji said nothing but his jaw hardened. He shifted his focus towards the window briefly, watching the rain dribble down the panes. For a long while Shikamaru simply gazed, his brows eventually drawing together in a soft crease. It was a look of concern Neji had framed in his memory, along with all the subtle nuances of Shikamaru's expressions.

"Don't look at me that way, Nara," Neji sighed. "It's none of your concern."

Shikamaru's brow flicked up. "Says the voyeuristic hypocrite who Rock Lee'd his ass through a wall straight into my business."

Taken aback by the quick comeback, Neji snorted, stumped for a reply.

He looked away again.

Damn it.

Shikamaru offered a crooked smirk. "Great. If I'd known that'd shut you up, I coulda saved myself a load of trouble." He held up his bandaged hand for emphasis.

Neji tried not to react, grappling for control of his face before his mask slipped. The stoic look cracked at the corners of his mouth, which betrayed a faint twist. Not quite a smile. It ghosted away when he looked back to the dark eyes observing him.

"I acted rashly," Neji uttered, reluctant to admit it. "And I had reason to."

"Oh yeah?" Shikamaru challenged, eyes hooding warily. "That the same reason you were watching me?"

Neji's lips tightened, body slanting back and defences rising up. It did nothing to ward off the glaring spotlight that Shikamaru's words shone on his weakness. His greatest weakness. But he couldn't deny it.

"You know my reason."

Shikamaru looked down, swallowing hard before throwing his hand up between them as if to swat
away the words. "I don't know shit when it comes to your reasons, Neji. Figuring out your mind almost cost me mine."

"Almost?" Neji returned, ruthlessly checking his pride, struggling to keep his voice both calm and controlled. "That's not what it looked like from where I was standing."

Shikamaru snorted and pushed to his feet with a rueful chuckle, forcing Neji to rise in a fluid, backward stride. He watched the Nara drift across the room, dangling his mug between long, olive fingers before setting it down on the ornate dresser to the side of the window.

The decisive 'chink' of the ceramic rang loud.

"From where you were standing," Shikamaru parroted, scorn lacing the slow drawl of each word. "Where was that again? Behind the invisible line you decided to leap and bound over?"

Neji took the verbal strike without reaction. But inside, the sarcasm stuck hard, more for the fact that Shikamaru had that unerring, unflinching ability to remember Neji's words and twist them around into recycled weapons. It drove the barbs deeper.

The Nara's lip curled wryly, sourly. "Reason for crossing that line? Old times sake? Or are you that much into pain?"

Neji tensed as the words sliced into his pride – and less guarded places. Even so, he made a show of bringing his hands calmly to his sides. "You know my reason."

"Not really."

"Just as you know that I didn't do it to end up here trading insults with you."

Shikamaru rasped a bitter laugh, angrily raking the stray strands of hair away from his face, cocking his hip against the dresser. "What? Met your daily quota already, Hyūga?"

Neji's lips flattened. "You've enough venom for both of us at this point."

"Venom?" Shikamaru echoed, his brow cutting up almost cruelly. "I'm pretty sure you're the one who got the brodifacoum booster."

Oh how easy it would have been to latch onto that. Neji's spine tightened dangerously, his pride screaming at him to take the bait and beat Shikamaru bloody at this bitter game. Gods knew he could take the Nara down a few pegs, bring them onto a playing field he'd have had no problem violently conquering in the past.

No.

Neji pulled on the air and exhaled calmly, purging his body of the toxic violence in a single breath.

Shikamaru smirked at the display of calm, his eyes hard. "Congratulations, Hyūga. What'd that cost your pride?"

The sarcasm rolled off Neji's defences like smoke off steel. He gave Shikamaru a long, level look before speaking softly. "And what was the price you paid, Shikamaru? Did you trade in your peace in hopes that I'd find mine?"

Shikamaru's eyes averted so fast his head followed the movement, turning his face away to hide what played across his expression. He brushed his fingers over a row of tiny glass bottles lined up
"Peace, pieces..." he muttered distractedly, hooking bottles between his knuckles to move them around like Shogi pieces, changing the arrangement into a square. "That's what we deal in, isn't it?"

Neji gazed silently, words hovering on his tongue but he swallowed them back. His silence drew Shikamaru's gaze, the sidelong glance shuttered and shrewd – but something less defined flickered just beneath the surface.

"Quite a team, aren't we? I'm calculated and you're controlled." Another dance of his fingers and the bottles were back to their original arrangement. "We have a riot with this game, don't we?"

"That's not true."

"Bullshit!" Shikamaru bit out, eyes flashing, a sweep of his hand sending the bottles crashing to their doom. "Our fates are fixed in this!" He whirled on Neji and laughed in sardonic amazement. "You're a goddamn liar and so am I. How's that for your precious progress Hyūga? It doesn't get more backward than this."

Neji said nothing in his defence, which caused his pride to rip him up one side and down the other. But there was more at stake here than the pride that had almost killed him.

And as painful as it was to sacrifice said pride, the silent tactic worked.

Shikamaru stared in bitter amazement, emotion scudding across his face in a shift too fast to be placed; something close to anger overthrown by alarm and anxiety straight back into anger again.

*Good.*

Neji understood anger, kept company with it often enough. He knew how to entertain it, feed it, play host to the rage. Knowing this, he gazed with nothing but calm understanding, taking a moment to string together words that Shikamaru wouldn't take, twist and turn into weapons.

*I know what it is to fight...and why you're doing it...*

Neji shook his head sadly.

"For all the lies between us, Shikamaru, none are more insulting to me than the truths you've twisted," Neji intoned, continuing on when Shikamaru remained silent. "And I would be angry, if I didn't know you were so afraid."

The reaction was instant.

Shikamaru's eyes rounded in a startled flash, the muscles in his throat pulling hard. Neji took in the panicked response with a tender ache behind his ribs. He didn't let it betray itself in his eyes and continued to watch the shadow-nin with unreadable stillness.

Threatened by that stillness, Shikamaru retreated from it.

He gravitated away from the dresser, pulled to the shadows in the corners of the room, passing into and out of their dark curtains in slow steps, rubbing his palms across his lean cheeks.

Neji watched him, the epitome of control if not calm. The urge to *do* something was maddening. But at this point, his words had hopefully spoken louder that any action he might have taken.

*Wait it out...*
And he did. Patience took root and he watched Shikamaru make two aimless orbits of the room, which eventually ended back at the futon. It was here that the shadow-nin turned and sank down onto the edge of the bed, shaking his head.

Neji waited a beat before turning towards him, testing the tension.

Shikamaru reacted by stonewalling any chance of a confrontation. He closed his eyes, propped his elbows on his knees and passed his hands across his face, sighing heavily into the cup of his palms. While he gazed forward, Neji could tell from his glazed stare that the direction of his focus had turned inward.

A scatter of wind and rain against the glass broke the spell.

Sniffing, Shikamaru shook his head and reached higher up to dig his fingertips against his hairline, thumbs pressed at his temples as if he could pierce them.

Neji could only guess at the speed at which his mind was racing.

*A mile a minute…as always…*

The stress rolled off him, louder than the growling storm.

And Neji stood in the centre of it all, utterly calm in the face of something that whipped around the edges of his control like a cyclone, pulling him back and forth in a tug-of-war battle between standing his ground and closing distance. There was no reconciliation to be found in the polar feelings the shadow-nin stirred up in him.

The final tug came when Shikamaru lifted his gaze.

Neji's breath hitched.

Those dark eyes gazed directly at him, glistening like lacquered ebony.

Neji moved without thinking, one long stride putting him within reach. He lowered to one knee, bringing himself at eye-level with Shikamaru. The Nara's hands dropped limply to hang between his knees, dark eyes tracing over Neji's face.

Neither shinobi spoke.

They studied each other in the silence and time lulled into a kind of eerie stasis. Across the room, the steam wafting from Shikamaru's mug began to cool, dissolving into nothing. Outside, the roll of thunder receded and the crash of rain on the veranda faded beneath the synched thud of heartbeats and the hum of blood.

A lick of lightning reflected off Neji's hitai-ate.

Shikamaru's eyes drifted up at the same time his bandaged hand lifted. He traced his fingertips across the cold steel of the hitai-ate, thumb hooking beneath the metal plate, tugging upwards.

Neji stiffened.

Shikamaru caught the reaction and redirected his touch, sweeping a callused thumb underneath one moonstone eye, then down along the high ridge of Neji's cheekbone to the corner of his mouth.

"I don't need your reason," Shikamaru husked. "And I don't ever wanna know."
Neji blinked slowly to show he understood.

A sad smile touched one corner of the Nara's mouth. "What the hell does that make me? A hypocrite?"

Neji inclined his head into Shikamaru's touch, a faint tilt of his jaw. "Human."

And that was enough. Enough to feel the shift in Shikamaru's breathing. Neji leaned up at the same time Shikamaru leaned forward, cinching their foreheads together as they'd done countless times in the past. Breaths shuddered out in tandem, warm and wordless but speaking louder and truer than violence or venom ever could.

They gripped each other's napes, anchoring themselves close.

Almost too close.

Shikamaru's body locked, as if to keep him from falling forward. But nothing could keep Neji from falling back – back into a feeling he couldn't fight. It rattled the chains around his heart, made him believe he could break all bonds but for the one holding him here.

_How can I be chained to you…and still feel free?_

And then he felt Shikamaru's fingers slip down, kneading innocently before dipping beneath the neck of his yukata, following each vertebrae until the destination occurred to Neji seconds too late.

They dragged over his chakra-charged blind spot.

The reaction was instant. Pleasure bloomed and rolled across Neji's shoulder-blades and down his back, crumbling through bruised muscles and swirling across skin like dust and ashes threatening a burn.

Neji clenched his teeth, arching back with a hiss.

Shikamaru's breath played across his mouth. "Tell me you feel that…"

_Gods above, he felt it._

It fed that primal yearning deep in the pit of the Hyūga's stomach, threatening to whet an appetite too ravenous in its need to be so easily controlled.

_Control…_

Neji shook his head and pulled a slow breath through his nose, opal eyes fluttering open to half-mast. "Don't push me, Shikamaru," he breathed back.

Shikamaru growled against his lips, fingertips back at his nape, digging in hard. "Just tell me you feel it."

Neji tensed at the rough edge in his voice. He drew back, aiming to search the Nara's eyes. He didn't get a chance to glimpse what was standing in them. Shikamaru's lashes came down, like a door slamming in Neji's face, threatening in Neji's face, cutting off access.

"Don't hide from me, Shikamaru."

"Tell me you feel it."
Neji cocked his head, grazing his thumb along Shikamaru's jaw, tipping the Nara's chin up so their lips nudged. The faintest touch, but the second their mouths brushed Neji felt Shikamaru's breath catch hard and shiver out.

"Feel it…" Neji murmured, gazing through his lashes. "Or feel you?"

Shikamaru didn't answer.

Confusion and concern washed Neji cold, dousing the heat in his blood. He blinked, drawing his head back questioningly. His body was shaken up with tension and arousal, the air so thick with both it felt like electricity dancing across his skin.

*How can you ask me if I'm feeling this?*

He didn't have time to voice his thoughts. Shikamaru flicked his lashes up, the half-twist to his lips both cynical and weary; but the look was diluted by the sadness in his gaze. And it was the sadness that had Neji's eyes widening in comprehension.

"That mind of yours…" He grazed his fingers along the prominent ridge of Shikamaru's cheekbone, following the fading scar. "Do you think you're going to wake up, Shikamaru?"

Shikamaru turned his head away, closing his eyes.

Neji ached at the reaction. He swallowed the tightness rising in his throat and grazed his lips over the shadow-nin's exposed ear, warming the cool stud embedded in the lobe.

"This isn't a dream. Look at me, Shikamaru…" Neji whispered. "See me…"

Shikamaru's body tensed against a shiver and Neji hooked his thumb behind the shadow-nin's jaw, feeling the stutter of his pulse.

*Bodies don't lie…*

Shikamaru's breath halved, his words below a whisper not meant to be heard. "I always see you."

Neji face twisted with pain. Longing and understanding welled up inside him, spilling like blood through the cracks breaking into his heart. "But you don't always feel me, do you?"

Shikamaru shook his head, a tight sound catching behind his teeth. "Don't, Neji."

"Don't what?" Neji dropped his lips to the hollow of the Nara's throat, pooling his breath into the shallow dip that deepened when the shadow-nin swallowed. "Make it real?" He grazed his teeth along a bared collarbone.

Shikamaru hissed and the sound shot sharp, dark arousal down Neji's spine. Addictive, undiluted cravings began to itch in his blood, screaming for the hard hit of an antidote that came from the same poison. That drug-like desire just the smell of Shikamaru's skin lured him towards.

*Even my memories of you…are just ghosts…compared to this…I want it real…*

Neji grazed his lips along the straining tendons in Shikamaru's throat. He mouthed slow phantom kisses up each side of his neck, caressing the skin into a flush with nothing but the damp roll of his breath and pinch of his lips until he heard the Nara panting through his nose.

Neji growled at the quickening breaths.
I want it...

And then he felt it.

Desire. Need.

They surged up inside him, flooding his system in waves of thick heat, pulsing warm honey into a hard throb between his legs. It devoured fear, threatened to sear away conscience and control, set aflame a carnal, dominant, blistering need.

I want you burning beneath me.

Neji's mouth stilled, teeth bared against the underside of Shikamaru's jaw, the tip of his tongue dragging a hot, wet slash across the pulse point.

"Shikamaru," he purred, caressing each syllable in a deep, sultry rumble. "God knows I'm going to make you feel this…"
Wrong…so wrong…

On so many levels, all of which were collapsing in his mind.

Stop. Think. Get a grip.

But Shikamaru was losing his grip one shudder at a time. His breaths struck the air in sharp, short bursts, following the rhythm his heart had thundered into. Neji's lips trailed up his neck, feathering warm, rough words he could barely catch above the hammer of his pulse.

"Shikamaru…"

The shadow-nin grit his teeth and tried to clamour for control. He felt the hot stroke of Neji's tongue across his throat. It might as well have been a blade severing his air-supply. The Jōnin's next words stole his ability to breathe at all.

"God knows I'm going to make you feel this…"

Just the rumble of that promise kicked up a storm inside him. Arousal ripped south through his body, shaking up blood, shattering control, pooling in a pillar of raging hardness between his legs.

It was too much, too strong, too sudden.

Too close…way too close…

Shikamaru's hands shot up and latched at Neji's hips, tugging forward then pushing back. He growled out a curse, confused and crazed. He felt wired up to some circuit he couldn't find the switches to. For all his rational ability to section off and shut down parts of his brain, his body refused to follow suit.

But then, hadn't that always been the danger?

Neji would walk in and Shikamaru's rational mind would walk out.

I can't fight this…

A screw of futile frustration and sadness tightened in his chest. He'd tried so damn hard over the past two weeks to get his head straight. And for what? Some fragile peace of mind? Just one encounter with Neji and this thing between them kicked him into a mindless, reckless, senseless mess.

It was as detrimental and dangerous as it had ever been.

And I still want you…so fucking much…

Want was a tame word, given the wild feeling howling around inside him.

He felt Neji's breath scatter across his neck. "Do you want to feel this, Shikamaru?"

"Yes…" he mouthed the confession wordlessly, unable to voice it, knowing he wouldn't be able to stop if he let those truths shudder out.
Besides, he was a self-proclaimed liar – wasn't he?

So lie...fuck just lie...lie...

He could manage that. Didn't even require his brain. Just one or two words.

But they wouldn't come.

Frustration welled up inside him, boiling into the need. It overwhelmed his ability to respond with anything another than a low groan. Damn, he'd never thought himself capable of being lured back into such explosive and irrational reactions. And yet here he was again, caught in a chemistry his brain and body weren't equipped to battle.

He was ready to combust from barely a touch.  

Too close...

Shikamaru tore his hands away from Neji. He balled them into fists against the sheets until he felt pain flare. He tried to focus on his injury to distract from the palms skimming up the backs of his calves, talented fingers kneading deep, drawing his legs apart enough for Neji to shift a knee against the low mattress and lean in further.

"Just say the words, Shikamaru," Neji murmured, his tones deepening to that rough velvet texture that Shikamaru knew would damn him to the blackest pits of hell. "I'll make you burn so slow you'll scream for me to end it before I've even begun..."

The words shot straight to Shikamaru's core.

Desire swelled him hard enough to doubt he'd ever be soft again. The thick jut of his arousal rode high and heavy beneath the soft friction of the yukata, shaft pulsing, the moist crown leaking hot and wet.

Fuck...if he says another thing I'm gonna...lose it...

Shikamaru clamped down on a groan, lashes flickering over his glazed eyes.


He struggled to tame the crazy rush, startled by the thought that just Neji's voice reverberating across his skin would be enough to tip him over the edge. Right over the edge...into a fever that might never break, even if some other part of him did.

No...

He shook his head, gasping. "No."

Neji drew the lobe of Shikamaru's ear between his lips, eliciting a sharp hiss. "Are you running back into your mind, Nara?" Neji breathed, grazing his teeth over the sensitive shell. "Let me bring you back into your body. Look at me."

Shikamaru swallowed hard, his voice just a puff of breath. "No."

"No? Tell me you're not harder than steel right now," Neji murmured. "Tell me you're not dripping with want. Tell me you don't want me to make you burn from the inside out."

Shikamaru felt the hinges of his jaw creaking, the strain pulling across his face as he struggled not
to react. God damn Neji's mouth: that low smooth voice which delivered words as erotic as his touches. They got under Shikamaru's skin like needles, so precisely honed they left his nerves tingling and screaming.

_Fuck. This bastard is built for sin…_

On cue, Shikamaru felt those mobile lips skimming down along his throat, following the strong curve of his shoulder, leaving a flush in the wake of feathering kisses.

"Lie to yourself, Nara." Neji dragged the words across the shadow-nin's skin "Your body won't lie to me."

"No," Shikamaru growled.

Neji sank his teeth into the nerve-filled junction of his shoulder.

Shikamaru arched with a ragged gasp, the sound catching in his throat, eyes squeezing shut. The flash of pain and pleasure stung like live ash, smouldering down into his blood, pulsing into the rigid flesh of his erection. He panted hard, the muscles of his stomach rippling, thighs trembling in an attempt to control the coil winding dangerously tight, aching to snap.

_Holy SHIT!...Hold it...god...dammit...just breathe...breathe...breathe..._

Shikamaru clenched his injured hand and let the spasm of pain pull him back from the edge. He mouthed a curse, feeling the warm roll and rub of Neji's tongue across his bruised skin, laving over the stinging mark.

"Well controlled, Shikamaru. Do you remember the night you let me brand and bruise you all the way to the brink?" Neji asked, fingertips coasting along the shadow-nin's legs, following the lean contours of thigh, kneading higher up until his hands inched under the yukata, rumpling and raising the fabric. "Even then, you didn't give yourself over…not completely…always slipping away like your shadows. I could never catch you."

No…

Shikamaru shook his head, the muscles in his legs and stomach jumping. But the dialogue in his mind refused to flow to his mouth.

_You got one hell of a grip on me...you never let go…_

His hips jolted when Neji's thumbs dug into the sensitive dip where groin met thigh. A roll of the Hyūga's wrists had the yukata parting. Crimson fabric slid aside in a rustle, baring Shikamaru in erotic and erect glory. The musky scent of arousal had Neji's nostrils flaring, a primal growl rolling low in his throat.

"As responsive as the last time I touched you…" Neji murmured, lips skimming a soft, lingering kiss across Shikamaru's furrowed brow, at odds with the harsh, possessive dig of his thumbs into the Nara's hipbones. "Tell me you want this and the burn I gave you then won't even take the edge off the one I'll give you now."

_Oh fucking HELL…_

Shikamaru groaned as pre-fluid seeped out of him, trickling its scalding cream along the straining shaft and prominent vein. He could feel Neji's eyes on him, making him impossibly harder.
"Ngh…s…shit…" he hissed through clenched teeth, struggling to breathe.

His legs began to tremble, the muscles in his arms drawn taut, fingers clenching into the sheets, tell-tale spasms shooting up and down his spine in incendiary sparks.

"Tell me, Shikamaru. Tell me what you want."

Shikamaru's lips parted, but his words died. Only the pant of his breath sounded, in and out in labouring gasps. God he was right at the brink already. Need danced through him like electricity, the static building around Neji's hands. And then Shikamaru registered it was chakra.

The…hell?

His glazed eyes shot open in shock when he felt Neji's thumbs brush the base of his erection. Chakra pulsed through the rigid flesh, closing tenketsu from root to tip, moving faster than the rush that followed behind.

Shikamaru stood no chance against it.

The climax hit him like a desert wind, ripping out of him in dry pulses.

HOLY…

He bucked hard, hips lifting upwards, throat locked around a cry.

FUCK!

Neji caught his bare hips, tugged him roughly to the edge of the futon and guided his pelvis into a slow roll that had Shikamaru riding out the bliss with every gyration.

"Ahn…ah…fuck…" he gasped, grabbing the Hyūga's wrists, arms shaking, chin dropping down to keep his head from tilting back.

"Look at me," Neji growled breathily, lips tracing the flushed angles of Shikamaru's face, kissing the crease between the Nara's brows. "Look at me. Look at me…"

No…

Shikamaru bowed his head again, breathless, boneless and already feeling a resurgent rush with every roll of his hips. Neji gripped him tighter, controlling the movement.

"Slow," the Hyūga whispered.

A feverish sensation swam around Shikamaru's mind, lapping at synapses, warping his perceptions into a haze. Even without the friction he craved the shadow-nin felt a powerful frisson building back up in his loins, causing his engorged flesh to twitch and jump.

"Ahn…" He arched into Neji's grip, head threatening to loll back.

"You feel that, don't you?" Neji coaxed, thumbs circling over Shikamaru's hipbones in time with his pelvic rolls. "This is what you do to me, Nara. Every time I'm near you…I burn…"

W-what…?

Shikamaru's lashes flickered open half-way, crescents of smouldering coal that stared glazed and unfocused from beneath heavy lids. He groaned, feeling Neji's hands massaging and pinching his
skin, all the while guiding the erotic dance of his hips until the shadow-nin felt every pant mirrored by the soft smack of his arousal against his stomach, the slit leaking copious, pearly tears.

And then he felt it again.

A wild flutter tingled inside him, intensifying into anticipatory spasms and stiffening pressure, winding tighter…tighter…tighter…

His eyes widened.

He made the mistake of looking up. Their gazes locked and the raw want in Neji's eyes stroked over Shikamaru like a heat wave, intensified by the Hyūga's words wrapping hotter than a mouth around his dripping flesh.

"Burn for me…again and again…."

Shikamaru choked out a rough curse and turned his face away, every muscle stiffening in concert, fingers clawing up Neji's forearms, desperate for an anchor. He felt his head spinning, his thighs shaking.

Oh fuck, fuck, FUCK!

Neji jerked his hips with a savage growl. "Now."

The dry orgasm tore through Shikamaru like wildfire. It scorched over the previous one, the force of rapture eating up every cell. His vision flashed white and he threw his head back, baring his throat in a sleek, glistening arch.

"F-FUCK!" he keened from behind clenched teeth.

He felt Neji's mouth latch at his neck, teeth sinking in. The sharp sting had his hips lifting. He ground his slick erection against Neji's stomach, thrusting up as the Hyūga bit down on his throat, sucking hard. The pain turned the pleasure from burning white to blistering red.

Shikamaru's lips parted around a hoarse, strangled cry.

Neji growled lustily at the sound.

"God, come here," the Jōnin snarled.

His hands glided around the backs of Shikamaru's thighs until he gripped the firm backside, jerking Shikamaru off the futon and into his lap. Their chests crashed, punching out twin groans, knocking air from starving lungs.

Shikamaru barely had time to catch his breath or his balance.

He found his hips tugged forward and his torso bent backwards over the futon. His head and shoulders hit the edge of the low mattress while Neji knelt and crushed their hips together in a friction both sudden and severe.

"Fuck!" Shikamaru's thighs tightened around Neji's, his back bowing further.

He let out a moan so deep and guttural it rippled along the muscles of his stomach all the way up to the pulsing tendons in his throat.

"Yes," Neji breathed, snaking a hand along the Nara's stretched stomach, chasing the sound of his
moan from origin to outlet, fingertips grazing the bared throat.

"Let it out," Neji growled. "I want to hear you."

Scrambling blindly, Shikamaru's hands anchored at Neji's hips, tugging the Hyūga into a wild, feverish rut. He thrust into every grind, unable to dictate the pace bent backwards like this. But damn if it didn't feel good. Thank god for flexibility. He could feel the pleasure running a helix up and down the backward curve of his spine, pooling in his groin.

"Fuck…y-you're…" he rasped, the words barely formed. "Mnh…you're…"

"I'm what?" Neji panted.

You're killing me…

Shikamaru choked on the words, his body undulating in a telling shudder. He tried his dammedest to fight back the building shivers and hold off the engulfing heat – afraid it might seriously stop his heart.

"Shit…Neji…"

Sensing Shikamaru dangling at the brink, Neji's hand pressed against his chest, keeping his body pinned in its bridge-like bow. "Let it take you, Shikamaru…let it come…let it come…"

Shikamaru bit down, expression twisting with pain and pleasure, too much sensation riding through him, threatening to tear him apart with the next explosion.

So…so close…

"Let it happen. It will feel so good."

Like a hypnotist's cue, those innocuous words bypassed Shikamaru's paralysed brain and fed straight into his unconscious. And from the deepest, darkest recesses of his mind, it hit a trigger he didn't think existed anymore. Instantly, beyond the haze of need and lust he heard it, his own voice – though younger – cutting bluntly into his pleasure.

This is wrong.

He groaned, shaking his head deliriously, rocking into the rigid flesh he felt grinding back against his own; sweating, shaking, scaling higher.

No. This feels…so…right…so…fucking good…

The voice in his head grew in volume.

It's not right. It's not good.

And then one of the scars opened up in his mind, bleeding a dark, nauseating whisper through his head.

"It's gonna feel so good, Shika."

Shikamaru's eyes flashed wide.

A chilling dose of fear and disgust washed through him, flooding panic into his pleasure. Then the memory blanked out, leaving him with only the emotion. His stomach lurched, his breath cut off
and he almost pulled back from the brink of release.

He didn't get the chance.

Neji's mouth latched onto his chest, jump-starting his heart.

Brutal, biting kisses tore from one pectoral to the other, a wet tongue lashing flat nipples into stinging nubs. Shikamaru gasped when teeth pinched down, tearing him out of his head and thrusting him headlong into blistering heat.

He slammed back into his body.

And then his body arched so violently he thought he'd break.

Pleasure broke over him instead.

Sweet and scorching.

It hit him so fast and took him so hard that the world white-washed into a blinding burst of flame. He slammed his head back against the sheets, vocal chords paralysed, screaming without a sound. His hips snapped up in Neji's lap, ribs heaving as he shot dry once more – over and over until the pleasure surged back on itself.

"Feel it," Neji purred, caging Shikamaru's hips in another iron grip, rolling the stiff flesh against the slow grind of his own. "Feel it…the way I never stop feeling you…"

Shikamaru didn't hear him. All thought was swamped by sensation – the sensation that his body was going to give out and he'd die here on the floor, bent backwards in bliss that began to build again.

AGAIN? God…wait…wait…

Delirious, Shikamaru barely felt Neji's hands dragging up under the trembling curve of his back, following the groove of his spine, tugging him upright again. The yukata slid off him completely. He collapsed forward, catching himself by gripping Neji's arms, shaking with the force of what had just crashed through him.

Neji's grip adjusted, bringing their naked groins together in a solid, single grind.

"Ah..." Shikamaru hissed, still harder than he could stand, right on the borderline between pleasure and pain. "W-wait..."

"Wait? It's far from over, Shikamaru."

Groaning, the shadow-nin dropped his head to Neji's shoulder and squeezed the Hyūga's arms in a plea he couldn't voice. His brain tripped over his words while his stomach tripped over the emotions racing wild and unchecked inside him.

Breathe...just...breathe...

The fear and disgust he'd felt so keenly were ashes under the embers of need. And Neji kept those embers burning with every brush of his lips and roll of his hips. Shikamaru had no words to describe the sensation, just sounds he was embarrassed to make. The ache in his groin built heavier, shook him harder, the exquisite need for a complete and uncontrolled release still denied by Neji's chakra.
It was too much sensation, too much confusion, too much chaos – and what frightened him more than all this was how much he wanted it.

"Neji..." Shikamaru gasped, pressing the Jōnin's arms harder. "Stop... stop moving... give me a minute..."

Neji stifled a breathy chuckle, his infinite control belied by the violent beat of his heart and the strain in his breathing. Even so, he stilled the roll of his hips and set his mouth at Shikamaru's ear, mellow voice just above a whisper.

"Dreams don't feel this way, do they?"

No fantasy could capture what Shikamaru felt right now. His dreams were nothing but gossamer threads fraying at the seams. Reality laced raw into every fibre still vibrating within him, pulling at heartstrings so sore he could scarcely breathe.

"No..." he panted, pressing his lips to the crook of Neji's neck. "They don't."

He reached up to squeeze Neji's nape, trying to ground himself. He closed his eyes, dragging a slow breath through his nose. The scent of the Jōnin's skin pulled up the memories of the last time he'd tasted it. A hint of sandalwood and kunai oil, a faint tang of metal from the hitai-ate mixed in with the tantalising musk of sex and sweat and the memory of a salt stronger than both... the taste of tears.

Did I find you?

Shikamaru felt a roiling pain in his stomach, reaching higher to his chest then right up to his throat. He swallowed with difficulty.

Just once...did I find you...?

He tucked his arm around Neji's side and stroked his bandaged hand up fever-hot skin, feeling the muscles in the Jōnin's back shift and ripple beneath his touch. He traced the scars he'd felt in Hanegakure, the flaws and imperfections that made the marble of Neji's body reachable, touchable, human.

Real...

Shikamaru nuzzled the warm skin at Neji's throat, fighting back the memories beginning to stir with the embers.

Blood, bruises, a body barely breathing...

He pressed his mouth to Neji's shoulder with a rattled sigh.

"Shikamaru?" Neji murmured in his ear, turning to kiss his jaw.

Shikamaru slanted his face away from those lips, pulling back to smooth his hands up the hard planes and ridges of the Hyūga's chest, scowling at the half-hanging yukata.

"Take it off." He barely recognised the gravel in his voice. "Now."

Neji cocked his head at the command, taking note of the coarse tone.
A heartbeat of hesitation.

Then those pale shoulders dropped back, allowing Shikamaru to straighten up and hook his thumbs into the lopsided yukata, drawing it away. Neji knelt back, shrugged free of the robe and came forward again, reaching for Shikamaru’s nape at the same moment the shadow-nin leaned in.

Their foreheads tapped.

Neji's headband fogged from the heat of their skin, the metal warming.

"Shikamaru…"

The Nara didn't look up.

His hooded eyes remained cast down, hands mapping out the powerful contours of Neji's torso, fingers moving in precise and methodical patterns. His touches followed the paths he'd memorized. The routes he'd charted between one bruise and another when Neji had been covered in them – black, brutal, vein-riddled contusions.

They were gone.

But the memories of them weren't.

Shikamaru remembered every mark. And he remembered every moment. Every agonising minute he’d spent tending to the damage when Neji had been comatose. He remembered it so keenly he could have mapped the marks out blind.

I can't forget you…and it's killing me…

He felt Neji's heartbeat beneath his palm.

But you survived…that's all that matters…

Shikamaru pressed his fingers again and again over the warm skin, rubbing the heel of his hand above the pounding heart. He felt Neji kneading his nape, loosening knots he didn't realise had begun to tighten there.

"Shikamaru…" Neji's other hand cupped his jaw. "Look at me…"

Shikamaru gritted his teeth.

He pressed his forehead against Neji's until he felt the Leaf emblem biting into his furrowed brow.

"Look at me…"

"I am looking at you," Shikamaru whispered back, brushing his thumbs over Neji's collarbones, squeezing the solid shoulders and bracing his hands either side of the Hyūga's neck. "Anyway… you hated when I did that."

"Because you saw me," Neji returned, his thumb settling at the corner of the shadow-nin's mouth. "So let me see you."

Shikamaru smirked bitterly, pulse quickening when the pad of Neji's thumb stroked across his bottom lip. "You're seeing me just fine."

Neji gripped his jaw, fingers biting into the hinges hard enough to hurt.
Shikamaru flinched and frowned, dark orbs flicking up.

His expression froze.

Silver-white eyes eclipsed his vision, the iridescent glow luring his gaze and holding it captive. His body went abruptly still. But inside, that inescapable gravity – defined by laws of need rather than nature – pulled between them.

Shikamaru's scowl dissolved, his resistance crumbling.

Neji's grip softened. Long elegant fingers traced over the bridge of Shikamaru's nose from one high cheek to the other, following the angles of his face.

They leaned in at the same time.

Open mouths bumped once, twin gasps snatching at the air. Shikamaru's tongue snaked out then curled back behind the clench of his teeth.

No…

A kiss would change everything.

"Stop me." He pulled in a ragged breath. "Stop me…"

Neji shushed him, fingertips ghosting over his mouth. "I know."

Shikamaru kissed the tips of those pale digits, leaned in to nudge noses. Together they turned their faces aside, avoiding that dangerous touch of lips.

But they didn't pull back.

Eyes closed while mouths opened against throats and shoulders, leaving wet trails on warm skin. Breaths deepened, heartbeats quickened. Their heads turned back and forth in a rough nuzzle, cheeks rubbing with an almost animal affection.

"Come here," Neji whispered, softer than the first time he'd snarled it.

His strong, sinewy hands curved around Shikamaru's hips, getting a solid grip on the sculpted buttocks, squeezing the tight flex of muscle. Shikamaru stiffened instinctively, taking a moment to relax into the touch, allowing his body to be pulled forward in a languid sway.

They pressed together again, slower this time, skin-on-skin without a stitch of material. Drawn back into Neji's lap, Shikamaru tensed the firm muscles of his legs around the smooth granite of the Hyūga's thighs. The pressure locked them together in that puzzle-piece perfection until the only breaks were the ones inside them.

Neji's mouth found his neck and Shikamaru's breath came harder.

"Shikamaru…" Neji breathed his name out like a prayer, damning them both.

I don't care…

And it didn't stop Shikamaru's hands from wandering the Jōnin's skin, following the slopes of shoulder-blades and the indentation of spine. He could wander this body for days with his hands, rediscovering deltas of flesh and depths of feeling that made every time the first time all over again.
I can't stop…

Shikamaru swallowed thickly, the intimacy of his thoughts beginning to startle him more than the intensity in his body. He shifted his hips and trapped their stirring lengths between bellies ridged with sculpted muscle. An experimental grind had them both groaning.

"Don't," Neji instructed, digging his fingers into each tensing glute when Shikamaru tried to take control of the pace. "Don't. I'll bring it to you."

Shikamaru panted a rough sigh through his nose, frowning in confusion and a hint of consternation. "What?"

"You don't need to lead this time, Shikamaru. You don't need to think about anything. All you need to do is feel." Neji kissed his throat, fingers squeezing with that skilled and knowing pressure. "Relax and let me lead."

Lead…

Shikamaru blinked heavily, the word rolling around through the haze in his brain. A strange discomfort knotted in his stomach. If his logic had been operating, he'd have analysed the cold rock in his gut and diagnosed it as nervousness.

Lead…?

He'd always been the one to lead in the past. Neji had been too controlled, too busy trying to cut himself off and keep himself cold. It had been instinctive for Shikamaru to seek him out, chase him down and lead him back.

Lead…

Shikamaru frowned harder, struggling to hold onto the thought, an increasingly difficult task with Neji's hot mouth and massaging hands working him into a fever. The Hyūga could stop his brain faster than a blackout – excluding Hyūga headbutts. And that knowledge caused the discomfort in his stomach to twist tighter.

Stupid…

It didn't make sense. Neji wasn't trying to attack him. And given what he'd done to Neji's control and the icy defences he'd managed to slip past, wasn't it only fair that he give up a little control in return?

That was never about control.

Of all the things he'd wanted to do to Neji and take from him, control had never been one of them. The only things he'd ever wanted to take away from Neji had been the Hyūga's pain, his suicidal goal and the ghosts from his past. He'd taken only what Neji had let him take; and only when Neji had let him in. He hadn't forced entry without leaving an exit. All that made sense in his head, but it failed to explain the cold feeling that came from letting the Hyūga take over…

"You have the audacity to come at me and dare get angry when I come at you?"

Shikamaru's eyes flickered open at the memory of Neji's words, his glazed orbs gaining an edge of bleary focus.

Angry…?
Was there truth in that accusation?

*I'm not angry…am I?*

Surely it was just anxiety. Anxiety that came from not knowing all the options and not being able to affect the outcomes; because the outcomes of being in such a vulnerable position were never predictable. Just like the one night in Hanegakure that he'd let Neji roll him onto his back and take control the way the Jōnin needed to. Shikamaru had allowed it because the Hyūga had touched him without pushing boundaries Neji didn't even know existed…and at the time it had felt right…it had felt good…

*It's not right. It's not good.*

The toneless, long-buried words struck him cold again – like a zombie hand thrust out from a grave, gripping his insides and clutching hard.

*It's not real…*

Shikamaru jumped when he felt a sudden pull on his scalp, followed by the fall of his hair from its bind. The thick, inky shards hit his back, brushing his shoulders and framing his jaw in their uneven cut.

"Back in your head again, aren't you? Kami, you're a challenge, Nara." Neji's fingers brushed affectionately through the jagged strands.

Shikamaru stiffened marginally. "Don't."

Neji paused, as if considering, then repeated the soothing stroke of his fingers. "You were always reluctant to have your hair down. Why?"

Shikamaru sneered, that cold nervousness souring into nausea. "I don't like it."

"Why?"

Shikamaru's eyes narrowed, disguising the discomfort in his gaze with irritation. The truth almost betrayed itself, boiling up in the back of Shikamaru's brain with all the other poisonous, banished thoughts. Rather than lace his tongue with honesty, he let the sarcastic venom fly.

"Take off your hitai-ate," he drawled scathingly. "Let's have a pissing competition over whose head is more fucked up."

The second he spat it he wished he hadn't.

Neji's fingers stilled. His face became unreadable, white eyes gazing intently.

Shikamaru frowned and made to pull away. He didn't get very far. The fingers in his hair speared back through the choppy strands, getting a solid grip. A harsh yank jerked his head back, baring his throat.

Shikamaru let out a surprised yelp. "The fuck!"

A scalding tongue dragged across his throat right up to his jawline, nipping hard. The actions stunned Shikamaru into stillness, his brain scrambling wildly while Neji took advantage of his shock. The Hyūga's mouth followed the tense slant of jaw, teeth pinching a studded ear, tongue
"Now why would such a harmless thing leave you feeling so exposed?" He paused, his voice falling softer as he added: "And so bitter?"

Panic fluttered in Shikamaru's stomach.

Rather than respond, he wrapped his injured hand into the rich mocha of Neji's hair, twining it like a silk rope around his wrist. One violent tug tore those lips away from his ear, settling their snarling mouths dangerously close.

"Don't go there with me," Shikamaru growled. "You'll lose."

Neji arched a brow. "There's only one thing I have left to lose."

"Says the Hyūga who 'never loses'."

"To the Nara who's already lost," Neji uttered.

Shikamaru hesitated, his eyes pinching. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Neji studied him for a moment, slivers of opal glinting beneath his lashes. "For all the things those sharp eyes of yours see, Shikamaru, there is one thing that I will always see clearer than you."

Shikamaru snorted, eyebrow cutting up in a scathing slice. But a wary flicker chased across his face. Neji must have sensed it, because the Hyūga's lip twitched in a grim smirk that didn't reach his eyes.

"Chakra," Neji said.

Shikamaru frowned at the blunt and obvious truth, but his sarcastic reply was cut short by a sudden and very genuine confusion. "I haven't lost my chakra."

"No, but you've lost control of it," Neji returned calmly. "I doubt you're even aware of what's happening with it right now."

What?

Shikamaru's gut dropped and his mind raced with the implications of those words. Rather than leave himself open, his automatic defence kicked in and he smirked bitterly.

"That's kind of rich isn't it? Coming from the guy who lived under a delusion that he had an unlimited supply," he snapped, wincing inwardly at the caustic bite in his words. "Don't exactly trust your judgement on that one, Neji, so spare me the highhanded Hyūga bullshit. Play a better card."

Neji's jaw tightened to the likeness of rock.

Shikamaru didn't even bother chalkimg himself up a point. He wasn't enjoying this one bit. He wasn't mean by nature, but when it came to defending himself his razor mouth and mind were his best weapons.

What the hell is he talking about? My chakra's fine...It's just low from training and crappy recuperation...

Without warning, Neji twisted his wrist, the movement putting pressure on Shikamaru's neck,
forcing his head to a slant. Snapping back from himself, Shikamaru growled, giving a savage tug on Neji's mane to even the power score and level their faces again.

Opal irises glinted warningly, locked onto onyx slits glaring back.

The deadlock held.

A cage of angry tension slammed around them.

Rain spat against the windows, hissing off the panes.

Fingers tightened and arms flexed, necks arching. Neither let go; both shinobi leashed by the grip they had on each other, reining in each other's violence. Shikamaru's jaw tightened, primal aggression and adrenaline bleeding into arousal, warring with dominance and desire and something he didn't want to face.

Neji let out a slow breath through his nose, speaking quietly into the charged air. "You can't live within your stratagems, Shikamaru. You can't reduce everything to a game."

The 'game' barb stung right on target and the pain flashed once in Shikamaru's eyes, gone faster than a lightning flicker. "Can't I?" he uttered, his voice flat, emotionless in a way he almost didn't recognise. "Keeps it interesting."

Neji frowned, but it wasn't anger in his face. "But not real. You can't hide behind your lies, Shikamaru."

Shikamaru snorted. "Pot, kettle, black. Make a stupid simple idiom with those words, Hyūga."

Neji's jaw ticked but his expression didn't change. "Even if I had been fooling myself with regards to my limits, I never considered myself to be living a lie."

"Yeah, you're waiting for a real mask before you start doing that."

Neji ignored the bait he'd once have taken hook, line and sinker. "You saw for yourself what was real. You saw what my denial – what my lie – almost cost me."

"Tch. Is this gonna be a veteran speech, Hyūga?" Shikamaru riled, his tongue lashing faster than his brain could intervene, trying desperately to keep Neji at bay. "Spare me your hindsight. I don't need it. I've been doing just fine for two years."

Neji's brow furrowed, eyes rounding. "Two years…?"

Fuck. Well played, genius.

Shikamaru clenched his jaw, teeth grinding until the enamel audibly creaked. For a long moment Neji just stared, scanning his face in narrow-eyed scrutiny. Shikamaru glared back, but it was weak. The fight seemed to have drained out of him like the colour from his face. Even without his clothes, he felt naked in a way that went way beyond skin and muscle and bone. The panic in his gut fluttered again, the tension shooting straight to his legs: the instinctive urge to get up and run.

Neji's eyes softened a little.

Shikamaru felt the Hyūga's grip on his hair slackening.

This was the chance. The opening. The time to get up and get the hell out. His thighs tightened around Neji's, everything in him primed to bolt. Until the Hyūga's fingers combed a soothing touch
through his hair and caressed his head softly.

"Two years…" Neji said softly, cautiously – without pressure, without pushing.

Shikamaru's panic was whipped away by his relief, lost like smoke on a wind of exhaustion. He sloughed out a weary sigh, shaking his head.

"It's buried. It's nothing."

*Nothing I can't forget all over again.*

He knew he could do it. Whatever ghosts were haunting his head just needed to be cast back into the shadows of his subconscious. That's where the past belonged.

*I know I can do that.*

The fear left his eyes, leaving them guarded and uncertain. He waited to see whether Neji would push for answers in the same way he'd done with the Hyūga weeks ago.

The Jōnin didn't.

Neji just gazed quietly.

Shikamaru took it as a chance to let the topic slide. He released Neji's hair, felt the silk of it slip through his fingers, hating the sense of loss that came from something so inconsequential.

"It's nothing," he said again, softer.

Neji watched him for a long moment, until the hand caressing Shikamaru's head slipped around to touch the shadow-nin's face. Pale fingers traced the dark rings under his eyes.

Shikamaru blinked slowly and forced a wavering smirk.


Neji didn't smile at the intended humour, but blinked to acknowledge the words. He continued to trace out Shikamaru's features, eventually reaching up with both hands to card his fingers back through the thick choppy hair.

For a second, Shikamaru wondered at the action, tried to gauge whether it was done to provoke him into a reaction. But there was something in the touch, some unspoken communication that put the shadow-nin at ease: I don't want to fight.

Shikamaru's expression gentled.

He was sick of the cruel words. Exhausted by the force of his anger.

*I don't want to fight either…*

Neji read the thought in his expression and nodded, working pale fingers back through Shikamaru's hair.

The shadow-nin's eyes shuttered and he let his head tilt back into the soothing touch, the skin of his scalp tingling and tightening. "Mmn."

Neji did smile then, the barest twitch to the left of his mouth.
Spying the faint smile, Shikamaru's lidded gaze dropped down. He studied the shape of Neji's lips, the sensual fullness of the bottom swell, recalling the way that mouth looked when parted and kiss-swollen.

*No.*

Shikamaru pressed his eyes shut, resisting the overwhelming urge to lean down and take those lips beneath his. Instead, he focused on the drag of Neji's fingers through his hair, skin prickling at the firm rake against his scalp. The tension in his temples flared then ebbed, the knots of pain that had long set up residence in his skull beginning to melt away.

He hadn't expected that.

But then, it's not like he'd ever allowed this.

Even his teammates knew that he hated his hair being handled. Yet here Neji was, combing long fingers through it and rubbing his scalp into a pleasant hum. It should have been pushing all sorts of buttons.

But the aggression and discomfort didn't come.

*Why?*

Shikamaru tried to frown and failed. His face seemed incapable of holding any tension, the little tingles from his scalp carrying down his spine in a shiver.

"You like this," Neji observed, his voice low and soft – just short of a question.

Shikamaru pressed into the rub of Neji's fingers, rolling his head to one side. "Hn. You think?"

"I do…" Neji quipped and the shadow-nin rewarded him with a small, lazy smile.

The next rake of Neji's fingers reached further, following the sleek shards of hair around to the back of Shikamaru's skull, finding pressure points with enviable ease. Pleasure orbited the Nara's head in pulses, punctuated with occasional stabs of pain.

"Does this hurt?" Neji asked.

*I don't care…*

The pain was tolerable. He understood it, given the constant ache that hung around his brain. He shook his head and bit down on a groan when Neji's fingers carved upwards, clawing along his scalp, tangling in midnight-black strands, kneading hard.

"Shit," Shikamaru hissed, his shoulders dropping back, neck craning into the firmer touch, bracing a hand at Neji's shoulder. "Harder…"

"Careful," Neji murmured. "I'm near pressure points."

*I really don't care…*

Maybe the pain would be a blessing. He wanted those fingers to hit those points, hell, switch them off completely. He needed those fingers to dig deeper, exert pressure severe enough to crack open the cage of tension encasing his head. Something to crush the thoughts, to make it all easier, make it all go away, make it all shut up, make it all—
"Stop," he whispered, the broken word slipping out unbidden.

The press of Neji's fingers ceased. Warm palms cupped the back of Shikamaru's head to tip his face down. Frowning at the abrupt halt to the massage his dark eyes fluttered open to half-mast, a hum of query catching in his throat.

Neji levelled him with a strange, searching look.

Confused, Shikamaru cocked his head, not understanding. "What?" he husked, not sure he wanted to know.

No response.

Instead, something more devastating than an answer.

An action.

Neji framed Shikamaru's head between his palms, tilted the Nara's brow down and pressed a kiss to his forehead…and then to his left temple, following across to the right, turning Shikamaru's face this way and that to skim his lips over every sculpted angle.

He'd done this before – once before.

Shikamaru remembered it as clearly as every other memory emblazoned in his mind. It was a moment carved into his heart, cut into him with that jagged blade of need. The same need lodging it's blade into his windpipe. The same need slicing through every knot of complicated emotion right to the root of the simple truth he couldn't speak.

So lie...

He worked his throat, the pain tantamount to swallowing a lump of burning coal.

"Lie…"

Neji raised his head a scant inch and looked into Shikamaru's eyes, threading his fingers through the shadow-nin's hair to hold it away from his face. "Lie?"

"Whatever truths I…" he cut off tightly, clearing his throat to try again, his normally smoky tones shrivelled to ash. "Whatever truths I twist…whatever lies I live…I do it…'cause I need something to make it easier…just for a while…two weeks…another two years…whatever it takes…"

Neji blinked, drawing back a little more, searching Shikamaru's face.

"Do you want me to lie to you, Shikamaru?" he asked softly.

Shikamaru closed his eyes. "Yeah."

Please.

Neji said nothing.

Shikamaru felt that knifing pain in his throat sink lower, heading straight for the vital organ beating hard in his chest.

And then Neji's hips began to move.
Shikamaru's breath caught.

"I don't want you," Neji whispered, dragging his fingers back and forth across Shikamaru's scalp in a rhythm that matched the rock of his hips. "I stopped wanting you the day I walked away."

The words dripped like acid into Shikamaru's mind, burning into his heart, stinging the backs of his eyes. All because they were impossible to believe. Twisted truths really weren't lies at all. Not the kind of lies he needed – not the kind of lies he knew Neji would ever give.

*Damn you, Neji...damn us both...*

Lies were supposed to make it right. Lies were supposed to sear over the past and bleach the memory. Lies were supposed to erase it, wipe it clean, corrode everything into a dust he could finally brush off his heart.

There was just one problem.

*We could never lie about this...*

And even if Shikamaru had pretended to believe the whispered lies, their bodies screamed the truth.

"I don't think about you," Neji crooned, knotting his fingers into sable hair, tugging to open up Shikamaru's throat to his mouth. "I don't think about tasting you..."

Neji's tongue dragged up his neck and Shikamaru's blood sang and sighed and surged arousal through him in warm laps.

"I don't think about finding you..." Neji's hands swept down Shikamaru's body and gripped the backs of his thighs. "I don't think about throwing you down."

He lifted forwards, toppling the shadow-nin down onto the futon. Shikamaru's back barely hit the sheets before Neji's thigh dragged across his hips and rubbed along the hardening flesh between his legs.

Shikamaru's eyes rolled back and his hips rolled up.

Neji straddled him, gazing down through opal eyes alive with flame – flames that licked Shikamaru's skin into a glistening flush, reaching deeper than the Byakugan's penetrating gaze ever could.

"I don't think about seeing you..." Neji panted, his voice growing hoarser. "I don't dream about your face...I'm not haunted by your words..."

*Stop...*

Shikamaru bit down hard, throat tight, body shaken up with need so intense he couldn't risk opening his mouth without the truth spilling out like blood from the breaks inside him. God, at least blood would wash away, but the truth would leave a stain he could never erase.

*I can't...*

Neji cocked his head to one side and his expression grew serious and intense. Those glowing eyes roamed Shikamaru's body again, slower this time, the raging storm of desire curbed by something else in his gaze that Shikamaru couldn't place and suddenly didn't want to see.
Don't look at me like that…fuck, please…

Shikamaru closed his eyes, turned his head to the side to snatch air.

He felt Neji's knuckle hook beneath his jaw, turning his head back as the Hyūga leaned down. "I don't think about taking you…"

Shikamaru's body tightened at those words. Neji felt it and rolled his hips down in a fierce grind. It crushed every molecule of tension in Shikamaru's body into dust. He shuddered, dark lashes flickering as his eyes rolled beneath closed lids.

Neji's breath danced across his lips. "I don't want to bury myself inside you and leave a burn so deep that you'll never stop feeling me…"

A ragged groan caught in Shikamaru's throat, eyes squeezing tighter. "Neji…"

"I don't think about any of these things, Shikamaru..." Neji shifted to blanket himself across the shadow-nin's body in one smooth, sensual caress. He leaned on one elbow and with his other hand stroked strands of black away from Shikamaru's face.

"Because just like you," he whispered. "I don't need this either."

Shikamaru went very still – still as the breath that died on his lips.

And then he opened his eyes.

Their gazes caught and held.

Thunder rumbled overhead, the wash of rain against the window pounding harder.

None of it mattered.

What mattered was glistening obsidian boring into pools of clouded opal. Black and white locked in a shade of grey emotion...emotion that passed like smoke across the fire in their eyes. Signals carried in that smoke and they read each other wordlessly.

The air shivered between them. They were sharing the same breaths.

After a small eternity, Neji stroked his knuckles across Shikamaru's high-boned cheek, tracing over the faded scar. The regret in his eyes was a shadow. Shikamaru recognised this shadow in an instant and he moved to take it away from Neji. He shook his head, communicating what he knew the Jōnin would understand: don't be sorry.

Neji offered no objection or acceptance.

Instead, he knelt back and reached up to hook his thumb into his hitai-ate.

Shikamaru followed the movement, his eyes widening.

Neji slipped his thumb under the black fabric, followed it around under the fall of his hair and worked the knot. The hitai-ate dropped onto Shikamaru's stomach, the metal cold against his flushed skin.

His gaze fastened on the curse mark.

Without a word the shadow-nin pulled an arm back to rest on one elbow, reaching up with his other
hand. Neji leaned down at the silent call. Shikamaru cupped the back of his head and drew the branded brow to his mouth.

He kissed the seal. A chaste press of his lips. "Neji…"

Neji pulled in a sharp breath and exhaled shakily. The naked vulnerability in the sound gripped Shikamaru's heart and squeezed mercilessly. He let his fingers steal down to Neji's nape, rubbing circles with his thumb, dropping kisses softly against the Jōnin's forehead.

The tenderness felt instinctive, essential and inescapable.

Shikamaru didn't question it; and for the first time that night, he let it take precedence over the fear. *Just this once…*

Neji knelt in silence, bowed like a man at prayer. His palms coasted down Shikamaru's sides, fingers fanning wide, flowing downward to sharp hips then back up again. Confessions spilled into touches. He lingered at Shikamaru's ribs and stroked the scars there, letting the Nara kiss the marked skin of his brow and trace out the etched lines of the symbol with his lips.

Shikamaru's breath shivered out. "Neji..."

The Hyūga tilted his jaw up.

Olive fingers ran through the dark chestnut bangs framing Neji's face, stroking them back from the crafted features. Shikamaru pressed a parting kiss to the curse mark and let his lips skim down Neji's nose until their mouths hovered close.

Breaths halved and heartbeats doubled.

Lightning flickered, turning the rain into silver ribbons against the glass.

Neji spoke then, his voice half whisper, half rasp – faint as a dream. "If our fates are fixed in this, then why are we always in pieces?"

Shikamaru's eyes stung, forcing him to pull in a watery breath. "Makes us easier to move around?" he croaked, his voice crumbling so painfully around joke he had to close his eyes.

Neji smiled gently, the soft, sad curve of his mouth settling above the shadow-nin's in a ghosting kiss. It branded Shikamaru's lips like fire, stirring his tongue into a wet flame.

*Stop me...fuck, please…*

His lips parted but Neji drew back before he could angle his head to deepen the contact. Shikamaru silently thanked him. It saved them from that beautiful damnation he couldn't and wouldn't have stopped.

But Neji's control was the blessing before a stronger burn.

His palm flattened against Shikamaru's chest, above the throbbing heart.

Shikamaru flinched, not in pain, but from the feeling of warmth emanating from Neji's hand. He wondered briefly if it was chakra, but doubted it.

Truth to tell, it felt like Neji was pulling the warmth up from out of him.
Neji blinked once then knelt up and pressed down on Shikamaru's chest, prompting the shadow-nin to rest back on both his elbows, dark eyes watching through a screen of damp lashes. He blinked back the sting, not wanting to blur the chiselled lines of Neji's face. He'd always lose that focus in his dreams, forced to watch it all melt away.

Dreams turned to dust, every time.

Stop…

As if sensing his thoughts, Neji shook his head, drawing Shikamaru's eyes to his. With a deep, throaty hum he stroked warm, rough palms up along Shikamaru's legs, parting them with a downward glide along the roped muscles of the shadow-nin's inner thighs.

Shikamaru's breath fluttered in his throat. "Neji."

"I know," Neji murmured, rubbing Shikamaru's thighs, drawing them further apart with every press of his fingers. "Trust me."

Shikamaru tensed and the muscles in his torso stood out in stark relief.

The reaction prompted Neji to change the pace, the cadence of his breath changing in tandem. He worked his hands slower, but firmer, until the tension in the shadow-nin's muscles began to tremble and tingle.

Shikamaru shuddered at the sensation, digging his elbows into the mattress.

Neji's palms moved like magnets along his skin, drawing up the embers in his blood like iron filings to the surface, flushing his body into a fine sheen. Only this time, Shikamaru knew it wasn't Neji's chakra.

"Mnh…” He fisted his fingers in the sheets, head dropping forward a little. "Neji…”

"That's right." He felt Neji's hands hook behind his knees and draw them far enough apart for the Jōnin to settle their hips flush together. "Just feel."

Shikamaru hissed, the delicious sensation wringing a quiet, breathy moan from low in his throat. He swallowed it back, gritting his teeth at the embarrassing sound.

Neji's lashes dropped to half-mast. "Shikamaru…” he purred the name, let the syllables melt on his tongue.

Shikamaru's body responded like a charmed serpent, undulating once, rocking into the achingly slow friction that Neji's hips set. The rhythm was torture – sweet, aching torture.

"Yes…” Shikamaru whispered, delighting in the slow burn that forced him to feel every shift in degree, raising the bar on his awareness, rooting him into his body like nothing else. "How do you…mnh...know…”

"Your body tells me," Neji answered, keeping up the rhythm, somehow managing to make the friction rise with only the barest shift in angle and pressure, sliding and grinding their arousals together.

Yes…god…yes…

Shikamaru felt that liquid burn pooling its lava deep in his belly, pulsing thick and warm into his
stiffening flesh. He felt Neji's answering arousal, solid and smooth as marble, gliding their slick erections with every rub, smearing the warm, salty musk welling at the thick tips.

*Oh…fuck…*

Shikamaru felt pain biting into his shoulders and spine, screaming at him to abandon his propped position and just lay back, give in, relax into the rapture.

*No…Not like that…*

Shikamaru shook his head. Bracing himself on one elbow he hooked his other arm around Neji's back for support, gripping the sharp jut of shifting shoulder blade, digging his fingers in hard enough to bruise.

Neji arched into the touch, his dark mane sliding and rippling across the shifting contours of his back, a deep panther-like purr thrilling low in his throat.

"Shikamaru…" he growled, reaching between their rolling hips to wrap his fingers around the thick base of the shadow-nin's arousal, stroking upwards in a slow twist, squeezing in a corkscrew turn about the wet, velvet crown.

Shikamaru cried out and panted against the crook of Neji's neck, his face contorting in an expression of pleasure and pain. He felt his spine tightening, the ache in his loins building, pre-fluid leaking in warm streams over Neji's fingers.

"Nnh…Neji…"

"Do you want more, Shikamaru?"

*Fuck…yes…*

He shook his head, brain struggling to follow questions and commands. He almost lost his head completely when a slow stroke and twist of Neji's hand crushed both their erections together, turning his mind to magma.

*Holy…god…*

Shikamaru's lips curled back against Neji's shoulder, snarling in primal want, blunt nails digging in at the Hyūga's shoulder blade, his other arm shaking under the strain of supporting him.

"Do you want me to taste you, Shikamaru?" Neji crooned, the cultured silk of his voice husky and hot. "To feel that fire of yours on my tongue?"

The words set off vibrations that rolled through Shikamaru like an earth tremor, threatening to shake the foundations of rules and safety zones the shadow-nin had concreted into his unconscious. Boundaries, lines, rules of logic that would keep the board of his body together so he didn't lose the pieces he could never get back if he let them fall.

*Fall…fuck…I always…fall into…you…*

Gloved in the rough warmth of Neji's palm, Shikamaru's chest heaved and strained with every pant, the rapture clawing through his limbs, leaving him raw and reactive, riddled with a mass of livewires in place of arteries and veins. And then Neji's thumb sawed through his weeping slit, rubbing hard under the sensitive delta of the flared head.
FUCK!

Shikamaru threw his head back, a strangled shout cutting off behind his teeth, trembling hard, right on the verge of release. But Neji's hand slid down and gripped him at his aching base until the spasms subsided.

"God dammit..." Shikamaru slurred breathlessly, his elbow starting to slide. He locked his arm, struggling to breathe and remain balanced. "Neji...fuck...more..."

"Do you want me deeper?" Neji breathed the words against Shikamaru's temple, nuzzling shards of dark hair aside to set his lips at the shadow-nin's ear. "Do you want to feel me inside you?"

Shikamaru stiffened, biting out a single word. "No..."

Neji went still for a moment, his hand still encircling the base of the granite column jutting up from Shikamaru's hips. The absence of movement might have alarmed Shikamaru if his heart wasn't racing and the fever wasn't flowing faster and growing fiercer – it flooded hot words to his mouth that spilt out in a rush.

"Don't stop...god...don't stop..."

"I never did," Neji breathed back, the tender words lost on Shikamaru.

All the shadow-nin heard was the jackhammer of his heart. He felt a soft kiss against his temple and a slow, slippery stroke of Neji's hand dragging up his length from the heavy root to seeping tip. Then that divine grip fell away, replaced by the hard thrust of Neji's arousal rubbing them together in a slick glide.

"Move with me, Shikamaru..."

"Yes..." he hissed, grinding back, head dropping forward onto Neji's shoulder, his embracing arm tightening like a vice. "Fuck..."

Shikamaru barely felt Neji reaching for his right leg, lifting the tense and shaking limb. His knee was hooked over the Jōnin's hip, winding to lock in a brutal cinch. He felt Neji roll them onto their sides, facing each other, holding Shikamaru's leg draped over his hip.

"Look at me," Neji panted against his lips.

Shikamaru's lashes flickered open half-way.

Raw, naked need smouldered in the burnt coal of his eyes, reflected back and roiling wild in the pewter pools gazing back at him.

"I want to watch you burn, Shikamaru," Neji purred, fingers dragging up the back of Shikamaru thigh to his buttock, tugging the Nara closer until their hips meshed into an almost painful friction. "You won't deny me that."

The same need in Shikamaru's eyes etched itself into the carved angles of Neji's face – an exquisite, erotic sensuality that ripped away the cool, ethereal mask the Hyūga used to cloak this raw, animalistic passion.

This human hunger to feel fire in all the places he kept himself cold.

"I'm tired of this cold..."
Shikamaru's heart swelled.

He gulped a breath, tried to punch back against the fist of emotions clenching inside him, all of them bleeding into the desire, making it burn brighter and hotter, a glowing-white nova building in his core.

His eyes widened, alarm spiking through him.

*It's too strong…*

"Let it come…" Neji coaxed, his hand dipping around to the base of Shikamaru's spine, pulling him harder into the grind of their hips.

Shikamaru began to shake, his leg tensing around Neji. "C…close…"

"I know. Don't close your eyes," Neji whispered, his voice noticeably hoarse, growing breathless with every staggered pant. "Look at me."

Shikamaru forced his heavy lids to lift, gazing back, intense and aroused and unable to withhold the aching emotion breaking through his stare.

"Neji…" he whispered.

Neji swallowed, looking pained before he reached up with his free hand, raked it back through Shikamaru's hair, caressing his head, hips rolling in a rhythm steady as a tide, pulling Shikamaru out into a scorching sea. The shadow-nin could feel himself drowning, resistance going under, the waves building, a tsunami of heat cresting inside him…climbing…climbing…

Neji's lips settled above his, breathing words into his panting mouth. "Burn for me, Shikamaru."

The words were his freefall, straight into the fire.

Shikamaru's eyes lost focus, his body stiffened, breath cutting off.

"Neji…" he whispered – right before it struck.

Ecstasy exploded through him, detonating in every cell, erupting outwards in a brilliant solar flare. He might have screamed, but all he heard was the roar of something in his blood that he couldn't contain.

*FUCK!*

Shikamaru's body bowed and broke under the bliss, undulating in a slow, rolling arch that had his neck craning back and his mouth tearing open.

He went up in flames, filled to the brink with white fire.

The pleasure swallowed him whole and he burst with an animal cry, torn apart as the fire spilled out of him in a wet torrent that didn't seem to end – gush after gush of a climax too severe for his mind to handle, engulfing him in bliss until the world burned into black.

It felt like death…the sweetest kind…

He barely felt Neji gripping him, holding him together as they both came apart. All he sensed was a deep, melodic moan breaking against his lips. Just the sound of Neji's pleasure wrung another shiver through Shikamaru's spent and shaking body.
Neji…

The name floated in and out of his blurring mind, sailing down like a feather to settle on the frantically beating muscle in his chest. His body shuddered and shivered, blood singing as it simmered.

An afterglow of aftershocks.

It left him trembling and panting until the velvet tongues of peace lapped over every limb, lulling and loosening his breaths, easing the storm.

Then stillness…within and all around…

Peace…

Awareness returned in gossamer threads.

Shikamaru's brain struggled to make sense of it, a chore that took about as much effort as it did to lift his lashes. He felt fingers brush over his heavy lids, coaxing them to close again.

"Close your eyes," Neji whispered, his voice sounding strangely choked.

Shikamaru tried to lift his head, struggling against his failing senses. He felt himself slipping…the lava cooling and dragging him away into a warm, welcoming darkness…

No…

He didn't want to go. Didn't want to fall into a dream just to wake and find that *this* was nothing more than a cruel imagining. He flexed his fingers, felt the sensation of something slipping through them.

Neji's voice rippled into the black waters. "Don't fight it…"

Again those fingertips ghosted over his lashes, smoothing over his face, stroking away the furrow in his damp brow before combing back through his hair…again and again…

"Let go…"

Shikamaru tried to hold on, tried to anchor his awareness onto the calming stroke of a palm drawing up and down his back…tried to latch onto the sound of rain against the panes…steadily replaced by the sound of Neji's breathing and feel of it against his mouth, soft and synchronised…matching the gentle rise and fall of his chest…

"Sleep…" Neji urged, his voice sounding fainter, further away.

No...

By the time Shikamaru felt himself going under, he had no strength left to fight it.
Chapter 13

There was solace in the shadows. The kind of comfort that leant itself to stolen moments; moments that belonged in memory, reduced to shadow-play on the walls of the mind.

_Memories…moments…that's all we ever have._

Neji blinked slowly, watching the shadows of raindrops play across Shikamaru's skin. They ran in shivering trails along the groove of the shadow-nin's spine, streaking across the sharp slopes of shoulder blades and along the sculpted planes of his back.

Like ink dripping down a breathing canvas.

Neji let out a soft sigh through his nose, swallowing thickly in the silence. He had no idea what time it was or how much time had passed. He'd measured moments in heartbeats, his breathing deep and regular, almost meditative.

_At rest…_

The kind he'd only ever found with the ninja resting beside him.

Shikamaru lay sprawled on his stomach, one arm lost up under the pillows, the other stretched straight beside his body. His face was turned away from Neji, the shards of his hair splayed in thick slices, sharper and smoother than black glass against the futon's white sheets.

Thunder growled overhead.

Neji held his breath, listening out.

Nothing.

While Shikamaru had shifted around for a restless half hour, he'd eventually found a position comfortable enough to go comatose in.

He hadn't moved since.

Not even the storm had shaken or stirred him. Konoha had taken a beating from it. Wind had whipped rain into a shatter against the glass and thunder had roared and rocked the skies, lightning slashing back in bright bursts. The world had screamed in elemental fury but Shikamaru's world was nothing but stillness and silence, wrapped in shadows and sleep.

Neji's lip twitched in a faint smile.

He shouldn't have been surprised. He'd witnessed Shikamaru's ability to close off his mind and shut down his senses when it came to anything that threatened to encroach on his sleep.

*But you can't shut out your nightmares, can you?*

Adjusting his elbow against the pillow, Neji tilted his head, leaning his temple against his fist. He gazed down through his lashes at the sleeping shadow-nin.

*You always knew what to say to me…and what moves to make to calm me down.*

And blinkered by his rage and recklessness, it had never occurred to Neji that Shikamaru had
understood and known what to do from personal experience.

"Practice makes perfect."

The drawl of those words crawled cold across Neji's mind, prickling his skin and running chills through his blood. He'd arrogantly assumed that Shikamaru's understanding of how to respond to such panic and pain had come from practicality and prediction. Not the shadow-nin's past.

I was so blind...did I ever see you at all?

Neji's stare grew vacant, losing focus. His attention turned away from the shadows of raindrops on Shikamaru's skin and onto the ribbons of thought playing out in his own mind. Questions that churned and spewed out a one-sided conversation in silence.

Have you always believed what you told me in Hanegakure? That the dreams aren't real?

Reality took on a different dimension in dreams. And Neji knew too well the twisted nature of nightmares. He knew that the forces that generated them could be far more menacing and cruel than the forces of nature and, at times, just as destructive. Those kinds of demons, whether real or remembered, didn't just slip away without an exorcism or a burial.

"It's buried. It's nothing."

Shikamaru must have believed this lie on some level. Or at least he had for a time.

"I've been doing just fine for two years."

Two years? Neji frowned, the corners of his pale eyes etched with concern.

What happened to you?

Asking that question didn't seem any wiser now than it had hours ago. The last thing Shikamaru needed was someone digging into his past, searching for the skeletons locked in whatever coffin he kept buried six feet under his lies. As for the truth? It was fragile. Neji only possessed fragments of fact. The rest was purely figment, at worst fabrication and futile guesswork.

"Don't go there with me. You'll lose."

Lose? Trust Shikamaru to reduce something that he found too personal or painful down to a game. But Neji couldn't find it in his heart to be angry. How could he? Two weeks ago he'd violently used what precious little he knew about Shikamaru's past as a weapon against him. It wasn't surprising that Shikamaru was doing whatever was necessary to protect himself now.

"Whatever truths I twist...whatever lies I live...I do it...'cause I need something to make it easier...just for a while...two weeks...another two years...whatever it takes..."

What right had Neji to take those lies – those defences – away from him?

What right do I have to even BE here right now? Taking away your peace because I only find mine when I'm near you?

He was the worst kind of bastard for that. Showing about as much resolve as a relapsing addict, his heart and head hooked on something he should've found the strength to let go of – for both their sakes.

This will bring you nothing but grief and it still stands to cost me everything...
If he'd allowed himself to dwell on that thought, it might have stopped him from reaching out. He brushed away a few strands of black from Shikamaru's shoulder blade, tracing his fingertips over the rise of bone and down along the warm skin.

Shikamaru didn't stir.

Neji repeated the gesture, trailing his hand up to slip his fingers into the dark hair, stroking it away from the shadowed face. He grazed his knuckle along the ridge of visible cheekbone.

No response.

_How have you survived on field missions, Nara? An enemy would take you out in a heartbeat._

The thought was amusing, if not a little unfair. Neji already knew that Shikamaru's mind operated on a different level of awareness when he was 'in the zone'. It made sense that when he felt safe enough to fully let go, he'd sleep through anything that didn't qualify as a threat.

A smile ghosted across Neji’s lips, his amusement diluted by sadness.

_You trust me, don't you? You shouldn't._

Lightning lit the room like a snapshot, emblazoning the moment in Neji's mind with photographic detail. He framed it away, along with all the other pictures and pieces hanging in his memories.

"What do you want, Neji? One more memory to try and forget?"

A fierce pang twisted in Neji's chest and he squeezed his eyes shut, turning his face away. When his eyes flickered open they settled on the cold gleam of steel at the end of the futon.

His hitai-ate.

Whatever had possessed him to remove it was the same thing keeping him from retrieving it. He'd wanted it gone, irrespective of what it had always meant to him. The scab over his own wound, the armour he shouldn't have let down.

_You still make me want to stop fighting…_

Another foolish and dangerous thought.

_I've had so many of those tonight…and have acted on all of them…_

Perhaps that was part and parcel of being a "doer" and allowing instinct to override everything else. Or perhaps that was the worst excuse yet. He had no conviction to back up that explanation.

_Because it's a lie._

One that didn't stop him from being held accountable for his actions. Actions he should never have taken. For thoughts he should never have had. For words he should never have spoken. And for emotions he should never have felt. All of these things served as the damning testimony for a trial his mind had already drawn up the sentence to.

_Guilty as charged…_

For crimes of the heart.

He'd already confessed in action, hadn't he? And in lies that screamed the truth.
Neji blinked slowly, clouded opal eyes refocusing on the body resting beside him. He gazed at Shikamaru for a long moment, time slipping away like the rain off the panes. Some part of Neji's mind urged him to slip away too; to vanish from the scene of the crime so that the shadow-nin could go about cordoning it off and erasing the evidence. 

*Let him finally forget...*

Neji didn't possess the ability to wipe it all clean the way Shikamaru did. He was the kind to hold on even if it hurt more than letting go. He'd hold on until it bled him dry and cut him down to the bone. Maybe there was a masochistic tendency there – but then pain had always driven him forward. Little wonder that the only thing that had brought him peace and pleasure would turn out to be a double-edged sword.

*Enough of this. Leave.*

A few more seconds slipped by, gathering into minutes that weighed heavier and heavier on his conscience.

*Leave.*

Neji raked his hair back in a rough snag and fist the mocha strands into a tangle, letting his elbow slide. He dropped his face into the crook of his arm, snarling with a silent curse.

*You weak bastard.*

Eyes squeezing shut, he pulled in a deep breath through his nose, diving deep into that reservoir of inner strength that had gotten him through the most devastating of battles. But then, fighting an enemy wasn't the same as fighting himself.

*I still don't know how to fight this...* 

A sharp gasp sounded and the bed jolted.

Neji's eyes snapped open, his head coming up fast.

Shikamaru's body had tensed against the sheets, the arm draped by his side drawn into a push-up position, palm pressed flat against the futon. He looked as if he were about to shove upright.

He didn't.

Neji frowned, watching the way Shikamaru's elbow shook, fingers digging into the white sheets. The shadow-nin tensed again, causing olive skin to stretch taut over the quivering muscles of his back. A fine sheen of sweat broke out across his body.

But he didn't make a sound.

Neji cocked his head to one side and strained to hear the Nara's breathing above the hammering rain. He couldn't.

*Damn.*

Instead of leaning closer, Neji held back and simply watched and waited, wary enough to keep distance.

*Give him a moment...*
If Shikamaru was caught between nightmare and reality, he'd be disoriented enough. Plunging in to pull him out of *that* volatile state risked a similar reaction to the one Neji had witnessed when pulling him out of the water.

Violence and fear.

After a torturous moment that felt more like several minutes, Shikamaru seemed to surface on his own. The tension in his muscles broke, ribs heaving once, body shuddering in a single ripple.

His breath punched out in a shiver and snatched back again in a strangled gulp.

Then silence.

Neji counted to five and rose up onto his elbow.

The futon dipped a little.

Shikamaru stiffened at the movement but quickly shed his tension in that chameleon shift, his body loosening visibly, maybe even deliberately. Neji couldn't see his face, but he suspected that the Nara's expression might have betrayed his relaxed movements.

"Shikamaru…?" he murmured.

Shikamaru tucked his arm under the pillow and hooked his hand over the edge, tipping his head up to drape shaking fingers across his eyes, shielding his face. He made a quiet, croaky hum in the back of his throat. Then he went very still and very quiet – enough to have convinced anyone else he'd simply slipped back into dreams.

Neji didn't fall for it.

Opal eyes softened with understanding.

Blinking slowly, his gaze sharpened on Shikamaru's back, staring hard. A second later, Byakugan veins flared at the Hyūga's temples and the pulse of chakra hit his eyes. Pale orbs flashed wide, gaining the pinprick pupils of his dōjutsu.

And then he saw it.

Shikamaru's heart.

The muscle was thundering in his chest like a bomb set to detonate.

Neji swept his gaze down along the rest of the Nara's body, scanning his tenketsu. The hazy drift of Shikamaru's chakra looked healthy enough, if not a little grey and patchy in places. That could've been down to a number of things, though Neji didn't detect anything malignant this time.

*At least I can sense him now…*

Deactivating his dōjutsu, Neji blinked and refocused on the damp skin of Shikamaru's back. In his mind's eye he could still see the imprint of the Nara's heart pounding out its panic. Given how agitated Shikamaru's body was it would have made sense if he'd thrashed or torn awake in a terror, but the shadow-nin had barely made a sound.

*You really have had practice with this, haven't you?*

A gutting concern left Neji with a feeling that felt foreign…but fierce…
He gazed for another long second, tracing his eyes over Shikamaru's back. Without thinking, he leaned down to press his lips to the valley between the Nara's shoulder blades, kissing a soothing trail across the salty skin.

His conscience kicked him mercilessly for the action.

The kisses might as well have been a knife in Shikamaru's back. Hadn't he betrayed the Nara enough already? He'd broken his promise countless times just for the sake of stealing a selfish moment.

Shikamaru let out a soft breath through his nose.

The sound startled Neji into lifting his head, his long mocha bangs whispering across Shikamaru's skin. The muscles in the shadow-nin's back rippled in a shiver. Transfixed by the reaction, Neji drew his palm up along the warm skin, chasing the shiver upwards to caress the Nara's nape.

"Shikamaru?"

"Still here," Shikamaru whispered, his voice thick with sleep.

Neji hesitated, not sure whether that was a question or a statement.

*Did you think I'd be gone?*

He didn't ask. He already knew the answer. Instead, he responded by reaching higher to rub the back of Shikamaru's head, communicating with a gentle press of his fingers.

Touch talked too.

Shikamaru tilted his head back fractionally, rubbing at his eyes. "Time…?"

"I don't know," Neji admitted softly, skimming his fingers down to hook his thumb just under the point of Shikamaru's jaw, feeling his rapid pulse. "If I ask you what it was, will you tell me?"

Shikamaru's jaw ticked, but otherwise he offered no reaction – or reply.

The question hung unanswered in the air.

The only sound was the rhythm of the rain, the violent downpour having softened to a dull drum against the panes…steady…soothing.

"It's not denial," Shikamaru said at length.

Neji blinked at the sudden and unexpected words, his fingers ceasing their drag through inky strands. "Denial?"

"It's detachment. There's a difference."

*Is there?*

Neji considered the thin distinction. Coping strategies were vast and varied things. They stretched across a psychological spectrum that perhaps he and Shikamaru were at opposite ends of. Neji pushed things down and suffocated them into numbness while Shikamaru pulled them up into his head and anesthetised them with analysis.

It led to the same end.
Avoidance.

Was there a difference between his denial and Shikamaru's detachment?

Shaking his head, Neji concluded that his thoughts on the matter were irrelevant. What mattered was Shikamaru giving voice to whatever demons he kept caged up, regardless of whether he kept them in his cranium or in his chest.

Neji weighed his words before speaking, his tones hypnotically low and calm. "It's a thin line between the two, Shikamaru."

"Sure, if you're the one drawing it," Shikamaru husked, a hint of a growl roughening his voice. "You love thin lines, don't you?" No sooner had he said it than he shook his head in apology, sighing.

Neji's expression remained neutral. He'd expected anger and cutting sarcasm, so he wasn't offended or surprised by it. If anything, it confirmed what he already suspected and what he'd already seen; that beneath the lazy and apathetic façade, Shikamaru was shaken up.

Afraid.

The thought drove a deep furrow through Neji's brow. He angled his head enough to glimpse Shikamaru's hand, still draped over the dark eyes, shielding them. The shadow-nin's fingers were rigid with tension, despite the rest of his body appearing relaxed.

Neji had seen this before in Hanegakure.

Shifting closer, he began to work a gentle massage against the shadow-nin's scalp, finding tender areas with an intuitive touch. While he only had access to one side of Shikamaru's head, it was enough to loosen some of the Nara's tension.

Shikamaru's fingers relaxed by degrees, but they didn't fall away from his eyes. His breathing shifted, growing deeper and calmer. He seemed to doze as Neji's fingers drifted and kneaded. Occasionally, he'd sniff or swallow, craning his neck to push harder into Neji's touch.

"You can't be comfortable in this position," Neji spoke softly into the silence, reluctant to disturb the other ninja.

Shikamaru grunted. "Can't really tell…"

Neji's brows knitted. "Oh?"

"I cramped up and lost feeling about five minutes back."

Sudden laughter rolled warm in Neji's chest, tumbling from his lips in a sonorous chuckle. "I take it that this numbness extended to your brain before you could think to roll over?"

Shikamaru snorted. "Pretty sure all the blood stopped flowing to my brain before that."

"Is that a compliment or a complaint, Nara?" Neji smirked, carding his fingers through the shadow-nin's hair, catching a glimpse of the faint scrape of heat across Shikamaru's cheekbone, though he still couldn't see the shadow-nin's eyes. "Though I still think your body speaks for itself."

Shikamaru snorted, but a drawl of reluctant amusement softened his voice. "I'd give you a non-verbal reply with my middle finger if I didn't have to move my hand."
"How unpredictably lazy of you."

"More like I'm good with not having feeling in it."

Neji blinked, sobering slightly. His gaze followed the long arm lost up under the pillows, attempting to gauge where the Nara's bandaged hand was resting.

"And you accused me of breaking through walls," the Hyūga muttered dryly. "At least I didn't break any bones."

"Good thing I didn't punch you in the head then. That would'a hurt like hell."

"Granted, you might have broken my jaw."

"Screw your jaw, Hyūga, I'm talkin' about my hand."

Neji fought hard not to laugh, but the much missed banter was breaking down any attempt to build up a cool wall against the warmth in his chest. He tried desperately to smother the feeling, knowing it would only leave him cold with yearning.

Stop making this harder.

Keeping the thoughts at bay, Neji arched a brow, a wry smile tugging at one corner of his mouth. "Ah, so that miscalculated punch was for your self-preservation rather than mine?"

"You bet."

"Backfired, didn't it?"

"Whatever. I still think your head would'a been harder."

Neji's half-smile travelled across to the opposite side of his mouth, completing an expression no one would've believed him capable of. "And now you'll never know. You wasted your chance. Not many get that close to me."

Shikamaru's fingers curled, folding way from his face. He turned his head, cutting Neji a sidelong glance out the corner of his visible eye. "What're the odds that half your head is rock-solid ego?"

Neji stopped stroking Shikamaru's hair, his smile tilting in a smirk. "And to think you passed up the opportunity to get in a hit and take me down a peg. Or at least you could've tried."

Their gazes caught.

Shikamaru's eyes flickered.

It was the only warning Neji had. The rest happened so fast that if Neji had missed the glint of intent in the shadow-nin's eyes he'd have been caught in a point-blank pin.

Shikamaru snapped around. His left arm lashed out in backward swing designed to bar across Neji's chest and take his balance.

I don't think so.

Smirking, the Jōnin ducked under the attack in a quick dive, muscles shifting like gears. He came up fast, aiming to turn the horseplay on its head by spinning around on his knees to counter-strike.
It was a miscalculated move.

A tactical error of his 'rock-solid' ego.

He hadn't expected Shikamaru to actually get serious.

The shadow-nin backed-up his strike before Neji could blink, snapping into the next move like lightning. In a flash, Shikamaru's hips followed the momentum of his turn. With a sharp twist, his right knee pulled up just as Neji made to spin, driving toward the Hyūga's back.

The hit struck like a mallet, slamming into Neji's bruised kidney.

Pain flashed through him in a white-hot blast.

Opal eyes squeezed shut, teeth clenching hard.

_FUCK!_

Shikamaru's hand latched around his throat, driving him down. Neji's back hit the futon in a bounce of sheets and the shadow-nin was astride him before he could heave out a cough. A sickening ache floated through Neji like a school of stingrays, tentacles of sharp, almost electric pain carried by waves of nausea and the fierce urge to vomit.

Hitaro had picked a cruel but clever point to target.

_Bastard._

Neji blinked when he felt Shikamaru's fingers leave his throat and drag through his hair, pulling it away from his sweaty brow. Then warm, rough palms framed his face. Blinking fast, Neji looked up into the dark spheres of Shikamaru's eyes, which were wide and wild with adrenaline. He looked fierce and flushed – almost feral.

Neji felt a pit of fire open up in his belly, swallowing the nausea and pain.

Primal sexual heat.

A ravenous and animalistic hunger. One that bled from the primitive urge to pit his dominance against Shikamaru's just to see who'd win. Just to see how far they could push each other into that fire until one of them—

_STOP it…_

Neji shuddered, reining himself in.

Shikamaru frowned, strands of hair fluttering as he panted.

"Shit. You okay?" he rasped.

Neji nodded tightly, swallowing down the bile riding up his throat. "Well manoeuvred, Nara. You're beginning to move like you think."

His earlier comment about Shikamaru's speed hadn't been hollow. Distracted by this thought, Neji followed it, if only to keep his mind off the fire in his blood. Evidently, the Nijū Shōtai had gone with Shikamaru's strength. While ninjutsu stamina and brute force would never be on Shikamaru's side, his taijutsu speed and reflex had improved substantially.
Asuma-senpai has honed you well.

For a long-distance fighter and strategist like Shikamaru, aligning his body with his brain's speed was the perfect enhancement.

You really have gotten faster.

Even the speed at which Shikamaru shed his expressions and disguised his facial tells made him harder to read.

Like right now.

The look on the Nara's face was difficult to gauge. Lines of tension kept etching and erasing from his expression, twitching at the corners of his eyes, tugging at his mouth and between his brows. He scanned Neji's features with quick flicks of his gaze, dark orbs fixing eventually on the bruises along the Hyūga's jaw.

"You're hurt." Not a question.

And not a statement Neji could avoid. The best solution here was the one he hoped Shikamaru would appreciate and respond to. Humour.

"Not everyone values the bones in their hands over the force of their hits, Nara," Neji teased weakly.

Shikamaru let a tense pause hang. Without taking his eyes off Neji's face, he slipped his bandaged hand down along the Hyūga's side, hooking under Neji's back, fingertips gingerly pressing higher along the skin until they hit the tender area above his kidney.

The pain bit deeper than those fingers pressed.

Neji's jaw tensed stubbornly, but he couldn't keep the pain from his eyes.

Shikamaru's lips tightened. "How?"

"Someone took their chance when it came," Neji murmured, the bitterness inside him diluted by the desperate urge to keep his mind off Hitaro and his clan. "You should have too."

Shikamaru frowned and pulled his hand back. The Hyūga could sense him deliberating whether or not to pursue an indirect line of questioning. One that would lead to a fight Neji didn't have the rage to fuel right now.

Let it go, Shikamaru...

These were the things he wanted to forget. The reminders he didn't need. The pain he eased with stolen peace. The bitter memories he'd begun to replace with all the broken moments that he couldn't forget.

And even if this moment breaks like all the others between us...I'll keep the pieces...

Neji drew a slow breath, breathing through the pain in his back until it lulled to a tolerable level, shuddering out a quiet sigh. Shikamaru eyes softened at the sound and his palms settled either side of Neji's head, pressing into the pillows.

Their gazes met and melded into a stare that prickled skin.
Every sense in Neji's body heightened.

His felt his pulse beat heavy in his throat.

Shikamaru leaned down by degrees. "Took a chance right now didn't I?" his voice husked out, drifting over Neji's lips. "So tell me. Did it hit you?"

You hit me harder than you'll ever know, Shikamaru.

"A glancing blow, Nara," Neji returned quietly, breathing deep, struggling to keep things in the safe zone of humour, struggling to curb the urge to lean up and drag his tongue and teeth across the Nara's bottom lip. "Not enough to knock me out the game. Though I see you've upped yours."

Shikamaru hesitated, then cocked his head with a lopsided smile, the dark shards of his hair framing both their faces. "Well you can relax. Playing possum is my next move."

"I suspect you play that every chance you get."

"I'm real good at it."

"Evidently." Neji smirked and tilted his head the opposite way, levelling their gazes at a playful angle. "Do you want me to call your bluff, Nara?"

"Go ahead. When it comes to close-quarter combat I'm a one trick pony."

"With tricks up his sleeve," Neji muttered, trying not to sound amused.

Shikamaru's smile hooked sharper, cutting a dimple into his lean cheek. "I'm all kinds of Tricky."

The stupid nickname did it.

A breathy chuckle bubbled up and Neji's smile showed a brief flash of teeth, laughter creasing the corners of his eyes. The expression caused an odd shift in Shikamaru's face. The Nara's head tilted further to one side. The gleam of dry mischief slid away from his eyes and they widened a little more, dilated pupils bleeding into the darkness of his irises. His gaze drifted slowly over Neji's face—as if he were seeing something rather than searching for it.

The warmth in those eyes pulled at Neji like a magnet.

His pulse thudded hard, slamming into a rhythm Shikamaru had beat into his blood two weeks back.

You hit me in a place I thought was too hard to feel.

And it sure as hell hadn't been his head.

Shikamaru continued to study him with that familiar razor intelligence, but the scrutiny in his gaze was softer than the cutting looks he'd set on Neji earlier. The cynical edge had crumbled away, replaced by a curious tenderness that Neji doubted Shikamaru even knew he was exhibiting.

"Do you still wake up at 4AM?" Shikamaru whispered.

Neji blinked at the unexpected question, but nodded.

Shikamaru frowned. "Nightmares?"
"Sometimes," Neji admitted, though they'd lessened considerably over the past two weeks, the psychosomatic effects all but fading away – just like the ghost of his father.

"Neji, you must live."

Neji closed his eyes, regret solidifying like a chunk of rock in his throat. He felt Shikamaru's breath ghost across his brow, lips skimming down over his nose.

"Is there pain?"

"Not anymore," Neji murmured, eyes flickering open to half-mast, a wry smile twitching at his lips. "Just deep breathing, as you know."

Shikamaru almost smiled, but the attempt was ruined by the strained look that flickered across his face. He lowered his gaze. "I'm not going off the deep end, Neji."

Neji's expression arched in surprise, then dropped into a frown. He tilted his head, trying to draw those averted eyes back towards him. "Shikamaru?"

Shikamaru shifted his weight onto his left elbow and reached up with his bandaged hand, tracing his fingers over the hard line of Neji's cheekbone, following it around to the Hyūga's temple, his thumb caressing the far corner of one moonstone eye.

"Deep breathing," Shikamaru said. "I get that."

Neji blinked slowly and shuttered his gaze, reaching up to drag Shikamaru's hair away from his face in a lazy sweep. "What does that have to do with you going off the deep end?"

"It means you don't need to pull me out of one. I'm not in one. It's not there."

"You're not making sense." Not entirely true, but Shikamaru didn't need to know that. Also, Neji wanted clarity.

"What I did earlier, I…" Shikamaru cut off, sucked his teeth and smacked his lips, struggling for a moment before he chuckled raggedly without raising his eyes. "It was almost worth the head trauma to see you jumping into a tub."

Neji ignored the humour, his eyes cool and calm. "What were you doing, Shikamaru?"

Shikamaru's face tensed.

Neji knew that asking that question was taking a risk.

But he told himself he was taking a chance instead.

Shikamaru didn't answer right away, not that Neji expected him to. Honestly, he expected an evasion coming any second now: a change of topic, a physical shift away, a lame joke or—

"I used to do it two years ago."

Neji's fingers stilled at the back of Shikamaru's head. "Why?"

There was silence for a time. A time that Shikamaru spent staring at the space just to the side of Neji's head, the muscles in his lean face flexing as if he were trying to control his features and flatten his expression.
"Because it helped," Shikamaru sighed, his voice hushed and hoarse. "It's psychosomatic…if you can push past the panic, get past the fear…sometimes you can find something."

Neji watched him closely, frowning. "And what do you find?"

Shikamaru pressed his lips, shaking his head imperceptibly. "It finds me."

Neji's frown dug deeper. "What does?"

A wince pulled at the corners of Shikamaru's eyes before they drifted shut. He set his brow to the crook of Neji's shoulder, resting his weight on his elbows.

"Whatever works, right?"

Neji considered this evasive reply, concern and caution roiling inside him. He decided to pitch his question differently. "How does it work?"

"I don't know, I don't think about it…" Shikamaru let out long breath through his nose, the warm air tickling Neji's collarbone. "It just…happens…"

The Jōnin squeezed Shikamaru's nape gently, rocking his wrist to try and draw the Nara's head back up. "So that's how you detach? You let something pull it all away, rather than push things down?"

Shikamaru stiffened – an immediate signal.

Close.

Testing the tension, Neji tilted his hips up and rocked sideways fast, rolling them over in a gentle tumble that put him above the Nara. "Is that what you do?"

Shikamaru scowled at the reversal of their positions, his breath coming a little harder. Another immediate signal. He tried to pull his elbows beneath him, growling when Neji didn't grant him the leeway to move.

"Knock it off, Neji."

"Why? So you can brush it off like it doesn't matter?" Neji countered.

"Like I said, whatever works."

"But it doesn't, does it?"

"Worked just fine for two years. I let it go."

"We don't have nightmares about things we've let go of."

Shikamaru's eyes narrowed, tongue lashing fast. "You would know, right?"

"I wish I'd known sooner," Neji whispered, the quiet words knocking the anger off Shikamaru's face. "You always knew…and I never stopped to consider why."

"Don't beat yourself up, Hyūga," Shikamaru muttered, the annoyance in his voice betrayed by the softening around his eyes. "You did enough of that at the time, coughing up blood and all."

There was a fine line between a joke and jab in those words; the double-edged blade of
Shikamaru's sharp tongue. Automatically, Neji's gaze strayed to the sensual curve of the shadow-nin's lower lip, then flicked back up to the dark eyes.

"My past and my rage created a wound that almost killed me, Shikamaru. Blood was the price for my denial," he said quietly. "Be careful it doesn't become the price for your detachment."

Shikamaru didn't offer a snappy comeback. In fact, he gazed up seriously through his lashes, dragging in a breath that streamed slow and controlled through his lips, sighing out his response.

"It won't."

"How do you know?"

"Because scars don't bleed, Neji."

*And what's under those scars, Shikamaru?*

Neji bit back the question, having checked himself ruthlessly regarding how deep he'd dig before he hit the coffin that Shikamaru had buried his past in.

*That's as far as I can go…*

Digging any further risked unearthing truths Shikamaru didn't want to face.

*And I have no right to make you go there.*

Neji pressed his lips, cutting off any words he might have spoken. But he made no effort to conceal the look of concern that played across his eyes.

Shikamaru inclined his head, offering that lazy, crooked smile. "Don't worry about me, Hyūga. I'm good at running away from troublesome crap."

"And if you run too far away from yourself, Shikamaru?"

The shadow-nin stared into his eyes for several seconds. Neji could sense the gears shifting in that complex mind, processing the words and the disturbing dead-ends they alluded to.

"That's a worse case scenario that wouldn't happen," Shikamaru said.

Neji leaned down, tapping their foreheads. "Not even worth considering in your two hundred possibilities?" he returned, managing to ease the weight of his question with humour.

Shikamaru must have appreciated the effort because he rewarded Neji with a rusty chuckle, rolling his eyes. "Fine, if you wanna split hairs over it. It's possible. But its still never gonna happen."

Neji didn't look convinced.

Shikamaru sighed and combed his fingers through the Jōnin's hair, raking back the long, thick bangs to draw Neji's head up a notch, levelling their gazes.

"Relax, Hyūga," Shikamaru drawled. "I've always got someone chasing me down and dragging me back." He paused before adding, "Whether I want him to or not."

Faces scrolled across Neji's mind; the faces of Shikamaru's friends and family until one figure that didn't quite slot into either of those categories came to the fore. Neji spoke the name before he could think to question it.
"Asuma."

Shikamaru looked impressed at the guess and nodded. "Yeah."

Neji smiled a little, amused at Shikamaru's expression. True, he might not have understood the bond that Asuma-senpai had created with his students, but that didn't mean he was blind to it. Other Jōnin joked about it. Neji had caught glimpses of it earlier in the way he'd seen Shikamaru and the Sarutobi playing Shogi.

"He taught you how to play Shogi, didn't he?" Neji asked, arching a brow when Shikamaru rolled his eyes, a wry smile tugging at his mouth.

"Yeah, he tricked me into it to prove his theory about my IQ," Shikamaru grumbled, but Neji detected amusement and affection in the annoyance. "Troublesome turn of events. Could'a gone on fooling everyone into believing that I was just a lazy dumbass who got kicks outta cloud-gazing."

"But you couldn't fool him, could you?"

"Like I said, troublesome."

"And is that the case now?"

Shikamaru shot him an angled look. "Now?"

"Does he know about your nightmares, Shikamaru?" Neji asked.

Shikamaru went quiet, his brows drawing together. He canted his head to one side and averted his eyes, setting his focus on the cascade of mocha silk hanging over one of Neji's firm, angular shoulders, the ends of the rich mane pooling on Shikamaru's stomach and chest. The Nara flexed his fingers through the chocolate mass, frowning with concentration that went inward.

"He doesn't need to know about that."

Neji watched him closely, curious but cautious. He hedged his next words in a murmur, grazing his fingertips against Shikamaru's temple. "Do you need him to know, Shikamaru?"

Shikamaru's eyes pinched hard, his fingers fisting in Neji's hair before he smoothed out the dark strands with a shaky breath. That was as much of an answer as he seemed willing to give. Neji took it for the affirmative he knew it was.

"You should talk to him," Neji advised, already preparing himself for the backlash on offering advice when it hadn't been asked for. Honestly, he had no business saying a damned word.

"I know," Shikamaru rasped – and the unexpected response seemed to surprise them both. "I know that."

"Then do it."

"Right, 'cause that's what you'd do, huh?" Shikamaru returned archly, glancing up through narrowed eyes. "You'd stonewall Gai-sensei and any other Jōnin and we both know it."

Neji drew his head back, pinning Shikamaru with a hard look.

It had no effect.

The shadow-nin's eyebrow scaled to a taunting arch, daring Neji to bullshit. The Hyūga knew that
he couldn't. There was no buffer against what was blatant to them both. He conceded Shikamaru's point with a tilt of his brow, but he didn't surrender.

"True," Neji admitted, begrudging the fact. "But this isn't about me. And for all my stonewalling, aren't you doing the same thing when you run into your shadows?"

Shikamaru's eyes flashed at that, a warning flicker. "Watch it, Hyūga."

"I watch you, Nara," Neji returned, using the words to his advantage. "But I don't always see you, do I?"

The anger bled out of Shikamaru's eyes and the tension fled his face, leaving his expression slack with uncertainty. "Neji…"

"I'm not blind to that fact, at least. But Asuma sees you, Shikamaru."

"He hears me."

"Hears you?" Neji blinked at the quick correction, not sure what to make of the words, sensing there was both a subtle and immense significance to them. "Meaning he understands you?"

A weak smile fluttered across Shikamaru's lips. "To make it stupid simple, yeah, something like that."

Neji dissected this in silence, struggling to fully grasp the concept. He could only analyse it under the microscope of experience. Going from his own understanding, the thought of lowering one's guard enough to be seen or heard – let alone understood – didn't seem safe or sensible. Or maybe he'd just never trusted anyone enough to try. He'd never let anyone get that close; not Gai, not his team, not his clan.

No one.

Liar.

He pulled in a breath, regarding Shikamaru through his lashes.

No one?

All evidence was suddenly to the contrary. Something pulled inside him and he hardened the armour around his heart in an attempt to keep the sadness at bay.

You remain the exception to my rule, Shikamaru…

Shikamaru didn't notice the conflicted look Neji shot him. He seemed to be ruminating over his own thoughts.

"A sensei should understand their student, right? I'm not so sure I understand him though." Shikamaru shook his head. "He's a pretty elusive teacher."

"How so?"

Shikamaru shrugged, shooting Neji a hooded look. "Might be the literal smokescreen."

Neji smirked, a chuckle catching behind his teeth. "Be grateful Asuma doesn't clad himself in spandex and encourage – or rather enforce – the rule that you follow his Youthful lead. I had nightmares about my sensei as a child."
Shikamaru laughed and the husky sound hit Neji's heart. It jack-hammered into his throat and warmth bloomed tender as a bruise inside him.

*God,* he'd missed that sound.

What he'd missed in equal measure was the look that accompanied it.

The look the Nara was wearing now.

Shikamaru was laughing with his eyes closed, those prominent cheekbones lifting higher, dimples digging deep. His brow had tipped down, as if to hide the breath-taking grin that cut sharp and sexy across his face.

Neji took in the image, breath holding hard in his throat. He barely had a chance to catch his breath before those dark lashes lifted with a lazy smile, obsidian eyes glittering in amusement.

"God, you gotta love the karma on that one," Shikamaru laughed, trying to smooth out the rumpled chuckles in his voice. "A student like you and a sensei like Gai? Wish I'd seen the look on your face the day you got assigned to him."

Neji smirked, too caught up in enjoying Shikamaru's open display of laughter to get hung up on his own pride. "The Sandaime had an interesting sense of humour. How polite of you to share it at my expense."

Another raspy laugh. "Hey, I'm taking you down all sorts of pegs without having to move anything but my mouth. It works."

Neji scoffed, but couldn't resist a smile.

Shikamaru smiled back.

They gazed at each other, chuckling softly into the easy silence.

The rain had softened into a patter against the panes, the glass clouded with condensation. It was the only sound now, its lull soft and soothing. The storm had passed and the staccato flashes had ceased, leaving behind a strange underexposed light which took on the dark, rough texture of charcoal, smudged around the edges.

It felt evanescent and eerie.

But peaceful.

*Peace...*

Neji drank it in, letting it seep through his senses: the balmy smell of bodies and musk, the sound of breathing, the soft beat of the rain, the taste of Shikamaru's skin lingering on his tongue. But it was the feel of Shikamaru's fingertips tracing over the scars on his back and the soft, mesmerised look in the Nara's dark eyes that rooted this precious peace into all the holes in Neji's heart.

The holes from all the hits he'd taken.

Holes gouged into a part of him he swore he'd never leave open again.

*You still find me...*

Neji swallowed thickly, his voice soft as rumpled velvet. "Every time."
Shikamaru's head cocked in question, the dark shards of his hair splayed every which way like an inky starburst, flowing over the crumpled pillows. He blinked up at Neji, fingers grazing along the Hyūga's spine, wandering in lazy spirals over his skin.

"Hmn?"

Neji swallowed hard, his throat tight.

Shikamaru's fingers stilled. "Neji?"

Shaking his head, Neji brushed pale fingers over Shikamaru's mouth, following the lopsided curve of the shadow-nin's lips. "I'll keep our pieces, Shikamaru. You can let them go."

Shikamaru's smile slipped away with his breath, eyes rounding slowly. The torn look ripped at Neji's heart and his conscience brutally flayed what was left of it. He drew back onto his knees but before he could force himself to pull away something pulled him in.

It was a look in Shikamaru's eyes.

A look that hooked him, held him and then hit them both – hard.

They both tensed.

Maybe they felt it at the same time.

That ache tugging back and forth between them; the bond that had brought them together and broken them apart. The force of it pulled at blood and bones, rolling its need along the full lengths of their bodies, bringing them closer as Neji leaned down and Shikamaru arched up onto his elbows.

Their mouths brushed.

It was electric.

Shikamaru jolted as if shocked, lips parting around a ragged sound. Neji's breath trembled out, heart throbbing. His thumb traced the chords in Shikamaru's throat, feeling them tighten with a quick flex and sharp intake of breath.

Stop.

Neji pulled back so that their open mouths settled a scant inch apart, just shy of touching. Only their breaths touched…warm air caressing in rough, sultry streams…passing back and forth between parted lips.

"Can't play without the pieces," Shikamaru breathed into Neji's mouth, his voice as strained as his smile. "Too bad this was never a game."

I know…

And that truth didn't make it any easier to live with than the lies.

It's never easy. But I will do it. After all, I broke my promise…didn't I?

Neji closed his eyes, shuddering.

Shikamaru leaned back, tipping his chin up to brush a kiss across the Hyūga's curse mark. His lips
lingered long enough for him to mouth something against the branded skin. Then he reached up to stroke his bandaged hand over the back of Neji's head down to his nape.

*Our lies have led to this moment…*

Neji mirrored the touch and settled their brows together.

*And I don't trust myself not to lie to you again...just for one moment more…*

Because as he'd always known, moments were all they ever had.

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The sun glowed butter-yellow beyond the haze, its halo blurred and lazy. Mist had come rolling in with the dawn, sheeting over Konoha's rooftops like frosted glass, obscuring the streets below.

A bird sang, its shrill song piercing the quiet.

Neji stood on the veranda, staring out across the ryokan's lush and glistening gardens to the village beyond. A small cup of jade dew tea steamed in his hand, the sweet smell of the infusion drifting on the breeze. The chill carried past Neji's sandaled feet, drawing thin gauzes of mist into the guestroom.

The bird called again, another taking up the chorus.

*Time to go…*

Neji closed his eyes and tipped his head back, hitai-ate glinting. He breathed deep of the cool dew-damp scents drifting from below – until he caught the aroma of coffee drifting from behind.

His lips flicked upward at one corner. "Come to catch the sunrise, Nara?"

A soft snort sounded. "Sadist."

Neji smirked and turned his head, glancing over his shoulder.

Shikamaru stood slouched against the open doors, leaning into the frame, coffee cup cradled in his bandaged hand. Neji noted almost immediately that the Nara's hair was back in its jagged tail, which appeared to be the only thing he'd bothered to secure.

Neji raked his gaze over the rest of the shadow-nin.

The crimson yukata looked like an afterthought, lazily shrugged on with the belt loosely tied. It exposed a hard ridge of collarbone and a bruised junction of shoulder and neck. Shikamaru looked sleep-rumpled and moody, a little rough around his sharp edges, yet somehow managing to wear this dark aura in a distinctly raw and sexual way.

The most appealing part was his utter obliviousness to it.

Neji smiled.

A dark brow shot up. "What?" Shikamaru croaked, raising his mug to his lips.

The Hyūga shook his head. "You look—"

"Like shit," Shikamaru finished, taking a sip of coffee blacker than the look he sent the brightening sky. "Told you what these hours do to me."
"I recall something about stupid o'clock." Neji turned and reached down to set his teacup on the balcony's lacquered table, the white sleeve of his robe skimming the puddles of rainwater that had pooled on its surface. "Go back to sleep."

"Can't," Shikamaru raised his mug toward the sun in a dry salute. "I'll end up burning daylight and I've got crap to do."

Neji straightened up and stepped forward. "Your birthday break is over then?"

"Before it even started," Shikamaru muttered, eyes fixed on Neji's chest. "Back to the grindstone." He hesitated, speaking his next words into his mug. "What about you?"

Good question.

Neji wasn't sure how to answer it.

Somehow he didn't think that 'ANBU by any means necessary' was a safe reply. He could always go with: T'm going to spend the day deliberating how many ways your father is likely to sabotage my freedom and put me in a casket – and given how crafty you Nara bastards are, I'm certain it will involve me digging my own grave and him putting me in it without having to lift a finger...just an eyebrow. Wonderful.'

Neji winced inwardly. All of that was a mindful to process, let alone a mouthful to articulate. Also, he didn't think Shikamaru would appreciate the update, for all the trouble it would start to fester in his genius brain.

"I will go wherever the next mission takes me," Neji said, deciding on something vague but plausible. "With the Akatsuki threat at large, anything is possible."

"Don't remind me," Shikamaru sighed, rubbing his temple against the shoji frame. "I got a little white booklet with all the fun facts to figure out."

Neji's interest piqued. "A little homework on the side, Shikamaru? That must cut into your nap time."

Shikamaru made a face.

Neji smirked. "I'm sure it's nothing you can't handle."

A faint line appeared between the Nara's brows, his gaze casting off to the side. "It's like doing a puzzle without having the pieces."

"Imagine how rewarding the outcome will be," Neji teased, trying to play down his own sense of unease at spying the apprehension in Shikamaru's face.

Annoyance was trademark to Shikamaru – but anxiety?

He didn't even try to return the humour.

Neji frowned. "What is it?"

Without looking up, Shikamaru raised his coffee to his lips and drank half of it in one long swallow, grimacing. Neji guessed the sour look had nothing to do with the brew.

"Something Asuma-sensei said about neighbouring attacks," the Nara explained. "It's all drawing a little too close to home."
"You believe it's Akatsuki?" Neji asked, betting his instinct on the answer.

The shadow-nin shrugged and pushed away from the door. He stepped out onto the veranda, barefoot, tucking his other hand into the deep pocket of his yukata. A capricious breeze slipped between them, ruffling Neji's bangs and playing with the loose fold of Shikamaru's robe.

The wind felt colder than it should have.

"Even if it isn't, it's just a matter of time," Shikamaru murmured, cocking a hip to the balustrade. He set his gaze on some far point in the distance, frowning. "Can't stop the clock, right?"

Neji watched him out the corner of his eye. "Shikamaru…"

Shikamaru blinked fast and shook off his frown, swirling the dregs of his coffee. He shot Neji a rueful look, a half-smile playing at his lips. "Not good with this part. You usually knock me out and hightail it."

"Hightail it…" Neji echoed, sampling the slang with a smile.


"I don't run away," Neji replied, pride an unmistakable undercurrent in his deep tones.

"Troublesome." Shikamaru shook his head in sardonic amazement, lifting his shoulder in a lazy shrug that simultaneously brought his mug to his lips. "Fine. You vanish into the ether. Dignified enough for your ego, Hyūga?"

Neji would have laughed, if he hadn't felt that longing threatening to swallow the air in his chest and destroy whatever remained of his resolve.

He tipped his head and fought back a smile. "You never cared about entertaining my ego."

Shikamaru snorted, setting his mug on the balustrade. "Too much trouble, unless you're gonna use the 'rock-solid' part of it to knock me out."

The humour wobbled like a bubble, bursting on the cool breeze that stole between them, carrying birdsong and shaky breaths. Neji kept his gaze locked on those dark eyes, searching for something he didn't count on either of them confronting. At least not in words.

But bodies speak too.

Neji closed the distance between them without hesitation, his stride calmer than the emotion churning in his eyes. Shikamaru didn't bristle or bolt, but his brow crept up in that subtle arch that Neji hadn't thought he'd ever miss seeing. The dry look had never failed to provoke and infuriate him in the past. But like so much else that he should have focused on forgetting or hating about Shikamaru, he'd ended up remembering and missing it either way.

"That wasn't an invitation," the shadow-nin muttered dryly, but Neji could sense the sadness in his smile.

Neji stepped up to him and set his hand at the junction of Shikamaru's neck and shoulder, brushing his thumb over the mark he'd left on the olive skin.

It would fade in time.

Unlike you…
Shikamaru didn't tense or try to shrug off the touch. He watched Neji without hiding his eyes behind their usual half-mast, not even attempting a wary look of calculation.

As they'd both learned, this really wasn't a thinking thing.

Neji cupped Shikamaru's jaw, stroking his thumb across coffee-warmed lips.

"You know why I came," he said, his voice little more than a murmur.

Shikamaru did hide his eyes then. He turned his face into the touch, his breath ghosting out in a sigh against Neji's palm. "I can think of a few possibilities."

"And I'm sure you can narrow them down to the reason."

"Can't," Shikamaru husked, shrugging his other shoulder with a shaky smile. "I don't ever wanna know, remember?"

Remember? Neji had never forgotten – wasn't that the problem?

He stroked his gaze over Shikamaru's face, warring with himself over his next words, well aware that the shadow-nin would hear and understand the underlying meaning in them. Knowing this, he shouldn't have said them. But they tumbled out regardless.

"I'll always remember, Shikamaru."

Shikamaru's eyes widened then drifted shut, jaw flexing hard. "Troublesome Hyūga," he chuckled quietly. "Can't keep it stupid simple can you?"

"It's always been simple, Shikamaru. Just never easy."

"Because fate's a bitch that doesn't pull her punches."

"Unlike you."

Shikamaru chuckled at that, slipping his eyes open to settle their gazes. "Shoulda hit you hard when I had the chance."

You did.

Neji slipped his hand around to the back of Shikamaru's head, tapping their brows. "Next time around, Nara?"

"Count on it."

A mutual understanding passed between them this time, spoken in a look, received in a touch. They'd breathed it into each other countless times. It went unspoken and unfinished in many ways. In unfathomable ways. In more ways than Neji could name or Shikamaru could predict. But then that was the nature of things that went undefined – even if somehow, in the stolen moments, it was understood.
The whisper of delicate feet and the rustle of women's yukatas fell like brushstrokes around the edges of a deep and abiding silence. One of HOTARU's most expensive luxuries. Manufactured peace. Customers paid a pretty price for it and the ryokan staff preserved it with optimum care and attention to detail. They were women trained in the art of meandering their way so eloquently that all they disturbed was the faint clouds of incense smoke cleansing the corridors.

They floated across the polished wooden floors on dainty feet, seen but barely heard.

*How like a Hyūga household...*

Neji's lip twitched at the thought.

He passed through a soft beam of light, morning gold streaming in through the shoji panels to bathe the corridors of the ryokan in a soft patina glow.

Somehow, it seemed warmer than a Hyūga household.

Neji inclined his head to a passing girl. The young woman blushed, cupped a steaming mug of coffee firmer in her hands and bowed low, her feet moving in quick and efficient little steps.

The aroma of coffee wafted behind her.

Neji's mind strayed with the scent, wrapping its thoughts around Shikamaru.

*Let go...*

Neji let out a long breath, shaking his head. He passed through a veil of incense and pulled deep on the thick scent of smoky rose, letting it swirl through his senses.

He could still smell the coffee.

*Damn this.*

Figuring that a shift in movement would elicit a shift of mind, he changed direction and passed along one of the adjacent hallways. It led away from the luxury suites, out through a bamboo garden, beneath a tree-covered walkway and past a large conference room that doubled as a venue for social conventions and catering.

Neji slowed his pace, picking up on footfalls.

The doors to the room swung open behind a server carrying a stack of white lacquered plates. The puff of air from the closing doors struck Neji with the rich smells of the morning buffet.

His stomach threatened a growl.

*Later. Locate the lobby.*

He made to continue down the hallway but paused mid-stride, instincts coming alive in a heartbeat.

*Something's wrong...*

A burst of sound beyond the doors had Neji hopping back seconds before the door flew open.
again. Avoiding the collision didn't lessen the impact of watching Kiba crash through the doors, smash into the fusuma wall and drop in a dazed and deadweight heap on the ground.

Neji stood dumbfounded.

*What on earth?*

He didn't get the chance to step forward.

The doors swung open again.

Naruto and Sakura came stumbling out in a tangle of limbs, grappling for possession of something black, shiny and square-shaped that passed back and forth between Naruto's hands like a hot potato.

Sakura screeched in his ear. "NARUTO!"

Neji winced at the volume.

He watched them crash into the fusuma wall beside Kiba with Naruto taking most of the impact. To Neji's amazement, the Uzumaki laughed. Refusing to surrender whatever Sakura was after, the Jinchūriki bent over to clutch the mystery object to his stomach. The pink-haired kunoichi all but climbed up his back in an attempt to reach around and snatch it back.

"Give me that camera!" she yelled.

Kiba groaned on the floor. "I can't feel my face…"

Naruto just laughed harder. "You should see it."

Kiba glared up through a swollen eye, ringed in purple and blackening fast. "Laugh it up, lovebird. I'm gonna slam-dunk your face and kick your ass up to meet it…"

Naruto grinned. "Bring it! You already look like the butt-end of ugly."

Neji shook his head and glanced over his shoulder. Backpedalling risked crossing paths with Shikamaru, especially if the Nara and his teammates were going to start gravitating towards food. Sighing, he glanced back at the scene, eyes widening when Sakura raised her fist.

He didn't have time to step in.

She slammed her knuckles into Naruto's thigh so hard the limb went dead. The Uzumaki yelled a high note worthy of a choirboy and his knee buckled. But rather than give up, he clutched the item tighter against his stomach, laughing.

Neji didn't see what was so amusing.

Further down the hallway, a cluster of staff looked on in shock, hands fluttering to mouths and throats.

*Wonderful…*

Neji frowned, taking a second to analyse the situation. While Kiba and Naruto were repeat offenders in the delinquent department – no matter the venue – for Sakura to hop onto the bandwagon in such a dignified environment suggested she'd been victimized.

*With a camera?*
Suddenly, Neji didn't want to know – or get involved. He should have walked on by without a backward glance. And if his militant sense of control hadn't demanded he bring order to the chaos, he'd have stepped over Kiba, moved past the scrabbling teammates and left them to their lunacy. God, just witnessing the drama made him feel guilty by association.

Sakura swung again and Naruto yelped like a kicked dog.

The ryokan staff let out a collective gasp.

Neji sighed. He worked to cover up his own embarrassment at the scene by closing off his expression and letting his voice drop to the cold tone of censure.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

Naruto squinted up through the sunny flop of his hair, beaming. "Neji!"

Not sure how to respond to the excitement in Naruto's tone and unable to return it, Neji transferred his cool gaze onto Kiba. "Get up, Inuzuka. This is a ryokan not a roughhouse."

"Thought I smelled a sour mood headin' this way," Kiba chuckled, not bothering to look up. "This nose upgrade is gonna take some getting used to."

"Get up."

"Wanna give a guy a hand?" The dog-nin rolled his head back to glance upside-down at Neji. "Or you could just keep standin' there while I lose feeling on the floor."

Neji made no move to assist him.

Kiba bristled at the stoic glare. "What? Would that be bowing too low for His Hyūga Highness?"

Neji's eyes glinted like polished steel and his lips tilted upward at one corner in a cruel smirk. "It's certainly a long way down to reach your level."

"Or maybe bending down might break the stick shoved up your ass?"

"For someone who's lost feeling in their face, you're doing a remarkable job with your mouth, Inuzuka."

Kiba's sneer curled just shy of a snarl. "Bite me, Hyūga."

"Hey guys don't be like that," Naruto frowned, tucking his shoulder to his jaw to keep Sakura from getting him in a chokehold. "Sakura-chan!"

"ARGH!" Sakura flicked her hair back with a growl, slender arms and legs crabbed around Naruto in a piggyback vice. "Give me that camera!" she hissed.

"No way!" Naruto argued, making a simultaneous effort to breathe, talk and not get wrestled to the ground by the fuming kunoichi. "It's not your camera. It's Kiba's!"

"Don't lie." Kiba made a face too innocent to be believed. "It's Shino's."

"I don't care who it belongs to!" Sakura roared. "What's on it belongs to ME!"

"Not just you," Kiba cut in from the floor. He raised his hands and made a heart shape with fingers and thumbs, framing Sakura's face as he pretended to angle for a shot. "You and Hibari can frame
it for the kids."

Neji arched a mental eyebrow.

Sakura flushed to the roots of her hair, aqua-tinged eyes rounding in horror.

"Hibari? Wait. WHAT?" Naruto jerked his head up, exposing his neck for Sakura's chokehold.

She locked his throat into the crook of her elbow, hissing in his ear. "Give me that camera RIGHT now!"

"What's Kiba mean about Hibari?" Naruto choked out.

Neji closed his eyes and rubbed at the bridge of his nose.

*Congratulations, Tsubasa...you came here for peace and you've just started a war...*

Further along the hallway, the cluster of startled staff parted their whispering ranks into two single lines along the corridor, making way for a man the size of a summoned behemoth.

Kiba let out a warning whistle but didn't budge from the floor. "Head's up. Here comes the brick shithouse."

Neji glanced up, about to snap out a heated reply until he followed Kiba's gaze.

The scowl dropped from his face and his eyes widened.

The ryokan's security man was built like an ox on steroids. And he looked like one. His huge bald head rounded down into two chins, one decorated with a thin plait of golden beard. A thick ruby winked blood-like in one earlobe and a circular barbell glinted from the pierced septum of his nose. His flat face looked like it had met with the business end of a frying-pan – which might have been down to headbutts or horrible genes – and sat atop a bull neck strung with bulging tendons and veins that pulsed like cables.

"Whoa. He looks wired," Kiba observed. "Have fun with that one, Neji."

"Get up."

"I ain't moving my ass just to get it handed to me."

Neji shot him a withering look. "Move."

Kiba swept his arm out in invitation. "After you, Highness."

Neji let out a long breath and held up a hand to the approaching guard to assure him that despite Naruto turning black and blue under Sakura's fists, everything was under control. But the ox-man's tawny brows drew together like thunderbolts above his deep-set and squinting eyes. Eyes that swept their stormy gaze over the scene before zeroing in on the Hyūga.

Neji stiffened when the man kept advancing.

Kiba gave a growly chuckle. "Oh yeah, that really convinced him," the dog-nin noted from the ground, flashing sharp canines in a grin. "He's gonna eat you up and shit you out, Hyūga."

"Shut up, Inuzuka." Neji held the guard's gaze, calculating the likelihood of resolving things peacefully. The man was a shinobi. Neji could tell from the way he balanced his bulk, in perfect
control of some serious weight that he undoubtedly knew how to throw around.

Kiba hummed a dirge in time with the man's heavy steps.

Neji shot him an exasperated look.

Clearly, the dog-nin had every intention of sitting this one out. As for Naruto and Sakura, they remained oblivious to the approaching goliath and continued to bicker and battle over possession of the camera and what was on it.

This left Neji fielding the massive, muscular cannonball.

Just his luck.

"Fate's a bitch that doesn't pull her punches..."

*Hn. So it would seem, Nara.*

The paragon of calm, Neji stepped around Kiba and made to come between the guard and the tussling teammates. No sooner had he taken a pace towards the approaching bull than a plume of smoke fired over the bald man's shoulder, stopping him short.

"Kids grabbing you by the horns, Oushi?" a relaxed baritone called, breaking blithely into the tension. "Or are you finding fun ways to work off the pounds?"

The huge man turned towards the speaker, squinting. Then his thunderous expression broke into a smile that saved his face from ugliness. "You know these punks?"

*Punks?*

Neji might have been offended if his attention hadn't redirected from the insult towards the Jōnin leaning casually against the wall, cigarette in hand. The Hyūga's eyes widened fractionally in surprise.

"Senpai..."

By now, Naruto and Sakura had stopped attacking each other long enough to realise they'd come under the threat of a greater authority. Feigning a friendly hug, Sakura held her piggyback position, arms wrapped like vines around Naruto's neck, smiling sweetly as she all but strangled him with her display of "affection".

Naruto's eyes bugged out and sweat beaded on his face though he flicked a thumb's up, managing a pained grin. "Heh...hey...sensei..."

Asuma's lip quirked, smoke streaming from his nose. "Yeah, I know them."

Oushi made a disgruntled sound and looked over at Neji, eyes narrowed. "How well you know 'em?"

"Well enough to know that that one will have you quadriplegic from 64 hits in less than 24 seconds."

Uncertain whether or not Asuma was joking, Oushi did a double take, giving Neji a head-to-toe assessment. He frowned, hesitated, then reached into the pocket of his huge haori jacket and pulled out a pair of glasses. He examined the lenses, fogged them with his breath and wiped them clean with the corner of his obi belt.
Neji stared without expression, not sure how to react.

He could practically feel Kiba holding in his laughter but resisted kicking the dog-nin while he was down.

Ignoring the incredulous stares, Oushi settled the horn-rimmed specs on the end of his nose, magnifying his small eyes into two massive spheres. Blinking, he looked at Neji again and jerked his head a fraction in shock.

"Ah…a Hyūga, huh? Swell." Oushi hawked a noisy cough, rattling phlegm as if ready to spit. "Back me up, Sarutobi?"

Asuma grinned around his cigarette, a flash of white in his tan face. "Nah."

"Old time's sake."

"It's a bygone age for you, buddy."

"Hey, I got some ninjutsu left in me," Oushi grumbled and plucked his glasses off, losing interest in a fight where the outcome rested on moving faster than a Hyūga's fists.

He stepped away from Neji.

"You used to be fun, Sarutobi."

"I joined the ball-and-chain ranks of responsibility," Asuma teased, smiling.

"Yeah so did I," Oushi grunted and held up his hand to indicate the gold wedding band suffocating his finger.

Neji watched them exchange a laugh before Oushi rolled his weight on down the corridors, puffing out his chest to impress the waif-like women who flowed around him like water, meandering silently about their business.

"Thank you, senpai," Neji said, glancing back at Asuma, more grateful for the fact that he could now drop this problem in the other Jōnin's lap and be on his way.

"No problem." Asuma took a deep pull on his cigarette, the amusement in his eyes sobering fast. "Seen Kotetsu or Izumo around?"

Neji managed not to look surprised and shook his head. "Not here."

"Right. Shikamaru?"

Neji almost hesitated. "Yes. I don't believe he's checked out yet."

Asuma looked away, exhaling a lungful of smoke downwards rather than up, his eyes following the drifting plume. Neji frowned, but didn't get the chance to pick apart the Sarutobi's expression; Asuma's introspective look lasted no more than a few seconds – there and gone with the smoke.

"He's a pretty elusive teacher…"

So it certainly seemed.

"Well, I guess I'll leave this in your capable hands," Asuma smirked, nodding towards the Chūnin trio who had picked up from where they'd left off.
Neji shot the older Jōnin a strained look, about to speak.

Asuma waved over his head, already turning to saunter back down the way he'd come, rumbling out a chuckle and a cloud of smoke. "Ball-and-chain, Neji."

Neji's eye twitched. He could feel the reins of his patience pulling in a tug-of-war game between the hand of control and the hand that wanted to reach out and hit something. Or someone.

Naruto let out a squawk. "SAKURA-CHAN!"

Neji turned sharply, drawing his arm out in a controlled slash. "That's enough."

"Oi, oi, Hyūga," Kiba piped up from the floor. "I wanna see who wins."

"Coward!" Naruto coughed out, flailing the camera at the dog-nin. "You're the one who took it!"

"No shit I took it." Kiba rocked to his feet, bumping into Neji's rigid back. He jerked his head over the Jōnin's shoulder and stabbed a finger towards his bruised eye, glaring at Naruto. "I just took it straight in the face."

Neji turned his head a fraction. "Unless you want another fist in your face, I suggest you get off me. Now."

Kiba sneered, leaning in to hook his head around Neji's shoulder until their gazes levelled, baring his teeth in a deliberate grin. "You're just a bucket of blazing sunshine aren't you, Hyūga?"

"Which would undoubtedly make you my rainy day."

"So what'cha gonna do about it?"

Their gazes fixed in a deadlock.

Tension bubbled up to the brink.

And Neji felt an old familiar violence singing through his veins.

Naruto flicked his hands up. "Hey guys?"

Kiba froze mid-growl, turning his head at the same time as Neji.

"WHAT?" They snarled in unison.

A click sounded.

The camera flash exploded in a bright burst, reflecting off Neji's hitai-ate to rebound the light directly into Naruto's eyeballs. All three males jerked their heads back.

Kiba yowled and cupped his eyes. "The FUCK!"

"Naruto, you idiot!" Sakura shouted, safe behind his yellow spikes. "That's dangerous for Inuzuka eyes!"

Naruto tucked the camera under his shirt, laughing. "But it shut them up!" He squinted and leaned in towards the stock-still Jōnin. "Plus, check out Neji's face!"

Neji couldn't even formulate a retort.
He wasn't even sure he was still looking in the right direction.

Naruto's face had vanished into a bright block of light - which meant he was likely to miss if he took a swing at the fool. A 'blinding stroke of luck' didn't apply here and he doubted he'd strike lucky and somehow hit Kiba instead.

"Whoa, Neji, you okay? You look totally spaced out."

Spaced out? Was Naruto even clued in?

*I am going to kill you.*

Frowning, Neji continued to blink owlishly, trying to banish the floating dots from his vision, his opal eyes rounded so wide it looked like he'd just taken a hallucinogen.

*No, that would feel liberating and possibly like flying...*

All he felt now was the severe urge to maim.

And Naruto was oblivious. "Kakashi-sensei's always goin' on about resolving conflict by using peaceful means and hey, this method works!"

*I know another method that works...*

Although 'peaceful means' didn't enter into it.

As Neji continued to blink at the box of colour hanging in mid-air, he considered applying the red mist of madness to this peace-free method. Maybe then he wouldn't be held accountable for his actions. Maybe if he murdered Naruto and Kiba he'd be confirming what Tsunade already assumed about his mental stability.

If anything, he could plead insanity at the trial.

*Breathe...*

Neji drew a steady breath. He curbed the urge to deck or damage either Chūnin and commended himself on keeping his composure. Fate had presented him with yet another opportunity to lose it.

A few more blinks and the world came back into focus.

Sakura had managed to wrestle one of Naruto's arms behind his back, threatening a fracture. She was shouting something about Kiba possessing sensitive 'tapetum lucidum' thrown in with some medical spiel about overexposure being painful to his eyes.

Neji glanced over his shoulder.

Kiba wasn't listening to a word, oblivious to Sakura's explanation of his clan's ocular genetics. Back turned, the Inuzuka had his hands cupped over his face, head thrown back like he was trying to keep his abused eyeballs from falling out his skull.

"Sonova...right in the fucking eyes..."

Naruto summed up the extent of his sympathy in two words. "Drama queen."

"You just blinded me you *jackass*!"
"You'll be okay in a few minutes, Kiba," Sakura promised.

"I'm gonna end up lookin' like Shino with those stupid shades."

"Kiba, you'll be fine," Sakura slapped her hand over Naruto's mouth to cut off his next wisecrack. "I've seen this before with Inuzuka shinobi who got too close to a flash bomb. The retained retinal image in your eyes will take a little longer to fade out but it'll go."

Naruto wrestled his mouth free with a twist of his head. "Oh come on it was a camera flash!"

Kiba growled over his shoulder. "I'm in pain here."

So am I, Neji thought. It was painful – holding back his fist when all he wanted to do was swing it.

"Anyway, aren't Hyūga eyes more sensitive?" Naruto argued, squinting at Neji with a wince. "Hey, you feeling okay, Neji?"

I'm feeling homicidal...

"I'm fine."

"Oh sure, play it strong, Hyūga." Kiba snorted towards the ceiling, tipping his head back further with hands still cupped over his eyes. "Never mind me seein' dots and stars, you should be seein' black holes and supernovas."

"No." Neji rubbed at his eyes, breathing deep. "Unlike you, I don't have tapeta lucida."

Kiba's head shot up. "What the fuck is tapeta lucida?"

"Sounds pretty bad to me," Naruto needled, grinning at Kiba's rigid back. "Like a disease."

"Stop it," Sakura growled. "It's the plural form."

Kiba whirled around. "Plural form of WHAT?"

"A disease."

"Shut up!" Sakura whacked Naruto upside the back of the head then turned her attention onto a squinting Kiba. "Tapetum lucidum, Kiba, weren't you listening? Ugh. Some Inuzuka shinobi possess this layer of tissue behind or within the retina of both eyes. Like dogs and cats. Just like these animals, your eyes can be sensitive to shifts in light."

Kiba's head came up with a hint of excitement. "You tellin' me I got some nifty dōjutsu I don't even know about?"

"No," Neji broke in. "Just enhanced night vision."

"Way to piss on my parade, Hyūga," Kiba drawled, visibly deflating.

Sakura rolled her eyes, offering the only vote of sympathy disguised as praise. "If it makes you feel better Kiba, you'll have that pretty golden eye-shine in your pictures."

"Hear that, lovebird?" Kiba grinned, eyebrows bobbing above his cupped palms. "Pretty."

"Hyūga eyes are cooler," Naruto laughed, mouth moving faster than his brain, "So Neji's prettier."
Neji went utterly still. "What did you say?"

Naruto blanched.

Kiba whistled lowly. "Shit, I wish I could see his face…"

Kiba would have been sorely disappointed.

Neji’s expression was stone cold, his voice a deep cavernous echo. "What did you call me?"

Naruto gulped around a nervous grin that looked more like a grimace. He ducked his head as if expecting a kick. Sakura delivered it straight to his ass, her knee ramming up.

Naruto's eyes flew wide. "OW! Why!"

"I just saved you," she growled.

"By a hairsbreadth," Neji uttered.

"Ain't gonna save you from the pain you've got coming from me." Kiba jabbed his chin in Naruto's direction, peering through the cracks in his fingers. "You better hope and pray I stop seeing dancin' dots and shinin' stars."

"Wuss," Naruto grumbled, earning himself another earful of medical lingo from Sakura that went straight over his head.

"Seriously," Kiba growled, wiping at the inner corners of his eyes with a scowl. "If you've screwed up my tappus looda—

"Tapeta lucida," Sakura sighed.

"Yeah that. If you've messed up my eyes I'm gonna make it so you can't find your own ass in the dark with a map."

"How's that even—"

"Both of you be quiet!" Neji snarled, not appreciating the little bright dots still floating and fading from his own vision. He slashed his arm out again in warning. "Naruto, hand over that blasted camera and give it a rest for one day. You're fortunate to have been invited to this ryokan and I doubt Shikamaru or Ino would appreciate their guests behaving like animals."

"That's not a compliment, Kiba," Naruto snickered.

Kiba flipped him off.

"Naruto," Neji warned.

Relentlessly stubborn, the Uzumaki refused to give up the camera but also failed to put up much of a fight in his own defence, unwilling to provoke Sakura further with her fist still raised above his head.

"Impossible," Neji sighed, the fight going out of him in one hot rush of air.

"So you saw Shikamaru, huh?" Kiba asked.

Neji froze inside, keeping his gaze fixed on Naruto and Sakura to keep from appearing startled.
"What?"

"Shikamaru," Kiba repeated, pressing his fingers gingerly around his refocusing eyes before draping one hand over them like a sunshade. "You saw him?"

Neji gave a neutral tip of his head. "Naruto mentioned it was his birthday. I was passing by and thought it appropriate to wish him."

"At this hour? Bet he thanked you for that cockle-doodle-doo," Kiba snickered, listing toward Neji for a moment, his nostrils flaring in a quick sniff. "You smell like him."

Neji's heart stuttered in shock.

STILL…?

Impossible. He'd stood under the hot spray until his skin had flushed raw. He'd walked through a cloud of incense for God's sake. He'd been sure to avoid the risk of detection by any nose – be it ninken or Inuzuka.

Then it struck him. Kiba's earlier words.

"This nose upgrade is gonna take some getting used to."

Neji bit down on a curse.

What an inappropriate time for Kiba's rite of passage into his own power. God, he didn't even want to think about what the dog-nin might have picked up on if Shikamaru had been standing there.

"Smell like him?" Neji echoed, trying to sound offended.

"Yeah, Ma calls it the perks and quirks of Inuzuka puberty. I call it my ticket to Tokujō." Kiba cut a sharp grin, tapping his nose. "My nose is sharper than any ninken's right now."

Fuck…

"Congratulations," Neji uttered beneath his breath, finding it hard to pull air into his lungs. "How polite of you to use it to invade my personal space."

Kiba ignored the warning in Neji's smooth voice and leaned in closer, his rough drawl gaining an edge. "If you're in the personal space of my buddies, Hyūga, it's only polite that I make sure you're shaking their hands instead'a smashing in their heads, yeah?"

Neji shot the Inuzuka a razor glare but caught himself just in time.

Calm down.

White eyes chilled into icy pools, the coldness setting his features into a granite mask. It was all he could do to keep from lashing out. Two weeks ago, he'd have done so immediately, in words, if not in action.

Kiba was probably hoping for that.

They'd almost gone for each other's throats twice in Hanegakure. And ever the dog with a bone to pick, Kiba hadn't let go of what Neji had done the night he'd smashed his chakra-laced fist into Shikamaru's skull.
Regret tore across Neji's heart like a hot, jagged blade…and memory bled cold.

Neji sucked in a breath.

*Stop…calm down…*

Neji exhaled a steady sigh through his nose, expression unchanging.

Kiba shook his head in something like disgust and leaned back against the fusuma wall, adopting a casual stance. He held Neji's gaze, lips pulling back into a baiting and too-bright smile. The glint of savage humour in his eyes gleamed with threat.

No surprise there.

There was no forgiving and forgetting with the Inuzuka – at least not where Neji was concerned. The dog-nin still gnawed over what the Jōnin had gone to Hinata three years ago during the Chūnin exams…and considering what he'd recently done to Shikamaru on their last mission…

*This is the last thing I need…*

And the first thing he should have seen coming.

Just because Naruto's heart opened the floodgates on forgiveness and the other Chūnin respected Shikamaru enough to follow his lead and trust his judgement, Kiba hadn't fully given up his own instincts on Neji's odd behaviour during the mission.

*Can I really blame him for that?*

It didn't help that by nature Neji and Kiba gelled with the grace of two grains going against each other. Egos got rubbed up the wrong way almost every time. They were dominant breeds set too far apart to seek or share common ground.

The only thing they shared was a common goal: to protect Konoha.

As comrades, this goal had always been enough to tentatively unite them in the past. But now there was a clear line between Neji's past and his present. And with his altered perspective over the past few weeks, he couldn't help but see Kiba's aggression towards him in a different light.

Understanding his own rage had changed everything.

Kiba's anger wasn't black and tainted like Neji's had been. It was red and instinctive, bold as the slash of his tattoos. It wasn't free of pride or power or even pettiness, but on the whole it was fuelled by something stronger and surer.

Something that until two weeks ago Neji had forgotten he possessed.

*Protectiveness…*

The kind that went beyond defending a village's populace or preserving the values held and handed down by the generations within its walls. It was the kind of protectiveness that attached itself to people, not to a population or a particular clan. It wasn't about duty or honour or codes of conduct.

It was about bonds.

Bonds wrapped up in this innate protectiveness and the urge to *act* on it for the sake of family and friends. Neji knew all about action. He'd just never had *that* kind of motive.
He'd only ever felt it once: for his father.

And he'd thought it had died with Hizashi...until Shikamaru.

_The will to protect_...

The same will flickering in Kiba's eyes.

Neji turned his gaze away.

Once again, he'd been blind to a truth he hadn't stopped to consider. It was a painfully hypocritical hindsight. The realisation that despite every cutting remark he'd ever made about the Inuzuka's wild and unbridled behaviour, out of the two of them, Kiba had always been the more human.

Neji's lip twitched in a wry smile.

_So blind...to so much...I think I win on the irony front, Nara_...

Shikamaru had given him back more than the heart he thought had stopped feeling when his father's had stopped beating. The Nara had pulled the shadows away from his eyes, allowing him to see the world – and the people in it – in those shades of colour that had begun to fade to grey.

"You once called me a stone cold bastard," Neji said.

Kiba arched a brow. "That's random."

"Relevant," Neji corrected, shaking his head. "You weren't wrong."

Kiba's brows lifted in surprise before dropping into a frown.

"I wasn't wrong?" the dog-nin echoed sarcastically. "You're worse than Shino. Why can't you just say 'you were right' instead of—" He cut off, turning his head a little more. "Wait, what is this? An apology?"

"No." Neji turned to face Kiba head on. "An overdue acknowledgement."

Kiba rocked his head to one side, looking at Neji sideways. "Yeah right."

Neji didn't recant his words or his actions, he just waited.

Acknowledgement meant recognition and respect – things that he'd only ever manufactured around Kiba for the sake of civility. But for the first time, there was nothing contrived or cold in his words or in his gaze.

No arrogance, no aggression, no alpha male faceoff.

Kiba frowned harder, as if a natural order had just been violated. Maybe it had. He'd issued a threat to Neji with his earlier words and Neji had responded by offering a truce.

A truce signed in respect.

As predicted, Kiba reacted like a baffled animal. Blinking fast, his head tilted further to the side in a way that suggested he was trying to examine the whole situation from a different angle.

"You've gotta be shitting me, right?"
Neji shook his head.

Unsatisfied, Kiba leaned in, his aura bold and invasive.

Neji knew he was trying to trigger a reaction and made no move to adopt the role of rival, tempting as it was. He hadn't expected Kiba to make this easy. Even so, he'd aimed to make a point here – hopefully a turning point – and there was no going back. He needed to move forward, especially with comrades he'd almost come to blows with in the past.

_This needs to stop._

He and Kiba were always on the knife's edge of a violent confrontation.

Whether or not this moment tipped them _over_ that edge was resting squarely on Kiba's shoulders. But judging from the furrow digging into the dog-nin's forehead it was a weight the other ninja didn't seem comfortable carrying alone. They'd always shared the load of their joint animosity towards each other.

But Neji had let it go.

Would Kiba keep dragging it with him into never-ending next times?

The dog-nin appeared to be debating this behind narrowed eyes, his tongue pressed against a sharp fang. He remained leaning in, drawing out the tension just to see if anything in Neji would snap or buckle.

The Hyūga checked his control ruthlessly.

_I'll have enough fighting to do soon enough...this ends here..._

Cementing this into his mind, Neji held his concrete position. Only he held it without the condescending air that normally chilled his face and turned his eyes to ice. It wasn't about pride this time – it was about integrity and intention.

Kiba must have sensed it as strongly as if he'd smelt it.

He leaned back a bit.

And then, for the first time, both shinobi held their ground without looking to shake or knock the other off their own turf. Respect might have held some tentative footing between them but it didn't get a firm toehold, hovering in and out of Kiba's eyes in wary flickers.

But it was enough.

"Well it's a cold day in hell," the Inuzuka muttered, backing off a step. "You're actually serious."

Neji let out a silent breath. "I don't make jokes."

Kiba hummed a low 'hn' in his throat, a faint smile failing to disguise the suspicion narrowing his eyes. But rather than sniff out the cause for Neji's change in attitude, Kiba shrugged it off like a wolf giving up the hunt – though Neji sensed the questions were howling around in his head.

The Inuzuka's smile stretched into a grin. "Good thing I didn't make a bet on this moment. Shikamaru would'a won."

Neji blinked. "Oh?"
"Yeah, the other day I said you were like a pissy tiger with stripes that weren't gonna change."

"Hn. And what did he say?"

"Other than 'troublesome'?" Kiba hooked his thumbs into the waist of his jeans, shrugging. "He said you were human like everyone else."

Neji's heart throbbed in his chest.

He managed a weak smirk, feigning nonchalance he didn't feel. "How uncreative of him."

"He's one lazy bastard, right?" Kiba laughed.

Naruto's yell startled them both. "MAKE HER STOP!"

Neji and Kiba glanced down at the wrestling teammates who'd tumbled further along the corridor. They'd taken their tussle to the ground and Sakura sat astride her victim with fists raised, threatening brain haemorrhage to the tortured Uzumaki. Naruto had adopted a foetal-position but was still shaking with laughter rather than fear.

Neji arched a brow, finally somewhat amused.

Kiba barked a laugh and clapped Neji on the shoulder, turning to head over and crouch down beside Naruto all in the same movement. He patted the back of his hand mockingly against the Uzumaki's whiskered cheek.

"I was gonna kick your ass, but now I just kinda feel sorry for you."

Naruto unfurled himself with a growl, about to reply. Sakura took the opportunity to hook his arms back, only to have her plan foiled by Kiba. The dog-nin saw the opening and took it. He snatched the camera from under Naruto's shirt, jumped back and whistled a shrill note.

A loud bark warned Neji of an incoming.

He looked up just as Akamaru rounded the corner at the end of the corridor.

The bounding mass of white fur skidded to a halt beside Kiba, who vaulted onto his trusty mutt with a wild whoop, hitching his ride. "Wey hey, buddy! Right on time!"

"KIBA!" Sakura roared.

Laughing like the devil in jeans, Kiba held up the camera and saluted the fuming Sakura and slack-jawed Naruto with a wild grin. "Animal reflexes, baby."

Sakura shoved off Naruto with a growl.

Kiba flexed his thighs and Akamaru bolted down the corridor like a bronco, a single bound carrying master and mutt straight over a woman balancing plates. She spun about with a startled shriek, rattling china.

"KIBA!" Sakura yelled after him.

Kiba deigned her with a backward wave.

Neji had to admire the quick exit, that is, *if* Kiba had actually planned it that way.
Fists balled at her sides, Sakura vibrated on the spot, strands of pink quivering above her shoulders. Naruto took the opportunity to crawl across towards Neji, pressing his finger to his lips when the Hyūga glanced down, arching a brow with a "you've-got-to-be-joking" expression.

Sakura whipped around, ready to vent her wrath. "NARUTO!"

The Uzumaki bounded up behind Neji and grabbed the Jōnin's shoulders, displaying no shame whatsoever in commandeering the Hyūga as his human shield.

"Naruto," Neji gritted out, turning his head to glare over his shoulder.

Sakura's gaze hit on Neji's exposed jaw and she halted mid-step, her expression changing. Her fist loosened as she stalked over, stabbing a finger over Neji's shoulder towards Naruto's ducked head.

"You're going to be late for Kakashi and Yamato-sensei," she scolded, switching from harbinger of brain-haemorrhages to responsible teammate. "No slacking!"

Neji shot her a questioning look.

Naruto, however, didn't question his good fortune. Hands still planted on Neji's shoulders, he pivoted the Hyūga around by degrees, unwilling to give up his 'bodyguard' until he'd orbited out of Sakura's reach.

For Gods' sake...

Preserving what precious little remained of his patience, Neji allowed himself to be rotated with a longsuffering breath streaming through his nose. The muscles in his jaw ticked with every fractional turn of his body until Naruto stopped, patted him on the shoulders and zipped off down the corridor in Kiba's wake.

Sakura waited until the Uzumaki turned the corner before speaking. "Neji, what happened?"

"Happened?"

Sakura brushed her fingertips across her jaw. "Those bruises, you've got chakra burn too."

Neji rolled his shoulders in a slow grind, feeling his defences rising up. His expression smoothed out into unreadable stillness.

"Sparring," he said, ignoring the dubious look Sakura fixed him with.

"You want me to heal it?"

"No…thank you."

Sakura pressed her lips, the tense line of her mouth pulling into a faint smile. "I figured you got back safe. How're you doing?"

He nodded. "I'm well."

"The brodifacoum should be working its way out by now."

"It is."

"Any side-effects?"
"None."

"That's good." She paused, doubt clouding the relief in her eyes. "When I heard you'd signed up to go back to Hanegakure, I didn't know whether..." she trailed off, biting her lip.

Neji could almost hear the buzz of her nerves.

"Whether?" he prompted quietly.

"Are you angry?" she asked.

Neji blinked, tucking his chin back. "Angry?"

The kunoichi nodded, searching his expression in a futile effort. "I just...I thought that's why you left so soon after you got back."

"That wasn't my reason."

"Neji, we never had time to explain. It all happened so fast and then it—"

Neji raised a palm to cut her short. "Don't." He mellowed his tones at her wide-eyed look. "There's nothing to explain, Sakura."

And certainly nothing he wished to discuss. Explanations always led to re-evaluations. He had no intention of allowing his mind to regurgitate that painful experience just to have the 'how' and 'why' of it fed back to him all over again.

It had been necessary.

The fact was bitter and unpalatable...but no less the truth...and that simple, painful truth was all he needed to know. A bitter pill his pride still couldn't swallow. But another part of him had understood and accepted that this bitter pill had purged him of a poison far more toxic and lethal than the brodifacoum.

"It was necessary."

"But Shikamaru didn't wan—"

"It was necessary, Sakura."

Sakura gave him a look that managed to combine regret with relief, though she sounded guilty for feeling either. Her voice was a whisper. "I'm so sorry it happened that way."

Neji offered a faint smile. "Don't be."

If there was any other way it could have happened, then just like Shikamaru, he didn't ever want to know.

The firefly winked at him, the thin gold leaf wings painted into delicate points. Shikamaru studied the purple symbol marking the door of Ino's luxury suite, not having noticed the intricate detail the night before.

He stood for a long moment, following the design.

A bag sat by his feet, the drawstring loose enough to reveal the shiny plastic of the Magic 8 ball...
bulging from the opening. It's fortune-telling navel peered up at Shikamaru like a Buddha's belly eager for a rub without the promise of good luck.

*Is Ino gonna grill me?*

Shikamaru nudged it with his foot, watched the ink slosh and the dice roll.

*CANNOT PREDICT NOW.*

He smirked.

How predictable. Too bad he couldn't apply this ambiguity to his own answers. He already knew Ino would demand an explanation from him. Maybe she'd use the Magic 8 Ball method on his skull and hope something rattled loose and surfaced from the murky waters in his mind.

Though come to think of it, things felt clearer to him now.

Much clearer.

He hadn't expected that. If anything he'd expected his head to have gone into a tailspin after last night. For some trigger to have blown in the back of his brain and splattered one hell of a mess over everything he'd been trying to scrape back into order.

Instead he felt stronger, steadier.

Like he'd stopped running long enough to catch his breath.

For all the running he'd been doing, he felt like he'd finally gained some ground; the kind that wouldn't give way beneath his feet if he inched his mental steps too far in Neji's direction. Maybe one day he'd be strong enough to take the memories out of their mental frames and hold them without feeling that yawning sense of loss.

*One day…*

He wasn't quite there yet. But for the first time, he believed that maybe, someday, he could be.

*One day…*

But not today.

Now that he'd stopped running and the dust had settled, he felt more aware of his surroundings and the people in it. He'd have called it an epiphany, but didn't like the drama attached to the word.

*Better get ready for some drama…*

Ino had probably saved up a load of it in her arsenal of "You Owe Me".

Before Shikamaru could contemplate how many ways to avoid taking flak, he heard the approaching whisper of footsteps across the polished floors. Turning his head, he spied a young staff member approaching, checking doors.

He offered a polite nod when she stopped beside him.

The woman flicked her eyes from him to the door. "This is your room?"

He shrugged. It might as well have been. "Sure."
She bowed and held out a small silver tray filled with flowers and topped with a small receipt booklet. It was wedged artfully in the centre. "Your bill, Yamanaka-san."

Shikamaru arched a brow. "Huh?"

She straightened up quickly, checking the receipt. "You booked several spa treatments yesterday."

_Hn. Figures._

Shikamaru bit down on his tongue to keep from smiling. "Right. What did I book in for again?"

The woman frowned and checked the receipt, a cross between confusion and embarrassment registering on her face. She wouldn't look him in the eye.

_Oh great._

Why the hell had he even asked?

"Never mind," he said. "How much does it total?"

The woman pressed her lips and handed him the booklet, staring at the floor with a bright shade of pink tinting her cheeks.

_Shit..._

Shikamaru flipped open the cover and made a point of skimming straight over the list of spa treatments — though he was pretty sure he spied the words "goddess" and "honey bath" thrown in there. Then he saw the whopping grand total. His brows shot up, the corners of his mouth pulling into a wince. Well shit, this would sure set Ino back on a few shiny spending sprees.

"Yamanaka-san?" the woman asked. "Is something wrong?"

"No." Shikamaru shook his head, though his frown said otherwise.

It wasn't the price that puzzled him, it was the fact that Ino hadn't put her name down. He guessed it might have had something to do with that moron who had been eyeing her up the other night at the party.

His frown turned a tad darker.

"Sir?" the woman pressed.

Shikamaru hummed distractedly and crouched down to rummage around in his duffle-bag, tugging out a worn leather wallet branded with the Nara symbol. Taking the ryō needed to cover the bill – which completely cleaned him out – he stood, took the receipt and slipped the payment into the booklet, handing it back.

"Thanks."

The woman had gone red, her entire face a mottled lobster shade. She offered him a lotus-looking flower, bowed politely and whispered off along the corridor.

Shikamaru waited until she turned the corner.

Then he glanced down to re-read the receipt resting in his bandaged hand and grimaced.
Scanning the long slip of paper, he scowled at the list of beauty treatments and all but blanched at an overpriced workshop: Discover Your Inner Goddess. The shadow-nin suppressed a shudder and stuffed the receipt into his pocket, wincing at the pain in his hand.

Get healed. Get fed. Get back to the grindstone.

He glanced up when a muffled sound carried through from the other side of the door: Chōji's laughter. It was followed by a high giggle that Shikamaru hoped was Ino and not the Akimichi.

Smiling faintly, Shikamaru took a step back and considered his next move.

If anything, it would get his teammates' attention. Taking the flower in his bandaged palm he raised his other hand to the door, rapping out a syllabic beat he knew they'd recognise.

Two distinct double knocks and a single rap.


Translation: Ino-Shika-Chō.

Immediately, he heard the quick brush of feet across the tatami mats followed by the rattle of room keys. Shikamaru switched the flower to his good hand, crouched to sling the knapsack over one shoulder and straightened up just as the door handle turned.

The strong smell of nail varnish had Shikamaru's nose wrinkling.

Slim fingers hooked around the edge of the wood and lilac fingernails caught the light, the polish wet and shiny. A shuffle of feet and the door eased open another inch to reveal half of Ino's face, cast in shadow and framed by the thick fall of her bangs. The golden strands were damp and tangled, streaking lowlights of deep honey through the pale mass. She had a few wayward tendrils clipped up to one side.

"You haven't done that in two years," Ino murmured.

Shikamaru couldn't see her expression clearly, but he could detect a single cerulean eye observing him warily.

He managed a weak smirk, canting his weight onto his right hip with a shrug and slouch.

"Surprise."

Ino didn't laugh or smile, but she did open the door. The light from the corridor struck a halo glow about her flaxen head, though Shikamaru knew better than to equate the word 'angelic' with the hellfire rising in those blue eyes.

She scowled at him. "You bailed on us."

Shikamaru pressed his lips, but didn't deny it.

"You didn't come back," Ino added unnecessarily, drumming her nails in an impatient click against the wood, waiting for an apology he wasn't going to give.

"Maybe I figured you'd still be out of it," he muttered.

Ino pulled her head back and her face did a kind of stop-motion animation, running through several
expressions in a flash that happened so fast it was impossible to follow. It ended with a blank stare at the floor.

Shikamaru frowned, not sure how to interpret the reaction.

"Did I..." Ino shook off her numb stare and glanced at the small firefly glinting on the door. "Did I say anything to you?"

Shikamaru arched a brow, though at least he could predict where this was heading. He wasn't sure whether to encourage the direction though. His mind flashed forward the image of Ino curled up on the couch, weeping into it as her tears and loose tongue told the tale he knew she'd never have confessed sober.

"Mom was right...no one wants me."

Shikamaru glanced away, gazing along the corridor to keep from settling a concerned look on her face. He swallowed, shaking his head as he debated black truths or white lies.

"Did I?" Ino ground out.

"Yeah."

Ino's nails dug into the door. "Like?"

Shikamaru shrugged. "You wanted to go dancing. You also thought it was fun to pick up where Temari left off in assassinating my character...and you threw several insults and kicks in there, just to be troublesome."

"What? That's it?"

"That's it."

Ino let out a high little laugh, that tremulous, affected one she always made when nervous. "Seriously?"

"...Yeah. What? Didn't meet your quota?"

Ino rolled her eyes, but Shikamaru could sense the relief that shook out in her breath. When she looked back at him, she'd recovered her cattish attitude, blue eyes tapering into an accusatory stare.

"You still didn't come back."

"I'm here now."

"Big effort," Ino muttered.

Shikamaru arched a brow and held up the flower to her.

Her eyes widened in a flash of surprise and then narrowed, searching for the intention behind the gesture. "Is that your apology?"

"It's a flower," he returned.

Ino huffed, plucked the bloom from his hand and stepped away from the threshold, leaving the door ajar. With a swish of purple silk, she tightened the belt on her yukata and padded barefoot back through the foyer into the main guest room, splaying her steps to avoid disturbing the cotton
wads shoved between lilac-painted toes.

"Well come on, slacker," she growled over her shoulder, tucking the purple flower behind her ear.

Shikamaru shook his head and shut the door behind him, following after her. He made sure to keep his injured hand tucked into the pocket of his slacks.

Ino heralded her return with a dramatic sigh. "Guess who I found on the doorstep."

Chōji shifted on the couch, reluctant to unglue his eyes from the television screen. But the second Shikamaru stepped through the shoji doors the Akimichi's attention switched faster than a channel flick, tuning into his teammates.

"Hey!" he grinned, hitting mute on the movie. "We were gonna come get you for breakfast."

"Chōji was," Ino corrected.

Shikamaru raised his eyebrows in a 'here we go again' display of resignation. That set the ground rules for Ino's mood, flower or no flower. Judging from experience, she'd remain crabby until she'd eaten.

Great.

Chōji grimaced at Ino's glare and shot Shikamaru an apologetic look, offering his buddy some potato chips in compensation. "You musta slept well, huh?"

The shadow-nin shrugged off the offer for chips with a smile, dodging the question at the same time. "You guys hungry for some real food?"

"My diet re-starts today," Ino announced.

Chōji's stomach took that moment to orchestrate an impressive symphony of gurgles and growls that tapered off into a high pitch whine that sounded like a question.

Shikamaru chuckled quietly.

Ino shot the Akimichi a scandalised look. "Really? After all the cake we polished off last night?"

The Akimichi grinned sheepishly, scratching at a swirl on his cheek.

"You can order a coffee," Shikamaru said. "Negate those calories or whatever your crazy thinking is behind that."

"Wow, you actually remembered," Ino rolled her eyes, rounding the low table. "Well you'll both just have to wait 'til I'm finished."

Shikamaru arched a brow and dipped his shoulder to drop his knapsack beside the lacquered table. The surface was covered with an array – or rather an army – of nail varnish bottles. Ino had divided them into ranks, colour-coded in varying shades of purple.

Shikamaru grunted. "Girly."

Ino sat down on a cushion and shot him a sarcastic look, curling her fingers to blow across her nails. "Good thing you bailed. I'd have got you in your sleep."

"She's not lying," Chōji said, holding up a hand to display a bright lilac thumbnail and a lavender
Shikamaru's expression flat-lined. "And you're still wearing it."

Ino smirked. "You should see his toenails."

"I don't wanna know…"

"She's kidding," Chōji laughed.

Shikamaru shook his head, making a face.

"Aww, don't worry, Shikamaru," Ino needled. "I'd have painted yours black to match your zombie-dark rings and general jackass moodiness."

"Hn." He sat down opposite Ino and pinched one of the dark purple bottles between forefinger and thumb, twirling it in a lazy spin. "Come to think of it, it'll probably match the rest of my right hand."

Ino flicked her eyes up from her nails. "What?"

Shikamaru sighed, but figured it was time to come clean if he was going to get this healed. He lifted his bandaged fist from his lap and set it with a light tap on the tabletop; the skin was discoloured to the bruised hues of a rotten peach.

Chōji's crisp packet stopped rustling.

Ino's lips parted in an 'O' of surprise, matching the rounding of her eyes.

Chōji spoke first. "What happened?"

"What didn't?"

Shikamaru shrugged. "I put my fist through a wall."

Chōji frowned. "You what?"

"You idiot!" Ino snapped, shoving onto her knees, wads of cotton and drying polish all but forgotten. "Why would you do something like that?"

"General jackass moodiness," Shikamaru muttered.

"That's not funny," Ino growled and reached across the table, grabbing his wrist to tug and turn the injured hand between her palms. "Is anything broken?"

Shikamaru bit down on a wince. "Not yet."

Ino frowned harder and cupped his swollen fist.

"You idiot," she growled again, softer this time. "Stay still." Pulling in a slow breath, the Yamanaka focused on directing curative chakra to the centre of her palms, flooding it along her fingers.

Shikamaru felt the tingle of nerve endings and the buzz of chakra flowing hot and cold along his arm up to his elbow, looping back down to the ends of his fingers.

Chōji looked on from the couch.
Shikamaru could sense the Akimichi studying him with concern that was hard enough to take from his friend at the best of times, let alone the times when there was a justified cause for it.

"Relax, Chōji."

"Seriously, why?" the Akimichi asked.

Shikamaru pressed his lips. This was the part where the script wrote itself up in his head one lying line at a time. All he had to do was follow it. Let his lips move and the bullshit would flow like breath.

But for the first time in days, he found he couldn't do it.

"Guess it's just been pending," Shikamaru murmured, flexing his fingers between Ino's palms.

"Tell us something we don't know, genius," Ino mumbled, concentrating the green glow towards the centre of Shikamaru's hand. "You've been in a funk ever since you got back from Hanegakure."

Shikamaru didn't even try to argue in his own defence. He glanced at Chōji to find the Akimichi's support weighing in Ino's favour, all communicated in a rueful smile. Shikamaru looked down.

"It's not even like you failed the mission," Ino pointed out, reaching with smudged nails to tug off the bandages. "So what's up with that? Is it because Neji got hurt?"

Shikamaru flinched, a reaction that Ino mistook for his hand feeling sore. She gentled her motions, unravelling the medic tape with care, muttering something like "big baby" beneath her breath.

Chōji spoke up when the shadow-nin failed to answer. "That wasn't your fault, you know."

"I know," Shikamaru replied, not even bothering to dig deep enough to discover whether he truly believed that. It wasn't important right now. "It's not that."

"Then what is it?" Ino asked.

Shikamaru made a fist, grinding the bones to test the pain. Not even a twinge. The bruises and scars on his knuckles had gone. The damage fixed. Clean and simple. Unlike the conversation. Unlike the truth.

"Shikamaru?" Ino pressed, kneeling back. "What's wrong?"

Shikamaru worked his jaw, eyes on the table.

He suddenly wished Asuma were there, wanting nothing more than to just be in his sensei's grounding presence. The tension became thick enough to have the shadow-nin sucking in a breath against the uncomfortable pressure.

"Shikamaru," Chōji urged.

Nodding, Shikamaru drew his hand back in a slow drag, pausing to hook nail varnish bottles between his knuckles, swapping their positions with an elegant twist and dip of his fingers.

His teammates watched in silence.

He repeated the motion, rearranging the formation.

"This is what I do," he said at last, his voice quiet enough that Chōji had to get up from the couch.
Ino exchanged a glance with the Akimichi before studying Shikamaru with her head tilted to one side. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"You guys know I play things out like Shogi," Shikamaru clarified, another dance of his fingers creating two arrowhead formations directed at each of his friends. "And when I do, it could be something close to me I'm moving around..." he switched the arrangement into a square. "Or it could be something I don't give a crap about. It's a drag, but I do it. We all play our roles, right?"

Ino gave a sharp nod. "Right."

"You bet," Chōji said.

Shikamaru smiled a little, sensing their undivided attention like lasers tracking his movements. "The mission is like a board. It changes but the game doesn't. Protect our King and capture or compromise our enemy's..." he paused, glancing up. "Right?"

"Sounds about right," Chōji said, looking between Shikamaru and Ino.

Ino frowned, her eyes zeroed in on Shikamaru. "But it's not right, is it?"

"Is it?" Shikamaru's lips twisted bitterly, bistre eyes pressing shut. He passed a hand across his face to rub at his brow. "You guys tell me. You trust me to get it right...maybe I can't always do that. I can't always guarantee that checkmate for our side."

Ino scoffed, puffing up in offence. "Well, duh, Shikamaru. Just because you're super smart, doesn't mean we're 'stupid simple'. I mean seriously."

Shikamaru frowned at the glib response, looking up sharply. "What?"

"We know how the 'game goes' or whatever. That trust thing works two ways you know?" Ino flicked her wrist, waving off his confused glower. "Anyway, that's not what you need to trust us with, is it?"

The shadow-nin glanced between them, eyes narrowed as he searched for whatever answer they assumed he already had. "Isn't it?"

Ino shot him an expectant and exasperated glare.

"I know you get it. I trust you to get it. It's the only way I can do it."

"Oh my god, not the missions!" Ino snapped. "How are you not getting this?"

Shikamaru scowled. "Getting what?"
"That we get you," Chōji said.

Shikamaru drew his head back, body bolting ahead of his brain. Before he could register he'd even reacted, the heel of his hand had braced against the edge of the table, ready to propel him up and away. It happened so suddenly he didn't have time to correct or disguise the movement.

Chōji spoke before he could think to act on it. "And just like Asuma-sensei, we know you're more than who you think you are when you're doing what you do."

"You're way more than that," Ino added, hugging her knees to her chest. "You might be the biggest brain in Konoha, but that's not all you've got."

"Yeah and we've been trying to show you that. Well, remind you."

"But you're not listening or looking beyond your stupid fat head," Ino cradled her hands into the shadow-nin's trademark 'strategic' pose. "It's like you're spilling your mission mode into everything. Frankly, it's freaking us out."

Yeah, me too…

Shikamaru clenched his jaw to keep from uttering the thought aloud, his breath shaking out quietly. He heard their breaths hitch and cursed himself for even making a sound.

Chōji set his hand on the table, drawing Shikamaru's gaze. "We've been trying to tell you without actually telling you."

"And you still don't get it." Ino sighed. "It's like you're lost in space around your brain. Seriously, what happened to the lazy-ass slacker we know and love to harass?"

Shikamaru stared down at the small bottles he'd arranged on the table, unable to respond with his usual quick riposte. He swallowed uncomfortably, the muscles in his face tense, lips drawn taut.

"Maybe he grew up…” he murmured. "We're not kids anymore."

"Well speak for yourself, old man!" Ino huffed, splaying her hand above her chest. "We just hit seventeen and I'm ready to bask in the flame of my youth, okay?"

Shikamaru smiled a little at that. "You don't do that already?"

Ino struck a pose. "Do you see purple spandex?"

That one earned her a raspy chuckle and Shikamaru brushed his fingers over his lips to quieten the sound, shaking his head. But the response earned him twin grins from his friends.

"See?" Ino wagged a finger at him. "That's what we're talking about. Getting you to laugh has been a mission."

"I laugh," Shikamaru defended.

"Dude, you don't even laugh at the bird," Chōji grinned. "That's not right."

"That bird's not right," Shikamaru argued, smiling.

"Well whatever, you're not exactly a giggle kind of guy," Ino admitted. "But still, it's been scary seeing you go all introvert, especially with your kind of head, it's probably not healthy."
"That's why we want you to know that we're still here, you know?" Chōji added. "Even if you're not really 'getting' that. It's okay."

God, said out loud like this it all seemed so… uncomplicated. But in the catacombs of Shikamaru's mind, the complications risked leading him astray, maybe even leading him down into the shadows of doubt…and the shadows that went into deeper, darker places.

I don't want to hide this…but I…

Chōji's hand touched his shoulder. "Shikamaru?"

The shadow-nin swallowed again, shaking his head. "You're wrong," he husked out. "I know you've both been there. You always are. I know that…I guess it's just been hard to see the difference lately…between who I am and what I do…"

He shrugged as if to say his words were unimportant and unnecessary. He knew they were far from either. And he didn't need to look up to sense his teammates knew it too.

Chōji squeezed his shoulder and he heard Ino shift position.

"Wanna know what'll make it easier when you forget?" she chirped.

Shikamaru nodded without looking up. "Shoot."

Ino didn't answer, not in words anyway. Her pale hand slid across the table and she began to rearrange the bottles Shikamaru was staring at into a different shape, taking her time to pick and place each one. Deliberate, slow.

Shikamaru watched from beneath his lashes, frowning.

After several taps, Ino finished setting up a large circle with a smaller one in the centre. On cue, Chōji reached across to help finish the design, lining up three bottles in the middle to complete the symbol: the number 10 inside a circle.

Shikamaru's eyes widened a little.

He didn't see Chōji and Ino exchange a glance and nod.

They leaned back and dropped their hands to the table, drumming out the same syllabic beat Shikamaru had used when he'd knocked on the door. It drilled home the message they'd created with the symbol and brought to mind all the countless times they'd used it in their Genin days.

Ino-Shika-Chō…

Shikamaru's lips curved gently and he closed his eyes. "I hear you."

An easy silence settled around the table, warm and companionable in a way it hadn't been for weeks. Shikamaru soaked it in and felt the tension crumbling out of him.

Thank you…

The acceptance from his friends settled like unseen hands on his shoulders – keeping a grip on him so he could let go of whatever it was he could never bring himself to say. At least not to them.

Sensei…
Shikamaru's chest tightened.

Someday I'll talk about it...

Breathing deep he slipped his eyes open and found a smile for his friends.

But not today.

"Dammit!"

The drawer of the filing cabinet slammed shut. The resounding clang of metal echoed loud and long through the warren of rooms that dominated the subbasement of the Konoha Archive Library. A cluster of dens filled with a wealth of information and resources dating back to the founding of Konohagakure.

It was the place he'd come to find something, anything.

But he could find nothing.

Not even a damned footnote.

Asuma snarled, bracing his forearm across the cabinet. "Shit..."

He stubbed out his sixth cigarette against the wall and added another stain to pockmarked plaster, the cracked surface streaked with the beginnings of mildew. Snagging a hand back through his hair, the Sarutobi sighed out a plume of smoke into the dust motes swirling under the glare of the lamplight above his head.

Good thing he wasn't claustrophobic.

He'd been holed up in this musty, stuffy, windowless room for the past two hours, scouring filing cabinets, raiding folders for details of mission reports dating back two years. Good thing he'd taken the opportunity to pull rank on Kotetsu and Izumo. As the Hokage's personal gofers, familiar with the cramped layout of the catacombs, they'd granted him access to the lower levels of the archive building.

Asuma growled out another curse.

A couple of rooms down, he heard the low mewl of a cat.

His mind strayed to Kurenai and her earlier words to him.

"You didn't fail anyone..."

Too bad I can't convince myself to believe that.

Pushing away from the cabinet, he turned a slow circle about the huge square table taking up the centre of the room. Boxes were stacked at each corner and lamps sat like spotlights atop the haphazard piles, directing their beams onto the papers and scrolls strewn across the table.

The proverbial haystack without a needle of useful information in sight.

Asuma sighed and let his gaze shift to a long scroll of text that spilled over the edge of the table, lolling like a paper tongue onto the floor: a full listing of Konoha's ninja examinations over the past several years. The rest of the scattered material was a compilation of reports all related to the
Chūnin exams two years ago, written by team leaders and accompanying proctors.

Dated, signed-off on and stamped.

Asuma propped a foot on the metal folding chair pulled up to the table, hitched the pant leg of his slacks and braced his arm across his knee. He wasn't giving up that easy. Rolling up the sleeves of his turtleneck, he rolled his wrists to adjust the heavy metal bracelets and hunkered over the table. Tapping a finger onto a stained sheet, he scanned across and along the rows and columns of text.

Two years ago…Chōji and Ino made Chūnin during the first Chūnin biannual exam. It was 6 months after that…that something happened…

He stopped scrolling when he hit the date for the second Chūnin exam held that same year, 6 months later. He double-checked the location. It had been held in Kusagakure at the end of September. Shikamaru had just turned fifteen.

That's right…straight after his birthday he went back to that second exam…

Asuma hadn't seen the point of sending his student along until Tsunade had insisted the young Nara get sufficient invigilator training. She'd wanted Shikamaru stationed as a proctor in the following year's exams that had ended up being held in Suna.

Right, I know that whatever happened to him happened in Kusagakure during those previous exams.

While the questions and possibilities had haunted Asuma for two years, finding answers now felt no different to the attempts he'd made the first time around. Though the first time around, he hadn't been chasing paper trails.

Back then, he'd been chasing a ghost.

Shikamaru just hadn't been there, only a shadow wearing his face.

You fooled everyone…and I let you fool me into thinking I could catch you.

But it was only Shikamaru's shadows he'd been following, led astray in a red-herring kind of chase. And like a fool, he'd fallen for it. Instead of grabbing Shikamaru and demanding answers to his questions, he'd let those questions hang like lifelines, never wanting to think that maybe Shikamaru had been too far gone at the time to reach up and grab them like he always had as a Genin.

Where did you go, kid?

Asuma pressed his eyes shut against the memory.

I should have followed this further, caught you and pulled you back...

Sure, he'd done his own investigating behind the scenes. He'd searched every indirect avenue he could think of to avoid cornering his student. But he'd met with dead-ends that twisted back on themselves. He couldn't get a grip on anything concrete and Shikamaru had offered no signs to direct him.

And the second you came back on your own, I let it go...

Because the relief had been too great…and even stronger than that relief had been Asuma's fear of fucking things up and driving his student back into that void. So for the sake of keeping Shikamaru
together in the only way he'd known how, he'd selfishly agreed to bury his questions…and he'd let Shikamaru bury his answers.

*You fucking coward, Sarutobi…*

And now here he was, back in the paper trail, re-opening the cold case file on his student. And even now, two years on, the answers were still like peas lost in a shell game. Clues constantly vanishing under the sleight of hand movements Shikamaru kept up with his defences.

*And I let you pull that crap because I thought that's what you needed...thought that being there for you was enough...God what the hell was I thinking? Too little, too late...every fucking time it matters most.*

Guilt sawed through Asuma like a rusty knife, tearing him down the centre. He ground his jaw, curling his fingers into a fist above the reports until his knuckles blanched white.

"*You never failed me, sensei. Not once.*"

Asuma shook his head, letting out a rattled sigh. "Can't bullshit a bullshitter, kid."

*And I'm sure as hell not failing you twice.*

"First sign of madness," a voice drawled from the doorway.

Jolted from his thoughts, Asuma snapped his head up, squinting past the glare of the lamplight towards to door. He caught a glint of steel – a thin flash of light that tapered down into a pinprick, twinkling like a teardrop at the end of the senbon.

"Talking to yourself," the voice clarified.

Asuma tipped his head, his throat rough and tight. "Genma."

The senbon winked in response, a lone star in the darkness. Shadows cloaked the threshold and spilled into the corridor beyond, swallowing Genma's lean frame into nothing more than a silhouette, making him indiscernible from the black.

"Interesting reading material…" the Shiranui said.

Asuma cracked a lopsided smirk. "Oh yeah, it's riveting stuff."

The senbon winked again. Once. Twice. Then it shot across the room, struck sparks off the chrome of a gooseneck lamp and redirected the beam of light towards a filing cabinet at the other end of the room.

Asuma grunted. "Show off."

Genma stepped out from the shadows, moving over to the cabinet he'd literally highlighted. "Raidō says your brat-pack's all signed up. They've come a long way."

"Yeah."

"Heard Shikamaru turned down the Feudal Lord's offer."

Asuma hummed, reserving comment. Contrary to whatever jokes rippled through the Jōnin ranks about his 'Team 10' pride, he didn't like talking about his students. Kakashi was the only one he exchanged notes with and even then said notes underwent strict edits to avoid too much red pen. If
his Team were going to come under anyone's scrutiny then it would be his alone.

*Unless I'm drunk and shooting my mouth off...*

He winced at the massive blanks in his brain.

What the hell had he said to Kakashi about Shikamaru anyway? He remembered snippets of more sober dialogue, but he was pretty sure that as the saké flowed, so did the unadulterated truth towards the end of the night. What made it more complicated was that Genma had been there during the unadulterated part. And as for the topic of their drunken musings, it could have been anything.

Hell, he could have *said* anything.

*Shit.*

Hopefully, they'd all been too wasted to recall much of what had been spilled or sloshed around in slurred conversation. Rubbing at his eyes, Asuma took a moment to regroup his thoughts and focus them back on the information at hand.

*Focus.*

Both Jōnin settled into their respective tasks and into respectful silence.

Time was marked only by the soft clink of Genma's teeth grinding on steel.

A good hour must have passed by the time Asuma finished scanning the side-op listings. A record that detailed any second-leg missions attached to the Chūnin exams in Kusagakure. It wasn't unusual for that to happen. The Chūnin exams presented ample opportunities for villages to rake in extra ryō by taking on side-op missions offered by Daimyo and bigwigs.

But he could find nothing relating to Shikamaru being assigned a mission.

*There has to be something here...*

The Sarutobi frowned. He'd breezed over these reports two years ago when he'd first tried to unravel the mystery. What he was doing now was fine-combing the carbon-copy details he'd rushed through at the time.

*I missed something...I know I missed something...*

He'd never been able to shake the feeling that information had been doctored or omitted from the reports. At the time he'd chalked it up to desperation, grasping at any clue or possibility that would take the edge off feeling so damned useless.

If he'd had someone to blame it might have made it easier.

He'd even grilled the team that had accompanied Shikamaru at the time, but no one had been able to shed light on what had happened. No hour-by-hour account of exactly where Shikamaru had been at all times, but it wasn't like that was expected of Chūnin level shinobi.

The Tokubetsu Jōnin in charge hadn't appreciated the interrogation.

"*You expected me to play babysitter to the kid? He didn't even want the damned promotion or the placement to begin with. The hell's your problem, Sarutobi? Empty nest syndrome? Get over it and get the fuck out of my face."*
Not feeling heard, Asuma's fist had seen fit to do the talking after that.

And *damn* he'd had himself one *hell* of a non-verbal conversation.

The Tokujō had ended up in the hospital and Asuma had earned himself a hot seat that made him think the guy sucking food through a straw had got the better deal.

Tsunade had torn into him like a tigress.

She'd threatened suspension of duty, demotion and a psych-evaluation to boot. But worse than any of this, she'd pulled up enough painful reminders of his heritage to leave him bleeding at the roots of a lost sense of identity he'd never felt at peace with. He'd avoided his father's grave for the full week it had taken him to stop fuming and hurting behind his fierce grins and false smiles.

What made it all so pathetic was that he hadn't gained a damned thing.

No answers from between the bloody gaps in the Tokujō's teeth.

Asuma had been left to draw his own conclusions – which had taken him back to a blank drawing board with nothing but a nauseating gut-feeling. A feeling he couldn't shake but had no solid evidence to support.

Just a loose paper trail of faded-out copies.

But as Asuma engrossed himself in re-reading these carbon-copy reports, he began to pick up the threads of old doubts he'd left unravelled two years ago, feeling them knot into balls of suspicion that rolled around his gut like rocks.

"Shit…" he hissed through his teeth.

Rubbing at the back of his neck, he straightened up from his hunched position and sank down into the chair, scouring his palms across his face, blinking hard to squint and refocus on the faded-out script.

He heard Genma wander over from where the Tokujō had been propped against a cabinet, scribbling notes.

He only looked up when Genma's shadow fell across the table.

The senbon glowed like heated steel between the Shiranui's thin lips, reflecting in his dark eyes. His gaze drifted over the official papers and he regarded Asuma's research with an expression of jaded disinterest he tended to set on most things. But when his eyes hit on the carbon-copies scattered to the side of the table, he shook his head.

"What?" Asuma asked, leaping on the chance to have someone else help him make sense of this mess.

"I didn't see you down here," Genma said, his voice flat, face void of expression.

His impassiveness left Asuma to interpret those words any number of ways. They didn't exactly translate to "I've got your back" but at least they didn't suggest Genma was going to stick a knife in Asuma's unsuspecting spine.

The Sarutobi spread his hands, forcing a grin. "Ah, me, I'm just doing some homework."

Genma shrugged, tucked his notes under his arm and turned to leave.
Asuma sighed, dropping his hands along with the act. "Genma."

His tone stopped the Tokujō short.

But Genma made no move to turn around.

A tense moment ticked between them and Asuma thought it would end with Genma at the door. Instead, the Shiranui glanced over his shoulder. Seeing a very slim window of opportunity, Asuma didn't hesitate to spin the sheet beneath his palm, twisting it to face the other man. He tapped his fingers atop the text.

"You remember this?" Asuma asked.

Genma craned his neck and cocked his head, scanning the information. "Hn. Didn't see that either."

Asuma frowned, watching the other ninja from beneath his brows. "Genma."

The Tokujō shrugged, slotting his hands into his pockets. "You wanna end up on the knife's edge of a demotion again? Be my guest. I'm at peace with my position."

"And your conscience?" Asuma growled. "You at peace with that too?"

Genma stared at the door. He didn't turn, but he didn't walk away either. Asuma took that as a cue to continue and he glanced down at the list of Jōnin that had accompanied the Chūnin candidates that year.

"You were there in Kusagakure two years ago."

"So?"

"So?" Asuma echoed incredulously, leaning back to pluck a cigarette from his pants pocket, dangling it from his lips. "The reports – official and otherwise – all state that our Chūnin got involved in three side-ops running simultaneously in Kusagakure during those exams. That true?"

Genma turned around. "If it's in the official report, then it's true."

Asuma shot him a 'my ass' expression.

Genma didn't blink.

"So explain this." Asuma smacked the back of his hand across the 'official' report. "Some dumb shit who didn't even write down his last name states he participated in all three missions."

Genma's brows drew together in a brief pinch. "What?"

"Yeah," Asuma dug out his lighter and lit the end of his cigarette, eyes glinting like brass chips. "Now unless he was having fun with shadow clones, I don't see how in hell that's possible."

Genma stepped over to re-examine the report, using his senbon as a pointer, eyes following across the script. Asuma waited for him to finish, already prepared for what came next.

"That's not what this report says," Genma argued without modulating his voice, sounding just as bored as he had to begin with. "That Chūnin, Naoki, signed up for one mission. You've been down here too long. Go get some air. You read it wrong."

Asuma raised his eyebrows in challenge and tipped his head towards the faded-out carbon-copy
sheets spread to one side. These were always attached to hand-written mission reports, serving as receipts kept in storage – and as backup just in case any reports went "missing".

"I didn't read these wrong," Asuma said on a breath of smoke, reaching across to tap the copies. "From what I can read of these, Naoki wrote out three separate reports detailing his involvement in each mission, but only one of them made it as his official statement. The statement you're reading now."

Despite his long pause, Genma's response was a short, "So?"

Asuma's eyes flashed. He shot to his feet with a growl, palms slamming onto the table, the legs of the metal chair screeching back across the linoleum.

"So it's bullshit!"

Genma's senbon flickered, darting side to side and up and down as his tongue manipulated the metal, like a needle on a Richter scale, measuring the turbulence in Asuma's voice.

"It's official."

"Official bullshit."

"No less official."

"Fuck that, Shiranui. It doesn't add up. Something's not right here."

Genma freed a hand from his pocket and pinched the edge of said 'official bullshit' report between forefinger and thumb, unwilling to leave even a fingerprint on this conspiracy. He held the paper up in Asuma's face.

"You see that big stamp, Sarutobi? The Hokage thinks otherwise."

Asuma smacked the paper aside with a slash of his hand. "I don't give a rat's ass what got the stamp of approval. And even putting that Naoki kid aside, I can't find a single mission report by Shikamaru. Carbon-copy or otherwise."

"Maybe he wasn't on any of those side-op missions."

"Then where was he?"

"Doing what he was supposed to do?" Genma returned, his half-mast gaze matching the bored drone of his words. "Watching the exams and taking mental notes in that photographic brain, instead of writing them down in a report like the rest of us."

"You've got proof he was there?"

"He signed the curfew sheet every morning, noon and night."

"With what? A tick? A nought and fucking cross?"

Genma's expression didn't change. "He signed it."

"Did you ever see him?" Asuma pushed, leaning across when Genma didn't answer, a dangerous edge biting into his voice. "Can you personally verify that he was there?"

Genma sucked on the thin metal, eyes hooded. He said nothing.
Asuma sneered. "Yeah, that's what I thought."

"Just because I didn't see him, doesn't mean he wasn't there."

"And yet not one of you bastards can tell me he was." Asuma crushed out his smoke against the table and took up the paper with the names of supervising Jōnin, fisting it in a crackle that sounded as electric as the tension in his voice. "Not one of you. And that makes two damn day's worth of time in which no one can confidently say where the hell he was."

Not a muscle twitched in Genma's face, but the senbon tipped down. "Did you ask him?"

"The hell do you think?"

Genma turned away from the lamplight and Asuma's inspection, dark hair framing his face in shadow. "I think you should let sleeping dogs lie."

"Oh some dogs are lying alright," Asuma snarled, eyes narrowing. "Never thought you'd be that kind of sonovabitch though."

Genma flicked his eyes up, the senbon following the movement, trained on Asuma's forehead. "Easy, Sarutobi."

"Yeah, that's how everyone likes it, right? Easy, clean, swept under the rug."

"You should know," Genma returned without bite, shrugging. "Or at least you used to. Back in the day when you didn't get involved in other people's personal trouble."

Asuma flinched. Even without the bite, the bluntness of that truth slammed straight into the root of his guilt, twisting it even deeper into his gut. He sucked air against the painful knot and shook his head.

"This is personal to me," he growled.

"It shouldn't be."

"They're my Team."

"Yeah, and if you go down this road, you'll lose them, your rank and your reputation." Genma paused here, like maybe he'd said too much. He kept a neutral expression, holding Asuma's gaze. "These paper trails are piss in the wind, Sarutobi. A dump of dead-ends. I'm advising you now to let this go."

From the look in Genma's eyes, it wasn't advice.

It was a warning.

Asuma's eyes widened and the air rushed out of his lungs. He felt shaken to the core, clammy and dizzy and on the verge of a dangerous reaction – until the shock took hold. It shot cold through his veins, paralysed his limbs.

The silence went on.

The cold sank deeper.

And the rage in his eyes chilled to a wounded look of betrayal.
"Shit," Asuma finally whispered, too gutted to be angry. "What the hell do you know about this, Genma?"

Genma drew a breath and leaned in, looking Asuma dead in the eye. "I know this conversation didn't happen. And if you care about that Nara kid, you'll let this go."

Asuma stared at Genma incomprehensively. "Did you know I'd come here?"

"I told you what I know."

"No, you haven't told me shit."

"But you told me enough."

"What?"

"Sorry, Asuma. I guess I hold my drink better than you do."

Asuma's eyes pinched. He searched the cool slate of the Shiranui's face for signs of the man he'd called his comrade – the man he'd called friend. He didn't know who the hell this stranger was, staring back at him through eyes that belonged behind an ANBU mask.

"Why?" he rasped.

Genma shook his head and for the first time, emotion registered in the barest tightening of his jaw. "I'm telling you, as your friend, to let this go."

Confusion poured through Asuma.

It left him aching and angry but too numb to act.

And Genma simply stood there, that damned senbon ticking from side to side like a clock hand counting seconds while time and silence marched dutifully along, letting go of moments to capture minutes.

Asuma knew all about letting go.

He'd done it all his life until he'd found the things worth holding onto.

And there's no way in hell I'm letting this go... I can't...

Asuma's jaw tightened, the brass hue of his eyes glittering with promise.

Not again.

Genma read the answer in Asuma's face. But the Shiranui didn't look surprised or disappointed. Rather, the Tokujō looked over Asuma's shoulder. He fixed his gaze on a large map pinned above a row of cabinets, one corner peeling off the wall along with the yellowed plaster. It charted the entire Land of Fire and all the lands beyond its borders.

"You're wasting your time, Asuma," Genma murmured.

"Get out," Asuma husked, pressing his hands to the table, bracing himself against the sensation of the world rocking beneath his feet. "Get the fuck outta here before I lose it."

"You'll have more to lose if you don't drop this."
"I'll fucking drop you."

Genma's senbon flew.

It shot past Asuma's cheek, grazed his ear and thudded into the wall behind him.

Asuma snapped his head up, eyes blazing. "Oh that tears it."

He upturned the table so fast and so violently it crashed into the wall and cracked down the centre. Papers sailed, boxes toppled and lamps rolled, beams of light tumbling across floor, glaring off metal cabinets.

Genma reached with both hands to pull his senbons.

Asuma only had one weapon to pull.

And he pulled it faster – with a hiss of screaming metal and a hum of glowing chakra.

The room flashed blue.

By the time the light banked, Asuma had his trench knife drawn horizontally between them. The force of his chakra spun wild along its jagged teeth, extending its reach until the glowing and serrated edge rested a twitch away from Genma's throat.

"You're gonna tell me why," Asuma snarled.

The Shiranui glanced down, his eyes shining blue in the light emanating from the weapon. Lips tight, he raised his chin in an attempt to escape chakra burn, not to be defiant. He didn't even taunt or threaten, just stood there.

Asuma's hand shook. "WHY!"

Genma said nothing, but something flickered across his eyes. It could've been the play of light or a play for time. Something small to keep Asuma guessing. A bluff before the bullshit.

Asuma wanted to believe it was something more.


But as Genma held his stare, he offered none of these things – just his throat.

In that second Asuma wanted to slit it. Wanted the truth to spill out in a bloody torrent, red and indelible and definite. Something real and concrete. Not the carbon-copy crap he'd been sifting through with desperation and growing dread.

God…how deep does this go?

Or worse than that - how high up? How corrupt or untouchable if Genma was willing to play 'good dog' for the sake of letting the sleeping ones lie.

"Tell me something," Asuma growled.

"I've got nothing to tell."

"Will you still feel that way with my chakra sawing through your throat?"
Genma sighed through his nose, never taking his eyes from Asuma's. "Who's to say? I sure won't be talking, will I?"

"Just screaming," Asuma threatened, his restraint so close to snapping that veins and sinew stood out like wires along his arms, trying to holding him back.

Genma glanced down at the glowing trench knife, then back up. "Do what you have to do."

"Why? Is that what you're doing?"

"Always."

Asuma's jaw shuddered and clenched, his anger warring with his reason. For just a moment he almost leaned in, for just a horrible and hurting moment, he almost let the razor edge of his chakra slit the Tokujō's throat.

**FUCK!**

Asuma's chakra cut out like a blown fuse.

He spun with a tortured roar, slamming his trench knife through the top of a cabinet to wedge in the cold steel rather than Genna's skull. Had his chakra still been flowing the weapon would've cut right through the metal, bisecting the cabinet like a knife through butter.

He wheeled back towards Genma, eyes fierce, voice shaking. "You stay the hell away from me until I'm done wanting to rip you apart."

Genma gazed for a long moment then turned towards the door. "You won't find any answers here, Asuma."

Asuma stared at Genma's back and felt like a knife was already lodged in his own. Bile crawled up his throat. Squeezing his eyes shut, he jammed shaking hands at his thighs and bowed his head, breathing hard through his nose.

Genma stopped by the door. "Some advice on where you should look from now on? Over your shoulder might be a good place to start."

Asuma's eyes shot open and his head came up, teeth bared.

But Genma was gone.

Just the echo of the Shiranui's words filled the empty doorway.

Bitter, betraying words.

A threat that weighed heavier and heavier on Asuma's head, boring down on him until it hit his gut. And the second it hit him there, the words began to change their meaning...changing it from a threat into something else entirely...something that had his expression crumbling from rage into realisation.

He drew a sharp breath, ignored Genma's warning and took the man's advice.

He looked over his shoulder, eyes rounding in shock.

*Well shit.*
There it was. The literal needle in the haystack.

Genma's senbon.

It winked at him from the wall, glowing like a thin beacon in the darkness, pointing the way. It had struck a location on the map...and it wasn't Kusagakure.
Chapter 15

The sun spread its glow over Konoha like melted butter, soft and warm. It took the edge off the autumn chill, spilling down from a cloudless electric blue sky that could've belonged to a summer's day.

Against this stretch of clear sky an eagle sailed on golden wings – waiting.

Neji tilted his head up, bathing the strong angles of his face in sunlight. The canopies rustled, red leaves shivering, casting dappled patches of shadow-play across the Hyūga's eyelids. He leaned back against the corrugated bark of the tree, arms folded and neck arched into the sun's kiss, soaking in the warmth while he waited.

High above, Hibari's eagle let out a soft cry.

Neji slipped his eyes open and watched the bird swoop low, broad wings catching the sunlight. It vanished into a cluster of large red maples. The trees stood bunched like a giant bouquet to one side of the village gates, a blend of crimson and scarlet. Neji gazed without focus at the red hues, until a flash caught his attention, drawing his gaze down from the star-shaped leaves.

The Hyūga's eyes widened a fraction.

Amidst the patchwork of shadow and foliage, the jagged edge of Hibari's sword gleamed like a giant fang, the razor edges winking in the sunlight. The blade lay propped against the trunk of the tree, unseen but for the glow of steel betraying its position.

The Tsubasa was no-where to be seen.

Neji cocked his head, frowning. It wasn't like Hibari to abandon the weapon. The Hyūga debated the wisdom of approaching and took the surveillance method, activating his dōjutsu. What he gleaned through the mesh of leaves and branches shouldn't have surprised him really. He might have taken a cursory glance to check for camera lurking troublemakers but sensed he was the only one privy to the moment.

It certainly explained a lot.

Sakura stood with her back to the tree, palms pressed flat against the rough bark. Hibari stood leaning over her, head bent, gazing through his lashes, his presence holding her there in place of his arms. He stood just shy of touching her, one forearm braced above her head, the other hand set at his hip, leaving an exit if she wanted to slip away.

He was speaking, lips lacing a faint smile.

Sakura's gaze was fixed on his chest, lip caught between her teeth. She didn't reply to whatever Hibari said and instead, reached up to dip her fingers into the neckline of his mesh vest. She tugged out a length of silver-ball chain and brushed her thumb over two wing-shaped pendants hanging from the end.

Neji recognised them instantly, well aware that one belonged to the Tsubasa's dead sister. Guilt twisted its rusted barb into his chest. His breath cut off sharply.

_Gods, if only..._
If only what? If only he'd acted on instinct rather than orders? If only he'd stopped to assess rather than assume? If only he'd questioned the mission rather than executed it? The 'if only' and 'what if's' were countless and consuming questions. Such questions had no place in a ninja's conscience; or in the mind of anyone seeking ANBU.

*Will that be the cost? My conscience?*

*"It costs nothing. Because you have nothing. You take that path when you have nothing to lose."*

Kakashi's words had inspired a cold tightening in Neji's gut, a black grip that hadn't eased. Perhaps that had been Kakashi's intention, to sow the seed of doubt and hope something took root in Neji's mind. Too bad such advice would merely wither on the vine of warning.

*I will make ANBU, one way or another. I will be free. This choice is my freedom.*

Neji let out the breath he'd been holding, his gaze shifting away from the Tsubasa's winged pendants.

Sakura was speaking now, shaking her head. Whatever she was saying had Hibari's brows drawing together. He lifted a hand to touch her cheek, brushing pink strands behind her ear. The gesture seemed idle and innocent, but the look in Hibari's eyes when Sakura glanced up at him was far from either.

The kunoichi dodged his gaze, skittish and unsure.

She tucked the pendants back into Hibari's vest, her fingertips following along his collarbone then smoothing down to the centre of his chest, curling into the mesh vest.

Hibari hooked a knuckle under her chin and leaned down.

Neji averted his gaze, deactivating his Byakugan.

Provided Sakura wasn't planning to elope, there was no reason to judge or concern himself with Hibari's advances towards the young kunoichi. After the purple shiners she'd given Kiba and Naruto, she was more than capable of handling herself.

"Neji-senpai!"

Neji turned his head, eyes shuttered against the glare of sunlight. It white-washed the stone apron that circled the village's gates and spilled warmly across a jigsaw of cobbled pavement. The scuff of running feet echoed off the slabs.

"Neji-senpai!"

The Hyūga's gaze zeroed in on a strip of blue scarf sailing along behind the running Genin. Konohamaru's hitai-ate gleamed, but brighter still was the smile the young Sarutobi wore.

Neji shook his head, amusement twitching the corner of his mouth.

*Abundantly spirited…*

He had to wonder whether Naruto's influence with this youngster was bordering on infectious. If it wasn't some lewd and inappropriate ninjutsu it was bright grins that Neji never knew how to respond to. He rivalled the sunny look with a cool stare, inclining his head.

"Konohamaru," he greeted mildly, noting Moegi and Udon traipsing along at a distance.
"Aww man, I wanted to beat you to the gates," Konohamaru puffed, skidding to a halt along the stones, heaving a lungful of air. A little orange bird flitted around his head, attempting to perch on his shoulder. "Has Hibari-san left?"

Neji shook his head, wondering how economical he'd have to get with the truth. Fortunately, Konohamaru's less than subtle announcement pulled the Tsubasa from the shadows of the trees. Sakura followed a few paces behind, smoothing her fingers through her hair. The scrape of the Tsubasa's massive blade drew sparks across the stone.

Konohamaru whipped about, grinning. "Hibari-san!"

Hibari's grey gaze drifted down and he gave a half-smile, shifting his weight to heft his blade and secure it at his back. "Well how's that for special treatment? I get a send-off from the future Nanadaime Hokage."

Neji arched a brow. "Nanadaime?"

Konohamaru thrust his arm back, giving Neji the thumb's up without turning. "Yup! Naruto-niichan is gonna be the Sixth, but you can bet your butt that I'm next in line after I beat him!"

Neji eyed Konohamaru with a look of ingrained scepticism. A look he set on anyone harbouring this much hot air. He wondered whether the Genin's indomitable sense of destiny stemmed from pride relating to his Sarutobi heritage or from his deep-seated idolization of Naruto. Perhaps Konohamaru's motive didn't matter; he clearly believed in attaining his goal, if the fire in his young eyes was anything to go by.

Neji's eyes had been cold at that age, as he imagined Hibari's to have been.

He glanced at the redhead, curious as to whether his scepticism was shared. Oddly enough, the Tsubasa's jaded, slate-grey eyes brightened a little, the ash-coloured flecks catching a spark.

"Beat him, huh? I'll bet a big sword on it," Hibari said.

"Cool!" Konohamaru bounced on the balls of his feet, stabbing his finger at the Tsubasa's jagged blade. "Whoa! Like that!"

"Bigger," Hibari promised, a wry smirk tugging at his lips. "And better for swinging at child-beating Suna ladies with big fans."

Sakura elbowed Hibari, glaring without menace. "You're still fixed on that? Would you drop this thing with Temari already?"

Hibari looked across, humour scudding across his grey eyes. "I'm flattered by this public display of jealousy, Sakura. And they say romance is dead."

Sakura's eyes flared wide, cheeks dusted with pink.

Konohamaru laughed. "Nice!"

Neji pressed his lips, containing his amusement with enviable poise.

Blushing scarlet, Sakura crossed rigid arms over her chest, green eyes sharper than thorns and stabbing wordless venom at Hibari. It had absolutely no effect on the Tsubasa. Hibari's gaze never wavered and he made no attempt to water down the heat in his eyes, which only threw flames on her flustered state.
Sakura sniffed and thrust her chin to a mulish angle. "You're an irredeemable ass."

Hibari inclined his head. "All part of my charm."

Sakura rolled her eyes, shifting position irately, but her hip cocked towards him rather than away. An unconscious signal. 

*Interesting*...

Neji glanced between them, curious at this exchange, cross-referencing it with the one he'd glimpsed a short moment before. He didn't have time to consider the nature of how this would benefit or botch the recent Peace Treaty.

*Provided Naruto doesn't find out, it shouldn't matter either way...*

Konohamaru broke into the moment with a chuckle, dodging Sakura's glare by ducking his head down, shoulders raised and hands held up in surrender. He backpedalled towards his teammates, not willing to risk a wallop if he turned his back.

"See ya, Hibari-san! Thanks for the birds!" Konohamaru waved, catching up with his friends to head back into the village, adjusting his hitai-ate when the small orange bird nestled on his head. "Naruto-niichan is gonna freak!"

"He already did," Sakura muttered beneath her breath, shaking her head. "And Kiba was dancing with them."

Neji adopted a nonplussed expression, catching Sakura's eye with a quirk of his brow.

Sakura rolled her eyes. "Don't ask."

Neji shook his head at the mental image, watching the young Genin team scamper off, stealing a glance at the puff of orange feathers chasing after Konohamaru. "Any other parting gifts, Tsubasa?"

Hibari glanced at Sakura, but stepped towards Neji, extending his hand. "Just an open invitation to drop by whenever you Leaf shinobi are around my neck of the woods."

Neji shook the Tsubasa's hand. "We will. Travel safe, Hibari. Keep to higher ground."

Hibari took his meaning and glanced skyward. "Good thing I've got eyes above me at all times. If I see any suspicious activity close to your borders I'll be sure to send word and garner whatever information I can."

"Appreciated." Neji cast a grim look along the open road leading out of the village. "But like Tsunade-sama warned, keep a wide berth of this enemy."

"Very wide," Sakura hastened to add, shooting the redhead a look. "Which means more than an arm's length, Hibari."

"Having a big sword helps with that," Hibari joked without smiling.

Sakura frowned. "Seriously, don't do anything reckless. Our information on the Akatsuki is sketchy at best. You could come up against anything."

"Yeah, the joy of S-rank criminals, huh?" Hibari muttered, shrugging off the concern, though his brow furrowed in consideration. "I hear they're quite the motley crew."
Neji nodded. "With a vast range of abilities. After what they did to the Kazekage, we can't afford to underestimate them."

Honestly, Neji wondered whether they could even begin to estimate them at all. He frowned, recalling Shikamaru's earlier words.

"It's like doing a puzzle without having the pieces."

And those pieces were already moving, charting their way across the Land of Fire. The game was in motion. The hour glass had been tipped on its head and time was gaining an ever-increasing momentum. With every passing hour, they seemed closer to running on double time; maybe even borrowed time.

"Can't stop the clock, right?"

Neji's gaze strayed back towards the village. "Hibari?"

The redhead lifted his brows in query.


"That bad, hnm?"

Neji set his jaw, but his silence confirmed what was already apparent. He imagined Shikamaru already had all the negative outcomes circled in mental red pen.

I don't envy you, Nara…

All three shinobi were quiet for a moment, feeling the play of wind like a gust of foreboding. Red leaves scraped across the stone, skittering into the village, bloody omens that swirled and crackled in the currents of a fickle breeze. And yet the sun shone on, bright and clear, appalling in its indifference to the darkening mood.

"Tsubasa," Neji eventually spoke, looking across. "You once said that our alliance is more than ink on parchment."

"I meant it."

"And should the time come when we call on you to prove it?"

Hibari tilted his head like he'd misheard, grey eyes narrowing. "You're already predicting war?"

Neji sighed through his nose, wondering whether such fatalistic thinking would encourage a self-fulfilling prophecy. But if fate continued on in her capricious manner, she wasn't to be underestimated either.

The Akatsuki aren't going to stop at the last Jinchūriki…

Neji could sense it in his gut. There were more menacing moves being made behind the scenes – a bigger game, with bigger players. And these fractious political gambles left them in the dark with only prediction as the light – and they'd need to be prepared for anything.

"Nothing can be ruled out at this stage," Neji eventually replied. "I won't lie to you, Tsubasa. But Hanegakure signed this alliance in hopes for peace, not for aiding us in war."

Hibari let out a quiet breath, grey eyes casting skyward again, fixing on the lazy orbit of his eagle.
The bird let out a shrill cry, sailing into a free-fall before rising again on a fresh current, making a lazy-eight path through the clear skies. Hibari's frown etched a little deeper.

"Hanegakure's elders may have signed in ink, but I've signed on in blood," Hibari murmured. "And those contracts are the only ones that matter to me."

Sakura shook her head, watching him out the corner of her eye. "Your people are still recovering from their own civil war."

Hibari shrugged. "I'm a Tokujō commander. I'm bred for war."

"That's not an excuse to jump headfirst into another battle," Sakura argued, half-turning, her words toeing a thin line between concern and anger. "And Tokujō commander or not, that's not why they elected you as their Peace Ambassador, was it?"

Hibari's features cooled but his eyes heated. He reached back to grip the hilt of his blade, as if her statement had impugned his integrity. "And I'll preserve that peace by fighting for it."

"But—"

"The council want to muzzle me for biting too hard but sometimes that's what is needed to keep the people safe."

Neji raised his brows at the edge in Hibari's voice, pale eyes on the sword, though he knew the other ninja wasn't going to use it. "Sakura has a point. Regardless of your honest motives, Hibari, I doubt your council would agree to involvement in an open war."

"Then I'll have to brush up on my non-violent persuasive skills, won't I?"

Sakura shot him a look. "And get exiled."

"Well…" Hibari smirked dryly, not looking at her. "Wouldn't be the first time."

Sakura stiffened, her slim fingers digging into the pale flesh of her arms. Neji turned his head, trying to read her, but Sakura's hair had already swung down to obscure her face. The Hyūga made a mental note of her strange reaction, his focus drifting between them before settling on Hibari. The Tsubasa was watching Sakura closely now, making no effort to disguise his stare.

Neji spoke up after a moment. "Becoming a nukenin won't help anyone, Tsubasa."

A muscle in Hibari's jaw pulsed, but his hand fell away from his blade. He looked across at Neji, his grey eyes hot as tempered steel. "If you call on Hanegakure, our shinobi will be there. If the council refuses, then I will be there with those loyal to me. Either way, I'll honour my word."

Neji took a moment to absorb the pledge, letting time and silence stretch as he searched the stern lines of Hibari's face, seeing past the embers of the redhead's hot-temper to what was fuelling the fire of his conviction.

Justice.

That was Hibari's credo, after all. Neji understood that word in its black and white context and even in all its shades of grey; what with the injustices he'd suffered most of his life. Gods, even Naruto was a victim of such discrimination, surrounded by a mass of eyes that burned with judgement, feeling justified in the blackest of ways. But justice was still a value worth fighting for. Neji might have considered it…if freedom didn't take precedence.
"I'll remember that. Take care, Tsubasa," Neji said.

Hibari nodded, but his gaze was back on Sakura. The fire in his eyes had banked to something softer. The warmth in his look melted the frown from Sakura's face and pulled colour back to her cheeks. She looked away, then back at him, darting glances that communicated just as much – if not more – than his steady stare.

"Sakura," Hibari said by way of farewell, inclining his head.

The kunoichi fanned her fingers across her arms, rubbing them with a sigh. "Goodbye, Hibari," she said softly.

Hibari smiled, touched a knuckle to his hitai-ate and tipped his brow to her. The kunoichi's eyes gentled and she smiled, nodding. The gesture obviously held some kind of significance for them.

Neji made no attempt to interpret anything further from their non-verbal signals, though he did recognise the next gesture the Tsubasa made when Hibari turned to face him.

The redhead touched his right hand above his heart and curved his palm towards the sky. "Fly free, Hyūga."

Neji considered the blessing, his opal gaze straying to the large eagle soaring on ahead down the open road. As if sensing she had an audience, the bird let out a shrill cry, golden wings fanning wide, scaling higher until her silhouette stole across the sun.

_Fly free…?_

Neji blinked slowly.

_One day…_

The bird timed it.

The serial, sadistic, dive-bombing little shit.

It must have been waiting in the damned wings, beady eyes calculating every step until Shikamaru came into range. Then it plummeted, swooping down to graze its talons through the spiky ponytail with a high screech.

Shikamaru wheeled around, turning a complete circle. "Crazy fucking bird!"

The falcon let out a soft 'kee', whirling above him in a fancy loop. Shikamaru knew this game well enough to know it was far from over. He eyed his house, guessed the trajectory the bird would dive at and estimated how many ways he could avoid the playful attack. There was usually a pattern in its movements – and Shikamaru took no pride whatsoever in having worked that out.

_Ugh. So stupid._

He slung his knapsack over one shoulder and braced his right foot forward, squinting up at the feathered menace. "You eat my Shogi pieces, claw up my friends, ransack my room and chase me around – what the hell do you want!"

The falcon sailed another calculated ring above his head, no doubt preparing for the next assault. It answered his shout with its standard shrill screech. Shikamaru shook his head, resigning himself to the inevitable.
A mental count of three and he feigned a dash to his right only to spring left off his right foot, launching into a dead run towards his house.

The falcon shot after him like an arrow.

Shikamaru clocked the bird's shadow and veered to kick off the base of a large sandstone statue of Kwan Yin. He butterfly-flipped over the koi pond and avoided the falcon's swoop, landing in a neat crouch on the porch. Barking out a hoarse laugh of triumph, the shadow-nin glanced over his shoulder.

"You lose, you crazy…" Shikamaru trailed off, eyes widening.

The falcon took a slingshot spin around the Kwan Yin statue, dispensing swift retribution on the stone goddess before Shikamaru could even blink back the shock.

"NO!"

The bird's talons cracked into the sandstone and gouged across the statue's smooth face, marring the Goddess of Mercy without a drop of remorse.

Oh...

"SHIT!" Shikamaru shot to his feet, dropping his knapsack, waving his arm around.

Unrepentant, the bird took to the skies, soaring beyond reach and reproach, ignoring the curses that shot from Shikamaru's mouth in a rapid-fire stream.

"Dammit!"

The shadow-nin hopped off the porch and jogged over to the statue, his voice cutting off though his lips still moved to frame silent insults, as if profanity might offend the precious and sorely mistreated statue.

Little late for that...

Shikamaru's expression pulled into a grimace. He lifted a hand to cup the goddess's stone cheek, brushing his thumb over the scratches. The grooves weren't too deep, but Shikamaru knew his mother would spot them, magnify them and blow them out of proportion.

He winced, shaking his head. "Stupid bird."

Like a bizarre warp in perception, the statue's smile seemed to morph before his eyes, those pale lips tucked up like he'd amused the goddess in some small and endearing way. Shikamaru shook his head, brushed the dust from the scratches and traced his fingers over the delicate features.

It occurred to him then that he'd never actually taken the time to study the statue before. His mother had installed it after the death of the Sandaime. The purpose? Shikamaru could only guess at it, never having delved further; never having wanted to.

"Not sure if I believe in gods…" Shikamaru thought aloud.

The idea of gods came with the risk of devils, demons and all those dark things that gained a grotesque and almost gargoyle definition in his dreams. He stroked his hand down and touched the tips of his fingers against the lip of the stone vase that the goddess cradled in her left hand.
Symbolic of the 'cup that runneth over' but never ran dry; the well of unconditional love and compassion that Kwan Yin was said to pour into and onto the world.

Shikamaru gazed at the statues smiling eyes, his own pinched by a sudden emotion he couldn't have named. "Can't wash everything away, right?" he whispered.

No answers in that enigmatic smile. No divine message to construe from the carved expression no matter how hard he searched it.

*Troublesome woman…*

He smiled a small, embarrassed smile and slotted his hands into his pockets with a grunt, feeling a little foolish. He wasn't one to give his brain over easily or willingly to those kinds of thoughts. They didn't have any bearing on reality, so why bother?

*I don't get it…*

And oddly enough, there was something comforting in that. Because it was one more thing he didn't need to figure out – but could still feel.

Damn if that didn't sound familiar.

Tilting his head, Shikamaru continued to gaze at the statue, pondering the mystery in the goddess's curved lips. He didn't notice his mother standing by the window, wearing the same subtle smile.

"That *bitch.*"

He hissed the words out, but got no reaction.

He *wanted* a fucking reaction.

Oh he'd got one hell of a reaction earlier. She'd screamed so pretty. But pretty didn't cut it. He wanted the fear to *howl.* To open those jaws so wide he could see down the gullet and into the soul. He wanted to gorge himself on that fear, smell it in sweat, see it in tears and taste it in blood. A holy feast.

The kunoichi kitten hadn't been scared *enough.*

*Bitch…*

Fear made torture musical. When he was conducting the ceremony he wanted to feel the music in his bones, rattling and radiating outwards with the pain. He wanted the arms outstretched, head thrown back, preacher-fever kind of shit. A zealot's high. Mayhem wasn't a good performance unless it had some of that animal keening and screaming thrown in.

*Ecstasy.*

It *should* have been. But he hadn't hit nirvana. He'd fallen just short of it. The bitch had promised him heaven but only taken him to the pearly gates. Then she'd started screaming to God. To *GOD.* What the hell? That was like screaming out another man's name during sex. Talk about an anti-fucking-climax.

"Biiitch."

"Shut up," the figure walking ahead of him intoned, the voice deep and guttural, resounding like
Finally! A reaction. Yeesh, talking to this prick was like having a conversation with the walking dead. Though come to think of it, his partner had that weird sort of mummified dress-sense going on. He didn't like that he couldn't see the bastard's face; felt it gave the guy some kind of mystery edge. He didn't like mysteries. All that messy mental shit gave him a headache. He liked life clean cut. Death, however, was another matter.

"Aww, don't be all pissy just 'cause I whacked her before you could."

"I could have whacked several people on my hit-list in the time it took you to finish the job. Your ritual bullshit costs me more than time."

"Man, you really grind my gears with all your blaspheming, you know that?" Violet eyes flashed with fanatical fire and thin lips pulled into a sneer. "Your money excuse for killin' is gonna stand up about as good as a dead man's dick when you meet your Maker. Judgement will fall. You're goin' straight to hell. Money is a cardinal sin!"

Silence.

His partner stopped. But it wasn't to react. It was to consult the large map in his hands. The navigating man tilted his wrists, turned right and headed up a steep path that hugged the side of a mountain. Or more accurately, a massive range of hell-hewn rock that stretched its geographical tit so high one couldn't even see the fucking peak.

Nature was the biggest bitch of them all.

"No fucking way, MORE stairs!"

"Shut your mouth before I stitch it, Hidan."

Hidan scowled with all the petulance of a tantrum-prone child and glared mental daggers at the other shinobi. "Tch. Inconsiderate ass."

The violet-eyed Akatsuki combed his fingers through slick, silver hair and tipped his head back, sighing long and loud. He gazed up at the cloudless sky, squinting at a golden eagle too far out of range to bother attacking. That sucked. He was itching to rough up anything that'd squeal, shriek or scream. So long as he could kill it. None of this half-cocked bullshit.

*Damned Jinchūrikis.*

Better dead and delivered than half-alive. That was just wrong. Sighing, Hidan hefted his triple-bladed scythe and stretched out a kink in his neck.

Then he began to climb.

The path was tiered but rugged, the trail increasingly steep with the surrounding rock hurling itself up towards the sky. Hidan felt sweat glistening on his body, stinging the deep gouges in his back.

*Feisty cat.*

Boy had that two-tailed kitty had claws. Big, fuck-off, Tailed Beast claws. He didn't mind the pain, just didn't like that she couldn't share it with him. What a waste. This thought needled him like a splinter in his heel, driving deeper as he scaled the mountain behind Kakuzu. His irritation pervaded everything, the dust catching in his throat, the grit grinding beneath his feet, the rustle of
Kakuzu consulting that stupid map.

_Ugh. When are we gonna see some action?_

Hidan gnashed his teeth and stroked his tongue around the inside of his mouth, searching for the lingering taste of that bitch's blood. He'd need a lot of blood. Leaving her half-alive left him deep in Jashin-sama's debt and the commandments were absolute.

"I just wanna rough something up," Hidan growled. "I'm starting to get bored of traipsing around like this."

Kakuzu ignored him.

_Prick._

They pressed on up the incline, cloaks billowing, sandals scuffing to kick up dust. Their shadows distorted into jagged angles across the rock, reaching on ahead of them. And then, like a bug buzzing at his ear, Hidan heard it. A deep, sonorous hum that shook the air and charged it, took control of it in a way that made his skin crawl.

_The fuck is that?_

The sound rumbled through his body, setting off vibrations in a gentle harmony. His expression soured with disgust. By the time the resonating hum lodged itself into every raw nerve in his body, his partner stopped walking.

"Yo, Kakuzu, you hearing it?" Hidan halted a pace behind. "The hell is that shit?"


"Eh?" Hidan wrinkled his nose. "Who's chanting?"

"We're here." Kakuzu slotted the map away, walking on ahead.

"Hey! Asshole," Hidan snarled, lengthening his strides to keep pace with his partner, the swish of his Akatsuki cloak lapping its black, fabric tongue across the blades of his scythe. "I said, who's chanting?"

He was about ready to bury his weapon into Kakuzu's antisocial ass for dragging his ass all the way up to the summit of Mount Waste of Time just to be stonewalled by the materialistic bastard. Which probably meant this was some crappy, filthy side-job again.

At least his rituals had a purpose and a point.

Kakuzu's little bounty hunting games just felt degrading.

Hidan opened his mouth to quote scripture only to snap his jaw shut with an audible click. The Jashinist's wide-eyed gaze cut straight past Kakuzu and across a long stretch of road, his violet orbs zeroing in on the massive Temple stationed at the end.

"Monks," Kakuzu grunted. "You should enjoy this."

Hidan's lips pulled into a sneer, his nostrils flaring.

"Monks…" he breathed out, scorn crusting his voice. "Infidels singing songs instead'a screaming…" He rolled his shoulder and the loud clang of his scythe struck the ground like a death
knoll. "That shit just don't fly in my religion."

And if there was one thing Hidan hated more than his victims calling out to their pathetic Gods to save them, it was monks believing that such Gods existed.

There was only one God.

One Lord.

Hidan reached up to catch the pendant around his neck, pressing the cold silver of the Jashinist amulet to his lips. He stroked the tip of his tongue along the triangle dominating the centre and tasted blood in the metal.

*Finally…*

He hefted his scythe back up. The Grim Reaper come to play.

Oh yes, he was going to enjoy this.

---

*Seduction is a clever mistress. She's coy and cunning. She knows how to woo a man's common sense into a web of confusion. She makes predators her prey. Renzo knows he's the fly wrapped up in the spider's silk. And this black widow makes him want to scream. But seduction doesn't scream, she whispers, breathy and hot. She leans down and purrs in his ear—*

"You seriously need to get laid."

Kakashi jumped, a curse slamming into his throat, right behind his heart. He shot a sharp look over the top of his *Icha Icha* book and the newspaper he'd used to cover it.

Asuma's eyes sparked devilishly, a thin stream of smoke curling up like whiskers around his Cheshire cat grin. "Caught with your pants down, Hatake?"

Kakashi fought hard not to broadcast his embarrassment and gathered his indignation into a cool glare, valiantly resisting the urge to dog-ear the page and skip to a less raunchy chapter.

"Mind if I cut in?" the Sarutobi drawled, already sliding into the opposite seat, hooking a finger over Kakashi's newspaper to tap the top of the *Icha Icha* book the copy-nin refused to snap shut. "Or were you at the good part?"

Kakashi stared back, deadpan and refusing to look guilty.

Asuma leaned back in his seat, casting a cursory glance around the dim lair of the establishment that looked more like a run-down tavern than a frequented bar. The lost-cause atmosphere of the dilapidated place made it a hot-spot for Konoha's hopeless drifters, a shelter for lost souls unwilling to check out of their personal purgatories.

Kakashi hadn't come here to do penance.

He'd come here, somewhat absurdly, for peace and guilty pleasures.

He'd ensconced himself in the furthest, darkest corner, taking a private booth seat. He'd hidden himself away in the hopes of avoiding the company of misanthropic patrons brooding over lost loves, lonely life and lessons learned too late.

*Much too late…*
While Kakashi carried the ghosts of all three of those regrets he didn't intend to ease the pain by dissecting his mistakes with the blunt razor of drunkenness. He preferred to bypass said drunkenness and the company of others just as well-versed in the art of fucking up and not forgetting it.

"Damn." Asuma let out a low whistle shot through with smoke. "People come in here looking for damaged dates and deep, existential conversation. You come in here to get your rocks off with dirty books. This is tragic, Hatake."

Not as tragic as the fact that Kakashi had spent the last couple of hours meticulously re-arranging his day around Naruto's hectic training just to make space for some alone time with his favourite series.

*I'm hiding in Niji next time…*

There was no way in any devil's hell that Asuma would set foot in the rainbow coloured coffee place. How the Sarutobi had managed to find him in this slit-your-wrists joint might have piqued Kakashi's curiosity under less embarrassing circumstances.

"Witness one Hatake Kakashi," Asuma began, assessing the other Jōnin like a criminal profiler. "Eligible bachelor, prize catch, nose-deep in porn, perusing filthy pages whilst giving off an impression of depth and damage that screams 'please fix me'. So hip. So cool. Ah, your bullshit smells like roses, Hatake."

Kakashi's lip quirked beneath his mask. "Guilty as charged."

"So take off the mask for your mug shot."

"It would be a greater crime, to break hearts with my looks."

"That ugly, huh?"

Kakashi chuckled quietly. "I doubt you came here for a verbal round, Asuma. Or a drinking round for that matter."

Asuma smirked, his eyes tracing along with the words *'LIFE BRUISES BUT LOVE BLEEDS'* etched crudely into the dark grain of the table. He swept his palm across the graffiti as if he could erase it.

"Yeah, I'm still recovering from the last round," Asuma muttered, not meeting Kakashi's gaze. His cigarette slid to the corner of his mouth, ash falling to pepper the stained wood. "I've got a question for you."

Kakashi arched a brow at the tension in Asuma's face. He considered responding but glanced down at his book, pretending to read. A beat later, he sensed Asuma's gaze swinging up again, studying him.

"Purely hypothetical question," the Sarutobi added, drumming his fingers at the edge of the table, turning sideways in his seat.

Kakashi didn't reply. He flipped a page instead, grey eye scanning lines without reading a word. This method tended to work on Asuma when the Sarutobi was feeling edgy. If his turn away from the table was any indication, he sure as hell didn't want to be here.

*Which makes it all the more important that he is…*
Therefore, the fastest way to get Asuma to talk was to dance around the edges of the topic with him before a skip and a hop – or a kick – directed the Sarutobi towards the point. It was a weird conversational tango, but Kakashi knew Asuma well enough to sense the Sarutobi appreciated him following the steps.

"Mnhmn," Kakashi hummed, giving an impression of barely-there attention.

"Census data for the village," Asuma said, taking a pull on his cigarette. "How'd one go about accessing that?"

Kakashi flipped another page. "One wouldn't."

"Wouldn't? Or couldn't?"

"Shouldn't."

"Right." Asuma turned a little more in his seat, tapping ash into a cracked and yellowed tray set beside a drink's menu. "So let's pretend I have a friend in need and you're a friend indeed."

Kakashi's brow quirked up. "Do you have a 'best friends forever' bracelet to go with that?"

"Ah come on, you love that corny shit."

"Let me guess," Kakashi began, flicking Asuma a glance. "This hypothetical friend of yours – and mine – isn't doing a demographics study."

Asuma flashed a grin that didn't warm his eyes. "Razor-sharp, aren't you?"

The edge in Asuma's voice upped the ante and Kakashi wasted no time in shifting conversational steps to kick rather than skip Asuma towards the point.

"Then allow me to cut straight to the chase," Kakashi returned, taking the lead in the verbal dance. "Who are you trying to find, Asuma?"

Asuma leaned back, jaw tightening. "Someone called, Naoki. Heard of him?"

"No. Clan name?"

"Who the fuck knows."

Kakashi gave him a dry look.

Asuma smirked mirthlessly around his cigarette, smoke misting out in a thin ribbon between his lips. "Yeah, that's the sad truth. Hence my detective work."

"You might be at a dead end. Information provided by census can never be used for investigative purposes without the express permission of the Hokage, Asuma."

"Rule books, school books, Hatake. Not scared of a little detention time."

"You'd get more than detention. Those rules are there for a reason."

Asuma acknowledged the breach with a tip of his head, raising a hand to ward off further warnings. "Just trying to track this guy down, nothing to worry about, just can't exactly ask around."

Kakashi was quiet, his gaze hovering for a moment. "Why can't you ask around?"
"Why?" Asuma snorted and rubbed at his mouth, attempting to disguise the sneer that pulled at his lips. "Might trip over some sleeping dogs."

Kakashi cocked his head, detecting more than just scorn in the deepening gravel of Asuma's voice. There was something shaky there. Thinking fast, Kakashi's eye clouded like smoky topaz then sharpened like flint, searching for clues in the other man's face.

"And what breed of dog are we talking about?" he asked.

"Wish I knew," Asuma muttered, taking a quick-hit pull on his cigarette, frowning. "Right now all I've got is a stray without a collar. Your guess is as good as mine – probably better."

Kakashi shook his head. "I don't know anyone by the name of Naoki. If I did, I would tell you."

Asuma paused and looked across, eyes deadly calm. "Would you?"

The question knocked Kakashi's head sideways but he remained pokerfaced despite his surprise. He set down the newspaper and book. "Why wouldn't I?"

For a long second Asuma held off answering, an odd aggression hanging in his aura like a palpable entity; dark and heavy. Tension buzzed, nerves twitched and tightened.

Kakashi blinked slowly. "Do you think I'm one of those sleeping dogs, Asuma?"

Just as fast as the frustration and suspicion had sprung to Asuma's eyes, it retreated, leaving him momentarily stumped. He shook his head, passing a hand across his face, running it back through his hair.

"Shit. I don't know..." Asuma sighed and his shoulders dropped only to roll back up, tense and agitated. "That might sound harsh. No offence intended, Kakashi."

"None taken."

If he felt anything about Asuma's suspicion towards him, it was a potent blend of curiosity and concern. Rather than offer any kind of reassurance, the copy-nin looked on in silence, measuring, monitoring, making more mental notes and checking them against the ones he already possessed.

This must be to do with Kurenai or his Team...

More than likely Shikamaru, given the recent vein of guilt that Asuma had opened up under the blunt knife of drunkenness. He'd spilt out a slur of words Kakashi hadn't stopped turning around in his mind.

"Damn kid didn't tell me. So I'm telling you I'm gonna find out who He is and then I'm gonna kill him..."

Was the 'He' who had harmed Shikamaru this mystery man that Asuma was trying to track down? The name Naoki didn't even pencil in on the register of names and faces Kakashi kept on instant recall. Identities were usually accessible at a moment's notice, but the copy-nin had nothing on this one. Not even a vague impression.

Naoki...

Kakashi clocked the name, attaching it like a paperclip of thought to the mental notes he needed to follow up on.
What's your story, Shikamaru?

Judging from Asuma's drunken rant, the kid had closed the book on whatever his said story was; he'd left it untitled, unread, maybe parts of it unrecorded.

No...there's always a trail...

And Asuma was obviously trying to uncover and follow it. Perhaps drunkenly confessing his concern and guilt had forced him to take the action he claimed he should've taken two years ago. Considering that, Kakashi couldn't help but feel the scabbed veins of his own guilt itching for a bleed.

Sasuke...

He shook his head against the image of the Uchiha's angry, coal-black eyes, burning with a fire of vengeance the copy-nin felt he should've tried harder to extinguish in his student.

But he hadn't tried harder.

Thus, he'd failed.

He'd been too cool, too controlled, too cerebral and too cut off – all of this compounded by the ghost of ANBU's mask resting atop the one he already wore.

So many mistakes...

And no second chances that would make a blind bit of difference. At least, that was Kakashi's thinking. Asuma might have shared this view on some level, but the Sarutobi possessed something Kakashi didn't: the willingness to hunt down and seize these second chances regardless of whether he felt he deserved them...and regardless of whether it would change anything.

Naruto's face eclipsed Sasuke's in the copy-nin's mind.

Just like Naruto...Asuma's will takes a unique kind of courage...to risk so much...knowing it might gain him nothing...and maybe cost him everything...

Kakashi remained quiet for a while, weighing all that he himself was and was not. And then he took the sum of those damaged parts and weighed them against all that he could offer and all that he couldn't afford to lose.

Those were dangerous scales and slippery slopes.

This has nothing to do with me...

And yet...

"Naoki..." Kakashi said again, glancing off to the side as he considered it. "Having no clan name could indicate ANBU."

"ANBU..." Asuma echoed, sounding dubious, almost reluctant.

"It's a possibility," Kakashi said, summoning a mental list of names from his time in the black-ops. "Yamato might know. I could ask..." he paused, looking over. "Unless you're worried he might be one of those sleeping dogs you want to let lie."

"I don't care about letting them lie," Asuma muttered, his jaw tightening so violently the tension
radiated down his neck, tendons pulsing. "I'll keep on kicking every damn dog until one of them yelps something useful."

"Keep on kicking?" Kakashi echoed, leaning into the table to invite confidence and offer support. A calculated move he made look casual. "Did you get bit, Asuma?"

Asuma's jaw turned to granite. He waved away the question, crushing out his cigarette in the tray. He made no move to reach for another one and Kakashi called himself ten kinds of fool for having asked his question.

Damn.

Asuma looked ready to cut and run, his gaze already shifting towards the exit. "Never mind. Thanks anyway, Kakashi. I appreciate it."

"Stay for a drink," Kakashi said, his tone casual, his intention anything but. He didn't like the rogue edge in Asuma's expression or the possibility of the other Jōnin doing something foolish. "I might even pay this time."

Asuma grunted something, his eyes wandering the bar. He hovered at the edge of his seat, frowning hard, his mind elsewhere. "You were ANBU…"

Kakashi sat perfectly still, but the breath he sucked in pulled hard at the fabric of his mask. He waited for an elaboration on those words, not sure whether there was accusation lurking in Asuma's tone.

The Sarutobi looked over. "Why did you quit?"

The feelings that question inspired were sudden, surprising and uncomfortably strong. Kakashi didn't answer. His hooded gaze remained trained on Asuma's face, giving away nothing of what roiled beneath the surface.

The Sarutobi offered a slim smile, a shadow of apology in his eyes. "Forget I asked that."

Kakashi shrugged. "I'm sure you could ask more dangerous questions."

"I could," Asuma admitted, turning back in his seat again.

Kakashi managed not to look relieved. A slim window of opportunity had opened up again – one that he'd have to slip through before Asuma locked down on the topic completely. If he could keep the other Jōnin talking just long enough to bring the blurry clues into focus.

"So ask," Kakashi said, letting the words hang.

Asuma continued to look askance at the copy-nin, stuck at the edge of suspicion. "I get the feeling this is gonna be an 'all kiss and no tell'."

"You're not my type."

"You're not funny."

"I can't guarantee I'll have the answers. But you have nothing to lose by asking."

"Yeah? How would you know?"

"I don't, but neither do you otherwise you wouldn't be here," Kakashi said, giving Asuma a long,
level stare that the Sarutobi returned. "Though it seems that whoever you asked last gave you a kick in the teeth for opening your mouth – am I right?"

Asuma's jaw hardened again, as if in memory of that figurative kick. He let out a hot breath and stared hard at the ash tray stationed between them, clearly contemplating a cigarette.

He didn't light one.

Kakashi eased back in his seat, sensing he'd cut deep enough with those words to come close to a vein. "Asuma, what ha—"

"Genma."

Kakashi's expression froze and his stream of calculated thought stopped completely, like breath cutting off. "Genma…?"

Asuma pinned him with a flat look. "Well, I was working more of a 'you've got to be shitting me' expression myself, but it's kind of hard to tell with you."

Kakashi blinked from his blank stare, cocking his head. "Genma?"

"Well done, Hatake, want me to write it down for you? He even has a last name."

The sarcasm snapped Kakashi back, allowing the copy-nin to gather his thoughts before they rushed down all the mental routes without a map. "You asked him about accessing census data?"

"No, I asked him if he knew this Naoki guy." Asuma shook his head in response to Kakashi's questioning look. "Well I wouldn't still be digging up dirt if he'd come clean, would I?"

"You think he knows?"

"I know he does," Asuma corrected without a shred of hesitation.

"But he didn't volunteer this information," Kakashi surmised.

"Delicately put," Asuma muttered. "He didn't want a big black stain on his record, so why the hell should I think you'd want one either?"

"ANBU painted my record an entirely different colour, I assure you," the words came out harder than Kakashi had intended and he recovered by lifting his shoulder in a lazy shrug. "We work in all shades, Asuma. Genma included."

"But the rulebook is always black and white, isn't it?" the Sarutobi pointed out with a sour smile, his gaze straying away. "Look, I get it. You don't have to play truant just because I am, Kakashi."

"I'd like to think of it more as playing devil's advocate."

That got Asuma's attention. Brandy eyes cut back to Kakashi in a heartbeat. "Devil's advocate huh? Gee, does that make me the bad guy?"

"Sounds to me like you're trying to catch the bad guy," Kakashi returned neutrally.

"If he's the bad guy."

"And what will determine that?"
Asuma gave a gruff chuckle, passing a hand across his mouth, casting Kakashi a begrudgingly impressed look. "Oh you're good, Hatake. Very smooth."

_Not smooth enough…_

Kakashi blinked at him in innocence.

Asuma didn't fall for it, looking away with another quiet chuckle. "And you didn't even need to ply me with saké."

Rather than digress into banter, Kakashi took a measured pause to reassess tactics and read any tells in the other man's face, speaking only when he sensed the Sarutobi's gaze threatening to turn towards the exit.

"I have no agenda here, Asuma."

"Yeah?" Asuma rubbed at his jaw, glancing back. "Tell me something, Kakashi...if it came down to choosing between following the rules or doing what's right, which would you pick?"

Kakashi's gaze lost focus. Suddenly the word 'rules' raised an ugly flag in his mind – red and tattered. A bloody streamer of thought…

"*Those that break the rules and regulations are scum...but those who abandon their comrades are worse than scum!*"

The copy-nin's gaze dropped down, deep down, staring inward through the dark portal of time that opened up in his mind's eye. The tomoe in his Sharingan orb spun into a pinwheel dance, bringing back the memories…the moments…the mistakes he could never make right…

*Obito…Rin…*

Pain knifed into his left eye, shooting through the swirling centre, stabbing through to the back of his skull. He flinched, his visible eye squinting from the pain. The portal of time vanished, sucked up into that lockbox in the back of his mind.

Kakashi blinked slowly and reached up to adjust his hitai-ate.

Asuma's brows pulled together in concern but he knew better than to ask.

Taking a moment to blink away the pain, Kakashi answered softly. "It's easy to say I would do what I thought was right. But in our world, what's right is always relative."

"Sure it is," Asuma muttered, almost to himself. "And how about what's wrong? Is that relative too?"

Kakashi lowered his hand from his hitai-ate. Anything he had to say in response to that wouldn't be anything Asuma would want to hear. Honestly, right and wrong were _always_ relative terms – relative to the person, relative to the world in which that person operated. ANBU had taught him that. ANBU had sliced up his conscience into threads that slipped between all the loopholes that existed within 'right' and 'wrong'.

"I could answer that question, Asuma," Kakashi replied. "But I don't think you'll appreciate what I have to say."

"Let me guess, it's along the lines of everyone just doing what they have to do, morality be
damned."

Well, Kakashi wouldn't have put it quite like that. That particular rope of thought tied into need and necessity, which in turn tied into an even more complicated knot of contradictions otherwise known as the human condition. Unravelling that knot was the business of gods and drunks.

Kakashi was no god.

He had no drink in hand.

And yet his mouth moved anyway. "Morality will always have a shadow side, Asuma. It's like the moon."

Asuma stared at him, shaking his head. "The moon…are you serious? You choose the most inconstant thing to represent what should be solid and fundamental to anyone with a conscience."

"You may think so. But morality comes with many faces and it changes according to custom, culture and more importantly, according to context, which is often affected by who and what we care about."

Asuma's eyes narrowed. "Somehow, I don't think the people I have in mind give a shit about anyone or anything but themselves."

"That's the eclipse…"

"The what?"

Kakashi plucked out a coin from his pocket and brushed his thumb across the tarnished metal. "A full moon is what the best of us strive to be," he slid his thumb until a crescent remained. "As shinobi, we remain as half moons, phasing between the definitions of right and wrong." He dipped his wrist, a sleight of hand trick that left him with an empty palm. "And some of us exist within a total eclipse of conscience, not caring about either."

"You just pull this shit outta your ass, don't you?"

"It's true," Kakashi murmured, giving Asuma a pointed look. "And you know it better than most, Asuma, given what you experienced with the Guardian Twelve."

"Don't go getting all profound on me, Hatake. I sure as hell didn't come in here for this deep, existential crap." Asuma stared off towards the exit and began to rise, taking out a cigarette to press between his lips. He slid from the booth, turning his back. "Enjoy your book."

Kakashi watched the other Jōnin from beneath his lashes. "Asuma…"

The Sarutobi stiffened, glancing back over his shoulder. "What?"

Kakashi let a slow breath seep between the fibres of his mask before he dredged up a weak smile, his grey eye warming. "Being a good shinobi and breaking the rules are not mutually exclusive. And it takes a rare breed of ninja to be capable of both."

Though Kakashi hadn't given up the words to gain anything, it earned him a weak smile from the Sarutobi. "Save me a bottle, Kakashi and I might drink to that later."

"You should." Kakashi paused here, his voice quieter as he added, "You're part of that rare and dying breed."
Asuma's eyes went wide in surprise before he snorted, blowing off the compliment and his black mood with a pseudo-salute. "Well this rare dog isn't dying until that mask comes off your ugly mug."

Kakashi's brow went up, grey eye twinkling with amusement. "Have fun living forever, Sarutobi."

"Perks of being a badass," Asuma chuckled, waving over his shoulder. "Apparently only the good die young."

---

Focus…

The rhythmic slap of bare feet and the sharp crack of wood echoed off the lacquered walls of the Jūken-ryū dōjō. The training place for the Hyūga's Main House elite, its foundation built upon generations of clan tradition and iron teachings. Teachings that gloved the Gentle Fist style in a gauntlet of control.

Focus!

Neji turned just as Hiashi slashed out with his bokken, curving the bamboo blade in a neat arc towards the junction of the younger Hyūga's neck and shoulder.

The strike came fast.

Neji's focus wavered.

He deflected the hit along his forearm, holding the limb rigid as steel. He felt the impact judder along the bone, threatening a fracture. The burst of ruptured tissue burned hotter than live ash beneath the surface, leaving a welt that almost split skin.

Damn it.

The bruise would be ugly.

If Hiashi had struck harder and angled sharper, he might have broken his nephew's arm.

He should have.

The fact that the elder had reserved his strength suggested he could sense something was off. Neji frowned. Gods, was he still that transparent to his uncle? Even now? Pushing down the initial rush of frustration, Neji let out a slow breath and rolled his wrist to knock aside the bokken, assuming a sideways stance, chin up and jaw set.

Hiashi arched a brow, taking his time to lower the weapon. "You sacrificed your grip strength. Your focus is weak. I have killed you twice in these past ten minutes."

Neji tensed but couldn't deny these truths. "Yes."

"Re-focus or leave," Hiashi ordered, his voice radiating authority without him having to modulate his tone at all. "You are stronger than this. Faster. Sharper. Deadlier. Where is your focus?"

Neji flexed his fingers, tensing muscles to squeeze out the ache in his limbs. They'd been training for the past four hours, over and over, again and again, thousands of attacks and defences all bled into a stream of continuous movement. But he'd taken more hits than he'd deflected in the past ten minutes.
Hiashi was not a man to tolerate even a degree of distraction whilst training.

Too bad Neji's focus had divided itself somewhere between the fight and the weird sense of a presence in the dōjō with them. Neji had tried to ignore it, but couldn't shake the lingering sensation of eyes boring into him.

*Ridiculous…*

Hiashi would have sensed it immediately.

"Again," the elder Hyūga said, his voice filling the dōjō in a sonorous roll, smoothing over the air, lulling away the odd vibes.

Alone. They were alone.

Adjusting his mental footing, Neji got a solid toehold on his focus, feeling it slide back beneath his feet. And with that focus came the seamless flow of breath. He let it glide in smooth, live-giving streams through his body, invigorating cells, waking up reserves of strength.

He moved faster.

He hit harder.

The strength became fluid, unforced, flowing through him and out of him. It was ingrained, intuitive and instinctive. He felt…

*Free…*

Chakra pooled along the side of his palm, the callused skin turning harder than horn. He knifed his hand out just as Hiashi swung the bokken.

A violent crack rent the air.

Bamboo exploded, raining a small shower of wood that scattered across the tatami floor in a mix of thin needles and thick fragments.

Hiashi's eyes flashed wide but his voice rang calm and clear. "Stop."

Neji froze on the command, feeling that cyclone of power humming in his aura, a spiral of chakra in perpetual motion. He breathed deep, pulling the energy into helix inside him. Contained and controlled.

Hiashi examined the shattered end of the bokken still clutched in his hand, turning it with a roll of his thumb. He hummed. "Impressive."

Neji let out a shaking breath, flexing his toes to feel the ground beneath his feet. A giddy, weightless sensation fluttered inside him. He wasn't sure whether it was excitement or adrenaline.

He watched Hiashi turn his wrist this way and that as if checking for a sprain. "No one has shattered a bokken while I was wielding it. Their speed and precision has always been inferior."

Neji had no trouble believing that. Even Tenten would have hard time trying to keep pace with Hiashi. He'd trained in kenjutsu from a young age, taking it up as an extracurricular interest. But he'd mastered the techniques of the blade with the same precision as anything else he set his mind to.
"You've improved remarkably, Neji."

The praise came like a swing to the temple, leaving Neji stunned. It took him a moment to process the words before he bowed, his thick mane spilling over his shoulders.

"Hiashi-sama," he acknowledged.

Hiashi regarded him in thoughtful silence, turned the broken weapon over in his hand and moved across the dōjō to set it down. Had Neji been watching Hiashi, he might have seen his uncle pass a subtle glance toward the shadowed doorway leading into a Shinto prayer room.

"Do not lose your focus. You will need it."

Neji blinked, glancing up without lifting his head.

Hiashi turned away to pace across the large room, his steps carrying the regal grace that distilled itself to all the elder's movements. He passed through the bars of grainy light that striped the tatami mats and moved to stand to one side of the entrance. It led out onto a porch which gave way to a set of long wooden steps, bent under the weight of age and the tread of countless Hyūga ninja who had come before.

"Hmn." Hiashi inhaled deeply, turning half-way to regard the interior. "It has been a long time since I've set foot in this dōjō. The last time…was with my brother."

Neji drew his head up, his eyes rounding.

The light streaming in through the doors cast a warm, patina glow along the cold ridges of Hiashi's expression. Neji could just about discern the squint around the elder's eyes, but that could have been him narrowing his pale orbs against the light, rather than fighting back emotion he'd never let show.

Hiashi turned his back again. "You honour your father's memory. You keep it alive."

Neji's breath snagged hard, the air thinning in his throat.

He gazed at his uncle's turned back and it occurred to him in a cruel flash that it could have been his father standing at the threshold. All he had to do was let his mind blur the lines of reality and maybe, just maybe, some small, lonely part of his soul could embrace the lie that it was Hizashi's ghost standing there.

Then Hiashi glanced over his shoulder, pale eyes catching the light – not warm, but not cold either. "Come here."

Neji swallowed, pushed down the ache in his chest and moved towards his uncle. Somehow it felt like he obliged rather than obeyed. A flutter of adrenaline returned to his stomach, the nervous sensation akin to wings struggling to test the tethers.

He came to stand beside Hiashi, squinting against the warm glare of late afternoon sunlight. It washed up to the edge of the porch, spilt over the sunken steps and turned the gravel of the dōjō's limestone path to a river of gold.

"I see my brother in you," Hiashi said, his voice deep and distant, echoing down from another time…another place..."As much as you see him in me."

Neji titled his jaw to look across, fighting hard not to let an iota of emotion touch his expression.
Hiashi wouldn't appreciate it. Control was tantamount with this man, even when defences came down.

Hiashi let out a soft sigh, dark lashes shuttering over his eyes. "It is what makes this confliction more personal to me than the divide within our clan."

"What confliction, Hiashi-sama?"

"You."

Neji's brows shot up then pulled together, betraying his confusion before he looked away. He set his gaze on the ripples of the koi pond, feeling the weight of Hiashi's answer spread through his veins, stirring the blood he'd always considered to be water.

"I don't understand," he answered on a breath, shaking his head.

Hiashi took his time in responding, his words quiet, his gaze faraway. "I cannot give you my blessing…and I cannot take away your curse. Therein lies the root of my confliction…and it runs deep."

*Why are you saying this? Why now?*

Neji bit back the questions, a tangle of bitter nettles that still stung the healing corners of his heart. His own conflictions and confusions twisted and twined like vines, binding him into a silence with his uncle that felt heavier than chains.

They stood together, watching the light change and the leaves shiver.

Time took on a surreal quality, elongating with the shadows.

And after what seemed like an endless time, Hiashi walked away.

Neji remained. He stood at the threshold, breathing in the residual sense of loss. He didn't understand it. Couldn't even begin to process the mess of complicated feelings his uncle's words had inspired.

*Your words come too late...just like before...*

Neji closed his eyes and stepped back into the dōjō, fully intent on taking up another hour's worth of practice before checking his next mission assignment. Gods, *any* assignment would do right now. He needed both the distraction and the focus.

*And I need direction...*

Until he could convince Shikaku of his eligibility, the path to ANBU was barred. This left him snapping up A-ranks, which was better than crossing his fingers in the hopes that Shikaku would give him the thumbs up.

*Breathe...focus...*

Rolling the tension from his shoulders, Neji paced to the centre of the room, feet sweeping across the tatami mats, pulling him into the kata. Muscles grew loose, became both steel and water, flowing and shifting.

Ten minutes into the kata he felt it again.
Like cold breath at his nape.

He made a deliberate turn, pretending to flow with the movement of the kata, glancing towards the raised platform to the right side of the dōjō. A thick curtain of shadow slanted across the tier, untouched by the soft strips of orange light and the dust motes floating like amber sparks through the beams.

Neji slowed his movements, his brows tugging into a frown.

*Odd...*

That part of the stage was usually visible at this hour. He glanced towards the small windows higher up, assuming some of the screens had been drawn shut.

They were all open.

Neji froze, wide eyes snapping towards the stage.

The shadows pulled back like a grinning beast, curving sideways, stretching their black smile to reveal a kunai lodged into the wall at the back of the platform. Its shining hilt winked from the eyehole of a broken ANBU mask.

Neji felt his skin prickle, the hairs at his nape rising.

The half-mask hung askew, pinned like an ill omen. Neji could already guess what it augured. The shadows shrank further, slipping away off the stage like oil, running in a sensual whisper across the tatami mats and up along the walls, blocking out the light. Tendrils of black brushed straight past the Hyūga, flowing behind him.

Neji's body went electric with tension – but he didn't turn.

The entire dōjō seemed to shrink, like a throat closing up, caught in the grip of a shadow hand wringing out the light.

Neji snagged a breath, fighting off the claustrophobic sensation.

The temperate dropped several degrees, chilling the sweat on his skin. For a long, lingering moment there was absolute silence. The only sound being the throb of his heartbeat and the pounding of adrenaline in his veins.

Further silence.

Without warning, the shadows thinned near the top of the dōjō, allowing for thin slats of light to penetrate the darkness hanging in the room.

Then he heard it.

The soft brush of feet across the tatami mats, the pace slow and lazy, completely relaxed in its step. It was an understated and unguarded approach, a man making no attempt to disguise his movements.

*Not needing to...*

Understated men were always the most dangerous to underestimate.

Neji stared ahead, eyes glazed, his focus on the man behind him.
Finally, the shinobi spoke.

"You think you know what it is to be broken, Neji?" Shikaku asked, his rusty tones stroking like a rough palm along Neji's spine, tightening his nerves. "You can't even begin to imagine all the ways that ANBU will make you redefine that word."

A muscle ticked in Neji's jaw, eyes focused on the broken, jagged angles of the mask. He held his silence, a pulse beating strong in the side of his neck – as if an invisible blade rested at his throat. Not that Shikaku required a hidden weapon. He was that weapon. A human weapon concealed in shadow. As deadly a blade as anything forged in steel.

"Do you grasp that implication?"

"Yes," Neji replied quietly.

"Then you have four days to imagine what you think it is," Shikaku said, his voice sounding further away. "And then you decide whether you're ready for the reality."

Neji's eyes widened.

_Four days?_

So soon? He'd expected the elder Nara to let him hang for a while. Neji turned his head, searching out the corner of his eye for the shadow master, stretching his senses to try and detect him. He couldn't identify a chakra signature. Not even the barest impression of one.

_Incredible…_

Phantom movement drew his gaze.

The shadows pulled away from the walls, peeling back, drifting down to flood towards the opposite end of the dōjō. Neji looked across, following the currents of black towards the shrine room at the opposite end, marvelling at the speed and silence with which Shikaku had moved. He passed like a shade between worlds, wrapped in the velvet cloak of his shadows, phasing into the darkness of the threshold.

Neji blinked, turning a little more. "And then what?" he called.

Shikaku gave a low, mirthless chuckle, his voice fading into the same blackness as his body. "Four days, Hyūga."

When the darkness pulled apart, the Nara was gone.
"Stupid kid. You should talk to someone."

"The last time you concerned me this badly, I never got an answer."

Shikamaru heard the voices as if from far away. They ran together in a warped and overlapping audio, trying to penetrate his 'in-between' state of sleep.

"I wasn't there. For whatever reason. For whatever happened. And I'm sorry."

"You should talk to him."

Neji...

"Dreams don't feel this way, do they?"

Something wet touched his forehead.

Shikamaru startled from his doze, swatting the air above his face. He rubbed at the damp spot on his brow, gazing through heavy lids to find that the late afternoon sky had shredded into sunset. Clouds spread their gauzy wisps in streams, their edges stained pink and red. They looked like bloody cloth.

Shikamaru breathed deep, letting the air out of his lungs a fraction at a time.

_Breathe_...

A cool breeze fanned the grass around him and brought the scent of loam and leaves. Familiar smells on familiar ground. He flexed his fingers, felt the earth beneath his palms.

_Get grounded_...

That's why he'd come here. To get his head straight and to focus on the stupid booklet he'd been puzzling out. Falling asleep hadn't entered into his plan.

_Great, how many hours did that set me back?_

A deer nose descended on him, bussing his brow.

Shikamaru grunted and turned his face aside, reaching up to push gently at the doe's neck, attempting to avoid the inquisitive nose sniffing him out. The hind nibbled at the ends of his hair, earning a grumble from the young Nara.

"Troublesome..."

Chastened, the doe blinked soft liquid brown orbs in what could only be described as the deer equivalent of 'puppy eyes'.

"Tch." Shikamaru reached up to scratch affectionately at a white birthmark on the deer's cheek, smiling a little. "Happy now?"

The doe's ears twitched and angled, drawn to the sound of his voice. She nibbled at the backs of his fingers, sniffing for rice crackers. Damn. He'd left the _shika sembei_ biscuits in his knapsack. In
fact, the only thing he'd brought out here with him other than the Akatsuki booklet had been the birthday present Ino had ordered him to open last.

(save the best till last, huh?)

Shikamaru swung his arms and sat up, startling the deer. He murmured softly to set her at ease, stroking her elegant neck with one hand, reaching out with the other to pull the gift into his lap. The deer hooked her head over his shoulder, attempting to get at it.

"Oi," Shikamaru drew his shoulder up, nudging her away. "Go bug my old man."

As the shadow-nin worked on opening the box-shaped gift, the deer folded her delicate legs to settle beside him, resting her chin on his thigh. With his lap commandeered, Shikamaru set the box on the ground. He pulled the velvet black ribbon off it and hooked his thumb under the lid, lifting it with the wary caution of a ninja expecting a flashbomb.

No detonation.

Just a big book.

Shikamaru cocked his head, the caution sliding off his face. Only so many ways this thing could be dangerous or humiliating. With brows raised, he reached into the tissue-padded box and pulled out a leather-bound album. The rustle of tissue paper caused the doe to twitch her ears and tuck her nose under Shikamaru's knee, hiding. Taking the opportunity to set the book in his lap, Shikamaru flipped it open, amusement canting his lips at the colourful design on the first page reading:

THE STORY OF YOUR LIFE...so far...

Intrigued, Shikamaru began to turn a few more pages and as he flipped through the scrap book his expression broke into a rare, full-blown smile.

No way...

He traced his fingers over the edges of photographs, annotations and sketches, shaking his head. Ino and Chōji had outdone themselves; Ino especially. She'd crammed the scrapbook full of anything and everything she could associate with the shadow-nin and Team 10. She'd even stuck in a rainbow-coloured menu from Niji and circled the coffee Shikamaru always ordered – she'd even taken the liberty of scribbling next to it what she thought went into the makings of the black sludge.

When did she have time for this?

Seriously, the entire book was like an art project; a detailed and creative record of the better and best times. Even Kiba and Naruto had contributed with crayon sketches and graffiti abuse. Chōji had also included snapshots from the Hanegakure mission. There were some pages left blank with pencilled notes of "PICTURES PENDING, SLACKER".

I'll bet...

He also bet some of those pictures included the stupid bird.

Shikamaru chuckled quietly, drawing the focus of the deer grazing around him. Three more does drifted closer while others continued to forage through the undergrowth, scrounging for the best roots. Further up the slope, Rikumaru surveyed his harem and turned his huge head to study Shikamaru, his sloe eyes sage and soft in the burnt hues of sunset.
Oblivious to his guardian, Shikamaru continued to study the scrapbook, lingering on some pictures and pretending to ignore others that were either too embarrassing or too bizarre to contemplate without someone else to share his amusement or annoyance.

Damn. His whole life in a book.

Well, the abridged and edited version of his life. But one that put things into a whole different perspective; it certainly made the dark side of his past seem further away than it had been for the past few days. That was a story untold, a black and white time fractured and half-forgotten.

I don't want to know…

His mind had omitted more than just colour from those remembrances. His brain had plugged up what he could only imagine was the worst of it…leaving him to deal with the rest, watching it swirl down into the shadows inside him like blood down the plughole.

"Worked just fine for two years. I let it go."

"We don't have nightmares about things we've let go of."

Shutting out Neji's voice and ignoring the questions and fears the Hyūga's words had inspired, Shikamaru turned the next page.

He went very still.

Two pictures dominated the centre of the page, one beneath the other. Both of them were photographs of him and Asuma playing Shogi, taken at different times; one was a grainy shot from three years ago and the other a recent picture that Ino must have snapped from the bushes. Funnily enough, Asuma was wearing the same expression in both shots: exasperation and disbelief. Shikamaru noticed that he too hadn't changed much in his reactions to his sensei. A lazy half-smile with his head turned slightly to the side, feigning boredom.

Shikamaru touched the corner of one picture.

And like an electric shock in the back of his mind, his brain flashed forward the words his sensei had spoken a fortnight ago.

"For two weeks you were a different kid. No one suspected. But even on missions I knew it in my gut…and in the way you played Shogi. Like a stranger. You just weren't there."

That's not true…

Shikamaru swallowed against the sudden ache in his throat. "You're wrong…" he husked at the page, startled by he hoarseness in his voice.

The doe raised her head, blinking at him softly. Shikamaru stared numbly at the page. The sudden burn of emotion in his eyes surprised him, frightened him. He tried to swallow and his breath shook.

"Just let yourself feel angry. Just let yourself feel sad."

His own words, his own voice, his own advice coming back to bite him in the ass. How fucking predictable. How hypocritical. He'd cheated himself for months on end, pretending he was intact and hoping everyone else bought it. Hell, he'd almost managed to convince himself for two fucking years.
Until Neji...

It had all come undone at the seams after that, leaving him scrambling to pull back the common thread of lies. To think he'd preached to Neji about the dangers of avoidance when he himself had completely converted to the dogma of denial. Searching for Neji's truth had shed light on his own lies. On a past he just couldn't face. And Neji knew it as much as Asuma did…

"For all the lies between us, Shikamaru, none are more insulting to me than the truths you've twisted. And I would be angry, if I didn't know you were so afraid."

What tore at Shikamaru worse than the fear was the thought that Asuma felt in any way responsible for it.

"I failed you."

No.

Shikamaru shook his head and closed the scrapbook in his lap, letting out a shivering breath. There were many things he could live with, including the broken half-remembered memories of what had happened to him when he was fifteen. But what he couldn't live with was the understanding that his sensei shouldered a guilt and sense of accountability that Asuma would more than likely take to his grave.

"You must have felt like I just didn't try. Letting it slide. Letting you slide like that."

No. You did try...

Hell, Asuma had been the one to keep Shikamaru from losing himself completely. Every Shogi game with his sensei had felt like he'd gotten a broken piece of himself back. One piece at a time.

You kept me strong...

Shikamaru gazed up at the sky and watched the red-soaked hues begin to deepen.

So now it's my turn...to try...

Four days...

The deadline loomed on the horizon of Neji's mind like a storm, encroaching on his meditation. He found no clarity in the stillness, no silver linings of surety. Doubt blew in and clouded his mind, sinking deeper inside him, hanging heavy over his heart.

"You think you know what it is to be broken, Neji? You can't even begin to imagine all the ways that ANBU will make you redefine that word."

Of all the things Neji could imagine, one of them had been the conflict of forsaking his conscience, in order to escape his cage. But was that not the price of survival? If so, did his own struggle for survival come down to his desperation to face and fight fate or his desire to fly free from it?

"Desire or desperation, Neji? Which is it that drives any Hyūga Branch pet?"

Hitaro's words went around with Shikaku's in his mind, two elemental voices raining down oil on the fire. The rage sputtered and hissed, crackled and burned.

Neji flattened his palm to his solar plexus, breathing deep.
The anger banked to a simmer.

_Breathe_…

He leaned back into the steady support of the tree, releasing the air through his nose. The calm came in a cool rush…and then something else pinged on his mental radar.

_Chakra_…

Neji's eyes snapped open, swinging up to settle on the shadowed figure perched in the branches above, observing him from over the top of a thin book.

Neji's lips tightened. "Kakashi-senpai."

Kakashi made a mock show of surprise. "Impressive. I didn't even get to turn a page."

Neji didn't look amused. He'd had about as much as he could take of being watched from the shadows. He still felt chilled from Shikaku's hair-raising demonstration only a few hours before. He was in no mood for company. As if to broadcast this, he kept his stare cool and his expression closed.

Kakashi snapped his book shut, head tipped down in false contrition. "Sorry to disturb you."

_No you're not._

Neji almost snorted at the irony. It was all kinds of 'disturbing' to have elite Jōnin creeping up on him left, right and centre. What made it worse was knowing that these 'disturbances' would be the least of his concerns in the upcoming days – which didn't keep him from frowning when Kakashi dropped down to his level.

"Meditating or ruminating?"

Unwilling to suffer disadvantage of height, Neji drew his feet beneath him. "Both."

No point in lying. Kakashi would see through it. Even so, Neji got no appraisal for his honesty, only an indecipherable sideways look. Kakashi seemed to consider something, then turned to face the large Memorial Stone, lashes drawing down over his eye.

"Your father was recruited for ANBU, wasn't he?"

Neji contained his pain better than his anger. His jaw tightened. "Is this some final attempt to manipulate me into bowing out?"

Kakashi shook his head. "It seems you've already decided."

"I decided a long time ago."

The conviction in Neji's voice startled him. Given his earlier doubts, it was like a beam of light lancing through the fog in his mind. A guiding light…and he wasn't even in the tunnel yet.

As if reading his thoughts, Kakashi gave him another sidelong look. "Nothing prepares you for it."

Neji held the copy-nin's gaze, defiance and determination the only buffer he had against the bite of experience in Kakashi's words. "I know."

He waited for the 'no, you think you know what you'll wish you had known' speech to mess up his
mind. But it never came. Instead, Kakashi reached into his flak jacket and pulled out a thin scroll, handing it over. Neji eyed the offering sceptically, but took it. Anything was better than a broken ANBU mask. Or a cage of shadows.

Focusing on the matter at hand, he unfurled the scroll with a tip of his wrist, took one look at the script and frowned. "A mission."

"Well, I suppose scepticism is better than surprise," Kakashi said, his voice light, his gaze sharp.

Neji shook his head. "Why am I being assigned?"

"Hmn?" Kakashi hummed with deceptive innocence. "I think you'd agree that volunteering yourself for every A-Rank available tends to up your chances of that. You're making the rest of us look bad."

Neji stared blankly at the mission outline; the kind one didn't sign up for, but rather, got assigned to, no questions asked. "This is an S-Rank."

"With the recent Akatsuki developments, A-Rank missions are no longer the priority of elite Jōnin. And while ANBU may be your priority, it's my understanding that Shikaku-senpai has four days left to squeeze blood out of you…" Kakashi paused here and cocked his head in phony consideration. "Well, that is before you offer it up for free of course."

Neji stiffened and immediately let a long breath seep through his nose, releasing his tension in the same instance. Reacting to Kakashi's double-edged humour would achieve nothing. It's not as if he hadn't expected one or two barbs to come flying his way, casual and innocent as Kakashi always made it seem. It was always hard to tell what the hell Kakashi's motives were, although Neji felt safe to assume that as far as ANBU was concerned the copy-nin, like everyone else, was probably plotting against him.

It occurred to him – belatedly – that no one was rooting for him.

Not his clan, not his comrades, not his superiors…

No one.

The stark sense of loneliness that thought sent through him might have hurt if he wasn't already numb to the feeling.

Liar…

The truth was that being alone had never hurt – until Shikamaru. That made sense. Considering he left pieces of himself with the shadow-nin every time he broke his promise and came close enough to want, to ache, to need…

To feel…

Neji pushed down the rise of emotion and scanned the mission outline again, taking in the details word by word until his focus sharpened. "Do you know when the details of this incident came in, senpai?"

"Golden eagle post about ten minutes ago."

Neji's head came up fast. "Eagle?"
Kakashi let that sink in, nodding. "It would seem your Tsubasa Ambassador came across a ruined site en route. The area was decimated and filled with chakra. Byakugan eyes will be useful in the effort to identify the chakra nature."

"I understand," Neji murmured distractedly, already calculating time and distance. If it was a chakra reading the Hokage wanted, he'd need to move fast, before the energy trails could disperse and dilute.

*Lee will halve the journey time.*

An understatement, considering Lee's inner clock ran on double-time by default. He'd probably up the ante to defy the laws of physics. Neji was close to admitting that the quality of Lee's endurance and stamina were almost second to none.

*Incredible.*

While the Hyūga prided himself on his solid constitution, Lee's ability to push beyond the realms of physical endurance was staggering. Whether or not Tenten shared Neji's private admiration was something she'd never, ever admit mid-mission, lest it feed Lee's unending supply of energy.

Energy in perpetual motion.

Neji's lip twitched a little at one corner.

*Tenten will keep up...*

She always did, albeit huffing and groaning for a break. Honestly, Neji had no problem sharing her complete lack of enthusiasm for leapfrogging over ravines or scaling inclines so close to being vertical that Neji still had no idea how Lee managed to do it without channelling chakra.

*Ridiculous...yet remarkable...but still ridiculous...*

He managed to keep from smiling and slotted the scroll away.

"I'll take my old team," he eventually replied. "I might put in for backup, if this is Akatsuki."

Rather than a nod, Kakashi's head tipped to one side and he followed up his non-verbal 'maybe' with a quiet sigh. "Given the extent of the damage, we might be looking at a Tailed Beast."

Neji's eyes rounded.

*Gods...*

Well, that was certainly grounds for an 'S-Rank' even if Akatsuki were in no way related to the incident. Though come to think of it, the shark-faced Akatsuki they'd come up against in the past had chakra equal to that of a Jinchūriki. Not to mention the fact that said Jinchūrikis were being targeted.

Naruto's face popped up gopher-like in Neji's mind.

*It won't come to that...*

"You'd best head out fast to get back in time," Kakashi advised, reaching up to adjust his hitai-ate before tossing in a random afterthought of, "Oh and its best if this mission stays strictly under wraps."

Translation: go quietly and quickly lest someone else goes loudly and recklessly.
Neji contained his amusement, but his suspicion leaked through into the faint narrowing of his eyes. "You didn't happen to put me forward for this mission, did you, senpai?"

Kakashi blinked wide and adopted that pseudo-innocent tone designed to get him answers without him having to give any away. "Now why would I go out of my way to do that?"

"I'm not in Naruto's immediate circle," Neji pointed out. "So it makes sense that you would pass this on to me rather than let any of the others catch wind of it."

A silver brow drew up. "That's your theory?"

Neji didn't buy the act but played along regardless, well aware that he was being tested – again. "I was there when Naruto went after the Kazekage…and I heard the words he spoke over Gaara's body before he was revived. If Naruto learned that another Jinchūriki had come under threat…” he trailed off, not needing to say anything more about that outcome. "I have no problem with lying to Naruto to protect him, or omitting information for the same purpose. Other than Shikamaru, who else would you trust to do that and not feel guilty?"

Kakashi tipped his head, an unseen smile carrying in his voice. "We do what is necessary, don't we?"

Neji's brow knitted, but he detected no sarcasm in Kakashi's words…which was strange, given that the copy-nin had mocked Neji for making 'necessity' a motive. To have Kakashi speaking his language rather than talking in linguistic tongues added to this whole encounter being somewhat…disturbing…but it called for less rigid defences.

Neji's expression softened a little. "How did you know I'd be here?"

Kakashi glanced towards the Memorial Stone. "Because this is the place I came to before I made the decision you made a long time ago." That grey eye pinched for a moment but Kakashi recovered fast. "And according to Pakkun you still smell toxic enough to trace at a moment's notice."

Neji snorted, smoothing out the smile that threatened. He followed the copy-nin's gaze and watched the crimson light wash over the Memorial Stone like blood soaking into the polished rock, liming the edges.

"Do you regret it?" Neji asked, regretting the question the second it left his mouth.

Kakashi kept his eyes on the cenotaph. "Are you afraid that you might?"

"No," Neji returned too sharply, biting back a wince.

Kakashi cut him a look.

Neji held that gaze and his ground, but kicked himself mentally for yet another blunder. His tone had revealed the answer for what it was: a lie. But the copy-nin didn't pull him up on it. Instead, the silver-haired Jōnin stepped closer to the Memorial Stone, his lidded gaze skating over the names etched into the rock.

"Naruto isn't the only reason I'd ask you to take this mission, Neji."

Neji stared at the back of Kakashi's head, taking a moment to consider whether or not he even wanted to venture into this conversation. Curiosity won out. "And the other reason?"
"I wasn't being facetious when I mentioned Shikaku-senpai wanting your blood."

Wonderful…

And this is why curiosity killed more than cats.

Drawing a breath, Neji braved the next step. "What do you mean?"

Kakashi let the moment draw out before he hummed a thoughtful note. "Let's just say that whatever you've done to get on our Jōnin Commander's dark side has earned you a hot seat straight across from Ibiki."

Neji blinked, stunned cold. The shock dazed him for a second. "What?"

Kakashi canted his weight onto his right foot, lazily turning his head just enough to glance over his shoulder. "Psychological evaluations and endurance tests are standard procedure for potential ANBU operatives. While it's not unusual for Ibiki to conduct them, Shikaku doesn't often have a ringside seat."

Fuck…

Neji felt his heart jackhammer against his ribcage. To his credit, he managed to keep a straight face and steady gaze. Inside, he felt himself vibrating like a tuning fork, a shrill note of alarm deafening him to everything but one thought.

I should have seen this coming.

On the heels of that thought, his mind barked the obvious question.

So why are you surprised?

This shouldn't have come as a shock. He'd been waiting for Shikaku to dish out punishment for what he'd done to Shikamaru. Truth to tell, he really should have expected it to come at exactly the same time Shikaku had lulled him into a false sense of security.

Four days…

He'd assumed that afforded him time to re-evaluate, to reassess and to 'imagine' – as Shikaku had put it – what it would mean to accept this self-chosen fate. But Shikaku hadn't mentioned anything about what he'd do while waiting on Neji's reply. Clearly, 'waiting' didn't enter into it at all.

Far from it.

If Neji was up for figurative 'brain surgery' with Ibiki, then Shikaku had never intended on sitting back and twiddling his thumbs. Gods, he'd probably had his mental fingers in a steeple the second he'd let Neji walk out of the Nara forest unharmed.

He played me…

Neji's eyes rounded with the realisation.

He bided his time...waited for me to come back from Hanegakure...even accounted for the Peace Conference, knowing that he could pull rank at any time...knowing he could manipulate things exactly into position…

Including his own part in it.
Silent as a shadow, Shikaku had taken measures to put himself directly between Neji and ANBU – the one thing completely out of Neji's control. While the Hyūga could fight to withstand whatever Ibiki threw at him, he couldn't influence or control the outcome of Shikaku's decision.

*He's taken away my control completely...given me an illusion of it with that deadline...an illusion of choice...when the choice is his completely.*

Once again, he'd had his precious value of control used against him; and all because he'd more than underestimated a Nara's premeditative mind.

*Again…*

Neji let out a weak laugh and shook his head incredulously, marvelling both at the irony and the inevitability.

Kakashi seemed marginally intrigued by this delayed reaction. "Well, they say nervous laughter helps with the fear. I'd certainly be sweating if I were you."

Neji managed a somewhat pained smile. "Is this a sympathy card you're playing, senpai? Why should you care what happens to me? What do you gain?"

"Gain? As I told you from the start, this has absolutely nothing to do with me," Kakashi dismissed, lifting a shoulder in a shrug as unbothered as his expression. "Honestly, I might end up in a hot seat too."

"So why are you doing it?"

The question knocked Kakashi's attention back onto the Memorial Stone and his gaze lingered here long enough that Neji doubted he'd get a reply. But it seemed Fate was in ample supply of surprises – and handed him another one.

"I was inspired by a friend," Kakashi said in an oddly hushed voice. "Inspired to pay forward what I cannot pay back."

The haunted quality of those words struck a sharp chord in Neji's chest, causing his brow to furrow. "And what is that?"

Kakashi blew out a quiet breath and turned his head, a slow, almost reluctant movement. But true to a man familiar with changing faces, an enigmatic smile creased the corner of his charcoal eye, deepening the mystery surrounding his answer. He said nothing else, leaving Neji with the futile option of drawing his own conclusions. The Hyūga doubted he'd even come close to the truth.

"Best to gather your team and leave early," Kakashi advised, turning away from the Memorial Stone to brush past Neji. "I've orders to send one of my ninken for you around noon. I suggest you're off Pakkun's radar long before then. And Ibiki's."

Neji frowned at the abrupt end to this…encounter…having expected a few more smoke and mirrors to be thrown his way, just to keep him guessing. This seemed a little too clear. No strings, no subterfuge, nothing to puzzle out. He'd stepped into a tar pit with Shikaku and now Kakashi was throwing him a rope to pull him out…without tying it into a noose to hang around his neck.

"Kakashi-senpai…"

He sensed Kakashi pause.
Neither of them turned around.

A chill breeze whipped between them, rustling the grass, diluting the thickness of the silence into a whisper. Neji stared hard at the Memorial Stone, trying to infer something from the names, trying to find some hidden message that didn't speak of death and regret and fates carved into the stone long before the names were etched there.

"You survived ANBU," Neji murmured. "Regardless of what I said before…you must have come out of it stronger, if not a better shinobi."

"You're making some pretty strong assumptions about my character, Neji."

"Then tell me you regret the decision you made and I'll recant those assumptions."

A quiet sigh, tainted by a roughness Kakashi's mask couldn't muffle and even his experience couldn't hide. "Would it cause you to doubt your decision if I said yes?"

Neji shook his head, his jaw hardening. "No."

"Then it doesn't matter either way, does it?"

But should it?

He didn't ask…wondered if Kakashi somehow heard it anyway. But again the silence. Longer this time. Leaves rustled, dropped from the trees and furled in on themselves like dead cicadas.

"No," Neji murmured. "It doesn't matter."

A muffled hum.

"Well then…" Kakashi said softly…and then in the same breath, he was gone.

Neji felt the stillness of an old, familiar solitude fall around him, a mantle he'd tucked around the corners of his bruised heart years ago. And in this stillness, he felt the heat of his conviction cool into a chunk of rock as hard and cold as the Memorial Stone turning black beneath the skies.

This is what I must do…this is the choice I make…

Like warm breath at his ear, Shikamaru's words came back to him…

"Don't forget what I told you…about being human…"

Neji gazed sightlessly at the cenotaph, but rather than the names listed, he saw sienna eyes cut sharper than the carved script of the symbols.

I'll never forget…but it's time to go…

Yes. It was time to go…and yet…

And yet Neji relaxed his stance, raised his eyes to the purple ash of twilight…and waited for the stars…wishing on the first one he saw, that one day he'd get one moment more…

Next time around…Shikamaru…

Konoha hadn't seen a red dawn in a while.
But the day bloomed like a bloody rose, clouds unfurling in dark red petals.

Kurenai leaned her head out the window, gazing up at the strange sky. The dark velvet hues of night had begun to drain away, sucked into a bloody void of crimson and crumbled maroon. Yet the darkness hanging over Konoha still seemed so thick, almost oppressive, bearing down on the village with the weight of a mist too heavy to drift.

Strange...

Kurenai drew back and took up the watering can on the sill. She watched vermilion petals shiver under the gentle spray and tipped her wrist to better angle the shower. The cluster of red flowers danced in appreciation, the deep whorls in the centre staring up at her like dilated pupils.

The poppies had flourished.

Kurenai attributed this to extensive research in how to care for them, rather than possessing a green thumb. She'd never had to care for anything other than her Genin Team. And those kids had flourished with hard work and training. The flowers didn't ask for much; a little water, a little sunlight. But watching these small flowers bloom had caused her to acknowledge that bud of feeling she'd been harbouring in her heart. It had begun to blossom inside her over the past few months, terrifying her.

She'd never thought it would happen.

She'd always been sure that such a thing would never bear fruit and only wither on the vine. Ninja life did not lend itself well to such things. Didn't offer the kind of stability needed to nurture that kind of emotion.

But I've always wanted to know, what this felt like...

Kurenai reached up to tuck a rope of dark hair behind one ear, shifting from one bare foot to the other, feeling the frayed ends of Asuma's old shirt tickle her bare thighs.

Yes, this was still new to her.

The thought of 'being in love' seemed silly and girlish. She didn't believe in 'the magic' that belonged to besotted lovers of star-crossed romances. And yet Asuma had only to flash that wicked smile and the spell stole over her.

A fluttering, giddy sensation tickled her stomach.

She grinned, biting the ruby swell of her lip, at once excited and nervous. Crazy! To think that she still felt those butterflies every time she thought of him. Crazier still to know that he was right behind her, completely oblivious to her thoughts.

Kurenai pulled her head back to catch his reflection in the glass.

Asuma sat hunched over the cherry wood coffee table, papers spread across it in a somewhat coordinated mess. This mess had been under the microscope of his inspection for the past hour. Two lamps burned low in the apartment, casting his profile half in shadow half in light. Frowning intently, he looked rugged and dangerous, the quintessence of a disgruntled male.

He turned a sheet of paper over, scowling.

She resisted the urge to go to him. His heavy silence concerned her, but she'd promised Asuma she
wouldn't disturb him. Instead, she'd brewed tea, made the bed and catered to her own crack-of-dawn routine despite his quiet words urging her to sleep.

Sleep had become difficult without him beside her.

Not that she'd ever admit it.

Just as she'd never admit the fact that going about the domestic business with him there had felt so...comfortable. What was even stranger was that she was beginning to enjoy it. It had been a constant worry in the past, the thought of this man ensconcing himself too deeply into her heart and into her comfort zone. It had never felt constant, never felt safe – until he'd said those words...

"You know why I stay. Why I'll keep staying..."

She did know; she knew hopelessly, utterly and head-over-heels-completely.

"Shit..." Asuma growled.

Kurenai turned around.

Asuma sat back with a wince, rolling stiff shoulders. He raked his hands back through the thick muss of his hair, shaking his head. Kurenai set the watering can down on the sill and went to him, skirted around the edges of the table, keeping a wide berth of his work, sensing privacy was of the utmost with regards to whatever he'd gotten himself involved in.

He offered a crooked smile. "You really like that shirt."

Kurenai knelt down beside him, folding her arms in his lap, gazing up at him through soft, strawberry eyes. "You obviously don't," she said, tipping her head down to indicate the numerous cigarette burns in the faded cotton, once the colour of tan leather.

Asuma's brows went up and down, a grin playing at his lips. "I'm so hot I burn holes through my shirts."

Kurenai gave herself over to the giggles. Asuma beamed at the sound, his eyes warming like heated brandy. That irresistible, boyish grin turned up the corners of his mouth. He pulled her into his lap, flopping back on the couch.

"I'm not sure what's more insulting. The fact that you just used the words 'back in the day' or the blatant disrespect towards my vocal talent."

"You have no vocal talent, Asuma," Kurenai chuckled, kissing the corner of his mouth.

"It takes talent to be as terrible as I am."

Kurenai laughed, squeezing his shoulders in an impromptu massage. Asuma closed his eyes and hummed, tipping his head back. Kurenai smiled, gazing at him through her lashes, feeling...

So much...

Almost too much. She felt so much around him it terrified her. Vulnerability was not something she
did well – and Asuma tended to avoid it at all costs. But the feelings welled up so hard that it hurt to crush them up and hold them back. Even the fear couldn't water them down, they were deep and warm and sweet as wine. They stole her breath, filling her up to the brim with…

"I love you…" she whispered, the words spilling directly out of her overflowing heart.

Asuma's shoulders drew up and his eyes slipped open.

Kurenai went very still. Fear turned cold and sour in her stomach, curdling worse than the morning sickness. She stared at him, eyes wide, lips pressed tight.

You stupid girl…

For a long moment Asuma just sat there, staring up at her, looking rugged and unreadable in the dim light.

You stupid, STUPID girl…

Kurenai felt her lungs burning, her throat tightening.

And then Asuma smiled. Soft and slow, the expression warmed his eyes and crept into every angle of his face. He sat up, brushing their mouths in an achingly sweet kiss.

"I love you back," he whispered.

Kurenai stared at him, unable to move, unable to speak. Tears pricked the corners of her eyes and she blinked them back fast, not wanting to take her eyes off his face for a second.

"You don't have to," she said softly.

Asuma smiled, kissed her nose and shook his head. "Thanks for the exit. But I don't need it. Not anymore."

He drew her into the powerful and protective circle of his arms. Gods but she'd never felt safer than when she was with this man. Kurenai settled her cheek against his chest, listening to the strong, steady drum of his heartbeat, purring at the feel of his fingers grazing through her hair, resisting the urge to grin like an idiot.

Head-over-heels…

They held each other, sank into the warmth of the feelings they'd both been terrified to name. Kurenai had thought it would destroy the magic, shatter the dream. But if anything, it made it sure, solid and something she never thought it would be. Safe.

Thank you…

She pressed a kiss to Asuma's chest, her breath misting through the fibres of his top. He kissed her hair and hummed deep enough that she felt the vibration roll through her, shivering.

"How are you feeling?" Asuma murmured and she knew immediately what he was referring to.

Kurenai walked her fingers along his arm. "No more missions for me. I'll have to find a way to tell my team…if they don't figure it out themselves. With Kiba's nose, he'll probably be able to tell."

Asuma grunted. "I don't even wanna know how he'd do that."
"Well, he'll be able to—"

"No. Really. For his safety, don't tell me."

Kurenai chuckled, tilting her head back to gaze up through her lashes. "A good thing that Kiba's 'sensei crush' stage is well and truly over with."

Asuna angled her with a look. "He'll be in a big 'sensei crush' with my fist if he starts sniffing around you."

Kurenai laughed, rolling her eyes. "My caveman hero. How chauvinistic of you to think I couldn't handle myself with one of my kids."

"I know you could," Asuna defended, grumbling.

He sobered from his disgruntled state when Kurenai's hands crept along his sides, threatening a tickle. He trapped her pale fingers between his, lacing them together until Kurenai pressed their palms flat, measuring the span of Asuna's large, callused hand against the slender shape of her own.

"Did you speak to Shikamaru?" she whispered, not wanting to disturb the peace that had settled around them – though asking that question was certainly taking a risk.

"Yeah…" Asuna whispered back. He sighed and the sound went through Kurenai like a rush of cold air.

"Does that have something to do with this?" She pointed her toes towards the maps and mess scattered across the table, not willing to move any further from him.

"Yeah."

Kurenai nodded. One word answers were better than silence. Besides, he'd said enough in his drunken ramblings the other night. She could still recall the pain in his eyes, the aggressive, uncoordinated pacing as he cursed his failings. She dropped another kiss above his heart.

"Is there anything I can do?"

Asuna's arms tightened around her in a brief squeeze. "You're already doing it, believe me."

Hurting for him, she tilted her head back, trying to draw his gaze. "Asuna…"

A sharp rap at the door startled them both.

Kurenai frowned, craning her neck back to glance towards the door. "Who on earth could that be at this hour?"

Asuna's mind must have supplied some answer because his breath caught and he jumped up like a dog on point, toppling Kurenai sideways onto the couch. Quicker than a cat she was on her feet, brows knitted in bemusement as she watched Asuna drag his arm across the table, gathering papers. He jerked a duffle back open and swept the documents into it, beating them down with a flat palm.

Kurenai couldn't help but be amused at his unnatural state of panic. "Expecting someone?" she purred teasingly, turning towards the door.

Asuna snorted, his movements becoming more rushed. "I should be asking that question."
Kurenai rolled her eyes, took up a crimson kimono hanging by the door and slipped into the smooth silk, tying the belt securely. She wasn't expecting anyone, which narrowed the mystery knocker down to her neighbour. Her neighbour, a.k.a the sour-faced, violet-eyed old lady living three doors down.

Twice a week, without fail.

It was routine. Ume-san made it her twice a week, early-morning business to keep Kurenai updated on the bowel movements of her prized Akita dog and the latest scandal taking place on their apartment floor. The old woman loathed ninja and absolutely refused to believe that Kurenai was associated with them, never mind the kunoichi’s given occupation or romantic interest. The old crow had disowned her own son over his ninja career.

"It's probably my neighbour," Kurenai said with a sense of fatalism. "Unless you've got someone hunting after you and your detective work."

"Hn, Genma might be looking to shoot a few senbons at my ass," Asuma muttered, zipping up the bag.

Genma?

That random statement came from way out in the left field, confusing Kurenai. Why would Genma give him trouble? She didn't have time to ask. The knock came again.

Asuma scowled at the door, took two quick strides towards Kurenai, stole a kiss and turned towards the window. "You'd better get that."

Kurenai nodded, already reaching for the door though she kept her eyes on Asuma, willing him to turn around so she could read his face. "You're leaving?"

Asuma hummed distractedly, opening the window wider. "Oh I'll be back. Just gonna stash the goods."

She watched him heft the duffle bag over one shoulder and not for the first time that night, she wondered at his secrecy with the information. It wasn't curiosity that nagged at her, but rather a deepening concern. This odd switch into detective mode was quite out of character for him. He wasn't the type to indulge in conspiracies or deal with the devil of their details.

What on earth had he gotten involved in?

Or more accurately, what had Shikamaru gotten involved in?

And what does any of it have to do with Genma?

Kurenai shook her head at the jumble of questions. "Be careful, Asuma."

Asuma chuckled, not catching the undercurrents in her voice. "If I fall to my death, tell them I did it with style," he joked, setting his foot on the sill, hunkering down to prepare for his dramatic exit. "I'll be home later."

Her heart skipped a beat at the word 'home'. A flood of warmth banished the dark clouds from her thoughts, spreading joy through her like sunshine. Smiling at his back, Kurenai turned the handle to crack the door open, keeping the chain on.

Deep breaths now…
Kurenai cocked her head and glanced out into the corridor. She prepared herself for violet eyes gone milky with signs of cataract and a misanthropic rant about dogs, scandals and ninja scum.

Coffee-coloured eyes gazed back at her, honey flecks catching the dim light of the corridor. "Kurenai-sensei."

Kurenai's mind staggered in surprise. "Shikamaru…?"

The young Nara's lips quirked a little at one corner, wry and apologetic. He shifted from foot to foot, hands lodged into the pockets of his slacks, a curious mix between a lost puppy and a streetwise stray.

"Hey…" He took a half-step back and freed a hand to rub at his nape. "I'm sorry to drop by unannounced at this hour…I'm looking for Asuma."

Kurenai blinked, her mouth moving wordlessly for a moment.

"Asuma?" she managed, her next question completely unplanned. "Why did you come here?"

Shikamaru arched a brow, but had the decency not to smirk. "Hunch."

The knowing look left Kurenai feeling awkward, amused and a number of other things that didn't allow her to supply an answer.

She didn't have to.

The answer came in a loud crash.

_________

*That didn't just happen…*

When the world came back into focus, Asuma wondered if it was possible to die from humiliation. He wasn't sure whether to curse the Gods who'd laughed at his plan to high-tail it out the window, or thank them for the massive wedge of bushes that had broken his fall.

*How in hell did I manage that…?*

He made a mental note never to joke about falling to his death. It was an invitation fate just couldn't refuse. Asuma groaned, shoving away the watering can that was dripping onto his face. That might have explained the slippery sill. He hadn't even thought to bother channelling chakra to his feet.

*Talk about a rookie mistake…*

Or just an idiotic one. Apparently possessing chakra went hand-in-hand with common sense – or lack thereof.

*Shit.*

He hoped to God no one had seen that. He hadn't even had time enough to make it look deliberate, not that a swan dive or a fancy free fall would have made it look any cooler to land on his ass. He growled, trying to get purchase in the bushes to shove upright and onto his feet.

A shadow fell across him.

*Fuck.*
Asuma cringed, colour creeping up his neck. Prepared to defend himself against whoever had witnessed his humiliation, he squinted up towards the staccato flicker of a streetlamp and brought the figure standing just beneath its dying glow into focus. His eyes rounded in surprise, embarrassment fast on the heels of his shock.

Shikamaru gazed at him sideways, one brow scaling up. "Such a cool adult."

Asuma gave a nervous chuckle, shooting a glance every-which-way, half expecting Ino and Chōji to be snickering from the sidelines. "Thanks for the concern. I'm fine by the way."

Shikamaru didn't smile.

Asuma attempted to dislodge his duffle bag from a tangle of branches. "The hell are you doing up this early? It's not even six."

Instead of the usual dry comeback, Shikamaru remained silent. Asuma glanced back at his student, catching the young Nara off-guard. Shikamaru tensed and leaned away from the soupy stream of light, putting himself half in shadow.

*Hiding…*

But not running.

*Not yet.*

Asuma recognised the signs. He considered but discarded the idea of using humour; there was something about Shikamaru's silence that screamed at Asuma. He couldn't have logically pinned it down to anything. The set-up carried all the signals that Shikamaru would probably sooner cut and run than say a word.

And then he spoke, or at least he tried to.

"It's troublesome but I can't keep…" Shikamaru trailed off until his breath fogged out in a shaky cloud.

Asuma's expression held as much concern as confusion. "You okay, kid?"

Shikamaru shook his head, pressing his eyes shut. "No…" he breathed out.

Asuma felt like he'd fallen out the window all over again. Stunned by the admission, he stared through wide eyes, never having expected even a hairline crack of breakthrough with his student. Certainly not *here*; with him stuck in a bush and Shikamaru standing under the proverbial spotlight. And not so soon after the Sarutobi's last failed attempt to reach across. It didn't make sense. It didn't fit Shikamaru's avoidance pattern.

*Fuck. What's happened?*

Concern sledge-hammered into Asuma's gut. He did a quick mental run-down of the past few hours, trying to account for anything that might have triggered this. In his delay to respond, Shikamaru drew in a ragged breath and turned his head away, body about to follow the movement…about to slip out of reach…

*No.*

Asuma swung to his feet. "Shikamaru," he called, his voice soft but firm.
Shikamaru stopped as if physically barred, still facing away. At least he didn't look ready to run. Asuma let out a breath and wrestled the duffle bag free bush, his eyes on Shikamaru the entire time. If he let this moment slide, there was no guarantee he'd ever get it back. The fact that Shikamaru had reached out rather than run away said more than Asuma could have responded to in words.

He'd have to find those words.

*Don't fuck this up.*

Rather than approach Shikamaru from behind he circled around to place himself in front of the shadow-nin. The young Nara stared off down the street, not meeting Asuma's gaze. He worked his throat, frowning hard.

"Hey," Asuma said softly, setting his hand on Shikamaru's shoulder, establishing a physical link to draw his student back from whatever mental road he might be thinking of running down. "Let's get outta the cold and some place I can smoke."

Shikamaru nodded.

That was enough.

Asuma chose Mangetsu. A restaurant situated a stone's throw away from the ostracised rainbow-painted Niji. Mangetsu, meaning 'full moon', lent its name to its tradition. The establishment only ever shut on the night of a full moon; a bizarre superstition that remained the exception to the 24/7 rule. However, one rule that allowed for no exception was the treatment the owner gave Asuma.

"Indulge her," Asuma said, drawing Shikamaru's gaze as they climbed the four wide steps leading up to the restaurant. "Megumi's a little intense but just go with it, alright?"

Shikamaru glanced questioningly at his sensei, but nodded. "Whatever you say."

Stepping into the foyer of the restaurant, they were greeted by an old woman with dark silver-streaked hair pinned up with ivory sticks. She was dressed in a long silk robe, its hues as soft as the iridescent pink of a conch shell. Pretty as a porcelain doll, Megumi Yoi may have looked delicate, but the lines of age about her eyes etched a portrait of strength rather than fragility.

"Obaa-san," Asuma greeted, ignoring Shikamaru's puzzled expression at the term of endearment.

"Sarutobi-sama," Megumi returned, her formality at odds with Asuma's familiarity, pressing her hands together to bow. "It's been a long time."

Asuma winced at the high title and the distance it created between them but he smiled, returning the bow. "Long time, but same old."

'Same old' denoted the routine purpose and unspoken requirements for Asuma's visits; privacy, a little purgatory and a lot of peace. He'd come here often enough in his youth to lick his wounds and escape his father. In that time, Megumi had become somewhat of a surrogate mother. During his self-imposed exile, he'd felt more guilt over leaving her than he had his village. She'd become the maternal figure he'd never truly had, perhaps.

"Same old, he says," Megumi muttered playfully and reached out to take Asuma's hands, squeezing them with fondness, amusement dancing in her ageless eyes. "But old Megumi sees you're not the same, Asuma-kun..."
Instantly, the affectionate title put Asuma at ease and his expression relaxed into a lazy grin. "Amazing what a beard can do."

Megumi chuckled like a little girl, the giggles bubbling up in flurries. Her ability to switch between wisdom and mischief kept most people on their toes. Smiling, Megumi’s gaze strayed past Asuma, her dark almond-shaped eyes settling on Shikamaru, inquisitive and innocent as a child.

"Your student, Asuma-kun," she stated rather than guessed.

Asuma nodded. "Shikamaru, meet Megumi-san."

Shikamaru pressed his hands and bowed politely.

Megumi surprised the young Nara by stepping forward to clasp both his hands in hers, forcing him to straighten up. Without permission or hesitation she cupped his face between her long, elegant palms and studied his features. Her sage orbs shone like black tourmaline crystals, sparkling from an inner glow rather than borrowed light.

"Shikaku's boy," she said, tracing out imaginary marks on Shikamaru's face: the scars his father wore. Then she looked deep into eyes, triggering the reflex shuttering of those brown orbs.

Asuma tried not to smile at his student's automatic and defensive reaction, his attention shifting between them. He probably should've given the kid a better forewarning. But maybe this would rattle him enough to shake a few things loose.

_Maybe she'll see what I can't…_

Megumi tipped Shikamaru's head down, angling his face in an attempt to get a better look at his shuttered eyes. She clucked her tongue. "'Tsk! Open those eyes, child. Let me see you."

Shikamaru's expression pinched but the look was gone before it could settle. Instead, his hooded eyes turned to Asuma for help he wasn't going to get. Resisting a chuckle, Asuma lifted a shoulder and smoothed out his smile with his fingers, nodding towards Megumi. An unspoken reminder to indulge her. Shikamaru's jaw ticked with annoyance and he stubbornly evaded the dark eyes trying to pull him in.

Megumi chuckled, seeming to have expected no less from the young Nara. "Just like your father was. Skittish as a Nara fawn."

Not appreciating the comparison, Shikamaru's gaze cut back to the old woman and he held her stare this time. Asuma smiled behind his hand. Megumi rewarded the kid's mettle with a nod, brushing her thumbs at the corners of his eyes as if following lines of age that weren't there. She shook her head, humming a soft, sympathetic note.

"So much you carry," she said on a breath. "And so much you cannot see. You don't want to see it. It is as it should be. You're not ready."

Shikamaru's eyes rounded and looked away completely. "Ready?" he asked, sounding hoarse and troubled by the word.

Megumi smiled that enigmatic Kwan-Yin smile and patted the Nara's lean cheek, drawing his gaze back to hers. "Nara men. Such veiled creatures. With your shadowed eyes…and your funny hair."

Asuma tried not to laugh. He was long used to Megumi's mystical, maternal and overly tactile tendencies. Unprepared as Shikamaru was, it was amusing to see the ten-steps-head brain stagger
over a reaction. The young Nara opened his mouth, shut it and reached up to rub at the back of his head awkwardly.

Megumi clapped her hands with delight, laughed and led them through into the restaurant's haven. "Come, come."

Inside, Mangetsu was dark and warm, all black-lacquered cypress and gold-leaf etchings, dominated by Buddhist undertones and illuminated with delicate paper lanterns that diffused the light into low, intimate hues. Non-oppressive on tired eyes and troubled hearts. Perfect.

The booth they settled on was in a private room at the back.

Asuma took the furthest bench, which gave him a view of the entire restaurant beyond the shoji doors. Shikamaru slid in on the opposite side, moving right down to the inner-end of the booth, bracing his shoulder against the window. The view looked out onto an elegant pond garden, its curvature design rife with slim islets and narrow bridges, the red hues of dawn rippling off the koi pools.

Asuma exchanged a few quiet words with Megumi regarding privacy and ordered a big breakfast. He slipped a cigarette between his lips, watching the shadow-nin with a deceptively relaxed expression.

"Hope you're hungry," he said, flicking out his lighter, the flame sparking in the glass.

Shikamaru looked across without turning his head, chin set in his palm. "So what is she? A soothsayer or something?"

"I told you to indulge her," Asuma said by way of vague explanation, offering nothing more about the woman. "Don't worry, that's the last of it. She understands that whenever I come here it's usually because I want to be left alone."

Shikamaru arched a brow. "Why would you wanna be left alone?"

Asuma avoided the look and the question, searching the table. "We're not here to talk about me."

Shikamaru frowned and gazed out into the garden. A second later he reached to slide a glass ashtray towards his sensei, the delicate bowl whispering across the wood. A cooperative movement. Asuma acknowledged the positive sign and let out the tense breath he'd been holding.

*Play this smart…*

The Sarutobi took a deep pull on his cigarette and prayed to whatever God had brought them to this moment that he wouldn't fuck it up.

Shikamaru continued to gaze out at the garden, saying nothing.

*Probably thinking everything…*

Asuma breathed tobacco into the silence, casting up prayers with the smoke. He waited for the meals to be set down and for Megumi to slide the shoji doors shut before finally speaking.

"Alright. I'm listening," he said, crushing out his cigarette. "Talk to me."

Shikamaru was slow to answer and took two bites of tofu before responding. "You said I was like a stranger..."
Asuma looked up from his meal. "What?"

"When we played Shogi two years ago. You said it's like I wasn't there. Funny…” Shikamaru went on quietly, eyes glued to the tofu in his soup. "…that's the only time I ever felt like I came back."

How that was funny Asuma couldn't even begin to fathom. He frowned, scanning Shikamaru's expression. "Came back from where?"

Shikamaru kept his gaze on his meal, poking rice grains around as if trying to sift through his thoughts. The grind of mental wheels turning inside that genius mind had Asuma wanting to jam the gears in Shikamaru's head just to get him to talk instead of think.

Don't. Fuck. This. Up.

Asuma let the ends of his chopsticks hit the china in a soft clink. He forced himself to wait out Shikamaru's silence and was rewarded by a brief flash of eye contact.

"When you joined the elite Twelve Guardian Ninja, were you…” Shikamaru paused, searching for the right words. "Were you head-hunted for the role?"

Asuma blinked, drawing up in his seat. The memory of that time felt like cold shrapnel lodged in his skull, a constant pressure on deeply buried nerves. He really didn't want to talk about that. But, figuring that putting in an answer might get him one, he considered his response.

"I wouldn't say I was head-hunted." He scratched at his throat, adjusting the neck of his top with a grimace. "I wasn't exactly recruited in the…uh…conventional way."

Shikamaru frowned. "How did they find you?"

Asuma grunted, glancing out the window.

"Get to me?" Asuma cocked a brow at the word-choice. "You make it sound like I didn't have a choice…”

"You know what I mean," Shikamaru dismissed, an insistent edge cutting into his voice. "How'd they know you were what they wanted?"

"My reputation preceded me," Asuma joked lamely, pulling back from the memory, digging out a cigarette. "Let's just say I was notorious rather than celebrated. Why are you asking? You had a change of heart – or head – about taking up the feudal lord's offer?"
Shikamaru didn't look amused or willing to answer, his eyes sharpening on Asuma's, searching, calculating. "You went with them because you **wanted** to."

"Well sure."

"So no one tried to…" Shikamaru trailed off, fixing his gaze on the tabletop.

Asuma frowned. " Tried to what?"

"Nothing…"

*My ass nothing…*

The Sarutobi took a moment to light his cigarette and took stock of the big fat stonewall his student had pulled up. Great. Now he'd need to create some cracks in those defences in order to get breakthrough. At least Shikamaru had armed him with *some* information to use as a pick axe.

He watched Shikamaru closely, betting his instinct on the response he'd get to his next words. "Headhunting isn't bounty hunting, Shikamaru."

Shikamaru stopped just short of picking up a square of tofu. He set his chopsticks down and snorted, dodging Asuma's gaze. "I know that."

"Do you?"

Shikamaru's hands tensed and slid off the table. He leaned away. "Yeah."

Asuma took note of the retreat and tapped ash into the tray, frowning. "When you turned down the Fire Daimyō you told me you rejected that offer because you wanted to stay in Konoha to protect your friends. But you also said it wasn't anything that noble either."

Shikamaru looked up sharply, then away.

*Bingo.*

"So," Asuma blew a lazy stream of smoke. "What's the real reason you turned it down?"

Shikamaru ground his jaw. "I told you…"

"Yeah…" Asuma leaned forward, drawing Shikamaru's focus back to him, trying to strategise the best way to handle this. "And I know you're lying to me. Is that why you came here? To feed me another cock-and-bull story?"

Shikamaru blinked, eyes widening. Asuma steeled himself against the hurt pushing into those dark orbs and kept up an offended front, hoping to corral Shikamaru with guilt.

"Maybe that's not even the worst of it," Asuma went on, watching the smoke spiral from his cigarette to keep from watching his student's expression pinch. "Maybe you want to add insult to injury by not only insulting my intelligence, but insulting the fact that you know I'll hear you out every time in hopes I'll get something even close to the truth."

Shikamaru looked like he'd taken a backhander across the face. He turned his head aside, blinking fast. "That's not true…" Then quite unexpectedly, his eyes cut back, narrowing into sharp pin-points. "You have no idea…"

Asuma took note of the flip-switch reaction.
Good. I can work with anger…

Anger was better than avoidance – hell, he should know.

"No idea? You're right about that." Asuma chuckled darkly and leaned back in his seat, easing out of Shikamaru's space, giving the kid room to breathe so he didn't feel trapped. "I just have inklings instead. Lucky for me I always place more on instinct than intellect. Probably makes me a shitty liar. You on the other hand…"

Shikamaru's lips tightened, but a deep and vulnerable pain played just beneath the surface of his eyes. He'd never been able to hide that from Asuma.

So you run…I get that…

Shikamaru shot a quick glance towards the end of the bench, a subconscious search for an exit. "Just say it," he growled. "Go ahead and tell me I'm a coward and a liar. I know it. You know it. So just say it."

Asuma shook his head. "I won't deny that you've got one heck of a silver tongue on you, Shikamaru. But if you were just a liar and a coward then why are we even here?"

The question dropped like an anvil, cracking the anger off Shikamaru's face. Dark eyes widened and whatever answer the shadow-nin might have voiced never made it up his throat. His breath snagged and he looked away.

"Talk to me," Asuma said softly. "I know you want to talk to me."

Silence mocked them both. It rang in Asuma's ears, setting off all kinds of alarms. He closed his eyes, sighing. God, he'd screwed this up. Stupidly lost his chance – perhaps the only one he'd ever get.

And then fate dealt a different hand.

"Why…?"

Asuma's eyes snapped open, locking onto Shikamaru. "What?"

"Why…" The shadow-nin's voice was faint, sounding about as far away as the look in his eyes. "Why the hell did you have to tell me you were sorry?"

Asuma stared for a long second. "Because you deserved to hear it."

"I didn't need to hear it."

"Then I needed you to hear it," he said; the honest to god truth, straight out his mouth without planning or preamble. "I needed you to know that I'm sorry…and that I'll always be sorry for that."

Shikamaru took a ragged breath. "It wasn't your fault."

"This isn't about my guilt, Shikamaru." Asuma crushed out his cigarette, his voice soft and low. "But if that's what's brought you here, then I don't regret laying it on you."

"You don't have to regret anything." Shikamaru looked back at him, his voice stronger, surer. "You weren't there. It wasn't your fault. You need to get that."

"Alright. I get that."
"You're lying."

A faint smile touched Asuma's lips. "Shitty liar by my own admission."

"I don't need you to be sorry."

"You've got a real problem with that word don't you? Why is that?"

"Because it doesn't change anything." Shikamaru ground out, straining to keep his voice flat, not realising that his eyes were already betraying him. "So maybe this was just a bad idea. The past is over. It's done."

Asuma shook his head, knowing as well as his student that the only thing that was done was the lie. Shikamaru had done the lie to death. And yet like a defenceless kid he was still dragging around the tattered remains like a safety blanket, reluctant to let go.

Asuma's eyes softened. "Shikamaru…"

The look caused Shikamaru to go rigid. He struggled to hold his sensei's gaze. "Quit looking at me like that. I don't need your regret."

"Is that why we're having this talk?" Asuma's gaze held fast on his student, a dark brow drawing up. "To make me feel better? That's not your job."

"It's not your job to protect me either. I'm not a Genin anymore," Shikamaru snarled back, blinking fast, latching onto the logic to save him from the emotion Asuma could already see rising in his eyes and roughening his voice. "You're not responsible for me and—"

"Does your father know?" Asuma cut in.

Shikamaru went rigid, leaving Asuma in no doubt of the answer. And the certainty of the answer ate into that knot of guilt Asuma had carried around like a cancer for two years.

"Guess that's a no-brainer, huh? Course he doesn't," Asuma said quietly, his eyes softening into deep wells of sadness. "You wouldn't still be in this state if he did."

A long stare punctuated by a longer silence.

He watched Shikamaru's mouth twist, lips pressed tight while the shadow-nin fought with himself, his breath coming a little harder through his nose.

"He can't change it…" Shikamaru grit out. "Neither can you…so spare me your guilt."

"You're not responsible for how I feel about the mistakes I've made."

"And you're not responsible for how I feel about what I've done."

"What you've done?" Asuma challenged in a deadly quiet voice. "Or what was done to you?"

Shikamaru pulled back in his seat. The flush of anger sucked out of his face, leaving him pale and stricken. "Don't. Don't twist it."

"Twist what?"

Shikamaru struggled to respond, his gaze seeming to bounce off every surface as he searched internally for some defence, eyes cutting back and forth across the table.
Riding on instinct alone, Asuma drew a deep breath and dropped his next question before Shikamaru could recover. "I know that something happened to you during those Chūnin exams two years ago. Did someone *get* to you before the Fire Daimyō?"

Shikamaru's gaze stopped darting. He sucked a breath through his nose.

Asuma's heart twisted just short of tearing.

*Genma, I'm gonna fucking castrate you...*

Getting a grip on his anger, Asuma pushed himself to go on, to do what he hadn't had the heart to do before. "Did someone try to—"

"*Don't*, Asuma...don't go there..."

Asuma set his forearms on the table, bridging distance very slowly. "It's alright."

Panicked, Shikamaru's eyes locked onto Asuma's chest, though the Jōnin sensed he wasn't seeing a thing. He had the look of someone whose systems were shutting down and walls were closing in. Those luminous orbs grew wider, haloed gold in the preternatural light streaking through the room, gazing without focus...staring...staring...

Asuma's stomach double-clutched at the lost expression. "I know you're scared."

Shikamaru's jaw quivered. He husked a shaking laugh, eyes glazed, his voice strained and small. "You don't know what I am..."

Asuma smiled sadly, a tender look. "I know *who* you are, if that helps."

A sheen of tears glazed Shikamaru's eyes.

*There you are, kid.*

Asuma had to push down the emotion that slammed into his diaphragm. "Shikamaru. It's alr—"

"It was supposed to be a mission," Shikamaru cut in, his voice hoarse. "A side op."

A chill shot through Asuma. "Supposed to be?"

"Three, there were three..."

Just like the reports had stated. Asuma nodded encouragingly. "And what happened?"

"I failed..."

"You failed?" Asuma frowned. "You mean it was just you on this side-op?"

There was no way that was possible.

Shikamaru didn't acknowledge the question. With a sudden turn of his head, his glazed stare swung out the window. And just as quickly as he'd opened up, the proverbial door slammed shut between them.

*Shit!*

Refusing to let that thread of truth slide, Asuma tried to configure the best way to reel Shikamaru...
Okay, this pseudo-mission," he prodded gently. "Did it take place outside of Kusagakure?"

Shikamaru nodded once. No hesitation.

"Where?"

"I don't know…"

Asuma cocked an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"I don't remember."

"How can you not re—"

"Dissociative amnesia," Shikamaru supplied robotically, continuing to stare numbly out the window, his eyes damp and distant. "That's the PTSD textbook definition for it." A brittle, black laugh – almost incredulous. "I researched…"

Dissociative amnesia. PTSD…

The translation shot up on instant recall: Post traumatic stress disorder. Dread dropped like lead into the bottom of Asuma's stomach, leaving him feeling a little dizzy and a little sick.

"Amnesia?" he echoed.

"Dissociative." Shikamaru sniffed and shook his head at his reflection, or maybe at the irony of his next words. "I remember things I wish I could forget…what the hell does that say…about what I can't remember?"

No amount of foreboding could have prepared Asuma for that. He felt like something was shaking inside him. Anger seemed safer than fear and it ignited in the pit of his belly, sending red smoke to his brain, threatening to fog out the clarity he needed to continue with his questions.

Calm down.

Asuma straightened up and set his hands on his thighs, the muscles harder than steel.

Get. A. Name.

He pulled in a deep breath and let it out through his nose. "Does the name Naoki mean anything to you?"

Shikamaru shook his head, a genuine lack of recognition as far as Asuma could tell.

Is that because you don't know…or because you can't remember?

God, what the hell had happened? What the hell had Shikamaru experienced that his subconscious had swallowed most of it into shadow? Asuma searched his student's profile, emotion clawing across his own face, tearing a deep furrow into his brow.

"Shikamaru…" he murmured. "Will you tell me what you do remember?"

Shikamaru said nothing, his moist eyes gaining and losing focus, like some part of him was struggling to minimize the memory while another part was magnifying it in his mind's eye. His breathing began to fray, coming harder through his nose.
Asuma fought not to reach across, his voice soft. "I need you to tell me what you remember."

For a long moment Shikamaru just stared at the condensation of his breath against the glass, watching it fog and fade in ragged puffs. Then he pressed back against the booth, as if drawing away from a dangerous mental edge.

Asuma willed him over it, just a little, just enough to get a name, a clue, a confirmation of the location Genma had given him…something…anything…

"Shikamaru…"

"What I dream…that's what I remember…"

"What do you dream?"

"Pieces...in pieces..." Shikamaru didn't blink, didn't breathe, didn't break state for a long moment, almost like he'd slipped into trance. "Faces, voices, noise...an onsen...a baiting cellar..."

"Baiting cellar?"

Nodding slowly, Shikamaru went on in a toneless murmur, the details drifting through his mind and out of his mouth like smoke; obscure, vague. "Sometimes I'm watching it...sometimes I'm in it...I can't get out. I don't know whether that's imagined or remembered. But I remember the noise..."

"Noise?" Asuma pressed quietly.

"Animals...and something else I can't make out. They said I'd proved my mind. Proved I was a strategist...but he wanted to bring out something else."

"He?" Asuma latched onto the pronoun, desperate to attach a name and face to it. He felt his body cramping with restraint, holding back the urge to jerk forward. "Who?"

Shikamaru didn't register that he'd even made the transition from 'they' to 'he' and continued on in the same remote tone, oblivious to Asuma's interruption. "They said it was a different kind of game...a bigger game...the instinct to survive. To understand motive at a base level..." he broke off here to snatch a breath, blinking fast, breathing harder. "It didn't have anything to do with strategy."

Asuma frowned, jaw clenched so hard his molars creaked. He had to focus. He couldn't react. He needed to respond. Get answers. "Then what did it have to do with?"

"Bringing out my instinct..." Shikamaru gave a choked laugh, the sound shaking him like the tremors before a break. His was sweating now, voice trembling. "Bringing out my fear...taking away the board..."

The board?

Asuma struggled to stay in his seat. He could almost see Shikamaru inching towards the mental ledge. He felt like he was standing right there with his student. Unconsciously, the Jōnin reached up to grip the edge of the table.

"Shikamaru...give me a name."

Shikamaru's throat closed up and he strained to swallow, panting through his nose, grimacing at the
pain. He reached up to rub at his face, pulled his hands back in shock and stared at his sweating palms and shaking fingers.

"This is…crazy…" he croaked out, trembling. "No. It's not real."

Fuck.

Asuma made to reach across. "Shikamaru…"

Startled, Shikamaru jerked away from the table, staggering in an attempt to bolt up and twist out of the booth, panic tearing at his breath.

Asuma shot forward and grabbed his wrist, yanking him back. "Don't run."

Shikamaru glared at Asuma's hand and his eyes seemed to eclipse like black discs, going dead and cold. Trembling lips parted and his voice came out so chillingly calm that it seemed completely detached from him.

"Get the fuck off me."

That voice washed Asuma cold. His heart dropped into his stomach and he lurched to his feet, getting a rough grip on Shikamaru's nape.

"HEY!" Asuma barked, anchoring their gazes, searching those murky eyes for some hint of recognition. He snatched his fingers in front of Shikamaru's face and shook him hard. "Focus! Come back here. Look at me, Shikamaru!"

Shikamaru's blinked, breaking out of whatever zone he'd slipped into. Dark orbs refocused on Asuma, wide and wet. "Let go, sensei…"

Asuma almost hesitated, almost gave in to the plea. He tightened his grip instead, his voice level and low. "And let you fall? Not happening. You came this far and I'll pull you the rest of the way if I have to. Even if I have to go through your shadows to get to you."

Confusion twisted Shikamaru's expression and the look was all the confirmation Asuma needed; the shadow-nin didn't realise what had just happened. He'd zoned out completely. Frowning, Asuma transferred his grip to Shikamaru's shoulders, keeping a solid hold on his student, cursing the table that restricted his leeway.

"Just tell me," he urged, torn between wanting to pull Shikamaru away from the pain and push him through it all at the same time. "Tell me so I can help you make sense of this. Tell me so I can help you make it stop!"

Shikamaru shook his head violently but he didn't try to break Asuma's grip. He could have, he could have twisted out of it. But he didn't. And the fact that he didn't screamed for help so loud Asuma could almost hear it.

Dammit! I'm RIGHT HERE!

Giving into the frustration rather than the sadness, Asuma seized his anger with both hands, his fingers digging in at Shikamaru's shoulders, wanting the kid's shaking to stop, wanting the questions and lies to stop.

"Stop RUNNING from me!"
"I CAN'T!" Shikamaru snarled, the anger lashing forward, teeth bared. He hunched his shoulders, tried to break that grip. "I can't STOP! I don't know HOW!"

Asuma gripped harder. "Yes you do. You did. You know how. God dammit. You came to me didn't you? You reached out. And now you're ready to cut and run? If you can't find it in yourself to try then try me. Try me if you don't trust me."

"Don't do that..." Shikamaru whispered, the plea snagging in his throat. He reached up with both hands to grip his skull but stopped at shoulder height, warding Asuma off with shaking palms. "Don't mess up my head with words...don't...it's not about trust..."

"And it's not about your head. I'd never play those games with you," Asuma growled back. "The only game we play is Shogi."

"Then consider this checkmate, sensei..." Shikamaru shot back, his voice rough as sandpaper. He wrenched free and made to twist from the booth, disoriented and desperate to escape. "I'm done!"

Done. Finished. Too late.

NO.

"The HELL you are!" Asuma snarled.

In one violent swing, he slammed his fist into the booth before Shikamaru could slip from it, crushing the wood beneath the plush upholstery, barring the shadow-nin's exit.

Shikamaru went rigid, stopped cold.

Asuma leaned in, growling his words directly into Shikamaru's ear. "SIT. DOWN."

The shadow-nin remained paralyzed, eyes fixed on Asuma's arm as if that punch had gone through him instead. Neither said anything for a moment. Asuma had stopped breathing altogether, the tension radiating off him so strong he could have sworn it was the force of his desperation crushing Shikamaru against the side of the booth. As it was, he wasn't touching the kid, but Shikamaru looked like something had a death grip on him.

The fear...

Asuma's eyes softened, his voice trembling hard. "God you stubborn kid. What the hell is it? Why can't you try? If it's over and done with then why are you still so scared?"

Ashen-faced, Shikamaru's stared ahead, eyes blind with fear.

God please...

Asuma let go of his tension by degrees, but didn't lower his arm, keeping his student penned in. "If you can't tell me what happened or who did it...then tell me WHY you can't."

"Stop..." Shikamaru rasped.

"Tell me why."

"I can't."

"WHY, Shikamaru!"
"I CAN'T!"

"DAMMIT!" Asuma shouted, leaning in. "What the hell are you so afraid of!"

"ME!" Shikamaru roared, the word tearing up like a piece of his soul, bloody and raw. The tears sheeted thick across his eyes and he snapped his head around to glare at Asuma. "Because maybe I'm something WORSE than they were! Worse than HE was!"

Asuma stared, numbed by the outburst. "…What?"

"THAT'S WHY!" Shikamaru shouted, his voice starting to break. "Don't ask me to go BACK! No one else did! And I'm GLAD! If I don't remember what those people made me do then I don't have to KNOW! Don't ask me to MAKE IT REAL, Asuma! It's not REAL anymore! It's OVER!"

Feeling something giving way in his chest, Asuma's hands flew up again. He gripped Shikamaru's shoulders and shook the kid so hard his teeth rattled. "It's NOT over!"

"YES it is!"

"It's not OVER until whoever hurt you is in the god damned GROUND!"

"Then it's ALREADY over!"

"WHY!"

"BECAUSE I KILLED HIM!" Shikamaru exploded, screaming the words point-blank into Asuma's face. "He's DEAD! He's in the GROUND because I KILLED HIM!"

The air went out of Asuma's lungs.

He let go of Shikamaru.

The shadow-nin dropped. His knees buckled and his elbows hit the table in a loud crack, head falling into his hands, fingers digging into his skull. "I killed him…" he gasped out.

Shock knocked Asuma's mind one way and then another.

"And I'm not sorry…" the shadow-nin husked, throat all but closing on the words. He stared through red, tear-struck eyes at the centre of the table, looking shaken to the core. "I don't care…I stuck that needle in his neck…and dragged him down into that pit…and I'm NOT sorry…"

Asuma stared down at Shikamaru incomprehensively, stunned speechless. If that wasn't enough, the futility of everything he'd been trying to fix hit him broadside and kicked his feet out from under him completely.

"God…"

Asuma sank down in his seat.

Silence dropped with him, cold and crushing.

A hundred questions swam around his head, instincts circling around the answers like sharks,
smelling the rancid stench of blood yet but unable to find the bodies.

_Because I'm too late…_

Always too late. Asuma grit his teeth. Veins pulsed, blood roared and his fingers balled into fists. But there was no one to kill. No named perpetrator to punish. The body he wanted to destroy was already buried. And all that was left was the gory, psychological mess from the aftermath.

_And I've left you alone in this...for two years…_

The shock wore off and time snapped back.

Almost peripherally, Asuma noticed that the red hues of dawn had begun to fade into a bowl of buttermilk sky, soft beams slanting through the glass to bathe the surface of the table. The light was both calm and clear, bearing witness to something that was neither.

The pastel glow drew Asuma's eyes to Shikamaru's hands.

Palms pressed against his skull, the shadow-nin's knuckles were bleached white from the strain, sinews paler than chalk against his skin, the lines strung so tight his fingers were shaking...arms trembling...shoulders held rigid in attempt to stop it…

The shock fell away from Asuma completely.

His heart throbbed and a gutting pain tore down the centre of his chest. "Shikamaru…"

No reaction.

Blinking back the moist sting in his eyes, Asuma reached up with both hands, pushed aside the trays of food and took hold of Shikamaru's forearms. The gentle contact triggered a reaction that shook the Chūnin's entire body in one crumbling shudder.

Shikamaru's expression broke like glass, eyes screwing shut. And finally the tears came, scalding and silent, squeezing out of him. "Fuck…what am I…?"

Asuma's breath caught on the knot in his throat. "You're a good kid, that's what you are."

"Then...why..." Shikamaru dug the heels of his hands into his eyes, shaking like a palsy victim. "No one said anything...asked anything...I...couldnt remember...and I didn't even wanna know...I didn't ask...didn't want to...and anything I remembered...I didn't tell anyone...because I..."

"Hey," Asuma whispered, squeezing the shadow-nin's arms, pulling his hands away from his face. "Look at me..."

"Because I can take what he did to me...but what about what _I_ did...?" Shikamaru choked out, staring at his palms, at the bitter salt of his tears. "What if I'm...something worse...?"

"You're not," Asuma growled, pressing Shikamaru's arms again, trying to impress his words into the grip. "I need you to trust me on that."

"How?" Shikamaru screwed his eyes shut, turning his face away. "I'm not sorry...and I don't wanna go back to find out if I should be...that's messed up..." A shattered breath tore out of him, strangling into a sob. "I'm messed up..."

Asuma drew him forward until the Nara's elbows slid across the wood, allowing for Shikamaru to curl down toward the tabletop. The shadow-nin dropped his head between his arms with a rattling
breath, the tears leaking out like blood.

"You're not messed up." Asuma laid a hand on Shikamaru's nape, squeezing gently, leaning down until their heads were almost touching. "People don't shed tears over things they don't care about. But let me tell you something. I don't care what you had to do to get out and get home...you're a good kid, Shikamaru...you're not whatever the hell 'they' or *he* told you that you were..."

Shikamaru shook his head and tried to pull away.

"Don't even think about it," Asuma growled, pulling him back. "You know I'll chase you down. Don't make me. Not now that I've finally caught up."

Shikamaru sank forward at the words, resistance collapsing, muscles trembling, breath snagging in shallow gasps. Asuma hummed quietly and continued to keep contact at the shadow-nin's nape, providing that vital lifeline, that crucial link.

A crucial link that comes too damn late...I should have been there...why didn't I prepare for this...? Why did I let her send you? Why didn't I think ahead? Why didn't I stop it? Why didn't Genma get you help? Why doesn't Shikaku know?

Why. Why. WHY!

It didn't matter that the 'whys' wouldn't change a damn thing. It didn't matter that the 'whys' had no bearing on the past or the people in it. It didn't matter that hindsight made everything seem solvable and reversible when in reality it didn't work that way.

It didn't matter at all.

Because as useless as those 'whys' were now, they cued up in Asuma's mind regardless of their futility. God, just the thought of anyone hurting Shikamaru had been unthinkable...and now to know for sure that someone had...

WHY!

Asuma gritted his teeth, trying to pull his own composure together, taking the opportunity to clench his eyes shut while his student couldn't see his face.

*If you hadn't killed him, God knows I would have.*

And God knows he'd have made it a slow, painful death to a vile, perpetual hell.

As for what Shikaku would have done...

The fact that Shikaku didn't even *know* opened up one massive, messy Pandora's Box of dark questions; all of them relating to how the *hell* this information had been kept from the elder Nara in the first place.

*Another web of lies...*

And Shikamaru had been caught up in it, struggling to keep all the threads together just to keep himself from coming apart.

*God...I'm sorry...*

Asuma stroked a hand over Shikamaru's head. "I'd undo it for you if I could."
Shikamaru made a tight, choked sound, his voice rasping out so faintly that Asuma had to cock his head down to hear it. "You're always chasing me down."

The Jōnin swallowed hard. "Keeps me spry," he teased, desperate to alleviate the pressure in his own chest. "But you don't need to run from me now. Or from yourself."

Shikamaru shook his head back and forth, ponytail slashing from side to side. "It's lost…I can't get a grip…"

Asuma ducked his head down, speaking quietly. "When you feel strong enough to remember it, it will come back. And when you're ready to face it and to talk about it, I'll be here. However long it takes. I'm not going anywhere. I won't let you fall. I won't leave you alone in this."

Asuma let the promise in those words settle over the silence. It was all the Jōnin could do to keep from raging, from taking matters into his own hands. But if Shikaku didn't know, then he'd have to play it very carefully. He'd need to get his tactics flawless and bide his time.

But that time would come.

And God help whoever had a role in the cover-up and a hand in the crime.

Because there was still a 'them' to punish if not a 'He'. There would be a line of perpetrators who'd allowed whoever had hurt Shikamaru the power to access him. And Asuma would sniff out those responsible, hunt them down and take them out. He'd dog them one by one if he had to. Wouldn't be the first time he'd exterminated so-called 'untouchables'; players that moved in social circles above suspicion and beyond reproach. He hadn't been an elite protector to one of the most powerful Daimyō's for nothing.

And that was based on principle.

This had nothing to do with duty or principles.

This is personal…

He wasn't a creature of detachment and logic when it came to what mattered. He wasn't Kakashi and he sure as hell wasn't Genma. Maybe he'd never have gotten this close to his students if he had been. And he wouldn't have sacrificed those bonds for anything, even if it would've made life easier.

Team 10 were the unit he'd not only taken on, but taken in.

They'd saved him from a life of aimless drifting.

They'd given him back what the Guardian Twelve had broken.

Those bonds went deeper than blood…and woe to anyone who underestimated how far he'd go to protect them.

I'll go as far as it takes me.

Even if it came too late, even if the blame stopped at whoever Shikamaru had killed, even if dredging it all up two years later seemed senseless and sadistic.

"If you care about that Nara kid, you'll let this go."

Fuck that.
It was because he cared that he couldn't. Wouldn't.

Someone will pay for this...I swear it...

Shikamaru let out a shuddering breath, drawing Asuma's focus back. The shadow-nin turned his head to one side like a diver coming up for air, resting a lean cheek against his arm. He'd stopped shaking, his breathing steadier, softer.

Asuma drew his hand back and pressed the Nara's wrist, checking his pulse at the same time, waiting until the beat began to settle. "I know who you are inside. And nothing and no one can touch that."

Shikamaru swallowed with difficulty, not saying anything for a long moment. "And if there's something else inside me?" he whispered, almost to himself.

Asuma's grip tightened, his voice a low growl that came out fiercer than a shout, rumbling with strength and emotion. "You listen to me and you hear me on this, Shikamaru. I don't give a damn what you needed to do to survive. You get that? Look at me."

With more struggle than Asuma could stand to see, Shikamaru straightened up just enough to raise his eyes, gazing at his sensei like a lost kid, his whisky-brown orbs limed with tears – letting Asuma read it all in his face.

The Sarutobi acknowledged the drop of defences with a gentle nod. "Whatever you had to do, it doesn't matter."

Shikamaru searched his sensei's face for a lie, desperate to believe the words but not daring to allow himself that reassurance. His eyes pinched. "You're wrong. It should matter..."

Asuma blinked, hearing his own voice in Shikamaru's words...and then Kakashi's voice, calm as you please, gliding over both:

"...morality comes with many faces and it changes according to custom, culture and more importantly, according to context, which is often affected by who and what we care about."

Asuma swallowed, feeling like he'd just been force-fed the obvious all over again. He couldn't help but smile a little, knowing Kakashi was – as usual – irritatingly right about objective insight into subjective matters. Not that Asuma would ever admit it...well, not aloud anyway.

"Maybe it should matter..." Asuma said. "To the moral police. But not to me."

Shikamaru's eyes widened. "But—"

"But nothing," Asuma growled. "I don't care how selfish that sounds. I don't care how low you had to crawl in order to make it back onto your feet. It brought you home. It brought you back. That's all I care about."

Another searching look, another rattling breath. "What if I never got back up?"

"You did."

"How do you know?"

Asuma smiled sadly. "Because even running away takes getting back up again. And you've been running a long time. Time to stop. You're safe now."
Shikamaru blinked slowly, the words sinking in. And for the first time since talking about this, he didn't slip away into those subconscious shadows like he had countless times before. For the first time, Asuma saw something lingering behind the pain and fear in those eyes, standing stronger than the shadows. He saw the seven-year-old Nara boy looking back at him, searching for clouds in the smoke. Lost, but not gone.

_That kid. God. That's all I needed to see…_

Because that kid had survived whatever hell the teenager had been through. Maybe something was broken inside, wrapped up tight in the darkness of Shikamaru's unconscious. But whatever was broken wasn't beyond repair. It was haunted but not hollow, disillusioned but not dead. And now, finally, they could work on bringing Shikamaru out of those shadows. Work on treating those wounds he'd stitched up with the infection still burning under the scars. Those scars would need to be cut open again so the poison could bleed out.

_But not today._

Shikamaru wasn't ready yet. But he'd taken the first step. Asuma would meet him at the threshold and pull him the rest of the way if he had to.

_I can't change what happened to you…but whatever that bastard and those people did to you, I'm not gonna let you fall because of it._

Asuma planted his hand on Shikamaru's head and rocked him on the spot. "You're going to get through this. And I'm going to be right beside you…booting you up the ass and dragging you by the ear if need's be."

Shikamaru was quiet for a long second before he mumbled a soft "Troublesome…" beneath his breath.

The familiar catchphrase was the signal. The returning grip on the hand Asuma would never stop holding out. It was another step forward, tentative but true.

"You bet," Asuma replied, looking up under his hand to catch Shikamaru's gaze, raising his brows. "So, you hearing me here or what?"

Shikamaru gazed back, processing, absorbing. He nodded beneath the grounding weight of his teacher's hand, lips flicking up at one corner.

"I hear you, sensei."

Asuma returned the smile.

For now, that was all he needed to know.
"Red clouds at night are a shepherd's delight. But red clouds at morning are a shepherd's warning."

The rhyme was a joke Chiriku-sama had shared with Sarutobi Asuma. It had something to do with their time as protectors to the Feudal Lord.

Yuji remembered the words well.

He remembered the way his Master had tried to contain his amusement to a smile, while Asuma's laugh had rolled warm and loud across the high walls of the Fire Temple.

Oh Gods the Temple…

Yuji's legs wobbled beneath him. He sobbed, staggered, then stumbled on.

Gone.

The Temple was gone. Gone like his brothers. Gone like Chiriku-sama.

I'm so sorry!

Yuji blinked the tears from his eyes, tried to choke down the next sob that threatened. The vision of red clouds had come weeks ago. A foreboding premonition, a God-sent warning of the shadow of death approaching the Temple.

He'd thought nothing of it.

Even on patrol, he'd dawdled in the hills and returned too late.

"Red clouds at night are a shepherd's delight. But red clouds at morning are a shepherd's warning."

The wolves had come. The sheep were slaughtered and the shepherd slain. Those clouds had swept in with the morning…red as the mists of hell…painted on the black cloaks of the Akatsuki demons.

Killers! Murderers!

Yuji felt the grief and terror clog in his throat.

They'd snuffed out every life, sent every one of his brothers' souls into Kwan Yin's arms long before their time. Ruthless. Merciless. Pursuing bloodshed with the same sick indifference as death pursues life.

Monsters…MONSTERS…!

Yuji's heart lurched at the memory of violet eyes and skeletal skin…of a nauseating triangle of
blood…of that huge, vile scythe cutting through flesh and bone and brick…of the other monster's puppet-like limbs and soulless green orbs…

Run…run…RUN…

His time was not done.

His mission was to warn the Hokage.

And the urge to reach Konoha before those filthy animals could reach the black market station drove him on…as did the vision of his dead Master. A vision of sage, serious eyes that wordlessly spurred him to keep running…when all he wanted to do was drop to his knees and cry.

I'm sorry! I'm so sorry…

His lungs burned, limbs seeming to drag, heavy as leaden clubs.

Don't stop!

Hours. He'd been running for hours.

DO NOT STOP!

He flew down the steady grade of the rock, tripping, stumbling, but not falling. He couldn't fall. Sobs of frustration and fear caught in his throat, but he kept going, knowing what it would mean if he stopped.

I will not fail you, Chiriku-sama!

The vow pushed him forward…loyalty to dead men and mentors pushing him further and faster…onwards until the endless stretch of rock gave way to an endless stretch of trees…trees that loomed over him, the red canopies like red clouds…

Yuji choked out a cry.

I WILL NOT FAIL.

The world bled away, bled into a blur, bled into a stream of brown and red and black…streaking past his blurry vision in blotches…bloody stains…in a distorted hell…

And then hell's long road gave way to something in the distance…

Haven…hope…

Konoha!

The huge gates of the village stood open, like arms beckoning him forward.

Yuji cried out and flailed his arms like a man struggling against a current, waving wildly, garbled words rising up his throat. He didn't have the breath to shout.

He didn't need to.

At the gatepost, two shinobi spotted him, drawing up in confusion before starting forward.

Yuji's heart soared ahead of his feet.
I…made it…

Relief crashed through him and his legs gave way.

The running Chūnin reached him just as he collapsed.

"Whoa! Easy, take it easy…” a voice soothed. "What happened?"

Yuji blinked away the tears blurring his vision, bringing into focus a face bisected by a strip of white that ran across the bridge of the shinobi's nose. Yuji curled his fists into the Chūnin's grey uniform, pulling him close to stare into wide dark eyes, as if his own look of terror could translate his message.

"They came…they killed…everyone…everyone…”

Kotetsu's brows shot up then pulled together sharply. He took hold of the monk's shoulders, steadying the shaking man. "Who?"

"The…red clouds…"

Izumo came to his side, face pale and lips drawn tight. "Akatsuki?"

Yuji turned tear-glazed eyes up towards the young ninja, mouthing his next words on a watery breath. "It's…begun…"

"Checkmate."

"Bullshit."

Shikamaru arched a brow and cocked his head towards the board.

Asuma leaned down and studied the formation of the pieces with a scowl. It took about two seconds of outright denial before his mouth dropped open, cigarette falling into his lap to burn a few holes in his slacks.

"SHIT!"

Chōji laughed, watching from over the edge of the hammock he'd settled in, playing spectator to Shikamaru and Asuma's game. "Dinner is on you tonight, sensei."

Asuma pinched his smouldering cigarette between his fingers, his scowl divided three-ways between his slacks, his wallet and his shame. "How did that happen? I swear to god I had you that time."

Shikamaru smirked, flicking his eyes up from the board. "You fail at Shogi, sensei…"

"You fail at life, Shikamaru," Ino defended, perched beside Asuma at the edge of the Nara's porch, painting her toenails. "I can't believe you didn't dance with Temari. Not even once. I mean, at least Asuma-sensei has a love life. He's a full Libra, which means he's romantic."

Choking on his attempt to inhale smoke, Asuma's eyes did a flashbulb imitation and a violent blush crested the collar of his turtleneck. He hacked out a rattling cough, but his fight to breathe didn't warrant any sympathy, only snickers.

Shikamaru set his chin in his palm and tapped his lips, smiling behind his fingers. "Oh yeah? Got
any pointers, sensei? Maybe the best way to land when falling head-over-heels outta a window?"

Asuma shot him a black look that screamed 'you traitorous little shit'. Shikamaru gazed back with a lazy smirk.

"Or falling head-over-heels into loooove," Ino crooned, pretending to swoon. "Not that Shikamaru knows anything about that."

Shikamaru shook his head at her theatrics, amusement tugging hard at the corners of his mouth. "I'm way too smart to do something that stupid."

"Pfft." She waved him off. "Asuma totally needs to educate you."

"Can we not bring me into this?" Asuma muttered, pressing his cigarette back between his lips, hunching over the board with a grumble.

"Oh hey! Speaking of education, Asuma-sensei, weren't you supposed to give us the birds and bees talk?" Chōji chirped, adding to Asuma's humiliation with an indulgent grin. "Iruka-sensei never did."

The colour Asuma had gained abruptly dropped off his face. "What?" he croaked.

"All-rounded education is important," Chōji went on, grinning.

Ino bit her tongue, trying hard not to laugh. "Yeah, isn't that part of your job, sensei? I mean, Shikamaru could realllly use that talk."

Shikamaru levelled Ino with a deadpan look and without even bothering to lift his chin from his palm he curled his fingers down until his middle digit remained.

Ino stuck her tongue out with a shrill 'hee'. "Don't be crabby. I was just playing."

*Crabby?*

Shikamaru smoothed his fingers out, turning his palm sideways to prop his jaw again. If only she knew how far from crabby he felt right now. For the first time in weeks, he felt like something had shifted. Neji had rocked the ground beneath his feet and Asuma had reached out to turn the ugly underworld of Shikamaru's fear on its axis.

And while he still felt shaky, for the first time in a long time, Shikamaru felt…safe…

*I'm not alone…*

The reality of that truth had finally penetrated the defences he'd built up, coaxing him to bring them down one brick at a time – and more than one wall had crumbled in the process. The aftershocks of what had happened earlier in Mangetsu with Asuma still rattled through him, sending tremors through his smiles and laughs. But unlike all the times before, he made no attempt to hide this from his sensei…or from his friends.

Going against every instinctive grain of fear, he'd let it show.

And rather than the twenty-question drill from Ino and the alarmed stares he'd been expecting from Chōji, his team-mates had responded in a way Shikamaru hadn't dared to hope for. They'd responded to his uncharacteristic flashes of vulnerability with an intuitive and intrinsic sense of understanding.
In their words, gestures and in the safety of an easy silence.

They'd held the fort for him by simply staying strong every time he felt a brick of resistance come crumbling down. With Asuma guiding them, Chōji and Ino had followed their sensei's lead to keep Shikamaru steady. They'd kept him grounded…kept him here, in the reality, not in the ruins of fears he didn't have to face alone anymore.

"Trust those around you to support you..."

He finally understood the faith Asuma had put in Team 10…and felt ashamed that he hadn't shared it. Regretted that he'd doubted it even for a second – although, maybe it was more that he'd doubted himself. In the blackness of forgotten memories and the ones that remained to haunt him, doubt about his own nature had festered with the poison.

You guys never doubt me...

Before, the faith Ino and Chōji put in him had felt like pressure and expectancy.

But now…it felt like acceptance…safety…trust...

Shikamaru watched Ino quietly for a moment, not hearing a word as she yammered on about something that seemed to be upping Asuma's blood pressure one shade of red at a time. She needle and nagged him like hell, but she knew him better than he'd ever given her credit for.

Shikamaru smiled a little.

You and Chōji…you've always been there...

Without turning his head, the shadow-nin transferred his gaze to his best friend. Chōji swung lazily in the hammock, laughing loudly and scratching at a spot of barbecue sauce on his red sweater. The kindest person Shikamaru knew and the most unconditionally supportive.

You guys have always had my back…even when I turned mine on both of you...and ran...

Shikamaru blinked slowly, then looked across at his sensei.

And even when I ran...you've always been there...

Shikamaru watched Asuma fumble awkwardly. The Jōnin looked like he was close to a stroke, the heat in his cheeks flaring brighter than was probably healthy. He rubbed at the back of his head until the strands stood even more on end, looking electric, which only encouraged Ino and Chōji to needle him further about grooming tips and the attractiveness of facial hair.

Shikamaru smiled, watching his teacher through calm, clear eyes.

You've always chased me down…always pulled me through without even realising it…you've taught me so much…but I've still got so much to learn from you...

Because as elusive a teacher as Asuma was, his lessons – once learned – were never forgotten. He didn't drop pearls of wisdom with witty or wise speeches or teach principles through standard procedure and practice. Occasionally, he'd play the sensei-game by the rules, but more often than not, he imparted knowledge in conversations more casual than 'classroom' and in interactions more open than orchestrated.

For Shikamaru, Asuma taught the most crucial lessons and imparted the most important knowledge
without even knowing he was doing it.

Crazy...how you're totally selfish and totally selfless all at the same time...

Because these crucial lessons were demonstrated in the way that Asuma led his life...in the way he'd lived rather than the rules he'd learned...in the way he walked rather than the way he talked. And in the way he inspired Shikamaru to want to aspire to something...when all his life the shadow-nin had just wanted to drift on by without direction or drama.

You hate drama too, but you'd risk it...you'd make those exceptions...

Shikamaru glanced down at the Shogi board, studying the moves Asuma had made. Bold, brash moves that had gained him some ground even though they'd cost him the game. But they'd made for an interesting and engaging match.

You're not keen on trouble...but you're not afraid of it either...that's what you told me when I was a kid. Everything's always been too troublesome for me...but maybe that's because I just haven't had the guts to do what you did...to risk facing myself...

Shikamaru glanced up again and watched Asuma fish around for a cigarette to distract from his embarrassment while Ino propped her Zodiac book on her lap and listed off his romantic Libran qualities.

Shikamaru's smile softened.

I promise you...someday soon I'll be strong enough to stand still and hold my ground...to be strong like you...to face myself...

He watched the flame dance on Asuma's lighter, burning with that Will of Fire he had yet to fully understand and fully inherit.

I'll find that fire...but if it's okay with you...just for a while...I'll stay in your shadow rather than get lost in my own...just until I'm strong enough...

"Shikamaru?"

Shikamaru blinked, looking up sharply. "Hn?"

"All okay?" Asuma asked around a smile, brows raised, concern playing just beneath the surface of his eyes.

Shikamaru nodded and reached across to set Asuma's King on the board, lips curling in a teasing smile. "Rematch? I'll go easy on you."

Asuma barked a laugh and snapped his lighter shut, exhaling a lungful of smoke. "What is this? Torture your sensei day?"

"Treat your students day!" Ino wobbled onto her feet, keeping her toes splayed as she padded off the porch and flopped onto the hammock beside Chōji, almost capsizing them. "More Nijū Shōtai training starts in an hour so we're taking advantage while we can."

"Yeah, maybe we should bet breakfast on this round." Chōji kicked the hammock into a swing, holding up a hand. "If you win, sensei, I'll pay for everything!"

Asuma looked askance at Shikamaru, eyes narrowing in playful menace. "Today's the day I beat
you."

Shikamaru sucked his teeth to keep from smiling and forced his mouth into a downward turn, shaking his head with a grunt. "Then it'll be a fun day for Tonton."

"What? Why?"

Shikamaru shrugged. "She'll be flying."

Silence – thick and trembling with withheld laughter.

It was broken first by Asuma's crappy comeback of "smartass" before the team dissolved into laughter. Laughter that tumbled through Shikamaru in a warm and husky roll, shaking off the grip of ghosts and the weight of memory...leaving only one voice to haunt him now...

"I'll keep our pieces, Shikamaru. You can let them go."

Shikamaru leaned back onto his palms while Asuma calculated his first move and turned his gaze towards the clouds.

*Can't play without the pieces, Hyūga...wouldn't mind a rematch...*

Little did he know that fate was playing ten steps head, already moving their pieces, right on the cusp of a greater game. But it wasn't the business of mortals to deal in destiny. They could only play with the cards of choice and chance that she handed out.

"*Next time around, Nara?*"

Shikamaru smiled faintly, breathing deep until he felt the sadness give way to the peace he'd found in the memory of those words and all the moments that had come before them.

*Next time around...Neji...*

**Chapter End Notes**

To Be Continued in REQUIEM

**A/N:** And we come to the end of On the Cusp. It's been another fun/raw ride and I hope that you've enjoyed it. Yes, some questions and threads have been left hanging. This is intentional as there are two more fics I aim to write to finish off the BtB series and tie it all up into a neat bow of completion. Information about those fics and future BtB developments can be found on my profile here and on ffnet and in more detail on the dArt BtB homepage.

**HIATUS:** However, it's with equal parts sadness and surety that I say I will be taking a 'break' to 'breathe' myself. I'll be putting down the fanfiction pen for a while. It's finally hit me that BtB has been an epic investment of emotional, mental and physical energy (me swinging myself around the place to see if certain moves are credible in combat reserves me a hot spot in a padded room ^_^)...and as such, this fanfiction has always meant more to me than mere fanfiction while writing it. It's been a labour of love, an adventure, a life-changing project. It's been a JOY to share that with reviewers and readers who've given me a wonderful payback on that investment by sharing your
thoughts and letting me know it had entertained you, touched you or reached you in some way. THANK YOU so much for that. That feedback has been my fuel, my fire, that voice shouting "FORWARD!" and 'encore'. It's for this reason that I DO intend to return to finish this series at some point in the future (the last two fics are already plotted out). But for now, I will be working on writing/publishing my Original novels and stories. If you've enjoyed how I tackle character/slash/angst/humour/etc!, then maybe you'll give my original ninja guys and gals a shot. More information about that on my profile.

Now it's time for me to bow out of Kishimoto's backyard for a while…I'll catch you guys next time around with a big Hyūga headbutt and a fresh ride of ShikaNejiShika 'running right back again' into the BtB world.

Until then, keep it raw and keep it real – and where necessary, keep it stupid simple.

With love, tea and deepest thanks,

~ Rayne

Works inspired by this [podfic] On the Cusp by AkumiSan

Please [drop by the archive and comment] to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!