Shadows of Konoha

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Summary

Naruto Uzumaki is one of the strongest ninja in the world today. But everyone has their limits. Can he survive ANBU or will it defeat him first?

Notes

-In this world, the time span between the beginning of shippuden and the end of Madara's war is two years.
-Canonically, the only person Naruto has killed is Yura. Other than that, Naruto has yet to kill/deliver the finishing blow to anyone else. Kakashi killed Kakuzu. Zombies don't count.
-I began this fic before the color page of Naruto's chakra cloak had been revealed. Therefore, in this fic, Naruto's chakra cloak is red because by the time I realized I needed to change it, the color began to grow symbolically to the story.

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto.
Lesson One

Every Fire Casts a Shadow, even those Forged by Will

Raindrops ran through his hair, soaked through his clothes, and flowed around petals and marble.

The memorial stone was larger than it had been before, a smooth obelisk reaching towards the sky with all of the names inscribed in its care. Naruto Uzumaki, the eighteen year-old eyed the inscribed names of all those that had been lost in the war that made him a hero. His eyes hung heavy from lack of sleep but nevertheless preferred the rainy night to another restless in bed.

People didn't understand, especially not the civilians who have never seen a battlefield in their life or the older ninjas who were used to too many. The blame people placed on Naruto's shoulders for letting an S-class criminal escape followed him like an unwanted ghost. Naruto had vowed to kill Sasuke, if it came to that. But when he finally had Sasuke's life in his hands, mercy was a stronger sword.

Naruto occasionally wondered what happened to Sasuke after Madara interrupted the fight. Did Sasuke escape the battlefield of war or did he die, his body unidentifiable, like so many others? Sasuke's name would never be among those immortalized in stone, simply a name among Naruto's fading memories.

Drenched by rain, his clothing began to sag on him like training weights. Naruto stood with his eyes closed, letting the water beat upon his head. He would eventually have to drag his corpse back to bed, wake up, and then put on the smiles and grins carved into a careful mask. It was a mask Naruto had carved for himself such a long time ago, it was dusty and cracked and dirty but well-worn. A mask was nothing new to Naruto Uzumaki.

"What do you want?"

Naruto's voice echoed through the raindrops. With the Kyūbi finally under his control, every scent filled his nostrils in a complex pattern as intense as the Inuzuka's, his ears caught every fleeting sound in the night, his eyes were no Hyūga but objects appeared sharper and clearer than before. He didn't need to use chakra to know he was being watched by shadows.

An ANBU, boar mask, flickered beside him, out of the bushes. The ANBU agent was hardly impressed by Naruto. The title of 'war hero' shouldn't be bestowed upon some kid who couldn't get the job done when it needed to be done. Boar had lived through a real war and knew one thing for certain, that the Four Shinobi War had been a sham, just like its young war hero.

"The Hokage summons you."

"In the middle of the night?" Naruto questioned, the night ached and called him to a bed he did not want to go to.

"The Hokage suggests you leave a shadow clone behind."

Those words set Naruto's mind racing. Was the village under threat of attack? Was there another terrorist organization hunting him down? Or was Granny just drunk again?

In seconds a shadow clone was casually walking back home and Naruto, under a "suggested" henge ran the newly constructed rooftops of Konoha. Drawing on the Kyūbi's chakra, Naruto easily left the
ANBU agent behind. The rain evaporated before it touched his skin. He crashed through the Hokage’s window, came to a stop by leaving a dent in the walls, and slammed his hands on the desk so hard, it cracked.

"Who’s attacking?" Naruto demanded.

Tsunade rubbed her temples with a huge sigh as she observed the destruction Naruto wrought in only seconds of being her office, and he was dripping water on the carpet.

"When I call for a secret meeting, I mean it to be a secret!" Tsunade yelled at her young hopefully soon-to-be successor. "How is it supposed to be a secret with a mysterious hole in my office window?"

"Oh," but Naruto felt relieved. The village wasn't in danger. He visibly relaxed. "I can fix it?" Naruto suggested.

"Please no," Tsunade said so fast she practically ran over Naruto's sentence. "I'll just tell the elders I had to throw someone out of the window."

A sudden gust of wind swept through, blowing rain and cold into the room. Tsunade's mood got even worse and she swore it would be Naruto she throws out of the window to further validate her excuse.

With the rain, cold, and the deep night, Tsunade decided to abandon protocols and poured herself a shot of sake. She opened a drawer and filled the small shot glass she always had handy on her desk.

She drank deeply, trying to regain her sanity as she faced Naruto. "You haven't requested any missions since the war ended."

Naruto's eyebrows bunched together in confusion. "You sent for me in the middle of the night just to ask why I've stopped taking missions? So… this is about a mission then?"

"No. I'm asking why you haven't requested a mission?" Tsunade asked as she looked over at the blonde who avoided her eyes. She knew better than anyone that Naruto earned a few months rest but she had never anticipated it would take this long for him to bounce back. Tsunade was afraid she already knew the answer, had been suspecting it when Sakura complained how some days Naruto won't even come out of his apartment.

Naruto shrugged his shoulders with a nonchalant expression, as if it meant nothing, "I feel lost."

"Lost?"

"Madara is gone. Sasuke is gone. There's nothing for me to do." When you've saved the world, the old mission routine wasn't enough to excite him out of bed anymore. His feet seemed to wander around Konoha without a purpose - searching or seeking something he did not yet know.

An ANBU mask was placed upon the desk.

Tsunade would have rather given Naruto an office job and a load of paperwork but as a war hero, that was nigh near impossible now. Sometimes what kept enemy villages in line was the ninja you had to keep them there.

"The war has ended but our battles have not," Tsunade said in an exhausted voice, "Every hidden village is weaker than we were before. We've all lost good ninja and have used valuable resources. In the wake of our weakness, crime has escalated, new hidden villages have been established in the
power vacuum, and the world is on the brink of another war than we have ever been before. I'm sorry Naruto, but Konoha has need of you."

"So… a mission?" Naruto questioned, looking at the mask quizzically.

"I wish it was only that." Tsunade picked up the ANBU mask and held it aloft, "This is yours, if you accept it."

Naruto eyes lit with a spark. "Do I get a cool sword and tattoo too?"

"This isn't a game Naruto. This is the next best step for you and the village," The Hokage reprimanded. The truth of the matter, Naruto needed more experience before he could become Hokage, as proven when he allowed Sasuke to escape. "ANBU are ninja who protect the village from the shadows. They are given the toughest jobs so that our village can thrive in peace. This is a huge responsibility and one that has to be taken seriously."

"I will," Naruto jumped up and down. He had always wondered what it would be like to be a part of the enigmatic ANBU unit. He never thought he'd actually be one, after all, he was still technically a genin and ANBU was by invitation only.

Even some of the best and most talented Jounin were not cut out to be ANBU. The Hokage knew that. It took a special kind of person.

"If you decide to put this on, you can no longer be the loud hard-headed ninja everyone knows you to be. You will be shadow, you will be silence, you will be death. But most importantly, you will no longer be Naruto Uzumaki."

Naruto nodded eagerly, barely listening. It was a new challenge to strive for, something exciting, just the thing to get him out of bed in the morning.

"The ANBU are protected by secrecy and because of this, the decision must be made here, tonight. What is your answer?"

Naruto picked up the mask and weighed it in his hands. "Why a dog? Wouldn't a fox have been better?"

The Kyūbi inside him grimaced just looking at it.

"Too obvious and already taken."

"A frog?"

"That's your summoning contract, too obvious." Tsunade was rubbing her temples again, "It's Kakashi's old mask when he was in ANBU."

"I don't think it's a good idea." Naruto asked, even though taking on Kakashi's mask would have been cool, Naruto decided to save himself the heartburn and indigestion the Kyūbi could cause.

"And why not?" Tsunade snapped, eyeing him for an explanation.

Naruto scratched the back of his head and admitted, "The Fox isn't a fan of dogs. Sometimes it's easier to give him the little concessions so he won't bother me as much."

Tsunade raised an eyebrow but did not reply. If anyone knew the nine-tailed demon, it was his host. "Well, do you have a better idea?"
Naruto was surprised that he did. "What was…" Naruto paused. "Uchiha Itachi's mask?"

Maybe Naruto asked because Itachi had left an impression on him after helping Naruto defeat Madara in the war, or maybe it was to let the legacy of the Uchiha clan live on in some small form, maybe it was for Sasuke. In either case, it seemed like a good idea at the time.

Tsunade bit her lip in thought. Itachi's mask have been passed between the Uchiha's all throughout ANBU history, but the Uchiha's were no more and no one dared to pick it up. Tsunade herself never dared to give it to anyone, just in case that unlikely person happened to come across Sasuke in a mission.

Naruto was another matter.

"I believe that will work." Tsunade turned to the Boar ANBU standing rigid in the corner of the room. "Bring me the Crow."

He returned in seconds with the mask and an ANBU uniform.

Tsunade handed over the mask. "Naruto Uzumaki, do you accept this mask and in turn accept the responsibilities of the ANBU to know shadows when the rest of the world knows light?"

Naruto's heart was pounding and hadn't felt like this since his academy graduation. Without hesitation, "I accept."

He took a hold of the mask.

"So… am I ANBU now?"

"No."

"Oh," Naruto scratched his head confused.

"You have accepted ANBU, but ANBU hasn't accepted you. You must prove yourself and complete a mission before you are fully initiated. If you succeed, you will receive your sword and tattoo and become a full-fledged member. If you fail, Yamanaka will erase your memory and this night will have never happened."

"A mission? That's all?" Naruto grinned. He defeated Madara and Pein, this should be easy. "I'll be back before you can eat a cup of ramen."

Tsunade pulled out the folder and placed the mission briefing on her desk. Somehow, the folder hit the desk louder than the rain thundering just outside.

Naruto's eyes widened and his face paled. Beads of sweat began to run from his forehead. He looked close to fainting. All his arrogance evaporated into air. The Kyūbi began a low chuckle, and then outright laughed.

It was an assassination contract.

"What did he do?" Naruto asked thickly. He wiped the sweat from his palms onto his pants.

"I can't tell you that."

"I mean, it must have been something really bad right?" Naruto asked, his eyes begging. Naruto has never attacked someone unless he was being attacked first, and Naruto always tried his utmost hardest to take his enemies alive - although not always, sometimes there's Yura.
"Is this because I let Sasuke live?"

"It has nothing to do with Sasuke," Tsunade replied sternly, although it had everything to do with the incident surrounding it. A ninja can't be a ninja if they can't kill. ANBU can't be ANBU if they can't kill on order.

Naruto didn't believe her. "It was mercy."

"There is no room for mercy in ANBU. You have a week starting now. Either you carry out the mission or not. Either you succeed or you don't." Tsunade hoped Naruto failed, the Hokage hoped he would succeed. "Now, put on your mask, take the folder, and do your mission Crow."

Naruto snatched the folder and clothes from her desk angrily. He made another hole as he jumped out of the window and disappeared into the rain.

Tsunade could only rub her temples. "What do you think Boar?" She asked the man observing from the shadows.

He shook his head. "Uzumaki's too emotional. I cannot imagine him ever wearing a mask."

Boar had lived through a real war and knew one thing for certain, that the Four Shinobi War had been a sham, just like its young war hero.
Lesson Two

A Ninja Equips at Least One Kunai and a Large Bag of Distrust

Naruto Uzumaki sped through the trees so fast he was merely a gust of wind. Then his ears caught the sound of battle and the trees bowed when he stopped. A blood curdling scream echoed through the forest, dying in tatters among the branches. Without hesitation, disregarding any concern about his current mission, Naruto raced to the battle site.

He reached a winding dirt road where the scene unfolded like the climax of a movie. A Cloud ninja stood on stick legs, which were threatening to break at any moment as he looked up at his attackers. With one hand, he held his blood soaked shoulder. The other hand was held to his chest, fingers crippled and marred by fire.

Two rogue ninjas encroached closer, but careful. One had his eyes gauged out. The other, a heavy wound against his rib. They still pushed forward, aware of their tasteless victory soon at hand.

The dead lay on both sides.

One of the rogue ninja attacked, but found his kunai deflected. He looked up and a shiver of fear ran through his spine as he stared at the bone-white mask of Konoha's nefarious ANBU. The rogue ninjas didn't know what hit them when they were struck from behind. Their bodies hit the ground at the same time.

Two shadow clones disappeared in a puff of smoke, a seeming illusion, like shadows never truly there.

With the rogue ninjas unconscious, Naruto turned to help the Cloud ninja but found him collapsed on the ground. With a quick check of the pulse, Naruto was relieved to discover the pale blond-haired ninja was still alive, but wouldn't be for long. With a heavy sigh, he made more clones for clean-up duty and pulled the Cloud ninja onto his back.

Naruto couldn't just leave the ninja to die. After all, he had a week for his mission. It shouldn't take him long to make a quick visit to Kumo before turning back towards Rice Country where his target waited for him.

Maybe this was a sign.

Maybe he wasn't meant to complete his mission after all.

Naruto was no medic-nin and rightfully worried about the wounds the ninja clinging to his back was suffering. Naruto had paused and managed crude bindings to stifle the blood loss but nevertheless, he hurried to Kumo to find help. In the distance, above the forest canopy Naruto could see the distant mountains rising high into the sky and touching the clouds.

The sun glinted off a flash of metal. Naruto reacted instinctively and with a sudden evasive twist, the kunai barely nicked his neck.
But he didn't see the tree.

Naruto crashed into the wooden bark with a groan, and at the speed he had been moving, crashed through the trunk and left a man-sized indent in next tree he hit. He slid down with bark and splinters embedded in his skin. He dropped his quarry but caught his feet and managed to land with some saving grace.

"I should have known Konoha was behind this," The Cloud ninja barked with fevered eyes, who twisted through a blanket of leaves until he rolled back against a tree and held his kunai, wavering, in an attempt to try and protect himself. Naruto knew even a civilian could get through that unstable defense.

"What?" Naruto asked confused, "Konoha and Kumo are allies."

Naruto felt a little saddened by the look of distrust he received. What was worse, he couldn't even give a comforting smile or assure the ninja that he knew the Raikage personally or that would give his identity away, and even though Naruto wasn't yet a full-fledged ANBU he was sure that giving away your identity was not allowed.

"Look, I was passing by and it looked like you needed help. I was taking you to Kumo."

"And why should I believe a Konoha dog?"

Even though Kumo and Konoha had fought a war beside each other, every ninja knew that allies were today, and enemies tomorrow. In the ninja world, all too often alliances only mattered in politics, but the sharp-end of a kunai on an open field.

"Because…" Naruto found himself at a loss. "Look," Naruto pulled out a scroll and the ninja instinctively prepared a hand signal, then his shoulders slumped at the uselessness of the marred burnt fingers of his right hand.

Naruto presented the scroll. "The bodies of your dead are in here."

The Cloud ninja looked stunned for a moment and then suspicion marred his face. "Why would a Konoha ninja do something like that?"

"Because we're allies!" Naruto said in exasperation. "I'm no Raikage, but if you get on my back I can have you home in no time. Just trust me."

The Cloud ninja didn't, but he didn't have a choice. His team had been tracking a band of rogue ninja that had been sabotaging and stealing from weapon production centers all throughout the Land of Lightning and in the process stole a highly classified item. When he and his comrades finally tracked them to a small country bordering the Land of Fire, the rogue ninja somehow managed to get the ambush on his team instead. Now the Cloud ninja was stuck here, with a Leaf ninja who should have killed him by now and who he suspected was sent to cover-up the Leaf's village involvement with the rogues. If only his chakra system hadn't been poisoned, then he could use his healing techniques. That's what he hated about being a medic, always in the back line of the formation, always the last one to die.

The Cloud ninja slumped back against the tree with a heavy breath. "Fine, but I only require you to take me to the border. There are patrols that will sense us the moment we cross. Once I am there I will no longer need your… assistance." That last word had to be pulled from gritted teeth.

"Alright then, up we go." Naruto grabbed the Cloud ninja's arm and pulled him none too gently over his back, "Sorry."
"Stupid Leaf ninja."

When Naruto began to speed through the trees, the Cloud ninja blinked in surprise, but quickly abandoned the thought as a symptom of his blood loss. After all, no one, especially not any Leaf ninja could be faster than the Raikage.

The two ninja from different villages sat on opposite sides of the fire. The flame reflected the light off the ANBU's mask, the two streaks of blue subtly lost in the darkness. On the other side, the crackling reflected off the Cloud ninja's Hitai-ite and in various instances did not know which red was blood or the flames.

"Hungry?" Naruto suggested and shoved a bowl into the cloud ninja's hands.

The steam brushed against the Cloud ninja's face. It looked too good to be true. With a distrustful gaze, "You poisoned it."

"What! Why would I do that? I just carried you on my back for two days." Naruto's disbelief echoed through the mask.

"Then you eat it first," the Cloud ninja dared.

"But I have a mask on," Naruto huffed and watched as the Cloud ninja dropped the food Naruto had spent all night cooking into the grass.

"Only dogs hide behind masks." The Cloud ninja spat a wad of blood, rubbing salt in the wound, as it landed in the lump of wasted ramen.

Naruto sighed deeply and was actually glad for the mask because he was about to cry. That had been the only cup of ramen he had left in his food scroll. He hadn't had time to stock up before the mission.

"And aren't you guys supposed to be more… enigmatic," the Cloud ninja sneered. Konoha's shadows were obviously a joke judging by this one. The rumors that said no one saw an ANBU and lived to tell the tale were obviously wrong. But the Cloud ninja couldn't help but wonder why he hadn't been killed yet. His condition made it too easy for the Leaf ninja to erase his existence. Maybe the ninja was mining for information? Maybe he was sadistic and just giving him a thread of hope only to yank it away at the last minute? Maybe he was looking for a way into Cloud?

If the ANBU agent was trying to frustrate him to death he certainly was succeeding.

Naruto chuckled and scratched the back of his head. "Yeah, I'm sort of new at this."

The Cloud ninja snorted and couldn't imagine how this ninja managed to live for very long. He collapsed backwards against the root of a tree and tried to keep one eye open on his enemy. His breathing was labored as the chakra crippling poison crawled through his blood. Eventually, his eyes closed. There was a flickering thought that wondered perhaps it wouldn't be so bad if he never opened his eyes and died here. At least he wouldn't have to go home and face the loved ones of his fallen comrades.

The Kumo ninja breathed a sigh of relief when they finally crossed the Kumo border. "Just put me down here, they'll come."

Naruto nodded and sat the ninja down against a cliff of rocks, which was just several out of the
various mountains that dotted the landscape.

"You can go now. They'll find me."

"But how do you know? What if they don't come? I might have to take you all the way to Kumogakure."

"No, you won't." As far as the Cloud ninja was concerned this is as far as the Leaf ninja will go inside of his country.

Naruto chuckled. "Fine, but I'll just stay here and make sure you're safe."

The Cloud ninja realized this one was a lost cause. "Are all Leaf ninja as insane as you are?"

The Crow mask tilted, "... I guess not."

The Cloud ninja sat back, just as confused as when they first met. "It's C by the way."

"I know," Naruto smirked but it could not be seen from behind the mask. "I saw you from time to time during the war."

C raised an eyebrow. "Do I know you?"

"Probably not, was just another soldier." Naruto shrugged and hoped it was convincing enough, "I guess my name would be Crow."

C scoffed. "As if I couldn't figure that out from the mask." Truthfully, C had hoped his name would strike fear and apprehension in his nonchalant opponent. But the Leaf ninja was unfazed.

"Are you sure your friends are coming?" Naruto asked.

"Of course they're coming," C snapped.

"You know," Naruto shuffled his feet against the fallen grass. "During the war we all fought under the same symbol."

"Not anymore."

Those words echoed through the emptiness of the winding mountain road, against all the obstacles that as Hokage, Naruto hoped to someday overcome. Situations like this reminded Naruto that finding peace for the ninja world was an idealism that clash violently with a brutal dose of reality.

"We're all the same really. You, me, those rogue ninja – we're all just human beings."

C laughed and was beginning to think the whole point of the Leaf ninja's presence was that even Konoha was trying to get rid of him. "Kid, I think they gave you the wrong mask. It should have been a donkey," C doubted the ninja even caught the insult. "You know nothing of the world. It is ugly and dark and evil."

Naruto knew of ugly, dark, and evil. It resided in his stomach. It was the hateful looks of his childhood, the random beatings in between alleyways, it was starvation as people passed him uncaring. Naruto was no stranger to darkness. For most of his childhood everyone thought of him as the embodiment of true evil, never truly seeing him, never giving him a chance. Was it wrong to want to give people a chance?

Naruto shook his head. "You're wrong."
C laughed, he couldn't help it. "You don't quit do you? Are you seriously going to talk me to death?"

Naruto wished C could see his smile behind his mask. "It's what I do, besides, it's boring around here."

Naruto didn't move when a group of patrol ninja appeared above them from a myriad of rocks, kunai poised and hand seals prepared. At first glance, all they saw was a hurt comrade and an enemy ninja. Risking a war, they attacked and a storm of kunai fell from the sky.

Naruto moved so fast it seemed he hadn't moved at all as kunai harmlessly flew past. A streak of lightning sailed barely past his cheek. The cloak that surrounded Naruto was a flash of red before it flickered away.

Surprised by the ANBU's skill, the Cloud ninjas froze long enough to hear their injured comrade.

"Wait stop," C coughed out. "He's helping me."

The ninjas looked at each other confused and then stared back at the uniform of the notorious elite of Konoha.

"Yeah, what he said," Naruto yelled out, "Stop throwing things at me and hurry and get him a medic. He's badly hurt."

"Don't move," the leader of the patrol ninja demanded. One ninja jumped from the rocks and his hands glowed green as he knelt down to heal C. C finally felt as if he was going to survive this. He might just make it home to his sister and girlfriend, the only thought that kept him breathing.

"Let him go," C coughed, "He's not coming any farther." C gave the Leaf ninja a warning glare. Naruto nodded and watched as the medic ninja did what he could without facilities. Finished, the allied ninja helped C up against his shoulder and they jumped onto a branch.

"Oh wait," Naruto cried, forgetting the scroll. He quickly tried to get it from his bag. In retrospect, moving so quickly perhaps wasn't Naruto's best idea.

In alarm, the ninjas attacked.

This time the streak of lightning did hit. Naruto popped into a cloud of smoke. A scroll fell unharmed to the ground.

One of the ninja neared the scroll carefully and inspected it. "It's just a regular storage scroll."

"We'll open it when we get home. It might be rigged, best to have someone look at it first," the patrol leader decided. "Go and contact the other patrol squads. Make sure he didn't cross the border." The squad leader turned to C. "Did you find the sword?"

"No," C admitted his failure.

When they couldn't find any sign of the Leaf ninja, C couldn't help but to ask, "Do you think he was really trying to help me out?"

His comrade scoffed, "We're ninjas."

Naruto Uzumaki was already half-way to Rice Country.
Naruto arrived in the small town of Jūhikara one day before the allotted time came to an end. He could have been in the sleeping village much sooner but Naruto might have, maybe, perhaps dawdled on his way here. He landed on a tree branch just outside the village. The stars twinkled in the clear night sky. Naruto's first step was intel. He created ten clones, henged them as small animals, and sent them scurrying into the village. The real Naruto sat back against a tree and watched the dawn rise as his eyelids grew heavy.

The sun rose, as it always did, but with the mask the warmth could not reach his skin.

Naruto jerked awake when a grumpy housewife smashed his rat henge with a broom. Naruto made a mental note not to knock on her door early in the morning. He mentally processed all the information he gathered during the night and instantly knew the exact location of his target.

Naruto stretched awake, and then in a swift movement a kunai flew from his fingers. It shot through leaves until it was deflected with a twinge of metal. Naruto frowned when an ANBU appeared from the foliage with open hands and portrayed his leaf sigil. Raccoon Mask.

Naruto should have guessed they'd send someone to watch him. With a shrug Naruto ignored the unwanted companion, leapt from the branch, and went to observe his target.

From what Naruto could tell Yamamoto Kaneshiro, his target, was a rice farmer, and looked like an ordinary rice farmer at that. Naruto observed the man at work, when he ate, who he talked to, and when he slept. As every hour passed, a heavy stone dropped into Naruto's stomach and built a pyramid until he was choking on them.

He didn't want to do this anymore.

This man was just a rice farmer. He wasn't hurting anyone. He wasn't plotting anything. He wasn't even a ninja.

There had to be something, Naruto tried to convince himself.

The sun was setting and his last day was coming to an end. Still, Naruto's morals were as restless as the wind. He decided to try a different tactic. He henged himself as one of the villagers, a robust man that he had seen Kaneshiro talking to that morning. Maybe if Naruto was someone familiar, he could get Kaneshiro to admit to his wrongdoings, whatever they were.

The disguised Naruto circled the house, knowing Kaneshiro was already out back. He found Kaneshiro bent over a well, trying to pull up a bucket of water. He was struggling as water toppled over the side. There was no way this man was a ninja.

"OI!" Naruto greeted and realized too late that perhaps his voice had been too high and too loud for the person he was portraying.

Kaneshiro jerked up in shock, his foot slipped, and his head hit against stone before falling into the well.

"You killed him and then took him to the local clinic?" Tsunade questioned as she looked over the report one more time. She was honestly at a complete loss on how to interpret it.

Naruto didn't know what to say.

"You have a lot of high and low marks."
"But I didn't do anything," Naruto said exasperated. He was certain when he met Tsunade in her office Yamanaka would be waiting for him.

Tsunade sighed before listing the comments, "You were sent off with only the weapons you had on your clothes. You didn't make any extra stops, even for extra preparations at your house. Graded positive. Stopping could have potentially jeopardized the mission and your identity."

Naruto tilted his head in disbelief.

"Found your target within hours of arriving to the village without the village being aware of your presence. Positive."

"Noticed the presence of your exam proctor, Raccoon, who is one of the stealthiest member of ANBU. Double Positive."

"Used only two jutsu for the entire mission. Positive."

"Showcased creative use for said jutsu. Positive."

"Killed target without any jutsu at all and made the death seem like a natural accident." Tsunade ticked off the last positive.

"It took all seven days for you to complete your mission. Negative." Tsunade slapped the paper down and gave Naruto a glare. "The proctor isn't as fast as you and eventually lost your trail but when he finally arrived at the village you were nowhere to be found. Naruto, where were you the first six days?"

Naruto chuckled awkwardly and scratched his head. "I got lost."

"There's a map in your holster," Tsunade said in disbelief.

"Those things are hard to read." Naruto gave a quizzical look to go along with the ploy but it was unseen behind the mask.

Tsunade shook her head. "So you'll have me to believe you truly did get lost?"

"Come on, it's kind of embarrassing. You don't have to say it so loud."

She waggled a finger at him. "I don't believe you. I think you were stalling for time. I think you weren't going to go through with the mission."

"Well, it was an accident," Naruto stressed for the fourth time, "I didn't mean to kill him!"

Hearing Naruto's distraught voice, Tsunade actually believed him. "But you succeeded in your mission."

"I don't want to be ANBU." Naruto crossed his arms. The way he acted so childishly in his ANBU outfit was almost comical.

"Accident or no, you passed. It seems you might have a knack for this."

That's when Naruto ripped the mask off and threw it at her. He didn't want to have a knack for killing people. That was one of his more positive traits that separated him from the Kyuubi.

Tsunade stood and slammed her hands on the table in anger. "Naruto! Have you stopped to consider that your abilities will be more effective in this type of work than on the open field? It may be dirty
but you can prevent people from dying!"

"I don't see how killing a rice farmer is saving the village!" Naruto snapped.

Tsunade flipped the desk over and found herself pointing a finger against his chest, "That rice farmer is an escaped convict, imprisoned for butchering thirteen children!"

Naruto couldn't find his voice and when he did all he could say was, "Oh."

"You killed someone but you did good as well."

"Why didn't you tell me all of that?" Naruto asked exasperated. He couldn't believe that he had been so close in letting a man like that go. "He didn't look so bad."

"Sometimes they don't." Tsunade said, digging her finger into Naruto's chest. "You are missing the point of this entire mission."

Naruto ran a hand through his hair. "Then what is the point? I don't see it."

"It's trust, Naruto. Did you really think I'd send you to kill just some rice farmer? Do you really believe I'd do something like that?"

Naruto shuffled his feet and eventually shook his head. "No… but what if you made a mistake? What if he was innocent?"

"Then I made the mistake Naruto, not you." Tsunade sat back against her Hokage chair in exhaustion. "I make mistakes, I admit it. But I need to be able to trust that you will carry out my orders without question and I need you to trust me that I know what I'm doing. That is after all, what being the Hokage is all about."

Naruto couldn't believe the irony. He had been asking an allied ninja to trust him all week and yet he couldn't even trust his own Hokage.

When Tsunade tried to rest her feet against her desk, she found it annoyingly turned over. Naruto absentmindedly upturned the desk for her. Her feet pounded onto the table.

"What's it going to be Naruto?" Tsunade asked. "Can I trust you with the well-being of this village? Can I trust that you are going to follow my orders no matter how much they don't make sense at the time? Can I trust that you will kill when I need you to?"

Naruto felt a heaviness over his heart. He suddenly understood what the Cloud ninja had been going through all week. Trust was hard.

"I think so."

"That's not good enough Naruto."

"I will always protect the village." It was the best answer Naruto could give.

With a great sigh that made her chest tremble, Tsunade signed the papers that proved he officially passed.

Naruto Uzumaki didn't know if he could trust himself.
In the ninja world, all too often alliances only mattered in politics, but the sharp-end of a kunai on an open field.
Lesson Three

We all Have Demons, Some Darker Than Others

"There's one final test," Tsunade said as she organized Naruto's ANBU file, "and this one is highly dangerous."

The words 'dangerous' never fazed Naruto before, but after his last mission, he's realized even he has his limits. In an almost uncertain voice, "Do I have to kill someone again?"

Naruto had been hoping for some time to sort through his thoughts and priorities before facing the crumbling tower of his moralities so soon.

"No."

Naruto sighed in relief, then he immediately lost interest.

"Listen to me," Tsunade snapped, trying to regain his attention. "If you fail, your dreams of becoming Hokage are over, the Leaf village will lose one of its best assets, and best shinobi. You better damn well pass."

"I will, I promise." Naruto added. Naruto had been forced to hand back the ANBU gear and mask. Now he stood in the Hokage's office in the pajamas he had initially wore when he came to her office a week ago. His confidence was hard to take seriously when he looked as if he was ready for bed.

Tsunade went through several locks and seals on her desk to get at the ANBU handbook. She placed it on the table. "This is all the rules you will have to memorize by the end of the week. You will be tested on them at your Initiation."

"This is what's so dangerous?" Naruto scoffed as he picked up the thin and ragged black handbook.

Tsunade sighed, "details of the Initiation Ceremony are all inscribed in the manual. Please tell me you'll have it all memorized by the end of the week."

Naruto honestly wasn't the best at this kind of stuff. He was dead-last in his academy days. But that was then, this is now. "Sure, that is what shadow clones are for. Don't worry, Granny. I can handle it. I've made it this far haven't I?"

'Accident or not,' Naruto silently replied to himself. With an absentminded wave, he crashed through the window and headed home.

Naruto smirked when he heard Tsunade screaming curses at him as he hopped the rooftops. At least it was just a window this time.

Naruto walked the street towards his apartment, a rare sight to see a ninja walking, but he enjoyed the quiet streets and the moon lazily watching from above. He had thoughts to sort but he found them too much of a jumbled mess to organize properly. As he walked, the quiet clean streets turned into ominous pathways of dirt. The village of Konoha gradually twisted and deformed into the darker areas. Cheap apartment complexes and rowdy bars lined the streets. Naruto stepped nonchalantly to the side as a man was thrown out of a second-story window.

There where whores on the street corner, boys selling drugs, thieves pawning stolen items, and gangs
stalking their territory. It was the part of Konoha that went ignored by the council. After all, this was a ninja village and ninjas needed some kind of escape from their harsh lives. Even after the reconstruction, Konoha fell into its same old routines.

This was home to Naruto Uzumaki. His apartment building has always been in the center of this illegal wasteland. When he was younger the Sandaime had provided for him a well-to-do apartment but the landlady kept raising the rent and before long Naruto had been forced onto the streets. It was only here in this district did he find cheap enough housing he could afford. By the time Sandaime realized what had happened and offered Naruto's old apartment back, Naruto had already settled in. These grimy alcohol soaked streets had welcomed him.

Naruto's friends were so easily blinded by Naruto's smiles and carefree personality that they found themselves in shock whenever they decided to visit. All of them, in subtle direction of the conversation, or in Sakura's case of outright disgust, tried to convince him to move. Naruto could have moved, had the perfect opportunity to move after the reconstruction, but sometimes it was easier to fall into old routines.

Standing on the corner of the street right next to his apartment was Maiko. She had come from a ninja family but her parents died on a mission a long time ago, leaving her an orphan and struggling to survive the orphanage system until she fled from it. Naruto knew what that felt like, it was hard enough without being considered a demon.

Maiko leaned against the building wall. Skirt short, shirt low, heels high. "Where you been?" She asked, a cigarette between crimson lips.

"Mission," Naruto replied. A pause occurred in the conversation and smoke filled the air. This was the part where Maiko should have offered her services but it hasn't worked in eight years and it wouldn't work now.

"One of your ninja buddies was snooping around here."

"Oh," Naruto knew how uncomfortable it was for his friends to come and visit, "Do you know-"

"The pink haired-bitch," Maiko interrupted. "You fucking her?"

Naruto blushed and Maiko snickered, "Geez, just asking." Maiko could tell a lot by just looking at a man, and it was so easy to get the one standing before her completely red in the face. With a drag of the cigarette and a snake of smoke she added, "She seemed pretty worried."

Naruto knew Maiko liked to tease him but he never got used to it. After he recovered from the embarrassed flush, he suddenly felt guilty. Usually he told Sakura when he was leaving for a mission, but this time had been so abrupt. He would have to find a way to make it up to her.

"Thanks," Naruto gave her a smile but Maiko didn't buy it. She took one look at his pajamas and the bags under his eyes. He couldn't fool her.

He made his way up the stairs and coin rang on the concrete, falling at Maiko's feet. Her eyes burned afire. "I told you Uzumaki, I don't want any of your fucking money!" She yelled up the stairs. "Don't you fucking pity me!"

Naruto was used to the yelling as he unlocked his door, undid the traps and seals, and went inside. Maiko stopped her curses when the door closed. She looked at the money at her feet. It wasn't much but probably all the kid had. She picked it up anyways. No point in wasting it.

Maiko knew she could just pick another corner, but she kept coming back.
Everyone knew Naruto Uzumaki was probably the only decent guy in this neighborhood. He had taken Maiko in when she had a rough night with a client. He shared his ramen with the many orphans roaming the streets. Everyone knew Naruto was a safe haven in the night. What he didn't know is that the denizens kept tabs on him almost obsessively. He was one of them. He belonged to this place like an old routine.

They all knew that being a prostitute, or drug runner, or thief was better than the life of a ninja. This neighborhood was no stranger to ninjas looking for an escape. Ninjas came with haunted eyes to drown in alcohol, or the touch of women, or the high of drugs. Their hands might be filled with money and grime, but a ninja's hands were filled with blood. All ninjas died, either on the battlefield or a little bit inside until they became walking corpses.

Shadows smeared the streets of Konoha.

Maiko settled against the brick wall of an abandoned building with the coins nestled in the safety of her bra. She was the one who pitied him.

Naruto collapsed onto his bed, his room as messy as he felt. The stocked cabinets full of instant ramen was the only evidence Sakura had stopped by. He tried to go to sleep but the couple down the hall was arguing again. Although, that had never stopped him from falling asleep before. With a defeated sigh he pulled the pristine black book from the waist line of his pajamas and flipped it open to a page:

If mortally wounded in battle, you must destroy your body at all cost to prevent enemy ninja from capturing your corpse. Below is a list of jutsu that will accomplish this task with varying degrees of intensity.

Naruto quickly turned to another page.

The Initiation Ceremony consists of several parts: Recitation of the creed, review over the rules, the signing of the contract sealing your services to the Hokage, and the Final Test.

Naruto eyes sped through the text until he came to what he wanted to know.

An ANBU agent must not only be physically strong but mentally as well. The Final Test is a powerful genjutsu simulation that will test your psychological capabilities under high pressure situations.

Naruto had no idea how to prepare for a test like that and could not imagine how it could be so life threatening. Just as he was about to throw the book down, footsteps were running up the stairs outside. By the time Naruto opened the door, an ebony streak of hair crashed passed his legs and stumbled onto his floor. Naruto closed the door and turned as his visitor picked himself up.

Tomu wasn't an orphan, but soon he would be. His mother was critically ill and constantly in and out of Konoha's hospital. They barely had enough money to pay the expensive medical bills so Tomu had stooped to doing errands for the local gangs. Judging by the heavy bleeding on the left side of the kid's face and the limp in his right leg, it wasn't going so well for him.

"You know where the bandages are," Naruto said and decided to make some ramen. He watched from the corner of his eye as Tomu pulled the first aid kit from the cabinet. Naruto could offer to help but he knew it was better this way. He knew what it was like to be too stubborn and too proud. Sometimes Naruto wished he could enlist Sakura's assistance but the children didn't trust her, they trusted him. They ran to him when things were desperate. More often than not, only in silence did he
receive their gratitude.

The ramen was ready by the time Tomu fixed himself up. He limped over to the table where a bowl was waiting for him. Naruto was never one to eat in silence, especially when he had company. "How is your mom?"

"The doctor says she's getting better," Tomu slurped his noodles loudly, "but they're wrong."

Naruto could see the fear cross the boy's face - the fear that soon he would be alone.

There were bigger things than his promise to Tsunade that ensured Naruto would survive his test. There were unspoken words and mutual understandings. There were unshed tears and long nights over bowls of ramen even when everyone else knew that ramen could not fix everything.

Naruto couldn't leave these kids alone. For most, he was all they had.

A knock came at the door. It was hard, rough, and threatening to break the door down.

"I didn't do it," Tomu and Naruto said quickly, at the same time. Tomu gave him a suspicious glare.

"I swear I have no idea who destroyed the Hokage's windows," Naruto chuckled.

Tomu smiled, "I swear I have no idea who stole that watch."

Naruto shrugged his shoulders with a grin and walked over to his door. He opened it to reveal four big thugs crowded in the hallway.

"Where is that punk?" The smallest one with a pock-marked face demanded. Even though he was smallest, he was the most dangerous. He was a retired ninja. He looked over his shoulder and found Tomu sitting at the table, eating ramen, and giving him an obscene hand gesture.

"I haven't seen any punks around here," Naruto replied innocently.

The small retired ninja poked his finger at Naruto's nose. "You can't protect him forever."

No, Naruto couldn't. He was simply somewhere to rest before you had to wake up and deal with life. And life always came for them, whether they want it to or not. Everyone had their demons to face.

The thugs bristled but they knew who they were dealing with. They had no choice but to back down. The retired ninja addressed Tomu with a growl. "Next time kid, I'll kill you."

"I find him dead and I'll kill you." Naruto replied in turn, the words came easily to his mouth. The urge to kill has never been so strong. Naruto was actually radiating killing intent. The thugs collapsed under the weight of it and scrambled down the hallway in fear.

He turned around and Tomu was eating his ramen much more happily. Tomu kicked his good leg in a happy rhythm under the table. The kid's dark and troubled eyes brightened just a little.

"You were gone. Mission?" Tomu asked.

"Yeah," Naruto said as he threw off his shirt.

"I still don't understand why you're a ninja."

"They're cool and they can scare the shit of good-for-nothing thugs," Naruto suggested.
Tomu stirred the noodles, then whispered into his bowl. "But ninjas die, like my dad."

"Not me. I've got to become Hokage first so I can declare a national holiday dedicated especially to ramen."

"They'd never let you do that. Dango is so much better."

Naruto looked appalled, "Now I'm going to have to kick you out of my house."

Tomu scoffed as he stuffed the rest of the food in his mouth and jumped on the couch in defiance, "I'd like to see you try."

When Naruto crept over to the couch Tomu was already fast asleep. Naruto slipped a blanket over the boy's shoulders. He walked into his room and collapsed into his bed. He didn't know what it was, perhaps Tomu's snoring, that finally lulled him to sleep.

Naruto woke up in the early dawn but when he walked into his cramped living room, Tomu was already gone - along with all the money in his frog wallet. Naruto didn't mind. He might have purposely left it there. Naruto knew no matter how much money he had, it would not save Tomu's mother but at the very least, give Tomu more time with her. Every kid deserves more time with their mother.

There were reasons why the Fourth Shinobi's war hero was the poorest ninja in the village. Even though he inherited the royalties from Jiraiya's Icha Icha series, which was a hefty sum, the Hokage and Naruto had an arrangement to use the funds to pay for her gambling debts. Naruto certainly didn't feel proud making money off of smut. Naruto didn't mind not having money. He wouldn't know what to do with it anyways.

Naruto stared at the black book he held in his hands.

There were so many things he wanted to change. But first he had to become Hokage and in order to do that he had to survive ANBU. With a defeated sigh he created several shadows clones, made several copies of the book, and for the first time in Naruto's life he truly studied until his eyes ached and he could recite the book word for word.

Naruto Uzumaki might have saved the world from Madara and that would be how most of the world would remember him. But every day he came home to the small triumphs that were Maiko and Tomu, the small triumphs none of his friends or anyone else ever knew about. Little did he realize that it was those small triumphs that kept him going, even if no one would ever know his name.

In the sink lay two washed ramen bowls, the only clean items in the entire house.

There was a new moon and the world was shrouded in darkness. Naruto Uzumaki stood atop the Hokage's tower, ANBU uniform crisp and cleaned, dressed as if he was going into battle. As Naruto adjusted his mask he finally replied, "Ready."

Naruto was itching to get this over with. He did not know how long all of the information he had crammed into his thick skull would stay there.

Tsunade nodded. It was a ceremony Tsunade has gone through too often as of late, but even so, she
has never felt as anxious as she did now. Perhaps it was because of the uncertain young man who stood behind the Crow's mask. Then for a moment, just for a moment, in the darkness of the night, Naruto's nonchalant pose that he often carried somehow made the Crow persona dangerous. It was gone as quickly as it came and all she felt was the anxiousness and the fear.

"Follow."

The Hokage jumped from the rooftop and Naruto followed. It was the Hokage's duty to personally oversee the Initiation ceremony. After all, it was she who handpicked her elite soldiers that not only served her but more often than not, died for her.

They disappeared inside the head of the five Kages and were further engulfed by the winding maze of tunnels within the grand cliffs that ringed around the village. The hallways were twisted and Naruto felt as if he had been turned around several times. They stopped in front of two large double doors. If Naruto ever had to remember his way back he wouldn't bet a cup of ramen on it.

The Hokage motioned for Naruto to enter first, and as he stepped inside, the two large doors emboldened with the sigil of the Village Hidden in the Leaves slammed shut. The darkness was thick and even with Naruto's enhanced senses he could not smell or hear. It was if he had stepped into a void that trapped everything in the unrelenting darkness.

Light came from two candles resting atop an altar. Naruto neared it. A katana resting in its scabbard was on display, a small kunai, and a contract that would sign his life away to the Hokage.

"Children, I have brought a new brother to join the shadows." The Hokage's voice echoed around the room. Lights flickered from the ground to reveal that Naruto was surrounded. There were four ANBU Captains, along with the Hokage, that ringed him on all sides.

The Captains bowed in the Hokage's presence, then raised their heads and studied him with the unison of the same words, "Only the shadows can judge."

"What are the different assignment classifications?"

The question came so fast Naruto almost missed it if he hadn't been so well versed, "Extraction, Espionage, Assassination, and Infiltration."

"When, if ever, should our identities be compromised?"

"Never, unless the Hokage instructs it under specific code words."

The other Captains delivered more rapid-fire questions Naruto somehow managed to smoothly answer.

"Who are you?"

Naruto sighed in relief at the question that indicated the first part had been completed, "I am Crow."

"Who are we?"

"We are the shadows that the trees cast, the blood spilled from our enemies, the fear known in the dark, the stench of death about a rotting corpse, and the secrets of Konoha. I am the shadow known as Crow."

"Sign your name if that is who you truly are."
Naruto picked up the kunai and slashed through his right shoulder. In large red strokes, he signed the kanji, "Shadow."

Naruto reached for the katana and the moment he gripped the handle the genjutsu was triggered. The words, "Only the shadows can judge," constantly echoed in his head.

Naruto opened his eyes to a blood red sky. He felt weak and dizzy as he sat up. With a gasp, his eyes widened as he took in his surroundings. Destruction stretched to all sides in the horizon. The world was silent and ruins littered the landscape.

Naruto tried going into Sage mode with the hopes of sensing anything else other than him alive, but he couldn't. His chakra networks were completely cut off from him. He tried to make a shadow clone but to no use.

His clothes around him were burnt and in tatters. He was wearing his sage coat and an extra coloring caught his eye. He quickly snatched the cloth from the ground and stared at the words framed in black flames upside down: Rokudaime Hokage.

This was weird.

Naruto dropped the tattered material to flutter behind him as he roamed the wreckage. "What happened?"

A deep dark chuckle crept into the air. Naruto knew that wave of killer intent like it was the back of his own hand. Red chakra began to bubble up from the puddles of blood on the ground and began to build until the chakra molded into a complete form.

The Demon Fox was standing before him, flicking all nine tails with a satisfied sneer.

"What happened?" Naruto demanded as he crossed his arms. The movement made him aware of a wound on his shoulder, somehow the pain was increasing in intensity.

The Demon Fox looked down at the pest who had caged him for years, who had the nerve to muzzle him like some disobedient dog. With a satisfied drawl the Fox answered, "Don't you remember? We killed them. We killed them all."

Naruto's face paled, "I-

The demon laughed and swiped his claw down. Naruto instinctively tried to summon a rasengan but like a fly was swatted through the air. The breath was knocked from him as he crashed through rubble and rolled until he had a mouth full of dirt. He could feel the pain of his landing when he tried to get up. He managed to roll over but yelped as the Demon Fox dug down his paw.

"It's just you and me." The nine-tails sneered. He decreased in size but only to increase his accuracy. Weak human flesh parted cleanly as he plunged his claw into Naruto's stomach, right where the seal used to be. The sharp exacting claw unearthed intestines and continued until there was nothing left but a hole of darkness that could not possibly contain his malevolence.

Naruto screamed in agony as his organs were torn from his body. In a desperate attempt to escape the pain of having your body ripped apart he pressed his hands together to form hand-seals. The chakra would not react and any hope of reaching it lessened as the Demon Fox dug his tongue into the large messy hole he created in Naruto's body. The Kyuubi gave a satisfied purr as he lapped the pooling blood. He savored it.
Jaws crunched down on Naruto's left arm and Naruto felt as he was being pulled apart. He was being pulled apart. Finally the pressure snapped. Bones, tendons, and muscles ripped from the socket. Naruto was losing consciousness as he watched in a quivering breath his arm snap and grind between the Demon Fox's teeth.

Suddenly, a large amount of the Kyuubi's chakra pumped into his body and as agonizing as it was to be pulled apart, the same was true as his body regenerated, pieces snapping and forced together, as he returned to his original form. The rapid manipulation of his body set off a pounding headache. Sweat marred his forehead.

A scream ripped from his throat as a claw pressed down on his legs and completely crushed them. The Fox feasted from the fear and despair and then declared, "I eat crows for breakfast." In one quick snap of his teeth, the Kyūbi showed Naruto what it feels to be treated like a caged dog.

Neutered, whipped, and broken Naruto coughed out in blood, "Stop."

It was the first in a long time Naruto has ever begged the Kyūbi.

His answer was the vengeance of eighteen imprisoned years in the hard glint of the Kyūbi's eyes. The Fox simply smirked, mischievously.

x

All ninjas died, either on the battlefield or a little bit inside until they became walking corpses.
Lesson Four

Keep your Friends Close and your Enemies Closer

All of Konoha heard Naruto screams when he woke up in the hospital. Ripping the IV and medical sensors from his skin, Naruto rushed for the bathroom. Vomit sprayed from his mouth and covered the toilet. Naruto frantically swept his hands over his body. All was still intact. No blood. But his hands could not stop shaking.

A dark chuckle bubbled within the depths of Naruto's consciousness. A shiver crawled up his spine. It's been a while since I've had that much fun. We should do it again sometime.

Naruto cowered over the toilet as he remembered. "That," Naruto spat a wad of blood, he had bitten down on his tongue so hard, "was not funny."

You should get a sense of humor.

"Fuck you," Naruto cursed and hit his head against the porcelain toilet.

You did. And the Fox Demon laughed and thrashed against the cage that weakly held him.

It wasn't fair. Bee and the Hachibi got along just fine. Even after all this time, after fighting Madara together, Naruto and the Kyūbi still couldn't see eye to eye. After the war and the constant pull-and-tug between their combining chakra, the Kyūbi had got even more restless and Naruto had no choice but to muzzle and chain him down. The chasm of the Kyūbi's hatred was deep.

"Why?" Naruto whined.

It's what I do.

A flash of the lingering nightmare erupted in Naruto's head and he dry-heaved again in the toilet. The hatred and resentment was like a poison.

We're not friends. We'll never be friends. The Kyuubi sneered. As long as I am trapped here inside of you, you will always be my enemy.

Sakura Haruno, head nurse to Konoha's busy hospital, found her long-time friend and teammate sitting on the floor of the hospital bathroom. His hospital robe was torn open with his hand on the deep black seal imprinted on his stomach. Splatters of vomit remained on his robe and skin. Naruto's face was pale, causing his whiskers marks to contrast more deeply with his skin. The toilet that sat next to him was deformed, obvious hand prints bent into the porcelain.

Sakura has worked in a ninja hospital for years now and was used to walking in on scenes of the unusual. She recovered her composure and said simply, "Naruto. Get back in bed. NOW."

If I ever escape, she'd be the first to go. I'd cut her tongue out and bathe in her silent screams.

Naruto's head snapped up to look at Sakura, then the blush came as he awkwardly scrambled onto his feet and tried to close the hospital robe he had torn apart.

The stumbling idiot was more like the Naruto she knew, not the one Sakura had witnessed a moment
before who looked as if he had experienced the most sickening experience of his life. Sakura quickly wrapped an arm around his shoulder to help him to stand.

"Sakura," Naruto quipped, embarrassed. "I can handle it."

Sakura did not doubt he could. After all, he was admitted into the hospital without a physical wound to speak of. Still, she was concerned and helped him to sit back onto the hospital bed. Just in case, she checked his vitals and they were stable.

Assigned by the Hokage, there was one important reason why Sakura was the only doctor attending Naruto and that was due to the fact Naruto had one critical physical addition: the ANBU tattoo along his right shoulder. The black curved streaks were emboldened against his golden complexion.

As the head medic of Konoha's hospital, she has healed her share of ANBU operatives, often times with wounds so gruesome only she or Tsunade could even treat them. She never knew her patients codenames or masks, only what they were as evidence of the tattoo.

"Tsunade gave me the option of joining ANBU," Sakura said softly as she reached into the closet to retrieve a new robe for Naruto.

It had been one of those days. Naruto had refused to emerge from his apartment, she had been working on little sleep, and she had just lost a small girl to the operating table.

Sakura never realized until the moment Tsunade offered her a mask how little a ninja career truly meant to her. She went to ninja academy because Sasuke went to ninja academy. She excelled in classes to prove herself and gain Sasuke's attention. She became a ninja because Sasuke was a ninja. Her entire childhood had been centered around Sasuke.

Back then she had been ignorant of the world, as innocent as the child whose heartbeat died underneath her fingertips.

Sakura was surrounded by death, the stench was always as equally present in a hospital as it was on a battlefield. It was by her own choice she decided on which field she would fight. Older, experienced, and more world-weary, she handed the mask back to Tsunade with grace and pride.

"I declined. There are plenty of field medics but only one of me. I am more useful to the village running the hospital, especially since Tsunade is kept busy as Hokage." Sakura smiled as she kept her back turned to Naruto. She clutched the robe in her hands.

Smartest thing the bitch has ever done. A weak civilian like her was never going to make it very far.

Naruto's fists were clenched so hard blood ran from his palms. "I think you are awesome Sakura."

Sakura turned to Naruto's easy grin. She walked over and handed him the robe, "Is that why you went on a mission so suddenly a week ago? An ANBU mission?"

Naruto looked up at Sakura in alarm. "How did you know? I'm not supposed to-"

"It's on your arm Naruto."

Sakura giggled as Naruto tried to twist and pull his shoulder to his eye. When he saw the tattoo his memory triggered, "Oh crap did I pass?"

"You did." Naruto and Sakura turned to the door where the Hokage stood at the entrance. "Sakura, I
need to talk to Naruto alone."

"Yes, Hokage-sama," Sakura bowed and took her leave but she was definitely going to finish her conversation with Naruto later. The Hokage quickly reminded her, "and as I am certain you have already guessed, this is a highly classified secret."

Sakura nodded in understanding. She walked down the hall and slowly came to a stop. Nurses passed her as they went to their various assignments with the determination and weariness of old ninjas receiving a mission. Screams from injured patients were last battle cries. Small beeps echoed like the failure of beating hearts.

Sakura couldn't help but to remember the tattered scream that tore through the halls in a haunting symphony of agony and fear just a few moments ago.

"And Naruto, why don't you have any clothes on?"

Naruto blushed and quickly looked around the room for his own clothes, finding none, he begrudgingly put on the new hospital robe Sakura retrieved for him. "So… I passed?" Naruto asked.

"The only condition was for you to survive." Tsunade gave Naruto a critical once over with her eyes. He seemed stable enough.

"What you saw, what happened to you, was not part of the plan. It was supposed to be a genjutsu, almost similar to what you experienced at the Falls of Truth. Instead," Tsunade felt ashamed at out of hand it had gotten, "the Kyūbi interfered."

The Kyūbi purred in contentment.

Tsunade thought Naruto would have been jumping around the room and screaming at her angrily. She certainly would have. She had seen the tortures Naruto had been put through. She had been forced to watch. Even the ANBU Captains who have seen some sick and disgusting scenes in their career were more than relieved when Tsunade offered them Yamanaka to tamper with their memory. Tsunade didn't take that option. It was the Hokage's job to bear the burden of those who followed her.

"You're not mad?" Tsunade asked.

Naruto shrugged his shoulders. Even if he was, there was no point yelling to her about it. The Demon Fox had always been his problem and he'll handle it alone.

"Can I get out of here?" Naruto asked. "I hate hospitals."

Tsunade studied the young man in front of her with a worried sigh. At this point, she was willing to forgive him anything. "I'll turn a blind eye if you promise me you'll get some rest. Then I want you to see me tomorrow. There are more protocols we need to go over."

Naruto brightened with a smile. Then he was already out of the window.

It always amazed Tsunade how strong Naruto has become. Only someone as resilient as him could be so brutally tortured and still wear a smile on his face, if not for him, but for the sake of everyone around him.
Naruto did not go straight home.

When he was younger, he used to swing his legs as he sat on the stool, waiting. Now he could only bounce his leg against the ground as he leaned over the counter in anticipation.

"Is it ready yet?" Naruto was compelled to ask even though he had long ago memorized the time it took for every item on the list to cook.

Ayame playfully hit his forehead with a wooden spoon. "You're always so impatient," she teased. "It is your fault, you know." She gestured with a wink to the crowded ramen stand. It had become popular ever since Naruto became labeled as the hero of the village. Other customers sat across from him, sneaking a peak out of the corner of their eyes. A group of girls were whispering with his name on their tongue. But none joined him. They all looked on at a distance as if he was an idol that shouldn't be touched.

Naruto averted his eyes away from the crowd and concentrated on Ayame. He couldn't admit to himself that the hateful and distrustful looks of his past were more comfortable than the ones of admiration. Like a brand new pair of shoes that just didn't fit right, something deep in him longed to go back to his broken, dirty, but comfortable old pair.

**Those pests don't care anything about you. They were the ones talking behind your back only a few years ago. They deserve to die.**

Naruto refused to be goaded by the Kyūbi's comments, no matter how much the truth was chaffing against his skin. He was relieved when Old Man Teuchi placed a ramen bowl in front of him, and knowing the nature of Naruto's appetite, quickly turned back to the kitchen to make more.

Naruto dug in with gusto. Ayame watched with a smile as she turned to attend the other customers. Explosions of flavor set off in his mouth when he began but they soon left debris of blandness. The noodles began to hang limp from his mouth.

Naruto didn't care what anyone said, ramen could fix anything.

**Look at how they're staring at you, as if they weren't the ones to beat you in the street or turn the other cheek.**

"Hey, Naruto, are you alright?" Ayame asked as she noticed his diminished appetite. When she tried to walk over to him, after a blink of the eye, he was gone. He left one bowl of half-eaten noodles behind.

"Dad, Naruto didn't eat," Ayame whispered to her father. They both stared at each other with worried looks.

Somehow Naruto found himself alone in the middle of a park, sitting on a swing set. Along time ago he could swing his legs absentmindedly in the air. Now his feet touched the rough ground.

Naruto Uzumaki stood with his arms crossed. The sage coat he wore fluttered in the wind that was pumped through the broken pipes above. He stood ankle deep in sewage water as he stared at the Demon Fox, jailed inside of his mindscape.
If there was one thing Naruto had learned through his eighteen years of life, it was how to deal with the Kyūbi that he housed. With the persistent and determined attitude that characterized him, Naruto stood before the Kyūbi.

"I will make the cage smaller and muzzle you again," Naruto threatened as he craned his neck upwards with a grimace. There was a time when he believed he could do something about the Demon Fox's anger but that was an optimist's delusion. Trying to change the Demon's Fox nature was as futile as grasping water.

The Kyuubi sneered and barred his fangs. "I will escape this prison and you will pay for my humiliation dearly."

"Someday I am going to die and I will take you with me," Naruto promised. "I refuse to let anyone else suffer your hatred."

The Kyūbi snarled as he rammed his muzzle against the bars. "I will not die fool!"

"Are you sure?" Naruto voice was a steady stone. "For eighteen years now your chakra has been leaking into mine and eventually we will become interconnected. The more that happens the more you are so desperate to escape. I think we are reaching a point soon that we can never be apart, in life and death."

The Kyuubi paced through the bars. "I will destroy you."

"I don't hate you. I pity you." The water flowed around his feet. "I'm going to give you another chance. I won't muzzle or cage you but if you insist on telling me to kill everyone I see in the streets, then I won't hesitate."

"You don't order me around, boy."

The two stood, staring each other down. In the presence of sheer malevolence, Naruto could not comprehend how he ever considered Sasuke his greatest rival. He had been wrong. Naruto's greatest rival had always been inside of him.

"I'm not the one in a cage," Naruto spat as he turned around, his back turned to the caged demon. The Fox chuckled in his footsteps.

The sun glowed through the window by the time Naruto stepped out the bathroom. His growing hair limped around his ears as it dried in the warm air. With a towel wrapped around his waist he set about making him some breakfast. He was starving.

"I'm impressed."

Naruto swiveled in annoyance as Kakashi sat in the open window of Naruto's apartment. His face was hidden by a mask, tucked behind the book he studied almost religiously. "Why do you have to show up when I'm not wearing anything!"

Kakashi pulled his book down. "Yaoi is not my type of kunai but if it's your weapon of choice I don't judge."

Naruto didn't even want to know what he was talking about and stormed into his room to get dressed. He pulled on sweat pants and a shirt, and then he smelled something burning. Naruto ran into the living room to take the pot off the stove. His breakfast was burning while Kakashi sat at the window without a care in the world.
"Why are you here?" Naruto asked annoyed.

"I hear the Captains had an appointment with Yamanaka. What in the world did you do?"

Naruto would never figure out how Kakashi knew everything, even information classified as a secret.

"The Fox," Naruto grumbled and started another pot of noodles. Normally, Naruto would have eaten the burnt set if it had been the last but thankfully, Sakura had filled his cabinets.

"I take it you haven't seen the Hokage yet?"

"I was going to after I ate breakfast," Naruto replied and stared at the pot of calm water. Impatient, he threw the pack of noodles in and waited for both to come to a boil.

"The tattoo," Kakashi said without ever looking up from his book to see if it was even there, "should be henged at all times when you aren't wearing a mask."

"Oh," that made sense, Naruto immediately henged the skin on his shoulder and the tattoo disappeared under the cover of the ninjutsu.

A knock pounded heavily on the door. Pulled away from his ramen, Naruto stomped angrily over to the door to reveal Sakura about to slam the door down with her impatience. "Hey Naruto," Sakura greeted and saw Kakashi at the window over Naruto's shoulder. Kakashi gave a quick 'oi' in greeting.

"Good morning Kakashi," Sakura greeted as she shoved Naruto out of her way and walked inside of the apartment. "NARUTO! How many times have I told you it's not healthy to live like this!" Sakura kicked the empty ramen containers and dirty clothes on the floor, "There could be rats!"

"I, um haven't gotten around to it," Naruto scratched the back of his head. "I'll do it, I promise."

"Seriously Naruto! You can make a hundred of yourself and not one of them has ever thought about cleaning up around here?" Sakura huffed, completely forgetting why she stopped by in the first place. She sniffed the air, a scent caught her attention. "Naruto, something is burning."

"Crap!" Naruto raced to his oven and stared heartbroken at his second batch of burnt ramen. He was so hungry he put a fork to it anyways, until he found himself embedded in the opposite wall by way of Sakura's fist.

"You can't eat that! It's burnt!" Sakura took the cracked pot and threw the contents in the trash. She opened the fridge and took out the eggs and sausage. Naruto stared amazed. He had no idea that stuff was in there. Sakura slammed the ingredients on the counter. She was going to make a proper breakfast!

Naruto looked at the cracks in his wall as he picked himself up. He hoped the money he made in ANBU would be enough to fix it. "Why are you here by the way?"

"Oh," Sakura turned with one hand on her hip, "I came to check up on you. I'm guessing you can't tell me what happened but I just wanted to make sure you were alright and give you these." Sakura pulled a bottle of pills from her belt and placed them on the counter. "Most ANBU patients have trouble sleeping. I figure you would need them."

Naruto didn't know what to say. People doing random things for him still surprised him.
"They are pretty effective," Kakashi agreed. Retired ANBU never truly leave ANBU.

"Oh wow," Naruto smiled, "thanks Sakura."

She smiled smugly. "Guess what? Breakfast is almost ready."

Just as she said those words a cloud of smoke appeared in the middle of the room, revealing an ANBU agent with a grotesque Squid mask.

"Great, a team 7 reunion," Kakashi muttered.

Sakura, much faster than her blonde counterpart, "Sai?"

"I am not Sai. I am Squid. If I was Sai I would be under rights to kill you. But I am not Sai. I am Squid."

Naruto was much slower. "SAI?" Naruto took one look at the Squid mask which had more expression than the man underneath ever wore. He collapsed in a fit of laughter.

Sakura was the one who realized how odd the moment was. Kakashi could have but didn't care. They had been a team once, like a puzzle that has had its pieces shuffled, lost, and forced together to form a suggestion of the image that had once been there before – just a little crooked, with holes, and jagged edges.

A random occurrence of fate, on a random day, brought the last remnants together since the war, the war where Yamamoto died and an end to whatever was left of Sasuke's soul. They had been a team once.

Naruto stood in the middle of these three individuals and the day suddenly didn't seem very random at all.

"The Hokage requests your presence."

"But… but…" Naruto looked like a lost puppy, "I didn't get to eat breakfast."

Slight smiles appeared, even hidden by masks, they were there. They smiled at the endearing personality of their friend, the glue that kept the uneven pieces crushed together.

Tsunade looked at her new ANBU agent. His growing build and developed muscles accentuated the uniform. Unlike other ANBU agents who always stood at respectful attention in her presence this one fidgeted impatiently. It gave him the look of a Crow and for a moment he looked almost intimidating, that was until his stomach growled loudly in the room. Shizune, who stood in the corner with the files, giggled.

"Shouldn't you have eaten already?"

"I was rudely interrupted," The Crow mask echoed the bitterness loud and clear.

"You can get some food after we're done, but first things first, you need an alibi."

"Alibi?" Naruto asked confused.

"A double life," Tsunade explained, "for example a grocery store owner or fisherman."

"So you're telling me that the local grocery store owner could be ANBU?" Naruto questioned and
went through a profile of all the unsuspecting villagers of Konoha in his mind.

Tsunade only smiled. "But your case is different. With your chakra, implanting a shadow clone in your normal routines will be more effective than coming up with imaginary missions to explain your disappearance. Your shadow clone will be Uzumaki Naruto and it will be as if you are always here. This is of the utmost importance so that our enemy spies will believe you are in the village always at hand."

Naruto nodded and tried to take in the rush of new information and instructions seriously. After all, he was ANBU now.

"For every mission, the squad leaders are given the files of their squad so they will be familiar with the talents of their team members, no doubt anyone with half a brain will figure out who you are. Within ANBU, your identity will most likely be compromised."

"So even some ANBU don't know who each other are?"

Tsunade nodded. "It's safer, but keep in mind not everyone in ANBU will be aware of your identity. In an ANBU's career they tend to work with the same handful of agents. These protocols are in place so if one ANBU is caught and tortured, he will not be able to reveal everyone's identity and skills. But listen to me carefully, no one, and I mean no one is to know your identity outside of ANBU."

Naruto didn't know how to bring up Kakashi and Sakura.

"There are exceptions. An ANBU agent has the option of telling close family members. As you have no family, Kakashi and Sakura can be your exceptions. They are granted limited access. They are allowed to know you are in ANBU but not your codename."

It was dangerous to even allow family members such information, but the danger paled in comparison to the alternative. ANBU agents needed an anchor, people to help them remember there was someone living and breathing behind the mask. They were often the thin line left holding them to humanity.

"From here on out, while you are in uniform you are not to get anything from your house, unless using shadow clone. You are not to hang out or talk with anyone that you know if it's not mission related, unless using a shadow clone. You are not to be seen, unless using shadow clone. Do you understand? Your involvement in ANBU is a highly classified secret."

Naruto nodded his head quickly.

"Any questions?"

"If I can't go back home where am I supposed to live?"

"While you are on-duty, you are to live at ANBU headquarters. This allows agents to be at my beck and call at all times."

"And where is that?"

"In a moment," Tsunade pulled a thick paper from her desk, "This is your schedule. As a new agent you have not yet been qualified for field work. You are stuck doing grunt work until your overseers tell me that you are ready. Then I will begin giving you missions into the field."

Naruto looked over the schedule without much thought.
"That's it," Tsunade said proudly, finally finished with all of his paperwork, "Any questions?"

Tsunade was already reaching for the next load of paperwork when Naruto said, "Actually I do have something to ask, but it's not ANBU related."

Tsunade raised a curious eyebrow.

Naruto reached for his mask.

"You are not supposed to-" Tsunade began as Naruto took the mask off from his face. The expression he carried made her falter. It was the same expression she saw back during the war when Naruto stood defiantly before her and the Raikage.

"I want to talk you about the Nine-tailed Fox."

Tsunade folded her hands below her chin. "Continue."

"In the case that I am to die," Naruto faced those words with utmost determination. It was the first time Naruto has ever broached the subject of his future other than being Hokage. "I want to be the last nine-tailed jinchūriki."

Tsunade slowly opened a drawer in her desk and pulled out a bottle of sake. She filled two cups. "Honestly, Naruto that request might not be realistic."

"Why not?" Naruto demanded as Tsunade took a slow sip from her sake. "The other villages lost their tailed-demons to Akatsuki. Killer Bee and I are the only ones left. There's no point for a jinchūriki to even exist anymore."

Tsunade sighed into cup. "It's true that is the case, but the Demon Fox is a property of the village. Konoha will lose a great source of its power, it gives us great influence among the other the villages, and now because of you, the villagers have come to rely on a jinchūriki to keep them safe and protected."

Tsunade hated the truth, but the truth was that a lot of Konoha's political weight rested on the fact that the Village Hidden in the Leaves controlled the Nine-tailed Fox.

"This is the very reason why your identity in ANBU is classed a secret higher than the identity of other agents. If the elders find out that I'll be putting you in the field and in danger so much, they'll have my ass for it. They won't say it aloud, but the reason why they are so adamant in keeping you in the village, is in the case that something happens to you they want to be there to oversee your death." Tsunade gripped her sake bottle.

"You can't let that happen," Naruto said softly.

"I will, if I must," Tsunade replied. "There are records that state the Demon Fox can survive the death of his jinchūriki. If I ever had to make the decision, I will create another jinchūriki before letting it fall into enemy hands or taking revenge on the village."

"It won't happen." Naruto said firmly, "I think because the Fox and I have been connected for so long we'll both die, together."

"You think." Tsunade stressed.

Naruto gripped the wood of the desk. "I am not going to let another child carry this burden."
"Like your son or daughter," Tsunade whispered.

"What do you mean?" Naruto asked in confusion. "Oh." It hit Naruto suddenly, the fact that Konoha's jinchūriki legacy had been passed down among the Uzumaki bloodline for the special chakra they carried. It completely blindsided him because he had never thought of having a family, much less children. Then to know those children will most likely be the next vessel if his assumptions were wrong...

Naruto's face paled and shakily grabbed the cup of alcohol Tsunade had poured.

"I know it's not something you want to hear but the fact is sometimes a ninja's duty to the village is more than just accomplishing missions." This was a conversation Tsunade hoped to have when the poor boy was at least twenty. Ninja understood that one of their primary duties was to produce living breathing weapons for the village. Tsunade knew Naruto would have a harder time understanding.

The alcohol went bitter down Naruto's throat.

He slammed the small cup down and it shattered. His whiskered cheeks were suddenly more pronounced, his eyes blood red. "You should trust me a little more Hokage," Naruto said as he calmly straightened his shoulders. "I will destroy the Kyūbi."

As Naruto walked from the office, there was an eruption of laughter so loud it gave him a headache.

I'd like to see you try.

x

ANBU agents needed an anchor, people to help them remember there was someone living and breathing behind the mask.
Lesson Five

The Mentally Insane Crazy Characters of ANBU

If the bustling streets of Konoha belonged to the citizens, then the underground belonged to the shadows.

Naruto Uzumaki woke up in the room given to him by ANBU headquarters. It was larger than his apartment. It was almost like a mini-house, with a separate bathroom, couch, and even small kitchen set. There were multiple racks on the wall to showcase different equipment. His katana rested on the lowest peg. A bingo book lay haphazardly on the floor. His uniform was thrown over the couch. Naruto reached out and slammed the alarm clock angrily, but it was ninja-proof, and did not stop. With an annoyed grunt, he rolled over and pressed the right coordination of buttons.

Naruto was sore and the stress of his muscles screamed throughout his body. Still, he was not going to be late to another training session. He fell out of bed with an exhausted roll. He threw on his clothes, his mask, and grumpily slammed his door shut behind him. There was no point in locking, sealing or even trapping a door when you lived among the most elite of shinobi. If they wanted to get in, they will find a way.

Naruto stepped out of his room and the hall stretched in both directions. The door behind him had a picture of a crow etched into the wood. Similar doors aligned the hallways, all decorated with the symbols of various animals.

There were plenty of ANBU already roaming through the underground where large and twisted roots the size of buildings created great domed spaces. And Naruto thought he got up early.

There was hardly any socializing among the ANBU. Meals were eaten in the privacy of rooms, baths and sleeping quarters were separate, all for the sake of preserving one's identity. If the ANBU underground claimed to have a center, it would be the training area.

ANBU said good morning with a punch to each other faces.

Naruto walked onto the vast training area that perhaps spanned the entire village of Konoha. There were private rooms if requested, gym and ninja equipment, and environmental areas to simulate realistic battlegrounds. It was a training exercise just to avoid the many sparring matches as Naruto dodged countless ninjutsu attacks.

In the midst of the fighting, sat a lone figure frozen in meditation. A katana sat across his lap and the white coat of an ANBU captain hung on his shoulders. Blonde hair scattered around the mask and flowed down his chest in a long ponytail. Naruto slid to a stop before his katana master, Tiger.

"200 ryo he won't last longer than thirty minutes."

Naruto grumbled as the ANBU who stood above the railing started placing bets. Somehow, he had become the morning entertainment. Naruto had once asked Sai if they did that for all the newcomers, evidently just for the bad ones.

Naruto conceded his skill with a katana was rather pitiful but he thought he was getting better. As Naruto waited patiently for his teacher to finish his routine, Naruto began to do a series of stretches. On the first day Naruto had learned never to interrupt Tiger's meditation. It was the first time Naruto had come the closest to death since joining ANBU, and it wouldn't be the last.
Finally, Tiger stood from his cross-legged pose. He opened his eyes and a chill crept up Naruto’s spine. Rumors said that Tiger hasn’t been allowed above ground in years, that he not only missed the Fourth but the Third Shinobi war as well. Tiger, like some of the other ANBU agents, have never even heard the name of Naruto Uzumaki. Naruto had become a no one, a nobody. He was clawing respect for himself all over again.

"Good morning Tiger Sensei," Naruto bowed respectfully.

Tiger deflected his words with a nod. Morning no longer mattered to one such as he. When you lived underground, it was hard to tell the time – it was always midnight.

Tiger might be in charge of training the newest recruits in the ways of the sword, but his reason to be was the blade. He lived and breathed its metal. "The rules are the same. No genjutsu, ninjutsu, or taijutsu – simply the blade."

Naruto unsheathed his sword and readied his stance. They circled one another. Tiger held his blade aloft and with the grace and power of his namesake, literally prowled around his target. Sweat dropped from Naruto's brow, even though they were moving in tandem with each other, he could feel how unequal it was, as if he was the one being encircled.

The only warning Naruto got was a shift in the air.

The clash of metal was drowned by the great sounds of other fights in the room. Naruto barely deflected the blow, stepped back and gave ground as he went on a desperate defensive. Tiger whittled down his prey with the steel arrogance of a hunter. Naruto had never realized how slow he was. It was true he could reach speeds that matched the Raikage but that was in Sage mode or Fox Cloak. Without any enhancing chakra, Tiger's speed was like lightning and Naruto was pushing through water.

Naruto staggered and a blade cut through his arm. He winced as it grazed his bone but was resilient enough to recover in time for the next barrage of attacks. Tiger believed the experience of a sword cut was the best method of teaching.

"I bet you the maggot is a medic nin, did you notice how healed he is from yesterday?"

"Not all the fancy healing jutsu in the world is still going to save his ass."

"I say ten more minutes."

Naruto was used to the odds always being against him. He was slower, less powerful, and less experienced than Tiger. But Naruto wasn't renown as Konoha's number one unpredictable ninja for nothing. An idea formed as Naruto was thrashed around the practice area.

He stepped to the right, and with a smirk thankfully hidden by his mask, fell to the ground in a crouch. A stray jutsu from a separate sparring match whizzed over Naruto's head. Tiger noticed it too late, but he was fast, and the earth jutsu missed Tiger's chest but slammed into his arm. Naruto took advantage of the opportunity and countered. His blade nicked Tiger's shoulder before Tiger leapt back. The Captain landed in a crouch, bleeding blood. Tiger touched his hand to his bloodied shoulder and held it aloft, looking at it in a curious sort of way.

The ANBU watching were leaning over the railing.

"No way, no one has been able to draw Tiger's blood in years."

"He got lucky."
"Hey, I think I actually win the bet this time."

Tiger left his fighting stance.

"How was that?" Naruto asked proudly.

Tiger walked towards him, and before Naruto could react, a sword was suddenly plunged through Naruto's chest. The accuracy of the blow was truly remarkable, as it was inches away from ending his life.

"The fight isn't over until blades are sheathed," Tiger whispered in Naruto's ear and then withdrew his sword. Naruto's breath hitched as the blade was pulled from his body. "Training is done for today. Same time tomorrow."

The white ANBU Captain cloak rustled as Tiger walked calmly off the training area. Stray jutsu whizzed over his head and at times, dangerously close, but none ever hit. A trail of blood followed him.

Naruto fell to his knees as his flak jacket was quickly soaked with blood. The pain was like being devoured by fire, it got worse and more life threatening as time passed.

"Who knew Tiger was such a sore loser."

"Um… should we do something?"

"He's a medic ninja, he'll be fine."

Naruto collapsed on the ground.

"Maybe not."

Naruto felt a hand on his back and his insides began to repair themselves as a cool chill swept through his body.

"Hey maggot, you alright?"

Naruto groaned at the nickname given to unfielded agents. When he looked up, he saw three masks: Sparrow, Baboon, and Bobcat.

Naruto limply raised his hand and gave all three an offensive hand gesture, "It was not luck."

Baboon and Sparrow laughed. Baboon's laughter was so heavy it suffocated the ringing in Naruto's head. "You know, maggot you got spunk."

Baboon, twice the size of normal men dragged Naruto up to his feet easily. Naruto winced as he balanced himself. He was breathing hard and blood still leaked from the wound.

"Sorry," Sparrow shrugged, "medic ninjutsu is not my specialty."

There were many ANBU agents who knew at least basic medical ninjutsu. Of course, not until it was too late.

Sparrow leaned over Naruto's shoulder, along with his side ponytail of black hair. "Since it looks like you've got time how about a sparring match?"

"That's an unfair advantage, he's wounded," Bobcat said timidly. He was the smallest of the three
and held a defensive stance.

"Just a little fun," Sparrow goaded. There was a large red tattoo on Sparrow's shoulder.

Naruto's stomach grumbled. Since his training session with Tiger had ended early he wanted to get breakfast but he's never said no to a sparring match either. It would be the first time Naruto could test the full extent of his abilities against another ANBU member.

Bets were already being place as Naruto said, "You're on."

ANBU said good morning with a punch to each other faces.

Naruto limped down the corridor, his uniform torn to bloody pieces and bruises blossoming along his skin. His lip was busted, he had trouble breathing, but had a huge wad of cash in his pocket. It's been a long time since Naruto could go all out like that. He had used up two reserve Sage clones and even used his Fox Cloak. The training area was wrecked and almost everyone had stopped to watch the fight in curiosity. Naruto was surely making a name for himself.

"There you are."

Naruto froze at that voice and hardly had the strength to fight as he was pushed against the wall. A Snake mask suddenly filled his field of vision. "That fight was rather impressive," Captain Snake whistled as she held a chakra infused palm to keep Naruto pinned to the wall. She wore a white cloak and a mesh shirt underneath, completely disregarding uniform.

"Snake," Naruto croaked before Snake pulled up his mask and her lips were on his. Naruto surrendered against the wall as her breasts pressed into his chest and she forced her tongue into his mouth. The heat was unbearable as the blood not leaking out of Naruto's body rushed downwards.

She gripped his hard cock and fondled him before releasing him from the kiss. Her lips licked against his ear and then she whispered, "By now the poison that I am immune to have entered through your mouth and is destroying your body." She squeezed his cock harder, "You'd be dead by now."

"Or you'd be dead," Naruto smirked as he held a kunai to her chest and then suddenly disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

Snake snapped back with a curse. "Well, I'll be damned."

Naruto lounged on a rooftop in boredom as one of his shadow clones dissipated. A smirk crossed his lips when he learned Snake finally fell for one of the decoys he had planted throughout ANBU. Without the burdens of saving the world and a deranged S-class criminal obsessing his thoughts, Snake had helped Naruto to realize he had grown into a full-blooded male and the consequences were obvious as he failed every test she put before him. His final solution to the problem was simple: never get caught.

"What are you smirking for maggot?" Sloth asked.

"How did-" Naruto began, but stopped with a sigh. Naruto accepted the fact that Sloth knew everything, even down to the expressions he wore behind his mask. "I finally got one over on Snake."

Sloth lounged over the building as he stared intently into the distance. "You should not have done that."
"Why not?"

"There are a lot of crazy characters in ANBU, her included. Some people take their tests a little too seriously."

"Yeah," Naruto grumbled as he remembered Tiger completely blindsiding him with a strike to the gut. Naruto's bandaged chest still hurt when he made any sharp movements. Naruto sighed as he sat back and continued watching the Hokage through the window of her office as she took a nap, with stacks of paper piling up around her.

This was boring and he was beginning to have a sneaking suspicion why he had been teamed with Sloth for bodyguard duty. The Hokage knew he would try using a shadow clone to get out of it, but with Sloth watching his every move that was nearly impossible.

Naruto curiously looked in the direction Sloth was staring. What could possibly be so interesting? Naruto ran through a mental map of Konoha. "Wait, are you peeking in the girl's bath house?"

"You should be concentrating on the Hokage. You never know when you need to prepare a silence or obscurity jutsu when some dumbass wants to take his mask off in her office and talk about S-class secrets," Sloth said casually.

Naruto crossed his arms with a pout, "And here I thought all Hyuuga's were stuck-up goody two-shoes."

"I've shed that name a long time ago," Sloth scoffed. He tapped the part of the mask that covered his eyes, "Besides, Hyuugas are born natural pervs. You can't masturbate or have sex in that household without someone peeking in on you. I was glad to get out of there. So I can do the peeking, not the other way around."

An image of Neji invaded Naruto's head. No wonder why he was so uptight all the time. A grin cracked Naruto's face and he couldn't help but to laugh.

"There you are."

Naruto wasn't laughing anymore.

He froze and turned around to find Snake standing on a light post. Even with his increase sense of smell and hearing, there were only a few ANBU agents who could manage to sneak up on him.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Naruto panicked as she turned and scooted against the roof.

"Do you know how foolish you made me look this morning?" Snake asked as she jumped from the post and slithered toward him.

Sloth shrugged his shoulders. "She's not mad at me."

Naruto was in full Fox Cloak as he blasted across the rooftops, determined not to ever get caught.

Naruto sighed as he walked into his scheduled meeting with Yamanaka, all the while managing to avoid Snake for the past few hours. If nothing else, his evasion skills were being polished since his prankster days.

"Crow," Inoichi Yamanaka nodded as he received another patient out of the long list he held in his hands. "Sit in the chair," Yamanaka stated procedurally as he walked around the room and set up the
equipment to the ANBU agent's head.

"Do you mind telling me what this is for?" Naruto asked curiously.

"We will be practicing and training your mental defenses in case you are captured by the enemy."

Naruto nodded uncomfortably. He wasn't too sure about letting someone into his head, but he allowed the suction to be placed to skin. A few machines in the corner began to glow with life and beep with information.

"Everything's normal," An assistant in the corner reported. It was Ino. She pressed buttons and casually looked at a monitor. Naruto wanted to say hi but had to remember to keep his identity a secret.

"Alright," Inoichi sat his clipboard down. "For this first time don't put up any resistance. We need to measure your vitals in the presence of a mental threat. Then afterwards, we'll work on resisting my intrusion."

Inoichi placed a hand on Naruto's forehead and closed his eyes.

When Inoichi reopened them, he was floating in the presence of a brain, wells of information leaking from the stem. Inoichi did an assessment of the mental health of the brain first and noted down any signs of stress.

The hairs on the back of Inoichi's neck began to stand on end. He turned around but found nothing there. He frowned. He told the agent not to put up any mental defenses. Confident he could counter whatever defense mechanisms were beginning to react, Inoichi turned back toward the brain. He picked a random memory to extract, and when he physically touched the brain to pull out the scroll, Inoichi's entire body froze in the presence of a horrifying killer intent.

Inoichi Yamanaka was the best of the best, but even he wasn't prepared for this.

In reality, Inoichi's hand was stuck to the semi-conscious forehead of the ANBU agent. Inoichi began to scream and his vitals were quickly diminishing.

"Dad?" Ino climbed over the equipment in a hurried rush to release her father from the jutsu that was killing him. Ino pressed her hand on his shoulder and disrupted the jutsu.

Inoichi collapsed on the ground in a shiver. Naruto opened his eyes and jumped from the chair, "What happen? Did something attack?"

That was an understatement.

"Damn crazy ANBU," Inoichi coughed as he raised his hands. He drew a big red 'X' on the Crow's file. "We're done."

Ibiki cracked his neck as a new ANBU agent entered his "office". In actuality the room looked more like a cell but Ibiki loved to set an atmosphere. Naruto gulped at the wicked smile on Ibiki's face as the door slammed shut behind him. "Have a seat."

There was only one seat in the room, which was the only item in the room. Naruto sat in the chair with a great amount of trepidation.
"Do you know why you're here?" Ibiki asked.

"Not really," Naruto responded slowly.

Ibiki walked around the Crow, folding his hands behind his back. "ANBU agents are involved in very dangerous missions, thus there is a greater possibility of being captured by the enemy," Ibiki leaned forward, his long scar marring his face. "I should know."

Naruto gulped.

"Every ANBU agent is required to see me at least once a month when they are not away on a mission assignment. My job is to condition your body to resist torture, ideally until a team is sent to rescue you, most likely, until you die. Either way, Konoha's secrets should not fall into the wrong hands."

Chains sprouted from the hollow insides of the chair and wrapped around Naruto's chest, ankles, and arms. Ibiki leaned forward, killer intent radiating off his person at all times.

"Let's begin."

Ibiki put forth the first question he always gives to new agents, the one they are to protect with their life. "What is your name?"

"Naruto Uzumaki," Naruto answered without thought, it was only a second later he remembered he wasn't supposed to be Naruto anymore.

There was a chill in the wind but there was no wind in the room. Ibiki coughed as he straightened his shoulders. A moment of silence elapsed until, "That was a new record. But I haven't decided if you cracked so easily due to the fear I can instill in you or your plain stupidity."

"Oh," Naruto gave an unseen apologetic grin. "That was a part of the test? We can start over. I won't screw up this time."

Ibiki began to think of ways how he could torture the Hokage for making him put up with this kid. Ibiki stared at the same kid that he had passed through the chūnin exams who never answered a single question on the first test. He stared at the hero of the Leaf Village, war hero of the Fourth Shinobi War. He stared at the pathetic excuse for an ANBU. He was going to have to fix that.

Ino Yamanaka sighed as she finished with her latest psychotic patient and pressed the button to call another one in. She brushed some dust from her ugly and unfashionable pants. Then she readjusted the Butterfly mask she wore. When she decided to join ANBU she was supposed to be following in her father's footsteps and enter the interrogation/torture unit. Even though she was training as her father's assistant and protégé, part-time she was stuck doing psych evaluation for ANBU.

Psych evaluations were simply a routine check-up and most of her patients just stared at her in daring silence. People with her abilities were recruited to help with this particular work but still, why her? Ino felt it was a waste of time when she could be ripping apart someone brains. The most she ever learned in this particular job was how to become immune to killing intent.

Ino flipped through her next patient's report. It was a blank slate with no mission history, signaling this agent was new. She stared at the codename. This was the same one who had put her Father in the hospital. Great, someone's head who was so messed up even her Father was helpless against it.

The door opened.
Ino raised an eyebrow as her patient entered. She couldn't see his face as it was covered by the Crow mask, but her eyes were immediately drawn by how his body filled out his uniform. He had nice muscled arms. Ino judged this one had to be well-versed in Taijutsu at least.

She watched as Crow collapsed in the chair before her. "Please tell me that this is just a psych evaluation where I just talk about my feelings and stuff. I don't think I can take any more surprises, ambushes, traps, genjutsu, henges, or even someone jumping out of that corner and saying 'surprise'."

Ino smiled brilliantly. Thank Kami. Someone with a sense of humor or at least personality.

"It might be hard to believe but most of my patients would rather jump off a cliff than speak about their feelings," Ino replied.

Naruto scoffed, he was completely exhausted and was sort of relieved he had someone to talk to even if she did wear a mask.

"So, how was your first week in ANBU?" Ino began.

"Horrifying and exciting at the same time," Naruto easily answered, "I love the new training regimen but Ibiki has me in his office every day because of my little mess-up. He should have explained the rules first. And Tiger pummels me into the ground ever since I pulled that stunt on him, and don't get me started on Snake..."

Ino wrote down in her notebook, 'loves to talk.'

"I know what you mean. I had to do an evaluation on Snake a few weeks ago. I swear, that woman loves to torture people. It's cruel that she's assigned to you."

"I'm beginning to think the Hokage did it on purpose," Naruto grumbled.

"Not even the Hokage is that cruel."

Naruto thought otherwise.

Ino went to the next subject on her list, "Have you delved into your mindscape yet? It's okay if you haven't. Many ninja haven't done it before."

"Why?"

Ino noticed the first signs of defense in his voice. Ino explained calmly, "It's important for all agents to be able to enter their mindscape. It can be a haven in case of a traumatic event, having access to it can greatly increase your focus in meditation, and it is a reflection of mental health. It is for this latter reason why I am interested in your mindscape."

"Oh," Naruto said softly. "Yeah, I can access it."

"Good, we can skip all of the mental exercises. Do you mind describing it for me?" Ino asked as she pressed the tip of her pen against the paper.

"Um," Naruto couldn't possibly tell her about the Kyuubi caged in the middle of it. "It's like a sewer."

"I'm sorry, did you say sewer?"

"Uh, yeah is there something wrong?"
"No," Ino said quickly as she wrote the detail on the sheet of paper. None of the books she has ever read had an interpretation for a sewer.

"There are pipes along the wall but most of them are broken, hot wind leaks out of them. There is water on the ground and it reaches as high as my ankles. There are tunnels in every direction, small ones leading to darkness but they all twist and turn, all paths eventually leading to one."

"And what does the paths lead to?" Ino asked softly, frightened.

"Nothing," Naruto whispered. "It leads to nothing."

"Wake up."

Naruto snapped awake. He tried to sit up but was pulled back down. Cords bound his arms and legs to the bed. He looked up and there was a porcelain mask of a Snake outlined in the darkness as she leaned over him.

"What are you doing?"

"So pathetic," She teased, "All I had to do was open the door. There were no traps or seals anywhere. What if you had been on a mission? If your enemies were nice they'd kill you. If your enemies were mean…." Snake made her point as the buttons popped off from Naruto night shirt as she ripped it open.

"This is insane!" Naruto yelled.

"Screaming isn't going to help you. It took you so long to wake up I even had time to place a silence jutsu around us. Aren't you in a predicament?"

"Okay, okay, I get it. I won't go to sleep without precautions so can you please let me go?" Naruto whined.

Snake smirked as she slithered onto the bed and sat on his stomach. "But as your teacher I care about you and I can't possibly risk letting you make mistakes."

Naruto squirmed in pain as Snake placed a needle into his chest

"Anko please…"

"I thought you'd learn by now, only codenames my dear student."

Naruto tried to wrestle with the bindings as needles were placed into his chest. They pierced his skin and blood pooled underneath each embedded needle. Snake didn't stop until she eventually drew a picture of a happy face. She pulled above him and took his mouth to hers. Her tongue intruded into his mouth and stole her way through. All the while her torso pressed down on the needles and the pain increased. Her tongue shoved farther and farther down his throat until he couldn't breathe.

**You fucking idiot. If you don't get this bitch off of you you're going to suffocate to death.**

Naruto was too caught up in the confusion of lust to even draw on any chakra. Right before he couldn't take it anymore, Snake let up. "You're hopeless," she threw up her arms. "You would be dead five times over."

A flush of embarrassment crossed Naruto's face as Snake lifted off of him and sat on the edge of the
"It's just... just hard to think when you're on top of me," Naruto mumbled.

Snake shook her head. "Because all your blood leaves your brain and you think with your cock. Men. You do realize that one of the highest causes of death for a male ninja is an enemy kunoichi? And often with their pants down at that."

Snake stood up and looked at her inspiring 'happy face' artwork. It was crying in streaks of blood. "That's all men want, power and sex," Snake said bitterly.

"Anko... not all guys are like that," Naruto said helpfully.

Snake's shoulders dipped. Behind the mask was an expression of bitterness and a myriad of memories.

"You're just a pathetic little virgin." Snake turned for the door.

"Umm, can you please let me go?"

Snake exploded with a maniacal laughter, "Where is the fun in that?"

"Wait! Untie me!" Naruto's yells went unheard as Snake slammed his door shut. His hands were tied so he couldn't make hands signs. He went Fox Cloak but not even the strength of that form could break the bindings. What the hell were they made of?

He had to get out. Tiger was going to kill him for being late.

The smiley face looked as if it was laughing just as manically as its creator.

And that was how Naruto's first week in ANBU had ended.

x

My job is to condition your body to resist torture, ideally until a team is sent to rescue you, most likely, until you die.
Lesson Six

How to Stop a Beating Heart

Tsunade sighed as she stared at the mission outline she just received on her desk. As she tried shuffling the teams of her ANBU to fit the highest odds of success she kept coming back to one ninja in particular. But she didn't know if he was ready.

She pulled his files and read all the comments from his overseers.

Tiger: *Can't use a katana to cut his meat, much less save his life. But his dedication, intelligence, and willingness to learn make up for his flaws.*

Snake: *He needs to get laid. Just assign me a kunoichi or give me some money to hire a whore and I'll make a man out of him yet.*

Ibiki: *His stupidity is going to get him killed. Nevertheless, he has a high pain tolerance and mental resiliency to survive torture for several days.*

Yamanaka: *Even though the enemy will easily realize they have the Nine-tailed Fox in their possession, there is no ninja in the world that will be able to extract data from his mind due to the Nine-tailed Fox's interference.*

The Hokage knew recruiting Naruto into ANBU had its shares of cons, including the knowledge that if Naruto was ever to get caught, the enemy would quickly discover the value of what they have. The Hokage was hedging all her bets that Naruto was too powerful to be captured so easily, and from her experience, Naruto was the safest bet. With Naruto, the pros always outweighed the cons.

Those previous reports were passable, even Snake's. Usually when Snake thought a student was truly hopeless she would have simply written, 'You should just cut his dick off.' But Tsunade was more concerned with the last report by the younger Yamanaka.

Butterfly: *His mindscape reflects a personality of self-doubt and a host of insecurities. It is very possible the subject has experience some form of abuse, either mental, physical, or both. The nature of his pathways suggests his life is consumed by an obsession that is poisonous for his mental health. The subject should be put under more observation.*

That was troubling.

Was Naruto Uzumaki truly ready for this?

The best lessons are learned through experience.

Naruto was training in his own private training room, which they were happy to grant him because nothing else had enough space for a "murder of Crows". With his intensive shadow clone training schedule, Naruto was determined to get a feel for the katana. The morning practice spars with Tiger was a mark of his progress and he was improving at blinding speed, or in other words, Naruto still lost every match but didn't lose as badly as before.

Naruto was parrying a clone just when the tattoo on his shoulder began to burn. He deflected the stroke and his counter landed a hit. The clone erupted in a cloud of smoke. Naruto wiped the sweat from his brow as the tattoo began to burn more intensely into his arm. As instructed, Naruto touched
his forefingers to trigger the summoning jutsu.

He looked up, a haze of smoke thinned around him to reveal he had been summoned into the Hokage's office. When Naruto noticed the other three ANBU bowing beside him, he knew he wasn't being summoned to fix yet another broken window. He bowed, placing his fist to the floor like the rest of his fellow agents: Owl, Squid, and Butterfly.

"I have a mission for the four of you," The Hokage replied as soon as Shizune closed the doors. "We have recently destroyed a Terrorist Organization called Kuro No Keiyakusha, but certain individuals have managed to survive its collapse, all of whom are highly dangerous. Our sources say the last remnants of this organization have scheduled a meeting in the town of Nishi in Tea Country. Your mission is to infiltrate the meeting where they will all be gathered and eliminate them once and for all. None are to escape, am I clear?"

Naruto could have sworn he felt her eyes digging into his skin.

"Owl, you will be squad leader for this mission."

Owl lifted from his submissive position and walked toward the desk. The Hokage handed him a folder of files. "Konoha also has an informant in the village that has been following one of the terrorists. Contact him, exchange information, and relieve him of his duty."

"Yes Hokage-sama," Owl bowed as he received the folder.

"The file also contains the abilities of your squad mates so you can employ them as you see fit. As usual, I expect the files to be destroyed after reading."

"Yes Hokage-sama," Owl nodded as he flipped through the papers, and then paused. His head snapped up to stare straight at Crow.

Tsunade smirked, "Bet you didn't see that coming."

Owl shook his head. "We will leave immediately." He snapped the files closed and turned to his fellow ANBU members. "Meet in supply room C."

They bowed once more to the Hokage, touched their tattoos, and disappeared from the office.

Naruto found himself back in the training room, right in the middle of an epic battle between the two clone teams which had separated themselves by "shirts" and "skins".

"Alright guys, I'm leaving for a mission."

Amidst a myriad of exclamations and proclamations of "You can do it, believe it!" Naruto left the clones to their own devices, knowing they would dismiss themselves after the game was over. Living among ANBU, Naruto always felt he had to train every single moment and he would maximize on every chance he got even if it was his clones that did the training.

Naruto set out for the supply rooms and met Sai in one of the various twisting corridors.

"Ready?" Naruto asked.

"Of course."

Naruto was struck by how smoothly Sai had replied, reminding him that Sai probably did these sorts of things all the time. Naruto envisioned a fake smile underneath the mask. The chasm of darkness
was deep above them and it grew lost in the hanging roots of the ceiling. While they were walking someone suddenly shoved Squid into the wall.

"Hey, watch where you're going!" Naruto yelled after the ANBU that had shoved past. The ANBU flicked up a middle finger and continued walking.

"That is alright Crow," Sai replied as he pushed himself from off the wall. "It happens all the time."

"All the time? Really?" Naruto asked concerned.

"After the war, Danzou's Root was completely disbanded but most of the operatives were absorbed into ANBU. Many ANBU members do not trust us." Sai replied with an uncaring voice.

"That's not fair to you," Naruto crossed his arms, concerned that even within ANBU there was distrust enough to go around.

"It is quite fine. According to my book when someone constantly teases another person, that means they secretly like them."

"Sa… Squid, I don't think that what it means," Naruto said slowly and wondered what kind of books Sai was reading.

Sai and Naruto entered the supply room where Butterfly and Owl waited. After a quick debriefing and destruction of the folders, they left Konoha.

Naruto had finally been given his first ANBU mission.

The trees blurred beneath them as they rode Squid's giant ink bird. The sun was bright in the sky and shone over the four ANBU agents who were crowded around a map.

"All four of us will enter town under a henge and under different disguises to avoid suspicion," Owl began to explain his plan. "We should have alibis. I will be a merchant buyer looking to invest in some of the shops around town. Butterfly you can-"

"I can come up with my own disguise thank you," Butterfly said with a sharp coldness to her voice. It surprised Naruto because she had only ever been nice to him. "I can be Crow's wife," Butterfly suggested as she leaned over and clung to his arm for emphasis. Naruto was glad he was wearing a white mask because the feel of her breasts pressing against his arm caused him to blush a deep shade of red.

Owl said with a sigh, "you don't even know who he is."

"He's better than you." Naruto swore if she wasn't wearing a mask she would have stuck her tongue out like a child. "Besides, the Hokage wants me to keep an eye on him since it's his first mission and all."

"That's Naruto."

Then the woman beside Naruto shrieked and Naruto cringed at the sound threatening to shatter his brains. "You've got to be kidding me!"

Butterfly forcibly ripped the mask from Naruto's face.

"Naruto?" Ino could hardly believe it as the whiskered face and awkward grin was revealed. All this time she had been fantasizing rather indecently about Crow and he was simply Naruto.
"Wait, you know me?" Naruto asked.

"I'm Ino you idiot," Ino threw her hands in the air, "and the dumbass over there is Shikamaru."

"I believe we are not to reveal our identities," Squid sat calmly at the head of the bird. Which everyone knew was Sai simply by the way he spoke.

"I think it is in our best interest to get this out of the way before it distracts us from our mission," Shikamaru said with a sigh, "We know each other's personalities and jutsu too well for our identities to not have been discovered eventually, I'm sure the Hokage took that into account."

Naruto was suddenly very excited. He felt a load lift from his shoulders to find out he was with friends.

Shikamaru turned to look at both Ino and Naruto, his voice was lace with a rare moment of seriousness. "We are to refer to each other by our codenames at all times even when we think no one is listening. We are ANBU and can't afford to make simple mistakes."

"I know that," Ino huffed.

"Yeah I got it," Naruto agreed.

"Now, disguises," Shikamaru stressed. "That wasn't a bad idea Butterfly, you and Crow can be newlyweds." Shikamaru was almost too glad to dump her off on someone else.

"I was only kidding," Ino whined.

"That's okay Ino, I can be something else?" Naruto suggested. He wasn't even sure how newlyweds were supposed to act.

With a roll of her eyes, Ino sighed, "Fine."

"Squid can be my assistant," Shikamaru suggested, "That gives each of us an excuse to maintain two man teams at all times. We'll stay at separate inns and correspond with each other through Butterfly's mind technique. I'll meet with the informant while everyone else should focus on gathering intel. Afterwards, we'll convene again to decide what to do at the meeting. Are there any questions?"

Under a henge that looked oddly similar to Iruka except without the scar and top-knot, Naruto entered the bustling village of Tea Country with Ino hanging on his arm.

"Oh look!"

Naruto was suddenly dragged forward to a merchant's cart showcasing hand-made jewelry. "These are gorgeous," Ino cooed and Naruto didn't know if she was doing it for the act or if she really meant it.

"They would look very pretty on you," the merchant smiled warmly. "How about a deal? I'll give you a sale as long as you wear it around town and let people know where you got it from."

"Really?" Ino asked and looked up suggestively at Naruto. Naruto blinked in confusion. Ino shoved her shoulder into Naruto ribcage and he almost jolted out of his henge. Naruto has always had problems with simple henges, and with Ino constantly moving against him and distracting him, his chakra control at maintaining the henge was shaky at best.

Ino poked him again, pointed to his chest and then to the jewelry.
"You can't be serious?" Naruto asked in disbelief.

"Come on," Ino said as she leaned against his shoulder, "You should be proud to buy things for your wife."

Naruto grumbled and reluctantly pulled out his frog wallet. He didn't have much money left.

_Come on, you're going to get paid after the mission._

Naruto would have jumped back but Ino kept him in a tight hold. _Calm down. It's just me. I'm not in your head, simply projecting my thoughts into it. Buy it for me. We have to look like vacationing newlyweds._

Naruto's shoulders drooped as he slipped the money into the merchant's hands. Ino smiled brightly and her eyes glowed. She gave it to Naruto to put around her neck as she lifted up her hair. It took Naruto a few tries before he snapped the necklace together.

"What do you think?" Ino asked excitedly.

"Um…" Ino looked like a twenty year old civilian with brown hair that ended at her shoulders, brown eyes and there were slight freckles on her face.

"You look great," Naruto finally stuttered.

"Of course I do," Ino said as she grabbed his arm and dragged him to the next stall. This one was filled with different fabrics, all of which Ino examined, touched, and scrutinized before she made a purchase. Naruto watched bored and leaned against the cart. Sometimes he was quite certain he would never understand girls.

The elder woman at the stall chuckled lightly. "New to this?"

Naruto slipped his hands into his pocket. "Yeah, newlyweds actually."

"Congratulations. You seem liked you'd make a fine husband."

Before Naruto knew it, a heated blush erupted across his face. "Um, oh, thank you."

The old woman chuckled and said in introduction, "Kimiko Yamakura, best seamstress in town. How about you, what's your name?"

Something instinctive went off in Naruto's head. He was in a dark room, sitting strapped to the chair as the same question continually assaulted him until it left bruises in his psyche. He immediately, without thought replied, "Crow."

_WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU!_ Ino had been keeping an ear to the conversation and jerked up when she heard Naruto's answer.

"Crow?" The old woman asked and looked behind her for the bird he had mentioned. When she found nothing and turned back around, Ino was already dragging Naruto away from the stand.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," Naruto tried to apologize. "I didn't mean- it just happened."

_What in the world possessed you to say that?_

Naruto said one word, "Ibiki."
Both ninja shuddered from the chill that name invoked, but it did not cool Ino's temper.

*You could have easily ruined our cover. Don't you ever think? Seriously, I don't understand why the Hokage decided it was a good idea to recruit you in ANBU! Maybe you saved the world and everything but you have no tact at all. You are an idiot!*

Naruto had naturally built up resistance to insults but these in particular had hurt, for he knew she was right.

Ino had unconsciously pulled him to another shopping cart and this time, Naruto didn't hesitate to buy anything she wanted. He felt so bad for the slip-up. Remembering who he was and who he was supposed to be kept getting more confusing.

By the time Naruto's wallet had emptied and the night had descended, he was dragging himself to the nearest inn. He had never been on the beck and call of a woman like that before, especially one so demanding. He was exhausted and he carried an armful of Ino's new items, all of which he had bought. At least he had sated her anger towards him as she hummed a pleasant tune, the necklace around her neck twinkling in the star light.

Ino knew she was a difficult person and she wasn't about to change. After all, she was Daddy's little girl. She was a princess. He bought her anything without complaint, he complimented her beauty, and boasted of her skills with pride. She was constantly testing and comparing all the men in her life to her father, and all were overshadowed by his stature. She had standards, and it was her Father who set them so high.

So when Naruto said in exasperation, "I don't have any money to pay for the inn." Ino rolled her eyes in disgust.

Naruto noticed and said, tired, "Ino, did you really need all this stuff?"

He suddenly got a shoulder to the gut. First, obviously she needed everything or she wouldn't have gotten it. Second, could Naruto truly be that daft?

"Ino? Who's that dear? Did you see somebody you knew?" Ino asked.

"Oh," Naruto felt as if he couldn't get anything right. "No, It was… a sneeze," Naruto covered.

With a shake of her head, Ino dragged Naruto to the most expensive inn.

"But, I don't-" Naruto stuttered as they entered through the door. Ino smiled brightly at the attendant. Naruto worried how he was ever going to pay for this as Ino chatted excitedly about marriage life.

"Oh dear, your hand is so hot, are you sure you don't have a fever?" Ino asked the attendant, "Let me check," Ino bent forward and placed a hand on the attendant's forehead. Behind Ino's back she had one hand in the form of a seal. The attendant's eyes drooped and her expression suddenly died, until Ino pulled her hand back.

In a blink of an eye the attendant regained her smile and chirper demeanor, "That would be the deluxe bedroom? I'll call someone to escort you. I hope you enjoy your stay." The attendant wrote down the name of the customers and how much they had paid.

Someone soon came to escort them to their rooms.

Naruto could only stare at Ino's effortless skill as a kunoichi. The war hero suddenly felt a chill of fear as he followed behind the demanding blonde. The moment they entered the room Ino went
straight for the bathroom and slammed the door closed.

Naruto dipped his shoulders with a sigh. Well, his first mission could have been worst. He looked around the large room. It had a balcony, a small library, a fireplace and a couch. But for all of the excess the room had only one bed.

Naruto blushed and pulled some blankets from the closet and dropped them on the couch.

"Ino!" Naruto called. "I've really got to go pee."

"Yeah, I'll be out soon." Ino rolled her eyes as she stepped out of the shower. She brushed her hair, put on a second set of ninja clothes from a scroll she carried, and blew herself a kiss in the mirror before replacing her mask. She took her time, so much so when she finally came out Naruto was peeing over the balcony.

Ino screeched.

"It's not my fault," Naruto jumped and quickly pulled his pants up when he was finished. "You were taking too long."

"Who in their right mind pee over a balcony? Do you know how many people could have seen you?"

"It was dark."

Ino threw her hands up in exasperation but before she could stomp to the bedroom she felt Shikamaru trying to contact her. "Hold on, message from Shikamaru."

'I no?'

'I'm listening. '

'I met with the informant. He's given us the information and details regarding the terrorist he has been following. Tomorrow your team will extract information from the target about the meeting, understand?'

Ino didn't answer.

'I no?'

'Do you love her?'

'I no, this is seriously not the time. '

'I mean you can't even spend much time with her. She's from a completely different village. It's never going to work. '

Shikamaru took a moment to reply, 'Neither will us.'

Ino frowned bitterly as she sat down on the deluxe bed. She looked up as Naruto exited the bathroom dressed for bed, wearing only some night pants. An eyebrow rose as she scanned his abs and the defining features of his body. She completely forgot what she was going to say.

Naruto's shook out his dripping blonde hair. Some of the water splashed on Ino and she was jerked from her ogling. "Stop that!" Ino yelled and then remember what she was going to say before, "and where in the hell is your mask?"
"Oh, I didn't think… since you know who I am and everything," Naruto mumbled and knew he had done something wrong again. He was at least smart enough to cover his ears this time.

"You idiot! You are always supposed to wear your mask in a mission unless you're under henge."

"But we're going to sleep," Naruto responded confused.

"Didn't you read the handbook at all?" Ino questioned. Naruto did, even memorized it but the moment after the Initiation Ceremony when he didn't need it anymore, he forgot it all.

"A henge must be maintained with constant chakra. You can't do that while you're sleeping, so logically you're supposed to sleep with your mask on during a mission. Besides, what if someone attacks and catches us unawares? We need to be battle-ready at all times. And are you seriously going to sleep in your pajamas?"

Naruto scratched the back of his head, "That's what pajamas are for."

Ino had no idea how Sakura did it for so long. With a frustrated groan she laid back in bed, allowing herself to drown in the peace of its comfort. When she heard noise she poked her eye open, "What are you doing?"

"Setting traps and seals on all the doors and windows," Naruto said as he slid the balcony door closed.

Finally, Ino was impressed by his safety precautions. She had been about to get up and do the same thing. Then she noticed Naruto placing an overload of traps. "Why so many?"

"You never know when Snake will invade your room."

Ino blinked. "She's all the way in Konoha."

"I wouldn't put it past her," Naruto grumbled and after he was satisfied his defenses could keep Snake out long enough for him to wake up and defend himself, he re-entered the bathroom. He came out with his mask back on but still in just his boxers.

Ino sighed. She would never understand him.

"Hey Ino… uh Butterfly, I mean Keiko," Naruto scratched his head, "Good night," he said defeated.

"Naruto wait," Ino sat up, "your… mindscape, has it always been that dark?"

Naruto leaned against the frame of the entrance. In a soft whisper he admitted, "Since I was little. Those paths I was telling you about, the ones that always go to the same place, they all lead to the Demon Fox."

Ino shivered. "Paths like yours reflect an obsession. It suggests your life is consumed by the Kyūbi."

Naruto frowned. The pale moon lit the room. The two ninjas stared at each other in breathless thought. A shrug. "I guess it is."

Naruto watched from the rooftops as Ino drew her target in with a mere glance. They walked the streets as Ino laughed at the target's jokes and flirted with him shamelessly under a different henge she wore before. This henge wore long black hair with sparkling blue eyes but the most significant change were her bust size that threatened to spill from her dress every time she leaned over. Naruto bristled, uncomfortable when the target placed a hand on Ino's butt. She allowed it and whispered
suggestively into his ear. They deviated into the alleyway.

Naruto didn't waste time to jump down behind the target and hit him unconscious. There was even a feeling of satisfaction to it.

"Thank Kami," Ino sighed in relief as the man slumped against the wall, "He was disgusting."

"He touched you," Naruto complained like a child.

Ino looked up with a smirk on her lips, "But we win in the end." Ino hardly thought about one squeeze to the butt cheek anymore, not when she's done so much more in the pursuit of information. "Watch the opening. This might take a while if he has any mental defenses," Ino informed as she set up her jutsu and dived into the target's head.

Naruto lazily lounged around the entrance of the alleyway, blocking the view from what was happening behind him from the passing civilians. Naruto frowned. He didn't like how Ino was so nonchalant about being violated.

"I've got the information." Ino said after she emerged from the target's mind. She created a false reality and planted it into the target's head to explain why the target was passed out in an alleyway.

Ino changed her henge back to the newlywed wife. She quickly ran a hand through Naruto's hair to mess it up a little, pulled his shirt out of his pants and tugged on it to where it hung sloppily from his shoulders. The two newlyweds left the alley, drawing no more suspicion than they were having a little honeymoon fun.

The four ANBU agents met outside of the village in the darkness of the night to discuss the second phase of their plan.

"There will be seven terrorists in total arriving to the meeting. Some are rogue ninjas and other are radical civilians who might have ninja bodyguards with them," Ino explained. "The meeting will be at the inn Naruto and I are staying at. It'll be two days from now at 9:00 at night."

"Good job Butterfly," Shikamaru said. His hands were shaped in his signature thinking pose. "We need to neutralize the ninjas first. If one of the civilians manages to get away we can easily recapture him, it's the ninjas who will be a bigger threat."

"How about we rig the room beforehand?" Ino suggested, "Paper bombs maybe?"

"No, civilians working in the inn might get hurt in the crossfire."

Owls hooted in the forest that surrounded them. Sai, Naruto, and Ino waited with confident patience that Shikamaru will come up with a plan.

Shikamaru opened his eyes. "I've got an idea."

"Sorry," Ino apologized as she tucked the unconscious and tied-up attendant into a closet. She henged into the exact replica and cheerily returned to the front. She greeted the unwary terrorists as they entered the inn. Ino made the hand seals behind her back and searched for Shikamaru's mind, 'They're all here.'

Shikamaru was sitting in the attic of the inn, directly above the gathering. Seven men and four extra ninja in total. 'Are there any sensors?'"
'Not that I could tell,' Ino responded.

Sai waited on the outside of the inn, chakra pinning his legs and feet to the wall as he pressed himself beside the window. The night concealed him from the civilians walking the streets, blissfully unaware.

Naruto sat in a room below, meditating in sage mode. It allowed him to keep track of the chakra signatures moving above him and those of his comrades.

"Why have you called us all here Danto? Do you know how dangerous this is? I know for a fact they are still hunting for me."

The shadows of the lit candles flickered in the room.

"I had to," Danto answered, "There's a patron who has showed interest in funding our group. We can rebuild again."

"Is it worth it to rebuild again?" Another man responded, "No matter what we do, nothing will keep the ninjas out of the daimyo's ass."

"The ninja's are too powerful. If they didn't have so much political power the civilians could have more control over the course of politics."

"It's the ninja's fault we have so much war. We owe it to our families to keep going. I vote for receiving a patron." The men in the room argued heatedly over harsh whispers.

Naruto did not like the conversation at all, and it stirred doubts about the whole system of ninja. Was the fact ninjas existed the cause of war? Or would there be war regardless, even without ninja? Those were questions Naruto had never asked himself. His concentration wavered but he had to keep focus on the task at hand. He focused on the swirl of their chakra flowing through their bodies, on their heartbeat, and on their breathing; anything to drown out the words and the doubts.

Then a knock came to the door.

The men went silent. The ninjas stood on edge. Danto got up to open the door, only to reveal one of the inn's servants with a tray of tea.

"Tea?" The woman asked but the men weren't looking at the tea. They stared at the way the kimono shaped around the woman's curves and the suggestiveness of her cleavage.

"Oh yeah sure," Danto nodded. His gaze followed her inside.

Ino slipped in with bowed head and quickly served the tea with nervousness, as befit a woman surrounded by so many men. The ninja bodyguards gave her a hard stare, but the civilian men had eyes that were eager to touch. Ino left the room and as the door closed her heartbeat calmed. She was glad that was over. She walked down the stairs and entered the room where Naruto sat.

She waited for ten minutes until Naruto opened his eyes, orange streaks surrounding his irises. "The tea has begun to affect their chakra networks. There are three who didn't drink. The one closest to the door, the two in the right corner of the room."

Ino nodded and relayed the message to Shikamaru. Those three would be the first die. "Owl says to set off the signal."

Naruto nodded as he stood and breathed deeply. "Hey Butterfly, have you ever killed someone?"
"Of course. You have to before you get into ANBU," Ino said impatiently, a little concerned by the sudden question.

"I didn't."

Naruto thrust both hands to the ceiling and summoned his wind element, which leaked into the small cracks above. The sudden draft swept through the room and blew out all the candles. The meeting room was descended in total darkness.

Ink blots disguised into the artwork of the partition and wall panels came to life, dripping from the serene cherry blossom trees and pagodas. Then the very shadows came to life, erupting from the floor and swallowing everything in its path.

The first three targets were dead instantly.

When the other ninja tried to perform jutsu they found their chakra networks uncooperative. They were all such easy targets. Screams filled the air but bent and wavered in the silence jutsu surrounding the room.

Naruto stared upwards. The screams impaled his senses. Blood stained and spread along the ceiling.

Naruto was thankful for the sudden crash from above. He didn't know if he could take much more of this. One of the hired ninja had managed to crash through the wall and went running. Naruto created a clone to leave behind and gave chase. Ino immediately followed. Naruto surrounded himself in his demonic cloak and easily caught up to the last survivor.

The ninja had fallen to his knees with his hands up in surrender. His kunai was dropped on the street. His eyes were feverish after witnessing the death of his comrades in seconds.

Naruto stopped in indecision, and watched the unarmed ninja trembling before him.

**Kill him.**

Naruto had always instinctively resisted the Demon Fox's wants. Even entertaining the idea was as if he was giving into the Fox's demands. It was the hardest thing Naruto's ever done as it was going against everything he believed in.

*Our mission parameters are to leave no survivors.* Ino reminded insistently in his head.

**KILL!**

In the span of Naruto's hesitation, the ninja's hand shot towards his holster. Naruto didn't hesitate. Blood splattered on Naruto's cheek as he stared at the kunai embedded in the fragile softness of the ninja's neck. Blood began to spread through the clothing. The stench of it invaded Naruto's sense of smell. His sight was filled with crimson.

Something had broken. The Kyuubi slipped and wheedle his influence through the cracks and spread like poison, preying on the doubts and insecurities. Naruto pulled the kunai out and plunged the steel back into soft flesh. A drop of blood fell on his lips.

A constant squelch echoed in his ears and the kunai stabbed again and again, carving flesh.

"Naruto?"

Naruto whipped his head around at the sound of a quickening heartbeat. His eyes were a gleaming
More. Kill more. Take more.

"We, we should go help Owl and Squid clean up," Ino said hastily and scooted back, trying to get far away from the growing killing intent. She suddenly found herself slammed against a wall. Naruto's body was flushed against hers.

The smell of blood triggered something deep inside of Naruto, an animalistic urge locked in a cage for so many years, a part of him, as physical as the whisker marks born on his cheeks. He reacted to the blood lust. He bent forward and licked the fear from Ino's neck. The taste caused his body to shiver and his hard-on shoved into her thigh. Naruto breathed heavily as he tasted her skin. He was going to take her, then he was going to kill her, and then he was going to eat her.

A kunai plunged into his gut.

"Naruto!" Ino demanded as she slapped his face.

Naruto blinked in confusion as the flicker of red left his eyes, the blood lust slowly overtaken by reason.

"Oh, oh Ino, I'm so sorry, I'm so so sorry." Naruto sobbed and the tears hid behind a Crow's mask. It hadn't been just a dream the Kyuubi haunted him with or a genjutsu that the Kyuubi interfered with. This was real. The taste of blood was real. The need to kill was real.

"We need to check on Owl and Squid," Ino prompted, anxious to no longer be alone with Naruto. She had seen how Naruto savagely tore that man apart with a kunai. They were ninjas, not butchers.

The walk back to the inn was the silence of a dead ninja. Naruto hung his head as Ino furtively stole nervous glances in his direction. Softly, she whispered, "Was this your very first kill?"

"No," Naruto murmured. "A man named Yura but... at the time, all that mattered was saving Gaara." Naruto stared at his shaking blood-drenched hands. This time had been different than the first.

When they arrived Shikamaru was storing the corpses in a scroll to be brought back to the village. Sai was posted by the stairs to make sure no one came up before they were finished cleaning. Naruto felt sick as he walked into the room.

Dead men lay sprawled on the ground, blank eyes staring aimlessly at the ceiling. Some lay with their mouth open as if crying out for air and angry red streaks suffocated their throats. Others had their faces and bodies mangled, as if a horde of rats had chewed their skin right off. Then the clone he had left behind while he left in pursuit dissipated and the screams of terror invaded his mind, giving the entire scene a soundtrack of absolute horror.

Then there was the blood.

Naruto backed out of the room and heaved vomit onto the floor of the hallway. He was respectfully ignored by his teammates. Shikamaru knew it wasn't easy, especially for your first mission. It takes time for everyone to adjust.

What they didn't realize was that Naruto was heaving up his insides for entirely different reasons.

When he had walked into that room his had mouth watered, he longed to lick the blood from the floor, longed to taste the flesh of raw meat.
Remembering who he was and who he was supposed to be kept getting more confusing.
Lesson Seven

The Hands that Holds the Kunai

When Naruto reentered the sleeping village of Konoha he knew something had changed. The gates were still the same stoic protectors. The civilian population was still asleep in their beds without a trace of fear on their faces. The alcoholics still had their bottles of liquor clutched to their chest. When Naruto returned to the Village Hidden in the Leaves, the monument still hovered in the sky, except now, those stone hard eyes were looking at him.

The Hokages of the past and present knew.

Naruto's shoulder's dipped in shame. He froze, and took three steps backwards until he was standing just outside of the gate. He didn't deserve Konoha.

"Crow," Butterfly whispered insistently. "We have to report to the Hokage."

Naruto didn't move, never really heard her as the storm of voices fought in his head.

For Owl, it would have been troublesome if he didn't understand the amount of trouble the situation deserved. "It's alright Butterfly. I'll report to the Hokage. Go home."

The night swallowed Owl's form as he jumped towards a rooftop.

Both Squid and Butterfly hesitated.

"If you need someone to talk to I'm always here," Butterfly gave a rare offer she wouldn't give lightly. She more than anyone knew it was easier to destroy a mind than to heal one. After a moment Butterfly and Squid disappeared into the night.

Naruto Uzumaki still stood at the entrance of the gate.

Pathetic.

It would be easy to assume that the container for the most malevolent being in the universe had no qualms with killing - that it would be easy to kill. It was certainly the logical thought of the villagers that feared Naruto in his childhood.

They couldn't be more wrong.

For most of his life Naruto could easily divide the world into good and evil. Evil: What the Demon Fox wanted. Good: What the Demon Fox did not want.

A snort. The world's not that simple.

Naruto hated to admit that the Demon Fox was right. The careful wall he had built to divide his sense of right and wrong was beginning to crumble. The boundaries were becoming blurred and shades of grey were beginning to paint his world.

In one night, Naruto had become the very monster people knew he could become.

We were always a monster.
I'm not.

**Did you not want to run the blood like silk through your hands? Did you not want to taste the flesh on your teeth? Did you not want to ravish the woman and claim her as yours?**

"No," Naruto whispered weakly. "That was you."

**I cannot control your body.**

"I… no."

A normal person would have thought it strange to find an ANBU standing before the gate talking to himself in the middle of the night, but the night patrol simply shrugged and moved on. Everyone knew ANBU were insane, that's what made them so dangerous.

**You cannot fool yourself any longer. I will forever be a part of you. I am your darkness. I am your anger. I am your lust. I am your despair. I am you.**

---

Ino Yamanaka tried to be quiet as she closed the door to her apartment, only to realize the effort had been futile as she turned around and found her roommate sitting in the living room and examining medical reports at ungodly hours of the night. Ino was quite convinced Sakura Haruno was one of the most underappreciated people in Konoha. A girl had to get her beauty sleep.

Sakura looked up from her documents as Ino entered the kitchen and unstrapped the utility belt from her waist. "How did the mission go?" Sakura asked, if only out of habit.

Ino hesitated to answer, "Alright."

Sakura put down her report and raised an eyebrow. Past the petty rivalries, the two young women had always been best friends and knew exactly when the other was lying. "What happened?"

Ino sighed deeply as she walked into the bathroom and turned the light on. "Had a new recruit on the team," she said casually as she pulled the ponytail holder from her hair and gave her hair freedom. "It was basically his first kill."

Sakura nodded. A ninja who hasn't killed wasn't rare, especially for career genin and those more suited to spying, tracking, or administrative endeavors. But for a medic nin, death was a common day occurrence.

Ino came out of the bathroom brushing her hair and her eyes became distant. Sakura knew Ino was remembering the first time Ino had killed. The events of the last mission had Ino recalling the memory vividly. After being knocked out in battle and taken as hostage to prevent Shikamaru's and Chouji's pursuit, she had woken up bound, her body naked and sore. She had lost her virginity to an enemy ninja. She had been so angry, so absolutely furious that without a single hand signal or touch, her mind invaded her captor and demolished him, took away all his happy memories until all he had left were the traumatic ones to suffocate the sanity from his mind. He fell down dead on top of her. There was blood everywhere, leaking out of his ears and eyes, smeared along her thighs and the crest of her legs.

It had been her first kill and even to this day Ino did not regret it.

The rape took her much longer to get over.

Sakura had been one of Ino's pillars, emphasized by being one of the only female companions in
Ino's life. It was another instance that made Sakura wonder why she wanted to be a ninja in the first place? Instead, she buried herself in medical reports and did for the village what no one else could.

Ino swept through the kitchen and began searching through the cabinets for a bottle of sake.

"Have you seen Naruto lately?"

To Sakura that seemed like a random question, but she knew Ino was in the habit for gossip whenever she got back from a mission. Sakura thought on Ino's question as a blush grazed her cheeks. Sakura has certainly looked at Naruto lately.

Ino snickered, "I don't mean that way, but I do have to add it's not a bad view."

"Ino!" Sakura screeched, and suddenly the two were little girls again. They were together at each other's houses, talking about boys they would marry, and far away from the burdens of adulthood.

Ino placed a cup of sake before Sakura and sat down on the couch with the rest of the bottle in her hands. "It's not until recently I've actually looked at him. The man has issues. I never would have imagined, he always seemed so…"

"Naruto." Sakura finished her sentence.

Even during the brief psych sessions, the topic of conversation were never about anything more than how his week went, how his training was going, or what craziness his overseers were putting him through. Naruto never talked. Ino never really knew Naruto at all.

It had taken Sakura years. "He blinds people with his smiles so much so that we can't see past that light. He never talks to me about anything, or at least what matters."

Ino huffed, "That's men for you. Don't know what to do with their own feelings." Then she rolled her eyes, "Don't even get me started on Shikamaru."

"Or Sasuke," Sakura whispered. There was a strain in her heart.

Ino gave a soft smile. "I know what it feels like."

"What does?"

"Heartbreak." Ino answered as she twirled her hair. She had always thought she'd grow up and get married to Shikamaru. After all, they had been arranged to marry. Even her crush on Sasuke was an unconscious rebellion of the fate she had been so sure was sealed. "I realize now what you felt for Sasuke was minuscule compared to how I felt about him. For me it was only a crush, but you truly loved him." Ino drank deeply from the bottle. "It hurts and may never heal."

The women sat together in silence, contemplating the complexities of that unfathomable thing called love.

"You have a thing for Naruto don't you?" Ino asked.

Sakura bit her bottom lip and hesitated having a drink. "It's not worth it," she finally said. "He's really busy with some important stuff right now and… I don't want to become another Hinata."

Ino raised a curious eyebrow, "What happened with Hinata?"

"Nothing," Sakura said with a sigh. "Naruto hasn't talked to Hinata since the Pein incident and that was almost a year ago. It's not that Naruto has become busy, when he wants to talk to someone he
will talk to them. Naruto avoids her. I don't think he knows what to do with her. He even has problems when I do things for him, as if he can't fathom why."

Sakura looked up at Ino with a concerned expression, "He can dish out so much love to a point it can become completely overwhelming but when it comes to showing him just a bit of your attention, he unconsciously panics. After months of avoiding her, Hinata eventually got the message. I don't think they've seen each other since the war."

"That's Naruto. He craves attention but doesn't know what to do once he gets it. He doesn't know how not to be alone."

"Poor Hinata," Ino shook her head and unofficially added Hinata to the Heartbreak Club.

"I don't think I can do it," Sakura strained to say and held herself with her arms. "I can't bear to be pushed away, again."

Ino understood. She had her own insecurities, her own obsessive need to be in control of every situation and relationship.

Ino sighed as she stared into her cup. There was a young man standing before the gates of Konoha wondering if he was worthy enough to re-enter the insanity of this life. The life of a ninja was filled with trauma and stress and heartbreak, and it was a cycle that continually affected those around you.

No, she didn't regret her first kill. Death was a mere moment.

But she would live with the rape for the rest of her life.

Shikaku trudged to the kitchen after a midnight trip to the bathroom. He was looking for a bottle of sake but when he found them all hidden he grumbled, he sat back against the kitchen counter and crossed his arms. Despite being the smartest ninja in the village, his wife continually outwitted him with the experience gained from studying him for years. Shikaku stared at the impressions that were beginning to become a decoration on the couch.

Troublesome.

Shikaku made himself a cup of water instead. Right when he was about to put the rim to his lips a soft click echoed throughout the house. Shikaku did nothing to find the source of the noise. He already knew the identity of the intruder. He finished the water and sat the empty cup back onto the counter. With a lazy gait, he walked to the back of the house and slid open the door as another click entered the night.

"Didn't you move out because we were too troublesome?" Shikaku asked as he stared down at his son, playing a game of shogi against himself.

"Chouji doesn't play," Shikamaru answered as he took a drag of a cigarette. The folded wrap of tobacco was the central reason for the constant one-sided arguments that had occurred between Shikamaru and his mother Yoshino. As far as Shikaku was concerned there were worst ways for a ninja to die but Yoshino's complaints had become so troublesome that Shikaku had "suggested" moving out.

In retrospect, that had probably been a bad idea.

Shikaku sat down before his son and easily continued his side of the game. "How is Chouji?"

"His clan has been developing a new food pill so he's been busy," Shikamaru answered as he made his move. The landscape of the game was largely uneven. Shikaku began at a huge disadvantage.
"You were on the couch."

"A slight argument with your mother," Shikaku answered as he came full-round to the issue that was consuming his thoughts. It had all begun when Shikamaru moved out and left a gaping hole that Yoshino felt keenly. "She wants another child."

"Troublesome," both men said at the same time.

"Aren't you too old for that?" Shikamaru actually made the effort to make a disgusted face. Shikaku chuckled. It was almost a compliment for a ninja to be considered old, "Your mom doesn't think so."

Shikamaru shivered in the warm night and placed a tile on the board a little too hard. The last thing he wanted to do was think about his parents in that way. Their conversation devolved into silence and left the small clicks of the shogi tiles.

Shikaku knew Shikamaru returned home when he was unsettled, especially after a mission.

Shikaku remembered the first time.

It had been on a night like this: while they were sitting outside playing shogi contemplating life and the clear moonlit sky. Then the ANBU came for his son. The ANBU agent wore a Boar mask. A teammate of his back when he had been in ANBU wore a Boar mask. But the Boar Shikaku knew had died. This one was an entirely different person.

They took his son away and gave him back with fresh bruises and wounds, broken and haunted. It was a night Shikaku remembered vividly. He had held his nineteen year-old son. Shikaku comforted him, as if Shikamaru was that little boy again who had just realized the worst cruelty of the world was the death of a new-born foal. Or when Asuma died. Just like then, he couldn't protect his son from death. As a father, all he could do was prepare his child, set the foundation so that when the storm ended, the house was weathered and in need of repairs, but it was still standing.

Sometimes Shikaku was convinced being a father to a ninja is harder than actually being a ninja.

It was something that plagued Shikaku's mind often. A father shouldn't be thinking about the what-ifs his son died before him. But for a ninja, it was necessary. After all, Shikaku needed a plan with emergency exits, blueprints, and back-ups to help maintain his sanity that such a crisis could inflict. A ninja could never be too careful.

It was no wonder why Yoshino wanted another child. She was afraid of losing the one she had. She was just a civilian and even they were accustomed to death. It infected everyone, from the rich to the poor, to those with power and those who held none, to civilians and ninjas.

There was a final click.

Shikaku looked at his defeat that began with a disadvantage. Death is like a shogi board. It's not that your opponent has been defeated, but how you have defeated him.

Shikaku slapped his hands on his knees and stood up, "Good night son."

Shikamaru nodded as he looked at the final end of the pieces situated on the board. Shikaku finally gave in, defeated, as he knew he would, and slipped into his bedroom.
Death could not exist without life.

His smile was a light brush stroke. Sai sat back as he finished his artwork. He held the image carefully and looked around his room with somewhat subdued alarm. His entire room, the walls, floors, and ceilings were all covered with black and white images. There was no longer any room to place his newest addition.

Sai's footsteps were soundless as he traversed a floor of papers. He finally decided to start covering the couch and placed it upon the back of the futon. Before he went to bed he paused to stare at the image he had just painted: His brother, Shin was playing in a field of flowers. His brother had been the first person he had loved and the first person who's death affected him so deeply.

Images of all those Sai held dear surrounded him as Sai laid down to sleep. Sakura held a soft smile on her face as she half-turned in a kimono, a bouquet of cherry blossoms decorating her hair. Shin had an arm wrapped around Sai's shoulders wearing civilian clothes, a katana just a memory. Naruto shone brightly with a smile, the robe of the Hokage wrapped around his shoulders as he sat atop the heads of his predecessors overlooking Konoha.

Sai knew he was never alone. As he slept, there was a genuine smile on his face.

"Sunshine sleepy head!"

Naruto jolted awake and fell off the couch at the sudden voice in his ear. The loud noise made his sensitive ears start to ring. He picked himself up and had to rub his eyes when he saw Anko cooking in the kitchen with an apron on… and nothing on underneath.

Naruto was extremely confused. He looked around and found he was on someone's carpeted floor. The house was spotless and seemed obsessively clean. There were stacks of porn books adjusted evenly.

His mask of blood and bone had fallen to the floor.

"I'm making breakfast," Anko chirped devilishly as her bare behind flashed him before Naruto covered his eyes with the blanket he found around him.

Right when he was about to ask how he had gotten to Anko's house…

"Stop torturing the kid," Kakashi said as he yawned, appearing from the bathroom with nothing but a towel around his waist and the usual mask on his face. Naruto's voice caught in his throat. Now he wasn't sure whose house he was in, even though the stacks of porn were obvious hints.

"Wha-, you and you and Anko?" Naruto stuttered at the absurdity of his morning which completely put his nightmares in the back of his thoughts.

"It's a mutual arrangement," Anko winked. "I like sex. He likes sex. It works."

Kakashi collapsed into one of the kitchen chairs and lounged backwards with his arms behind the back of his head. Anko placed three plates on the table. Smelling the food made Naruto's stomach grumble. His stomach had a mind of its own and Naruto was pulled to the table. He sat down and stared dumbly at a plate full of pancakes with eggs, bacon, and sausage on top in the shape of a happy face.

Anko threw the apron off and sat down to eat. Naruto blushed as he diverted his eyes back to his
plate. As far as Anko was concerned, she was here first and wasn't about to let some bashful teenager keep her from walking around naked.

"How did I get here?" Naruto asked softly.

Anko pursed her lips, "Kakashi brought you here, crying like a little baby. He was in the area." Anko asked, "So, how was your first mission?"

Naruto frowned and with a hoarse whisper, "It… happened."

"I can see that," Anko rolled her eyes as her foot casually pressed inside of Kakashi's towel underneath the table.

"What do you-" he followed her line of sight and stared at his uniform, at not only his blood but that of the ninja he had killed soaked into the cloth. Naruto stopped breathing. The chair flipped over as Naruto stumbled over it and raced to the bathroom. The door slammed shut behind him.

Kakashi sighed as he pulled down his mask and began eating breakfast.

Naruto wrapped his arms around his legs as he sat down in the shower. The water beat over his head.

_Aren't you glad you were right all along? Are chakra's are mixing. You're becoming more like me._

I'm not you.

_Oh? What other pleasures do you know that is better than the blood lust? What could possibly be better than killing?_

I refuse to become like you.

_You already have. You're a killer._

Naruto didn't have a response to that. The Kyuubi was winning the argument when the door of the bathroom was forced opened. Naruto looked up solemnly as Kakashi reached into the shower and roughly pulled Naruto out.

"Get dressed," Kakashi demanded as he shoved Naruto's regular outfit into his hands. Kakashi crossed his arms and under Kakashi's demanding eyes Naruto feebly pulled on his clothes.

"Walk with me."

Naruto followed Kakashi out onto the streets of Konoha. The marketplace was booming and bustling as people sought to sell their wares. Children ran underfoot, oblivious and happy. The day was full of sunshine and warmth on all the citizens of Konoha.

Naruto followed Kakashi with his hands in his pockets until they entered a graveyard and stopped before two gravestones. One read 'Uchiha Obito' and the other 'Inuzuka Rin.' Kakashi stared at both graves and never gave a reason why they were there.

Naruto stared at the weathered monuments. Fresh flowers had recently been placed underneath them. Rin and Obito weren't the only one Kakashi wished were still alive. Minato always knew the right
things to say and even if Minato didn't, the words he said became right. Kakashi was well aware that the young man who stood beside him had no father, no mother, and had lost his only godparent. He was all Naruto had, a sensei who continually failed him, who failed to notice when the little boy beside him had become a man.

In an effort to do something, Kakashi began, "Do you know how your father gained his nickname, "The Yellow Flash"?

Naruto blinked, "The Yondaime?"

Kakashi nodded and did not blame Naruto for having to be reminded who his father was. Naruto knew very little about the man and had only met him once in his life. Naruto was glad to finally know his father but had gone so long without him, Naruto hardly gave the man any thought.

Naruto tried to rack his brain to answer Kakashi's question, "It was because of that special jutsu he had."

"The Flying Thunder God Technique," Kakashi nodded, "He developed it to end the Third Shinobi War. He killed thousands with the signature jutsu most people remember him by. It worked so well that Rock ninja began fleeing on sight."

Kakashi looked at the stone that marked his comrades' graves.

"Naruto, a ninja's job is to kill."

Naruto's hands clenched into fists. Naruto knew that. He understood facing his enemy honorably on a battlefield and fighting to the death. But what had occurred a few nights ago was slaughter. Those in the meeting room never saw it coming. Death came for them as silent as shadows, without warning, without a challenge issued, without even a chance to fight back.

Their screams still filled his thoughts. The blood of the man he had killed was warm on his hands. He heard the man's heart stop beating. Naruto's stomach ached.

"It was sometime after Sensei became Hokage when he told me how he regretted the many he had killed in the war. It was necessary, he had to protect the village and those dear to him, but he still regretted it. But that regret, the responsibility of so many deaths, and the nightmares, he bore them all with pride – that's what makes us human."

The sun shone brightly on the two weary ninjas, casting a deep shadow that reflected off the graves.

x

The boundaries were becoming blurred and shades of grey were beginning to paint his world.
Lesson Eight

The Fragility of Promises

Naruto Uzumaki had wasted another day in bed. The curtains were drawn over the window so tightly the room was as dark as the ANBU underground. He flipped a kunai up in the air and caught it on its way back down. Naruto probably should get up and train, or eat breakfast, or take a shower but his body felt like dead weight and the gravity of his thoughts were crushing him.

It was a rule that after every mission in the field an ANBU agent got a few days off - to help maintain their sanity.

The week that the Hokage gave Naruto off-duty from ANBU was soon becoming unproductive. Maybe it was due to the fact Naruto had been forced to take a break at all. He had nothing to do but think and Naruto hated thinking. He was much more of a 'do'er. But now, Naruto found himself in the darkness of his bedroom, reluctant to come out of it.

Suddenly, his tattoo burned.

Naruto jumped up and fell from the bed. He stared at the tattoo glowing red that was embedded in his skin a little confused. He was supposed to be off-duty. Once it settled in his mind that the Hokage was actually calling for him, he scrambled over the bed. He grabbed the pieces of his ANBU uniform littered throughout the room and shoved them on with careless abandon. He put on the Crow mask and finally touched his forefingers to the restlessly burning tattoo.

The Hokage raised an eyebrow as Crow appeared with his flak jacket on backwards. This was why she usually called for agents on-duty who were prepared at a moment's notice. She crossed her hands under her chin and glowered darkly. "I'm sorry to call you while you were off-duty but this is extremely important and highly dangerous."

"What happened?" Naruto asked and the steel crept into his voice. He mentally prepared himself to meet Madara Uchiha in battle if he had to, because as you know, the most infamous are the first to be revived.

"You may not be aware but Iwa is currently embroiled in a secret civil war. The southern sector has declared independence and is attempting to break away from Earth country." The Hokage began and her shaky hands poured a cup of sake. "Recently one of our genin teams had been assigned to a mission in the village of Jūikaru on our border with Grass. Evidently, the Iwa militants have snuck past our border patrols. They raided one of our villages for supplies and in the process captured our genin. Normally, an opposing village would charge ransom in return for our younger ninja who typically do not pose much of a threat but these actors are unstable. I honestly have no idea…" The Hokage's breath hitched. She picked up the cup of sake and then placed it right back down. In a shaky whisper she admitted, "I don't know what's going to happen to them."

"I'll do it," Naruto didn't know the details but already committed himself to the task. "Just tell me where."

The Hokage felt strengthened by Crow's confidence. She bent over and placed an 'x' on the map she had displayed on her table. "The Jounin sensei was able to send a summon to warn us of his team's situation. They are currently being held in Earth country at one of the bases close to their southern border. You are the fastest thing we have in ANBU and we need an agent out there now. I will send your regular squad as back-up but you will be in the field alone until they catch up."
"I understand," Naruto answered.

"I'm leaving the objective at your discretion." Normally Tsunade would not hand over so much power to an agent with little experience, much less one on his second field mission. But she had no choice and she knew that she could trust Naruto with this task. "There are no folders and no information. You're basically going into this blind. That is exactly why I need you to scout the situation and their base. If the situation looks dire do not hesitate to go in. I'll deal with the fallout from any of your decisions."

Naruto grabbed the map from the desk. "Don't worry, I promise that I'll save them."

"Be careful," The Hokage replied but she had spoken to the emptiness of her office. The window had erupted into shards of glass and the pieces lay on the floor. Naruto was already gone.

Naruto was tucked into the trees as he watched a mining operation traverse through one of the large mountains, which was just a front for the ninja working within. Naruto needed to find an indiscreet way to scout out the area. He left several clones to scout the surroundings and henged himself into a miner who looked like he had lived in Iwa all of his life.

Naruto grabbed a pike lying around the site and casually fell in line with the other miners.

"Where did you come from?" One of the miners asked as he eyed Naruto up and down.

The sudden pressure pulled an answer from his mind. "I'm new. I couldn't find the bathroom so I went in the trees."

The miner huffed, "Should have asked. Got to be careful, these blasted ninjas will kill you quick if you do anything a little out of line."

Naruto nodded and promptly copied what the elder miner was doing and helped him lift shovels full of coal out of a cart. Naruto tried to find a subtle way to ask what was going on, but couldn't and finally settled for, "I didn't think there would be so many ninja around."

"Things didn't use to be this way," The elder miner shook his head. There were streaks of black soot and a coat of dirt across the miner's skin. There were grey streaks beginning to grow into his hair, but he was in shape physically and easily lifted the load of coal. "Some have left because it's gotten too dangerous."

Naruto gave him a genuine perplex stare, "Then why work here?"

The miner laughed, "Same as you. The money is good."

Naruto was about to ask another question when a pair of ninjas walked passed. Naruto couldn't help the stiffening of his shoulders but the other miners were doing the same. When the ninjas seemed to be out of earshot all the miners began to supplement their work with a song of complaints.

"I don't understand what they want," Naruto placed the comment in the conversation of complaints carefully.

"Me neither," the old miner beside him replied, "I just work. Why is it so hard to work and earn a living for my family without some ninja sticking their nose in your business?"

Across from them another miner stopped work and leaned against a cart, "You know nothing. Those ninja are fighting against the Tsuchikage for signing that stupid peace treaty with Fire Country. I'm
all for it. I lost an uncle to one of those ninja wars. Why should we make peace with our enemy?"

The older miner shook his head. "When you get to be my age you don't care who's in power as long as you can find work. If making friends with some fire ninja prevents my son from getting caught up in a war then why bother?"

A bad feeling crept up Naruto's spine as the younger miner pulled away from the cart and proclaimed, "We're people of the Earth Country. Our pride is like the mountain. We do not bow in the face of storms, especially not some fire ninja."

"Young folks." The elder miner pointed to all those around him who had stopped to listen, either with a shake of their heads or a nod of agreement, "You know nothing of war."

"I think he's right," Naruto added, unable not to add his two cents. "Why hold on to an old grudge?"

"No one asked you," the younger miner spat at Naruto's feet.

The older miner patted Naruto on the shoulder in encouragement and argued, "During war both sides come through and burn crops so the other can't get to them. There is no food and it is us, the common people, who are hurt the most by it. Is it worth seeing your family starve?"

The miners who agreed grumbled in support.

Naruto had heard enough. If this was what the political situation was like he had to save those genin quickly. The ninja here were definitely not Leaf ninja sympathizers. He "broke" his shovel. "Oh, uh hey, where can I get another one?"

The elder miner pointed to the mine entrance. "Inside, there should be a storage room on the left. Watch out for the ninja."

Naruto nodded and left the heated argument behind. With the broken shovel over his shoulder, he entered the mine shaft. He passed unmolested by the two Stone ninja guarding the entrance, but they kept a watch on him as he entered the storage room. There were some miners sitting and chatting, taking an "unscheduled" break.

Naruto squeezed himself into a corner where he could not be seen behind the broken carts and equipment piled atop one another. He made a shadow clone who walked out with a new shovel in hand to rejoin the miners and casually pump them for more information.

He entered sage mode and probed for chakra signals within the large mining cavern. Naruto sucked in a breath. There had to be at least a hundred ninja here and a headache was starting to form as he tried to keep track of all of them.

The doubts were washed from his thoughts as he focused on saving the genin team. A sickening feeling was beginning to plague his stomach as he attempted to focus in on every chakra signal, searching for one larger than a civilian but small enough for ninja children. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack. A painful pulsing began in the back of his eyes as he scanned and attempted to narrow his senses even further. Then he found it.

There was a small chakra signal but what caught his attention were the millions of miniscule chakra signals crawling throughout the system. An Aburame.

It was a lucky catch, for if sage mode didn't work he was going to have to go manually looking for them with a combination of shadow clones and henges.
Naruto breathed easier as he unfocused his sage chakra. He henged himself as a Stone ninja and took extra care to create a full body mask to hide his face. The miners on break jumped when Naruto appeared seemingly from out of nowhere and exited the storage room with a stream of curses behind him. With a combination of his sage chakra, hearing, and sense of smell, he casually avoided the ninja walking in and out of the mine as he moved deeper within.

Naruto was forced to stop. There were two ninjas standing guard in front of the door exactly where his ward was hidden. Naruto was racking his brain for a complicated plan on how to bypass them.

Kill them.

...That was one way. Naruto would go that route unless he couldn't find any other option.

Are you really going to sit here and act like a little pussy?

Naruto clenched his fists as he tried to remind himself that killing wasn't going to make him into the Demon Fox. He was Naruto. This was his choice.

Naruto created a shadow clone and handed him a kunai. With a signal of his finger he commanded the clone to take the one on the left. He'll take the one on the right. Naruto waited for the perfect moment.

You're stalling.

In a burst of speed provided by the sage chakra, Naruto rushed the ninjas before they even knew what hit them.

Kill.

Naruto's kunai made a clean slice along the neck. The crimson blood that spilled onto the ninja's uniform mesmerized Naruto and his mouth began to water. The smell drew him in until he was just a hair's breadth away.

Taste it.

A hand gripped his shoulder. Naruto jumped away in embarrassment as he looked up at himself, his shadow clone forcing him away. A streak of jealousy crossed through Naruto's thoughts. The shadow clones were lucky enough not to have a demon talking in their ear. Once Naruto was stable, his shadow clone dissipated.

Naruto picked himself up and clipped his kunai to his holster.

'I am not you.'

The Kyuubi only laughed.

Naruto turned to the fallen ninja and took a ring of keys from the belt. He went through three keys before the door finally opened.

Naruto's heart plummeted from his chest.

He found a little girl whimpering, curled against the stone floor, naked with bruises along her skin.

As Naruto drew closer he understood why Aburame were so adamant about covering up all the time. Insects literally pulled in and out of the pores of the young girl's skin. Naruto was hardly repulsed by
it as he placed a comforting hand on the child's shoulder.

Her weeping slowed and in fear opened her eyes. She didn't see the Crow mask that indicated him as the elite ANBU of her village. She saw a person trying to come near her and she kicked and screamed in terror.

"It's okay," Naruto tried to soothe her. "I'm from Konoha."

The little girl shook her head. She knew she was in enemy territory and this was only a cruel trick. She tried to kick him away until a scent caught her nose. She stopped and stared at the white mask of the Crow. She held out her hand. To Naruto's surprise a beetle popped out of his hair. She looked at the beetle and tears began to fall from her eyes. "You're friends with one of the main family members." She looked up, finally understanding. "You're here to save me."

Naruto nodded, trying to put the fact that there had been a bug living in his hair behind him. "Are you alright?" He asked her with instinctive gentleness as he tried the keys to the chains she wore.

The little Aburame nodded. "They took me away from my team and tried… they wanted…" she paused and looked at him with large traumatized eyes, "but they were scared of my beetles."

Naruto sighed in relief.

The chains clicked away from her skin. "I know every good Aburame has their teammates bugged," Naruto suggested.

The little girl gave a shy smile and nodded.

"Here." Naruto pulled his flak jacket over her head and placed it over the girl's shoulders. It engulfed her and she held the jacket closer to her in thanks.

"But what if-"

"I'm ANBU," Naruto said easily and made a shadow clone of himself. "Now, where are those friends of yours?"

"My jounin sensei… he… they killed him in front of us." Harder tears began to pour down her cheeks. "The others… when they took me they were still beating them up. They're a few rooms down to the right. I could hear them screaming but they've stopped." The Aburame whispered.

"Don't worry. I'll save them. I promise," Naruto said as the shadow clone beside him henged into one of the enemy ninja. The Aburame jumped in fright but calmed herself back down with enviable resolve. "I am going to henge you into a fuma shuriken and you two," he pointed to his clone and to the girl, "are going to walk right out the front door."

"A shuriken… is that even possible? It's an item." The Aburame commented in skepticism. She had to admit that she had never thought about henging into an item before.

"Of course. Just don't make any noises," Naruto proclaimed as he prepared the jutsu and henged the young girl before him into a simple shuriken. It was the first time he had done it to someone else before. The shadow clone picked up the weight of the Aburame and they walked out of the room none the wiser.

Naruto hoped nothing went wrong and was about to leave to rescue the other genin until the Demon Fox said, **are you really going to leave those dead ninja in the middle of the floor where they can easily be found and it will be harder for you to escape?**
Naruto looked back at the corpses. 'I guess you have a point.'

**Idiot.**

Naruto scrunched his nose as he dragged the ninjas into a corner of the room where they would be harder to find. Then he went in search of the other two genin. As he came closer to the designated room a sense of dread washed over him. His sage chakra wasn't picking up any small chakra signatures, just like he hadn't been able to pick up anything when he first entered the mine.

**They're dead kid.** The Demon fox was quick to point out the logical.

*No.* Naruto argued. They couldn't be dead. Naruto promised he would save all the genin. *They're just really hurt.*

He stopped against the wall and silently moved toward the entrance of the room where four ninja chakras resided. His sensitive hearing caught their conversation easily.

"What do we do about that bug bitch? No one is going to want to use that."

"We should just kill her with the rest of them, send a message once and for all to that blasted Tsuchikage what we think about leaf ninja."

These ninjas were bitter, so deeply ingrained in losses of the past, their resolve was immovable. They lost loved ones and the memories could not be wiped away with a simple signed piece of paper.

"Guys, don't you think we went a little too far. I mean, they were children."

"Children with kunai. If you can use a kunai, you're a ninja, no matter what age."

"Good riddance. I lost my son to those Leaf ninja in the war. It's about time they get a taste of their own medicine."

Naruto clung to the wall, shaking, like a volcano prepared to erupt. There was only once in his life he had ever been this angry, and that was when Hinata had sacrificed her safety to save his life. But this time was different. The Kyuubi was separated from his chakra so there was no explosive transformation. Instead, the Kyuubi didn't hesitate to pump imaginative images of how the children were tortured into Naruto's mind, deepening the hatred he fed from.

'I'm going to kill them,' Naruto said in a sudden resolve. 'They're the monsters' What human beings could possibly harm two defenseless children and try to rape another?

The Kyuubi smirked. **Kill.** But for once, he certainly didn't have to urge Naruto on. Instead, for good measure the Demon Fox sent one last wave of images:

*The little Aburame looked up with wide eyes of fear. All her little bugs had been destroyed. There was one holding her down and another on top of her. She was just a child.*

The fox cloak around Naruto erupted in a red blazing inferno and every single ninja in that mine froze in fear at the poison that was the nine-tails killing intent.

As the Demon Fox fed his hatred with maniacal delight, Naruto controlled the demon's chakra with a will of fire. Like a hunter, Naruto stalked into the room. His senses were suddenly sharper than ever before. His nose picked up the scent of blood splattered along the wall and floor. His ears heard every small sound and focused on the quickening heartbeat of the scared ninja. He felt his own anger in the stifling air. He could taste their fear.
There were two mangled and bruised bodies lying in the corner of the room.

The mountain shifted and an earth jutsu shot downwards to crush him. Naruto sidestepped it so fast it seemed as if Naruto had simply walked right through the jutsu. An inferno of fire shot towards him but the fire simply grazed past his Fox Cloak as if it was air. A tidal wave of water but Naruto simply jumped over the jutsu and landed before his first target.

The enemy ninja before him yelped and produced a katana that suddenly glowed with lightning chakra. Naruto grasped the hilt of his own katana and blocked the attack with his blade. The lightning chakra reverberated up his arm but died in the face of poisonous red chakra. Naruto's katana struck like a whirlwind of blades. With terrifying speed he struck again, and again, and again – easy as cutting a piece of meat.

Naruto turned and plunged the claws of his left hand into the stomach of the ninja bold enough to creep up behind him. The word "Demon," was the only thing the ninja managed to attack Naruto with as his spinal cord was pulled and crushed from his body.

You can't see wind chakra, but Naruto heard it and bounded up the wall to flip over the jutsu to the ground. Behind him the entire mountain wall crushed inwards and a spray of rocks erupted outwards. The warmth of sunlight touched the back of his neck.

In a crouch on all fours, Naruto looked up at the remaining ninja.

In desperation they hit him with an attack none of them would survive. A fire jutsu and wind jutsu combined and the entire room burst into flames.

The various other ninja scattered throughout the immense mine were rushing toward the commotion. Six ninja came upon the room as the flames were dying away, leaving ash in place where their comrades had once stood. They stared in awe. At the inferno's center stood one lone survivor, unscathed.

When they noticed the Crow's mask that was a telltale sign they were facing Konoha's ANBU, they stood in fear and some stumbled over themselves to get away.

None survived.

In a rare moment, Naruto and the Nine-tails had been of the same mind. It was a perfect mix between Naruto's unstoppable determination and the Nine-tails rampant destruction, between the enduring compassion and mass-murdering insanity, between the human morality and demonic anarchy, between the man and the animal.

Naruto's clone held the small Aburame girl in his arms as she clutched the shirt against his chest. He needed to get her to Konoha's hospital quickly. He was worried about the bruises and suspected a wound against her side was affecting her breathing. He was moving so fast he hardly registered when he passed the three ANBU moving towards him.

He continued without pause and only when he was close to Konoha's gates did he remember that Ino knew some medical jutsu and could have helped. He didn't take it to chance as he sped like a bullet through the gate. He didn't stop until the roads of Konoha were ripped through by red chakra, the front doors of Konoha's hospitals were torn off its hinges, and he had literally bowled over Sakura as she walked through the halls.

"Sakura," Naruto breathed in a rush. "She needs to be looked at immediately."
"Alright, alright Naruto," Sakura instinctively responded to Naruto's voice, but when she looked up, she was staring straight into a Crow's mask. She paused but didn't have time to react as Naruto shoved the little girl into Sakura's arm and disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

She hated when he did that.

"Report," The Hokage asked as she stood at the desk.

Naruto didn't want to be here. He wanted to be at the hospital. He wanted to make sure that the Aburame was safe, alive, and healthy. His mind constantly twisted his memories as if he had seen the Rock ninja torturing the genin, as if he had seen them raping her, as if he had carried a corpse back to Konoha the entire way.

"Report Crow," the Hokage repeated anxiously as the Crow just stood there, with a mask that showed none of his emotions.

"At the time of my arrival the Jounin sensei and the two other genin were already dead," Naruto answered drowning in a lake of guilt. In his head it had taken him two days to reach the base when in reality it had only taken him hours. But he blamed himself for he should have been faster. In his head he had heard their screams when he entered the mine and he blamed himself for he should have found them sooner. In his head he was there and had watched the torture and blamed himself for he should have not hesitated to kill.

"What information were you able to gather at the base?" The Hokage asked.

"The reason for the civil war is the peace treaty. The militants are those who oppose the treaty and who wish to continue being our mortal enemies."

The Hokage frowned. When she had talked with the Tsuchikage the situation had been washed over as insignificant. This was a problem. Not only that but if the Tsuchikage found any evidence that the Leaf ninja had attacked his people, militant or no, the peace treaty could easily come undone.

"What are the details of the operation?"

Naruto paused to collect his thoughts and shuffle the real ones from his paranoia. "I infiltrated the base, pinpointed the Aburame and successfully rescued her. Then I went in search of the other two genin but they were already dead."

"You escaped without any problems?"

"None at all."

"Did you get a number on how many are manning the base?" The Hokage asked while Shizune was writing down the information. The Hokage hoped when Owl's team returned he would have collected even more data.

"There were three hundred twenty four," Naruto answered without hesitation.

The Hokage frowned. This was much bigger than she thought if only one of their bases held that many. Then she noticed his choice of words, "were?"

"There were no survivors."

Tsunade's jaw actually dropped. She had assumed the mission had been a stealthy get-in and get-out.
"Three hundred and twenty four?"

"Yes. I secured the Aburame's safety before I attacked. I deemed the Stone ninja too much a threat to our village," Naruto answered. He's had some time to think of something better than, 'I was angry.'

The silence in the room was audible.

"Am I dismissed?" Naruto shuffled nervously.

Tsunade gave a slight nod of her head as her agent disappeared in a cloud of smoke. She could hardly believe it. Naruto had a problem killing just a week ago and now, with the successful sweep of an enemy's base, he successfully pulled off an ANBU Captain level operation – by himself.

"I guess he deserves a bonus?" Shizune suggested.

The Hokage simply nodded and pulled out a bottle of sake. She was getting too old for this.

"Thanks Tanaka-san, the dinner was delicious." Naruto grinned as he exited the elder miner's house. His two children and his wife waved Naruto goodbye.

Tanaka stepped out of his house as his wife and daughter went about cleaning the kitchen and his son ran around the room behind them. "Are you coming back to the mine tomorrow?"

Naruto shook his head, "I don't think so. With what happened…"

The elder miner could only shake his head. It had surprised everyone when at the end of the day they went in search of the ninja supervisor to catalog their work hours and every single one of the ninja had been found dead. None of the miners had been none the wiser to the massacre going on inside. They heard explosions sure, but it was a mine and ninjas do that all the time.

"It is dangerous. I'm going to find work elsewhere."

Tanaka nodded in understanding as he placed a hand on Naruto's shoulder, "Good luck. I'm an old miner and that's all I know how to do but make sure you come back to visit."

"No problem," Naruto replied, "I wouldn't miss your wife's good cooking for nothing in the world."

"You know, my daughter cooks just as well."

"Really? Well I can't wait to try some of that," Naruto exclaimed.

Tanaka sighed. He's been dropping hints all night and they've just gone right over the young man's head. He gave a defeated wave as Naruto walked onto the road.

When Naruto was out of sight, he poofed into a cloud of smoke.

The real Naruto sat in a tree as he watched the little Aburame recover in her hospital bed through the window. He was there when she woke up, her eyes waking up to the safety and comfort of home. He was there when the parents of her teammates had come to visit her and Naruto's heart had broken all over again as the child was forced to retell the story of their capture. The parents left in tears. Naruto was there when a crew of Aburame entered. He was there when a woman who wasn't an insect user at all rushed to the child's side and gave her a comforting hug only a mother could give.

When the Aburame girl was finally given clearance to leave the hospital, Naruto finally dragged
himself home. His shoulders felt heavy and flashes of the things he committed only a few nights ago continually haunted his thoughts. But every time he felt a twinge of regret he remembered how a little girl had to tell the parents of her friends how they had died.

Naruto neared his door and was surprised to find it already opened. He stalked inside but entered to find Kimi sitting on his couch reading a book. The four year old girl turned at the click of the door, her eyes were a pale color, almost like the Hyuuga, but half-way blind.

"What are you doing here Kimi?" Naruto asked. "Where is your brother?"

"He had a job so he left me here," she said as she kicked her legs and flipped through the images of kunai in the book she was holding. It was the only book Naruto had with pictures and she enjoyed looking at the fuzzy images within them. Naruto frowned as he walked in and prepared a bowl of ramen for him and his visitor. He was honestly glad to have her here. She kept his thoughts occupied.

"So you're the ones who have my extra key?" Naruto asked. His key routinely rotated among the children of the streets.

Kimi nodded.

"What kind of trouble has your brother gotten into this time?" Naruto asked as he leaned over the kitchen table and remembered the rough teenager just a few years younger than him.

"I don't know," she said happily as she flipped a page of the book.

Then there was a knock at the door.

"I got it!" Kimi exclaimed as she jumped from the couch as gracefully as a ninja and threw the door open. "Hello!" she sing-songed.

Naruto leaned back from the stove and was surprised to find the little Aburame standing confused at the door. "Is… your um dad home?" the Aburame asked.

"My dad is dead." Kimi chirped, wide dimples in her cheeks.

"Oh… um…" Naruto had never seen a nervous Aburame before and enjoyed her discomfort before coming to the door.

Aburame looked up and her eyes grew to the size of saucers, "Uzumaki Naruto?" she asked as she looked up at her hero. "You're the one that saved me?"

"I'm guessing you bugged me?" Naruto asked as he invited her inside. "I hope you like ramen," Naruto said as he return enthusiastically to the boiling water. The Aburame looked around at the dirty house with a frown and then gave a quick bow. "I am here on behalf of the Aburame clan to express their gratitude, and I am here on behalf of myself to express my own gratitude," she said as she held out a hand, "Aburame Mushi."

Naruto chuckled as he placed the bowls of ramen down on the table and moved to shake the young girl's hand, "Uzumaki Naruto."

"Woo! Food!" Kimi shouted as she jumped toward the table.

"Is she-"
"Not related," Naruto assured her. "I get a lot visitors."

"I see," Mushi sat down and stared at the noodles. "Do you really live here? It surprised me."

Naruto raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"Not to be disrespectful but…" she shuffled her noodles in her bowl. A neighborhood full of drunken and strung-out ninja certainly wasn't safe for a genin. "This isn't the best part of town. Uncle Shino had to escort me here."

"Why didn't he come in?" Naruto exclaimed as he looked out the window curiously.

Mushi shrugged her shoulders, "He's Uncle Shino. My mom still doesn't feel very comfortable with the main family members. She's thinks they're weird."

"They are weird." Naruto laughed with noodles in his mouth.

"They're awesome," Mushi argued and pulled her large coat closer to her. Mushi could hardly believe this was the same man who killed her guards and smuggled her out of a mountain base filled with enemy ninja. Then again, this was the Uzumaki Naruto.

Mushi tried the ramen and was surprised it was even better than her mothers. She ate it hungrily.

"How are you holding up?" Naruto asked.

Mushi's expression darkened as Kimi beside her began to make pictures with her noodles. "I can't ever do anything right. My team was already considered dead-last and now this happens."

"It's not your fault. Sometimes bad things happen to good people. Nothing you did deserve that."

"But… but… if there was a prodigy on our team like Konohamaru or Hanabi then maybe my teammates would have survived." She stared at the noodles and then admitted in tears, "I lied to you. I knew… my beetles told me they were dead but I was still hoping… just hoping. I told you they were alive when I knew they weren't. I- I'm sorry, you could have been hurt."

Naruto shook his head. "I would have checked anyways." He gave her an encouraging smile, the one he always wanted to give but it had been obscured by a mask, "You were very brave."

"I didn't do anything."

"I don't think I'd have the courage enough to face the parents of my fallen teammates," Naruto assured her. "Believe me, there are some ninja who can do amazing things, know the most awesome jutsu but would rather do anything but that. It takes a huge amount of courage and resolve."

Naruto could hardly believe he was sounding so smart.

Mushi blushed. "Thank you Uzumaki-san."

Naruto held a hand to his heart, "You wound me. I'm not an old man. Please, just Naruto."

"Thank you. But… I don't know if I want to be a ninja anymore."

"Look a turtle!" Kimi chuckled as she pointed to the slimy picture she created on the kitchen table. Mushi looked over, "Here" and showed her how to better correct it. Mushi would look back on that night and wonder how an Aburame started drawing animals out of noodles. That was the kind of influence Naruto Uzumaki had.
Suddenly the door busted open.

Naruto was in Fox Cloak in an instant as he rushed to the door and caught the boy before he fell onto the ground. "Tomu?" Naruto asked softly.

He was covered in blood and bruises, as if he had endured a heavy beating. Tomu looked up with a busted eye. "I messed up," He admitted softly.

"It's alright," Naruto said as he stood up with the boy in his arms. "Tell me what happened," it was a demanding voice Tomu had never heard Naruto use before. Tomu whispered in shame, "I was running drugs for Yatou's gang but the Dragons caught me and stole them. Now Yatou is mad because I lost his merchandise and they tried to kill me and… I used one of those ninja jutsu Dad taught me and escaped. They're going to kill me," Tomu breathed roughly.

"I won't let them kill you," Naruto said easily, "but I'm taking you to the hospital."

The bloodied boy kicked and yelled, "No, you can't take me! Only dying people go there."

Naruto normally would not have but even he could see that Tomu's wound needed more than a simple medic's kit. "Believe me, I'm tired of the hospital too." Naruto looked up at Mushi, "I'm sorry to ask this favor but can you watch Kimi while I'm gone? I'll be right back."

Mushi nodded with uncertainty as the famous Naruto Uzumaki disappeared from the entrance of the door with the bloodied boy in his arms. Mushi sat back in disbelief, "Does this happen all the time?" she asked the little girl who stared at her with pale eyes.

"All the time," Kimi replied with a giggle and a smile.

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Naruto Uzumaki arrived at the hospital, would have rushed to Sakura but he pinpointed her location in one of the surgery rooms. Instead he was forced to stop a nurse and shoved the boy into her arms. "He needs help."

The nurse's breath hitched as she looked at the body she held. "Right away."

Naruto waited in the emergency room until one of the nurses neared him with a clipboard of papers, "Uzumaki, you're the one that brought in the boy correct?"

Naruto nodded. "Is he okay?"

"He's been stabilized but he'll be in the hospital for some time."

Naruto felt instantly relieved. "When can I visit him?"

The nurse shook her head. "Only family can visit."

"But I am family," Naruto tried to argue but everyone in Konoha knew Naruto was an orphan.

"Can you please fill out these forms to the best of your ability?" the nurse asked. The nurse walked away briskly when another patient came through the door. Naruto frowned as he stared at the paperwork and sat down to fill out the form. He filled out the name and age category but had problems with the rest.

He didn't want to put down any family information or contact number because he knew Tomu wouldn't want his sick mother to know or worry about him being in the hospital. He left the cause of injury blank because he didn't think it would be a good idea to write down 'running drugs'. Then
Naruto flipped to the back page and saw the cost of the surgery, emergency room cost, and hospital admittance fees.

One of the reasons someone decides to become a ninja is due to the lifetime pension that will be paid to the family in the event of a ninja's death. But that pension was just enough to live off of. It wasn't nearly enough for a woman struggling with cancer in and out of the hospital, and it surely wouldn't be enough for her son's hospital fees either.

Without hesitation, Naruto wrote down his back account number. In one night, the money and bonus he got from the mission was gone.

When he was finished he stood up and made a shadow clone who would sneak into the hospital and visit with Tomu despite the nurse and her rules. He hated hospitals and knew what it was like to be stuck in one. Then the current Naruto disappeared in a cloud of smoke, to let the real Naruto know that Tomu was alright.

Kimi snuggled up to Mushi's side as Mushi read aloud 'Basic Ninja Survival Guide.' Naruto didn't have any books not related to being a ninja and judging from how new they looked Mushi doubted if Naruto has even read them. Mushi sort of like the way Kimi used her for support.

Then there was a heavy knock at the door.

Kimi jumped up in alarm, "That's not Naru," she whispered and stared at the door in fear.

"Don't worry," Mushi said and stood up. "I'll protect you. I'm a ninja."

With the composure of an Aburame, Mushi opened the door. She stared up at two large men who looked like street thugs.

"Where's Tomu?" One of them spat.

"I do not know of this Tomu," Mushi replied. She had just lost two of her teammates on a traumatic mission, the least she was scared of was two thugs.

"Move aside little girl or we'll beat you."

"It is not my house to welcome you into," Mushi replied with cold reason, "I cannot let you inside."

"You little punk!" The thug swung back his fist but when he tried to strike, he met a wall of resistance as black bugs began to creep up his arm.

"The hell?" The other thug cried as more of Mushi's beetles swarmed from beneath her clothing to protect her. The thugs fell over themselves in fear and screamed out onto the streets.

Mushi breathed a sigh of relief and closed the door. She returned to the couch and picked up another book. "See? I won't let anything harm you."

Kimi gave her a big smile.

It wasn't until then did Mushi wonder why didn't Uzumaki Naruto, the shadow clone specialist, leave a shadow clone to protect them?

He did. The shadow clone sat outside of the window, ready to interfere if they needed him but the Aburame had it all under control. Naruto made a shadow clone to continue watching them and disappeared himself, to let the real Naruto know everything was alright.
Naruto walked through the door of the apartment to find Kimi fallen asleep in Mushi's lap. He almost had a heart attack to see what Mushi was reading. "Why are you reading that?"

Mushi looked up from Icha Icha Tactics. "From the cover I thought it was a romance novel," she explained, "the plot is actually very interesting."

"You are hardly old enough to read any of that!" Naruto pouted as he pulled the book away from her and threw it to the corner where it belonged.

Mushi gave Naruto almost disbelieving eyes, "I am an Aburame. I know plenty about sex. After all beetles mate inside of my body."

Naruto placed his hands over his ears. "I don't want to know."

Mushi sighed. It was so hard to make friends with people other than your clan.

"Come on, I am going to take you home," Naruto offered as he tried to shake the disturbing image from his head.

"Alright," Mushi sighed as she stood up and watched as Naruto made a shadow clone to leave with Kimi, further increasing her suspicions. As they walked the streets of Konoha's most dangerous sector, which seemed the safest with Naruto by her side, Mushi decided to finally confront him, "Two thugs came when you were gone."

"You took care of them?" Naruto asked with an innocent smile.

"Of course I did, but you could have too." Mushi pointed out.

"I already told you. You're strong enough. You didn't need me." Naruto explained. As he held her hand through the streets her beetles crawled up his arm. It was a little unsettling at first but he got used to it.

Mushi sighed. "Maybe I do still want to be a ninja but I don't have a team or even a sensei."

"They'll probably give you a new one," Naruto offered. "When I lost one of my teammates they gave us a new member to replace him. It was hard to get used to but we all had to learn how to rely on each other to stay alive."

Mushi dragged her shoulders. "I was wondering… the rumors say that you've helped Konohamaru become so strong. Could you teach me too?"

"But I know very little about Aburame techniques. Wouldn't it be best to ask Shino?"

Mushi shook her head. "He's a main family member. They don't take on apprentices from the branch family unless you have huge potential."

"Then he must be an idiot if he doesn't see yours." Naruto grinned.

"Indeed the potential of Mushi Aburame's skill has been noticed by the main family but she has not been selected as an apprentice," Naruto looked up a little caught off-guard as Shino appeared at the border of the Aburame estate. Mushi was used to it. "Why not do you ask? Because the main family deemed she needed more field experience first."

Mushi looked up in surprised. "Really?"
Shino motioned her forward and Mushi Aburame joined her uncle. "Naruto Uzumaki you have earned my deepest gratitude. Why? Because you have saved my talented niece from the enemy," then Shino glasses reflected light when there was no light in the moonless sky, "and for exacting appropriate revenge."

The Aburame were known for holding grudges for years but their gratitude lasted a lifetime.

Naruto chuckled nervously, "No problem."

Then he poofed into a cloud of smoke.

Mushi stared at the smoke in surprise, never realizing she had been traveling with a clone. Even the bug she used to track him had been moved. If that was a clone, then where was the real Naruto?

At that moment, the real Naruto was deep in the criminal underground holding Yatou's neck to a wall as Yatou begged for his life. All of the thugs and hired minions lie scattered across the bar dead. You know what they say about retired ninjas, they were either cowards or legendary. Yatou surely wasn't the latter.

"Please, I'll pay you anything… anything… I don't know who you are or what you want but surely we can work out an agreement?"

"All I want is your life." It was a voice mixed with both Naruto's and the Kyuubi's timbre, a chilling sound that made Yatou crap his pants.

The last thing Yatou saw in life was the emotionless mask of a Crow.

x

*It was a rule that after every mission in the field an ANBU agent got a few days off - to help maintain their sanity.*
Lesson Nine

A Tangled Web of Politics

Konoha's hospital held the record for most burn victims admitted in the world. It was Fire Country after all. So when Sakura entered the emergency room she was unfazed by the indistinguishable mass of face, the raw skin, or smell of burnt flesh. She worked with experienced calm. Sweat gathered at her brow as she maintained her chakra control until eventually she saved her patient, but as she pulled off the gloves she knew that nevertheless, behind the cotton gauze waiting to come off and the crippled appendages never to recover, the old life he had was dead.

Sakura walked from the emergency room with a sigh of relief.

"Hey Sakura, want to go grab some lunch?" He asked the same question that he asked her every day at this time if he wasn't on a mission. The people who sat in the waiting room shot Naruto baleful glares. The glares did not bother Naruto.

"I'm sorry Naruto. I'm extremely busy." She watched as Naruto's shoulder's dipped in rejection, "but you can accompany me on an errand I need to run?"

Naruto's face brightened, an expression that stood out among the anxious in the room.

"Let me go change." Sakura went to put up her robe. Even though this Naruto was just a clone for appearance's sake, a cover for his real job, Sakura still felt bad for always turning him down. Gradually, she could feel herself drowning in the flood of her job.

"Ready?" Naruto asked.

Sakura smiled as they walked from the hospital and out into the streets of Konoha. A mild wind swept through the pink bangs that framed Sakura's face. Her pink hair was pulled back in a ponytail to keep it tamed for work.

"So... How are you doing?" Sakura asked.

"Not bad," Naruto said as he walked with his hands behind his head. "I have plenty of time to train every day."

As a medic ninja that worried Sakura. "It that safe?" and then said in a low voice, "what if you poof out of existence because you're training so hard?"

"I have enough chakra," Naruto grinned.

"But, what if you need that chakra on a mission? That's dangerous, no matter how much chakra Naruto has."

"It's fine," Naruto chuckled as they walked through the markets. Sakura technically didn't need take this route as it was longer than others. But she enjoyed the smell of fresh fruit and vegetables, enjoyed making their walk just a little bit longer than necessary.

As they walked, Sakura tried to weigh the consequences of splitting chakra over long distances. It just wasn't safe. That meant wherever the real Naruto was, he might be working at 50% efficiency.

Sakura turned to scold him and to threaten to warn the Hokage just how much chakra he had
pumped into his clone, when Naruto leaned in and said, "Hey Sakura, is that bags under your eyes?"

The impact when Naruto hit the ground was crater-sized. Naruto crawled meekly out of the hole some poor genin team will have to fix later. "I was just saying you look kind of tired," Naruto raised both hands in submission.

Sakura huffed as she crossed her arms. "That better be what you meant."

Sakura tried to resist the temptation of punching Naruto again and risk running a test on just how much chakra this clone contained.

Naruto dragged himself onto his feet. "Sorry Sakura."

"I might be a little tired," Sakura begrudgingly admitted. "I've been working on this case with the cadaver unit that has everyone in the medic team stumped."

Not really sure what a cadaver was, Naruto questioned, "What happened?"

"Just some dead thugs," Sakura shrugged. "But they've been trying to find evidence for the identity of the assailant and it's a brick wall." Sakura put her hands on her hips in thought, "We know it was a ninja. The weapon used was a kunai and the cuts were too clean to be a civilian. We just don't know anything else. I swear, the job was so precise ANBU would be jealous."

**I told you we should have left more blood.**

When Sakura turned to Naruto to vent her frustration with the job, Naruto had wandered away and was now talking with an old woman. He was shouting at her enthusiastically until the elder woman turned over the bags she held with a sigh.

"Thank you," the older woman replied as Naruto held her grocery bags.

"No problems old lady!" Naruto smiled as he trailed after her through the market, and suddenly Sakura was left behind. Just when Sakura thought she had a companion who wanted to listen to her, Naruto's short attention span struck again. With a defeated sigh, Sakura caught up to Naruto beside a melon stand.

"You should buy some stuff too," Sakura suggested, "you should learn to eat more food other than ramen."

**Or warm fresh meat.**

"There's nothing wrong with ramen," Naruto argued. Besides that point, he was broke.

"A ninja needs to maintain a balanced diet!" Sakura claimed as she grabbed a melon and shoved it into his face.

The old woman chuckled beside them, "You two look so cute together."

**As long as we're on top.**

Naruto and Sakura came to a pause, and then an awkward blush.

"Oh we're not together," Sakura responded.

"Why not? He is the hero of the village." The old woman replied with a wink and moved to weigh two of the melons in her hands.
An image suddenly assaulted Naruto's head. There was pink hair, two naked bodies… and melons.

"Well, that was awkward," Naruto chuckled nervously and brushed off the incident easily with a smile. Sakura wished she could brush the twinge of pain off so easily.

'Would you stop that!' Naruto mentally yelled at the Kyuubi.

**Let's go kill something, preferably the pink haired thing.**

Naruto took a deep breath and counted backwards from ten.

Sakura had turned, hoping to hide her disappointment by the lack of Naruto's response. "How much do I owe you for the melon?"

"Nonsense," the short man at the stall smiled. "Here, have another. Anything for the village hero."

Naruto turned with a perplexed stared at the fruit that was handed to him. Sakura elbowed him in the arm, "What's wrong with you? Take it and say thank you."

"But…" Naruto stammered as the melon was put into his arms. He eyed it warily, there were no huge sections of it molding and it didn't seem unripe. It looked too good to be true but nothing came for free, that was one lesson he learned early in life.

"What are you doing?" Sakura hit her fist against his dull head, "Stop being rude!"

"Oh," Naruto stammered as he turned to the merchant, "I'm sorry. Thank you," Naruto gave a quick bow but the worried look did not escape his face. With a sigh, Sakura began to push Naruto toward the next stall where the old woman had roamed.

"You can have it," Naruto said immediately as he gave it to Sakura, taking a glimpse behind him to watch for the merchant's reaction as he placed it in her arms.

"Naruto, I don't know what's wrong with you," Sakura sighed as she placed her arms on her hips. **It's poisoned.**

"It's poisoned."

"What?" Sakura stopped in the middle of the road and asked.

"It might be poisoned," Naruto said more urgently, "You're the best medic nin I know. You can figure it out."

This hadn't been the first time Sakura has noticed Naruto's odd paranoia, just the most recent occurrence as she's been too busy to spend time with him lately. "Naruto, I assure you the melon is not poisoned. Why would the villagers want to poison you?"

Naruto thought the answer to that was obvious.

**Now can we kill her?**

"Why are we going to the Inuzuka's?" Naruto asked curiously as the main streets of Konoha fell behind and a plain of grass began to stretch out before them.

"I have to talk to Hana about some research I'm doing." Sakura explained. "I'm working on a pill that
will hopefully slow down the process of hemorrhaging. I want to try and inject artificial vasoconstrictive paracrine to increase the rate of hemostasis—Sakura was oblivious as Naruto's eyes glazed over. "-If I succeed, it will increase the probability of ninjas surviving long enough to receive adequate treatment in a proper facility," Sakura finished with a smile and a fist pump. It was one of many projects Sakura Haruno had planned, including working with Anko to create a new highly toxic poison and working with the Akimichi clan to include vitamin supplements in their pills.

"Wow, Sakura. I have no idea what you just said but that sounds amazing."

Sakura rolled her eyes and smiled. She wouldn't be amazing until she actually succeeded but accepted the compliment nevertheless. A bell on the door chimed as they walked into the veterinary office. It was a slow day and the front room was empty of any visitors. There were two birds nesting at the top corner of the room and a cat lazily stretching on top of a bookshelf. As they approached, Kiba was sleeping on top of the main counter.

The moment they walked through the door, several pitches of barking rang throughout the clinic. Several dogs of all shapes and sizes bounded toward the front where a sturdy fence kept them at bay.

"Um, Kiba?"

Kiba opened an eyelid, and with a startled gasp, jumped over the counter and landed behind the receptionist desk. "If you're looking for my sister, she's sick today, but if it's medicine you want I can get it for you."

Naruto laughed, "Never thought I'd see you as a vet."

Kiba's eyes snapped in Naruto's direction and the growl released from his lips set an uncomfortable tension in the air. The two birds had stopped squawking and the dogs sectioned off began to join Kiba's growl.

Naruto looked bewildered but his body tensed in instinctive opposition.

"Um, is there something going on between you two?" Sakura asked. If she had known, she would have never brought Naruto along.

Naruto shook his head and questioned, "What's your problem?"

"My problem isn't my problem," Kiba growled, turned his attention to Sakura, and made a point of ignoring Naruto's presence. Naruto crossed his arms. He could do that too. He stubbornly turned to examine the frames hanging on the wall.

Sakura looked between the two boys and shook it off as them being boys even though you would think they were past this age by now. "I'm sorry," Sakura sighed. "I just came to ask Hana a question about a certain kind of medicine."

"Which one?" Kiba lazily asked as he leaned against the counter and scratched a spot behind his ear.

"It's an YC injection used as type of pain reliever."

"Yeah, I know the one," Kiba replied. His brown hair was beginning to grow shaggy past his ear and the white vet's coat he wore made him seem oddly the professional.

"Do you happen to know its content and how safe it is for human consumption?" Sakura asked, doubting Kiba would know much. The drug she was referring to was no longer widely used in favor of another more effective drug, but she was sure somewhere in the chemical make-up was the
unorthodox ingredients she was looking for.

Kiba scoffed. "If a human drinks that stuff they'd have bloody diarrhea for a week. If you want to know what's in it there is-" Naruto's ears began to zone out as Kiba listed off various names of herbs and ingredients.

Naruto's eyes flicked over the framed pieces of paper that declared all those who were certified veterinarians within the Inuzuka clan. Naruto was surprised to find that Kiba had one of his own framed regally next his sister's. He continued to wander the veterinary as the barks of dogs and puppies waxed and waned. He leaned behind the counter and found Akamaru lying asleep in large white puff ball.

There were so many different puppies, all different breeds and different colors. Some had scar marks through their fur but most of them, more wild and clumsy were as far from trained ninjen as a civilian from a ninja.

Kiba had stopped when Sakura pulled out a notebook to fervently jotted down his suggestions.

"There are so many dogs here," Naruto commented.

"Strays," Kiba sneered, the way he said the word sounded as if he had called Naruto an idiot. Naruto ignored Kiba's strange behavior. Then Naruto realized he had never once seen a stray dog in all of Konoha. Even the orphan dogs had a home, but the orphan children didn't.

"How do you take care of all of them?" Naruto asked curiously.

A small puppy scratched against Kiba's leg with a ball in its teeth. Kiba grabbed the ball and lazily threw it over his shoulder. A crowd of puppies went racing down the hall. Kiba locked narrow eyes onto Naruto's blue irises. Naruto got the strange feeling that Kiba was thinking of multiple ways to kill him. Kiba replied with a snarl, "Usually other family members help out when they're not on missions. Upkeep and food costs a lot but we're funded by the Daimyo's wife. She's been a patron of ours for years as she brings in her cat all the time."

Before Naruto could ask another question, Sakura interrupted. "Hey Kiba, would you know how the medicine is actually made? Some of these ingredients are very delicate." Sakura asked curiously.

"Yeah," Kiba said as he leaned down and threw the ball again. Kiba explained the various dangers and then the procedure of how to make the medicine. Naruto leaned over the counter as he watched the puppies playing with each other thoughtfully. Naruto suddenly wondered who funded the local orphanage.

"Wow, Kiba I'm impressed." Sakura said in genuine surprised, "I thought only your sister would know this stuff. Under that mane of yours you actually know what you're talking about."

"Hana is the one who practically raised me," Kiba grumbled, "and I am the next clan head."

Not being a part of a clan herself, Sakura knew very little about the intrinsic politics, especially since every clan have their own rules. "I know I don't have a prescription but I was hoping to get a sample of that medicine. I want to try to work on a human variant of it."

Kiba grinned and his prominent fangs were more pronounced, "Come back tomorrow and I'll have it ready. I'd have it ready for you today but Hana will probably still be sick and I need to get some training in."

That one word piqued Naruto's curiosity, "What are you training for?"
"The Jounin exams," Kiba replied with a lazy hand on his cheek. "I have to pass in order to succeed my mother as clan head." Then a sudden brilliant spark went off in Kiba's head. He smirked with all the mischievousness of a puppy up to no good. "Have any free time next week? I could use a good sparring partner."

Naruto's eyes' lightened at the challenge. "It wouldn't take me anytime to wipe the floor with you."

"You want to bet?" Kiba hopped on the counter, growling, with the eyes of a predator.

Sakura could already tell where this conversation was going and she did not want to be in the middle of an all-out brawl. Two well-aimed strikes made two sizeable holes in the ground, each the size of Kiba's and Naruto's face respectively. "We didn't come here to fight," Sakura yelled, "You can hit on each other all you like later!"

Both boys looked embarrassed as they pulled themselves from the floor.

"Sorry," Naruto mumbled.

"He didn't have a chance," Kiba huffed as he leaned back against the counter.

Sakura sighed as she was about to drag Naruto out of the office, when she remembered she also wanted to inquire about Hinata. Before she got the chance though-

"WHY THE HELL ARE YOU NOT TRAINING!" A yell cut across the entire Inuzuka compound.

"She got back early," Kiba grumbled and replied, "I CAN'T TODAY! HANA'S SICK!"

"WHAT?"

Sakura got the notion that Kiba yelled back and forth across the compound all the time.

"Was that your mom?" Sakura asked. She had never met Kiba's mom up-close before and what she understood of the woman from the rumor mill, nor did she want to.

Kiba shrugged his shoulders, "Just got in from a mission."

"HANA! WAKE YOUR ASS UP!"

"MOM!"

"WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED TO YOU? IS THAT A RASH!"

"MOM, WE'VE GOT VISITORS!" Kiba yelled, turning toward the back of the veterinary that connected with the rest of the compound.

"VISITORS MY ASS! STOP FLIRTING AND GET BACK TO TRAINING!"

With a blush, "Ignore her," Kiba grumbled.

"SO FUCKING LAZY LIKE YOUR GOD-DAMN FATHER!"

Sakura stepped back as a literal beast overcame Kiba's expression as he turned, slammed his hand on the counter and bellowed, "HOW THE HELL WOULD I KNOW? I DON'T REMEMBER MY GOD-DAMN FATHER!"
Naruto and Sakura watched like two bystanders who knew they weren't supposed to be there, without realizing, that for those who lived in the Inuzuka compound it was simply background music.

"OH IS THAT MY FAULT!"

"MOM! DON'T TELL ME YOU'RE FIGHTING OVER THIS AGAIN?"

"SHUT UP HANA!" Both Kiba and the Tsume yelled at the same time.

Suddenly, Naruto's tattoo started to burn. He slapped his hand over his arm as it began to break the henge keeping it hidden.

"AND WHERE THE HELL WERE YOU?"

The entire veterinary compound began to shake. "I WAS PROVIDING FOOD FOR THE CLAN!" The voice was getting louder. The floors trembled, until Tsume burst from the back room and lifted her grown son with one hand against the wall, "AT LEAST I CAME BACK HOME!" She yelled even though they were right in each other's faces and their sensitive hearing was becoming overloaded by the noise. "IF YOU WANT TO DO THE SAME I SUGGEST YOU GET TO TRAINING NOW!"

Kiba looked like a kicked puppy as he fell on his feet when his mother dropped him. The mother and son stared at each other in defiance. Kiba had long ago promised that no matter how many missions he was given, he would be there to raise his children.

Tsume on the other hand, knew what it was like to make sacrifices. She was a single parent, raising two children, a business, ninken, and a dwindled clan decimated by the Kyuubi attack. She had no choice but to accept mission after mission, simply to have enough. She was never at home during her children's formative years and her work didn't subside until they were old enough to bring in their own income. But at the very least, she was determined to make sure Kiba was strong enough to always make it back home.

"Sorry, Mum," Kiba said as he now stood at her tall height, the argument dissolved as quickly as it began.

Tsume pointed to the door, and Kiba walked, as if tail behind his legs to the training area.

That's when Tsume noticed the pink blob on her property. "And who the fuck are you?"

Sakura looked around and realized suddenly Naruto had abandoned her, alone, with Kiba's mom, the scariest woman in Konoha.

Naruto would find time to apologize to Sakura later as he raced home for his ANBU gear. If Granny Tsunade found out he had left his post along Konoha's wall to go have lunch with Sakura he would be washing windows and re-carving the entire Hokage Mountain.

He was relieved when he finally had his ANBU uniform and activated the reverse summon into the Hokage's office, he was only several seconds before Butterfly.

The Hokage stared at the ANBU agents, "I have a mission for the four of you – a search and rescue."
Crow had his orders. The Hokage wanted them dead and he could do nothing but place his trust in her. He watched the two guards of his designated entrance. The Kyuubi was growling in anticipation in his stomach and a tick began in Crow’s hand as he tried to resist the urge to act before the signal was given.

An explosion occurred on the other side of the forest. The guards stumbled and looked at each other in confusion. They didn't see the red bolt charging towards them, creating claws out of red chakra. The claws struck both of their intended targets, like a double bladed assassin. Crow landed on all fours as the guards dropped dead beside him. Crow stalked into the darkness of the underground base.

The Kyuubi longed to delight in a bloodbath but Crow held on to that small measure of control needed for the subtlety to successfully complete the mission. He crawled along the shadows of the ceiling and picked his targets in careful silence. If any of the enemy ninja were alerted to intruders too soon they wouldn't hesitate to kill the hostage.

Crow watched as a patrol of three ninja walked beneath him. With a hand signal, there were two more copies of Crow. They dropped down behind each target with the grace of night and in seconds a kunai protruded from each enemy ninja's throat. The Kyuubi laughed in glee. Crow gave a silent apology to the dead bodies and continued down the hallway.

Suddenly the radio in his ear crackled with static. "Butterfly has secured the hostage. Commence to Act II. I'll cover Butterfly's retreat. Crow and Squid, clear the base."

Only seconds after Owl's message the lights along the ceiling flashed and alarms sounded throughout the base. Crow could hear the echo of an explosion somewhere in the distant sprawling hallways.

Suddenly the memories of two of his shadow clones catching and killing an enemy ninja trying to escape into the forest popped into his head. The alarm lights bathed Crow in a glow of crimson. That was the image the four ninja saw first as they rounded the corner and stumbled upon him.

The Crow cocked his head, only he could hear the malevolent chuckle that was even louder than the alarms.

Four kunai were thrown towards Crow and he deflected each with his katana. He ran forward and the closest opponent put his hands together for a jutsu. A freezing breath of ice rushed towards him. With a rasengan he cut straight through the icy torrent and exploded a massive rasengan against the ninja's chest, angling toward the floor, the body flailed and collapsed into a man-made pit. Sliding his foot back he turned and cut his katana cleanly through the ninja beside him. Blood sprayed in the hall as the torso fell first.

Crow looked up and the other ninja was preparing a jutsu. But the second ninja to Crow's right, blood fell from his lips. He fell over dead to reveal a shadow clone. The last turned to looked at his comrade to realized he was all alone. He hesitated with his jutsu – and hesitation will get you killed.

Crow shoved the ninja against the wall, his katana slicing up into the man's body where it protruded from his shoulder. The undistinguishable rogue ninja grimaced weakly, "I was just trying to help them."

"And I'm just doing my job," Crow thought the man deserved a reply.

The spreading blood caught a hold of Crow's attention. The smell made his body shiver. Like a river breaking through a dam, the smell crashed through the last remains of his control and the blood lust took over. His claws became more pronounced. He rushed to find the next prey to delight in the
shower of blood until none was left.

"Crow."

"Crow!"

"Naruto!" the calm but firm voice finally snapped Naruto out of the sudden darkness that had engulfed him. Naruto looked up and stared at Squid who stood a cautious distance away from him, crouched in a defensive position.

Naruto was about to ask what was wrong, but as he tried to navigate his words he found something warm and mushy in his mouth. It tasted even better than ramen and Naruto didn't hesitate to swallow it. He tried to make sense of the situation as he took in his surroundings.

Naruto's breathing faltered and caught in his throat, his heartbeat began to pound against his chest, and his body trembled. With horrified eyes he stared down at the body lying across his knees. The shirt of the corpse had been torn open and a bloody gash exposed the rib bones of the dead ninja, as if his skin had been torn apart by sharpened fangs. Naruto's hand trembled as he brought his fingers to his lips and they slipped against and smeared the liquid along his mouth. Naruto could only stare at the blood along his hands.

It was good, wasn't it?

Naruto gasped and flung himself backwards towards the opposite wall. His stomach churned in disgust. He heaved the crushed bits of flesh and tendons to the floor. He splattered and coughed up a pool of blood.

Sai approached Naruto fearlessly. Trained as an assassin by Danzou from an early age, he was accustomed to grotesque sights and accustomed to the different ways in which individuals approached and grew to accept death. But even for Sai, this one was a new one.

"Do you eat them to make sure they stay dead?" Sai tried to understand.

Naruto could only cry at Sai's misplaced understanding. "I'm- I'm- why aren't you afraid of me?"

"In Root, when a body had to be disposed of as quick as possible, for members who weren't proficient in fire jutsu, didn't have fire bombs, or a jutsu that could do the same, agents were instructed to eat the body. Leave no evidence."

Naruto stared back at Sai in horror. Sai shrugged, sat right beside Naruto and pulled out a scroll. He drew several ink rats and they jumped up and scoured the hallways. Naruto watched as the rats began to lick up the puddles of blood and attack the corpse as if it was a snack. They sat in silence until there was nothing left but pristine white bones.

"You won't- you won't tell anybody about this will you?" Naruto asked hoarsely. The blood was all on his uniform and Naruto swore he could feel it seeping into his skin.

"I was ordered to kill, and I did," Sai said simply, "They said nothing about reporting on your strange mannerisms."

Naruto shoulders drooped and had to wonder how messed up Sai had to be to describe eating someone simply as a "strange mannerism." They were both messed up and Naruto was somewhat relieved he wasn't alone.
"Crow. Squid."

Naruto jumped as Shikamaru's voice came over the radio. "Where are you? Were there any complications?"

"No," Sai replied calmly. "We will be at the rendezvous point shortly."

"Hurry up," Shikamaru said in a low voice, "This hostage is troublesome."

Sai got up first and walked over to where Naruto's mask had been abandoned on the floor. He handed the mask back to Naruto who grabbed it reluctantly. He stood on shaky legs and tried to force what happened here to some forgotten crevice of his memories. What Naruto will soon learn, is that no matter what he did, the taste will always be in his mouth.

Naruto stood silently at the center of the forest as Shikamaru poked him in the chest. "What were you thinking? I told you to clear out only your area."

"I thought the point was to kill everyone," Naruto grumbled, enduring the short reprimand after Shikamaru asked him to report what happened. There were considerable parts Naruto had skipped over but even still, he was in trouble.

"That's not the point," Shikamaru sighed, "I need you to follow orders. Sometimes there are reasons why I want you in certain places. Your location is often important for my back-up plans."

"Sorry," Naruto whispered, "I won't do it again."

"Please don't Naruto. You're my friend and it would be too troublesome to report you on disobedience," Shikamaru sighed. The mission was hardly finished yet and all Naruto wanted to do was go home and take a nap.

"There's a lake a few miles from here. Go get cleaned up. I don't need you to scare the Daimyo's great nephew," Shikamaru stressed the words as if he had heard them a thousand times. He reluctantly returned to camp.

Naruto was more than happy to go get cleaned up. He tore off his previous uniform and burned it. After washing the blood off his skin and out of his hair as much as he could, he went through his storage scroll and procured a new uniform. He tried gurgling water, even ate a few leaves, but nothing removed the taste from his mouth. He was disgusted at himself and it took him every effort to return to camp and not put a kunai to his own neck.

There were two reasons why he didn't do it: He wasn't entirely 100% sure the Kyuubi would die with him and didn't want to take the chance of unleashing him. The second was because of Sai, who still treated him as a human when he could only think of himself as a monster. It kept him going.

Naruto tiredly broke through the trees surrounding the camp. The ANBU agents had settled down for the comfort of their guest. Only one tent was erected. Naruto passed Shikamaru lying on a rock, both taking his turn at watch and staring at the night sky. Sai was stirring the cooking pot above the fire. Ino was sitting on a log but the way her body language was tensed clearly hinted she was hiding an expression of disgust under her mask.

A small chubby man looked up at his arrival. His hair looked as if it was once tied into expensive buns but now they hung limply. His clothes were dirtied and torn but it was obvious even to Naruto they were expensive.
"Oh you must be the other ninja that saved me. I'm Tahiko Yamamoto, the Fire Daimyo's great nephew," the man smugly replied.

"I'm Crow," Naruto responded but his words glanced off Tahiko ears as he turned to Squid. Tahiko clapped his hands, as if that was going to give him the attention he wanted. "Are you done ninja vassal? I am absolutely starving."

"Yes, your lordship," Sai replied with the force of a fake smile. Sai poured the carefully made broth and handed it to Tahiko with a bow. Naruto watched as the Daimyo's distant relative placed a hand around Ino's waist.

Tahiko looked up with innocent eyes, "I am so desperately tired. I order you to rub my feet."

"What?"

Tahiko waved his slippers in the air before the fire. "Rub my feet."

Naruto crossed his arms. He was a ninja. "No."

NARUTO! Ino's voice yelled straight into his head. We don't have a choice.

"Excuse me, what did you say?" Tahiko asked flabbergasted that one of his subjects would dare defy him. All he had to do was say one word to his uncle and Konoha would lose all its economic support.

"I mean," Naruto said through gritted teeth as he attempted to fix his words, "No, I won't do just your feet. I'll do your shoulders as well."

"Of course," Tahiko smiled smugly, the smile of a person who was used to getting his way.

This is stupid. Naruto thought as he knelt down and pulled Tahiko's feet from his slippers. An ANBU elite was forced to massage the feet of the Fire Daimyo's great nephew. Tahiko ate his dinner, blissfully unaware of the hardened grimaces behind the masks that surrounded him.

"What do you think of the current political climate?" Ino asked, trying to keep his interest on the conversation rather than on her breasts.

"I don't see why the peasants deserve a lax on their taxes," Tahiko replied. "They wouldn't be starving if they weren't so lazy. The taxes are for their own benefit. It motivates them to work."

That was one of the most twisted ideas Naruto had ever heard and as a ninja whose faced Pein and Sasuke's warped thoughts, that was saying a lot. Naruto bit his tongue as he massaged the man's shoulders, a front row view as Tahiko began to openly grope Ino.

You could kill him.

Naruto stared at Tahiko's fragile neck.

Think about it. What would happen if this guy became the next Daimyo? You'd be doing the world a favor if you just end it now.

For once the Kyuubi had a point Naruto wasn't opposed to.

Then we could eat all of the fat off his body.
No. Naruto said forcefully, drawing the line there. *I'm not going to kill him.*

Tahiko finished with his bowl and stretched. He clapped. No one was really sure what that meant until he looked up at Naruto and back down at the bowl in his lap.

"Oh." Naruto quickly came around and took the bowl.

Tahiko stood up and stretched. "It is about time I retire." He turned to Ino sitting beside him. "Congratulations, I have bestowed upon you the privilege of being my bed warmer for the night," He said with a grin and his eyes roamed the curves of Ino's body.

*Let's kill him.* Naruto growled, instantly changing his mind. When he tried to make a move, he found his body frozen. His shadow was locked in place by Shikamaru's jutsu.

"A pleasure," Ino forced herself to say. Tahiko came and wrapped an arm around her waist, guiding her into his tent.

"What are you doing Shikamaru?" Naruto growled.

*Crow,* Shikamaru said, "There is nothing we can do. It's politics."

"Fuck politics," Naruto spat, "He can't do that to Ino! We're not they're slaves."

"We are slaves," Shikamaru said softly. "Look, I don't like it any better than you but if that man comes to any harm it could incite a civil war."

A moan came from the tent.

"I can't just stand here and let him take advantage of her!" Naruto cried. "Release me," Naruto demanded. He could overload Shikamaru's jutsu easily, make it to the tent and rip that guy to shreds.

"We have to give him what he wants. If it's Ino, then so be it. If it was me he wanted, I'd have no choice but to oblige." Shikamaru could only respond tactfully, trying to reign in his own emotions. He cared about Ino and didn't like this anymore than Naruto did.

There was no way Naruto was going to just stand by and do nothing. When Naruto was little he had hated the people who were beating him just as much as the ones who stood by and did nothing. Naruto would never be like that.

Before Naruto could gather his chakra, Ino came out of the tent.

Both boys blinked.

"That was quick," Naruto commented in surprised, "Did you really- do it?"

Ino's Butterfly mask reflected off the fire as her hips swayed past them. "He *thinks* we did," Ino responded with well-deserved haughtiness. Both boys only stared after her as she raised her arms above her head and stretched before the campfire. The tease was meant for Shikamaru but she didn't mind giving Naruto one either. Both boys had heated faces but a show was all it was, to touch her was death. Ino was quickly becoming one of the deadliest kunoichi of Konoha.

Ino turned to Shikamaru with a flip of her hair. "Owl, aren't we supposed to be going over the second phase of the plan?"

"Right," Shikamaru stammered as he repeated the name of his girlfriend over and over in his head.
The ANBU agents sat around the shared fire.

Owl began to explain phase two, "We have to deliver Tahiko straight to the Daimyo but in the Daimyo's presence no masks are allowed. It has already been decided that you Crow should be the one to deliver our escort."

"Why me?" Naruto questioned.

Shikamaru said what should have been obvious, "You are the Great Uzumaki Naruto."

Tahiko woke up from the best night he had ever had in his life. After being kidnapped and held for ransom he certainly deserved it. He stretched as he exited the only tent in the camp and was surprised to find a blond-hair blue-eyed man waiting outside. He jumped up in fright until the man turned to him and Tahiko could clearly see the leaf insignia engraved in the man's headband. Tahiko sighed in relief.

"Good morning," Naruto strained to say, "One of your ANBU guards sent for me last night. I will be your escort the rest of the way to the Daimyo's palace." Naruto had practiced those lines all last night, not so that he could remember them but to keep the hatred at bay from his voice.

Tahiko brightened, rightly honored that Konoha would send him a more appropriate entourage. After all, those masks were just unsettling. "You have the honor of escorting Tahiko Yamamoto, the great nephew of the Fire Daimyo."

"An honor," Naruto bowed, "Uzumaki Naruto."

Tahiko brightened as he racked his memory for the name. He swore he's heard it before. The thought soon left him as the other masked ninjas had finished clearing the campsite and were ready to depart. Tahiko couldn't be happier to continue down the road. He longed to return to the comfort of the palace, especially after a long and tiring journey from the Shogun's military fort.

With an annoyed grimace Naruto followed his escort down the road.

By the middle of the day the grand palace of the Daimyo's estate could be seen in the distance. But the pristine image was clouded by the thousands of poor and homeless camped right outside of its walls.

Naruto looked around him in concern as peasants huddled in the cool air of autumn. Mothers held children suckling to their breasts with twig sized arms. Children's watched the entourage as they passed, their stomachs bloated, without the energy to even tail after them in curiosity. None of the peasants made any moves to near the ninjas, the sharp kunai at their belts glinting like warning beacons.

Only one was brave enough in his desperation to crawl forward and touch Tahiko's robes. "Please sir, please... have mercy on us."

Tahiko kicked the peasant in the face. "Disgusting," Tahiko grimaced. He turned to Naruto, "Uzumaki, kill this peasant for infesting me with his filth!"

"Seriously?" Naruto asked.

"Of course I am. Kill this thing!" Tahiko demanded.

Naruto looked at the man lying in the road, too weak to even pull himself up. For Naruto, it wasn't
much of a choice. Damn the consequences. "No, he is a civilian."

Tahiko's face suddenly flustered red. "Do as I say or I will see to it that Konoha's population meet an even worse fate!"

Naruto stepped forward and a growl left his lips as he stood over the robust pampered elite. The killing intent, laced with the Kyuubi poisonous chakra, was akin to rising pressure. In the cool autumn air, everything was suddenly hot.

Shikamaru could only watch because his own heart was conflicted. He wanted to tell Naruto to stand down, the logical part in his brain was demanding it. But the rest of Shikamaru wanted Naruto to tear Tahiko in two. For the first time, Ino was gleefully glad Naruto hardly cared for the rules.

It was Sai who acted.

He walked calmly forward, pulled out his katana, and beheaded the peasant in the streets.

A woman choked on a wail. Holding a baby to her bosom she ran into the road and collapsed over the fallen peasant. The red that was beginning to descend over Naruto's eyes shattered with Sai's decisiveness.

With trembling legs, Tahiko stepped away from Naruto. He was very certain he did not want to be anywhere close to a ninja whose eyes could flash a crimson red or his teeth looked literally the length of most predators.

Sai bowed, and then took up his post back at flank.

Shikamaru cleared his throat. Without a word, but the tension between them stifling, they walked the last hour to the Daimyo's gate where they were admitted inside with ease.

Naruto couldn't help but notice the sharp dichotomy. Inside the walls magnificent architecture rose into the sky. Cherry blossoms littered the roads with their petals. Intricate bridges and gardens were styled to maximize the chi that flowed through the well-kept grounds. Koi ponds weaved through the architecture of exotic plants and fruit trees. Naruto had never witnessed such extravagance in his life.

Two ninjas, both wearing the waist scarf that marked them as one of the Twelve Guardian Ninja, stopped the group at the gates. "Password?"

"Password," Tahiko huffed, "Don't you recognize me? I am the Daimyo's great nephew Tahiko!"

"The birds have flown," Shikamaru responded.

The two ninja's nodded. "You may enter but no masks or weapons."

"Uzumaki Naruto has been chosen to deliver the Daimyo's nephew to him." Shikamaru replied and motioned to Naruto. With a sigh Naruto took off all the weapons he carried and handed them to Shikamaru.

"Don't be too troublesome," Shikamaru whispered in Naruto's ear and he turned for the gates.

Once Naruto and Tahiko were inside the doors closed behind them. Naruto's breath was stolen from him as Naruto stared at the statues of gold and exquisite paintings that lined the hallways. It was as if he had walked into a little girl's fairytale. The two Guardian Ninja walked beside Naruto and Tahiko until they were stopped before the doors that opened to the grand courtroom.
"Before you can enter we need to check and make sure you aren't smuggling in any weapons." One of the Guardian Ninja turned to Naruto and pointed to a side room. Naruto was escorted into the room and the door closed to afford him some privacy.

"I'm sorry Mr. Uzumaki but I'm going to need you to strip."

"You need me to what?" Naruto asked in disbelief. Luckily Konoha had the Byakugan to bypass all these trespasses on privacy but no one else had the luxury and had to do things the old-fashioned way.

"Rules are rules, no matter who you are or what you have done for this country."

Naruto grumbled as he began to pull off his shirt and pants.

"Your boxers as well."

Naruto asked in alarm, "Who would hide a kunai in their boxers?"

"It's been an added security measure after the terrorist known as Deidara had a mass supply of his bombs distributed through the underground after his death. If you want to see the Daimyo, you've got no choice."

Naruto tried to remember why he wanted to see the Daimyo again. That's right - The Hokage had given them strict instructions that the mission wasn't finished until they had delivered the hostage to the Daimyo personally.

Naruto grumbled as he took his boxers off.

The ninja stepped up and checked through all of Naruto's clothing items he had placed on the table. "Clear," the ninja replied. "I'm going to need you to open your mouth."

"What for?"

"You could be smuggling something in your teeth or under your tongue."

Naruto felt extremely uncomfortable as the ninja prodded through Naruto's mouth and even up his nose while he was completely in the nude.

"Clear," the guardian ninja said as he pulled on a pair of gloves, "I really hate this part of the job but I need you to bend over."

Naruto just stared.

"… what?"

"I just need you to bend over. It won't take long."

Naruto tried to think of the various ways he could knock the ninja out and escape without inciting a war. 'Kyuubi, a little help here.' The Demon Fox sure wanted to give advice when he was not needed.

You're on your own kid.

"We can't just overlook this part?" Naruto suggested weakly.

The Guardian Ninja thought for a while, "How much money you got?"
"None."

"Then no."

This mission was quickly becoming the worst mission of all time, even worst than Haku and Zabuza, much worse than failing to retrieve Sasuke. In retrospect all that seemed insignificant when you were face to face with a man who wanted to stick their hand up your ass.

Naruto reluctantly bent over. Somewhere deep inside of him the Kyuubi was laughing hysterically.

"It'll be easier if you relax."

"There is a finger in my butt," Naruto growled and the mechanical prodding did nothing to ease the tension. "You try to fucking relax."

The Guardian Ninja shook his head. He went through this at least four times a day. "Clear."

When the guardian ninja was done, Naruto quickly snatched his clothes and put them on. His face was flushed with embarrassment. He was ready to get this hell mission over with.

"I really am sorry and I really am grateful you didn't tear my head off or something," the Guardian Ninja replied as he looked away, to give Naruto some privacy as he dressed. "I really do respect what you've done for this country."

Naruto grumbled as he felt uncomfortable walking, and with as much dignity as he could muster, walked out of the waiting room to Tahiko's smug face. Naruto really wanted to kill someone right now.

**I'm in.**

*Shut up!*

The grand double doors opened. Tahiko and Naruto entered as someone introduced them to the court. "Tahiko Yamamoto, Our lordships's great nephew and 24th descendant!" Naruto watched as Tahiko walked proudly into the room. "Escorted by the Fox Sage and war hero of the joint Shinobi War, Naruto Uzumaki!"

Naruto almost tripped over himself at the introduction. In the Hokage's political correspondences, Tsunade couldn't possibly refer to one of her strongest ninja as a genin so she simply bestowed the same title of "Sage" as his mentor and added the "Fox" moniker to remind everyone of Konoha's greatest strengths. All political, but it was surely Naruto's first time hearing any of this.

Nobles murmured in curiosity as Naruto walked through the courtroom and came at a stop before a throne that could rival the Emperor. Sheer layered curtains were draped like flower petals and hid a figure sitting behind them.

Naruto had enough sense to bow as he appeared before the Fire Daimyo.

"Great Uncle, I am home!" Tahiko declared.

"Good. Good," a voice came from the curtains. "I'm glad you are safe…"

One of the guards, dressed in complex ceremonial attire, standing atop the dais leaned over, "Tahiko you're lordship. The fat nephew."

"Oh yes, yes. Tahiko. I am glad you are home."
Naruto thought the expression on Tahiko's face was priceless as the large ego Tahiko held deflated. "I'll show you fat," Tahiko grumbled as he stormed off into the crowd.

"Poor thing must be tired," the Fire Daimyo said, "Send some of the concubines to take care of him."

"Your Lordship," the guard nodded and left to do the Daimyo's bidding.

Naruto suddenly felt the scrutiny of everyone present within the court room.

"So this is the one that defeated that evil ninja?" an interested chuckle came from the curtain.

The curtains began to shuffle, "Your Lordship, that's not advisable…"

"But I want to see this hero who saved us all." Naruto watched as the curtains were drawn back and was surprised to find just an old man almost towered over by his expensive garbs.

**Now's our chance.**

Naruto kept his stare locked to the floor as various ways to kill the Fire Daimyo shoved into his mind.

"He's still just a young boy," The Daimyo said surprised. "Fox Sage, I have a proposition for you. How would like to be one of my esteemed Twelve Ninja Guardians?"

Naruto's jaw slackened as a million thoughts raced through his mind at once. He couldn't possibly leave Konoha. His friends were there. The orphans had no one else to turn to. And there was Granny Tsunade. Even though he was beginning to hate ANBU he still wanted to protect Konoha.

"I... I..."

"Yes?" The Daimyo asked eagerly.

"Konoha still needs me," Naruto answered. Almost everyone in the room held their breaths. Little did Naruto know, no one ever said no to the Daimyo. Everyone watched the Daimyo's expression as if waiting for lightning to strike.

The Daimyo sat back in his chair with a pout, "Oh well." There were sighs of relief all throughout the room. "But if you ever change your mind there will always be a position for you."

"I am grateful for the consideration your Lordship," Naruto replied, trying his best not to mess everything up.

"You are dismissed. I look forward to hearing more of your exploits."

When the doors closed, Naruto was quite glad to get the hell out of there.

A shadow clone walked down the street, carefully henged to hide the defining features of his identity. He stopped as a limp body impeded his path. The head had been severed and a woman was crying over the corpse.

Naruto kneeled down, "Do you need help burying him?"

The woman looked up in fright. Pockmarks from a childhood dis ease marred the right-side of her cheek. "My husband," she whimpered.
"Here, let me help," Naruto offered. The other peasants who were crowded along the roads watched in silent awe as the stranger helped the woman onto her feet and carried the corpse to the side of the road. One of the children huddled under a tattered blanket crept from under it and as Naruto bent down to dig a grave with his bare hands, the child wordlessly followed suit.

The grave was dug and the small woman that stood beside Naruto trembled as she held a sick baby in her arms. "He was just trying to feed us," the woman said hopelessly.

Naruto looked around at hundreds of starving faces. He couldn't save any of them. Because he was so used to being the hero, that fact sent a jolt through his heart. Naruto didn't have any money. He didn't have the resources to give them a home or the medicine to cure the widespread disease inflicting them. He gave what he could.

"I don't have any money but I do have some food," Naruto suggested as he went into his pockets and pulled out his storage scroll. He summoned all the instant cups of ramen he had. "If we can make a fire, I'll cook it for you."

Naruto was just one man. But when the woman looked up at him she saw a benevolent spirit or an angel fallen from heaven. She collapsed in tears against his shirt. Naruto looked startled but patted her awkwardly on the back until she calmed down.

As the ramen finished cooking, it attracted the surrounding peasant population. Naruto smiled as he cooked all of his cups of ramen and passed it around to all the little children, whose parents insisted that they eat first. Ramen might not be able to solve the world's problems but it could help them to forget for at least one night.

"What happened? How did all of you get here?" Naruto asked Haruko, the small pock-faced wife of the dead peasant.

She sniffed and wiped her face with her trembling arms, from lack of food or grief, Naruto did not know. "When the Daimyo's raised the taxes, we did not have enough money to buy seeds to grow our crops. In order to do so we had to borrow the money and the interest rates kept going up and up until we were too far into debt and lost our homes."

"But our dads said they were going to do something about it," one of the children replied. The adults ringed around the fire were silent and wore hard expressions.

Haruko shook her head. "Some of the peasants had the idea that if they gathered up their money they could hire a few ninja to abduct the Daimyo's nephew. They weren't going to hurt him. It was just for the ransom, just enough money to feed their families." Haruko sighed as she looked at shrunken babe in her arms. "Some of the ninja that were related to peasant families went rogue to help us because they couldn't bear to see their families starve. It was so stupid. They should have stayed in their villages. At least they had something to eat. At least they'd," her breath caught, "would still be alive. At least my Shinji-kun would still be alive."

The peasants all knew what it meant when the Daimyo's nephew came strolling up the gates with a contingent of Leaf ninja. They all knew their plan had failed.

Naruto could only answer with silence and the weight of the world bore down upon his shoulders. "I'm sorry," Naruto whispered, his voice cracking in his throat. "I'm so sorry."

He just wanted to make the world a better place. In a poof of smoke and tears, he disappeared before their eyes.
The peasants turned back to their ramen to eat their last meal as the chill of the coming winter wind wrapped around their bodies like thin blankets.

Owl stood before the Hokage as he gave his mission debriefing.

"It went better than expected," Tsunade smirked as she picked up the letters she had received while Owl's squad was returning to Konoha. "The Daimyo was so impressed by him he requests Naruto in all his future personal missions. It strengthens our trust and provides more income for the village."

Tsunade hadn't expected that the Daimyo would try to recruit Naruto into his personal unit of bodyguards and had been extremely relieved to hear Naruto turned it down. Konoha needed Naruto.

Shikamaru had assumed the decision to choose Naruto as the escort was a political one. "It couldn't be a more perfect match, to have your successor meeting the Fire Daimyo."

Tsunade just smiled. At this rate, Konoha will be back to running at its full capacity in no time.

Naruto had begun to feel sick. Not physically, but emotionally. The job was putting unexpected cracks in his mental walls he never prepared for. He walked slouched down the streets of Konoha toward his apartments. He held his hands in his pocket as all of the events of the last mission seemed to pin him to the ground like gravity.

"I'll give you a discount," Maiko teased from the corner, but Naruto simply passed her by in silence and began trek up his apartment stairs. Maiko watched Naruto enter his room with a concerned expression.

There were no unexpected visitors waiting for Naruto when he got back. The apartment was empty. He trudged through the various items on his floor and detoured for the bathroom. The warm water pounded onto his shoulders, relieving some of the tension as he hit his head against the shower wall. He didn't know if he could do this anymore. His hands had been shaking, ever since he had come to his senses with pieces of flesh in his mouth, and they only got worse with each added stress the mission demanded from him.

He didn't know what kept him going. Habit perhaps, one he had acquired when he was a little boy who didn't understand why people hated him, why people beat him up, and spat on him. He just knew he had to keep going because somehow, he believed everything was going to get better.

Older and more mature, Naruto Uzumaki knew that things for him never got better. He would always have a demon residing in his gut. He would always be a ninja trying to hold on to his morals in a job that did not require them. Still he hoped, if only out of habit.

He pulled himself from the shower and put on some pants. When he walked out of his bathroom he was surprised to see Maiko sitting on the couch. But he wasn't in the mood to deal with her teasing. He simply went into his bedroom and closed the door. He got very little sleep in his bed nowadays as he stared at the ceiling above him.

The door opened and closed.

Maiko yelped as a kunai was pressed against her throat the moment she tried to crawl onto the bed. It had been instinctive, formed during his "lessons" with Snake. Naruto withdrew the kunai. "Sorry," he said softly.

"Believe it or not, its not the first time a client has pulled a kunai out on me," Maiko chuckled. After
all, this was a ninja village and she has serviced her share of them.

"Why are you here?" Naruto asked softly.

Maiko made her intent obvious as she pushed her lips onto his. Naruto was too exhausted to fight her and drifted backwards against the bed as she expertly explored his mouth with little nibbles of her teeth and strokes of her tongue. As she began to dry hump him, Naruto's body responded in kind. Naruto easily found an escape in her kisses and grew lost in the heat she was making him feel. Naruto hands held onto her waist as she pulled her shirt over her head. He was drowning in the lust as she pressed her breasts against his bare chest.

The need was becoming unbearable. With a growl Naruto turned them over until he was the one on top and digging his boner into the crest of her legs. He attacked her mouth hungrily and pulled at her flesh.

"Naruto," Maiko gasped as Naruto pulled from her lips and began to lick at her neck. "Naruto, you're hurting me."

**Fuck her.** The Kyuubi's voice was becoming more audible as he drove Naruto's lust, be it blood or sexual.

"Naruto please!" Maiko screamed and her piercing voice ripped through Naruto's haze. He regained his senses as he had been licking the blood from the bites he had made along her neck. His elongated claws had pierced her skin. He pulled his claws out of her body but even then he couldn't stop his sexually deprived body from humping against her madly, the friction between the clothes all he had to work with. He finished in his pants and his body finally calmed down.

Naruto looked down at Maiko's terrified face and immediately jumped away from her. Maiko scrambled for the edge of the bed in fright. Everyone knew that Naruto had the Kyuubi sealed inside of him. As Maiko remembered his contented groans as his tongue lapped up her blood, she was beginning to think they all were wrong. Naruto was a demon.

She grabbed her shirt from the floor and pulled it on quickly. Then she went through the pants at the top of a pile. Everyone knew that ninja who were just finishing a mission was the time they needed comfort the most, and also the time they had just gotten paid.

Naruto didn't say anything as Maiko found his wallet and took all the money he made from the mission. She stopped before the bedroom door, "I'm sorry," and crept out the house to return to her corner where she had left all her pity and regrets.

Naruto sat frozen on the bed as the realization truly hit him. He could never make love to a woman without hurting her. He could never control himself in the throes of passion and lust. He could never be with someone. He would always be alone.

**I'm not going anywhere.**

Naruto snapped. He couldn't take it anymore. Inside of his mindscape the muzzle came down so hard he hoped the Kyuubi could suffocate. The Demon Fox only stared at him as if to say, 'Do you really think this will subdue me?'

Finally, Naruto's head was as silent as his surroundings, as silent as the tears that fell from his whiskered cheeks.

Naruto stared at his alarm clock as it echoed through the room. The only thought that helped him get
out of bed was the fact he had a sparring match planned with Kiba today. Fighting and training was one of the only ways Naruto had found to relieve some of his stress. When he emerged from his apartment Naruto put on his carefully crafted mask and gave smiles to everyone he walked past. After all, the hero of Konoha can't go around being depressed or the entire village would panic.

"Kiba, what are we waiting for?" Hinata asked, tempting to just use her byakugan to ruin the surprise.

"Just Shino, Hinata," Kiba said hurriedly. "I wanted to surprise you with a reunion of sorts. I know you need it with everything you're going through."

"That's sweet Kiba," Hinata said softly and then, "but Shino's on a mission."

Kiba was beginning to sweat. She was going to figure it out. Then she would leave, and Kiba would never be able to fix this mess. Kiba's nose finally caught scent of the blonde. He smirked, "He's coming Hinata."

"Hey Kiba!" Naruto shouted as he rushed around the trees, "You better be ready because I'm going to kick your ass-" Naruto voice died in his throat as he stopped and came face to face with Hinata for the first time since the war.

Not much has changed about her. She still wore the same oversized jacket, her face still went red when she saw him, and her fingers still came together nervously. But what was different is what Naruto could not stop staring at. Hinata Hyuuga held the bangs of her hair back with her hitai-ate to reveal the light green marks of the caged bird seal upon her forehead.

Suddenly all his troubles paled in comparison.

"What happened?" Naruto choked.

Hinata couldn't find her voice.

Kiba spoke up for her, eagerly waiting for Naruto to do something stupid so Hinata would finally get over the jerk and realize that Kiba had been by her side from the very beginning. "After Hiashi died in the war, the elders proclaimed Hanabi as the next heir. It's okay if you didn't know," and this Kiba said snidely, "They did it without telling anyone."

"How could they?" Naruto exploded. "I'm going to- I'm going to kick some Hyuuga elders all the way to the Hokage Monument!" He proclaimed. To Naruto, the act of sealing was something unforgivable.

The Hyuuga had balled up her pale fists. All of the anger - at the world, at her fate, at Naruto, all came to finally crack her perfect manners. In perspective, when your Father dies and the clan elders seal you into the branch family, an unrequited love was nothing to die over, but that doesn't mean it still didn't hurt. "Now you care?" Hinata whispered. "I had to get branded for you to care?"

The venom in Hinata's voice shocked both Kiba and Naruto.

"Wait, no Hinata, that's not… no," Naruto responded as he stared hopelessly at the Hyuuga heiress… non-heiress.

"I get it Naruto," Hinata said softly as she stared at a patch of grass on the ground. "You don't like me. I just wish… I just wish you would have told me instead of fooling me to believe I had some kind of hope. It was cruel."
"I… I…” Naruto shuffled his feet nervously and admitted, "I didn't talk to you because I didn't know how I felt. I didn't want to make a mistake and do something bad and have you hate me."

Naruto wasn't perfect, and it took Hinata the hard way to learn that. Hinata and Naruto looked into each other eyes. Without hesitation, a stutter, or a blush of the cheeks, in a voice she was getting more comfortable using, "Naruto Uzumaki, I hate you."

Then Hinata turned and walked briskly away from the scene.

"Wait Hinata!" Naruto called.

Kiba quickly got in his path. "Don't you think you've done enough Naruto? Let her go. She doesn't idolize you anymore."

The air was knocked from Kiba chest as he was slammed through two trees before hitting against a rock. "Dammit it Kiba," Naruto growled, his eyes glowing a fierce red as his claws ripped holes through Kiba's shirt. "I am this close to the edge right now. Step in my way again," Naruto breath was poison on Kiba's cheek. "I will kill you."

Naruto cracked Kiba's shoulder blades into the stone before turning to follow Hinata.

Kiba might have lost the battle but he won the war. As far as he was concerned Hinata was finally given the chance to resolve that chapter in her life. She can get over Naruto so Kiba can show her what a true man was like.

Hinata gasped as Naruto suddenly appeared right in front of her. "I'm sorry," he said immediately. "It's too late for that. People can be sorry all they want but I've learned words cannot take back the past." Hinata said. She raised her head up proudly. If Naruto could bear his seal, then so could she. "They passed me over as heir because I am not weak but because Hanabi is younger and more impressionable. They knew I wanted to change things and have kept me from doing just that." She brushed her hair behind her ear, accentuating the new hairstyle she has adopted, "I am not ashamed of being sealed."

"That's bullshit!" Naruto proclaimed. "Someone could have done something. Granny Tsunade can do something. No one deserves to be sealed without their permission."

Hinata shook her head. "Its clan politics."

Then a scream escaped Hinata's lips as the seal on her forehead glowed.

"Hinata!" Naruto caught her as she dropped to her knees. "I'll fix it. When I become Hokage I'll fix it. No one will ever be afraid of being sealed again."

Hinata pulled away from Naruto, wincing under the pain. "I have to go. They're calling for me."

Naruto tried to follow but when he tried to move, the tendons in his legs suddenly choked up. His chakra networks had been severed from the chakra point in his calf. He could only watch as Hinata rushed home. The blood dripped into the grass as Naruto clenched his hand too hard.

It wasn't fair.

Why did so many bad things have to happen to good people?

"GRANNY TSUNADE!"
Tsunade looked up from her boring paperwork to the voice that bellowed her name throughout the Hokage tower. At least whatever Naruto wanted would make her day a little more interesting. Her door burst open and she had to raise an eyebrow by the frantic look on his face.

He slammed his fists into the desk. "Granny Tsunade! We have to do something now! The Hyuugas, they've sealed Hinata!"

"Oh," Tsunade propped her feet on the desk. "You're just now learning about that?"

"What?" Naruto asked confused, "Then why aren't you doing something?"

"Because my hands are tied Naruto. I've done all I've can, but the truth of the matter, is that its clan politics and I can't interfere."

"What are you talking about? You're the Hokage!"

Tsunade sighed. It was obvious Naruto missed this lesson at the academy. "Sit," she pointed to the chair.

Naruto was too riled up to sit.

"Shizune! Bring me my board."

In seconds Shizune was rolling a whiteboard into the room. Naruto stared at the entire scene perplexed. Originally the board was used to train medic-nin but it was useful in other purposes as well. Tsunade stood up and started drawing nonsensical pictures. "There are three main political powers in Konoha. The Daimyo, the Hokage, and the Clan heads."

"What about the village elders?" Naruto asked.

"They act in advisory roles but do not actually possess any real political power," Tsunade explained. The elders were just respected enough to butt into people's business. "Let's say for example, someone like Danzou had become the Hokage. My grandfather put in place checks and balances that will mitigate any destruction his reign would have caused. The Hokage is entitled to the Daimyo and largely relies on his economic clout. The Clan heads are a buffer to prevent the Hokage from becoming a dictator. Because of this, they are guaranteed certain rights and powers. I can't simply go into their clan and tell them what to do."

"But… but…"

"Besides," The Hokage leaned against her table and crossed her arms. "It's extremely difficult to argue with something that works. There is but one case where another country has the Byakugan – one. That is impressive for how long the Hyuuga clan has been founded."

"But they don't need to seal each other!" Naruto argued. "The Uchiha had doujutsu and they weren't throwing seals on each other's foreheads!"

"Naruto," Tsunade said calmly, "The Uchiha don't exist anymore."

Naruto did not how to respond to that. He wracked his brain for a solution. There had to be a way.

"I don't think you truly understand what we ninjas are," Tsunade walked back around and sat at her desk, almost pained to bring him out of his cave of innocence. "We aren't peace keepers. We aren't on a mission to rid the world of evil. We are simply on the Daimyo's paycheck. I know this isn't something that you want to hear and I've argued this with Jiraiya a thousand times but there is no
such thing as peace for us. The Daimyo's are all entitled to the Shogun. In order for the Shogun to maintain his power, he plays the Daimyo's against one another to keep them weak so they are denied the opportunity to join together and overthrow him. As long as the Daimyo's are always at war, so are we. Peace alliances between ninja villages are accepted with the understanding that it could be broken at any time. If our Daimyo's tell us to go to war, we have no choice but to go to war."

"But that's... that's," Naruto remembered Shikamaru's words, 'We are slaves.'

"How can we follow a Daimyo who raises taxes so high the peasants can't eat and they starve?" Naruto argued.

Tsunade gave him a soft smile, as if he was a child. "He raised the taxes to support the reconstruction of Konoha. It wasn't just Konoha that was crippled during Pein's invasion but the Daimyo as well. When his main military power is weakened, so is he. He raised taxes to do everything in his power to get us back on our feet, and then afterwards, prepare for Madara's war."

Naruto rubbed his faced with his hands. "There's got to be something!"

Tsunade shook her head. "It's beyond the power of the Hokage."

"But the Hokage is supposed to be able to fix everything! You're supposed to make everything right!"

"I can only do so much, Naruto."

"Then- Then- what's the point of even being Hokage?!" Naruto screamed. "What's the god-damned point if you can't stop people from starving or keep good people from being sealed against their will!"

"Naruto, just calm down."

"NO!" Naruto yelled as he slammed his fist onto the table. "I can't- I can't-" Naruto expression was just as broken as the truth he had previously held. "Then what's the point?"

"The point is to protect Konoha's citizens and the Will of Fire."

Naruto shook his head. His heart was crushed under the brutal hand of reality. "I- I don't think I want to be Hokage anymore."

Tsunade jumped to her feet, "Stop being a little punk!" She poked her finger into his chest. "Do you think I wanted this job? You're the one who practically gave it to me! It's not easy Naruto but it doesn't mean you have to bitch about it."

Naruto dropped the necklace she had given him onto the table. He's seen enough to realize the truth.

"I don't want it," He said as he pushed away from her desk and exited her office with a slam of the door.

Naruto couldn't help but to wonder when did his dreams become such nightmares?
He would always be a ninja trying to hold on this morals in a job that did not require them.
Lesson Ten

Shadows Cannot Exist Without a Source of Light

Naruto gasped as if he was a man trying not to drown. He sat up in bed with rolls of sweat dripping down his body. His heart was racing like a bolt of lightning. His head was ringing and there was a pulsing pain behind his eyes.

He looked at his clock.

Three hours.

That was how much sleep he managed to steal away from the nightmares. Every time he closed his eyes he saw his friends lying in corpses all around him, their flesh ripped and torn apart by an animal, with the taste of their flesh in his mouth.

Naruto collapsed backwards as his stomachs did flips. It was nice to have a break from the Kyuubi's incessant homicidal voice, but he couldn't escape the Kyuubi's projection of images into his mind or the worsening nightmares. Naruto laid in bed and wondered when he had gone from dreams of becoming the Hokage and finding world peace, to just trying to find a reason to get out of bed in the morning.

A curious smell drifted into his room and Naruto sniffed the air. He smelled breakfast. He would have been more alarmed if he didn't also smell Sakura's overwhelming cherry blossom perfume masking her natural scent. Naruto reluctantly pulled himself out of bed and peered around the corner of his bedroom door.

Sakura had her hair pinned up, humming a song as water boiled atop the oven.

"Sakura?" Naruto questioned.

Sakura looked over her shoulder with a smile. "Breakfast is almost ready."

Naruto trudged through the obstacle zone that was the mess of his apartment and collapsed into the kitchen chair. He leaned over a bit as one of the chair legs was loose.

"Coffee?" Sakura asked.

Naruto scrunched his noise. "That stuff is disgusting."

Sakura huffed, "No it's not. You've just got to find the right mix just for you." Sakura made two cups of coffee anyways. Looked over at Naruto with the apparent rings around his eyes and thoughtfully added more mixture of cream and sugar than the actual coffee. "Try that?"

Naruto stared at the light brown drink. He put the mug to his lips and the bitter taste enveloped his mouth. With a frown, "More sugar."

"The whole thing is going to be just sugar," Sakura sighed as she added more sugar into his mug.

Naruto tasted it again. It was just bitter and sweet enough to mask the lingering taste in his mouth. Perhaps he could get use to coffee after all. Naruto watched Sakura as she walked through the kitchen, knowing she had work today. Then he realized what was going on, "Granny sent you here didn't she?"
Sakura noticed Naruto's bitter expression, "She's just worried about you. She said you kind of went off the deep-end yesterday."

"I'm fine," Naruto grumbled.

"You are obviously not," Sakura responded as she finished breakfast and placed it on the kitchen table. Boiled fish, miso soup, and white rice was spread across the table. Breakfast was the least Sakura could do considering Naruto gave Tsunade an excuse to give Sakura the morning shift off. "She told me you left through the front door."

"So," Naruto grumbled, "Normal people use the door."

"Not you," Sakura pointed out. She sat down and began eating after an exclamation of, 'Itadakimasu.' Sakura paused and noticed Naruto hadn't moved at all. She leaned her cheek against her hand thoughtfully, and then asked, "Bad mission?"

Sakura could see she hit the target when Naruto's shoulders slumped.

"It happens to everyone. We all have those bad days," Sakura said as she enjoyed the fish.

"How would you know," Naruto grumbled, "You just work in the hospital, you're not out there."

Sakura shoved the table back until it collided with Naruto's chest. He wheezed until he finally managed to scoot back in his chair. "I might not be taking open mission anymore but I'm the one who has to patch everyone up after they come from the field. I know what it's like. I see it every day."

Sakura pointed her chopstick like the end of a deadly senbon needle. When Naruto flinched she smiled smugly and sat back against her chair. "When I first starting working I had such a hard time adjusting, especially once I became head medic of Konoha's hospital. I had to realize that some patients took precedence over others because of who they are. Ninja families come before civilian families and sometimes that meant someone had to die. That little fairy tale world I had been living was just a little girl's last grip on her innocence before she was forced to become an adult. I know, Naruto. I know," Sakura said softly as she put her deadly chopstick back down.

Sakura ran the tips of her fingers through her hair. Naruto drummed his fingers around the coffee mug. "Well then what do you do," Naruto took a deep breath. "when, when-" In frustration he began to wave his arms through the air.

"There's no more fairytale and realize this world is just on big fuck up?" Sakura chuckled as she leaned back in her chair. "Get drunk, or at least that was Ino's solution. I prefer coffee," Sakura smiled when she placed the rim to her mouth as she reminisced. "That night was crazy. It was my first real hangover."

Naruto scrunched his nose and questioned, "Why haven't I ever heard any of this?"

Sakura looked softly into her pitch black coffee. "I didn't want to bother you about it. After the war you were already tired enough. Besides, you just basically inherited the protection of an entire village on your shoulders. I didn't want to be selfish."

"Sakura I would have-"

"Done what Naruto? Tell me you were going to become Hokage and fix everything? You were going to make a promise that things were going to be okay, find peace as if it was some lost sock, ensure everyone will live happily and no one will ever have to die on my operating table again?"
Sakura nodded her head. It had taken her a long time to come to terms with it but, "people die. That's what we do."

"I would not have-" Naruto paused. "Maybe sort of-," He looked at Sakura's raised eyebrows, "Fine. I can't. I can't fix everything…” An image of all those starving people came to mind. "I know that now," He added bitterly.

"It doesn't mean you have to give up though," Sakura said as she unceremoniously stuffed breakfast into her mouth. "I know that one day it might be you on that operating table."

"I'll be fine," Naruto shrugged.

"No, Naruto you won't. You aren't invincible. You might have a demon inside of you but you are made of flesh and bone like the rest of us. One day, it might be you and I am not going mope around knowing that I can make a difference between the life and death of my friends," Sakura paused to watch as Naruto dejectedly scrambled his food around.

"You better eat that." Sakura warned. "I made it for you."

Under Sakura's 'I'm going to hit you if you don't do what I say' stare, Naruto shoved the food into his mouth. It tasted bland but Naruto managed to swallow. Even Sakura noticed his difficulty. She knew Naruto had never had a hard time eating.

"You know, the Hokage has me working on a pill of sorts to help alleviate the headaches of the Hyuuga branch members."

Naruto stubbornly stared at his plate. Pills did not solve the problem.

"Naruto, what I'm trying to say is that you don't have to give up on your dream of being Hokage. You might not be able to save the world but you can still do some good," Sakura responded persistently.

"You're wrong," Naruto said softly. "You and I are different. Sakura, you save lives. I kill them."

"Have you not been listening to me?" Sakura asked in frustration, "People die. That's the way the world works."

Naruto pouted. Sakura could tell Naruto was refusing to listen. She looked at the time on the wall clock. She was going to be late for work. She was going to have to try and talk some sense into him later.

With a sigh she hurriedly dug in her purse for the list of items she had been meaning to pick up but never found the time. She slammed the piece of paper, along with her house keys, down on the table. "I have to go to work, but since you are obviously off-duty pick up these things for me, drop them off at my apartment and give me my keys back at the hospital later."

"Sakura," Naruto complained. All he wanted to do was lie in bed and count the number of crevices in his ceiling.

"No, Naruto. I know you. I will not let you wallow in your apartment like a frightened little boy afraid to go outside."

Sakura looked at her watch and stood up from the table, swinging her purse over her shoulder, "Get them for me? I never have the time anymore."
Naruto grumbled as he stared at the list.

"Good," Sakura walked to his front door. She stopped, right as she was about to close the front door. She sighed at the image of Naruto hunched over his meal without the usual gusto. "Remember Naruto, we work to live, not live to work."

Naruto put the bag of herbs Sakura requested from the Nara's estate into his jumpsuit pocket. Few people were out on the road today, either at work or in school. Naruto dragged his feet and a trail of dust followed after him as he walked the outskirts of Konoha.

He felt empty, as if he had lost something that had filled an important hole in his life. He wondered if everyone felt like this when they lost their dreams.

A chill came over him as he passed a crossroads in the street. He paused and stared down that desolate long winding road, a road Naruto had promised himself he would never walk again. Naruto took a step back in fear. He didn't need to hear the Kyuubi to know what it would have said. He was a ninja, an elite of ANBU. He shouldn't be afraid of a crossroads.

Naruto rubbed the sweat from his hands against his pants. He didn't know what he was trying to prove or what compelled him forward, but Naruto took the road little have traveled.

At the road's end was the haughty laughter and cruel words of children. A massive house loomed above him, bent from the weight of dirt, broken windows, flickering light fixtures, and missing shambles.

"Here to abandon a child?"

Naruto jumped at the taunt voice. He turned and found an older woman in her thirties hanging clothes on the line to dry.

"Um, no." Naruto answered awkwardly.

The woman raised an eyebrow and asked in disbelief. "You're here to adopt?"

"I… um…"

"You seem a little young but I'm not complaining. I'm glad someone can get at least one of these monsters off my hands."

"Monsters?" Naruto said in alarm.

"You obviously have not been around children much," She pulled Naruto by his jacket's sleeve and dragged him into the orphanage where a small office room was set up, just like he remembered, little used and all. Naruto was pushed into a chair and the woman bent behind her desk in search of files, "What type do you want? Younger or older? Normal or one of those chakra demons?"

"Chakra demons?" Naruto asked, feeling fainter the longer he was here.

The woman sighed in exasperation. "Ninja children." She pulled up the folders and spread them across the table, "I just need your papers and we'll be all ready to sort this out."

"What papers?"

The woman looked up from the glasses she wore and gave him a terse expression, "the papers you fill out at the Hokage's tower to prove you're eligible. It's fine, you can get them later. We can get
started on the process here," The woman pulled out a crinkled and old paper that had been shoved into the recesses of her desk. "Name?"

"I…um," When Naruto had stepped onto that beaten path, the last place he expected to find himself was sitting in a chair about to adopt a child. It was never something that had occurred to him. But somehow Naruto found himself leaning over the desk in eagerness. "Naruto Uzumaki."

He was going to take one of those children home with him right now, save them from this nightmare of an orphanage, and they'll never ever be alone again. That black abyss in Naruto's heart, that warped sense of hero-complex, simply yearned to be needed and wanted.

"That name sounds familiar," the woman tapped her chin as she recorded his name with a brush stroke. Naruto tapped his hand against his knee nervously. 'What if she remembered him?'

"How many do you want? Please take more than one. The orphanage has hardly enough room with all the newest additions.

"What do you mean?" Naruto asked.

"The usual that comes with war. Families who would rather give their children away than let them starve or orphans from people caught in the crossfires of a battle. Not to mention the victory celebrations caused a lot of unwanted pregnancies, both forced and consented. At least it wasn't like the previous wars where nations had been at war with each other. Still, we're pretty packed here."

"I see," Naruto said softly.

"So how many do… oh Uzumaki? We had a…" Her head snapped up and her eyes narrowed on the scars of his cheeks. "Oh god, don't hurt me!" She screamed as she scrambled backwards and began throwing items atop the desk at him.

"Wait, I'm not here to-" He lifted his head from his arms when the barrage had stopped and found the woman fainted in the chair. He combed a shaky hand through his hair. He looked around the empty room, then two pairs of feet suddenly rushed passed him, and giggling disappeared down the hall.

Naruto really didn't know why he was here.

He wandered the halls of painful memories. Even after all these years, he knew exactly where everything was. He noted the hand-me-downs and donated clothing the children wore as they paid him no heed in their fun. Their bedrooms were overfilled with children, some even lying on the floor for an afternoon nap. Naruto stopped and looked at a closet door.

It was just a normal closet and easy to miss in the dim-lit hallway. A small snuffle suddenly came from behind the door, as if a small child was crying.

Naruto heart tore from his chest as violently as he tore the door from the wall. He searched the darkness, a darkness deeper than any street corner or homeless night, but it was empty. Naruto dropped the door and it landed with a thud in the hall. His hands were shaking as he leaned against the wall. Coming here had been a bad idea.

He had to get out.

Naruto raced through the orphanage, flinching at the sight of his blood staining into the floor boards. He had done nothing wrong but they insisted his existence was a sin and punished him accordingly, every day. He kicked a bowl in his frantic pace to find the exit. The bowl was empty, like the many he had held in his hands hoping that today they would be kind enough to feed him. The walls were
closing in on him, trapping him, as if angry he had escaped.

He burst through a door and found himself tumbling over his own feet into the grass. He nearly cried to feel the soft brush of freedom underneath his face. His clothes were drenched in sweat.

Naruto grabbed a wooden post and used it to support him to his feet. He acutely felt the fear that had been hidden away in his subconscious. He leaned against the post and watched as children ran underfoot and played on old playground equipment. They taunted and fought each other. They laughed and cried with each other.

Naruto noticed two children in particular who sat far apart for the rest of the crowd. He immediately saw why. The oldest had red swirling eyes, similar to the Yuuhi clan, which outwardly marked her as different. At her side, sat a boy tucked into her shoulder with patterned scars that marked his body.

Naruto slowly walked over to them and sat down. The girl quickly shot him a distrustful glance. She looked to be about only seven years old. "What do you want?" She snapped, "If you want to get to Ichigo you'll have to get through me first," she threatened. The little boy at her side peeked over, sucking his thumb.

"I just thought you would like to use some company," Naruto shrugged.

The girl narrowed her eyes, "Who are you? You don't work here. If you're here to recruit me like you've done with the older children then no, I need to stay and protect Ichigo."

"Recruit?" Naruto asked curiously. "I'm just visiting." He looked out at the children running in the courtyard, playing tag with one another, and drawing pictures on the building walls. Naruto rested his head backward on the wooden picket fence. "I... I used to live here."

The girl frowned, "Why would you ever want to come back?"

"I didn't mean to," Naruto whispered.

The girl glanced at Naruto up and down, "They must have hated you," she commented, "With that face deformity and all. If you look different they hate you."

Naruto knew that all too well. "Do they treat you badly?"

"Typically the ninja children who look normal have a tendency to run things around here. If you're an outsider you're especially a target because they hate what they are and take it out on you," She said with the bushy red hair that framed her darker skintone.

"But none of the staff hurt you?" Naruto asked.

"They try to make us behave from time to time but it never works," the young girl shrugged her shoulders, "They tend to avoid us."

Naruto nodded. He didn't know what he would have done if these children were treated by the staff the same way he had been. Little did Konoha know a disaster on the scale of Pein's invasion had just been averted. "You mentioned something about recruiting. What did you mean?"

"People come here to try to recruit in secret but we all know they're just pimps and gangs. But sometimes," the young girl dug her hands into the dirt, "anything is better than here. They make you feel like you're wanted... I'll- we'll do anything to feel as if we belong somewhere."

Like become Hokage.
"Yeah," Naruto whispered, "I know the feeling." He turned to the children thoughtfully and watched the red hair's face as she longingly looked at the children at play. "Let's do something." Naruto declared, "I have plenty of free time. Anything you want."

"You want to do something with us?" the young girl asked in surprise. Naruto nodded. "Anything?"

" Anything."

The young girl blushed, "Do you know how to jump rope?"

Naruto gave a quizzical expression, "I'm not really sure what that is but I'll try?"

The girl jumped up with a squeal and ran toward a bush that poked out against the wooden fence.

"Ame," Ichigo whined softly when he was left alone. Ame stuck her hand inside the thorn bush and pulled out a long rope with handles. She shoved Naruto and Ichigo into position and gave them separate ends.

"You just have to rotate it, simple." She said breathlessly and stood at the center of it. "Go."

Naruto tried per her instructions but he either went too fast or too slow for Ichigo. The rope awkwardly limped through the air. The young girl stomped over frustrated and pushed Naruto in the middle, "I'll show you. All you have to do is jump over the rope."

Naruto was a ninja. This couldn't be too hard.

"Earth, Wind, Water, Lightning and Flame

Tell me the initials of your boyfriend's name"

"What are you singing?"

"You can't jump rope without a jump rope song," Ame explained. She began and the rope immediately twisted around Naruto's feet.

"Wait wait, let me try again. The song distracted me," Naruto said determined as he attempted to try again.

Even though Naruto hardly got any sleep, he had never felt so alive as he played with Ame and Ichigo. Then the bells in the orphanage began to ring, alerting all of the children on the premises that it was lunch time.

"You'll come back?" Ame asked shyly. Ichigo was more forthright as he nodded his head vigorously with his thumb still in his mouth.

"Of course," Naruto grinned. He looked at the two children who stared up at him as if they were the only three people left in the world. He felt needed and he felt wanted. Naruto didn't hesitate to make a decision. Naruto went down on one knee and promised, "Someday, I don't know when, I'm going to adopt you and Ichigo."

Ame sucked in a breath and then she collapsed in tears against his shirt. "I- I- Thank you, thank you, thank you."

Naruto hugged her gently. He felt so big compared to her tiny frame. He had to protect them. "It might take me a while though. There are some things I need to sort out with Granny Tsunade first and I'm going the need to save some money." Naruto was not going to have two little children in his
rundown apartment in the middle of the worst part of Konoha. If he was going to do this he was going to have to move. "But I'll come for you, I promise."

He couldn't stop Ame from crying.

When he was finally able to pry her loose so she could eat lunch, she stole furtive glances behind her to make sure he wouldn't disappear as if it was all a dream. Ichigo actually took his thumb from his mouth and waved goodbye.

Naruto watched as they disappeared into the orphanage. He leaped over the railing with a purpose. Naruto walked down the dusty road with his hands behind his head, and a smile.

Naruto entered the Yamanaka's flower shop. Flowers of all colors and size surrounded him as he made his way to the counter. Naruto found Ino arranging a bouquet of flowers, singing a song loudly to herself as her hair swayed behind her. She wore an apron imprinted with a field of flowers and touched the petals of the bouquet with soft grace. Looking at her like this, you would never know how deadly she was really was.

"Ino?"

Ino turned with a smirk. "Naruto, I didn't think I'd ever see you here." A hand on her hip, she leaned forward conspiratorially, "Buying flowers for someone?"

"I was actually picking something up for Sakura."

"That's right," Ino cursed under her breath, "I keep forgetting to bring it home," she shuffled underneath the counter and brought up a small vial of yellow liquid.

"What is this?" Naruto asked confused.

"Nectar she needs for one of her experiments."

Naruto nodded and grabbed the vile. He turned and his eyes caught sight of a lavender flower.

He turned back around, "On second thought I do want to get someone flowers."

Ino nearly toppled over her counter in curiosity. "Really? Who is she?"

"Just a friend," Naruto assured her as he stepped back to escape Ino's scrutinizing glance.

"Right," Ino smirked.

"But I don't exactly have any money."

"We just got paid," Ino said incredulously.

"I know, it's a long story. I owe you?" Naruto suggested.

Ino sighed as she placed her hands on her hips. 'I'll give it to you for free but only because Shikamaru told me how concerned you were when I had to deal with that pig. Not many people would incite a civil war over little old me," Ino teased. "Is there anything you want the flowers to say in particular?"

"Not really," Naruto scratched his head as he looked around the store.
Ino sighed, "Then just go pick something."

Naruto walked around the store and picked up the lavender he saw first. Then his eyes caught another flower and then another. He was zipping around the store grabbing flowers until he figured he had enough. He brought the assortment to Ino. "This is what I want."

Ino couldn't help but to smile at his choices. There was one lone lavender flower in the middle but it was overwhelmingly overpowered by the many bright colors that surrounded it. She didn't need to interpret each and every flower to get the general idea: "Happiness."

Naruto held his bouquet of flowers with pride. Now all he had to do was figure out a way to successfully infiltrate the Hyuuga compound.

Hinata dutifully served the cups of tea to the elders. It pained her to watch as they instructed Hanabi on which documents to sign or not to sign. Hanabi should be outside playing like a normal teenager but the only time Hanabi was out from under the elder's thumb was training and missions with her genin team.

Hinata stood next to the other branch family and stood as still as a porcelain doll until she was called upon. She didn't understand how those who were not ninja endured this life, always called back and forth between chores, on your feet all day long, and hands aching.

Neji stood on the dais as a dedicated bodyguard. All in the family knew the position was nothing but a leash the elders held to watch him.

Hinata couldn't look Neji in the face anymore for fear of the failure she would see in them. Neji didn't fail her. She did.

After the ceremony and pomp was over, Hinata sighed in relief. The chores and constant attendance of the main family members were more bearable than watching Hanabi literally burdened by ceremonial robes. Hinata shuffled towards the bathroom before making dinner preparations. She crossed the gardens, all the way to the other side of the property where the branch family lived, where they even used the restroom separately from the main. She entered the branch quarters and immediately noticed her relatives giving her giggling looks.

"What's going on?" Hinata stopped one of her younger cousins. The younger girl stopped and bowed immediately. Hinata didn't need to be a main branch member to earn their respect. Respect simply had to be given in turn.

The younger cousin smiled brightly, "Someone left you a present in front of the branch quarters."

"Present? Who?"

"Don't know."

"Didn't anyone see the person?" Hinata asked nervously.

"They say it was just a blur, moving too fast to get a read on the chakra signal. Go see it. It's beautiful. They put it on your bed."

Hinata gave her younger cousin a blank stare before walking faster to the bedroom she shared with an aunt and two of her cousins. Almost all the branch family were spying on the ex-hyuuga heiress as she peaked around the corner of their room. They were all wondering at the identity of Hinata's secret admirer and made guesses of almost every male member of the Hyuuga branch household.
Naruto entered the hospital. After returning Sakura's keys to her he went to visit Tomu who was almost healed enough to make escape from the hospital. He went by Tomu's room and found it empty. Naruto scratched his head with a sigh. Then he decided to go by Tomu's mother's room to see if he had went there. But when he walked inside the room was as empty as the first.

Naruto stopped a nurse in confusion, "What happened to the lady in the room over there?"

"Oh," the nurse stopped, "she passed away last night."

Naruto cursed and then raced from the hospital.

"Daijiro, have you seen Tomu?" Naruto asked as he placed a coupon into the open guitar case.

Daijiro didn't stop his strumming at Konoha's lone street corner. He leaned over the guitar case, "A coupon?"

"A ramen coupon," Naruto corrected, "Sorry, it's all I've got."

Daijiro shook his head and his fingers strummed the chords with finesse and delicate fingers. His voice and his fingers kept him alive. "It'll do I guess. It's getting harder out here and more dangerous. Maybe Tomu was caught up in that."

"What do you mean? People are bothering you again?" Naruto asked. He would never understand why some civilians considered a singing and homeless minstrel a loiterer.

"No, the gangs have gotten more violent. After Yatou's gang was wiped out all the little gangs have been killing each other to claim turf. A lot are dying in the crossfires."

Naruto tried to hide his expression of regret. If he knew there would have been such dire consequences maybe he could have restrained himself to kill just Yatou. "Stay safe, if you need anything just let me know."

Daijiro laughed, "I want a palace that compares with the Daimyo's and a fat man to fan me when it gets hot."

"Maybe not anything," Naruto laughed.

"Don't laugh," Daijiro replied and sang, 'All a poor man's got is his dreams.' The lingering chord echoed through the streets. "If I see Tomu I'll let you know."

"Thanks."

"Sticky, have you seen Tomu?" Naruto asked, his voice growing more frantic as the hours passed and the search remain inconclusive.

"Pick a cup, any cup." Sticky replied with a sly grin as he shifted three cups on top of a cardboard
"You can't swindle someone who has no money," Naruto said matter-of-factly.

"But they can get in debt." Sticky raised his eyebrows with a laugh. "No, I haven't seen Tomu. Last I heard he was in the hospital. I heard that Yatou gang beat him up." He leaned forward, "I think they're ghosts came back to kill him."

"Well then have you seen any ghosts around?"

Sticky scratched the back of his ear, "Not any lately," he replied stubbornly.

Naruto smiled. "Thanks." He turned to leave but stopped and patted down the pocket of his jacket. He looked at Sticky, "Wallet?"

"You're right. You are broke." Sticky somehow pulled the wallet from behind his ear and tossed it back towards Naruto. "You're no better off than the rest of us."

"Maiko, Akishi, have you seen Tomu?"

Maiko leaned against a run-down store. Night had fallen during Naruto’s fruitless search. A chill wind began to creep through, reminding everyone of winter fast approaching.

"Haven't seen the runt," Maiko answered with indifference. As far as Naruto was concerned she deserved to hate him. Underneath the brand new coat she wore, he could see the scars he had made along her neck.

"Didn't know you did so young, sweet cheeks," Akishi said as she lit up a cigarette. Akishi was only a year younger than Naruto. In the pale light of the lamps that lit the street Naruto could see bruises running down the left side of her face.

"What happened?" Naruto asked.

Akishi twirled the cigarette around in her fingers, "Just another client."

Maiko stared at Naruto as she said, "Some like it rough."

Naruto felt ill, "I'm not like that. I didn't mean to."

Maiko shrugged. Then a man neared them and turned to Naruto. "How much for one?"

"He's not our pimp," Akishi immediately replied, "I'll take you." And the two began to discuss rates as if he was borrowing an item from the store.

"Wait," Naruto growled angrily as Akishi took the man into the alleyway. Maiko grabbed Naruto's jacket sleeve. "Let me go," Naruto snapped, "I have to-"

"Have to what Naruto?"

"Stop them," Naruto mumbled. "It's not right. You shouldn't have to-"

Maiko interrupted him with a roll of her eyes and, "Don't you dare go taking the moral high ground on us. What are you exactly? Your pimp in that big tower tells you what to do and who to service, you never question and do exactly as he says. Then you get paid for it afterwards." Maiko shook her head, "You ninja open your souls as much as we open our legs. We're both whores so where do you
get off saying our way is wrong?"

Naruto punched a hole in the wall and his sensitive ears caught a hold of sounds coming from the alleyway that he really didn't want to hear.

"I refuse to work for a pimp or in the brothels. I like to choose my clients even if I do get hurt sometimes and cheated out of my money but at least my body is my own to do with what I will. Can you say the same? What are a few bruises compared to a ninja who can barely escape a job with his life?"

"I guess," Naruto said weakly as the sounds of sex ringed in his ears. Then an image of all the faces he had killed in the recent month flashed before his eyes. "I guess not much at all."

Maiko looked at the man across the street walking towards her. "By the way, thanks for the new coat."

Naruto walked into the strip club. A flush of embarrassment crossed his face as naked women danced atop poles and gave patrons lap dances. Both ninjas and civilians crowded the place, both looking for escapes. Naruto kept his head down and shoved past the throng of people until he made it to a discreet door at the back.

He opened the door and walked into one of Konoha's most notorious drug dens. He wanted to get out of here quickly. His sensitive nose was already letting the atmosphere get to his head. Naruto spotted the dealer, ringed by men with the tattoo imprints of the dragon gang.

"Genkei," Naruto called. Genkei looked up from his poker game as he took puffs from an opium pipe. Genkei raised an eyebrow and smiled as he sat back, "The Great Uzumaki Naruto, what brings you here to my place of business?"

"Have you seen Tomu? He's a black haired kid, twelve, and works for you from time to time."

Genkei sighed, "There are plenty of kids working for me."

Naruto had hoped asking nicely would have worked but he knew coming in these men did nothing for free. In the blink of an eye, the poker chips were scattered on the floor, and Naruto had a kunai to Genkei's neck. The dragon tattooed bodyguards scrambled to get out their weapons. Naruto leaned down and whispered in Genkei's ear. "Answer my question or I'll be happy to show you what happened to Yatou and his men."

Genkei audibly gulped. He had some of the best underground ninja working for him but even he knew that they would shit their pants if he ordered them to go after Naruto Uzumaki. He had known Naruto when Naruto had been just a runt living on the streets looking for anyone to give him the time of day. Not even the dealers wanted him.

"I haven't seen the kid," Genkei admitted. "I thought he was dead. It's not like people don't disappear all the time."

The kunai disappeared as quickly as it appeared. "Thanks."

Naruto turned to leave but caught sight of a kid about to bend over and sniff the trail of white powder on the table. Naruto grabbed the boy by the back of his shirt and dragged him out of the den and finally out of the strip club where Naruto threw the teenager to the ground.

"Is that what you've been doing when you drop Kimi off at my house?" Naruto asked angrily.
"Where is she, Katsuo? Who's looking after her?"

"A friend," Katsuo coughed as he picked himself up. "Who do you think you are?" The sixteen year old argued. "You can't tell me what to do."

Naruto crossed his arms. "I know you've been working with a weapon's dealer but where does the money go? Are you taking care of her or are you taking care of yourself?"

Katsuo's eyes were red and Naruto did not miss the needle pricks on the inside of his arm. "How dare you," Katsuo spat. "She's my sister and it's none of your business. Stay out of it. Not having a family of your one doesn't mean you should go meddling in everyone else's." Katsuo spat.

He swung a punch and Naruto caught it easily. Katsuo scowled in frustration as he tried to pull his hand from Naruto's grip.

"I never asked for your help. Let me go."

"I'm just trying to make sure you're alright."

Katsuo laughed cruelly. "Nothing is alright. Everything is fucked up and nothing in this world makes sense but the high. It's the only thing that ever makes sense."

"Maybe it not supposed to make sense," Naruto replied and released his hand. "But we can't let that beat us. You're stronger than that, Katsuo."

Katsuo shook his head as he neared the entrance of the club. "No, I'm not," and he disappeared inside.

Naruto rubbed his face with his eyes, tired, so very tired. Naruto couldn't help to wonder if even he was stronger than this cruel world.

By the time midnight descended on Konoha, Naruto was dragging himself back home. He hadn't found one trace of Tomu and he was going back to his apartment to pack a few bags just in case he had to spend some days in Konoha's countryside looking for him.

Naruto pressed his key to the door but it opened with a creak. Naruto walked into the darkness of his apartment and turned on the lights. He finally found Tomu.

Naruto breathed a sigh of relief as Tomu picked up his head from the couch as Naruto came in. Naruto could see the grief carving wrinkles into the boy's face.

"Want some ramen?" Naruto asked. Tomu smiled weakly as he wiped tears from his eyes.

Naruto went to his kitchen and began boiling water. When it was finished, Naruto had to carry a protesting Tomu to the table to eat. "I know you probably haven't eaten all day," he replied and forced Tomu into his chair.

They sat in silence.

Naruto wanted to say something but didn't know how. He forged ahead anyways, "I wish I had something to say that would make you feel better."

"I don't want to feel better," Tomu grumbled.

"Yeah," Naruto said softly, "A friend I had told me that I'd never understand. He lost his parents too
"Your friend is a dick," Tomu said and Naruto coughed on his food. "Having had a mother is better than not having one at all," Tomu said softly. He stared down at the noodles as if they were the cause of all his pain and then looked up at Naruto suddenly. "Wait, how could you have never had any parents? You had to come from somewhere."

"Oh," Naruto said, "They died on the day I was born so I never really knew them at all. I sort of have an idea what they were like in my head," Naruto smirked at his own inside joke, "but that's all really."

"So you've been by yourself all of your life?"

Naruto wondered how the conversation turned on him but if it distracted Tomu's mind from his grief, Naruto was willing to go through some of his own. "No, not at all. I've had my teammates… then Sasuke left. There was the pervy sage… but he died. I have old man Ichiraku and Ayame. I also have lots of friends."

'And the Kyuubi,' Naruto admitted to himself begrudgingly. With the Kyuubi, he has never been alone.

"I never see any friends visiting except for that pink-haired lady," Tomu observed.

"They're really busy," Naruto defended. "I do have lots of friends."

Tomu nodded as he looked around the room. He knew in Naruto's bedroom there was a team picture face-down on the dresser. But besides from that, there were no pictures at all. Tomu wondered why he had never noticed before. "No, I mean like aunts and uncles or cousins?"

Naruto shook his head slowly, "No, none of that."

Tomu had an aunt in a neighboring rural village. He had a cousin who worked in the capital. He didn't have his mom anymore but he had family somewhere.

"Aren't you ever lonely?"

Naruto's empty denial was right on his tongue until he stared up at Tomu and remembered how nice it was to come home to someone in the apartment.

"Do you want to stay?" Naruto asked suddenly. The desperation that leaked into the question was the closest answer to the truth.

"Stay what?"

"I mean stay here with me," Naruto grinned, excited. "I could get another bed and move some of your things."

Tomu almost cried in relief. He could not bring himself to say aloud the fact that he would rather stay with Naruto than to be given to an aunt he barely even knew. He had been afraid Naruto would say no. A smile tugged at Tomu's lips as he asked, "are we going to eat ramen for dinner every night?"

Naruto winced, "I guess not if you don't want to."

Tomu twirled his noodles. "But what am I going to do when you're gone?"

"I'll leave a shadow clone. It'll be as if I'm always here." Naruto suggested easily.
"No, I mean, what am I going to do when you die?"

"I'm not-"

"You're a ninja Naruto. Ninjas die."

Naruto didn't know how to respond to that. "I don't plan on going out anytime soon."

"Nothing ever goes to plan." Tomu stirred his noodles and softly muttered, "You could just stop being a ninja?"

Naruto paused, completely caught off-guard by the request. "How am I supposed to make money to pay for the bills and ramen?" Naruto questioned.

Tomu rolled his eyes, "Get a normal job."

"But I can't…" Naruto tried to think of himself as being anything other than a ninja. "What if some crazy ninja decides to take over the world again? And I'm the only one who can stop him?"

"That doesn't make any sense. There are plenty of other ninjas who can stop him."

"But I'm different Tomu. People rely on me to protect the village."

Tomu frowned. "Why? Why you?"

"Because… "I have a demon in my stomach and it's a weapon of mass-destruction.'

"Because?" Tomu raised an eyebrow. "Fine, go kill yourself." He huffed and turned in the chair. His shoulders began to collapsed inwards and Naruto placed a hand on the kid's shoulder as Tomu tried not to cry.

"I know it's not fair," Naruto agreed, "Believe me I know, this world is not a pretty place. But you know," Naruto said softly, "None of that matters because right now we have each other."

The tears finally fell as Tomu collapsed in Naruto's chest. After three years of being responsible for his mother, of smuggling drugs in and out of Konoha for various gangs, he finally didn't feel so alone anymore.

Naruto never thought he could feel so content watching someone else sleep. He stayed up with his eyelids afraid to close for very long. Restless, he turned to stare at the clock. The Hokage's tower was still open. Since he couldn't go to sleep he got out of bed and got dressed. Before he left he created a shadow clone. He knew Tomu could take care of himself but he didn't want the boy to spend the night alone or wake up wondering where he was.

Naruto jumped from the rooftops and made a clean entry into one of the open windows of the Hokage's Tower.

Tsunade looked up from her desk, just about ready to leave and head home. She watched as a blonde ninja stepped lightly into her office from the open window. He looked up at her and the first thing she noticed was his lack of sleep. She leaned back in her chair, hoping he had come to grovel at her feet and apologize. "Changed your mind?"

"Actually, no." Naruto replied as he shuffled his feet nervously.

Tsunade sighed. "Then you want to retire from ANBU?"
Naruto looked up confused, "Not that either. I actually kind of need the money."

"And you're planning to do what?" Tsunade knew Naruto well enough to know money was always a low priority on his mind.

"I'm planning on moving," Naruto said proudly.

"About time," Tsunade breathed in relief. She was also glad to see the bright grin that had been diminishing as of late make a return.

"Perhaps you should think about buying a plot of land," Tsunade suggested. "To invest in the future and help rebuild the prowess of the Uzumaki clan."

"Yeah, whatever," Naruto shrugged and finally asked, "Let's say a few years from now I might want to adopt to kid, what would I have to do?"

Tsunade raised an eyebrow. This was the last question she ever expected Naruto ask. "There's a fairly lenient criteria. You have to make a certain amount of money, no criminal record, that sort of thing. You won't be able to adopt until you retire from ANBU."

"What do you mean? Why not?"

"The job is too dangerous and since you're the only one left of your clan, if you adopt and something happens they'll only end up back in the orphanage. It's not advisable Naruto. Even so, some missions can be months at a time. You can't simply leave a shadow clone. The amount of chakra needed to be able to handle raising a child could negatively affect you out in the field. There are reasons these rules are in place."

Naruto crossed his arms with a frown and hoped the answer to his next question wouldn't be too complicated. "What do I have to do to build an orphanage?"

Tsunade gave him a confused gesture. "We already have one."

"It's not enough," Naruto argued. "We need another one."

The Hokage sat back and weighed the determination on Naruto's face. "Fine." She looked in her desk and pulled out a stack of papers. "All public projects must have a written proposal and all these forms must be filled out. Once it passes by me then it'll go to the council and you'll have to convince them why we need a second orphanage."

Naruto stared at the stack of paperwork in horror, "All these forms?"

Tsunade nodded. The tower of paper looked more formidable than Madara. Naruto gulped, took the challenge, and scooped the papers up in his arms. "I also want three-fourths of all my earnings to be donated straight to the existing orphanage."

Tsunade, leaning on the back legs of her chair, almost fell from it. "What? Naruto I can see how passionate you are about this but three-fourths is a little overboard."

"I can make do," Naruto shrugged, "and I would also like the Icha Icha royalties to transfer to a private savings account."

This time Tsunade pouted for personal reasons. She waved a hand, "I still haven't paid off all my gambling debts."
"Granny," Naruto pleaded.

"Fine. Any other demands?" She asked courteously.

Naruto thought for a second, "No."

"Well then let's talk," Tsunade said and pulled out the sake to emphasize the informality of the meeting. "What brought on all of this?" she asked curiously.

"I've realized that I don't need to be Hokage to do good things," Naruto said thoughtfully, "and I'm not going to give up on peace either. I've just decided to change my focus. I can't save everyone but that is not going to stop me from trying and I'm going to start with the kids."

Naruto admitted, "I know without the Sandaime and then Iruka I probably would have turned out a lot differently. I could have easily become Sasuke or Pein. What made the difference for me," Naruto stopped examining the patterns of the floor board and looked up at Tsunade with determination. "Sometimes all it takes is for someone to care."

A smile tugged on the tips of Tsunade lips. "I know I yell at you all the time but I am proud of you and proud of the man you're becoming, Hokage or not." She went into her drawer and withdrew the necklace that symbolized all her dreams. "This is yours."

Naruto smiled, glad Granny was able to understand. He reluctantly grabbed the necklace from her hand. He almost sighed in relief when he put it on. He's worn it for so long and felt weird going without.

"And get some sleep," Tsuneade called after him as Naruto purposely crashed through the only closed window in the office. "NARUTO!"

Naruto spent the night with Jiraiya's gravestone before returning back home at the rise of the sun. He unlocked his door, took one glance around, realized he had the wrong apartment and reclosed the door. Naruto stopped. He looked up at the right apartment number. He nudged the door open and stared slack-jawed at the pristine clean and organized apartment.

"Told you I'd have a heart attack," the clone replied as Tomu was at the sink washing dishes. He turned around with a scowl, "This shadow clone thing is weird. It's like you're really here but not. I'm never going to get used to it," He grumbled.

"What are you doing?" Naruto shivered as he walked into some kind of warped genjutsu. His shadow clone disappeared and Naruto retrieved memories filled with him complaining as Tomu cleaned around him with an obsessive fervor. Naruto looked around his "new" apartment. Even everything in the bathroom was organized.

It wasn't Tomu's fault really. He just couldn't bear what his mom would say to see him living in such filth. She hated mess in her house and when she was sick, Tomu often helped her with the chores. Tomu scrubbed a dish and saw a reflection of her face. He rubbed the tear away with his arm.

Naruto noticed but didn't say a word. "Well, I guess ramen for breakfast?"

"NO!" Tomu said horrified. "Ramen for three meals a day? Didn't your mom ever teach you- oh," Tomu stopped himself. "I'll fix breakfast."

"You cook?" Naruto asked eagerly.
Tomu shook his head as he mumbled, "How have you survived for so long?" From Tomu's point of view, Naruto obviously needed someone to take care of him, and Tomu was fine with that. He was too used to taking care of people to stop now.

After he was finished Tomu took the plates to the couch and the two boys lounged as they watched the sun rise over Konoha.

"What are we going to do today?" Tomu asked curiously, "We might need to go shopping for more cleaning supplies."

Naruto grinned, "We can do that. But I was thinking we should go jump rope."

Naruto Uzumaki might have saved the world from Madara and that would be how most of the world would remember him, but every day he came home to the small triumphs none of his friends or anyone else ever knew about. Naruto has finally realized that it was those small triumphs that kept him going, even if no one ever knew his name. Even if he never became Hokage.

x

You ninja open your souls as much as we open our legs
Lesson Eleven

Mistakes and Consequences

Naruto barely had time to tuck his shoulder as he tumbled over and did a belly-flop to the floor. His shoulders creaked in pain as he pushed himself up. "I thought you said no jutsu," Naruto spat and blood speckled the ground. His ribs were complaining from the wind jutsu that had completely blindsided him.

"The rules are for students who pay attention," Tiger responded as he held his katana aloft before him and his other hand behind his back in a statuesque pose.

After an ANBU's agent first field mission they are assigned to an ANBU Captain's jurisdiction and mentorship. It was the Captain's choice and Naruto has yet to understand why Tiger chose him, and according to rumors, even fought Snake over him. Tiger could give Naruto specialized solo missions but it seemed that all Tiger liked to do was cut his students into pieces.

Naruto was about to pick himself up when Tiger slammed a foot down onto his back and Naruto's face kissed the floor. "You're getting worse," Tiger sneered in disgust. With the help of his shadow clones Naruto had been improving his natural speed and skill with a katana exponentially but lately Naruto could hardly keep up with his new sensei's movements.

Naruto winced as he was pulled to his feet by the roots of his hair. Tiger looked Naruto up and down. There were multiple tears and blood-stained cloth.

Some ANBU have mastered the art of eradicating all emotion from their body language while others have mastered the art of projecting emotions into their voice. Tiger was the latter and even behind the mask, his words were an obvious mix of disdain, disgust, and revulsion. "Come back only if you want to die."

Tiger turned, the white coat he wore flapped against Naruto's face. "What does that even mean?" Naruto asked but Tiger sat down in his meditative position with the katana across his legs. Naruto sighed as he combed his fingers through his hair. He had made only a few mistakes and then the pain in his body reminded him of the consequence. As he took a breath the wound on his side cut a knife of pain. He quickly went to the medic's ward to get bandaged up.

After a few months in ANBU, agents tend to develop a habit that can later turn into an obsession. Initially it begins as a way to cope until it turns to an outright crutch. Naruto didn't think he had one. Freshly bandaged, battered, and bruised, Naruto was walking right back toward the training area. The only thing preventing Naruto from getting his usual twenty-four seven training regimen finished, thanks to shadow clones and his recent inability to get any sleep, was the tattoo that began to burn on his shoulder.

He activated the reverse summons and appeared into the Hokage's office, along with Owl, Butterfly, and Squid.

Naruto immediately took note of the foreign ninja, who wore a white mask with the cloud symbol of the Land of Lightning. An ANBU Captain, Cat, stood stoically between the foreign ninja and the
Hokage, abandoning any pretense of trust.

"We've been commissioned by the Village Hidden in the Clouds," the Hokage replied. "Your target is Hishiki Nakagawa, the wealthiest landowner in the Land of Lightning."

Tsunade didn't need to see the expressions behind their mask to know the agents were a bit perplexed. "Nakagawa is very close with the Lightning Daimyo and has been advocating the abolition of ninjas to his service. Recently, his wife's family has suffered a death and the Nakagawa family is traveling to the Land of Waterfalls for the funeral. Since the Cloud Village is acting independently of their Daimyo they risk repercussions if the mission turns out badly, out of good faith the Land of Fire has decided to accept the mission."

The Cloud ANBU huffed, "Is it really necessary for them to know the details?"

"I want them to understand the gravity of the mission," the Hokage responded civilly. She didn't like her agents going into a situation blind and she knew that a certain stubborn-headed ninja would be less resistant if he knew some of the details.

"Because of Nakagawa's distrust of ninjas he has hired a retinue of samurai to escort him and his family. The target is Nakagawa but there cannot be any witnesses or any trace our involvement. Owl, here are the folders and the expected route Nakagawa will take." Tsunade turned to the Cloud ANBU. "Are you sure the information is correct?"

"We'd send our own ninja out with that information. Our sources are trustworthy. Are you sure your ninjas can handle it?"

"They are my elite, of course they can." The Hokage smirked as Owl retrieved the folders.

"Hokage-sama," Owl bowed and then turned to his comrades and said, "You know where to meet."

All four agents placed their forefingers to their tattoos and disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

"This looks like the best place," Owl decided as he looked at the map and back down at the mountainside road. Crow lounged flat against a tree branch as Owl explained the plan. "We're going to set up explosives along the side of the mountain. When they get in range we'll trigger the trap. Hopefully we'll be able to catch some of the samurai in the crossfires but it will definitely be enough to topple the wagon and allow us an open shot at Nakagawa."

Owl pulled out the crossbow he retrieved from the supply room. "Squid, you have the best aim so you will take the shot. Once we kill Nakagawa, the four samurai he has escorting him will most likely come after us. We'll lead them into another trap," Owl said as he slid his finger along the map. "Even if the samurai survive, they'll still be wounded and we should be able to take them out easily enough. If push comes to shove, samurai are masters at kenjutsu so it'll be best to hit them with ranged attacks than engage in close quarters combat. Once they are taken care of, mission complete."

But of course, everything was easier said than done.

"Squid and Butterfly will set up the explosives against the mountain. I'll set up the trap for the samurai. Crow will do recon."

"I can use my shadow clones and do more than that," Crow argued.

"Sorry, even I don't trust you with delicate explosives," Butterfly chimed in. "Let us take care of the traps."
"Crow, I want you to plant shadow clones all along the route and keep us updated on their progress. We need you to let us know when they're coming."

"Fine," Crow sighed. He wanted to do more to help but nevertheless he clasped his hands together into a hand seal, created twenty shadow clones, and disappeared into the forest. Squid, Owl, and Butterfly quickly went to work.

Crow sat atop the tree in sage mode as he sensed his quarry coming around the bend. The first thing that caught his attention was the fact that the capacity of a samurai's chakra coils resembled that of a civilian. The amount of their chakra was completely misleading compared to the yoroi armor and multiple weapons that they wore.

The shadow clone disappeared.

Crow jumped up as the information tunneled through his head. He activated the radio, "Owl?"

"Report," Owl's voice came through a cloud of static.

"The target just past checkpoint #5," Crow relayed the information from his shadow clone. "We have a visual confirmation on four samurai, each walking a corner of the wagon. There are also five people riding inside. The windows are covered with a curtain so I have yet to get a visual on the target."

"Copy. Comparing the space of time between your last report and this one, I've calculated that the target will be upon us in about five hours. Plenty time for us to finish setting up. Keep us updated if their speed changes."

"No problem," Crow released the radio button and sat back against the tree. He turned his eyes back towards the road.

"Crow!"

"CROW!"

"Dammit Naruto, where the hell are you?"

Crow was startled awake. The radio fell from his ear and hung over his shoulder. Crow's head was pounding with a load of new information.

Passed checkpoint #4.

Crow's eyes widened.

*The target has been getting impatient and ordered the samurai retinue to speed up.*

"Oh no," Naruto gasped, "No, No, No…"

Passed checkpoint #3.

Naruto scrambled for the earpiece.

Passed checkpoint #2.

"Owl?" Naruto asked shakily.
"Crow! Crow?"

"I'm here," Naruto whispered. His whole body was shaking in fear.

Owl let out a quivering sigh of relief. "I thought you were dead," a slight pause as Owl caught his breath. "What happened? How did they get past you?"

Naruto's voice caught in his throat, turned into a lump of disbelief and he began choking on the realization of what he had just done: Naruto Uzumaki fell asleep during a mission.

Naruto hadn't been able to get a solid night's rest for the past week. Why now? His answer came with the wicked rumbling in his stomach. Bark flew as Naruto slammed his head against the tree. "Shit."

But he didn't have time to dwell on the Fox right now. Naruto activated the radio, "What happened?"

"I was setting the traps when I was radioed by Butterfly that she and Squid have engaged the enemy. Both parties were completely caught by surprise. I circled around and I'm overlooking the situation now. They're staring each other down while Butterfly is weaving a lie why we're out here. I need you to get in position for a surprise attack."

"I'm on it," Naruto replied as he kicked off from the tree branches and navigated the forests with hurried ease.

"You reported five people inside of the carriage?"

"Yeah, I did." Naruto responded. "I'm sure about it, there were five."

"Two of your count was samurai riding inside. Our source of information was deceived. We're four against six," Owl explained. "Hurry and get your ass over here. The situation is getting worse very quickly."

Naruto got to a vantage point where he could survey the situation along the road.

"I swear to you, we're just investigating a murder that occurred close to here," Butterfly lied smoothly. Butterfly and Squid had their hands raised in the air, away from their weapons.

"You're Leaf Ninja," The commanding samurai noted with his katana poised towards their chest even though they stood the road's breadth apart, "in the Land of Sound?"

"They're lying," a man who matched the picture of the target shouted as he stuck his head out of the carriage, "Leaf has an alliance with Cloud! They want me dead!"

"We have no idea who you are," Butterfly tried to convince them.

"Don't believe their ninja lies! Kill the both of them." Nakagawa shouted.

The static crackled for a second before Owl's voice came over the radio. "Crow, go and activate the paper bombs now."

Crow jumped from the trees and channeled chakra to his feet to cling to the rocks. Crow stealthily crept along the mountainside just below the road.

"Butterfly, Squid," Owl whispered as he changed the radio frequency to all channels. "Crow is activating the paper bombs. Get ready to move. I'll take care of the target."
Naruto slammed a timed paper bomb atop others who were intricately patterned along the cliff. He activated sage mode as he pushed himself away from the cliff, grabbed a branch behind him, and flipped upwards. He pinpointed Owls' chakra signature.

Owl jumped as Crow appeared right at his side when the entire road exploded. Rocks tore from the ground and tumbled through the air. Smoke covered the area like a thick ominous cloud. A horse whinnied and there was the sound of a wagon overturning and falling to the ground.

The smoke did not obscure Crow's sage mode sensory abilities. He sensed that despite the explosions and the smoke, because the samurai had been at the other end of the road, the samurai quickly regained their composure and went after Squid and Butterfly.

"The others are in trouble," Crow reported as he jumped down into the fray without any hesitation.

"Crow wait," Owl called and slammed a hand against the rocks as Crow disappeared into the grey obscurity.

This mission was spiraling downward by the minute.

When the smoke cleared the battlefield was set. Squid was standing atop an ink lion that was growling at the two samurai who stood before him, and two Crow clones stood behind those samurai with a kunai pointed to the back of their necks. Butterfly held a bloody hand to her chest as she was crouched with a kunai in her other. The samurai Commander stood before her and another Crow stood with a katana to his back. There were three more samurai standing with weapons pointed at the previous Crow clones, with even more clones pointed at them.

The samurai commander, with a cross scar along his cheek looked at the situation. "Never trust a ninja," he grumbled. "At ease men, ninjas only travel in groups of three or four. The rest must be clones."

"Sir, I don't know about that. Feels pretty solid to me," One of the samurai gulped as he felt the metal tip of the kunai pressed against the exposed skin of his neck.

Before Crow could think of some ingenious plan to get Squid and Butterfly out of this safely, Takagawa yelled, "It must be a trick! Ninjas are lying deceiving bastards."

"My lord, get in the wagon at once there might be more-"

A kunai came whizzing from the mountain above and landed right at the base of Takagawa's neck. The woman that had been shivering beneath the wagon screamed as her husband fell down dead beside her.

Everything happened at once.

One of the samurai who stood before Squid slid a foot backwards, swiftly turned around and tore his katana straight through the flak jacket, but before the samurai could hear his opponent's last breath, a cloud of smoke erupted around his sword.

"They're just shadow clones!" the samurai yelled as Squid's ink tiger pounced and attacked the samurai from behind. Squid turned for the other samurai bracing for an attack.

At the samurai's revelation they all fearlessly turned to attacked the shadow clones which quickly disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

"Looks like I found the real one," the samurai Commander smirked as his katana sliced through his
opponent's arm and blood began to stain the uniform.

Crow took the cut along his shoulder gladly as he twisted around and put himself between Butterfly and the enemy.

In the corner of Crow's eye, Butterfly's left hand glowed green as she quickly tried to repair her right hand in order to create hand signals again.

Owl had jumped down on top of the wagon. He used the shadow that the wagon cast to capture two other samurai. The last assisted the Samurai Commander as they stalked towards Crow.

Owl studied his opponents as he ran several scenarios through his head. With a bitter thought, he realized how ill prepared they were to fight samurai. Close quarters combat was instant suicide unless you were a taijutsu master. Most of their standard weapons like the kunai were obsolete as the samurai were too heavily armored against a kunai's quick kill.

These were samurai, a dying breed from an age past, but they were survivors and had no doubt been trained in the art of killing ninja.


The shadows crept up the legs of the samurai but did not get higher than their waists. Owl's eyebrow arched in frustration as he was suddenly pitted against wills as strong as forged steel. His opponents closed their eyes in meditation and Owl's technique faltered. He had never faced opponents whose mental faculties were so focused.

In a last ditch effort, he released the technique on one of the samurai and focused entirely on the one still underneath his jutsu. The shadow shot upwards past the chest and fumbled right before it reached the samurai's neck.

"We shall not fall for your mind tricks," the freed samurai replied as he kicked off from the dirt and jumped towards Owl. "For the first tenet of Bushido, our warrior's way, is rectitude!"

And Owl's way was the Will of Fire. One of the brightest minds of Konoha's focused all his mental strength and the dark claw wrapped around the samurai's throat in a vice grip, surpassing strangulation, and simply crushed the esophagus in a splash of blood.

The samurai's head rolled to the ground.

Owl released the jutsu and moved just in time to for the sword to barely missed Owl's neck, instead the blade cut deeply into his shoulder until it grazed bone. Owl jumped back as the samurai began to chase after him. In an attempt to lose the chakra inept samurai, Owl funneled chakra to his feet and ran right up the mountain.

"Ninja and their chakra," the samurai grumbled as he watched Owl climb higher and higher. Samurai might not have as much chakra as the average ninja, but they have spent a lifetime learning control over what they did have. The samurai cut into the mountainside with his katana. Channeling chakra into the blade, rock fissures raced up the mountain in multiple directions until it exploded. Rocks rained down and Owl fell as the dirt crumbled beneath his feet.

The samurai jumped up from rock to rock as the rocks plummeted downwards, quickly gaining onto his target. Owl barely deflected the attack with his own katana as their blades impacted mid-air. They landed backwards on falling rocks. Owl had sense enough to evade and dodge as a chase of cat and mouse commenced until both opponents had fallen to the ground. A bellow of thunder echoed
through the mountain range underneath a clear blue sky.

"Shadow Sewing Jutsu," Owl shouted as soon as he landed.

Spikes of shadow erupted from underneath the samurai. Flashes of metal caught the sunlight as the samurai's blade twirled and cut through the spikes of shadow. One shadow spike successfully hit below the knee, another cut across his cheek, but the rest were destroyed by his katana.

The samurai yelled, "I will kill you and honor the death of my fallen comrade!"

Owl could feel his chakra reaching a dangerous low and the wound in his shoulder arced pain through his body. "Troublesome." Owl placed his hands together in preparation for what could possibly be his last jutsu.

The samurai knew when a ninja prepared their hand signs was the best opportunity to strike. Without hesitation the samurai pushed off from the ground and charged forward. The world seemed to slow as sweat dripped down Owl's forehead. Just as the samurai neared, Owl shifted just in time to avoid an instant fatality, but the forged metal slipped with ease through Owl's flesh.

The samurai smirked, knowing he had just inflicted a critical wound and had stopped the enemy's jutsu just in time.

If Owl wasn't wearing a mask, the smirk on Owl's face would have let the samurai know who truly won. Around the sword poking into his body, Owl clasped his hands together for the last hand seal. "Shadow Sewing Jutsu."

One single shadow needle shot up from Owl's own shadow. Like an unstoppable projectile it crashed through the Samurai's armor and struck cleanly through the heart. The samurai quickly realized he had been lured into a trap, that the ninja sacrificed his safety to draw the samurai in close. Blood fell from the samurai's lips with a contented smile, "This battle has been an honor."

The power of the jutsu's impact threw the samurai backwards, until he collapsed immovable against the ground in a clang of metal.

Suddenly Owl was thrown off his feet as a massive explosion occurred at the base of the mountain in the forest. He tried to pick himself up but his body felt as if he was moving through mud. He gave in and relaxed against the ground. There were clouds passing by overhead, always oblivious to the happenings that occurred underneath them.

Shikamaru could be thinking about his teammates, or the recent news that his mother confirmed he would soon be an older brother, or Temari and perhaps his own future family life, or death. But Shikamaru was thinking about absolutely nothing. No worries, no ingenious plan to get himself out of this situation, no epiphanies, and no moves ahead of moves ahead of moves. Simply nothing, and it was glorious.

A stream of blood flowed from the cracks of his fingers as he held his wound.

Crow held his katana aloft like his Sensei Tiger had taught him.

One of the samurai's scoffed, "This little ninja thinks he can go toe to toe with us kenjutsu masters. Ninjas are nothing if not arrogant."

The one with the cross-faced scar, the leader, gave no indication of his intentions. When he suddenly sliced through the air with his sword, Crow was completely caught off guard and barely deflected the
blow with a mess of clumsy footwork. In the corner of his eye, the other samurai came forward with a naginata and the blade end shredded a fine tear through Crow's flak jacket.

Without hesitation Crow summoned his fox cloak and used the burst of speed to get behind the samurai commander. Crow brought his katana down diagonally until there was a sudden clash of metal. Crow rebounded backwards against his failed attack. The moment he landed, he sped towards the other samurai but no matter how much Crow danced around them with augmented speed, every single one of his attacks was calmly blocked as the samurai stood still in a defensive stance.

"Mind Body Disturbance Jutsu!" Butterfly shouted.

The samurai who held the naginata froze. He slowly turned toward his commander. "Sir, I'm sorry. I can't help myself. These ninjas… these bastards."

"Calm yourself and focus. We are stronger than they. They cannot control us," The Commander replied.

The samurai took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Then there was a mental battle between Butterfly and the samurai, like a tug-of-war between two strong and sharpened wills.

The Commander feinted towards Crow but turned towards Butterfly at the last minute who was trying to maintain her focus against an opponent with a pillar of focus she's never encountered before.

Crow reacted just in time to cut off the commander's attack, at the cost of a sword through his thigh. The commander stepped back as the red chakra cloak around Crow began to heal the wound at once.

"I see," the Commander observed, and in a flash of light, his weapons exploded in a blue flame of pure chakra.

Crow did the same and his blade was covered in a tornado of wind.

An explosion rumbled the ground as rocks began to fall from the sky. Crow and the commander attacked and dodged out of the way of raining rocks. The explosion of wind and chakra sounded like a bellow of thunder. Crow deflected an attack. He knew that any small mistake would be brutally exploited.

Everyone in the ninja world knew it was suicidal to mentally challenge a Yamanaka, even for the mentally astute strength of a samurai. Butterfly exploited the insecurities and doubts, fed on his fears and despair until the samurai's mental defenses were completely obliterated. The samurai turned into a reflection of a living corpse.

As Crow and the Commander fought, the possessed samurai turned with his spear point towards the battle and jumped into the fray. The Commander cursed as he was suddenly double-teamed.

Crow jumped back as the possessed samurai came forward to attack. Then there was the sound of metal through flesh. Crow froze as he watched the Commander put a blade through his own soldier.

"These ninja will not have your soul," the Commander replied as he gently placed his comrade on the ground.

Hurry and attack them. Butterfly projected urgently into Crow's head, but Crow could not bring himself to ruin the moment.

"Thank you for freeing me. Kill these bastards," the samurai responded as his eyes closed. The
Commander laid his teammate to rest. The commander stood and raised his blade.

"You killed your own teammate," Crow responded hoarsely as he could not shake the image from his head. The calm and cool efficiency in which the deed was done chilled him to the bone.

"The same he would have done for me," The commander responded as he set his knees and readied his sword. "I admit that you are somewhat good but your speed is ineffective to my skill."

There was a sudden explosion of fire in the trees at the base of the mountain but neither opponent looked away from the battle, instead they focused on one another and any flex of the muscle or twitch that would give away their opponent's next move.

*Crow, Owl is down. Butterfly suddenly projected into Crow's head.*

"Go help him. I'll take care of this," Crow replied.

The samurai didn't move to prevent Butterfly as she carefully moved around him, her back never once to him. Finally, she reached the fallen Owl.

Crow and the last samurai encircled one another.

The samurai had cut through Squid's ink tiger and now Squid was surrounded by two samurai. They prowled towards him as Squid's foot stopped at the edge of the road. Without hesitation Squid flipped into the air. He pulled a scroll open and drew the image of a large hawk. Right before Sai impacted with the ground, the hawk cawed into the air and caught Sai with the end of his talons. Sai quickly upended the ink jar and it splashed down at the two samurai's feet.

A fathomless darkness of snakes slithered upwards and around the samurai's feet and legs. As they flailed and tried to cut through the sticky ink jets, Sai flipped upwards atop the hawk and produced a new jar of ink. He drew two projectile bats, attached a paper bomb, and they shot towards the samurai's faces.

One of the samurai stepped up, channeled chakra through his sword and arced it through the air. An arc of chakra rushed up to meet the bats. They crashed together in a large explosion that forced the samurai backwards as the snakes still attempted to restrain them, forced the hawk to scatter in a cloud of ink, and forced Squid backwards into the air.

Squid crashed through the trees below and landed heavily against his back. As he looked up, the mountain looming overhead suddenly exploded in a shower of raining rocks.

Eventually the samurai were able to work together and cut each other free from the snakes. Deciding they couldn't let the ninja get away, they quickly slid down the cliff-face with a literal hole blown into the side of it from the explosions earlier.

"He's running," one of the samurai, who wore a swastika necklace, noted as he caught onto the trail.

"Just like a ninja to abandon their comrades," the other younger samurai noted.

The older samurai responded silently, "Do not underestimate them. It might not be one of honor, but these ninja do have a code of their own."

The younger samurai huffed as he ran to try to catch up to the retreating ninja. Both samurai stopped when they came upon the ninja standing across the field with a burning paper bomb in his fingers.
"A trap," the younger samurai breathed, "How? There was no time to-

The older samurai didn't reply as he invoked the virtue of courage and stamped forward. The younger samurai clutched the grip of his katana and followed suit with a bellowing roar.

Squid threw the paper bomb forward and activated the trap that Owl had set up earlier.

The clearing went up in a plume of fire. The surroundings trees were scorched and the smoke could hereafter be seen for miles. Squid could feel the heat through his uniform.

Then a shadow came out of the fire. No one accounted for the fact that a samurai's armor protected against flames that would have instantly turned a ninja to ash.

Squid didn't get out of the way in time.

The blade sliced across Squid's abdomen. Instinctively, Squid pulled out of his jar of ink and splashed it across the burnt samurai's face. The ink turned into small snakes that crept through the crevices of the armor and bit every patch of skin they could find.

The samurai died without a sound.

The flames died down, revealing the other samurai's burnt scraps of armor fallen at the edge of the ring of dead fire. The body encased by the armor had burnt and shriveled. Even when the armor fell, it looked as if it had continued to crawl forward, until the end.

Squid collapsed against a tree as his intestine spilled from his body. He pulled the mask from his sweaty face and it fell in a patch of untouched grass.

Sai wanted to feel the sun's warmth on his skin. When Danzou had appointed him to Naruto's team, the first thing that had startled Sai in comparison to Root's dark underground base, was the warmth of the sun.

It danced on his skin like the touch of a smile. It was the sound of peace that thrummed through a heart. It was the warmth next to a fireside with teammates that cared. It was the first time Sai had felt alive.

You could never capture that in a painting.

"Ino, stop crying."

It was getting harder for Ino to see as the tears gathered behind her mask. She managed to get to Shikamaru in time but the fear had stopped her heart. Ino and Shikamaru had literally been best friends since they were born, predestined by the alliance of two clans and the friendship between two fathers.

"You should be stabilized until we get back to Konoha," Ino said softly as she bandaged Shikamaru's chest. Shikamaru gave a weak smile as he clutched one of Ino's hands and rested his head in her lap. Shikamaru could comfortably fall into unconsciousness, knowing Ino would keep him safe.

"This is for my husband!" A sudden screech and pain flashed into Ino's back.

With the fury of an erupting volcano, Ino's hands went through a flurry of hand signs before she turned and clutched her hands against a woman's forehead.
Ino saw nothing but red. She said as if smoke was seething from her mouth, "Mind destruction jutsu."

As if a paper bomb was lodged inside the woman's brain, the civilian's head exploded, raining blood all over Ino. Now Ino was shaking in fury as her hair was drenched with fried brain. She reached behind her and threw the stick of wood out the back of her shoulder blade.

A large explosion of chakra.

Ino jumped before Shikamaru's limp body as they were thrown backwards against the wagon.

The large explosion in the middle of the forest rustled Crow's blonde hair as the two opponents circled each other, looking for any holes in the other's defenses.

Then hands suddenly clawed up from the ground and attached around the samurai's ankles. Crow shot forward, with red claws grown out of his cloak with a rasengan in each clawed hand.

Unable to escape the unexpected trap, the samurai stilled and looked death in the eye. As the twin rasengan and Crow came closer, the samurai's katana flared with a blaze of chakra. The two blades clashed. The rasengans hit their mark. The resulting explosion caused a tornado of chakra that whipped through the air.

Crow's uniform was torn to shreds. Cuts of blood that were quickly healing dotted his body. The only item that did not suffer any damage, not so much as a scratch was the mask that he wore. Crow picked himself up and found his opponent, one of the most skilled kenjutsu users he has ever met lying motionless on the ground.

Crow limped over and found his opponent still alive. The samurai's breathing was slowing as he looked up into the emotionless mask of his killer.

"I'm sorry," Crow said softly, "If we had met under any other circumstances, then- I-

The samurai smiled at the vastness of emotion he found in the voice behind the cold mask. "It has been years since a samurai or ninja has beaten me." He coughed. "In the end, the way of the warrior is death."

The last of the samurai succumbed to death. In all, the fight only lasted a few minutes.

Naruto turned his head when a symphony of terrified screams filled the air. Ino was pulling the last civilian from behind the wagon. Ino said in a cold voice, "I guess we're going to have to kill her."

"She's a civilian," Naruto said with steel in his voice.

"We can't leave any witnesses. If things had gone to plan, the civilian would not have seen us and we could have left them alone. But this turned out into one big giant mess," Ino explained with a shake of her head, "We have to kill her."

"Please no." The young woman cried as she tried to pull from Ino's grip. "Please, you monsters! Monsters!"

Ino flipped a kunai in her hand. Red chakra surged around Naruto. Before the kunai could cut across the young woman's neck, Naruto had gripped his hand securely around Ino's wrist.

"We have to," Ino told Naruto more gently as a flash of red tinged Naruto's eyes.
"No. We could- we could-" Naruto searched for an answer. His eyes widened when he found one. He looked at Ino with a smile, "You could erase her memory."

"Any ninja will be able to tell her head's been interfered with."

"Like who? Like the ones who employed us?" Naruto answered quickly.

Ino narrowed her eyes. "Good point." Ino never thought she'd ever say that to Naruto. "I'll do it. Just let me go. You're hurting me."

Naruto's hand shot away from her in alarm. He didn't miss the bruise forming around her wrist where he gripped her. It was all he could suddenly stare at.

"I don't see the point," Ino grumbled, "We leave her out here by herself without her memory and at the mercy of bandits. Not all good intentions are right. What if she does survive? She'll always be wondering what happened. It'll eat away at her insides until she's a hollow shell of paranoia and distrust." Ino said softly as the woman screamed when Ino placed her hand along the woman's forehead.

"So you're saying it would better that we kill her?" Naruto argued with a bitter frown.

"There are fates worse than death," Ino replied as she gathered her focus and went to work on the civilian's brain.

Naruto crossed his arms as he looked around at the decimated landscape. "Where's Sai?" Naruto questioned. He stood still, gathered nature chakra, and entered sage mode. He searched his surroundings for Sai's chakra signature.

Naruto couldn't breathe and the fear was beginning to choke him.

From Ino's point of view, Naruto disappeared from where he was standing. Ino caught a glimpse of the horrified expression on Naruto's face and already knew what Naruto has yet to accept.

Ground was upturned and the trees bowed in his haste as Naruto went straight toward the site of the large explosion of fire he had felt earlier.

"Sai?" Naruto shakily called as he surveyed the burnt battlefield. He spotted a figure slumped against a tree, a hand clutched a wound at his stomach, and the head bowed in stillness. Naruto called Sai's name, as if simply rousing someone from sleep.

Naruto reached out and touched his friend. Sai responded with silence. He could hear the absence of a heartbeat, could smell the beginnings process of rot, could taste the stream of salty tears that touched his lips. But he didn't believe it.

Ino let the unconscious woman fall onto the ground after she finished the jutsu. As she turned to check on Shikamaru's progress, the only warning she had of Naruto's arrival was a strong gust of wind that shoved her backwards to the ground.

"Ino," Naruto cried as Ino's arm was suddenly pulled forward, "You have to heal Sai. He's hurt. He's not moving."

Ino didn't have to check for a heartbeat to know. All she had to do was look at the severity of the wound. "Naruto," Ino struggled but helpless as Naruto pulled her to her knees over Sai.

"Fix him," Naruto demanded with a trembling voice.
"Naruto, Sai is dead," Ino said softly as she put a hand on Naruto's shoulder. "But Shikamaru is alive and we need to get him to a hospital," Ino words bounced right off Naruto's ears.

Naruto stared numbly down at the corpse at his feet. His disbelief broke into shattered pieces of glass as all his senses but his mind told him it was true. Sai was dead. And, "it's all my fault."

There was an amused chuckle in the pit of his stomach.

Anger filled every fiber of Naruto's being and red chakra flared around him like a beacon. "Damn you!" Naruto cursed as poisonous chakra whipped through the air. "Damn! Damn!" Naruto cried as clawed hands slammed into the ground and the resulting ripple of force uprooted plants and brought the mountain to its knees.

Ino was paralyzed before the massive killing intent, but when the entire mountain threatened to collapse and take Shikamaru with it, she acted quickly. Pulling out a paper bomb she threw it at Naruto's feet. The ground broke apart with an explosion and Naruto fell.

He landed to the ground on all fours and five red chakra tails.

Naruto was tired and done with putting up with the Fox any longer. It was ruining his life, and slowly ruining the lives of everyone around him. The Demon Fox was like a poison and it contaminated Naruto's life and everything that he touched.

Six chakra tails.

He couldn't do this anymore. He couldn't let his friends suffer because of what he carried inside of him.

Seven chakra tails.

"Why me? What the fuck did I ever do to you?" Naruto screamed as he literally shoved his claws into the black seal. Naruto couldn't breathe as he attempted to claw the demon fox out of his stomach and out of his life.

Eight chakra tails.

FINALLY! The Kyuubi roared as his shape was almost complete.

"NO!" Naruto bellowed as his senses suddenly returned with the Kyuubi's voice. The world had enough problems. He refused to let it deal with the Kyuubi as well. If truth be told, Naruto would have denied the Demon Fox just to piss it off, the world hanging in the balance aside.

"Fuck you," Naruto forced through gritted teeth as the number of tails began to gradually decrease.

He soon found himself in the center of what looked like a meteor crater. His body was sensitive to the ruined ground underneath him as skin and muscle gradually began to heal from the poisoned chakra.

But the grief was still there.

This is far from over.

Sometimes Naruto wanted to melt his brains out.

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Ino carried Shikamaru on her back as she trudged down the road. Physical strength wasn't her strong
point and she could not take to the trees because of his weight. Ino turned at the sound of boots hitting the road.

Ino didn't care that Naruto looked like shit or that he wasn't wearing any clothes except for a mask in his hand and a pair of pants that obviously came off a dead samurai. "Get Shikamaru to the hospital, now," Ino demanded, without a flinch, of the man she had just seen almost turn into a gigantic demon fox.

Naruto made a shadow clone, took Shikamaru from her arms, and the clone sped off in a jet of red chakra. "He should be there in little over an hour."

Ino sighed in relief and took an exhausted pause on the side of the road. Ino looked up, "Done crying like a dramatic little girl?"

"I didn't-"

"That mountain doesn't even exist anymore," Ino said, "so much for not leaving any evidence."

"Oh," Naruto somehow hadn't noticed the mountain was missing, even when he left clones behind to clean up. "Did you manage to save-" Naruto trailed uncomfortably as he couldn't complete the sentence.

"To save Sai's body?" Ino questioned. "No, you burned his body."

Naruto stared at his feet as a shaky hand combed through his hair. He just didn't have any more emotion in him. He had already cried all of his anger and grief. He felt empty.

"It's my fault," Ino whispered as she stood up. "That's what you said. What did you mean by that?" Naruto flinched as he felt Ino's eyes on him. "Explain something to me Naruto," Ino smiled sweetly but Naruto could see it was nothing of the sort, "How did we get caught by surprise?"

Naruto grumbled an answer.

"I'm sorry I didn't hear you. What was that?" Ino asked as she leaned down and forced Naruto's haunted blue eyes to stare at her.

"I- I fell asleep."

"YOU WHAT?" The rage that overcame Ino's face was quicker than the blink of an eye.

Naruto's head hit the bark of a tree and Ino's horrific scowl was all Naruto saw as she wrapped her hands around his neck. "You fell asleep? Not even a genin will make such a stupid and idiotic mistake as fucking falling asleep!"

Her nails dug into his neck. "You better come up with a better excuse because I swear- Shikamaru almost died because of your mistake! Sai did die! I swear Naruto I'll kill you now and tell everyone a samurai did it because," Ino tried to squeeze all her anger into crushing Naruto, but as Naruto gasped for breath and his face turned blue, her fingers loosened.

Ino screamed in frustration in his face. Naruto's sensitive hearing collapsed under her voice. "I-"

Naruto turned his head, unable to hear his own voice, "the Kyūbi…"

"So you're blaming this on that demon?" Ino snarled.

"No," Naruto cried. "I blame myself."
When Naruto and Ino finally arrived in Konoha, exhausted, they entered through the secret ANBU entrance. The shadow clone had already reported back that Shikamaru was stabilized and would make a full recovery. Ino and Naruto went their separate ways. Ino walked towards the hospital and Naruto walked towards the training area.

Naruto got a few curious stares as several agents stared at him with only a mask and pants. Others simply shrugged him off. Naruto begrudgingly took a detour to his room to put on some clothes and then back towards the training area.

He walked in and spotted Tiger in his usual pose. Naruto walked with a determined stride toward his sensei and withdrew his katana.

"Come to die?" Tiger asked without opening his eyes or making any movements.

"Perhaps," Naruto whispered. His hands hadn't stopped shaking since his near transformation.

Without any warning, Tiger struck.

It was perhaps one of the most stupidest decisions of Naruto life. Just coming from a mission, his body was already exhausted and in too much pain to move. He barely had the mental faculties to focus on any form of defense if he even wanted to put one up. If there was anyone in the world that could and would kill him it would be Tiger.

As the metal sword came towards him, Naruto realized suddenly that he didn't want to die. He had things he wanted to do. Orphanages to build and kids to adopt. He had a dream to make the world a better place even if it was only a small part of it.

Somewhere Naruto found the strength. His form was perfect, his feet moved perfectly, and the angle so precise, Tiger's blade twisted from his hand.

Tiger crossed his arms. "Congratulations. Finally, no mistakes."

Tiger held out his hand and with a brush of wind chakra, his blade returned. "Now we will work on that bastard wind chakra of yours," Tiger grumbled. "It's the worst control of elemental jutsu I've ever seen."

Naruto was too dazed to even respond to his words, "Wait, what?"

"You treat wind as if its fire, as if you're meant to be flashy and explosive." Naruto felt a cool breeze wrap around him, but there was clearly a deadly intent underneath. "Wind is subtle and sharp. It is speed and precision. It can be a gale of wind or a gentle breeze." Sensei Tiger continued as he readied his sword, "Other than that red chakra kekkai genkai you have, everything about you is untrained."

"Stand up," Tiger demanded when he could see that Naruto hardly had the strength to hold aloft his sword. "You came here to release that anger of yours. Then fight," Tiger shot forward but this time as Naruto prepared to parry, his legs were suddenly pulled from beneath him by a gust of wind. "Or die."

Naruto picked himself up as he focused on the adrenaline of the battle, and all that other stuff, for a time, didn't matter anymore. For every mistake he received a new bruise or wound. Perfection never came without mistakes.

Naruto limped home. Without thought he crept to the window and slid into his living room.
"Shit!"

Naruto jumped as he turned and saw Tomu who had fallen to the floor in fear. Tomu had been cooking dinner while a clone was sitting in the dinner chair reading a book on seals. The cloned quickly got up from the chair and said, "Its okay. Tomu, its just me."

Naruto blinked, the events of the day caused him to completely forget he was living with someone else. He should have used the window connected to his bedroom.

Tomu peaked over the table, "But... but..."

Naruto took the mask off and Tomu's eyes widened. "You're covered in blood."

"Yeah," Naruto said softly as he hurried for the bathroom and shut the door behind him.

Tomu looked at the clone, "That was the real Naruto?"

"I'm not going to worry you every time I go on a mission," the clone said staring after the door. "Something happened," the clone responded, "something really bad." The clone disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

"Wait," Tomu called out, "You're not going to leave me with- with- that?"

Naruto heard Tomu's shouting from the shower and couldn't help but to shiver as he scrubbed the blood away from his skin. All the wounds he had suffered were healed, not a scar in sight. Even though there were no external scars didn't mean there were none at all. Naruto held a hand to his stomach, slid against the shower, and all the events of the mission flashed before his eyes - what he could have changed and what he could have done differently.

Suddenly there was a knock on the bathroom door.

"Dinner is ready!" Tomu's voice called. Naruto looked at the door in disbelief. He picked himself up, threw on pajamas and dragged himself out of the bathroom.

"I made ramen," Tomu said as Naruto collapsed into the chair. Tomu noted how the atmosphere had changed so drastically from just a few moments ago when he was with the other Naruto. "I'm never going to get used to these shadow clones." Tomu said probably one too many times since he had begun living here.

"Why aren't you eating? I thought ramen was your favorite?"

Naruto looked down at the ramen, and suddenly he was flavoring it with tears.

"What happened?" Tomu asked softly.

"I made a mistake," Naruto said hoarsely.

A soft silence enveloped the two boys.

"Well, its simple," Tomu pointed out, "Don't make that mistake ever again."

Naruto shook his head. He would gladly carry the burden of the Kyuubi's voice if it meant he would never make that mistake again. "Believe me, I never will."

Tomu got an idea. He jumped from the table and shuffled in the kitchen cabinets, a part of the house literally unknown to Naruto, and pulled out a bottle of alcohol. "Here."
Naruto frowned. "Where did you get that from?"

"I stole it." Tomu shrugged.

Naruto jerked upwards in concern. "You can't steal things."

"It's fine. I just took it from one of the Dragon's bars. It's like the story. Steal from the bad and give to the poor," Tomu explained as he poured Naruto and himself a cup of sake. "Besides, now that I'm living with you they haven't touched me at all. They're more scared of you than the Hokage."

Naruto pouted as he held the cup of sake. He drank it quickly and Tomu followed suit. Tomu leaned against the table as he watched Naruto quickly finish the entire bottle of sake but marveled how it hardly affected him.

"So…" Tomu said softly, "You kill people."

Naruto frowned bitterly but nodded in concession, "I kill people."

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Nanami Nakagawa woke up with a grinding headache. She slowly opened her eyes as the wagon wheel screeched around the rusted hinge.

"Dad?" She called. "Mom?"

She looked around in fear and the twenty three year old woman stumbled the wild, forest and hills of rocks around her. She looked around wondered what happened to their samurai guard or her parents or the road. Tears slid down her face as she trembled and sat down in the dirt. She was all alone, as if she was the only person left in the whole world.

"Are you okay?"

Nanami screamed as she shuffled backwards against the overturned wagon. She peeked her eyes open and stared up at a smiling stranger, brown hair done up in a top knot.

"I don't where I am. I was traveling with my family but they're gone," she said softly.

"Maybe I can help you?" the stranger suggested. "What happened?"

"I was traveling with my family to my aunt's funeral in the Land of Waterfalls but… but… something happened. Maybe I fell out and hit my head but… I can't remember."

"Well, it's not safe to stay out here. There are bandits. I was headed to the Land of Waterfalls for some business. You can travel with me and I can take you to your family there?"

"Maybe," she said softly, "Maybe we just got separated." Nanami stood up. "Thank you so much I don't mean to be a burden."

"Nonsense," the stranger smiled.

"Nanami Nakagawa," Nanami introduced herself.

"Oh I'm… Iraiya," Iraiya smiled as the two set off down the road.

The young woman looked at her escort suspiciously, "You're not scared of any ninjas?"

"Ninjas aren't anything to be a scared of," Iraiya grinned as he leaned toward the girl as if to whisper
a secret, "I'm a Sage."

"Oh my," the girl gasped, "You don't look like a holy person."

Iraiya nodded with a drawn expression to look wise, "You see, Sages have the ability to cross borders without being pestered by silly ninja. Ninjas don't mess with us."

"I'm so lucky you were passing by," the girl breathed in relief, her peace of mind settled by the fact she was traveling with someone respectable. "My dad always said ninjas were extremely dangerous."

"Why would he say that?" Iraiya asked curiously.

"He believes the reason why the world is so dangerous right now is because the Daimyo employ ninjas. Back when samurai reigned there were hardly that many wars or deaths at all. Battles were fought with honor back then."

"I'm sure not all ninja are bad. They don't have a choice but to accept the job."

Nanami looked at him with muted anger, "There is always a choice."

Iraiya shook his head. "Have you ever considered a choice between what? In a hidden village civilians born with enough chakra become ninjas because after they die their family is secured and taken care of. No other profession offers that kind of security. Ninjas from clans continue in their profession because they have to protect each other from those who would want to steal the special abilities they were born with. Have you ever considered that it is a choice between wanting to protect their families, like I'm sure your father wants to protect you?"

Nanami stopped and frowned. "My father also warned me against holy men. He says they're so keen to want to change your mind."

Iraiya smiled brightly. "It's just been my experience that every side has a story."

It took them three days to reach the border of the Land of Waterfalls and another day to reach the village where the rest of Nanami's family lived.

The town came over the horizon as they neared the gate. A large river flowed passed, connected to the large waterfalls roaring in the distance.

"Thank you so much," Nanami blushed as she came to the end of their long journey. She couldn't help but to remember how Iraiya gave her his tent and cooked her dinner and carried her when she felt her feet could no longer go on. She quickly dove in and stole a kiss.

Iraiya blushed as he scratched behind his hair. "Be careful, are you sure you don't need any more help?"

"I'm fine." Nanami smiled. She waved as Iraiya grinned and turned back down the road. Smoke rose up over the horizon.

"Do you need help looking for someone?" the gatekeeper, a ninja who wore the symbol for the Village Hidden in the Waterfalls, asked as Nanami turned around.

She immediately turned with a scathing expression. "I don't need any stupid ninjas help. I can find my family just fine without you."
The ninja at the gate raised an eyebrow, "Sort of funny how you hate ninja considering the company you keep."

"What do you mean?" Nanami asked confused and distrustful.

"The man that escorted you here, he was a ninja."

"No he wasn't. He was just a traveling Sage."

The ninja chuckled, "That man had chakra coils large enough for an entire ninja army. If he's a Sage then he came by the title with senjutsu and not just with prayers."

Nanami whipped around, speechless. "But… why?"

"Ninjas have hearts too."

"One of the samurai knew a little genjutsu. That's why Crow never saw them coming."

Naruto was shaken out of his numb stupor at Shikamaru's words. The moment Shikamaru was healed enough to walk they were to report immediately to the Hokage and Naruto knew he would be in trouble. Naruto could only stare at Shikamaru as if another face was growing from his neck.

The Hokage sighed deeply as she stared at the report and her gathered intelligence. She looked at all three of her agents. "Do you know what this sounds like? This sounds like bullshit."

The moment the Hokage said those words he knew he was done for. The Hokage signaled toward the window and the ANBU always guarding the Hokage immediately locked the entire office with a privacy jutsu.

"Masks off, all of you." the Hokage demanded. The moment she saw the expressions on their faces she knew. "Naruto what the hell did you do? Why are they covering for you at the cost of their careers? Why is my intelligence division getting reports that the Sound government thinks we're planning to invade them because there have been sightings of the nine-tailed fox in their borders? If we didn't have one of your shadow clones to prove you've been in the village the whole time this could have been a disaster." The Hokage could only rub her forehead. "I said no evidence left behind. Be subtle. Be," the Hokage groaned, "less Naruto."

Naruto dried his sweaty palms on his pants and replied, "I take full responsibility."

"Of course you damn will once someone tells me what really happened," The Hokage demanded. Shikamaru recounted the entire mission accurately this time and then replied afterwards, "I am the squad leader and it is my responsibility for the results of the mission."

Ino crossed her arms. "I'm not taking responsibility for this shit."

The Hokage was literally at a loss. She didn't even reach for the alcohol because she needed her thoughts straight for this.

There have been a few of Naruto's missions that have proven he could be one of the greatest agents she's ever had, and then a situation comes along and destroys all his potential. What kind of ninja goes to sleep on a mission?

That sort of mistake cost a ninja's career. The problem was there was no way in hell she could revoke Naruto's ninja license. The elders would be breathing down her back, the villagers had begun...
to rely on Naruto for the villager's safety, the Daimyo would ask questions, and the other villages would be watching her like a hawk ready to swoop down on a piece of prey. Naruto was a born weapon and nowhere was that more obvious in the Hokage's final decision.

"I'm putting you on probation."

"Shouldn't he be kicked out of ANBU or something?" Ino couldn't help but to ask.

Shikamaru shrugged his shoulders. It was the same reason he had covered for Naruto and should have predicted the Hokage would come to the same conclusion: The pros outweighed the cons.

"What does probation mean?" Naruto asked curiously.

"Whatever I feel like it means," the Hokage snapped. "All of you, dismissed."

They put their masks back on and left the office.

"Thanks," Naruto muttered, "for trying to-"

Shikamaru whirled around. "Shut up, just shut up. Just-" Shikamaru pointed at Naruto, "don't make me regret it."

"I promise," Naruto said hoarsely, "I swear to you it won't happen again."

Shikamaru sighed. "I turned in my papers for reassignment. Since I can't go back on the field for a while I've being assigned to the Village Hidden in the Sand to help organize their famine crisis."

Shikamaru patted his good hand on Naruto's shoulder, "Good luck."

Naruto watched as Shikamaru hunched his back, could only slip one hand in his pocket because of the sling, and disappeared down the hall.

"Don't think we're done quite yet," Ino seethed into his ear. "Meet me at Choji family's restaurant for dinner. You're paying."

Naruto gulped.

He was anxious as he walked into the BBQ restaurant and spotted Ino sitting in a booth to the far right corner. Naruto sighed as he gathered his courage and sat across from Ino.

Ino crossed her arms, but didn't say anything until a waitress came to take their order. Ino ordered everything on the menu. With a sweet and charming smile she sent the waitress away and turned to Naruto with the face of a lioness.

"After I calmed down a bit, I realized that what you did out there, wasn't you. You've always been protective of your friends and would never make a mistake like that. What happened," Ino leaned forward, "What is wrong with you?"

Naruto twitched underneath her gaze but it pulled the truth from his lips. "I haven't been able to sleep lately and it negatively affected the mission."

Ino frowned. "That's what sleeping pills are for. Haven't you asked Sakura? She makes some really effective ones."

"I have," Naruto said frustrated. "But they don't- It's like alcohol- I'm not affected by it," Naruto mumbled softly.
Ino arched an eyebrow. "Really?" She waved over a waitress who served Ino as if she was a most honored patron. "Some sake for us too," Ino smiled.

"Right away," the waitress said as she turned for the bar.

"How does it work?" Ino demanded.

"I… I'm not sure."

Ino frowned and you never wanted to make the princess frown. Naruto gulped and quickly replied, "It's sort of how I heal so fast. My body attacks the weird substances as if it was constantly healing itself. That's how I've sort of make sense of it," Naruto said, "The hospital has a more detailed report. Painkillers don't last very long with me either."

"And all this is because of the nine-tailed fox?" Ino asked curiously.

Naruto looked away from her. "Sort of. We kind of had an argument and in retaliation he hasn't been letting me sleep."

"An argument?" Ino asked curiously "You can talk to the thing?"

"Look Ino, I don't really want to talk about this."

"No," Ino snarled. Then the waitress came and placed the sake bottles on the table. Ino shoved the bottle towards Naruto's chest. "No, because of you we almost died and I want to know what is the fucked up shit in your head that put my life in danger." She leaned back. "I thought you had that thing under control."

"I separated the Kyūbi from its chakra but we're still mentally connected. When we don't agree, he sends images that keep me from sleeping." Naruto combed shaky fingers through his hair. "He's like a devil on my shoulder. It's a nightmare Ino," Naruto whispered, "and the worst part is knowing that I'm stuck with him for the rest of my life. It was my weakness that allowed him to get to me and cause all this mess."

Ino sat back in thought. "It's a he?"

Naruto sighed. "Not exactly."

That piqued Ino's interest. "How so?"

Naruto's shoulders drooped as he explained. He already had to deal with the Demon Fox every second of his life, the last thing he wanted to do was talk out loud about it. "The Kyūbi is a demon and demons don't have a gender, according to the Fox. He is a he because that is how my mind projects him. 'It' would describe the Nine-tails more accurately. If it so chooses it can be a he, she, or both."

"And what are you planning to do about it?"

"I don't know if-"

"That's not what I wanted to hear. Naruto, you have to deal with this or it's only going to happen again." Ino eyes narrowed, "and you better fucking deal with it. In my opinion, I think the Demon Fox is half your problem. The other half, you have yet to figure out how to cope with the pressures of your new job."
The waitresses came and delivered dinner to the table.

Ino smiled. "Let's eat."

Naruto watched as Ino tasted and enjoyed just one bite from every plate they brought to the table. "I'm sorry Ino."

"Spare me." Ino said. "I'm just trying to help the next person that's stuck with you."

"Oh," Naruto sighed as he stared at the untouched bottle of sake. "What does that mean?"

Ino rotated a pair of chopsticks in her noodles. "I'm transferring full time to the T&I Division."

"Because of me?" Naruto whispered.

Ino arched an eyebrow. "You may be the "hero" of the village but not everything is always about you. I am tired."

It is far more easier to destroy a mind than to heal it."

It was sunny. Naruto wished it was raining, or even storming, but the world refused to match his mood.

There wasn't a funeral. As someone in Root and then later in ANBU, Sai knew very few people and a funeral procession would have been pointless.

Sakura and Naruto stood before Sai's gravestone. Sakura hiccuped and wiped her eyes as she gently placed a ring of flowers and a decorative ink bottle before the grave.

Naruto gripped his offering tightly as he walked forward and stared at the name of the friend he had killed. Naruto wanted to apologize but knew apologies were futile. Naruto hadn't known how he could possibly live with himself, until he walked into Sai's room and was surrounding by sketches. All the emotions that Sai had struggled to show on his face were in his paintings. All of their happy memories that they had ever experienced were reflected in the black and white images. Tears slid down Naruto's cheeks.

It was a group image of Sai, Sakura, Kakashi, Naruto, and Yamamato together. Naruto had framed it. He placed the sketch carefully before Sai's gravestone.

Naruto has made many mistakes, some because of the Kyūbi, but most because of himself. As Naruto stood before Sai's headstone he knew what his greatest mistake in life had been. Naruto would always regret wasting his early ninja career chasing after someone who did not want to be found, refused to come home, and did not want to be saved. Sasuke had been a waste of time.

You never realize what you have, never see the ones that are there, until it's too late.

Team Seven was always complete.

x

You could never capture that in a painting
Naruto's eyes were exhausted as he shuffled through the restricted section of the Hokage's Tower. Dust covered him from head to toe. It felt like only yesterday when Naruto had snuck into the Tower's Forbidden library, and now he was cleaning and organizing the various tomes, until he got distracted.

Naruto picked up another book about seals, written by his own father, and sat down among a pile of forbidden scrolls and books. The words faded away to blurry lines. None of these books had any details about how to mentally seal a demon from its vessel. Most of the books contained advanced sealing techniques, so advanced once he read them, they hit his head and bounced right back to the page.

Naruto yawned. Books were never his strong point.

He fell asleep and abruptly woke up when the book he had in his hand fell to the floor. He stretched upwards. He grabbed a few books and scrolls with his Father's signature and with ease snuck them out of the Hokage's tower.

He slipped into his bedroom window and dropped the ancient and wizened documents in a corner of his room. He took off his ANBU uniform and threw on his pajamas. Then Naruto heard a loud thud. He turned to look at his bedroom door curiously while shouting occurred on the other side.

"What's going on?" Naruto asked and walked right into middle of a battlefield. Naruto's clone was posted on the living room side, the couch upturned. Tomu was on the kitchen side with a pot in his hand. Naruto walked in just in time to see Tomu throw the pot, barely sail pass his clone's head and hit the wall with a booming thud that left no question whether or not Tomu was a ninja's kid.

Tomu turned with a disgusted expression. "I can't even have an argument with the real you!" He said frustrated and pointed at Naruto. "Damn clones! You're impossible!"

Naruto was completely confused. He dismissed his clone and the information rushed into his head. Tomu wanted space. He appreciated Naruto's attention the following months after his mother's death but now it was becoming too much.

Naruto blinked. "I don't understand. What if something happens to you?"

Tomu tore at his hair in frustration. "I don't need a clone trailing me to the supermarket! Or a clone following me every time I leave this house! Or every single second I'm in the house!"

"You never know what can happen," Naruto explained. "I'll keep them out of sight. You won't even know they're there."

"That's not the point!" Tomu yelled. "I'm twelve years old! I don't need you to babysit me!"

Naruto looked incredulous, "You're only twelve! Anything can happen. Yatou and his gang might-"

"Yatou and his gang are dead," Tomu huffed and gave Naruto narrow eyes. "and don't think I don't what you did." Tomu crossed his arms. "I just didn't want to talk about it."

"I was just protecting you," Naruto grumbled.
"I never asked you to do any of that. I can take care of myself. I don't want you to- to-" Tomu closed his eyes and pinched his nose as he said the word, "kill people for me."

"You're just twelve," Naruto muttered as he said on his heels.

"The average age of a ninja who graduates from ninja academy is twelve. Mushi is twelve and she has already lost both of her teammates. I think I can handle walking to the market."

Naruto brushed his hand through his hair. "You don't understand. It's dangerous."

Tomu slapped his hand to his face. He's smuggled drugs and other illegal contraband in and out of Konoha for the last three years of his life. He's been threatened and beaten up by several rival gangs. Tomu knew how dangerous the world was. He carried a pocket knife wherever he went but having a personal ninja bodyguard that didn't give him any room to breathe was overdoing it.

"Naruto, just give me some room. Please. It's... overwhelming."

Naruto crossed his arms. If the Aburame could bug every single one of their family members it meant little to shadow Tomu with a clone for the rest of his life. "No."

"I can't do this anymore Naruto!" Tomu yelled angrily. "You're driving me insane with your overprotectiveness and your ninja stuff and your clones! I never know the real you!"

"But I have to," Naruto tried to explain.

Tomu threw over the chair before storming towards the door.

Naruto's heart stopped as he watched Tomu's back receding from him. An emblem of a red and white fan flickered before his eyes.

"Wait," Naruto called as red chakra flared around him. He threw himself in front the door before Tomu could get to it. "Stop."

Tomu fell backwards with a hoarse gasp. He crawled backwards, scrambled onto his feet, and raced to Naruto's room where he shut the door tightly behind him.

Naruto was frozen by the sudden fear in Tomu's eyes. As the red faded away from his vision and the rest of his body, Naruto stumbled backwards as the claws receded and his eyes transformed back to his usual blue. Naruto hit his head against the door as he tightened his fist.

"It wasn't my fault this time. The Kyuubi laughed in amusement.

"Tomu?" Naruto called as knocked carefully on his own bedroom door. "I'm sorry, we'll talk about it. Just give me a chance to explain." Naruto creaked open the door fearfully. His shoulders drooped as he was greeted with an empty room and the creak of an open window.

He's not coming back.

"I know," Naruto whispered as he slammed his fist against the door and didn't flinch as it splintered off its hinges. "Should I bring him back?" Naruto asked concerned and realized a moment later he had just consulted the nine tailed fox.

Only if we get to eat him.

Before Naruto could punch a hole in his wall the tattoo on his arm began to burn. Naruto stared at
the open window before he donned his outfit and decided Tomu was probably better off without him.

Naruto wondered what foreign dignitary he had to babysit through Konoha this time. Probation was boring. Not that he didn't deserve it but Naruto wanted something to do.

"What's up?" Naruto asked as he popped into the Hokage's office.

Tiger crossed his arms. "What insolence. You will address her as Hokage-sama."

Naruto's head snapped up from the floor and was surprised to find Tiger standing beside the Hokage's desk. Naruto's shoulders slumped as he muttered out a half-hearted honorific.

Tsunade noticed Naruto's depressed demeanor but didn't comment on it due to Tiger's presence. "Tiger wants you off probation for a solo mission and I've decided that you've done enough grunt work. Tiger is very," Tsunade paused to find the word, "...particular about the people he allows to touch his sword. He needs the blade refinished."

Naruto knew why. Tiger's blade had been worn and chipped against the bones of those unfortunate to become his students.

"There is a man by the name of Kimura Toshio that Tiger usually contracts with. The only slight problem is that Kimura isn't officially commissioned with the Leaf and resides in the Village Hidden in the Rain of which we do not have the best relations. All you need to do sneak into the country, get the sword fix, and get back out without messing anything up. It's as simple as you can get."

"Yeah, no problem," Naruto nodded slowly. He knew this was the easiest field mission he could get.

The Hokage motioned to Tiger. Tiger carefully withdrew his katana and before Naruto could grab for it, Tiger leaned over and whispered, "Anything happens to this sword I will gladly show you why four Hokage's have deemed it too dangerous for me to come above ground."

Naruto gulped. He grabbed the hilt of his sensei's sword with a shaky hand. Certain he had instilled fear in Konoha's most recent war hero, Tiger disappeared from the room. Naruto stepped back and had to place a hand over his beating heart. He looked up at the Hokage, "Umm why isn't he allowed to leave the village?"

Tsunade smirked as she leaned back in her chair, "That's classified information. If you're that curious I guess you're just going to have to become Hokage."

"Very funny," Naruto grumbled. The worst part, the curiosity was eating him up inside.

"I'd hurry up if I was you. The longer I have to deal with an impatient Tiger is the less you're getting paid."

Naruto cursed, he hadn't been getting paid on probation. He poofed from the office and back into his room. When he looked around, his house was still empty. The wind from the open window brushed against the exposed skin of his neck.

With a tortured sigh, he pulled gathered supplies and left Konoha behind.

Ever since the power vacuum that followed Pein's death, the land known for constant rainstorms has been a land of civil war. With no Daimyo, multiple warlords controlled various parts of the country,
all vying for complete control of the whole. For the natives, the Land had begun to be fondly called the Land of War.

The rain today was a cool mist and made monitoring those who came in and out of the gates of the Village Hidden in the Rain much more difficult. On a day like this, Tsubasa was glad she was a sensor. A fight suddenly erupted between two civilians. Tsubasa wondered if she should get involved or just let them fight it out. One more dead body on the streets made little difference. Then Tsubasa jumped as she caught an unexpected chakra signature that had just walked through the front gate.

She left her post and traveled the rooftops. She looked through the crowd until she finally spotted the person she was looking for. He looked like a mere civilian and with that top knot hairstyle he was certainly a foreigner but she couldn't move her eyes away from the vast amount of chakra she could sense coming from the individual. He had to be a ninja.

She immediately raced to the current warlord's base of operations. In the Village Hidden in the Rain, the person in charge changed every few weeks. As a native to the infamous Rain Village and without any loyalties except to herself, she simply offered her services to whomever was in charge, as many of the other ninjas did, as long as she got paid.

"Arai-san," Tsubasa formed a mocking bow as she entered the warlord's office. The sizeable amount of cleavage she displayed got the warlord's attention better than her current news. "The village has an intruder."

Arai flashed her a smile, the gold tooth in his mouth shining as brightly as the gold coins he held in his hands. Stacks of ryo littered his desk, all made from the drug business Arai ran on the side to finance the ninjas he had in his services. Arai had paid his way into power.

"Is it Genki again? That bastard can't call it quits."

"I'm not sure which warlord has sent him," Tsubasa replied. "But an unidentified ninja has entered our village walls and I believe he is really powerful."

"I wonder what kind of deals someone made to get a ninja like that." Arai frowned scratched his chin. "He's no doubt a spy. Find out how much his employer is paying him. If he is uncooperative, extract any information he has, and then kill him."

"Why would I go through all that trouble? You're only paying me to watch the gates," Tsubasa replied. New equipment and living expenses didn't come cheap in Rain Village.

"Fine, I'll pay handsomely for any information worth my wild."

Tsubasa leaned over the desk. "You still haven't paid me for opening the gates to you, nor have you for that night."

Every powerful man dreamed of having sex with a kunoichi and of course, surviving with your life cost a hefty amount.

"Damn you harpy," Arai said as he slid a portion of the money towards her. "You ninjas always want to take a man's money."

"Pleased to do business with you," Tsubasa smirked as she grabbed the money and playfully tucked it in the crevice of her bosom. With a wink she went in search of the intruder.
Naruto scratched his head as he walked through the maze of tall metallic towers. Tarps stretched overhead in between various buildings. Water dripped from the edges and spilled down into the drains. Because of the cover overhead, Naruto was surprised to find the streets rather dry. What he didn't expect was the omniscient darkness. There were few street lights. Corners and alleyways were as dark as a moonless night. It was the perfect place to disappear.

With every second or third turn, Naruto found himself at a dead end. He felt trapped and small against the tall buildings that felt like cage bars. Naruto cursed and swore he had run into these crushed metallic shacks before. He wanted to give up the civilian act and take the rooftops but knew this mission was supposed to be incognito. With a grumpy frown he turned to ask for directions but found the streets around him were suddenly empty. His nose picked up a faint scent of dead bodies and the only sound he heard was the soft pitter-patter above as the rain drummed along the tarp and the small roar of machinery.

**Why did I have to get stuck with such an idiot.**

"What do you mean?" Naruto asked as he eyed his empty environ with suspicion. Then his surroundings began to blur. The rundown walls disappeared and revealed he was standing alone on a grassy patch of hill, just miles outside of the village, with five ninja surrounding him.

Naruto could have hit himself. "Genjutsu."

"Who is your employer and why are you here?"

Naruto turned to the ninja who spoke. The ninja was a kunoichi with the long blue locks that were native to Rain Country. On her arm, she wore a bandana that displayed a crudely stitched symbol of the Rain.

"I'm not here to cause any trouble," Naruto replied quickly and eyed all the foes that were surrounding him. The ninjas had their hands together, ready to make seals at a moment's notice.

"Are you here to switch sides? Arai-san will pay you better than whatever you've been promised," Tsubasa asked. Her opponent had fallen into her genjutsu too easily. She had decided that such an expert ninja had fallen into her trap on purpose.

"Money means nothing to me," Naruto answered.

Tsubasa rolled her eyes. She never understood those sorts of people. Money, not strength, was the center of power.

Naruto moved for his kunai.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," the woman replied. "You've walked right into our trap and any one of these ninjas would love get the money from whatever information your fallen corpse might have once I give the signal."

Naruto went for his kunai anyways.

"Crap," the woman cursed. She brought her arms up and easily deflected the kunai.

"Torrential Cage Jutsu," the four ninja shouted.

The ground began to glow with chakra and border each of the four ninja with Naruto in the middle. The falling rain froze and turned inward toward Naruto, sharpened by infused chakra.
"Tell us everything we want to know or die," the Tsubasa declared, and cursed once again as Naruto slapped his hand to the ground. Tsubasa couldn't believe how her opponent was so hard-headed.

"Wind Barrier Rasengan," Naruto shouted the new jutsu he had learned from Tiger as the ninja activated their jutsu and sharpened knives of water sped towards him in all directions.

A ball of wind chakra exploded around Naruto akin to the chakra manipulation of the rasengan but with Naruto at its' epicenter. The water was immediately dispersed by the torrent of wind.

Naruto formed hand signals, the wind whipping like a tornado around him and obscuring him from the view of his opponents. Naruto grimaced. He really hated this jutsu.

I like this one.

"Wave Wind Jutsu!" Naruto declared as he spread his arms outward and waves of wind pulsed from the core of his body. None of the ninja saw it coming, except for the sensor. Tsubasa was the only one who managed to dodge the devastating attack as wind tore through the bodies of the other ninja like blades of shuriken. Limbs were severed from the body and torsos were cut in half.

Blood and pieces of human flesh were all that remain when Naruto dropped his arms and the wind subsided. After a pause, the rain continued to fall.

Tsubasa stared from the safety of a tree branch in disbelief. She had just witnessed what had to be an S-class jutsu but it didn't put a dent into the user's chakra stores at all. She recognized when she was way over her head and was ready to cut her losses and run.

"Water Dragon Bullet Jutsu." Tsubasa declared. The dragon formed in the air and then sped forward, growing larger towards its target as it absorbed the falling raindrops.

Naruto swept the drenched rain from his face as he created a clone and prepared a rasengan. He ran to meet the dragon head on. The ball of chakra in his palm erupted within the dragon's maw. Naruto was soaked wet as he slid back and the dragon evaporated.

It wasn't until then he realized his henge had fallen. He cursed as he put it back in place. Fighting five ninja and maintaining a henge at the same time was just too much chakra control for him to handle.

He looked around for the last ninja, invoked sage mode, and found the kunoichi had already run far from the battlefield. He could chase after her, which he didn't want to, or return to the search of his quarry.

Naruto turned back toward the Village Hidden in too much Rain.

"Kimura-san?" Naruto called as he knocked on the door the directions finally led him to. Just when Naruto was about to give up and see if there was a window he could sneak into, a click came from behind the door. Naruto focused on his hearing and could easily hear the disabling of various locks and seals. The wooden door cracked opened. "Would you shut up?"

"I'm looking for Kimura Toshio."

"Don't know him." The door moved to slam shut but Naruto quickly put his shoulder against it.

"Wait, I have a sword that needs to be refinished. Do you know anyone that fixes swords?" Naruto asked as he held the blade up.
The man’s eyes wandered towards the scabbard. "Come in," the man said quickly.

Heat brushed against Naruto's face as he entered the house. Naruto looked around in curiosity. From the view outside, it looked like a small house crushed among many others but inside, those small houses were actually one large house. The space was surprisingly dry and various forge materials were scattered around the abode. Pumps of steam through machinery was testimony to the ingenious work of craftsmanship that allowed all the utilities of a forge.

"So you are Kimura?" Naruto asked.

"Not anymore. Left that name years ago. It's Narita now."

Naruto studied Narita as he rubbed dirty hands against the apron he wore. Narita was an older man, but hardly looked it. He was heavily muscled and carried himself with a rigid posture.

"Didn't think my old client was still alive. I haven't had the pleasure of his business in a long time." Narita held his hand out for the sword and Naruto carefully handed it over. Narita studied it with narrow eyes. "I have other orders from that damned warlord to complete but I can have it finished by evening tomorrow."

"What am I supposed to do until then?" Naruto asked exasperated. "People have already tried to kill me."

The old man chuckled. "Welcome to Rain Country."

Naruto checked into a local inn for the night. Other patrons were shoving each other around the fire and demanding food. A fight broke out between three drunken customers but nothing too severe for Naruto to get involved.

Naruto entered what would be his room for the night. It was small and dirty but at least it was a bed. Naruto dropped the henge he wore and kept on his mask as he walked around the room and began placing seals. He walked into the shower and waited for the water to get warm but it never did. Naruto decided that being on the cheap side probably hadn't been a good idea as he took a cold shower.

He stepped out dripping wet, grabbed the towel, but his nose caught a musty scent coming from it. Naruto shrugged his shoulders and dried off anyways.

Then a knock came at the door.

Naruto gave the door a confused look, did a quick henge, and threw some clothes on. Without hesitation Naruto opened the door. "What do you-"

A woman shoved into his arms and knocked the breath from him. "Please help me."

Naruto was surprised to look down and find the very woman that had tried to kill him just several hours ago. "Umm..."

"Did they see me?" The woman cried as she peeked out into the hallway and quickly shut the door behind her. She turned to Naruto with pleading eyes. "Please, you've got to help me."

"I- what's going on?" Naruto asked in surrender as he gently sat her on the bed.

"You're strong. You can protect me. I never wanted to kill you but they made me. I failed and now..."
I'm a loose end… they're after me."

"Who?" Naruto asked as he quickly added extra seals around the house.

"The warlord and his men. I was only following orders, please you have to understand. I just need somewhere safe to stay for the night. I have a contact who can sneak me out and my possessions in the morning."

"I understand," Naruto gave her a reassuring grin. "You can stay here."

The kunoichi held her hand over her heart in relief. "Thank you so much."

"Iraiya," Naruto introduced the name he decided to officially use for all of his pseudonyms. It was easy for him to remember and having too many names would mix him up.

"Tsubasa," the kunoichi flashed a brilliant smile.

Then Naruto realized he wouldn't be able to go to sleep, for in order to do that his henge would be dropped. "I'll watch the windows. Feel free to get some sleep."

"Thank you. Do you mind if I use your bathroom?"

"Go ahead but the water isn't hot."

"Did you kick the pipes?"

"What does that-" Naruto began but trailed as his eyes followed her figure into the bathroom.

"Believe me, it works." The kunoichi winked as the bathroom door closed behind her. Then Naruto could hear the sound of running water. He focused his hearing and heard cloth falling onto the ground and the soft slap of feet against the floor.

**Are you really falling for this?**

Naruto frowned. "She might really be in trouble, and if she is, I'll never forgive myself."

**And I'm not really a hell-bent demon who enjoys making your life miserable.**

"Shut up," Naruto snapped. Nevertheless, he tried to run in his mind all the lessons Anko tried to drill into his brain. But when that door opened and the blue haired kunoichi walked out in the nude, all those lessons were completely lost.

Naruto took a faltering step backwards and in his panic, the henge around him collapsed.

"A Leaf ninja?" Tsubasa asked in disbelief.

Naruto swore and knew he had to kill her now but he certainly didn't want to. She was a girl, a naked girl with no weapons anywhere near her. Naruto panicked, turned for the window and tried to force it open.

There was a small explosion as the bed overturned. Naruto groaned as he found himself thrown backwards to the ground when he accidently activated the seal he himself had just placed.

"I thought you were going to protect me," Tsubasa pouted as she leaned forward above Naruto, her breasts hanging right before his eyes. "I just wanted to show my appreciation."
"That's okay," Naruto croaked.

Tsubasa placed a hand over the mask as she straddled him. "I promise I won't tell. You can even keep the mask on. I find it kind of…" Tsubasa's tongue touched his ear as she whispered, "kinky."

A deep purr came from Naruto's chest as he allowed Tsubasa to take his shirt off. Blue curls fell around his face like a curtain of rain. She pressed her lips against the inside of his neck and slowly crawled down as she kissed the hairs on his chest, the carved six pack, and then lower and lower each time.

Naruto's heart was beating against his chest like a drum, his dick was throbbing painfully, and the colors of his eyes flashed repeatedly from blue to red.

Then his eyes began to droop and he collapsed backwards.

"He might be strong, but completely stupid."

Tsubasa gave out a relieved sigh as she straightened atop the knocked-out ninja. She couldn't believe how unbelievably long it took for the sleeping tonic to take effect. She had administered it the moment she came into the room and into his idiotic arms. Tsubasa looked at the mask of the Konoha elite and knew she was in over her head. Her intuition was telling her to leave this job alone but something interesting caught her eye.

She traced her hands along the black markings that covered the golden abdomen of her prisoner. Tsubasa knew very little about seals, but knew one when she saw one. She also knew that very few secrets were stored inside of a living human being unless they were really important. She had stumbled upon a gold mine.

First Tsubasa got rid of the stupid mask. She pulled it away and was pleasantly surprised with what she found. Usually people tend to henge themselves as more prettier or more handsome than their true identity, but in this case it was the complete opposite. Except for the weird whisker like scars, Tsubasa found him extremely handsome. "Too bad I'm going to have to kill you."

Tsubasa withdrew a bottle of poison from her belt that worked slowly but will have him dead by sunrise. Without hesitation, Tsubasa plunged the needle tipped with poison into the blonde's bloodstream.

"Now, before you die let's see what in that pretty head of yours." Tsubasa formed the required handseals and placed her hands on his forehead.

She delved into his mind.

She studied the brain that floated before her and searched for any traps before she attempted to access it. Tsubasa admitted she found it weird for there to be no mental blocks to destroy or disarm for intruders like herself. This was supposed to be an elite ninja.

With some trepidation she began to pull out a scroll. Then she felt a chilling presence crawling along her neck.

Tsubasa froze as a malevolent killing intent washed over her. It was nothing like she's ever experience in her entire life. She immediately tried every jutsu she knew to repel whatever trap this was but no matter what she tried the killing intent was bearing down upon her heavier and heavier.

She attempted to cancel the jutsu. A ragged scream escaped her lips as a claw clenched around her ankle.
The naked body vibrated and jerked atop Naruto's unconscious form.

Tsubasa hadn't felt the cold grip of fear since she was a little girl running through the streets of Rain after witnessing the death of her parents. She had sworn to herself to become a ninja so she wouldn't ever have to be afraid again.

Her eyeballs rolled in the back of her head. Blood began to flee down her nose, mouth, and ears. Her skin grew cold. Then like a taunt cord finally snapped, the body fell over limp, just a hollow husk.

Tsubasa hoarse screams followed her as she was dragged through a sewer. She tried to claw through the bloody water and escape this nightmare. Then she disappeared behind the bars of a cage and her screams were drowned out by laughter.

When Naruto woke up the following morning, the migraine he found felt as if his brain was trying to claw out of his head.

But that was the least of his problems when he realized he had a bloody and naked woman dead on top of him.

Naruto couldn't find his breath. The shake that crept into his hand as he pushed the corpse away from him was a brittle cold in his bones.

"What happened?" Naruto croaked as he pulled himself away and backed up against the far wall.

**You finally became a man last night.**

"Wha- I didn't." Naruto paused. He didn't remember what happened. Then he winced as images of him humping her with blood dripping off his fangs were forced into his head. "You're lying," Naruto snapped as he looked over the corpse and noticed the absence of bite marks. "What have you done?" Naruto growled angrily.

**What have you done?**

The doubt ate away at Naruto's conscience until the gravity of the situation finally destroyed the mental dam. He ran into the bathroom to vomit and tried to straightened out his mind but every time he closed his eyes memories or projections went through his head. Naruto didn't know what happened last night. In the bathroom he had a clear view of the dead woman in his room. Her blood was streaked across the floor, her hair was like puddles of water, and her life gone in a flash.

Naruto thought bitterly that he should be used to dead people by now.

It took a lot of will and strength to keep going, a battle he struggled with every morning that got harder and harder to fight.

"I will not let you beat me," Naruto whispered.

**There will only be more casualties.**

"No," Naruto shook his head as he picked himself up from the floor and tried to decide what to do with the body, "the last casualty will be me."

Naruto Uzumaki greeted Narita that morning with a smile. It had become a habit to smile. If everyone around you thought everything was alright, it was that much easier to believe it yourself.
Naruto watched as Narita worked on the sword but his focus was largely on his own thoughts.

Reading about seals wasn’t helping and he doubted he could become a master in fuuinjutsu before the Kyuubi caused another disaster. Naruto silently conceded that he couldn't handle this alone but the only people who could truly understand what he was going through was another jinchuuriki but he needed the Hokage's permission to see Gaara or Killer Bee.

Naruto sighed. He watched the sparks fly as Narita hammered metal for another order. Narita looked over his shoulder annoyed. "Can't you find someone to kill or something?"

Naruto flinched and answered, "I don't like killing people."

Narita grumbled. "Are you even a ninja?"

Naruto shrugged his shoulders. His eyes wandered to the various blades displayed upon the wall but there was one that caught his attention. Naruto has seen the likeness of the katana before but could not remember where he had seen it. He tried to rack his brain for the memory until it came to him. "Did you use to be a samurai?"

"You never stop being a samurai." Narita gruffly replied as he hammered away at his forge. The heat in the room caused sweat to drip down Naruto's face and his hair to stick to his forehead and neck. "But I did leave the service of Iron Country. The samurai's way was becoming too distorted and bastardized, out of necessity, but it was a code I could no longer accept."

"What do you mean?" Naruto asked curiously, almost in relief to have a distraction from his thoughts that continually led to a dead end.

"When the ninjas grew to prominence the samurai lifestyle could not effectively keep up. In order to compete, the code began to focus more on the art of war. We used to be artists, and scholars, and philosophers."

Narita carefully evaluated the weld he had just forged with a scrupulous eye. Steam whistled in the air as the power hammer drummed to life. "I'd rather leave than watch the way of life I had loved change so much."

Naruto was never a person for history but he was always intrigued by other people's lives. Often, it is their history that has forged them. "I never realized so many things changed when ninjas came along."

Narita shrugged unconcerned. "Everything changes, that's just the flow of time. A few hundred years from now ninja would be like old relics to even more effective and more devastating weapons. The wars of today will seem like fond memories."

"You don't think we will ever have peace?"

"I knew a kid that used to think like that. A shame, really. For the first time in years the Village Hidden in Rain had known peace until he decided that peace was something the rest of the world wanted. Then he invaded Konoha." Narita paused and looked out the window. The view was distorted by the water hitting the glass but in the distance was the tallest tower of the village with four humanoid faces on either side. "This land is always in tears."

Naruto remembered the destruction that Pein had caused to Konoha. He had never understood Pein's twisted ideology of hurting people to bring them peace, until now, as he stared out the window at the Village Hidden in the Rain.

"Why did you come here?"
"I've often asked that of myself. Rain Country is a cesspot of despair and bitterness, and of pain and sorrows. It breeds radical decisions and desperate choices. It is the very lowest of humanity but it is my lifetime attempt to redeem the abandoning of my comrades," Narita answered.

"I don't understand. I thought the samurai lifestyle abandoned you." Naruto looked perplexed.

"All choices have consequences. Hand me those tongs." Naruto turned for the item and watched as Narita cooled the metal.

"What is the point of punishing yourself?" Naruto asked. "What does that accomplish?"

"We must all walk our own paths toward inner peace, for that is the only peace we will ever have."

"And have you found it yet?"

Narita chuckled as he paused to pop his back. He was comfortable amidst the heat and the soft song of rain. Narita took a loving look at the metal he shaped, like an artist searching for the meaning of perfection.

"I believe I have."

Naruto could get in trouble for this but he didn't think it would be too big of a deal if he took a small detour to Suna. A few miles outside the wind blown gates Naruto changed into his regular clothes and stored his ANBU uniform away. Then he stared at the Village Hidden in the Sand and wondered how he was going to infiltrate the walls without anyone knowing he was here and alerting the Hokage. From his experience in ANBU, Naruto was pretty sure there were Konoha spies in Suna and Suna spies in Konoha.

Seeing as it was the middle of the day, sometimes the best way was the direct way, or the best option Naruto could think of at the time. Naruto invoked his chakra cloak and ran straight towards the natural barrier that surrounded Suna. Channeling chakra to his feet, he ran straight up the cliff face and past two posted guards at the top. The guards whipped their heads back as Naruto passed them by like a strong gust of wind.

"What in the hell was that?"

"I didn't see anything," the other guard muttered, "probably just another storm coming soon."

Naruto stopped on the rooftop adjacent to the spherical structure that was the heart of the Village Hidden in the Sand. What caught Naruto's attention was the mob of people out in front of the gate. In sage mode he sensed two skulking on the rooftops on a few buildings away and another sitting on a bench right outside the door. They seemed not at all worried about the mob right outside the gate.

Naruto slipped to one of the windows barely missed by the ANBU's field of vision and successfully snuck inside Gaara's Kazekage Tower. Naruto henged himself as Kankurou and strutted straight through the tower without much bother from the people who rushed by him with documents. Knowing Kankurou didn't like children, Naruto couldn't stop himself from having fun as he cursed out a child who had run into him. The child fled down the hall in terror.

It wasn't until he found himself right at Gaara's door, by the perplexed look on the secretary, did someone suspect anything. Naruto heard voices coming clearly from inside the office that belong to all three of the sand siblings.
Naruto pointed to himself. "Puppet. I have an urgent message to deliver," he explained to the secretary.

The secretary calmed down, if only a little. "Puppet or not, you're still going to have to wait like everyone else. Nothing interrupts family business."

Naruto was a little surprised by that as he sat down in one of the waiting chairs. His enhanced hearing heard everything that occurred in the room.

"Gaara, I know you're trying to set an example but you've got to eat," Temari reprimanded.

"She's right." Kankurou reluctantly admitted to anything Temari thought was right. "You're only hurting yourself."

"We're going to find a solution. Shikamaru and I have been working on it for the past several nights."

"Is that what you two have really been working on at night?" Kankurou asked.

"Shut up Kankurou." Then there was loud thud followed by a miserable groan.

"Temari. Kankurou." Gaara got the attention of his feuding siblings. "I'll eat. Kankurou, get the door for Naruto. Temari, have you gotten those reports I asked for?"

Kankurou didn't respond to the sudden request asked of him. Both Temari and Kankurou exchanged concerned glances. And then finally Temari replied, "It seems you could really use some sleep as well."

Kankurou peered outside of the door curiously and found a clone of himself sitting outside. The henge was instantly dropped and the secretary screamed as the ninja who sat before her now wore a Leaf symbol.

"What the hell Naruto? Is Konoha being fucking invaded?" Kankurou asked as he stepped back and allowed the blonde ninja inside.

"No, nothing like that," Naruto replied. "I just stopped by for a visit... that no one knows about."

Kankurou smirked smugly. "Konoha keeping you on a tight leash?"

The choice of words ran through Naruto's ears like a cut piece of glass.

"Kankurou," Gaara said darkly.

"It was a joke," Kankurou muttered.

"How did you get past our ANBU?" Temari asked concerned. "They should have reported you were in the village."

Naruto grinned as he blatantly set on the Kazekage's huge desk. "It was easy. I ran past them." Naruto turned to Gaara as Temari went through a storm of curses, "When did you know I was here?"

"When you set foot in the desert," Gaara replied as he looked out the window. Naruto noticed the tired rings under Gaara's eyes which he hadn't seen since they were children. Gaara's face was pale and skin seemed to cling to the bones underneath. "Hey Gaara, what's wrong? What's going on?"
Gaara gave Naruto a tired look and eyed the blonde just as Naruto did to him before. "I could ask the same."

"Yeah well," Naruto scratched behind his head. "Why is there a mob at your front gates?"

"Famine crisis," Kankurou muttered tiredly as he collapsed in one of the office chairs.

"I thought Shikamaru came to help with that?" Naruto asked, but directed the question largely to Temari since he figured she would know what he was up to the best.

"He and I are," Temari muttered bitterly, "but developing better technology and techniques to use what little arable land we have is a long-term solution. In the short term, there is no food. Suna is no stranger to long droughts but because of the war, prices to import are high everywhere. Konoha has given us all she can but it is not enough as she is struggling to feed her own. We're falling into debt, there is a mob outside our window, and people are starving. If we don't-" Temari paused and abruptly caught her balance on one of the chairs.

Gaara whipped his head around and Kankurou sat up from his chair. "Hey sis, are you okay?" Kankurou asked.

"Yeah, just a little dizzy. Probably just the heat," Temari responded but both brothers heard the doubt in her voice.

"Kankurou, take Temari to a medic."

"I have legs. I can get there myself if I wanted to." Temari made no attempt to move. "I'm fine. Besides you're the one who needs to go and-"

"Temari," the tone in Gaara's voice was enough to command her to shut up. A few years ago, Temari and Kankurou would have been on edged and hoping in the next second they wouldn't be the ones to die, but now they handled the tone as if it was as insignificant as a mosquito.

"Now, Gaara," Temari continued. "Don't turn this conversation on me. How about you tell Naruto about this fast you're attempting?"

Gaara closed and rubbed his eyes. "Temari, please," and it was that word that finally caught her attention. "These dizzy spells of yours have been happening a lot more frequently. Go see a medic."

Temari sighed, "Fine." She pulled her fan where it was embedded in the floor and over her shoulder.

Gaara looked at Kankurou.

"Yeah, I'll make sure she gets there." Kankurou followed Temari out of the office.

Gaara returned to stare at the view he had out his window. It was a comfortable silence that fell between the two friends. The words will come when they were ready.

"I'd never thought the worst enemy I'd ever face is the lack of food," Gaara replied in his deep and gravely voice. "I feel wrong eating when I know the people that depend on me are starving. It doesn't feel right but Temari and Kankurou have a point. There isn't much I can do if I can't concentrate properly."

From the vantage point of the window, ninjas were trying to distribute the sparse food left in storage to the population as the mob shoved and pushed, and only collapsed more into chaos.
Naruto drew his eyebrows together in thought. "What about your Daimyo?"

"The Sand village and the Wind daimyo have never had a good relationship. We preferred independence with the occasional concession but now the Daimyo is hoarding the resources he has and Suna is left here starving. It makes me wonder if Suna's tradition of independence was such a good idea. I have advisors telling me everything from killing our current Daimyo and implanting a proxy, turning our ninja into common bandits, to invading a surrounding country." Gaara's lack of sleep was obvious but his eyes were sharp and clear of purpose.

"There is no easy answer. Let's say we go to war, in the end that will only be a long-term solution. It will not bring relief right now."

Naruto noticed the bitter irony. He had gone from one country that had too much rain to one that had too little and both were on the verge of war.

"What do I do Naruto? Do I let my people starve to keep the peace? How long must I wait until there is rain?"

"Wow," Naruto breathed, "being a Kage sucks."

Gaara gave a small smile, "That is perhaps the smartest thing I've heard in weeks."

Naruto grinned and leaned over the map that was displayed across the desk. "Tea country doesn't have any ninja so I doubt they got caught up in the war as much. They're not selling?"

"At exorbitant prices. Soon Suna will be so far in debt they'll be asking special favors of us," Gaara replied. "No matter what we do, it's still not enough."

"Hey Gaara," Naruto's own problems seemed insignificant with the plight of an entire village. Naruto said with a mischievous smile. "What are you doing tonight?"

Naruto leaped through the trees with ease. Gaara floated downwards from a blanket of sand and lightly landed atop a branch. Gaara knew this venture wouldn't make much of a difference but he decided to humor Naruto anyways.

"There it is," Naruto whispered as he overlooked the food stores of the richest merchant in Tea country. Long wooden houses were aligned symmetrically in an enclosed encampment, which only took up a small part of the large and extravagant estate.

"You don't have to lower yourself to this on my account."

Naruto gave a bitter laugh. Stealing was the lesser evil. "Hmm, what should we to do them?" Naruto questioned as he eyed the two civilian guards posted by the entrance. They could just sneak past them of course but Naruto had other ideas.

"Kill them?" Gaara shrugged.

"I mean to scare them. Tonight we're thieves, not ninjas." Naruto laughed as he crept forward with the silence of a shadow Gaara noticed Naruto hadn't possessed before. Naruto jumped atop the warehouse and landed on all fours. Then Naruto threw a rock to the ground that bounced and skidded into the bushes. The guards jumped.
"What was that?" The guards whispered and one of them went to go check out the noise. Eventually the guard returned and shook his head. After several more minutes Naruto threw another rock. The guards muttered angrily and both went this time to check on the disturbance. Naruto tried to hide his amused laugh as he slithered to the ground and stalked after them.

Naruto activated his fox chakra and his characteristics were suddenly more animal-like. "I'm here for your blood," Naruto whispered behind them, having come so close his breath crept up their necks.

Naruto threw clawed hands over both of the guard's mouth before they could scream. One of the guard's faces turned red. They both fainted. When Naruto released them to slump on the ground he smelled the sharp scent of urine.

"Wow, that worked too well," Naruto muttered as he bent over the bodies. After a moment, Naruto took out an ink pot and began to draw on their faces.

"And the point of that?" Gaara asked curiously and allowed Naruto's eccentricities without a word.

"I guess there's no point really," Naruto said with a reminiscent expression. "Back in my prankster days I used to draw on the faces of my victims all the time. It was funny but... all I really wanted to do was leave my mark so they couldn't deny that I existed. It's silly really."

Gaara placed a hand on Naruto's shoulder. "What happened in Sound Country?"

"You know about that?" Naruto questioned in a silent whisper.

"Shikamaru fails at keeping information from my sister," Gaara answered, "and I was concerned about the reports coming from Sound country."

Naruto frowned as he stood back and Gaara crushed the warehouse lock with his sand coffin technique.

"I killed my own teammate," Naruto replied as they stepped into the large storage center. Naruto rubbed his face with his hand. "Geez Gaara, this is going to haunt me for the rest of my life. I can't sleep at night unless I stop by his grave every day. It's like... I'm turning into Kakashi." Naruto said in disbelief.

The two jinchūriki, the two thieves, and two of the most powerful men in the world quickly gathered bags of grain and rice. When they were loaded down with bags the size and weight of boulders they fled from Tea country.

Dust swept into the air as they landed atop the roof of the Kazekage's Tower.

"Thanks Naruto," Gaara replied. "I appreciate the thought but this will only last a few days."

Naruto reluctantly agreed, with his appetite, he could eat through all of this in just a day. "How much do you people eat?"

"You'd be surprised for a whole village."

"Well, is this enough?" Naruto asked hopefully as clones began to land on the roof around them, all carrying large bags of stolen food from almost every country. In countries like the Land of Snow and Land of Moon, or countries that owed him favors, Naruto Uzumaki had to simply ask.

It would certainly last for a while.
"Yes Naruto, that should do."

Naruto wasn't a jealous person, but sometimes it blindsided him like a stab in the back.

"I'm having a baby," Temari glowed as she broke the life-changing news to her family. Shikamaru couldn't stop smiling as he wrapped his hand around her waist as Temari sat in his lap.

Gaara frowned. Kankurou whined.

"You can't keep that thing here," Kankurou said as he stared at his sister's stomach as if the baby would come out and attack at any moment.

"I will write to the Hokage immediately and inform her that you are henceforth stationed to Suna." Gaara role Shikamaru as he crossed his arms.

"I'm supposed to report in-" Gaara raised an eyebrow and Shikamaru went instantly quiet. "That's fine. I'm good here."

"And I expect marriage plans?" Gaara asked.

Both Temari and Shikamaru looked at each other quizzically.

"It's such a waste of time," Temari complained.

"And too troublesome," Shikamaru grumbled.

"Waste of time?" Gaara asked. "You'll have plenty of time since you are no longer on active duty."

Temari was affronted. "I'm not even showing yet and you already want to pull me from active duty? I knew you'd be like this. Kankurou, talk to Gaara."

"I'm on his side this time."

"Shikamaru!"

Shikamaru gave a lazy shrug before a fan was knocked against the back of his head.

Naruto felt invasive observing the family moment and slowly slipped out the room. Naruto stepped onto the balcony and the wind rushed through his hair and touched his face. He crossed his arms along the railing and rested his head in his arms as he peeked towards the horizon with an ugly bitterness.

Naruto didn't move when Gaara joined him outside.

"I can't control the nine-tailed fox," Naruto admitted, "and I keep hurting the people around me. I'll never have," Naruto waved his hand behind him limply, "that. I'll always be alone."

"Naruto," Gaara said and overlooked the pattern of stucco houses spread below him. "That's the same as letting him win. It's hard for people like us, but we need other people to remind us that we're human."

"But," Naruto clenched his eyes closed. "I need to protect them from myself."

"Or are you just pushing them away?" Gaara asked as he turned to watch his growing family argue and laugh with one another. "Don't be afraid to love or be loved."
A cool moist drop fell from the sky and landed on the red kanji of Gaara's forehead. Gaara and Naruto looked at each other as several similar drops began to fall all around them and drench their clothing.

A grin broke across Naruto's face as he looked up and the rain was calm as a breath of fresh air. Lights began to appear all across Sunagakure as people crept outside. Joyous cries rang through the air as people brought pots and pans outside to catch the falling drops. They danced and sang songs that brought the barren desert to life.

"Naruto," Gaara said with a smile, "I'm going to be an uncle."

Tomu couldn't stop cleaning. He was worried that perhaps Naruto had taken his words a little too seriously. He had only been reassured when he talked to Mushi who confirmed Naruto was away on a mission.

Tomu jumped as the window slid open behind him and literally squealed like a girl as he hit the ground in fear.

Naruto froze. When he finally returned and reported the Hokage, he honestly didn't believe that Tomu would be home waiting for him. "Are you alright?" Naruto couldn't help but to ask.

Tomu huffed as he looked up from the cover of his arms. "It's not every day maniacs come through the window." Tomu tried to pick himself up with as much dignity as he could muster. Then the house was as silent as the two looked at each other.

"Tomu, I'm-

"Naruto, I didn't-

Their words ran over each other like a train wreck. Naruto surrendered as Tomu went through a series of apologies. When Tomu stopped to catch his breath, Naruto was finally able to say, "Tomu, sit down."

Tomu looked perplexed as Naruto placed a hand on his shoulder and shoved him into the chair. "There's something important I really need to talk to you about."

"Okay," Tomu said slowly.

Naruto stepped back and leaned against the couch. "What do you know of the nine-tailed fox?"

Tomu was baffled. "I have no idea what that is."

Naruto didn't mince words or look for euphemisms. "It is a demon of pure malevolence that attacked Konoha almost twenty years ago."  

"Demons aren't real," Tomu scoffed but paused as he took note of Naruto's expression. This conversation wasn't a joke or one to lighten the atmosphere. Whatever Naruto wanted to talk about, it was real, and it was serious.

"Okay," Tomu said slowly. "If that's true, how did we defeat something like that?"

"They sealed the demon inside of a baby."

Tomu paled. "Who would put a demon inside of a baby? That's crazy. What happened to it? Did it die?"
A pained expression crossed Naruto's face and he finally broke eye contact to look away. "No, he didn't die. Although he wanted to, many times."

"You mean-"

"It's one of the reasons why I can't stop being a ninja Tomu," Naruto explained. "People depend on me to use the Demon Fox to protect them. I'm," Naruto closed his eyes as he admitted the bitter truth to himself, "I am a living weapon."

Tomu froze as his throat constricted and mouth grew thick. Then a fire flickered in his eyes after the implications finally settled and a storm of anger crossed the boy's face. "That's not fair! They can't do that to you!"

"It's alright Tomu, I've come to terms with it," and the calm Naruto used to say those words surprised even him.

"It's not fucking fair. Who the hell puts a demon inside of a baby? How is that legal? Ninjas are stupid!" Tomu continued to rant until he collapsed in the chair with his anger spent. "It's not fair," he muttered.

"I'm dangerous," Naruto said softly and all those he had hurt and killed flashed before his eyes, "and you deserve to know that." Naruto's throat began to constrict as he said, "If you want to leave, I'll understand."

Tomu's head snapped up. "Wait, what?"

"I know I scared you last week and I lost control. I'll let you go, even if it means protecting you from myself."

"Shut up, Naruto." Tomu frowned. "I'm not going anywhere. You've never hurt me and I know the reason why you want to protect me so much is because you care. Why would you think I'd just abandon you like that?"

Naruto looked down at his hands. "I had something of a brother once," Naruto whispered, "but he…" tried to kill me time and time again.

Tomu sighed deeply but he had to remind himself that Naruto didn't know any better. Naruto had been an orphan all his life. "Naruto, that dick wasn't your brother. I am."

Naruto looked up at Tomu in surprise. Tomu smirked as he nodded and said, "You're my big brother."

Naruto bit his lip to keep the sob from escaping. His hands clenched the edge of the sofa tightly, needing to hold something to keep himself from falling into disbelief. Breathlessly, Naruto asked, "We're a family?"

"Of course we are," Tomu answered. "Family fight sometimes but I'm not going to abandon you or anything."

Naruto grinned as the rain of tears finally fell down his face. He quickly tried to wipe them away with his hands, hoping Tomu wouldn't notice. There was a smile that refused to leave Naruto's face.

"And…" Tomu said slowly and folded his hands in front of him diplomatically. "You do know that if I ever have a problem I'll talk to you about it?" Tomu asked.
Naruto nodded.

"So you don't have to worry and you don't have to babysit me all the time..." Tomu suggested hopefully.

Naruto took a deep breath as he pulled himself back together. Naruto folded his hands behind his hair. It wouldn't be fair to tell Tomu no. "I promise I'll give you more room. I'll let up with the clones."

Naruto no longer wanted to push Tomu away, after all, he was a big brother now.

x

We must all walk our own paths toward inner peace, for that is the only peace we will ever have
Lesson Thirteen

Children with Kunai

Naruto dodged Baboon's enlarged hand, turned and countered Sparrow's glowing red katana. In mere seconds he created two shadow clones and sent them after Baboon as he deflected Sparrow's counterattack.

An explosion as a rasengan and Baboon collided. Naruto and Sparrow slid across the ground from the force of their clash, and out of the smoke, Baboon came charging.

"Oh shit," Naruto cursed as he looked up and Baboon tackled him across the room, past several other fights, until he was thrown against a wall and it cracked around him. Naruto's head was spinning as he sat up with a groan.

Usually Naruto would have shaken off the blow like a brush to the shoulder but when he sat up a grunt of pain escaped his lips. "Stupid Fox," Naruto grumbled, unable to understand why his rate of healing has been reduced as of late.

Naruto looked up as knives grew from the elongated crimson tattoo on Sparrow's shoulder and were thrown towards him. Red coated Naruto's vision as he summoned his Fox Cloak and forced himself to move. Naruto rolled, throwing three shurikens as he dodged out of the way. He pushed off the ground, and landed right against Baboon's enlarged fist.

Then Naruto poofed into a cloud smoke.

Sparrow deflected one of the thrown shuriken with his kunai, and the shuriken twirled upwards into the air.

"Did you get him?" Sparrow asked as he turned to Baboon.

"Shadow clone," Baboon gave a frustrated grumble with his failed attack.

The shuriken spinning in the air suddenly erupted in a burst of smoke. Naruto fell from the grey cloud down onto his opponent and brought his kunai to Sparrow's neck. Sparrow raised his hands in surrender and stood back.

"Fire Release: Flame Bullet Tank," Baboon shouted. Naruto's eyes widened as a flame covered boulder charged towards him, like a meteor crashing across the training room. Various battles were suspended as agents moved to get out of the way.

Naruto's Fox Cloak blazed around him as two claws sprouted to help form the rasenshuriken Naruto held over his head.

That's when agents began to flee the training room.

Naruto threw the large jutsu. The wind cackled within the technique as it was flung through the air. When wind and fire connected, the room went white, then it sounded like a booming thunder clap.

Naruto fell off his feet and Baboon was sent to a halting stop from the force of the clashing jutsu. The fire element saved Baboon from the rasenshuriken's cellular damage, but the large man was thrown bodily across the room.
Baboon grimaced. When he opened his eyes he saw a Crow mask standing before him, and a kunai to his throat.

"Yield," Baboon laughed at the excitement of the match. Naruto slipped the kunai back into his belt and helped Baboon to his feet.

"Crow!"

Naruto flinched as he turned to see a Captain demanding his attention at the doorway.

"We might have gone a little overboard," Baboon agreed and slapped a heavy hand on Naruto's shoulder that made him stumble more than any attack in the match. "Meet you in Sparrow's room?"

Naruto nodded as he trudged over to meet with Captain Wolf who was the ANBU teacher in the art of tracking and leader of Konoha's Hunter nin.

"I hereby ban that jutsu from being used in the training room," Wolf barked at him.

"Understood," Naruto nodded. He would have never used it if Baboon was in actual danger, but the fire protected him.

"Young pups these days," Wolf grumbled as he turned and walked from the destroyed training room. Agents gave Naruto annoyed looks as they filed back into the training room to return to their sparring matches.

Naruto sighed in relief. When an ANBU Captain wanted your attention it was never anything good. Naruto made a beeline for Sparrow's room. He walked in without knocking and was met with a room of unfamiliar faces who were sitting down with bottles of sake. Naruto did a quick henge before taking his mask off and joining the other henged agents. Naruto winced at the careless way he sat down in the chair, jostling a sharp pain in his chest.

"Thanks for the match. It was a good one," Sparrow replied, and then tipped his cup toward Crow and took a shot of sake. It always disoriented Naruto to hear Sparrow's voice from a multitude of different faces every time Sparrow wanted to sit down and drink.

Naruto wasn't going to turn down a fight, especially when they just lost their teammate Bobcat. Naruto had attended the funeral a few hours ago and once it was over Baboon and Sparrow demanded a sparring match to blow off some steam.

Naruto couldn't stop thinking about the face that lay behind the mask. Bobcat was a girl, a small bony little girl. She had an underground funeral, popular among those who considered their closest family to be ANBU.

"Crow beat you again?" Wasp asked with a smirk, Sparrow's unofficial girlfriend, and as dangerous as the senbon needles she uses to hold up her hair.

"I could beat him," Sparrow sat back with a grumble, "if he wasn't so damn unpredictable."

Naruto grinned. "Maybe next time."

Then three tattoos began to burn. Without hesitation they activated the summons, and Crow, Baboon, and Sparrow appeared in the Hokage's office.

The Hokage narrowed her eyes as she slapped a folder onto the desk, "Your target is Ishida Nashi, former member of the Seven Swordsmen in the Mist and missing nin. Normally this would be in the"
Village Hidden in the Mist's jurisdiction but we've gotten reports that he's been abducting children from inside the borders of the Land of Fire. One of our undercover agents have been able to pinpoint his base. Go in, end whatever operation he has going on, and kill him."

"Yes, Hokage-sama," a chorus of voices rang throughout the room.

Sparrow straightened and went to retrieve the folder than outlined the details for the mission. "All for the Hidden Leaf Village."

"So who is this Ishida Nashi? I haven't heard of him before. Is he as tough as Zabuza or Kisame?" Crow asked curiously, trying to gauge his opponent's power level. The three ANBU agents paced themselves as they raced through the trees toward the mainland area of Water Country.

Baboon laughed. "Yeah, he's tough. He's in the bingo book."

"From what I understand," Sparrow replied, "the Fourth Mizukage's generation of Seven Swordsmen was the most powerful the Village Hidden in the Midst ever had, which included Kisame and Zabuza. According to rumors the Third Mizukage's generation was more cunning and deceptive. Nashi is from that generation, supposedly he is the one who killed most of the swordsmen who succeeded him. This mission is a big one."

This was the biggest mission Crow has had since Sound Country. This was the mission to redeem himself.

"Did the files say anything about any known jutsu?" Baboon asked.

"We know he's water affinity for sure but my lightning affinity should be able counteract that," Sparrow answered. "Still, a ninja doesn't survive this long without knowing how to counter his weaknesses. Crow, got any spiffy unpredictable techniques for Mist ninja?"

Crow chuckled awkwardly. "That stuff sort of comes in the heat of the moment."

"You mean you don't plan that stuff out?" Sparrow asked in disbelief.

"I wish, but I know they're nefarious for that mist technique. I should be able to sense him out using sage chakra," Crow suggested.

This was the first time Crow had been placed on a team with Baboon and Sparrow, as he was usually shoved with teams that had lost a member or were on long-term leave because of an injury. What always surprised Crow was how different teams functioned. Owl had always come up with the plan, but here Baboon and Sparrow consulted one another.

What didn't change from team to team was how easily every team assimilated him among them, as if losing a teammate was nothing more than a bad day.

Naruto remembered how difficult it was to get used to Sai.

But as Crow learned the hard way genin teams were important only because they were your first. As a ninja, your members could change at a moment's notice and the next mission your life could be dependent on a stranger.

They converged on the rendezvous point with the informant. Crow was a little taken aback to find he was facing a small boy with ashen green hair and dirt smudged onto his face.
"The fire will always burn," the little boy said as they entered the clearing.

"And cast shadows over the world," Sparrow replied from the branch, at a safe distance away.

The little boy's shoulders shrugged and Sparrow jumped down into the clearing. Crow and Baboon followed. "About time," the high-pitched voice of a boy who has yet hit puberty replied. "For a moment I was afraid I wouldn't be able to escape."

"What happened?" Sparrow asked.

"Wait," Crow interrupted, "You're a kid."

The little boy crossed his arms. "I have been in Root, and in extension ANBU for my entire life. Where did they get this one from?"

"That's just Crow," Baboon laughed and then teased, "But best be careful sprite, he can kick your ass like the mom you've never known."

"I find no humor in that." The boy's eyebrows furrowed and focused his attention on Sparrow. "Nashi is secretly developing an army to annihilate the Village Hidden in the Mist. I don't know what vendetta he has against the Mist but he is well-versed in genjutsu and uses it as a mind control on his soldiers." The boy took out a scroll and summoned the ANBU uniform stored inside. He quickly put it on and placed the mask of Mantis onto his face. Then he dropped the henge he had been wearing.

"If we can catch him by surprise, he won't have enough time to perform his genjutsu," Sparrow said as Mantis handed him a map of the complex they were going to infiltrate. Baboon looked over his shoulder as Sparrow studied the map.

"Wait," Crow said abruptly. He had been standing still and storing sage chakra when his senses brushed against chakra signatures much larger than simple forest animals. "There are others out there. Four ninjas; closer to the base than we are but they don't seem to be moving. I don't think they're patrols."

"This can't be good," Sparrow grumbled and ordered Crow to send out a shadow clone.

The four agents waited with impatience until information arrived.

"So…" Crow said slowly as he looked at Mantis. "How'd you get this job?"

Mantis crossed his arms and gave an impatient sigh. "There are many missions that require the subtlety that only children are capable of. Satisfied?"

"Actually I was wondering-"

"Crow," Sparrow interjected, "there are a number of children in ANBU for some reason or other."

You would think that all this time in ANBU nothing would surprise him anymore, but it reminded Crow that there were many things he wasn't aware of. "There's not any good reason why children should be killing. I mean, isn't that what we're for?" Crow argued. "So they don't have to?"

Sparrow nodded. "I've never thought of it that way. But on the other hand, Bobcat was young. She came from the countryside. Rumor has it that when she was even littler, she snapped one day and killed her stepfather who abused her and her siblings. Then rural village politics labeled her as a murderer and sentenced her to death. ANBU recruiters gave her a choice. ANBU saved her life."
"And ANBU killed her," Crow grumbled as he remembered the lifeless bony little girl in the casket.

Crow stumbled forward as Baboon shoved against his shoulder. "Stop being so depressing. ANBU sucks but sometimes we're the only home that accepts outcasts and weirdos like you."

"I'm not weird," Crow replied defensively and Baboon just laughed in his face. Then Crow's back straightened as new information rushed through his head. "They're Mist hunter-nin and they want to talk to us."

"Looks like we're not the only ones after this guy," Sparrow noticed.

"Do we have to talk with them?" Baboon grumbled. "I get a crick in my neck every time I see a Mist ninja."

"Like how your knees lock up when you see Cloud ninja?" Sparrow shook his head. "Unfortunately yes, we are under a peace treaty, and they do technically have more claim over our target than we do. Come, we'll meet with them."

Four Leaf ANBU and four Mist ANBU stared each other down.

Since no one was saying anything, or seemed inclined to, Crow decided he had to say something. "It seems to me that we're after the same guy?"

"Turn back," One of the Mist ANBU stepped up to say. He carried himself as the leader and wore a mask akin to a Piranha. "You have no idea what you're up against."

"You turn back." Sparrow finally offered words to the conversation. "We have this situation under control."

"We have been hunting this man down for years."

"And have been doing a bad job of it, obviously," Baboon said without remorse. All the agents tensed and readied for battle.

Crow quickly stepped between both of them. "I have an idea. How about we work together?"

Both ANBU agents of the different teams looked at Crow as if he was the enemy. "It makes the most sense." Crow offered, but any ANBU agent was doubtful of trusting anyone not affiliated with their village.

"We don't need you," Piranha argued. "Go home."

"Do you have a map outlining the details of the base?" Crow asked curiously.

The Mist ninjas went silent and then finally, "How did you get that?"

"My point is, it would seem most beneficial if we work together. If this guy is so dangerous then naturally wouldn't more assistance raise your chances of finally getting this guy?" Crow suggested.

"Or we could simply kill you right now and take the map off of you," Another of the Mist ninja declared.

The Mist ninja who had yet to say a word, put a tentative hand on Piranha's arm. He was shorter than the others with a mask portraying a Seal. He carried a wrapped sword with twin hilts tethered to a holster he wore. "Piranha, we should take advantage of the situation."
Piranha crossed his arms and stepped forward and scrutinized Crow for a silent minute. Crow gulped and felt as if the Mist ninja was piercing through his mask, even though Crow knew that an ANBU's mask had constant streams of chakra running through them that obscured even the eyesight of the byakugan.

Finally after a stiff silence, "Fine."

"Piranha!" One of the other Mist ninja whispered urgently. "We don't need their help."

"No, Seal is right. We've been chasing this guy for too long without results. It is time to take a different approach."

Seal's shoulders dipped in relief and then addressed the Leaf ninja before him. "Let me emphasize that Nashi is extremely dangerous. Nashi is a former Seven Swordsmen of the Mist during the reign of the third Mizukage. At this time, the swordsmen were given free rein to do whatever they wanted. Nashi capitalized on this freedom to pillage, plunder, and rape as he pleased. Even the Fourth Mizukage realized Nashi had to be reined in. Nashi refused to follow orders," Seal paused and his mask glanced toward Piranha before continuing, "He was convinced in the conspiracy theory that our Mizukage was a shadow puppet. Eventually Nashi's title was revoked and he became a missing-nin. In retaliation, this is the man who killed four of the most recent generation of swordsmen and stole their swords. He was the one who sold these swords to Kabuto for the Fourth Ninja War to fund his own goal that includes the annihilation of Mist."

Piranha continued, "Nashi is a master of genjutsu but most of all is a master in deceit and lies. To fight him is to fight shadows. He will crush you ninja life a leaf."

"All the more reason we should work together," Crow said more persistently. "You share what you know about his jutsu and we share the information we have gathered on his base?" Crow suggested.

The ANBU agents from two separate villages looked at each other, and conceded silently.

Crow acted as the main ambassador between the two teams as information was distrustfully exchanged and a plan was formed.

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The Leaf ANBU team staked out their chosen entrance of the base. In the negotiations the Leaf ninja agreed that the Mist would take the entrance closest to Nashi's likeliest location. If the Mist couldn't take him down, then the Leaf would have their chance.

"Good work back there," Sparrow replied as they easily took out the guards at the entrance. "It could have gotten real ugly. You're a natural."

Crow was perplexed as he turned toward Sparrow and waited for the information from his shadow clones to finish scouting out their section of the base. "Natural what?"

"A natural leader. If this mission goes all to plan I'll be writing a recommendation for your promotion."

"Please don't," Crow was just fine following orders, just the thought made his stomach sick. "I'll only end up getting someone killed."

"You're so pessimistic all the time," Baboon replied. "But I guess in our line of work it's the best place to be."

Crow was about to reply but his shadow clone dissipated. "No ninja patrols until we hit the first
"Alright then," Baboon said as he delved into his flak jacket pocket and popped some pills into his mouth. "Let's go."

"Are those some kind of chakra enhancing pills?" Crow asked curiously.

Baboon would have laughed if they weren't so close to the base. He simply gave a mad grin. "Something like that," he said before disappearing first into the darkness of the base.

"Drugs," Sparrow said and continued next into the base.

"Obviously," Mantis said sarcastically as the little boy followed the rest.

Crow sighed, a dark shadow in a valley surrounded on all sides by mountains, then stepped into the metal hum of the base's interior.

Through Sage mode Crow sensed hundreds of blue light in the next room. "It's a trap. I'll go in first," Crow suggested as he created shadow clones.

Jutsu rained down once Crow entered the room. Crow rolled on the ground, brought his hands together for a wind jutsu but froze when he realized he was being ambushed by hundreds of little children. They threw themselves blindly, without any regards to their lives, into the path of the jutsu that sprouted from Sparrow and Baboon's hands. They went down willingly to allow the children in the ranks behind them the opportunity for a successful attack.

Naruto had frozen and backed up against the wall.

**Scared of a bunch of kits?**

Naruto couldn't even get his hands to move to form hand seals. Naruto couldn't. A young girl raced towards him, until a shuriken suddenly embedded itself into her neck.

"Their children," Naruto snapped at Sparrow. Naruto certainly didn't need to be saved from a little girl. He would sooner be pierced in the heart than to kill a child. Naruto had been there, in the alleyway, broken and beaten as a child. That had been his reality, and refused to show the same cruelty that he had been given.

"I don't like it either," Sparrow replied as the red tattoo covered his arm and withdrew his red katana, "but a kid with a kunai is a ninja all the same."

Small screams were uttered before death and so much blood coated the ground. Children were slaughtered before his eyes. Naruto had to do something.

"Multi shadow Clone Jutsu!" Naruto shouted as he looked up with fire in his eyes. Then there were thousands of him. Naruto evaded the clumsy fire jutsu of a small boy, sped behind him and placed a well-aimed strike to the back of the neck. Children began to fall down unconscious and were then placed gently on the floor to rest.

When it was all finished Crow looked at Sparrow. "We don't have to kill them."

"And what are we supposed to do with them?" Sparrow asked. "Leave them here and let trained immature soldiers loose on the local population? These kids need rehabilitation and Konoha does not have the resources for that sort of thing. Baboon, take care of it."
Crow turned to Baboon and threaten with an inhuman growl, "I swear you touch or harm any of these children and I'll kill you."

"Sparrow, we could let them go," Baboon suggested.

"I'll take full responsibility," Crow replied quickly.

"If any harm comes to Konoha-"

"They hardly harmed us," Crow pointed out.

Sparrow's white mask turned to the pile of bodies that surrounded them.

"Where did Mantis go?" Baboon asked as he searched the room.

Sparrow cursed. "Now it makes sense. This mission was a set-up from the start. Consider Mantis a rogue operative." Sparrow spat and motioned for the agents to follow him down the hallway, but when he passed Crow, "we'll debate this after the mission is over. Remember, our main concern is the safety of Konoha."

Crow combed nervous fingers through his hair, as he stood in that room, he didn't regret threatening Baboon or arguing against Sparrow, only the fact he didn't save more.

Crow, Baboon, and Sparrow arrived at the center of the base, a large antechamber. A ninja that matched the target profile stood over two Mist ninja with the other two scattered and lying dead on the floor.

Nashi turned with a smirk. "It seems your Leaf friends have gotten here sooner than expected." Then Nashi shot a glare at Mantis who stood watching on the balcony above.

"I apologize. I haven't worked with them before and am not familiar with their abilities," Mantis replied.

"ANBU and their secrecy, typical." Nashi turned back towards his prey. Seal favored a bloodied arm that he held closer to his body and in his other hand, he held a sword burning with flaming blue chakra. Piranha held a restrictive hand on Seal's shoulder. Nashi smirked. "They'll get their turn as soon as I take care of you, Chojuro and retrieve your sword."

"I am confident I can defeat you," The Mist ninja declared.

Crow wasn't one to sit on the sidelines while others talked away. His chakra cloak roared into existence, and then he shot like a whizzing shuriken through the room to land a right hook straight through an illusion. As the genjutsu dispersed Naruto found himself completely surrounded by mist.

Naruto went to sage mode and the muffled sounds that clashed together in the mist became more detailed as Naruto followed their chakra signatures. Sparrow and Baboon could not see but stood tentative by the door, coming up with a plan. The last remaining Mist ninja were battling with Nashi.

Crow took a step forward and a kunai shot down from above. Mantis stepped out of the hazy cloak that hid him. "I can't let you interfere."

"But why?" Crow asked.

"He gives me a purpose."
"Your purpose is to protect the village."

"I don't give a shit about the village," the venom in Mantis' voice was thick. "My purpose was Danzou-sama. I live to serve him. After Nashi is done with the Mist Village he will turn for Konoha and destroy all those who were ever an obstacle to Danzou-sama."

Crow shook his head. "Danzou is dead. You don't have to keep serving him."

The ninja, really a boy, shouted. "I am his living tool! I was born to serve Danzou-sama, in life or in death!"

Crow evaded the kunai Mantis threw. With silent resolve, Crow placed his hands together. Instantly shadow clones were scattered throughout the mist. Crow diverted Mantis' attention until a shadow clone crept from behind with a rasengan. The ball of chakra struck Mantis' back but Crow dissipated the jutsu just in time to prevent it from becoming a killing blow. Crow stood over Mantis' unconscious body and couldn't bring himself to kill him.

Naruto didn't see a killer but the boy he could have become if circumstances were different.

Crow turned as he heard a grunt and a body falling to the floor. Crow decided it was time to even up the playing field.

"Wave Wind Jutsu!" The jutsu blew through the room like a soft gust of wind as Crow regulated the amount of chakra he used. The thick mist was easily blown away. Crow moved just in time to get in the middle of an attack that would have been the killing blow for Chojuro.

Piranha quickly helped Chojuro from the floor.

"No, let me go. I can still fight," Chojuro declared as he watched his sword fall into enemy hands.

"What does a Leaf ninja care about the life of a Mist ninja?" Nashi asked.

"I'm here about the children," Crow growled, "and you will answer for what you've done to them."

Nashi leaned back and gave a bellow of a laugh. "Done what? Gave them a home and a purpose? They came willingly."

"You took advantage of their desperation," Crow argued, "I'm here to avenge them."

"This is my fight, Leaf!" Chojuro yelled.

"No," Piranha replied. "Let this leaf ninja distract them while I heal your wounds."

Baboon laughed. "Crow is one of our best agents. He'll finish this." Nevertheless, Baboon and Sparrow stood on the sidelines just in case.

Nashi sneered and the flaming blue chakra sword suddenly turned into a large hammer. "I don't know who the hell you are but you are in my way."

'How would you like the taste of shark meat?' Crow asked the Demon Fox and his killing intent and bloodlust rose in intensity. The Demon Fox watched with amusement. Crow activated his Fox Cloak and with a rasengan charged forward.

Nashi smirked as he planted the hammer before him. The rasengan clashed with the sword's chakra. Crow's arm gave a jerk when the rasengan he held began to absorb into the hammer and made it even larger.
Crow quickly jumped back as the hammer crashed downwards. The floor quaked underneath him and a sizeable crater was left behind. Crow's speed suddenly became negated as the hammer began to grow with the chakra Nashi pumped into it, until it almost took up the space of the entire room.

Crow dodged and weaved out of the way, contorting to small spaces to keep the enlarged weapon away from him. When Nashi had Crow cornered, he swung the hammer downwards.

Then a shadow clone Crow had hidden in the room dropped down from the ceiling and attacked Nashi from behind. His rasengan went straight through water, kept barreling forward, and barely missed the real Crow by inches.

The light created by the chakra from the sword extinguished and the twin hilt dropped with a thud to the floor.

Crow abandoned his chakra cloak and went to sage mode. He closed his eyes in order to sense where the real Nashi was hiding. Crow's eyes snapped open and threw a shuriken at one of the puddles on the floor.

Nashi appeared from the puddle with Crow's shuriken stuck to his shoulder.

"No more hiding," Crow demanded.

Nashi shook his head. "I'm afraid it's already too late for you. I have stared into your eyes." Nashi placed his hand together for his signature technique, akin to Itachi's tsukiyomi and the jutsu the Mist ninja warned him about.

Nashi never had the chance to utter the jutsu aloud, as a wisp of wind wrapped around his throat like rope. It was silent, invisible, and deadly. Nashi grasped his throat with his hands and tried to prevent the sharp breeze of wind from cutting into his skin.

Crow had never canceled his previous jutsu and his chakra remained in the cool air of the room.

"You're not the only master of deception." Crow stated before disappearing in a puff of smoke. The clones were only a way of luring the real Nashi out.

One of the dead mist ninja picked himself up off the floor, a hand sign released the henge, and revealed where the real Crow was hiding.

"I swear, there is no way he makes this stuff up on the spot," Sparrow muttered as he watched what was literally a battle of wits.

Nashi screamed inaudibly as the wind finally finished torturing him with a slow death and made a clean cut through. The head fell on the ground the same time the body did. Crow felt no remorse for killing him.

Chojuro, Seal, ran to retrieve his fallen sword. The mist ANBU, Piranha stepped forward and held out a hand towards Crow. "Well met, you've rid us of a nightmare plaguing us for years."

"It was a pleasure," Crow replied. Then he turned to his squad mates. "We can't leave the children here."

Chojuro interrupted as he clutched the hilt of the sword to his chest. "We'll take care of the children if you help us evacuate them outside. Nashi was the Mist ninja's responsibility, and so are the children he stole. We can't leave you with that burden as well. We'll make sure the ones who have family get back home and the rest will stay with us."
"Wait, are we really going to give young children to the Village of the Bloody Mist?" Baboon asked doubtfully.

Chojuro crossed his arms. "We don't do that anymore."

"Right," Baboon scoffed.

Crow placed a hand on Baboon's arm. "It's better than Sparrow's option." Crow turned to the Mist ninja. "We can have them evacuated in no time."

Crow made several hundred clones. Then the Leaf and Mist worked together to carefully bring the children outside. When they were all out of the base, Crow went to sage mode to make sure none were left behind.

"Wait, there is still one left." Crow noticed. "I'll be right back."

"Let your Kage know that the Mist owes her a debt," Chojuro was saying to Sparrow as Crow left them.

Crow roamed through the hallways until he finally came to a deserted room. It was filled with large vases that were packed tightly inside of the space.

"Mantis?" Crow questioned as Mantis stared at one of the vases with intensity. The dirty white mask that Mantis wore turned toward Crow.

"I just wanted to serve," he whispered.

"You can still do that. Come back to Konoha. It not too late." Naruto insisted.

"He called me son," Mantis whispered. "He was my father. Children are meant to serve their fathers."

"He wasn't your father Mantis. He was using you."

"I killed my brother for him. I killed many people for Father. All I wanted Father to do was acknowledge me, to see me as one of his favored ones."

"Believe me, you can't let your life be determined by the acknowledgement of others." Naruto broke rule number one in the ANBU handbook: he took his mask off. "You must first believe in yourself, you have to first acknowledge yourself."

Mantis tilted his head. "You are the nine-tailed Fox."

"No," Naruto shook his head. "I am Naruto Uzumaki. Do you know who you are?"

"I am Dazou-sama's weapon," Mantis insisted.

"We are more than weapons," Naruto argued.

Mantis looked down on the floor and his mask fell with a ring. His shoulders shook and tears stained his cheeks. "I've never cried before."

"Come on, let's get out of here. If you let me, I'll protect you against the village and against the Hokage. I promise." Naruto meant this promise with all his heart. "You shouldn't have to suffer the mistakes of others."
The young boy with grey hair that fell past his shoulders, with green haunted eyes, and scars that lined his face no child should ever have, stepped forward. Naruto wrapped his arms around the child and the little boy collapsed into tears against Naruto's shirt.

Naruto tightened his large arms around the boy's petite figure. Tears ran between their cheeks. Around Naruto's neck small and deft hands came together to form a seal.

"All I ever wanted was for him to be proud of me."

The explosive tag that had been embedded deep within the boy's body since he was a baby activated like yearning flint against steel.

The surrounding vases of gunpowder and explosive chemicals lit the entire base like a star, like a falling star.

"I still don't understand." Tomu frowned as he watched Naruto eat ramen like a pig. "If you're just a clone then why do I have to fix dinner for you?"

Naruto didn't stop eating as he replied, "It's give me energy. It allows me to stay here longer and when I do disappear, boss Naruto receives some of that energy."

"When are you going to go to school?" Naruto asked in return.

Tomu scrunched his nose. It was an argument Naruto and Tomu had on regular occasions. "I'm three years behind. I'm not going back to look like an idiot. I'd rather find a job than go to school."

"But your mom-" Naruto said carefully.

"I'm not going back," Tomu shook his head. "And what's the point? Mushi says that the history and politics learned in civilian school compared to the academy is drastically different. So why would I go to learn a lie?"

"There's math," Naruto replied helpfully. "I'm really horrible at it. I think-"

Naruto disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

Tomu blinked as he watched the chopsticks Naruto held and the noodles hanging out of his mouth fall back down to the table and slide to the floor.

Once Tomu realized Naruto had never disappeared in the middle of a conversation, much less eating before, a dread began to build in Tomu's stomach. Tomu fell out of his seat and pulled the kitchen drawer so hard, the contents fell to the floor. Tomu scrambled among the items and reached for the notes Naruto wrote for him after the conversation about the Nine-tailed Fox:

*Sharpened claws and more animalistic features – Leave the house for a while to let me calm down*

*Red bubbling chakra - Run and inform the Hokage*

*One chakra tail or more – Run and inform the Hokage*

None of the notes said anything about Naruto's clone disappearing unexpectedly. Tomu bit his lip and looked around the empty house. He was loathe to admit it, but he needed a ninja's advice. He ran to the phone and called Mushi's house. Her mom picked up and informed him that Mushi was training on training ground #4.
Tomu gave her a rushed thanks as he grabbed one of Naruto's old jumpsuit coats and ran out into the early morning of winter.

"Mushi!" Tomu called as he ran onto the training field, it was hard to miss her when her insects were covering the sky.

"Something is wrong," Mushi observed and casually instructed her insects to retrieve the kunai implanted in the bull's-eye of the many targets that surrounded her.

"Naruto's clone disappeared this morning and I don't know what that means."

"The clone dismissed himself," Mushi replied as she placed the kunai weapons that were handed back to her into her pouch.

"No, he disappeared all of a sudden while he was eating, eating." Tomu stressed.

Mushi froze in thought. She crossed her arms. "We should inform an adult."

Tomu heart stopped beating. "Is this bad?"

"Yes," Mushi calmly replied.

"What should we do?" Tomu's eyes bulged. "Inform the Hokage?"

"No, as a genin I will not be able to gain access to her in a timely fashion. We should circumvent her authority and find another who is much more easily accessible. We will seek out Sakura Haruno. She is head of the Konoha hospital and the person most likely to operate on Naruto if he is still alive."

"If?" Tomu legs were weak and he collapsed. "He could be dead?" His entire body shook and tears began to fall down his face. "It's not fair! Naruto said he'd come back, that he wasn't ready to die yet. He told me he wouldn't abandon me," Tomu hiccupped on the fallen grass.

Mushi was unused to such displays of emotion. Aburame rarely lost their cool and there was a general understanding about death among ninja children. "Tomu, get up." Mushi demanded. "Crying on the grass isn't going to help anyone. If we get to Sakura in time maybe she can get a medic team together to go help him. Time is of the utmost importance."

Mushi asked her insects to help Tomu onto his feet. She snatched Tomu's hand and dragged him behind her, who followed in a dumb daze. Mushi knew it was up to her now and she walked with purpose towards Konoha's hospital.

Sakura carefully poured the exact measurements. "Hopefully it'll work this time," Sakura said wistfully.

"Of course it will work," a gruff voice replied behind her. "You're the smartest person I know."

Sakura rolled her eyes as Kiba's fangs gently slid across the skin of her neck. Sakura placed the measured chemical on the rack as she worked in her personal lab underneath Konoha's hospital.

"Kiba, I told you this isn't going to work out."

Sakura's run-in with Tsume had led to a forced date with her son, which led to the one-night stand she was beginning to regret. The complications came when she needed a veterinarian's help with her lab work and somehow Hana was always absent or too busy.

Ever since the incident with Naruto, Hinata has refused to speak to, much less see Kiba ever again.
Kiba was finally willing to follow his sister's advice and after torturous years of a dead-end crush, it was time for him to move on.

"You didn't hit me this time," Kiba said with a pointed grin.

Sakura almost forgot. She whipped around with a punch, one Kiba completely predicted as he dodged and used the opportunity to get closer. He pressed his face against her hair and took a deep sniff of her scent.

"Kiba," Sakura tried to back up but hit against the edge of the table filled with easily flammable material. "I can't."

"There's a saying in my family," Kiba growled into her ear and the vibrations of his voice shook her body. "We would rather have our hearts broken than to break them."

Sakura scoffed, "I'm not falling for that line."

"I'm serious Sakura." Kiba said. "I'd never do what Sasugay did to you," Kiba grinned as he picked her up and sat her on the table without resistance. "A dog is always loyal."

Sakura knew she should just do what Ino says and give the guy a chance, but her broken heart always told her otherwise, always told her that being broken hurts too much.

Sakura turned away at the last minute as Kiba moved in to kiss her. A sudden noise had occurred upstairs. Sakura turned back to Kiba in alarm, where his lips didn't hesitate to capture hers. As his mouth encompassed her lips, Sakura became a willing prisoner to Kiba's dominance.

When the noise, and a few startled voices began arguing, Sakura had to infuse her hands with chakra to push Kiba off of her. "Did you leave Akamaru in the waiting room again?"

"No."

Sakura raised an eyebrow.

"Really, I left him in the backyard this time."

Then urgent knocks came from the door.

Sakura quickly jumped off her desk, but when her black flats landed on the floor and felt bare, she held her hand out immediately.

Kiba smiled mischievously. "Can't I keep them?"

"No!" Sakura snapped. Kiba reluctantly handed over his prize and Sakura retrieved her underwear. She hadn't even realized when he had taken them. She moved to hurriedly put them back on when she noticed the straps of her new thong had been snapped by razor-like nails.

"Fine!" Sakura yelled heatedly and threw the lacy thong in Kiba's face. She stomped over to open the door.

"Haruno-sama," Sakura's assistant bowed and then indicated the two children next to her. "They were very persistent in seeing you." The assistant gave squeamish eyes toward the young girl that Sakura didn't recognize, as if she had seen a spider.

Sakura did recognize the boy, the one that has been living with Naruto as of late.
"Naruto's clone unexpectedly disappeared," Mushi replied without delay. From the look that crossed Sakura's face, Mushi knew the older woman understood the gravity of the situation.

For Sakura, it was straight out of one of her nightmares. Sakura turned to her assistant. "Get one of the emergency rooms prepped and ready just in case." Sakura said as she stepped outside of her lab. "I'm going to go the Hokage to request a medical team and the details of whatever missions he's on."

Sakura strode through the hospital as if she owned the place, and technically, by authority she did. There was fire in her eyes.

"Do you'll think she'll give them to you?" Mushi asked hopefully. "He's in…" Mushi trailed, conscious of the people around her listening.

"If the situation is dire enough. I've been sent to retrieve our agents before," Sakura responded. Mushi still had a hand clutched around Tomu's wrist as he walked behind her like a zombie.

'Sakura Haruno,' the voice called over the loudspeaker of the hospital. 'Report to emergency room number five immediately. Report to emergency room number five immediately.'

Sakura cursed. She almost made it out the door. That's when the side doors of the hospital swung open, the doors the ANBU medics typically used for their most extreme cases that they themselves could not handle.

Sakura's breath caught in her throat as a burn victim came through on the stretcher. The hair was burned off the scalp. Pieces of shrapnel were embedded in the body. What caught Sakura's attention first was the medical anomaly that had rolled in before her. With burns as severe as those, the man should be dead but his chest was still moving. The second thing she noticed was the whiskers on his cheeks.

"Naruto," Sakura breathed out all her fear and then focused on being a doctor. "I'm going to need you to get all of Uzumaki's medical records." Sakura ordered to the nurse immediately.

Mushi heard the name Uzumaki as she stared at the burnt husk, then her head grew light, and she fainted, dropping like a rock to the ground. Tomu's arm was jerked downwards. "Mushi," Tomu shook her and pointed to the stretcher that passed him by. "He's still alive. He came back like he promised. He's still alive."

"Hey, how about we clear out and give them some room to work? It's going to get really hectic around here." Kiba suggested to the kids.

"No, we're not going anywhere," Tomu said. "I'm family and I'm not- I'm not going to let another one die without me."

"Okay," Kiba nodded, "you don't have to leave but we still have to get out of the way." Kiba picked up the girl and guided Tomu towards the waiting area. Tomu sat down in one of the large chairs. He hated the hospital. People die here.

Sakura had just finished setting up the IV fluids and antibiotics within the machines when the Hokage burst through the medical door with a medic nin's outfit on, followed by Shizune.

"What's the situation?" Tsunade asked as she, without any hesitation, began to clean the burns with antiseptic ointment so she could begin to surgically remove the dead tissue.

"He's not healing like he's supposed to," Sakura replied as she compared the medical records with...
what she saw before her, "And it'll be the death of him."

Tsunade didn't look up at Sakura but focus on the task of her hands. Her eyes grew grim. "What are his chances?"

"A normal person should have died in such an explosion, but the small amount of chakra that is healing him is only prolonging his death. These injuries are irreversible. His healing is the only thing that could possibly save him and if we can't figure out what is stunting it then…” Sakura couldn't finish her sentence.

"How long do we have?" Tsunade asked.


"Alright," Tsunade said and motioned to Shizune to take her place. Tsunade pulled out the whiteboard and began to brainstorm ideas. "Number One: Demon Fox being a bitch. Number Two: …"

"It has to be something crippling his chakra." Shizune suggested. "Perhaps his chakra networks?"

Sakura immediately tested the theory. With medical ninjutsu, Sakura carefully checked all of his chakra points, but his chakra network was perfectly intact. "Negative."

"Or some sort of poison? It could be carbon monoxide poisoning from the fire."

"I gave him the antidote for CM poisoning the instant he came in," Sakura replied.

"Or some other poisoning?"

"Negative," Tsunade reported. "I had his squad leader report to me on my way here." Tsunade replied. "He didn't mention anything about poison in his report. We could do a blood test but the result would take too long to retrieve."

"How was he transported here?" Shizune questioned. "Perhaps his body came into contact with a substance while his body was weakened?"

"A Mist ninja had a Albatross Summoning Contract that rushed him here."

"If he was flying the decrease in oxygen could have had an effect?"

"On his chakra?" Sakura shook her head. "I don't think so."

Every beep from the heart monitor took a little longer than the one before.

"Any other options?" Sakura demanded but for all of their medical expertise few have operated on a jinchuuruki in critical condition. "I'll take the blood sample. In case this works we need to the remove shrapnel without damaging him any further."

Tsunade didn't argue with her apprentice and began the careful operation of removing dirt, debris, and shards of broken pottery from the body.

Fifty minutes.

Sakura took the blood sample and when she reached the emergency room door, she was knocked over by the elders who forced themselves inside.
"Tsunade!" Homura called. "We have to extract the nine-tails now!"

"He still has time." The cry of a baby filled the room. "Where the hell did that baby come from?!" Tsunade demanded.

"You assured us that if a moment like this ever came you'd put the village first. We have to extract the nine-tails right now!" The baby's cries droned on.

Tsunade couldn't focus on the elders and Naruto at the same time. "Get out!"

"No, we have to make sure you do your job of protecting this village!"

Sakura handed the blood sample over to an assistant who ran it down to Konoha's lab team. Sakura's pink hair whipped around, "But if you do that Naruto will die."

Tsunade clenched her hands into fists and stared at the burnt body lying before her. "Ten minutes," Tsunade replied hoarsely. "If we have ten minutes left then we'll…"

"No!" Sakura shrieked. "How can you even consider this? He's sacrificed his life for this village time and time again!"

Forty minutes.

"We need a better candidate than a baby you picked up from the nursery," Tsunade said through a hardened voice.

"We told you to have a list of candidates available and you never did." Homura accused.

"How do you even know the Kyuubi will escape if Naruto dies?" Sakura challenged.

"Why do you think before Mito-sama passed away she placed it within Kushina? Why do you think there have been multiple jinchuuruki? If Naruto dies here then the Demon Fox will be released on the village. Do you want that idiot girl?"

"There is no one in the village who have enough chakra to contain the beast that the Uzumaki's have. No one will be able to contain the beast for long."

"The other villages made do without an Uzumaki."

"So we should sacrifice helpless children one after another until we get it right?"

"Then we should transport Uzumaki out of the village before he dies."

Thirty minutes.

"And what?" Sakura screamed at the elders. "Dump him on an enemy village like a bomb?"

Koharu shrugged. "Might as well take advantage of the situation."

The baby wailed over the screaming and arguing. The heart beat monitor was as loud as a whisper.

"Homura and I have retrieved the documents on how Mito-sama passed the demon on to Kushina. We will begin drawing the seals."

"You will do no such thing," Tsunade said. "He will live," even though he was dying beneath her hands.
Twenty minutes.

"You are fooling yourself Hokage. That boy is as good as dead. We have to look toward the future now."

Homura began drawing on the floor, and the doctors were too busy trying to save a life to stop him. Dark lines marred the floor. When Homura was finished, "We have to draw the rest of the seals onto his stomach."

Ten minutes.

"I'm not letting you get anywhere near him," Tsunade snapped as she examined the body with a critical eye, then cut the dead tissue so the rest could heal.

"Hokage it is your duty."

"The village comes first."

One of the lab assistants rushed into the room. "The entire lab team came together to work on it and we've uncovered toxic substances in his system."

Five minutes.

The lab assistant handed the paper to Sakura. Sakura scanned it with sweat on her brow. "These substances are more commonly used in the poisons of Rain ninja."

"He was in Rain a month ago," Tsunade said frustrated.

"Since the Demon Fox's chakra constantly heals him, the poison probably didn't have a chance to take effect and it's been in his system all this time." Shizune surmised. "He probably didn't even know."

"What is he doing in Rain Country?" Komura sputtered. "He is supposed to remain in this village!"

"Can you make an antidote?" Tsunade asked.

All the years of hard work to master the medical craft so Sakura could protect her precious people seemed so meaningless. All eyes were on Sakura Haruno to make the antidote for a poison she was unfamiliar with in less than five minutes. Those who worked out in the field would never know the gripping stress it took to work in a hospital's emergency room. It was like going to war on the losing side, and only a miracle could save you.

"I have it!" Sakura held up the antidote as she rushed through the emergency room doors. Sakura's had exceeded the five minutes and hoped that somehow, Naruto was still alive.

Sakura screeched to a stop. In only ten minutes the emergency room had been destroyed. Walls were cracked and hissed with steam. Machines were turned and bent over; the heart beat monitor had fallen sideways to the floor. The only thing untouched was the Naruto's prone body, stationed protectively behind the Hokage.

"Hurry," Tsunade demanded. "We don't have much time."

Sakura rushed passed the elders and released the antidote into Naruto's bloodstream. They all waited with held breaths, waited for the wounds to miraculously begin to heal, waited for Naruto to open his eyes with a grin and say everything was going to be alright.
Nothing happened.

"Maybe it takes some time." "Maybe it's too late." Both Sakura and Koharu replied at the same time.

"All your options are spent. We have to." Koharu demanded.

Tsunade felt very much her age, old and tired of life's tough decisions. As the seconds ticked away, and her chest heaved in grief, she saw only one option left.

"Extract the Fox."

"No!" Sakura howled but was gently held back by Shizune.

Komura stepped up to the burnt husk and began writing the seal on the blackened stomach. But when he was almost finished, and the ink almost circled in completion, the sound on the monitor flattened and a single note wailed throughout the room.

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Naruto Uzumaki sat against the sewer wall of his mindscape, blood drenched his pants as it flowed across the floor. How ironic that his inner mindscape would replicate one of the most traumatic moments of his life. He had to have been only four years old when the villagers got the bright idea to throw him down into the sewers. It took weeks to find his way out, weeks in the darkness, and the stench, and the silence of his own frightened sobs.

Naruto had forgotten all about it, had forced the memory into the recesses of his mind until he no longer understood the significance of the sewers. But as he sat there and the darkness began to surround him and the stench of death clogged his nostrils, he finally remembered.

Naruto leaned his head back and closed his eyes, but every time he tried to rest he was interrupted by the noise.

"It looks pretty pointless to me," Naruto noted and watched the Nine-tailed Fox ram against the rails of his cage. The Demon Fox didn't so much as dent it. The bars glowed with purple chakra every time the Kyuubi attempted to get too close.

The Demon Fox snapped, "What is wrong with you fool? You are dying."

"Yeah," Naruto said as he stared at his hands. "I am."

"If you let me out I can save you. I'll save the both of us."

Naruto chuckled. "I'm not that stupid."

The Demon Fox roared and tried crashing against the bars once again.

"I get it now," Naruto mused out loud and his voice echoed through the wall and dripping pipes. "You've been fucking with my head so much because you knew that if we ever came to this point that you wouldn't be able to escape. Your only way out is for me to make a mistake."

Naruto had come so close when Sai died.

Naruto wondered how many people truly knew what happened when a Jinchūriki died, or if people were just too pressured by precaution or the greed of maintaining their power to find out.

"Dying isn't so bad," Naruto said. It was cold. "It's about time you tried it for yourself."
"What about your precious village? What would happen if you were to die?" The Kyuubi growled.

"As long as I can take you with me. It's good enough." Naruto smiled as he closed his eyes. "It's good enough."

Eyes the color of a clear day crawled open.

Naruto Uzumaki stared at a drab white ceiling he knew well. He was in Konoha's hospital. Which made sense because he could never remember being in so much pain as he was in now. When Naruto tried to move it felt like lifting a mountain. When he tried to concentrate moving one part of his body, his head began ringing like the distant bells in his ears.

Without many other options, he craned his neck and to his surprise found Tomu sleeping on the edge of the bed.

The nurse, who Naruto didn't notice at all, jumped with Naruto's slight movement.

"You're awake already?" the nurse gasped in disbelief and hurried out the room.

In mere moments Sakura arrived in tears, which woke up Tomu from the bed, and he too joined in the chorus.

"What happened?" Naruto asked perplexed.

If Naruto wasn't hospitalized, Sakura would have hit him on the head. "You were dead for about four minutes and fifty-two seconds."

"Wow," Naruto breathed. "I feel like I just died."

"That's not funny," Sakura sobbed.

The wind from the window swept in. Naruto's eyes widened. "Am I-" Naruto wanted to place his hand on his head but couldn't reach.

"Your hair follicles burned in the fire. Yes, you are bald."

"And you have no eyebrows," Tomu mentioned.

Naruto wished he could see himself, but he could see in their eyes that it pained them. Naruto scanned the room and was a little overwhelmed by all of the flowers. "Why are there so many flowers?" Naruto questioned.

"Most of them are from Ino, the rest are well-wishes the villagers sent when they heard you were in the hospital." Sakura explained and finally regained some measure of her professionalism as she checked his vitals. "Not to mention the oxygen is good for your recovery."

"Wow," Naruto breathed.

"Yep," Sakura smirked. "You are the most popular patient in the Hospital. We're still getting gifts from places even outside the Land of Fire."

"And you have really weird friends," Tomu noted as he carefully navigated the bed around Naruto. "There was this one guy who wore these green tights who kept yelling at you when I kept telling him to shut-up."
"Lee was here?" Naruto asked.

"Almost all of the Konoha Eleven dropped by when they had time between missions. Even the Kazekage made a personal visit. Konoha tried to put a lid on your hospitalization for national security reasons but the rumors traveled too fast."

Naruto looked at her in alarm. "We're not in danger are we?"

"All you need to do is rest and not worry about a thing." Sakura said as she placed a gentle hand on his bandaged arm. She didn't want him to worry. She didn't want him to know that the reason the Konoha Eleven had such brief visits were because they were summoned to protect Konoha in its time of vulnerability. Sakura had been brutally reminded that Naruto was an issue of national security, just by being the container of the Demon Fox, much less his other accomplishments.

"And look at this!" Tomu said excited as he reach out onto the desk and placed a CD in Naruto's face. "It's a signed copy of Killer Bee's first album. It's illegal to even carry this in the Land of Fire. I can't believe you know him!"

Naruto chuckled and just doing that, hurt his chest. "I didn't realize people actually listened to him."

"He's only the most controversial rapper in the world," Tomu claimed.

"And you also got this," Sakura lifted the winter coat from the edge of the bed. It was orange with black highlights in the sleeve and color.

"That's pretty awesome. I needed a winter coat," Naruto replied.

"The weird girl with eyes like Kumi got it for you, but she's not actually blind."

"Hinata? But I thought she was still mad at me?" Naruto questioned.

Sakura bit her lip and wondered who could possibly stay mad at Naruto after seeing his brush against death. "Hinata is polite even if she's mad at you."

Then Sakura showed Naruto the best part. She revealed the bags and bags of ramen, sent courtesy of Ayane and Ichiraku. Sakura and Tomu laughed by how large Naruto's eyes bulged.

Tsunade entered the hospital room in the midst of the laughter, a drastic change from the sober atmosphere that held the air when visitors came to see him. "I see you're awake and moving before anyone expected you to, like usual."

"Hey Granny," Naruto smiled.

"Is she really your grandmother?" Tomu asked, "Doesn't she have to be old?"

"Watch it kid or I'll revoke you visitation privileges," Tsunade threatened as she pulled up a chair and sat beside Naruto. "I'm sure you have quite a few questions?"

"Just one actually," Naruto said and tried to twist his neck more comfortably. "When can I go home?"

Tomu gave the Hokage accusing eyes.

"Naruto," Tsunade said gently. "I had to come up with a cover story. As far as anyone else knows, you started a fire in your house while trying to cook something."
"And people believe that?" Naruto asked incredulously.

"I'd believe it," Tomu grumbled.

"It's not important whether people believe it or not. If there isn't any evidence the elders can't bring the issue in front of the council," The Hokage explained. "I'm sure they suspect it, but no one needs to know you were on a highly classified mission."

Tomu crossed his arms and in impatience said, "She burned our house."

"What?" Naruto shouted and tried to sit up, but the pain landed on him. "You did what?"

"To go with the story I burned your house," Tsunade explained. "You still have all of your stuff, you've just been moved."

"But I liked it there," Naruto complained.

"I thought you wanted to move anyways. That's what you told me," Tsunade pointed out. "It's closer to Ichiraku's."

A tense silence followed until Naruto conceded, "Fine."

"And you're not leaving this hospital until your burns heal."

"How long will that take?" Naruto whined.

"When Sakura or I sanction it," Tsunade responded sharply, "and I mean it Naruto."

"I would like to talk to Naruto in private," Tsunade announced and turned to both Sakura and Tomu. Sakura face instantly fell grim.

"I'm not going anywhere," Tomu replied.

"It's okay," Naruto said gently. Tomu frowned but reluctantly followed Sakura out of the room.

Tsunade looked at her adopted grandson, without a piece of hair to his head. His bright blue eyes stood out against the disfigurement of his skin.

"Are you aware that you were poisoned in Rain Country?"

Naruto drew his no-eyebrows together. "I had no idea. I did... things did feel weird."

"When anything feels like that you have to come to the hospital immediately. It was like a ticking time bomb and prevented us from treating you properly. The Demon Fox's chakra was so busy combating the poison it hardly had enough time to attend to your burns," Tsunade explained and placed a tired hand on Naruto's bandaged one. "If it wasn't for your miraculous ability to heal you would have been a lost cause. No other ninja could have survived."

Naruto was no stranger to being burned alive. After the growth of four chakra tails, the chakra burned like acid through his skin and muscles. In about a day he was healed enough to walk, Naruto wasn't surprised this was any different.

Tsunade had been a medic nin for most of her life and was used to breaking bad news to patients, but this was different, and it felt as if her own heart was breaking.

"While I was... dying I had a heart to heart chat with the Kyuubi. I don't think my death is going to
free him. He is going to die with me, or at least die as dead as a Tailed demon can be," Naruto said and honestly he couldn't be any happier.

An awkward silence filled the room. Tsunade felt ashamed.

"I don't blame you for any decisions you feel like you had to make," Naruto assured her. "But the Fox wants you to transfer him to someone else, to someone he could more easily escape from. The Kyuubi could have told me about the poison but he didn't. He was trying to get me killed. He made a gamble."

"Are you sure?" Tsunade asked. "When you died and nothing happened we didn't know what to think."

"I'm sure. I'm not going to let him escape."

Tsunade and Naruto sat in silence and looked over Konoha from the open window. The sun was setting, casting purple and red hues over the village.

"Do you remember when I talked to you about the negative effects of the Kyuubi's chakra?"

"Sort of," Naruto said slowly.

Tsunade pulled out Naruto's medical file. "In order to survive the later stages of the Kyuubi's transformation, the Demon Fox's chakra constantly regenerates and destroys the cells. This also applies to near-death situations. Every time you come close to dying like you did a few days ago, you're forced to use your rapid healing to survive and you come closer to reaching your Hayflick limit."

"Granny," Naruto said with an even voice. "I don't understand all this medical stuff. Just tell me."

"You're dying."

The words were an odd sort of refrain compared to the bells that kept ringing in his ears.

"You're reaching your limit. After Pein, the war, and then Sound, and with what happened recently your cell count has dropped drastically. Another drastic drop could lead to various complications that range from Parkinson's, to anemia, to irreversible tissue damage. Right now, the degeneration will be slow and you're still looking at plenty of years ahead of you but I wouldn't be surprised if you start feeling the effects."

"I see." Naruto said as he closed his eyes and rested against the pillow.

"But Naruto, another life or death situation, and that's it. Another drastic drop in your cell count like you've experienced recently can have very dangerous consequences. Even if you survive, your body could be irreversibly damaged and I will be forced to pull you from active duty," Tsunade stressed. "You've got to stop running headfirst into danger because the reality is, you're not invincible Naruto."

"Does anyone else know?"

"Sakura does, since technically she's your personal doctor. Perhaps she can develop some medicine that will minimize the effects."

"No. I'd rather Sakura spend her time creating something that will benefit everyone instead of just me."
Tsunade sighed and felt the onslaught of tears again. "Naruto, if you need any help don't be afraid to ask."

"I'll be fine," Naruto gave a weak smile. "I just want to go home."

Eventually Naruto Uzumaki's hair grew back, his skin recovered, and the wounds closed.

But of course, there are some things that never heal.

When Naruto closed the cabinet, his face was reflected on the mirror's surface. Blonde hair fell to his shoulders and framed his matured face. A darkened discoloration crept like a claw up from his neck toward the right side of his face, where his cheek had touched the tear streaked cheek of a small boy. There were discoloration along his arms, where the burns had been the most intense, where his skin had touched skin as he wrapped the young boy in a hug.

After surviving a near-death experience, discoloration of the skin and first-time scars, where shards of the porcelain vases had embedded inside of his skin, was certainly nothing to fuss over. It all seemed so insignificant to the fact he had held a child in his arms that he couldn't save, a child he so easily could have become.

Naruto stepped out of the bathroom and always felt a little disoriented when he didn't step into the living room he had known for most of his life.

"It's almost ready!" Ame shouted excitedly as she leaned on her tiptoes to look over Tomu's shoulder.

Ichigo ran around the table with his thumb in his mouth and placed the utensils on every place setting.

"I can't wait!" Naruto exclaimed as both Tomu and Ame had to carry the large bowl of ramen and placed it at the center of the table. All four gripped chopsticks into their hands and before they could all dig in, the doorbell rang.

"Wait, hold on," Naruto rushed out of the seat and almost threw the door off its hinges to open it.

Sakura looked up as Naruto forced the door open. She's been checking up on Naruto's progress. She finally found time to come by for a visit, but with the Hokage's insistence, she was really here to make sure he was doing okay before he returned to active duty.

"Just in time for dinner!" Naruto exclaimed as he jerked her inside. With one arm, Naruto lifted Ichigo from his seat and sat Sakura there instead. Naruto sat down with Ichigo in his lap. "Alright."

Chopsticks were poised in the air.

"Ready, set…"

"Itadakimasu!" A chorus of voices rang out. Sakura leaned back and watched like an estranged spectator as the challengers dived into the large bowl of ramen. They slurped and broth sprayed everywhere.

"Don't shu wants some?" Naruto asked with his mouth full.

"That's fine. I just ate." Sakura watched as the bowl of ramen was emptied in seconds.

"Alright, bed time." Naruto declared.
"A bed time story?" Ame begged with large puppy eyes.

"If you hurry and get your pajamas on." Naruto grinned. Ame grabbed Ichigo's hand and they raced for the bedroom.

"Naruto, whose children are those?" Sakura asked as Tomu lifted the bowl from the table and began to wash it.

"Their mine," Naruto declared proudly.

"Naruto, those aren't your children," Sakura responded in confusion.

"No," Naruto said slowly, "but I might have stolen them from the orphanage."

"Naruto!" Sakura reprimanded. "You can't just take them."

"I don't see why not."

"But what if something happens to you again? Have you thought of how that will affect them?"

"I guess they go back to the orphanage," Naruto said with a shrug, "But at least they go back knowing someone loved them."

"Naruto, you're only nineteen years old."

Naruto shrugged. "Life's too short."

Sakura was getting really worried. "Are you okay? Are you feeling well?"

"I'm fine Sakura," Naruto smiled. "I've never felt more alive."

"I don't understand why you're doing this. What exactly happened on that mission?"

"Ready!" Ame screamed at the top of her lungs.

Naruto gave Sakura a wink and admitted, "I got lost on the path of life."

Naruto walked into the bedroom and threw himself onto the bed. He landed right between Ame and Ichigo.

"Alright…" Naruto opened the book and began to read. Ame cuddled by his side and Ichigo climbed onto his back.

"This is the Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Shinobi, and how no matter what, in the face of triumphs, mistakes, and failures, he never ever gave up."

x

I got lost on the path of life
Clothes were tossed into the air as Naruto Uzumaki went through his pile of dirty clothes one more time, and found nothing. His feet were shadows gliding across the floorboards. He peeked inside of his closet. He moved around books, clothes, and various utility belts. He even found a sandwich and took a bite of it. Naruto scratched his head in confusion.

"You put it in the ceiling of the closet."

Naruto bumped his head against the top shelf, which caused a rain of scrolls to fall, as he turned to find Ame sitting up in the bed.

"I was trying not to wake you up," Naruto admitted as he reached to the top of the closet, slid the ceiling tile across, and grabbed the hilt of his katana. Naruto used to place the blade anywhere in the room and had forgotten he had tucked it away for safety reasons.

Naruto strapped the hilt of the blade across his shoulder.

"I don't want to go to school," Ame pouted as she climbed from the bed and slid to the floor. "Everyone will look at me weird."

Naruto snapped together the buckles of his flak jacket. "But little children are supposed to go to school."

"Why?"

"I don't know. They just do."

Ame pouted as she reached for the mask on the dresser and outlined the blue markings with chubby fingers. Naruto tugged his feet into the standard black sandals and snapped on the arm guards.

Once Naruto was finished getting dressed, he knelt down and gently picked up her chin. "Kids are mean," Naruto agreed. "When I was little they laughed at me, taunted me, and even beat me up. I know what it feels like, but don't you ever," Naruto stressed, "let them fool you into thinking that you deserve less."

Ame tightened her hands around the cool and solid mask. "It's hard," she whispered, barely inaudible but Naruto's ears caught her words perfectly.

"What some stupid little kids have to say will never mean anything because as long as I'm around, there will always be someone to love you."

The small seven year-old fell into Naruto's flak jacket with a sob. "I'm so glad- that you wanted to be my daddy." Ame sniffled.

Naruto beamed with pride, even brighter than when he had defeated Pein or defeated Madara. One word from one little girl made Naruto's crazy and insane world make so much sense.

Naruto grinned mischievously. "Besides, there's nothing wrong with weird."

Then Naruto flared his chakra and his eyes flickered from blue to red.
Ame eyes widened, then giggled, "You looked like a kitty cat."

I AM A DEMON OF MASS DESTRUCTION!

Naruto laughed, scooped Ame in his arms, and tucked her back into the bed. 'I guess the big bad demon is losing his touch.'

The Kyuubi growled in annoyance. These rodents are making you soft. Go kill something.

Ame pouted as she reluctantly gave up the mask. "You'll be careful?"

"I promise I'll be careful," Naruto replied as he left a clone to replace his empty place in the bed. After several months, he was finally ready to return to active duty for the first time since his tryst in the hospital.

"I love you daddy," Ame mumbled softly before snuggling up to the clone.

Naruto put on the mask that has experienced too much. "I love you too."

Naruto had no idea what was going to happen when Tiger Sensei declared he wanted to teach Naruto something new and followed him into a suspicious underground cavern. Naruto got even more worried when they had to pass several security posts. Finally they came upon a waterfall that trickled down cavernous rocks and fed into an underground lake. Glowing trees radiated like soft blue lanterns. Naruto guessed they were somewhere underneath the Hokage's monument.

"Where are we?" Naruto asked curiously.

"One of Konoha's most prized possessions and Konoha's most lucrative business venture." Tiger explained and knocked Naruto in the head when he reached out to touch the pulsing bark that chimed with stored energy. "They are chakra trees, created by the esteemed Senju Hashirama, and the only of their kind that exists throughout the world. These trees were the primary reason for the First Shinobi War," Tiger paused, "S-class information."

Naruto nodded. Naruto has learned a lot of things he wasn't supposed to know from Tiger. The only secrets Tiger cared about were his own.

"So they're dangerous?"

"No, just extremely useful. Are you aware of chakra paper?"

"Yeah, I used it to learn I was a wind affinity," Naruto answered, "to prepare for Akatsuki."

Tiger shrugged, the infamous organization's name bounced off of him as insignificant as a genin. "Chakra paper is made from these chakra trees. Because there is a limited supply, chakra paper is extremely expensive and rare."

"So what are we doing down here?"

"As an ANBU agent it is about time for you to have learned two elements," Tiger Sensei explained. "Which one do you wish to study?"

Naruto blinked in surprise. This was more awesome than he thought it was going to be. Naruto could imagine flames spewing from his mouth, a large water-breathing dragon, a whistling chidori, or a tough earthen wall. "I don't know." Naruto asked curiously, "Which ones do you know?"
"I would have to kill you first."

"Right…” Naruto grumbled.

"Since elemental chakra is genetic, it is tradition that a ninja's second element is the natural affinity of your other parent which makes it slightly easier to learn than the others."

"But I don't know my parent's elemental affinity and I can't exactly go ask them. They're dead."

"Which is why I requested the information from the Hokage. Your father's chakra affinity was wind and your mother's was water."

"So I should learn water?" Naruto asked.

"It would be slightly easier," Wolf replied, "but it's your choice."

"Alright," Naruto slapped his hands together in preparation, "Water element it is."

Wolf pointed to the closest tree. "Go sit underneath it."

Naruto looked perplexed but did it nevertheless. When he leaned his back against the tree he was surprised to find the contact very cool. Naruto could feel the effects immediately as his chakra began to drain. "What am I supposed to do?"

"The trees react to elements. Since wind is your natural affinity they will drain that first."

"Is this how other ninja usually obtain another element?" Naruto asked.

"No, most ninja put in years of long work. Other ninja with high privileges or who are extremely wealthy will simply drink the sap from the chakra trees to drain their elemental chakra in order to speed up the process of their training, but considering your large stores of chakra and our limited stores of sap, bringing you here was more logical."

Even so, Naruto could feel that the draining of his chakra was going to take a while.

"When you can no longer complete a wind jutsu, leave the tree and begin to attune your chakra with water."

"And how am I supposed to do that?"

Tiger shrugged his shoulders and motioned to the lake before he moved to leave. "Try drowning."

"Wait, does that actually work?" Naruto questioned.

"I got struck with lightning fifteen times before I became attuned to it," Tiger turned around briskly, with his cloak flapping behind him. "Under the Hokage's permission, you're the only one who has access to this area. If you see anyone else, kill them."

That definitely crossed the fire element off of Naruto's list. Being burned alive once was enough times for him.

"Wake up! Time for school!" Naruto shouted.

Ame grumbled, turned, and tucked the covers over her head. Ichigo didn't move at all.
"Up!" Naruto declared as he mischievously formed hands signs. "Wind release: Wave Wind Jutsu," and the covers were ripped away.

"That's not fair," Ame whined as she shoved her head further into the pillow. Ichigo never moved an inch. Naruto grabbed Ame's foot to drag her out the bed.

"No," Ame moaned as she put her hands together, and in a blink, Naruto suddenly found himself holding a block of wood.

Naruto looked under the bed. "I didn't know you could do that."

Ame grumbled.

Naruto shook his head as he dragged her from under the bed and sat her on her feet. Ame leaned forward and fell asleep while standing. Naruto reached out and was handed the school uniform he had bought, then he pulled off Ame's pajamas as she yawned deeply.

Meanwhile, a clone was struggling atop the bed as he tried to clothe a screeching and kicking Ichigo. "Can we switch?" the clone asked exasperatedly.

"Done," Naruto declared, completely ignoring the other clone, picked Ame underneath the shoulders, and rushed her out of the bedroom.

Another clone greeted them as he proudly placed breakfast on the table. Ame was dropped in the kitchen chair and stared at breakfast for a second before finally picking up a utensil.

Naruto sat down to eat, and Naruto brought a grumpy Ichigo and sat him down in a chair, and Naruto got himself dressed as he hopped in and out of the bathroom, and Naruto poured three cups of orange juice – all at the same time.

Tomu yawned as he trudged out of his bedroom, stared at the Naruto clones running around the house, and then turned back around to bed.

"Alright, what's your name?" Naruto asked.

"Ame Namikaze," Ame answered as she stuffed her face full of breakfast.

"Right, and if the teachers ask who your parents are?"

"I was recently adopted by Iraiya Namikaze." Ame hit the arm of a Naruto clone and snatched away the hairbrush that Naruto attempted to attack her with. "Why did you pick such a funny name?" Ame asked as she began to brush her own hair.

"It's the only one I can remember," Naruto answered as he attempted to shove a spoonful of oatmeal into a pouty Ichigo. "It's like Iruka and Jiraiya combined."

"But wouldn't that be Jiruka?" Ame asked.

"Ugh, just eat your food."

Ame giggled. When she finished with breakfast, she placed her bowl in the sink. "Naruto, can I bring an extra snack?"

"But you already have one and wouldn't that hurt your tummy?" Naruto asked, not paying attention when he hit Ichigo in the nose with a spoon and had to rush him to the bathroom to clean him up.
Ame sighed as she turned to the Naruto who began washing the dishes. "Can I bring a snack please?"

"But didn't the other Naruto say no?" Naruto asked as he placed the bowls back into the cabinets.

"It'll be our little secret," Ame suggested with a magnetic smile.

"Okay, fine," Naruto relented. Ame grinned as she added a rice cake into her clumsily made bento box.

"Let's go!" One of the Narutos grabbed Ichigo over his shoulder and shuffled Ame outside. Naruto groaned as he took a look at the clock before he closed the door. "We're almost late."

"Then I guess I don't have to go?" Ame chirped brightly.

"Hold on," Naruto declared as he picked Ame up. Ame saw a blaze of red chakra, and the next time she blinked, she was looking at the front of Konoha's elementary school while a rush of wind attempted to catch up.

"Let's do that again!" Ame exclaimed.

"Tomorrow," Naruto agreed as he put Ame down onto the sidewalk. Other parents were also dropping their kids off, with simple farewells and last minute reminders. It was weird. Naruto suddenly felt kind of normal.

"Ready?"

"No," Ame pouted as she eyed the large building. She's never gone to school before and didn't know if she wanted to. "I don't know anything."

"That's kind of the whole point." Naruto laughed. "You go to learn stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Well, I don't know… stuff."

"Why?"

"Because…” Naruto scratched his head. "You're just giving me a hard time."

Ame smirked as she reached up and gave Naruto a hug. "I'll see you later Naruto."

"Ame?" Naruto asked when Ame stepped back. He stood up awkwardly, dug his hands in his pockets, and shuffled his feet. "Last night, you called me…”

Ame smirked. "You're Naruto. Daddy is at work."

Naruto watched as Ame skipped backwards and eventually disappeared inside of the building. Naruto was a bit surprised to realize the meaning behind her words: Ame had the ability to differentiate between the real him and his clones.

There was still so much he didn't know about Ame and Ichigo.

"Hokage-sama." Crow bowed as he placed his fist to the floor. He looked up and realized no other agents were summoned. There was only the Hokage and the ANBU Captain, Wolf.
"We've recently been tipped off to the whereabouts of a missing-nin."

"Sasuke?" Crow asked without thinking.

"Uchiha Sasuke might be our most recent case, but he is not Konoha's only missing nin," the Hokage reprimanded. "Your target is Shinosuke Shiyo, the only ninja to succeed in escaping from Konoha's prison. He has proven to be a difficult ninja to catch. Crow, you are to assist Captain Wolf in his mission to bring the missing-nin back alive."

"Yes Hokage-sama." Crow nodded. Red tipped his ears in his embarrassment. He should have known this wasn't about Sasuke.

"Hokage, I don't need some pup trailing after me," Captain Wolf argued.

"This isn't up for discussion. You've failed three times to bring Shiyo back. Perhaps this time some assistance will help."

Wolf growled before turning toward the window. "Fine, meet me at the gate."

"Crow, be careful," Tsunade warned. "The target has slipped through our fingers for years."

"No problem. I'll catch him." Crow replied before he grabbed hold of the window ledge and prepared to vault outside but stopped when the Hokage called his name. "Yeah?"

Tsunade didn't think she could ever get the image of Naruto's twisted and burnt corpse the moment the heartbeat monitor deadpanned out of her head. "Be careful," she repeated.

Naruto could see the flicker of fear in her eyes. "I'll be careful, promise."

Crow shivered as snowflakes fell from the sky. He was forced to concentrate on his chakra control more than he was used to as he slipped on the icy snow blanketing the tree branches.

"This kid is really ANBU?" The large blue and white nin-wolf asked as he pounced from tree limb to tree limb with ease.

"That's what they say," Captain Wolf replied as he made markings on a map and jumped without ever looking where he set his feet.

"Chakra control is not one of my strong points," Crow huffed, just as he slipped and caught himself with a branch. Crow could feel the chill of the ice through the gloves he wore, swung forward, and allowed the momentum to take him to the next branch.

"Where are we going?" Crow asked as they continually moved north, even deeper into the freezing temperatures.

"Our target is hiding out in a Jashin temple," Wolf replied. Then Wolf stuffed the map into his pocket as if it had suddenly offended him.

"How did we find out he was in a place like that?"

"Our target sent Konoha a distress signal."

Crow stopped, as he landed, snow fell from his hair and the creases of his uniform. "Wait, let me get this straight, the missing-nin, our target, sent Konoha a distress signal so we can rescue him?"
"Yes."

"I'm confused."

"He probably got in way over his head," Wolf explained. "Who is more likely to rescue you from a cult of maniacs other than the village you betrayed and wants to kill you themselves?"

"I guess that makes sense," Crow said slowly.

The temple, situated high into the mountains came into view. The walls of the temple glistened with frozen ice and the wind wailed in haunting. It stood isolated and forgotten among the beacons of snowy peaks.

Wolf and Crow settled among the powdered snow and scouted the temple atop their stomachs. "Now we have to figure out how to infiltrate a temple no one but the priests come out alive."

"I can send in shadow clones to scout the place?" Crow suggested.

"That'll take too long."

"Just seconds," Crow smirked as he create a hundred shadow clones and henged them all into snakes. They left curved trails as they slithered forward and eventually disappeared into the cracks of the temple.

"Impressive," Wolf admitted.

Crow frowned only seconds later. "All the entrances are heavily guarded."

"My turn," Wolf motioned for Crow to follow as they trekked around the temple and without drawing attention drew close to the ancient and solemn walls. "Here."

"Here what?"

"Earth Release: Earth Corridor," Wolf activated the jutsu. Both snow and dirt collapsed inwards. The grinding earth formed a tunnel leading into the ground. "Shippo, stay and keep watch," Wolf ordered. The Captain's canine companion snapped his jaw and then stalked back into the white forest.

"Come on." Wolf dropped down into the hole. Crow stared at the small hole leading into darkness and followed. It wouldn't be his first time shifting around underground. When the tunnel upturned, Crow slowed in his crawl as Wolf's butt was right in his face. When they hit the wall of the temple, Wolf punched right though. Crow and Wolf infiltrated the temple without drawing any attention.

It was warm inside the temple's walls and the snow quickly melted and drenched Crow's uniform. A sizeable puddle formed at their feet.

Wolf breathed deeply. "I have his scent. He's not too far from here."

Crow took a curious sniff of the air. He gagged on the stench that suddenly invaded his nostrils and left an aftertaste on his tongue. "It smells like dead people," Crow said in disbelief as he leaned against a storage shelf. When Crow looked up, he found himself face to face with several separated body parts stored in jars all along the shelves.

Crow leaped backwards and took in the entirety of the room fill with rows and rows of ingredients Crow would rather not identify. "This is sick."
"We're here for the target, that's it."

"How can you possibly ignore this?" Naruto asked as he turned a corner and found what his nose had already confirmed. Two rotting corpses were stretched on what looked to be old and unused torture machines.

Wolf found two pair of robes. "These could help us walk around better."

Crow began to breathe through his mouth as he pulled on the blood stained robes. Just in case, he activated sage mode and was surprised to find there were a lot of people who resided in the remote temple.

"Let's go," Wolf ordered.

Crow hesitated as he turned and stared at the storage room. It all gave Crow a bad feeling.

Naruto sat down on a park bench and sent Ichigo to go play. Ichigo wandered the playground with his thumb in his mouth, silently evaluating the large metal structure that loomed over him. Ichigo went to great lengths to avoid the other toddlers running around and eventually found the empty sandbox. He sat down, quite content at being alone and began playing in the sand.

"Oh good morning, Naruto."

Naruto was jolted from his thoughts about Ichigo's strange behavior and turned to see Kurenai holding her young daughter, Akai, on her hip. The small toddler wiggled in her mother's arms until Kurenai finally set her down and Akai attacked the jungle gym.

"How are you?" Kurenai asked as she joined Naruto on the bench. She was trying hard not to stare at the discoloration that marred Naruto's face but couldn't help it. She had never seen a wound heal in such a way before. "I heard you were in the hospital not too long ago."

"It was nothing," Naruto said, immediately brushing the incident away.

"That's good." Kurenai knew 'nothing' was far from the truth, but knew enough about ninjas when it was best to move on to a new topic of conversation. "I often worry about your generation, so talented, but because of it you have so much responsibility thrust upon you."

Even her own students seemed to be slipping from her fingers. Both Kiba and Shino were preparing to take the reins of both their respective clans and Hinata… Kurenai clasped her hands together nervously.

"Kurenai-sensei, I might need your help."

The fact that someone needed her help had her agreeing immediately. "Anything."

"This is kind of a secret," Naruto began nervously, "but I've recently adopted some kids from the orphanage."

It was the last thing Kurenai ever expected to hear, especially from Naruto. Her eyes focused on the petite little boy, bundled in a thick jacket, with black hair and green eyes. She stared at the scars that patterned the boy's face. The scars trailed into the neck of the jacket, hinting that there was no end.

"Those are worrisome scars," Kurenai whispered.

"They're everywhere," Naruto answered darkly, "all over his body, but he's a good kid if not a little
"Wow," Kurenai leaned back. She was beginning to feel old and she guessed that was a good feeling for a ninja. Shikamaru was about to have a baby and Naruto already had some. "Children are a huge responsibility."

"Yeah," Naruto nodded and then shifted in the bench. "I also have a daughter, with eyes just like yours."

"Oh," Kurenai replied thoughtfully. "I didn't know the orphanage had a Yuuhi."

"I was hoping that you'd meet with her, so she knows that some else like herself exists?" Naruto asked hopefully.

"Of course," Kurenai agreed. "When the Kyuubi attacked-" Kurenai paused to realize who she was talking to.

"It's fine." Naruto nodded.

"When the Kyuubi attacked the Yuuhi clan was decimated. My clan did things differently than the other doujutsu clans. Not everyone in the Yuuhi clan was born with the red-ringed eyes. Those who were born with them were inducted into the main family and those who did not were branch members. Since the branch members outwardly looked normal they sometimes integrated with civilian families. It wouldn't be the first time a civilian family of Yuuhi ancestors suddenly found their newborn with red eyes."

"I see," Naruto replied softly, and then he felt a tug on his pants. Naruto looked down to find Ichigo wearing a terrified expression, with his tongue wagging in horror, and lifting hands full of dirty and slimy worms. "Bad ramen."

"That's not ramen!" Naruto panicked and rushed Ichigo to the water fountain to wash out his mouth.

Kurenai gave a small peal of laughter. Who could have ever imagined Konoha's number one prankster would become such an adult? They grow up so fast.

"I think we're going to go get some real ramen," Naruto decided. "Later Kurenai-sensei."

Naruto carried Ichigo across the park but stopped in his tracks when he noticed a symbol written in the sandbox. It seemed so familiar to him. Naruto stared at an encircled upside down triangle written in sand.

Crow stared at an encircled upside down triangle written in blood. Four priests stood on four identical symbols as they surrounded their sacrifice chained to the altar. The hoods were lifted from each of the priest faces to reveal black skin and white markings.

"Our lord Jashin, accept our humble offering," One of the priests declared. The knife he held gleamed red in the torchlight as the priest pressed it against his chest and casually parted his skin like old paper.

The sacrifice screamed in horror as the wound appeared upon his bare chest. The other priests followed suit as they drew blood from their arms and face, every wound the priests inflicted upon themselves occurred simultaneously on the sacrifice.

"We have to stop this," Wolf declared. "I don't know if Shiyo can take much more of that." Wolf
searched for an alternative, but didn't know how interfering with the ritual would affect the target. He needed to find a way for the priests to deactivate the ritual themselves. He formed hand seals.

Crow didn't think as he clasped Wolf's forearm. "What are you planning?"

"I'm going to cause an earthquake. They'll stop if they see the temple falling down on them."

"You can't," Crow whispered urgently. "There are hundreds of people here."

"Who gives a shit about these crazy fucks?" Wolf snarled.

"Wait, give me five minutes."

"He might not have five minutes."

"Please," Crow begged.

"Fine, but five minutes is all you get."

Crow nodded as he raced back into the hallway and made as many clones as he possibly could. With a motion of his hand he sent them off in different directions.

Crow came upon cages that were hardly large enough to contain the mass of naked and dirty bodies crammed inside them. Prisoners pleaded and called out the moment they saw him. Crow ripped the bars right off the cage and made more clones to help lift the prisoners out of the temple.

Crow froze as he came upon a classroom full of children. They looked at him with dead red-rimmed eyes, and faces lined with carefully patterned scars that Crow was very familiar with. Without a sound the children turned back toward their textbooks.

"And if our Lord Jashin is displeased with our sacrifice he will destroy the world-" The teacher stopped teaching when she noticed Crow had intruded upon the room.

Crow never gave the teacher a chance as a rasengan burst through her body. Crow was shaking with anger as he scooped the children into his arms, while other clones found other classrooms, and torture chambers, and priests who had taken their religion too far lying in a pool of their own blood with a smile.

Then the ground beneath Crow's feet began to shake. He was carrying a crippled woman out the exit just as the temple collapsed in a deafening roar. Prisoners who never thought they'd see the light of day cried and rejoiced. Naruto didn't understand how countries could go to war with each other when this type of evil existed.

"Good job." Crow turned as Wolf walked out the temple with his quarry unconscious over his shoulder.

Crow nodded weakly and then rushed behind the temple ruins to vomit when the unneeded clones dissipated. Some of the things he had seen in there would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Once Crow cleaned himself up, he joined Wolf who was doing an assessment of the survivors. "I've already sent Shippo with a message for Konoha to send a team to help get these people back home. Leave a few clones to stay with them until the help arrives. We need to get our fugitive back to Konoha."

Crow nodded. He saw a few of his clones talking gently with some of the prisoners. Some of them
raved and ranted, other didn't speak, but all had lost a piece of their minds in the ruins of that temple.

"Get up Shiyo," Wolf demanded as he dropped the ninja to the ground.

Shiyo coughed as he picked himself up. Shiyo brought one hand to his chest and it glowed green as he began to heal himself. "I was hoping they'd send you to come get me."

"Was this another one your bright ideas?"

Shiyo chuckled weakly. "I figure what better place to hide from Konoha than in a Jashin temple? I asked for asylum and then they made me a sacrifice. I never thought anything would be worse than Konoha's prison."

"And that's exactly where you're going."

Shiyo snorted as he looked around. "It's almost humbling to realize that compared to all of the religious crusades I've seen over the years, that the victims of Jashinism are comparatively low."

"Are you making an excuse for this?" Crow asked sharply.

"Just an observation," Shiyo shrugged. "You have a sidekick this time."

"I don't plan on losing you this time around," Wolf spat. He took out chakra draining ropes, pulled Shiyo arms forward, and twisted them around Shiyo's wrists.

Crow crouched down in front of one of the children but was only met with a blank stare.

"What's wrong?"

"There's nothing you can do to save them," Shiyo answered. "From what I've seen they've been fed a mixture of opium and blood to get them addicted to killing since they were little. These kids are already weak and malnourished. They're not going to survive the withdrawal symptoms."

"You're not a medic-nin," Crow snapped. "You don't know that."

"He's a stubborn one." Shiyo pounded a fist to his chest and coughed blood. The streaks in his hair turned whiter as the snow fell.

"Let's go," Wolf declared as he pulled on Shiyo's ropes and Shiyo stumbled forward.

Crow followed after the two ninja. Crow took up the rear and watched for any signs of escape Wolf warned Shiyo would undoubtedly try.

"So..." Shiyo began as he easily kept pace despite being injured, "how is the wife?"

Wolf snorted. "We separated a long time ago. Women," Wolf landed on a branch and it snapped in a shower of ice, "are bitches."

"Tough," Shiyo nodded. "I told you not to marry her. I told you on your wedding day as I was getting you drunk not to marry her. So if you haven't been busy with the family what have you been doing? Don't tell me you've been looking for me all this time, Mr. Captain of the Hunter-nin division."

Wolf gave him sharp eyes. "I do my duty to the village."

Shiyo laughed bitterly. "Don't we all? Now look at us, two bitter lonely old men."
"Speak for yourself."

"It's a tragedy how we get sucked into this life. I keep running and running, without knowing how to do much else." Wolf felt resistance in the ropes. He turned to see Shiyo give him a grim smile, "I'm not going back."

Then Shiyo poofed into a cloud of smoke.

Crow jumped out the way as Wolf blasted an entire forest with a fire jutsu in enraged anger.

"I never took my eyes off of him," Wolf cursed. "I fucking hate shadow clones, smells the god-damned same as the original." Wolf punched a tree with so much force the bark burst into a fine powder. Wolf hated to admit that Shiyo was a master at exploiting his weaknesses.

"Most likely he hid among the survivors from the temple," Crow suggested, "That's what I would do."

Wolf shook his head. "The moment that clone dissipated he most likely made a run for it. He's gone."

"Not exactly," Crow said slowly. "I might have sort of left the real me with the survivors."

"Then what the fuck are you waiting for? Go get his ass!"

Crow nodded and disappeared in a cloud of smoke. That's when Wolf realized he might have forgotten to tell Crow that Shiyo possessed a kekkai genkai. Oh well.

Crow gently lifted his canteen of water to the cracked lips of one of the freed prisoners. The elder woman held the canteen gratefully to her mouth.

"It'll be alright," Crow assured her when the rush of information hit his head. In seconds, Crow activated sage mode and cursed when he spotted several chakra coils large enough to belong to ninja among the survivors. He would have to check them all.

"Hold on," Crow patted the fragile old woman and put his hands together to make more clones. Then a chill breeze swept through the area that not only brought flurries of snow, but a scent Crow remembered from Shiyo's shadow clone.

Shiyo was running and already out in the woods.

Crow blazed in a cloak of red chakra, instantly melted the snow, and leapt from a puddle created at his feet. Crow wasn't a professional tracker, but all ANBU were required to take lessons and with his nose, he had completed them with ease.

Crow whizzed through the trees on all fours, a red blur as he focused on the scent of his target. Shiyo's retreating back came into view, who was now fully clothed with stolen attire. The taste of blood swelled in Crow's mouth. Crow had been this close to digging his claws into Shiyo's back, but the metallic taste in the back of Crow's throat triggered a drastic decline in his adrenaline. Crow gathered his senses just in time to remember they were supposed to take the target alive. Crow slid passed, brushing an arc of snow in the air until he came to a stop before Shiyo's path.

"I don't know how you caught up to me but I refused to be captured again," Shiyo responded as he set his feet for a fight. "Static Release: Body Armor."
Crow reacted to Shiyo's haymaker with a punch of his own. Crow's fist connected but so did Shiyo's. The left side of Crow's ribcage suddenly exploded in small bites of pain. They exchanged a series of blows Crow found to be futile. Even when Crow blocked an attack or connected with one of his own, Crow was hit with an electrical charged static shock. Crow couldn't land a blow without feeling the sharp shock of Shiyo's kekkai genkai.

Crow unsheathed his katana and attacked in one smooth movement. The blade connected with Shiyo's arm guards. Crow cursed as static traveled from Shiyo's body through the katana and burned Crow's hands to a point he was forced to drop the blade. The cloth of his gloves had been burned through and steam sizzled from his palms. Crow looked up just as Shiyo came forward with a fist aimed right at his heart.

_I promise I'll be careful._

Crow funneled chakra to his feet and moved from the fight at blinding speed. "Wind release: Wave Wind Jutsu," Crow declared. Wind rushed through the trees and shook the branches until it was raining snow. Crow took advantage of the dusty powder to create a few shadow clones, exited the fight altogether, and hid behind one of the trees.

Crow grimaced in frustration as the hair all over his body stood on end. That attack could have killed him. When he was in the hospital he had heard to no end about his health, including a review of all his past medical records. Thanks to Kabuto, Crow knew with a well-placed strike to the heart he was dead, healing factor or not.

Crow could feel his body beginning to heal. The burns on his palms receded instantly. How ironic that it was the very thing killing him.

'Fox! Stupid Fox I know you can hear me. Why don't you ever answer when I want you to?'

_Shut up._

_"The healing factor is a part of your chakra. How do I regulate it?"_ Crow asked. If he could slow down minor injuries perhaps he could use it more safely for severe ones. He wished he could have thought of this idea when Sakura was in the room, not when he was in the middle of a battle.

_You can't._

_"What do you mean I can't?"_ Crow questioned. _"I can use your chakra whenever I want. Why can't I heal myself?"

_Your chakra control sucks._

Crow physically hit his head against the tree. His time was running out as his clones kept falling victim to Shiyo's indestructible armor. _'I can't believe I'm doing this,'_ Crow thought as he prepared himself to make a deal with the devil. _'If I give you some control over your chakra can you regulate it?'

_I'd rather tear your head off._

'Look, if I die you die, so believe it or not it is in your best interest to help me out. I don't need to be healed for every minor injury just the ones that could negatively affect me in battle.'

_I'd still rather tear your head off._

It wasn't a no. Crow knew this was going to have repercussion but at this point dealing with the
Kyuubi's attitude was worth it in exchange for, in the long run, another day to live and spend with his family. Crow carefully loosened the seal just enough for a trickle of the Kyuubi's chakra to flow through. Crow's wounds stopped healing.

At that moment all of Crow's clones were defeated.

Crow could think of multiple rasengan variants or wind jutsu that would take this guy out for good, but the problem was, Shiyo had to be captured alive. Capturing an enemy alive was so much harder than killing them.

"You can't hide from me!" Shiyo declared. "Static Release: Flowing Current." Shiyo slammed his hands to the ground.

Crow watched, confused by the targets jutsu until a charge of electricity zapped Crow's legs and then his back through the bark of the tree. Crow jumped off, landed on the ground and found knives of static traveling through his feet. Crow leaped into the air and threw several kunai that forced Shiyo to release the jutsu and roll out of the way.

Crow was relieved when he landed on safe ground.

Shiyo crouched in opposition. A sheen of sweat decorated Shiyo's forehead as his breathing became labored. Crow smirked as he realized his opponent's chakra stores were waning. Red claws formed from the Demon Fox's Cloak.

"Lightning Release-" "Wind Release-"

"Lightning Pierce Kunai!" "Rasenshuriken!"

Crow released the deadly fuuma shuriken and it spiraled in an arc, right around Shiyo's technique, right around Shiyo himself.

Crow's speed moved Crow out of the way just in time as the literal lightning bolt charged through the crackling air and only nicked Crow's forearm. Crow cursed as he stumbled. The static from the jutsu tightened the muscles of his left arm until it was unable to move, paralyzed.

It was the first time Crow had ever been hit without his healing armor, the first time he felt pain like a normal ninja would. It didn't heal instantly but remained a numbing sensation as his muscles continued to painfully tighten.

**I think I'm going to enjoy this.**

Crow winced. *'You're an evil son of a bitch.'*

"That's it?" Shiyo exclaimed. Shiyo knew he had been lucky, if those two highly dangerous techniques had collided his static cloak wouldn't survive the explosion.

"This is far from over," Crow smirked.

"You're entire left arm is paralyzed. You can't make hand signals any longer," Shiyo claimed.

Then a bell-like screech grew louder and echoed through the forest. Like a boomerang, a white flash cut through anything that got in its way. The rasenshuriken looped around, sliced through an enormous tree that groaned and fell at an angle.

Shiyo's eyes widened at the large shadow that grew at his feet. He turned around tiredly as the large
tree came crashing down on top of him, followed by piles and piles of snow.

Shiyo shook the snow from on top of him and looked up at Crow’s white mask. Nevertheless, he attempted to crawl from underneath the tree that had him pinned to the ground. When he tried to use his static jutsu he only succeeded in shocking himself. "Oh I know you're out there. You can stop fucking laughing now."

Crow turned as Wolf appeared, and to Crow's eyes, Wolf seemed to have been camouflaged to the environment. "Good job."

"If you were there the whole time why didn't you help?" Crow asked, unbelieving he had missed Wolf watching the whole battle.

"I would have interfered before you died," Wolf answered. The Captain bent down and twisted the chakra draining wire around Shiyo's neck, before turning the tree to dust with a fire infused punch. "Up." Wolf demanded.

Crow tried to rub feeling in his left arm but it was growing worse. 'Okay, you can heal me now.'

Can't handle a scratch?

Crow was about to cut off the Kyuubi's access to the demon's chakra but realized the Fox had a point. Perhaps he should just heal normally, like everyone else.

"I can't go back there," Shiyo pleaded as he attempted to run but only tripped on his own two feet. Crow could hardly believe Shiyo equated Konoha's prison to the horrors he saw in the Jashin temple.

"You have to answer for your crimes." Wolf argued as he crossed his arms and looked down at Shiyo who fell at his feet.

"I tried to save the village!" Shiyo declared. "If Konoha had just given into their demands the Third Shinobi War would not have lasted two more years."

"You stole S-class technology and tried to give it to our enemies."

"To end the war! What are some concessions to the lives we could have prevented?" Shiyo grimaced bitterly and struggled with the wire placed on his wrists. When Shiyo realized it was futile, his back hunched in defeat. "I lost my son in that war."

"I know Shiyo."

"He was only thirteen years old and he died because the Sandaime refused to surrender. You have no idea what it's like to lose a son. What I did, I did for Konoha."

"You still betrayed the village. You still stole top-secret information. You still escaped from Konoha's prison. Shiyo, you have to return and take responsibility for your crimes."

"To be tortured and rot in the silence of those cells? You know what those prisons are like. You know I can't possibly face that sadistic bastard Morino."

Wolf withdrew his katana.

"What are you doing?" Crow asked, alarmed.

"Mercy," Wolf whispered as he stood over Shiyo. "We can't do this anymore. I'm tired of chasing you."
"I'm tired of running," Shiyo admitted. "But what other choice do I have?"

The choice was given to him as Wolf plunged the katana, slicing through cloth and skin with ease. Wolf's shoulders quivered as he kneeled and held his best friend in his arms. "I'm sorry."

"No," Shiyo whispered. "Thank you. I never had the guts to do it myself. Surviving for this long seems... kind of meaningless."

Wolf nodded. "Right now, it does seem meaningless."

Crow respectfully turned away as Wolf stayed with Shiyo in his last moments. Crow couldn't help but to think about Sasuke, and how all meaningless it seemed indeed.

Wolf stood up, with the blood of his best friend soaked into his captain's cloak. The Captain of Konoha's Hunter-nin was a lonely and bitter old man. He had no wife to return home to and no children to raise. With the hunt complete, Wolf walked like a ghost through the snow-covered forest of Fire Country.

"Where are we?" Ame asked as she held onto Naruto's hand.

"You'll see." Naruto grinned as he knocked on the door.

Ame gasped when the door opened and revealed a woman with long wavy black hair and eyes just like hers.

"Ame, this is Kurenai-sensei," Naruto introduced.

"It is really good to meet you," Kurenai said gently as she opened the door to let them in. Ame didn't move and Naruto had to push her through the door.

"There are more like me," Ame said in awe as she noticed the little girl on the floor playing with blocks.

"Naruto said you might have some questions?" Kurenai offered as she motioned her guests to sit on the couch.

"Are you-" Ame looked up at Naruto and he encouraged her with a nod. "Are you my mommy?"

"No, I'm not," It hurt Kurenai to watch the girl's disappointment, "but we are a part of the same clan so we are family."

Ame brightened at that last word. "Wow, I thought I was the only one."

"You're not and if you ever have any questions about your abilities or how to use them do not be afraid to come to me. Our eyes are a gift."

Ame looked down while she fiddled with her fingers. "Do you know who my parents are?"

"Before you came here, I did cross-reference the Yuuhi clan files with those in the hospital. I do know who your parents are."

Ame sighed deeply before looking up at Kurenai. "They abandoned me, didn't they?"

"I'm afraid so. You don't have to do this."
Ame shook her head. "I want to know what they look like. I have to know."

Kurenai gave Naruto a doubtful glance and handed over the house address.

"Thanks Kurenai," Naruto said as Ame hopped down from his lap and headed with a determined stride toward the door.

"You're always welcome here if you want to talk," Kurenai responded as she said goodbye and watched Ame lead Naruto by the hand down the street.

Naruto didn't question Ame. He could see her resolve clear enough. When they entered the street and could see the house, Ame slowed and finally stopped. Ame looked back towards Naruto.

"Whatever you want."

Ame nodded and marched right up to the front door, but she couldn't knock. Instead, all she did was stand there. All of her fire dwindled in doubt. She could hear voices from the other side. Ame hesitated and then finally went to the side of the house. She reached on her tiptoes to see over the windowsill.

They looked normal, just a man and a woman laughing with each other over dinner. She had an older brother and a sister. Ame couldn't help but to try and picture herself sitting at the dinner table, her eyes as brown as her mother's.

Ame stepped back as tears began to stream down her face. "It's not fair!" Ame screamed and a torrential of rain began to pour from the sky. Naruto was at her side immediately and attempted to calm her down as Ame kicked the mailbox. The well-placed kick tore down a last name that would never mean anything to her.

Then a cloaked woman sped passed them and walked purposefully down the road. Ame's temper and tears subsided as she stared after the woman, pushed herself away from Naruto, and followed.

The long road led them to the orphanage.

The cloaked woman knocked on the door. An elderly woman, a woman Naruto knew to be dead and preferred she stay dead, answered the door. "What do you want now?"

"This baby has been left at the hospital. We have no more room."

"We have no more room either," the old woman spat.

"It's a baby," the nurse pleaded. "Have mercy."

"Mercy will not feed the monsters I already have," the elder woman spat, took the child anyways, and shooed the nurse back down the road. The elder woman grimaced as she looked down at the child. "No wonder why no one wanted you."

The door slammed shut, muffling wails and cries of children.

Naruto and Ame sat on the railing fence outside the orphanage. The rain pounded down as lightning streaked across the sky. Naruto could hardly believe how real the rain felt on his skin, how real the sudden genjutsu replicated the memory.

"Now I know why they call me 'rain,'" Ame whispered. Naruto wrapped a comforting arm around Ame's shoulders. "If I wasn't born a monster they would have wanted me."
"You're not a monster," Naruto replied immediately. "I didn't know my parents. I thought," Naruto paused and realized he's never voiced these feelings aloud. "I thought my parents had abandoned me too, because I was a monster. It wasn't until years later I learned differently. I went most of my entire life believing my parents hated me, that they feared me, or wanted me to die. And no one cared enough to tell me that I had been loved."

For a lonely, hated, and abandoned little boy, it would have made a world of a difference.

Naruto pressed Ame's head against his face. "You don't have to wonder anymore. Know that I will always love you."

Ame leaned against Naruto's arms. "I know," she whispered. "It's just, they didn't want me and that hurts. My parents are bad people."

Naruto wanted to tell Ame differently, that her parents were just civilians and they had probably been scared, but Naruto's heart wouldn't be in his words. Naruto wasn't even sure he had forgiven his own parents for sealing the Nine-tailed Fox inside of him. He understood how he was the most viable candidate, understood the politics, and understood the logic behind it all. But it didn't mean his heart, for all it has suffered, could forgive and forget.

As far as Naruto was concerned, there was never a good reason to ever harm a child.

Crow was relieved when reinforcements finally arrived. A medic team and a chuunin squad landed within the area, led by the ANBU agent Wasp.

"What's the situation?" Wasp asked.

"These are all the people we rescued from the Jashin temple. Most of them are traumatized and will be more than a little frightened. Over there are the most severe injuries that need to be looked at immediately. The children are over here. I've already done a survey of where everyone is from or where they have family to return to."

"Good job." Wasp answered.

Crow thought otherwise. People needed him and he needed something to do. Crow watched as the medic-nins went to work. The chuunin began to separate the crowds according to the country they would be escorted to.

As night descended Crow began to become increasingly worried as he noticed tremors in the children who moaned and lied helplessly on the ground. Crow picked up a little boy and noticed without meaning to that the boy had green eyes just like Ichigo. Suddenly panicked, Crow rushed the child to one of the medic-nin, who have been working non-stop since they arrived.

"Something is wrong with him," Crow demanded the medic-nin's attention.

The medic-nin shook his head. "There is nothing we can do for the children. We don't have an abundance of opium to wean them off gradually. They have less a chance of survival than these other patients. We have to save who we can."

"But shouldn't children get priority?" Crow asked.

"These are sacrificial prisoners. Those children were acolytes, priests in training. Even if recovery is successful, they could easily recede back. They're too unstable and dangerous."
"I'll show you dangerous," Crow growled as he grabbed the medic-nin's jacket. Wasp placed a hand on Crow's shoulder.

"Crow, that's enough. You're tired and you need to rest."

"But the children-"

Wasp gave Crow a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. "Everyone can't be saved."

Crow shoved Wasp's hand away from him. Crow refused to believe it but even he could see that the line for a medic's attention was long.

Crow tried to think of a solution while he watched in vigilance as the boy he held developed tremors that grew increasingly worse. The child cycled between chills and sweat. Often times a medic-nin would try to reason with him, try to insist he needed rest, but Crow remained. Crow was grasping at good ideas but he could reach none of them. The boy began to struggle with his breathing and in tears began to cry out for his father.

That had been Naruto's breaking point.

There wasn't a ingenious solution that Naruto pulled out of his ass. There was no help and no time. The boy in his arms was going to die.

The kunai reflected the moonlight. Naruto's chest heaved and released a ragged breath. Naruto memorized the expression of pain and the fear of a child lost in a darkness he couldn't escape. The tip of the kunai pressed against the small neck coated in sweat. The blade parted the skin like clouds and blood poured like water.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," Naruto cried as the kunai fell from his hands and the body went still. Naruto cried as he clutched the boy and hugged him to his face. Naruto's apologies fell on a dead corpse. There was no one to forgive him.

The winds of winters weren't as painful as the mournful sobs that beat against Naruto's chest. The blood of a child, an innocent child, soaked into Naruto's skin like a bitter fragrance. There were scars on his heart more painful than the ones on his skin.

Naruto still had one hundred and nine more children left to go.

Naruto crept into a window of his house. Unlike before, he had left all of his ANBU gear back at headquarters and left under the guise of a henge. He refused to bring it home any longer, refused to risk the chance of Ame or Ichigo waking up and seeing him covered in blood. Fresh from a shower at HQ, Naruto entered his room and put on his pajamas. Naruto froze when he noticed Ame asleep with tears down her cheeks.

Concerned, he dismissed the current clone in bed and Naruto was tackled by a rush of memories. A lot had happened while he was away.

Naruto watched as Ichigo tossed and turned from another nightmare, nightmares Naruto now understood. Naruto's thoughts dwelled on what could have been Ichigo's fate. Then, unbidden, came the faces of all the children he had killed. Not even the worst of men could boast such numbers. Naruto shoved the memory away in a dark crevice of his mind, hoping it would be lost, hoping he would never have to confront his worst nightmares again.

Somehow, you get to a point where you just can't cry anymore.
Naruto reached over and crawled into bed. Naruto pressed his lips to Ame's forehead and winced at the soreness that plagued his body. Naruto closed his eyes.

"All I ever wanted is for him to be proud of me."

*Flames licked at his skin until the pain subsided to a bright white light that beckoned Naruto to come closer. Naruto stepped forward, but found Sai blocking his path. "You should have been the one to die."

"I'm sorry," Naruto begged forgiveness and reached out. Sai scattered in a cloud of mist and Naruto fell forward into the light.

*He was kneeling in a field of the dying. He held a bloody kunai and two dead bodies in his arms. Their faces were paled by death's cold embrace. Their heartbeats vanished like the brief flicker of falling stars.*

"I'm sorry," *Naruto pleaded, but the corpses of Ame and Ichigo didn't answer.*

Naruto whipped awake. Sweat poured down his chest and his heart pounded rapidly. His entire body felt as if it flames were eating away at his skin.

"Daddy, are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Naruto rasped and looked down at the little girl who had been woken by his sudden movement. "It's nothing, just another day at work," Naruto assured and patted her gently on the head. He pulled from the bed and stumbled from the room.

His hands couldn't stop shaking as he rushed around the house and laid down more seals and traps. He closed the blinds and the curtains, and even when Naruto's senses confirmed there was no danger, the tension required of him out in the field never went away.

**I think you're losing it.**

Naruto rubbed his eyes as he collapsed on the couch. He refused to admit the Demon Fox was right as he scanned the room, his senses hypersensitive to his surroundings. The muscles in his body still tight, he leaned back and his blonde hair fell limply around his shoulders. Dark rings decorated his heavy eyes. Naruto didn't know if it was his decision not to rely so much on his healing ability, or the consequences of it, but Naruto's body felt as if it was reliving the memory of being burned alive.

Naruto sat like a sentinel on duty, like a ghost in the darkness.

*...there was never a good reason to ever harm a child*
Lesson Fifteen

The Burden of Responsibility

"Is everything alright?" Naruto asked concerned as he eyed a chair shattered to wooden splinters on the floor and a large dent in the wall above it.

"Just report," the Hokage could only rub her eyes. A bottle of sake was vagrantly sitting atop her desk without any attempts at trying to hide.

"But didn't Wolf already report?" Naruto argued.

"Yes," Tsunade nodded. "He did, but you failed the mission to bring the target back alive. I want to hear from you."

Naruto scratched his head. "Well, Wolf killed the target."

Tsunade nodded. "I know, Wolf told me. What I want to know is why didn't you stop him?"

"You expected me to stop an ANBU Captain?" Naruto's question was a mixture of joking and doubt.

"Yes, I did." The Hokage responded. "Look, I understand that things can be different on the field than what is on the piece of paper I have. The situation can change at any moment that comprises the mission and calls for flexibility but I am trying to determine if the deviation from the mission was justified or not."

"I think it was something Wolf needed to resolve," Naruto answered. "I don't know what kind of information the guy had or why you needed him alive but I don't think Shiyo was necessarily a bad person and Wolf gave him a chance that Konoha refused to."

Tsunade pursed her lips in thoughts. "Nevertheless, I'll have to put Wolf on probation. He hasn't taken a vacation since he's made Captain and hopefully it'll be good for him because he's the best tracker we got." Tsunade made a note to tell Shizune to write up the papers. "I also heard from Wasp what you did out there."

"I don't want to talk about it." The words spilled fast from Naruto's mouth.

A silent pause occurred in the office until Tsunade gave a slow nod. "I promise I'll never bring the mission up after this but I have to say, you did a very hard thing, something a lot of my agents wouldn't have the heart to do, something I don't think I would have the courage to do. Not only that, but even apart from the mission, you saved all those people. You did good work out there."

Naruto shrugged his shoulders as he busied with an interesting spot on the floorboards. For Naruto, his mistakes seemed so much louder than his triumphs.

For Tsunade, she was relieved that despite everything Naruto has experienced in the last months his compassion and his heart hasn't changed. All too many times Tsunade has been forced to watch a ninja's heart turn too hard and cold and mean.

Tsunade made a signal before the window and in seconds she was secure in knowing that the monitoring ANBU had her office completely sealed. No one but the Hokage and Naruto would know what occured in this room. "Naruto," Tsunade said gently.
Naruto looked up at the sudden use of his name. He had to look down to make sure he was still in ANBU uniform. "Yeah?" Naruto asked nervously.

"I have decided to promote you to squad leader."

Tsunade prepared for the storm. The words needed time to sink into Naruto's head, until he began to shake like quivering thunder clouds. "No."

"You can't just say no. It is your duty to the village." She knew he wouldn't be like other ninja, who would accept the responsibility and raise in salary without a word.

"No," Naruto threw his hands up in the air. "Sai died because of me!"

"Everyone makes mistakes," Tsunade answered. She could see Naruto paying the consequences in a dose of self-doubt for an opportunity a more younger and immature Naruto would have accepted without question just a year ago. This was why she decided to tell him now before springing the news on him right before a mission.

"No," Naruto said fiercely. "I mean, you tell me who to beat up and I beat them up, it's as simple as that. I'm not like Shikamaru or Neji," Naruto shook his head. "I can't do this."

Tsunade poured her a shot of sake. "You command an army filled with Naruto clones. That's a feat unto itself." Tsunade argued. "Both Sparrow and Wolf highly recommended you for this promotion. You work well under pressure. I know you Naruto, you're the sort of person who needs someone to rely on you. You need to be the hero."

"That's not true," Naruto denied. "I'm no hero."

"Then why did you adopt those children?"

Naruto opened his mouth to argue, then paused. "You know about-"

"Naruto, I'm the Hokage. I mean really, Ame Namikaze?"

Naruto crossed his arms. "There are plenty of people with the same last name and they're not related. I didn't think it would be that obvious."

"Naruto, why did you adopt them when I expressly told you not to? Are they your way of coping?"

"No," Naruto snapped, much angrier than Tsunade ever anticipated. "I'm not using them to make myself feel better. I'm trying to protect them. I'm trying to care since no one else does. This isn't some sort of selfish wish fulfillment. I would never use them. I don't-"

"Naruto," Tsunade calmly interrupted, "I wasn't implying anything of the sort. I know you would never harm those children. The point I was trying to make is that they depend on you."

Naruto looked away. "I'm sorry. I- just… don't take them away from me."

Tsunade rubbed her face as she leaned against the desk. "I'm not going to forcibly take children out of a home that cares for them but I can't legally sanction it."

"Thank you," Naruto mumbled. "So if we're done…"

"We're far from done. I was in the process of promoting you."

"Granny," Naruto clung to the name as he collapsed in one of the office's chairs. "I can't."
"Why not?"

"I already told you. I'm not smart enough for this. I can't lead anyone."

"All this coming from the kid that wants to become Hokage?"

"Wanted," Naruto corrected. "If I can't keep my teammate from dying, how am I supposed to protect a whole village? I don't know what the hell I was thinking. I was just some stupid little kid looking for attention."

"Naruto…"

"I'm not going to let people die because I did something stupid or made another mistake. I'm not going to do it."

"Naruto, I know you might not be able to see it right now, but you could become a great leader. Maybe you don't make elaborate plans like Shikamaru or demand respect like Neji but things out in the field change instantly and I need someone flexible, who isn't afraid to break mission protocols, and whose judgment I can trust in morally delicate situations. The world is changing Naruto and right now, in such a delicate political environment when anything can tip the scale into war, I need someone I know will take every life into consideration friend or foe, will take every choice into consideration, whether it's wrong or right. I need you Naruto."

The hero-complex that Naruto denies he has, made him pause and think. "I don't know."

"I'll give you some time to think it over," Tsunade suggested.

Naruto nodded his head slowly. "Are we done?"

Tsunade smiled sweetly. "I could use another favor. It's about Kakashi."

"I'm listening," Naruto replied, his curiosity just too irresistible.

"It's about time for Kakashi to take on another genin team. He's being as resistant as you are. I was wondering if you'll talk to him."

"I'll try," Naruto stood up. "Now are we done?"

Tsunade smirked. "Yes Naruto, we're done now." When Naruto turned to leave Tsunade called one last time. "And Naruto, bring the kids by the office sometime. I'd like to meet them."

Kakashi was always a hard man to find. Usually, he found you. But over the years Naruto became well-enough acquainted with his sensei's chakra signature to find him anywhere in the village. Naruto was among the few in Konoha who could boast the ability to find Kakashi when they wanted.

Naruto found Kakashi on the third training field… reading porn.

"I'm guessing you're late to something," Naruto asked as he landed on the tree branch above Kakashi's head.

"Jounin meeting," Kakashi replied as he flipped a page to continue the illusion that he was reading it. By now Kakashi knew the contents of the book inside and out, but it had become his primary tool of wasting time.
"My answer is still no by the way."

"Why not?" Naruto asked curiously. "It's not like you have anything better to do."

Kakashi didn't answer as Naruto shook a few leaves loose and one drifted to land on the page of his book. "How is ANBU going?" Kakashi asked.

"It's-" Naruto was trying hard to find the words.

He was too embarrassed to admit that he's never cried as much as he has these past few months, too worried to admit that he was afraid he was going out of his mind and that the only sane voice in his head was the Nine-tailed Fox, and too tired to admit that he woke up every day and wondered when he would be punished for all of the horrible things he has done.

"Want to spar?"

"That would be great," Naruto sighed in relief.

The two ninjas hopped from the tree. Kakashi casually tucked his book behind him in his belt.

"Are you sure you're up for this old man?" Naruto grinned.

Kakashi reached in his pocket and produced a chime when he revealed a small silver bell. "What do you say? How about one last test?"

Naruto looked at the bell that contained fond memories and couldn't help but notice how three had dwindled to two and finally down to one. "You're on."

"Same rules apply. Steal the bell," Kakashi responded. He didn't waste time. He lifted his mask and activated his sharigan.

Naruto smirked, created five hundred shadow clones and disappeared among them.

Kakashi lifted an eyebrow as he analyzed the clones with his sharingan. Usually shadow clones had an equal share of chakra distributed between all of them, but Naruto's experience with the technique was so advanced he could now determine how much chakra each clone received which made it harder for Kakashi to find the real one. If anyone could ever claim to master the multi-shadow clone technique, it would be Naruto.

Kakashi defended against the barrage of flying limbs, fists, and feet. With his sharingan he could easily track and counter the clone's movements even if Naruto's wild and chaotic taijutsu was on par with his own.

Kakashi kicked against a clone and the momentum pushed him back far enough to prepare a technique. "Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu."

Flames spewed from Kakashi's mouth as a gigantic ball of fire bowled right into the crowd of Naruto clones which burst into smoke upon impact. The smoke obscured the field and when it cleared only a few clones were left standing, but that's not what worried Kakashi. His sharingan revealed Naruto's chakra intertwined within the air, invisible to the naked eye.

"This is new," Kakashi noticed as he analyzed the technique and noted the flexibility in its use. He should have copied it, if only he had seen Naruto performing the hand signs. The remaining clones charged forward but they were only a distraction. Kakashi caught the indiscernible transformation of air before it whipped inwards.
"Earth Release: Hiding like a Mole."

The tumultuous wind crashed together as Kakashi settled in the safety of the dirt. He knew he wouldn't be safe for long, knowing that Naruto's sage mode would most likely pinpoint his location. Kakashi created a shadow clone and dug deeper into the earth just below the clone so it seemed their chakra signatures were on top of the other.

Just as Kakashi predicted, an enlarged rasengan plummeted into the ground and completely obliterated his clone.

"One Thousand Years of Death!" Kakashi erupted from his hiding spot to finally catch the real Naruto. Kakashi chuckled as he watched his old student fly into the air with a loud "fuck" and crash through the trees. "Never gets old."

"What do you mean you don't want to fucking heal me!"

Kakashi tilted his head as Naruto yelled from the bushes, giving up his position too easily for a ninja, but Kakashi judged it to be no ploy.

Naruto crawled from the bushes with a frustrated expression and a frown. "I swear, that's worse that getting butt checked."

Kakashi raised an eyebrow.

"Don't ask," Naruto muttered as he picked himself up and rubbed his behind.

"You haven't gotten the bell." Kakashi noted as the bell still chimed at his waist. Kakashi was still in his battle stance, ready for the next attack.

Naruto grinned. "I got that a long time ago." Naruto said as he revealed a bell in his palm.

For the first in a long time, Kakashi was confused.

Naruto snickered. Kakashi always carried two bells. "You never said which bell. You were so focused on the one at your belt I snuck up behind you during your fireball technique and stole the other one from your back pocket."

And just like that, as quick as a ninja's life in battle, Kakashi lost the test. And quite honestly, Kakashi didn't think he would lose this quickly.

But that's how ninja battles went. They happen in the blink of an eye. Ninjas fight for survival and use their best and most deadly skills upfront to win, not long drawn out battles with someone pulling bigger and bigger techniques out their ass. You either give all you got or not at all. You either live or you die.

"I'm quite impressed," Kakashi replied. Even with his sharingan Kakashi couldn't possibly keep up with so many Naruto's enacting so many different tactics all at once.

Naruto reached out to give the bell back to Kakashi until Kakashi shook his head. "Keep it this time."

"Really?" Naruto asked.

Kakashi crouched down atop on the rocks. The sun began to set over the third training ground. "I hear you have kids now."
Naruto threw his arms in the air. "Am I that incapable of keeping secrets?"

"It's not very subtle when the Hero of Konoha is dragging kids all over town. Villagers talk. You never know what you hear lounging around in trees."

Naruto sighed deeply, "Figures." He tossed the bell into the air and it glistened in the setting sun. Its note was clear and Naruto caught it back in hands.

"What happened to Team Seven was my fault," Kakashi said suddenly.

Naruto frowned as he leaned against the rock Kakashi was sitting on. "That's not true. Those were Sasuke's choices."

"It's not just about Sasuke, it's not about you or Sakura. None of the techniques you used in battle today I taught you. I failed you. The problem was I had too much baggage coming into the team and you suffered for it. Having the title of teacher didn't make me one."

Naruto tried to find a plausible argument to counteract it, but realized suddenly that it was true none of the techniques he had used in battle was taught by Kakashi. Sure Kakashi had an unhealthy addiction to porn but that didn't mean he was a bad teacher. "No, you taught me something more important that the greatest jutsu in the world. You taught me what it means to be a team," Naruto answered, "and I've carried that with me all my life."

"It's not easy turning children into ninja," Kakashi replied as he lingered on his students and how far they have come, both the good and the bad.

"I can only imagine," Naruto said slowly, "which is why we can't give up. We make mistakes yes, but the only way to do better is to learn from them and keep going on."

Kakashi sat quiet for a long time. Kakashi knew he was right, that he had been a bad teacher to Team Seven, at the same time he knew Naruto was right as well, that he could become better. "I'll think about it."

From Kakashi that was the best answer you were going to get.

Naruto stood up and stretched. Before leaving he paused and turned back to Kakashi. "Can I give a piece of advice?"

Kakashi raised an eyebrow.

"Show up on time," Naruto replied. "I know you visit your old teammates a lot, but the dead shouldn't keep us from our responsibilities to the living."

Kakashi chuckled quietly. "Everyone always remarks how your personality mirrors your mother but I've always seen your father in you. He'd tell me the same thing."

Naruto nodded. Naruto Uzumaki walked down the road, stopped, and then slapped himself in the face. He just used Talk no Jutsu on himself. Naruto groaned as he headed for the Hokage's tower.

"I guess I better start taking my own advice."

"Thought about it?" The Hokage asked casually. Her feet rested atop her desk as she threw kunai at a map hung on the door behind Naruto's head. Naruto seemed unaffected by the kunai thrown past his ear.
"You're sneaky," Naruto accused.

"When commanding ninja who always think they have all the answers, sometimes you have to be," the Hokage smirked. "So you're willing to accept the position?"

"I guess," Naruto mumbled as another kunai whizzed past. Naruto frowned as he turned around and stared at a map of all the ninja nations. "You're more annoyed than you usually are. What's going on?"

"Hokage classified information only," Tsunade frowned as she threw the next kunai with more force. Naruto caught it in mid-air. "Seriously, what's going on?"

Tsunade pouted and after a moment of thought signaled the ANBU outside and then pointed to Naruto. "This information leaves this room and I'm killing you."

"Promise."

"Do you remember that mission you did in the Land of Earth where you saved Aburame Mushi?"

Naruto frowned, not liking where this was going. "Hard to forget."

"The southern province of the Land of Earth has decided to secede. The renegade ninja have decided to place the cousin of the Earth Daimyo in charge of the newly formed country called the Land of Mountains. Now the only thing acting as a buffer between the highly militant country with a vendetta against us is the Land of Grass."

Naruto had to sit down. "Can't the Tsuchikage do anything?"

"If he wasn't mired in economic turmoil to properly deal with the situation and since they are using the Earth Daimyo's cousin as a puppet, the Earth Daimyo accepts the succession. It's a mess."

"Not only that but the Land of Lightning has been experiencing constant thefts from their weapon production centers. We found the thieves."

Naruto widened his eyes as he remembered C, the Cloud ninja no one knew he had helped during his ANBU mission test. "Who?"

"The stolen weapons showed up when the Land of Sound successfully launched a surprise attack on the Land of Hot Water while all the major countries were fretting over the succession problem. They were just waiting for the right time to strike."

"So that means…"

"As of last night, the Land of Hot Water doesn't exist anymore. Not only that but Sound has turned towards the Land of Frost which borders Lightning. This morning the Raikage has declared war on Sound."

Naruto turned and looked at the map. The lines that were supposed to be borders seemed to be changing before his eyes. Naruto turned around and eyed Tsunade. "That's not it is it?"

"Do you remember your very first mission? When I sent you to kill the remains of a Terrorist Organization called Kuro No Keiyakusha?"

Naruto always remembered.
"It's back, stronger than before, and has an alliance with the samurai. The risk of security is as high as the level allocated to the Akatsuki. In the light of the recent political turmoil they have demanded for all Daimyo to eliminate their reliance on ninjas. We can't get to them because they are given amnesty within the Land of Iron. Our informants have tipped us off that the organization is manufacturing weapons modeled after Deidara's clay bombs. Its technology reported to even the playing field between samurai and ninja."

"My head is beginning to hurt," Naruto sighed as he tried to comprehend all the information at once. Tsunade tipped a bottle of sake. "I know how that feels," then she drank straight from the bottle. "So what do we do?" Naruto asked.

"There was a jounin meeting today to discuss the recent events. What I just told you, only jounin-level and up know about this information. The civilians have hardly realized that one new country has been created and another has been lost." Tsunade paused to throw another kunai into the map. "I really need you out there right now Naruto."

"I'll try my best," that was all Naruto could truly promise.

"Here, I have the information on your new squad. It'll mainly be an infiltration team." Tsunade explained as she handed Naruto the folders on his new squad mates.

Naruto curiously took the folders and opened them.

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**Codename: Fox**

**Gender: Female**

**Element: Water**

**Affiliation: Tracker**

**Abilities: Byakugan; Medical Ninjutsu**

**Summoning Contract: Snake**

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**Codename: Boar**

**Gender: Male**

**Element: Earth; Fire**

**Affiliation: Torture and Interrogation**

**Abilities: Genjutsu Specialist**

**Summoning Contract: Hawk**

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*The dead shouldn't keep us from our responsibilities to the living*
Lesson Sixteen

The Sound of Silence

The antique tea set struck the ground like a bolt of lightning and shattered porcelain ruin across the wooden floor.

"I humbly apologize," the old nursemaid repeated like a chant as she bowed her forehead upon the wood.

The Hyūga elder looked upon the incident with cold pale eyes as branch members quickly rushed to clean up the mess. "I have had enough of your accidents. Perhaps a whipping will steady your hand."

Like a statue coming to life, Hinata Hyūga placed the tray she was holding into the arms of a branch cousin and moved from her assigned spot to bow before the Hyūga elder.

"I plead your mercy," Hinata's soft voice floated through the room as harmless as a butterfly.

"There must still be a punishment." the Elder flipped a page of her book. "You could take the punishment in her place."

Hinata's answer was not surprising to any in the room. "I accept."

The elder motioned to a branch member to send for her grandson. As if nothing had ever happened, she turned right back to her tea, and flipped another page in her book.

Hinata remained with her head bowed to the floor, her hands set in a position as delicate as arranging flowers, and her body bent from the waist in a submissive gesture that hid her discomfort.

Iyashi entered the room with the barbed whip over his shoulder. He took one look at Hinata with a sneer of disgust and asked, "How many?"

"Ten will do," the Elder replied with little attention, much more engrossed in her fictive tale of political intrigue.

Hinata finally lifted her head with as much expression of one involved in an oft-performed ritual. She didn't need to be told to slip the happi coat from her shoulders. Her breasts were exposed to the witnesses in the room but what was modesty to a Hyūga? Her shoulders were hunched and hands were folded as if she was simply serving tea. Her pale and unblemished skin was broken by the scars that marred her back like the twisting roots of a naked tree.

The branch members looked away in shame. The main members couldn't be more aloof. Iyashi looked as if it was nothing more than an undignified responsibility.

The whip snapped across Hinata's back. There was the sound of stripped flesh. The branch members held their breaths in anxiousness. The Elder flipped a page. Iyashi pulled his shoulder back to gather momentum.

Hinata never spoke a word. She never released a gasp of pain. She never flinched. Her resolve was as hardened as the fire hidden within the depths of her eyes.

There was never so much strength in silence.
When it was done, Hinata readjusted her clothes, picked herself back up, took the tray she had been holding and once again became a statue at the periphery of the room. A branch member rushed to quickly clean the blood from the floor. Nothing moved in the next thirty minutes but the turn of a page, and then they were all dismissed from the Elder's service after her tea had been finished.

"Hinata-sama!" Two of her closest cousins immediately went to her aid while others watched with concerned glances.

"Are you alright, Hinata-sama?" Tokuma asked, but when he reached out to assist her Hinata stepped away.

"I'm alright," Hinata smiled even though her back was on fire.

"Tashiko, make sure Hinata sees Auntie. I have guard duty." Tokuma was hesitant to leave but Tashiko shook her head and shooed him off.

"I'm fine really." Hinata assured her younger cousin.

"No," Tashiko said defiantly as she pulled Hinata by the hand toward the branch quarters. Their Aunt, a medical prodigy back during her youth, quickly tended to the violent gashes across Hinata's back.

"Hinata, you've got to rest. I'll send for someone else to cover your chores."

"I'm a ninja. I can wash dishes," Hinata replied simply, but her Aunt gave that cold expression her Father had mastered.

"Harming yourself like this is not going to change a thing. The branch family will always be branch family."

Hinata kept her silence.

"Tashiko, make sure she gets to her room."

Tashiko nodded and followed Hinata from the room and into the hallway. She watched anxiously as Hinata insisted on walking without any assistance. There were none in the branch family who held their head so high.

"This isn't the way to your room."

"I'm going Neji's room," Hinata answered as she stopped before his door and undid the appropriate seals.

"Really?"

"You assume too much."

"Sure," Tashiko didn't believe her. Everyone in the branch family suspected Hinata and Neji were secretly courting each other, much to Tokuma's and the other male branch members' disappointment. When Tashiko peeked inside of the room and saw no one, she quickly rushed off to finish her chores.

Hinata climbed atop Neji's bed and rested against the window. Her head was a thrumming of bells and ached much more than her back. She pulled the pills that Sakura had her testing from her pocket and swallowed two without hesitation. When the pain didn't subside she took a third.
Neji's room was the only place Hinata could steal a few moments to herself. Neji was the only person in the branch house with his own room, bestowed to him by her late father.

But those fleeting peaceful moments didn't last long.

Neji stormed into the room and his loose clothing billowed like clouds when he turned to slam the door. He littered it with silence seals before finally turning around. "Hinata-sama," Neji bowed respectfully. He was among many of the branch members who refused to drop the honorific from her name. "You've got to stop getting in trouble like this, especially a day before returning on-duty."

Hinata never moved from her spot from the window, but tucked her head even further against the smooth glass surface. "She changed my diapers when I was little. How could I do nothing?"

"Sometimes you've got to look the other way."

Only a small perceptible wrinkle above Hinata's brow indicated a frown. "You've become accustomed to looking the other way."

"I'm doing what I can," Neji argued coolly as he crossed his arms. "Hinata, you've got to stop tempting their ire. They can't risk sending you to the hospital again. Next time they're going to kill you."

That's when it all began – the incident that had placed Hinata in the hospital. That was when Hinata realized actions were much more important than words.

"This carelessness could get you in trouble on a mission."

"I'll be careful."

Neji frowned. He wished he could accompany Hinata and keep her safe but the elders kept him on a tight leash. Hopefully, it would be their undoing. Neji worked as an undercover ANBU agent within his own clan. He was hoping to discover some kind of discriminating evidence to build a big enough case that would allow the Hokage to bring the elders to trial. It wasn't going to be easy to bring down the strongest members of the strongest clan in Konoha.

"And what are you looking at?" Neji activated his byakugan in the direction Hinata was directing hers. His back stiffened as his visions led him through houses until he caught a view of Kiba and Sakura making out on the kitchen table. "That's disgusting."

"You peak at the girl's bath."

"Hinata-sama!"

Hinata titled her head almost imperceptibly. "Hyūga sees through walls, not hear through them." Neji's secret was safe in this room. Hinata watched as Kiba tugged on Sakura's shirt. "I'm glad he's happy. I'm glad he's finally moved on. Thank you for delivering the letter to his sister."

"I do what I can to ruin your love life."

The two stoic cousins looked at one another, and gave a small smile.

"How is Hanabi today?"

"Angry, as always. Our deadline is approaching."

When Hanabi turned sixteen, she would be forced to marry her insufferable cousin Iyashi. The only
thing that has prevented this from happening thus far was a Konoha law established years ago. It had been a common practice for both ninja and civilians to enroll their daughters in the academy for the sole purpose of finding a ninja husband. The moment these daughters graduated, they married and began families. It was an economic loss for the village that spent resources in training them. In an attempt to insure some years of service, the minimum marriage age for a kunoichi was set to sixteen. It was a law not even a Hyūga could change.

"It's time for me to leave soon," Hinata noted as she opened the window and whistled. She waited for a moment before a snake slid into the room and wrapped around her arm. The reptile's glittering green contrasted with her porcelain white.

Neji's frown deepened. "If the Elders find out you signed a summoning contract--"

"They are going to kill me," Hinata finished as she raised her arm and the snake tasted the air. "Shizuka, I am leaving for duty soon. You will continue to watch Hanabi for me?"

"I can watch Hanabi." You wouldn't think Neji's frown could grow even further, but somehow it did.

"Shizuka is less noticeable," Hinata replied. The wily snake stared at Neji in disgust with glimmering red eyes before twisting around Hinata's neck in a teasing dance.

Neji watched on edge and followed every scale on the reptile with his byakugan.

"I will continue to do this for you," Shizuka responded with a hiss. The summon was much more willing to serve this master than her previous ones who tended to use her brethren only as shields.

"I think the Hyūga clan could use a summoning contract in the family." Hinata gave no hint of discomfort as the snake tightened around her neck and then crawled down her shirt. She stretched her arm towards the window. Shizuka reappeared from the edge of her sleeve and slithered back outside.

"Not snakes."

"They strike as quick as the Jyūken. Not to mention," Hinata turned to her cousin, "They're cold blooded."

"I find no humor in that statement."

Hinata smiled at Neji's annoyance. She climbed down from the bed. He stood in her way of the door. "Be careful out there. Come back alive."

Hinata has done a lot of things all in the name of coming back alive, back to a home hardly bearable, back to a hope far in the distance.

"They're probably watching."

"I know."

Neji leaned over Hinata. The clan wasn't supposed to know Neji was an ANBU insider, nor that he and Hinata were collaborating. There was only one viable cover story to explain why Hinata visited the solace of his room often.

Their lips met. Often they would close their eyes and imagine that they held someone else. Hinata was too tired to imagine and after the briefest touch attempted to pull away but Neji deepened the
"Hinata…" Neji released her with a whispered promise upon her ear.

Hinata refused to look at him and finally fled from the room. A confused turbulence in her chest questioned if perhaps it was only she who imagined someone else on the other side.

But those confused thoughts were tucked away into the hard emotional shell that had formed to protect her. Nothing was more important than the mission. She had already given over her first kiss, her first kill, her pride, and her dignity. She was left with little else but would sacrifice it all to see the Hyūga elders toppled from power, to see her little sister smile again.

Fox walked from the Hyūga compound, never making a sound to disturb the silence.

Fox wiped the blood from her mouth as she picked herself up from the private training room floor.

"That's all you've got, branch heiress?" Sloth asked with a smug smirk. He knew she hated that appropriately bestowed nickname.

The second Fox regained her footing, her hands were slapped away by her opponent's Jyūken. The two exchange a whirlwind of blows that could not penetrate each other's defenses. Fox saw it coming, saw the muscles betray his next movement, but Fox's hesitation kept her from defending in time.

Sloth lifted his foot, channeled chakra into his feet, and slammed it as quick and deadly as a jyūken strike against the chakra point in Fox's shoulder. Fox went skidding to the floor and quickly processed the fact she could no longer use chakra in her right arm.

With sweat and an iron will, she forced herself to her knees just as Sloth descended on her, his arm pulled back and lightning crackling at his fingertips. He struck her and the lightning tore through Fox's body like cracked glass. Her chakra stirred, then conformed and suddenly became a conduit of power. On instinct, her left hand shot forward. A flash of lightning scattered from her fingertips as she impacted with the chakra point in Sloth's chest.

Sloth went flying across the room.

He sat up with a groan. "Now I know what my own jutsu feels like," Sloth coughed a splattering of blood to the floor and then promptly healed with glowing green chakra. It would have been a killing blow if his natural affinity didn't absorb most of the attack. "You've finally adapted to the element."

Fox was too tired to even nod her head. She rested against the wall as she tended to her own wounds. It had taken her months just to pull off one successful lightning jutsu. It would be years before she had it fully mastered but it would be worth it. Sloth was proof of that. Combining the lightning element with their clan's technique was devastating. It was the very reason why Sloth had been banished from the clan. The main family was too afraid Sloth was going to use the technique against them.

The pain slowly ebbed as Fox focused on closing her wounds.

"Only animals are whipped."

Fox was too tired to modestly react to the fact he was looking at her naked, again.

"It's nothing," Fox responded. The pain of being whipped was insignificant to what she was feeling
now. Fox could bear the burden much more easily than her branch brethren.

"It's slavery. We bear brands like that of cattle." A hard dark glint in Sloth's eyes suggested that perhaps he was banished for good reason. "Why don't you kill them? Don't tell me all those times they put a whip to your back you've never thought about striking your fingertips into their throat and watching as they gasp for breath? It would be so easy for you to strike their hearts as they sleep, kill the women who lie in their bed, kill the children who have inherited their cruelty. It would be so easy."

Fox's response was a chill that strangled his words. It was a response rooted in a history of pride and tradition, in a history of competition and recent betrayals. "The Hyūga are not Uchiha."

"Are you so sure?" Sloth questioned, and finally stood up. "You are your father's daughter. Same time tomorrow?"

Fox watched her teacher with suspicion as she stood up.

Sloth noticed her stiff gaze. "I was only joking," but both Byakugans caught the twitch of muscle that betrayed he was lying. Nevertheless, Fox and Sloth walked from the room but Fox's thoughts were shadows. Neji had warned her not to trust Sloth. There was none a ninja trusted, not even their own family.

In the corner of her eye, Fox noticed Sloth looking her up and down, obvious in his intent. "It is disrespectful to look at someone naked without their consent."

"You have nothing to be ashamed about." It was the only reason why he agreed to train her in the first place. Fox grew increasingly uncomfortable under Sloth's lewd leer. Then his hand brushed across her backside. At first it had only been small touches during training, quick, almost experimental to test her patience. Now, it had grown into a blatant squeeze of her butt cheek.

Not a sound left Fox's lips as Sloth shoved her against the wall. Fox might have found the courage to stand up for the well-being of others, but to stand up for herself she was insecure and helpless. Sloth devoured her with his eyes and the clothes she wore were meaningless as protection.

"Certainly you know by now nothing comes for free, branch heiress," Sloth whispered and shoved his erection into the crook of her legs. Fox didn't dare faint. His hands trailed the lining on her pants.

"Take your hands off her or I'll tear your dick apart and feed it as a snack to my pets."

Sloth stepped back with careful mind to the kunai at his throat. Sloth didn't dare attack an ANBU Captain and decided to abandon his quarry.

"I can have you tortured without leaving a mark. Keep that in mind next time you decide to touch her." Snake threatened and watched as Sloth fled down the hallway.

"Sensei," Fox whispered.

Snake rolled her eyes. Snatched Fox by the hand and dragged the woman down the hall. So many people had given up on Snake in her lifetime but Snake refused to give up on someone who needed her help. Out of all her students Fox was the most impossible. Every ninja had their trauma but it was the trauma that settle in as children that were the most destructive. It wasn't normal for a person to feel so insecure, so worthless, and so incompetent. A man's inability to become a father shouldn't have to scar the child, but it ran deep within Fox's psyche.

Snake and Fox disappeared into Fox's room. It was bare, clean, and easy to assume that no one lived
there. "What did I teach you about men?"

Fox stared down at her hands. "That they're stupid, untrustworthy, and can only think with they're dicks."

"Exactly," Snake nodded approvingly. "Never give them power over you. You must be the one to maintain the power at all times," Snake warned. Rape wasn't unheard of in ANBU. The stress was high, emotions were frayed, and after completing a difficult mission some were looking for comfort no matter how they got it. A kunoichi had to be able to hold their own. And sometimes, it was the other way around. Snake readily admitted she's taken advantage of quite a few herself. At first, Snake's relationship with Kakashi hadn't exactly been consensual.

"I was looking for you because I heard the Hokage finally placed you on a permanent squad."

Fox wondered if it would last.

"Have you been doing your homework?"

Fox blushed immediately. Masturbating was out of the question, especially in the Hyūga household.

"You're hopeless. How are you supposed to have power over your own body if you don't know it?" Snake asked. The incident with Sloth had Snake considering it was time to be a little hands-on.

"Since you seem to find it so difficult I will just have to show you."

Fox's eyes widened and released a gasp when a snake bit her ankle, and then she collapsed.

The next time Fox opened her eyes, she found her arms cuffed to the bed. Fox tested the cuffs and found she was completely disconnected with her chakra network.

"You're not getting out of those cuffs. They're the latest in Konoha technology available only to ANBU Captains. It's even tested to hold a jinchuuruki," Snake said with a wink.

"This is not training."

"Don't say anything," Snake said as she saddled Fox, "just feel." Fox squirmed as Snake began to strip away her clothes. Snake traveled her fingers up Fox's spine before unclipping the bra which snapped loose and freed Fox's breasts. "Damn, your tits are huge."

Fox fainted in embarrassment.

Snake didn't let that get in her way. Snake hooked her fingers around the most unattractive panties she has ever seen and threw them on the floor to be burnt for later. Finally, she pulled away the final piece of clothing and chunked their masks to the ground.

Anko loomed over Hinata's unconscious body, and then she allowed her tongue to travel the length of Hinata's porcelain skin. After several detours and loops, Anko's mouth sucked in a nipple. It was this sensation Hinata woke back up to, her nipples teased and hardening along the taste buds of Anko's tongue. Anko bit down hard enough for her incisors to draw blood, forcing Hinata to open her mouth with a sudden gasp. Anko took the opportunity to stick her tongue down Hinata's throat and the kiss was more scandalous than anything Neji could have done. Anko continued to pull at Hinata's lips as she snaked her hands downwards and began to circle Hinata's outer labia with a tease. Hinata began to squirm underneath Anko's ministrations. When Anko drew her hand away, Hinata's body attempted to follow.

The tease was too much and Hinata's well controlled thoughts became chaotic. She knew she needed
something, but didn't know what. She was falling deeper and deeper into Anko's trap.

Anko smirked in victory when Hinata's vagina became the center of heat and fluid. When Anko had teased her young apprentice enough, Anko navigated the intact hymen and pushed her fingers inside.

"Sensei," Hinata breathed. It was nothing she had ever felt before as Anko curled her fingers inwards. The strangled mewls that left Hinata's mouth were devoured by Anko's lips. Hinata's tense body erupted in a series of quivers that set her vagina to pulsing. Her skin was slicked in sweat and her chest heaved in heavy breaths. Hinata closed her eyes, a breathless flush to her cheeks. She never thought it would feel this good.

Anko snapped the cuffs apart with a spike in her chakra. "Your turn."

"I can't…" Hinata replied breathlessly.

"I'm sure you've seen through enough walls to know that everyone needs a release." Anko instructed and pulled Hinata's hands and placed them on Hinata's breasts. Hinata's hands didn't feel nearly as good as Anko's mouth and they fell limply at her side. There was no motivation and Hinata was too modest to even try.

Anko could feel Hinata's resistance and figured she needed a new tactic. Hinata had turned over on her side so Anko took a hold of her waist and spooned her. "Have you decided what you're going to do about your virginity?"

"I don't understand."

Anko sighed. Her little fox was still innocent in so many ways. "You're a perfect candidate to infiltrate high society if needed. Eventually, there will come a day when a mission needs your body. Even though a kunoichi offers her body for the village to use, there are some things we shouldn't have to sacrifice."

Hinata knew missions of the sort were often given, but she was always too busy to give them much thought.

"Would you rather a stranger take it from you? Would you rather Sloth?" Anko asked fiercely as she clawed her nails into Hinata's skin. "You deserve better."

Anko's tongue touched Hinata's ear. "You deserve anything you want, even if it's your new squad leader… even if it's Naruto Uzumaki." Anko could feel Hinata tense at the mention of his name. "I know you had a thing for him."

The last words Hinata said to him were, 'I hate you.' Perhaps it wasn't hate, but there was bitterness. Hinata admitted, "That was a long time ago."

Anko wasn't convinced.

"To have a man is different. They fill you and can fool you into believing you need them to feel whole. Don't you deserve to know what that feels like? Don't you deserve his hands upon your body?" Anko emphasized the question by groping Hinata's breasts. "Don't you deserve his lips and his pleasure?" Anko peppered kisses along Hinata's neck.

Hinata's will was fighting but her body did not. Hinata began to breathe heavily as images became unbidden to her mind. When she had been a child the daydreams were of chaste kisses and holding hands but now the air was filled with sex, she was filled with sex, and all Hinata saw was her body underneath his. She never noticed when her body began to rock to the fingers Anko had inserted into.
her pussy, never noticed when she added her own fingers.

Anko was finally breaking the infamous Hyūga shell. All she had to do was say one name. Anko began to rub her own sex against her young apprentice's backside, turned on by Hinata's newfound sexuality. She pulled against Hinata legs, and their fingers worked in tandem to add penetration and pleasure.

Anko continued to whisper in her ear, "You deserve his hands through your hair, his tongue on your skin, and his dick between your legs."

Hinata arched against her as she pumped faster. She saw Naruto arched above her in his golden glory, felt with every second she was growing closer to him.

"Naruto…" Anko teased in her ear. "Naruto…"

A scream ripped from Hinata throat as her body orgasmed to a new high. It pulsed through her in waves until her body finally collapsed in sheer exhaustion. When she opened her eyes and found Naruto just a mere whim of her thoughts, she grew even more bitter, even more angrier, even more ashamed of herself.

Then with a well-placed jūken, shoved Anko off of her, and cried.

"Fuck," Anko spat as she picked herself from the floor in frustration. Anko didn't do tears nor did she deal with them. Anko was an idiot to think a Hyūga would be easy. Anko stormed into the shower and felt as if this night had been for naught.

Hinata hugged herself and couldn't stop the tears. Hinata made many sacrifices the moment she decided to become the Elders most visible enemy in order to protect the weaker branch members. Those sacrifices included whatever feelings she had for Naruto. Hinata made her decision and there was no turning back.

Anko exited the bathroom in the nude and dripped water on the floor. The room smelled of sex. Her student had fallen asleep. Hinata had developed a habit of sleeping on her stomach and Anko could see why. It was the first time Anko saw the physical scars. Anko knew firsthand how hard it was to respect your own body when others were constantly mistreating it. Her little Fox was still so ignorant of herself. Hinata hardly realized she had grown from a young girl into the kind of woman that caught men's attention, made them stare, and made them want.

A woman, especially a kunoichi, had to love her own body. A mission, rape, an enemy ninja, an ally ninja, or a pedophilic selfish asshole who cared for nothing but his own power, could take away your dignity, and your pride, and your self-esteem, but your body will still remain. It may be wounded, or scarred, or mutilated, but your body was still yours. It will continue and so must you.

Hinata woke the next morning and Snake was gone, but she left plenty of evidence to prove her existence, evidence left mostly on Hinata's body. Hinata was slightly sore as she reached for the shower and turned the water to scalding. The steam gathered upon the glass as Hinata's thoughts wandered toward last night. Hinata caught her breath as she unintentionally thought of Naruto and pressed her thighs together in discomfort. Hinata tried to fight for control but her body screamed for appeasement. Hinata finally gave in. Unknowingly or not, Anko had triggered something that Hinata could not return from. For so long her body had been accustomed to pain but now it ached for something more.

Fox was summoned into the Hokage's office and two other agents whom she has never worked with
before appeared beside her, but she certainly has heard of them. Boar was one of ANBU’s resident

The Hokage gave a deep sigh as they appeared. "This isn't the ideal first mission I wanted to give

"I don't understand what's so important in bringing back his corpse?" Crow questioned.

"To extract data. According to our informants the weapon's specialist is close in confidence to the

"It doesn't sound that bad a mission," Crow responded as he stood to retrieve the paperwork.

"Crow, you have to successfully infiltrate the hidden village of Sound and then infiltrate one of the

Crow was bitterly reminded how real this was and grimly flipped the pages within the folders.

Meanwhile, the words going through Fox's head like a repeated mantra was, 'It is rude to look at

Fox surrendered to her curiosity. One of the benefits of wearing the mask included the fact that even

Fox tried to wrap her head around this fact and suddenly a lot of peculiarities made sense. She didn't

Then she remembered the last words she had ever spoken to him.

"Um, well, alright. I guess we'll meet at the gate."

Fox was the last left in the room.

"Is there something wrong?" The Hokage asked curiously.

"No," Fox said coolly, and with a touch of the tattoo, activated the reverse summon back to her

Fox's face flushed a twinge of red when she remembered what had occurred last night, how she had
closed her eyes and imagined Naruto. The last thing she expected was to see him the next morning. She wondered if her obsession with him was evidence that she still loved him or simply a way of coping.

Fox took a deep breath and locked those wants and desires away. She was a Hyūga. Nothing else was important but the mission, nothing else was more important than making it back home alive.

Crow peeked over the map to find Boar watching him. Although Crow couldn't see Boar's expression he just knew it was one of annoyance.

"By the time you figure out which way to go the Fifth Shinobi War would have started already."

Crow tried to concentrate on the map but was distracted by how unsettling his squad members were. Boar spoke down to him as if he was an incompetent child and Fox didn't speak at all. Then he returned his stare at the map, sighed and scratched his head in embarrassment. He knew the general direction of Sound but had never been in the hidden village.

"Do you need help?"

Crow jumped at the sudden closeness of the voice, slipped from the tree branch but manage to catch the one below. Crow knew first impressions weren't going very well as he jumped back up.

"I always get stuck with the weird ones." Boar had a habit of talking to himself, loudly, but Crow could handle the snide remark easily. It was Fox he was still trying to get used to. He couldn't hear her, and his hearing was on par with an Inuzuka. She didn't make a sound. It was as if she had trained for a lifetime in stealth and stalking people. If Crow focused hard enough he could hear her heartbeat but even that was as soft as a butterfly's flutter.

"Do you need help?" Fox asked again.

"Oh yeah, right." Crow gave up the map with a sigh. He thought Fox was going to point the way but was surprised when she pulled out a bottle of ink and attacked the map with a brush. Then she finally handed it back.

Crow brightened when the map revealed various arrows that indicated which way to hold it, small representative symbols of every country, and better defined borders. "Thanks," Crow bashfully replied and continued to lead his team through the trees.

Crow studied the outskirts of the Village Hidden in Rice Fields, the capital of the Land of Sound. Terraces lined the arching hills and mountains for miles, which textured the landscape in layers. Farmers were stooped over in the fields. Water buffaloes were magnets for flies.

At one point in time the Village Hidden in Rice Fields had been an important trading partner for many of the surrounding countries. It was prosperous and wealthy. It was famous for its rich culture and the hundreds of carved hills that became a tourist attraction.

That was until Orochimaru convinced the Rice Field Daimyo that the country was better protected with a stable supply of its own ninjas instead of hiring them from elsewhere. In a span of a few years Orochimaru recruited ninjas from all over the world to establish secret bases in the countryside. At first the citizens of the Village Hidden in Rice Fields were ambivalent to the change in power, until the wealth started to drain from the village to the ninja bases in order to pay for loyalty, ambitious projects, and technology. The village became poorer and poorer. There was no other country with such a huge wealth gap between ninja and civilian.
With Orochimaru's death, the remaining sound ninja moved their center of power to the capital. The shift showed in the characteristics of the city. Technology clashed violently with culture, the rich clashed with the poor, the native clashed with the foreigners, the civilians clashed with the ninjas. The once prosperous village was defined by the tension drawn by these lines.

"It doesn't look like we're getting through the front gate," Crow observed the highly choked checkpoint.

"We could sneak over the gates," Fox suggested. "I should be able to navigate us through."

"We should probably wait for night time."

"Or we could go right now," Boar argued. "They'll be expecting us at night and will most likely have even more guards. During the day will be our best time."

Crow bit his lip as he hesitated. All eyes were on him as he tried to come to a decision. What if he picked the wrong one? "Fox, are there any holes open right now that we can exploit?" Crow asked. If not, they would wait for the night.

Fox examined the wall with her byakugan. "There is a way into town if we cut through the training grounds to the east. It is not heavily guarded. We could slip in easily."

"Alright, let's go." Crow allowed Fox to take point. He has never been placed on an ANBU team with a byakugan before but immediately recognized its usefulness.

**Nice piece of ass.**

'Shut up. I'm on a mission. I need to concentrate.'

**You're going to fuck up no matter what I say.**

Crow ignored the demon in his gut but before they reached the training fields Fox stopped abruptly. Crow instantly activated sage mode to sense out the enemy.

"Crow, your chakra stores are too large. We'll be recognized as ninjas instantly," Fox replied. Crow's chakra was like a literal sun in the dark.

"Oh," Crow made about a hundred clones. "How about now?"

"Better."

Crow sent the clones to do reconnaissance in the countryside and then followed Fox as she chose a trail of empty training fields. Crow's hearing picked up the laughter and argument of genin teams. A couple was 'hiding' in the bush not too far away. It almost felt like Konoha.

They finally crossed the threshold into the Sound capital.

"Henge," Crow directed after they observed the clothing and dress of several civilians passing by. The population seemed to love wearing bright colors and they made music as they walked. Bells hung as earrings, scattered through hair, jingling on shoes, or hanging off clothes. No wonder why Orochimaru renamed the country Land of Sound. The village was a chorus of music.

Crow guided his team as he tried to get a feel for the village. He immediately noticed the contrast in poverty. The ninjas who walked around were in immaculate uniforms while the civilians were often dirty and wore patches of worn clothing. It wasn't the only difference he saw. The ninjas didn't wear
bells. The civilian women wore colorful headscarves while the kunoichi wore none.

"Have you located the weapon's center yet?" Crow whispered carefully to Fox.

"No," Fox answered and then she paused. "Maybe. This way."

The Leaf ninja stopped and nonchalantly turned at the end of a guarded street. Behind the guards sat a large building that had generators running outside. Crow activated sage mode once they were out of sight. A mass of signatures erupted before his eyes and followed the lights downwards.

"It's underground and huge." Suddenly a wave of chakra pulsing from the center of the building disrupted his vision of all those inside. "What was that?"

Fox was quiet for a moment before she replied. "I think it's a security system. It looks like a machine sends out chakra pulses in regular intervals to identify the identity of anyone within its walls. I've never seen technology like this before."

"I guess we're going have to figure out a way to get past it."

"I could map out the entire structure but it will take me a few days."

"No point in rushing into things. If we're going to be here a while then we should find somewhere to stay."

"The longer we stay here the higher the chance they'll find us," Boar warned.

Crow analyzed the dilemma but finally said, "I'm not sending us in there without knowing what we're getting ourselves into. We'll have to take our chances."

"If we get caught-"

"Then it's my fault," Crow finished. "I'll take the blame."

"We might not be alive to be blamed," Boar grumbled but followed behind Crow in obedience.

Crow entered one of the hotels but Fox stopped him at the desk. "They are keeping records of everyone who checks in. If they compare that roster to the names at the gate we could be caught easily."

"And they've changed their currency. We can't use the money we have."

Things could never be easy.

"I'll think of something." Crow leaned against a building and his eyebrows scrunched together in thought.

"Don't hurt yourself," Boar said.

"I don't think it is very beneficial to the mission if you continue to criticize our squad leader," Fox suddenly replied.

"I'm not afraid of a Hyūga," Boar said in disgust. Boar had always despised the main branch of the Hyūga, and she enunciated her words just like one. "Don't you have some branch member to whip?"

"Wait, stop," Crow got between the two ninjas that had begun bickering before he even realized what was happening.
"Do you have a problem with the Hyūga?" Fox's killing intent was that of a sudden chill that began at the base of your neck and crawled down your spine.

"I have a problem with this team."

"Stop!" Crow pushed the two apart, trying not to make too much of a scene among the restless market crowd. "Boar, go gather intelligence around the edges of town. Fox, go gather intelligence with the village women. Meet me back here in two hours. Now!" Crow demanded in a voice he wasn't used to.

The two squad members, cloaked in henge, were almost comical in the illusion of two civilians who looked as if they would pull a kunai on each other at any moment. Eventually, they thundered down opposite sides of the road.

Crow breathed a sigh of relief. On the way here, he had memorized their chakra signatures in sage mode and should find them easily enough if he needed to.

Suddenly a solution to one of his problems caught his eye. He quickly neared one of the people on the street and the air rang with bells as the stranger stopped. "Who's that guy over there?" Crow pointed to the over-sized man riding in a man-lifted carriage down the street.

The guy Crow had stopped shook his head. "That's one of the landowners. When the village became poor the farmers who collaborated with the ninjas bought all the land. They own everything now and take our rice away. I wouldn't be sad if anything happened to him."

"Thanks. I'm sort of new here. I got stuck in the village before they raised the checkpoint at the gate." Crow weaved a story effortlessly.

"Welcome. We used to be more hospitable," The stranger took a bell off his coat and threw it at Crow. It landed in Crow's hands with a chime. When he looked up the stranger was gone in the crowd.

Crow placed it in his pocket. At least now he jingled. A henge was an illusion after all and could not produce the sound of bells.

Crow had been studying a few of the beggars on the street and finally picked his target. It was a kid who hobbled after the crowd and wore his cap over his left eye. Crow smirked as he crouched in front of him. "Want to make some money?"

The poor pathetic looking boy suddenly straightened. His limp disappeared and he pulled the cap up to reveal two inquisitive eyes. "I'm listening."

The cart that carried the wealthy landowner overturned from a sudden blast of wind.

"Ow," the little boy declared as he clutched his arm.

"Get that thing out of my way," The feudal lord bellowed, affronted. His servants quickly helped him return to his cart.

A man wearing tattered clothing rushed to check on the boy, running into the feudal lord along the way. "You ran him over!"

The feudal lord sneered. "Continue," he snapped at his servants, "Or next time I'll run you over." He and his entourage disappeared down the street.
The man quickly picked up the boy in his arms and disappeared into an alleyway. The second henge over Crow disappeared. "Nice acting."

"You should have seen his face," the boy snickered.

"Here is your half."

"You're giving me all this?"

"It was an even job." Crow nodded. "It's all yours, but don't use it up all at once or they're going to wonder where a kid got so much money and take it away."

"I'm not that stupid. I used to go to school."

"Then how did you end up out here?" Crow asked curiously.

The kid shrugged. "My parents were farmers but all of their rice was taken away and we couldn't feed ourselves. They sold me to the ninja academy but I ran away. They beat you there."

"The ninja academy pays people for their children?" Crow asked in disbelief.

The kid nodded and then suddenly rummaged in his pants pocket. "Here," the boy produced a bell.

"What are these for?" Crow asked exasperated.

"Ever since I ever remember they make bells for the harvest festival. They're a good thing," the boy responded and ran off down the alley with his pocket full of cash.

Crow met with his team two hours later. It was the first time Crow heard Fox coming as she had four bells pinned to her clothing. Fox reported on the political situation that stirred the air and Boar said much of the same.

"I've got enough money for our stay and I have already chosen the hotel," Crow said.

"That is good," Fox replied. "The women complained of a night time curfew." That information made Crow glad they decided to sneak in during the day. Getting around would have been harder if there were no one in the streets at night.

Crow motioned for them to follow. The market place and the ninja operated buildings were the only infrastructure that hinted at wealth. The rest of the buildings, especially the residential areas were drab and broken down. Crow stopped before a lean-to and the night crept slowly through the village. Crow had spent time talking to more people of the streets and surmised this place was their best bet.

Crow went inside. The woman at the counter looked at them suspiciously when they entered.

"I'd like two rooms."

The woman bit her lip. "The rooms can only carry a certain amount of weight. How much do you weigh?"

"This is how much I weigh," Crow responded as he slid the wad of money he carried onto the counter.

The woman snatched at it hungrily and then traded a tightly sealed package. "Pick any room you want."
Crow turned to go upstairs but after an afterthought, reached in his pocket, produced a bell and placed it upon the counter. The woman smiled.

"What was that about? How do you know this is safe?" Boar demanded.

"This inn is a cover-up for drug-trafficking," Crow explained. "It's not safe but it is our best bet. Unlike Konoha, drugs are illegal here. The civilians and ninjas are in complete competition. This place is run by civilians so I doubt a ninja will come here. The ninjas probably have their own drug house. It works for us. The woman thinks we're here to buy drugs so she's not going to record our presence. We're off the map."

Boar conceded but didn't praise him. Not many ninjas understood the streets, not many would have found this solution.

Crow looked out the window. The bell tower where the Otokage supposedly operated chimed at the center of the village to signify the start of curfew.

"I'm not exactly sure what to do with all this," Crow said as he pulled out the package of processed opium.

After a moment, "It could be used for medicinal qualities," Fox replied. She was the medic-nin of the team so Crow didn't question it.

"It's all yours." Crow threw it and Fox plucked it out the air. "Tomorrow Fox will begin to map out the military base. Boar will begin to map Sound and looking for a viable escape route."

"And what will you do?" Boar asked.

"I'll be with the both of you, of course."

"It seems they change shifts three times a day," Crow noted as he tracked the movements of the guards with sage mode.

Boar marked the time in his notes. "There is only a small window. It's not enough to sneak through without being seen."

Crow kept forgetting he was the only one who could run through with ease. "What about a distraction?" Crow suggested.

Boar shrugged his shoulders. "That means we'll have to leave someone on the outside."

"Clone," Crow reminded. Then the bell tower resounded through the village.

They spent the next minutes in silence until Crow couldn't handle it anymore. "What's your problem with the team? Is there any way I can fix it? We can't work together like this."

"Not your problem."

"Your attitude is my problem." Crow snapped. "I don't care if you don't like me but if you do anything to jeopardize this team you'll regret it."

"I'll follow you but only because I'm faithful to the village." Boar spat. Then the silence continued for the rest of the day.
Crow watched Fox draw a much more detailed schematic of the base than he could ever do, on the roof of five houses away.

Crow kept a look out for enemy scouts but found himself largely bored. Instead, his eyes kept lingering on Fox as she drew her sketches, particularly on how she popped pills almost every hour.

Crow argued with himself inwardly and wondered if he should mention something. He didn't want to be rude but he couldn't bear any more mistakes.

"Fox," Crow caught her attention but stared at the roof tile directly underneath him.

The only notion that Fox heard him was a nod of the head.

"I've seen the type of things drugs do to people," Crow began awkwardly. "It's harmful to the body and it makes a person volatile and unreliable. I was thinking it might be too much of a liability to the mission and squad if you... maybe you shouldn't... I don't think it's a good idea, at least during a mission."

Crow flinched as Fox stopped her sketch and turned to stare at him with her expressionless mask.

"Their headache pills."

"Oh," Crow sighed in relief. "Wait, is it healthy to take so many? I mean- if you're having headaches maybe you shouldn't activate your byakugan for so long? You should probably take a break. You've been at it for a while now."

"This map is mission priority."

"Yeah, well my priority is to make sure my squad members make it back home alive, which includes not working you to death. Come on, byakugan off." Crow declared. Then he reached down and lifted Fox from her position.

"What are you doing?" Crow chuckled to hear Fox's normally cool voice give an abnormal squeak.

"Break time. Let's go get lunch."

Fox certainly didn't count this as a date. It was too unsettling to eat lunch with a henge that eerily looked like your academy teacher. She had always been taught that ninja were supposed to be incognito, to simply be a part of the background. Naruto was obviously the exception.

The civilians of Sound gravitated towards him like the planets revolving around the sun. Crow invited them to sit with a smile too wide and eyes too bright, that made it hard for people to believe he could be a cold hardened ninja. People of all backgrounds gave their stories and grievances as if they were talking to their best friend. Most of the civilians were apt to fall into song or long verses of poetry, and Crow watched like a fascinated little kid.

Even Sound ninja who had stopped told their own stories, about how they were concerned for the future of Sound being bullied by the Five Shinobi Nations. They wanted a voice in the world and whole heartedly believed in Orochimaru's founding slogan, "technology and innovation." Crow talked his way through, as if he had been a concerned citizen of Sound country all his life.

Fox could only watch as the world revolved around Crow and she faded into the background. She didn't mind being forgotten. That was the point of her henge. She was normal. She was average. She didn't have to walk around with pale eyes that forced everyone to notice her no matter how much she
Their empty bowls of rice curry sat untouched for several hours on the counter. Fox touched Crow on the sleeve to get his attention.

Crow jumped and looked surprised when he remembered Fox was sitting next to him. "Ah, it's time to go isn't it?" Crow asked with a pout.

One of the men Crow befriended leaned over the counter. "The wife finally taking you home?"

Crow chuckled, and much to Fox' surprise, placed an arm over her shoulder. "Yep, it's about time we left. Take care."

The patrons of the restaurant sent their farewells and Crow and Fox continued down the street. Once they were out of sight Crow removed his arm from Fox's shoulder. "Sorry about that. I hope you didn't mind."

After a moment, "I don't mind."

"I didn't mean to stay so long. Thanks for pulling me out of there. Guess it's time to get back to business." Crow found he couldn't help himself. It reminded him of the days when he traveled with Jiraiya. Sometimes the best way to gather intelligence and gain the whole picture was to talk with the people. It was the people who formed the heart of a village.

Crow was never so anxious in his entire life. He had spent days studying Fox's map, days going over plans and creating back-up plans. The moment of truth finally came, the moment he would find out if the Hokage hadn't appointed him just because of a drunken haze.

"Here we go," Crow said while he observed Boar placing a genjutsu over his clone.

"This genjutsu should keep you invisible to the guards but I can't hold it for long," Boar reported.

"Go," Fox said. "Remember, you have a 30 second window before the next pulse." A cloak of red chakra blazed around his clone, shot through the gate, passed the oblivious guards with blinding speed.

Crow desperately hoped his clone remembered the schematic of the building. Fox was following Crow's clone intensely as he navigated through the building and was a gust of wind for all those he passed by. Crow tried to follow but all he saw was chakra signatures that blazed like lights contrasted with the speed of his red. Fox was the holes in his vision.

Once the clone made it to the targeted he room, he snuck behind the guards and inputted the right sequence of numbers Fox had gleaned from her spying a few days ago.

"The clone made it to the objective. The alarm is off," Fox reported. Without direction she deactivated her byakugan and stood for the next task.

"Wait, are you sure you can do this?" Crow asked suddenly.

"She's a kunoichi. Distraction is supposed to be their specialty," Boar said blankly.

Fox didn't reply as she dropped into one of the adjacent alleyways. Crow hated this. He didn't like the idea from the get go but Boar suggested it and Fox agreed. Crow watched as the henge Fox chose walked briskly down the street with an aggravated perk of her eyebrows. Crow noticed she
chose a silk kimono that many of the rare high-class citizens wore in the village. She wore flowers and bells embroidered in an intricate bun in her hair. It was a delicate henge that incorporated so many details only a specialist in chakra control could upkeep it.

Crow had assumed she would slink forward with fluttering eyelashes and an ample bosom like Butterfly would have done. He couldn't have been more wrong.

The guards stared at the henge in confusion. "Um miss you can't be here."

Fox stopped with her head titled so high it seemed the guards offended her as much as the dirt on the streets. In three words she declared, "Find my dog."

Crow had to stifle a laugh.

"Miss you must not have-"

"Find my dog." The woman demanded. "I require assistance and you two will serve. If I must contact my husband..." the threat was left hanging. Fox never raised her voice but the cut of her eyes gave them no choice.

"Immediately, we'll get on it at once." The guards tripped over themselves in fright as they ran down the street to find her dog. Fox followed with an arrogant grace.

"Guess we shouldn't have expected any less from one of her kind. Of course they'd be good at that sort of thing."

"Boar, shut up. Go set up the trap."

Boar tensed but eventually left to place seals along the side gate they had chosen to infiltrate. Boar finished well before the time the guards came back. He returned to the rooftop.

"Did we lose her?" The guard asked as he looked over the guard shoulder in paranoia.

"I hope so. I can't believe she wanted us to look for her damn dog. Rich people, always thinking their problems are more important than protecting the village."

When the two guards stood by the gate they suddenly froze.

"They're caught in the trap. It should hold for at least an hour."

The gate was not only their point of entry but also their guaranteed escape route.

"I'm ready."

"Shit." Crow jumped again as Fox returned without warning, never making a sound. Crow didn't think he'd ever get used to the quietest agent in all of ANBU, especially considering he was the loudest.

Crow motioned forward and all three ninjas entered the enemy base.

With Crow and Fox's combined sensory abilities, the three-man team navigated the halls. Fox stopped at a corner with a raised hand. Crow and Boar went still and melted into the shadows until Fox nodded, Crow passed her and took point. He checked his corners, motioned with his fingers and watched the rear as Fox passed him and changed position as vanguard.

They finally arrived at the door that held their target. Crow's concentration faltered. He couldn't
distinguish the chakra signature in the inner room from those in the outer areas. Fox held up four fingers.

Crow nodded and burst through the door first. He knocked out all of the non-essential targets. Once he was done he turned to find Boar had already put a kunai into the target's throat. Fox was posted by the entrance to watch for anyone coming their way.

"I'm preparing the target," Boar reported as he spread the scroll onto one of the work tables.

Crow nodded and then quickly activated and then de-activated his Fox cloak in quick succession. In sage mode, the clone waiting by the alarm system noticed the signal. He was ready to wreak havoc. This had Crow's idea written all over it, which allowed Boar the time he needed to prepare the scroll without worries.

In mere seconds, the alarm hummed with life and the blaring horns alerted every ninja in the base that there were intruders. The iron doors shut immediately, locking the three ninjas inside the research laboratory. Fox kept a close eye on the situation outside.

Crow calmly reached down and began securing the unconscious ninjas he had knocked out.

"Why don't you just kill them?" Boar asked as he drew the appropriate seals.

"Why don't we just let them live?"

"They could pretend to be asleep waiting for the right moment to strike. They can't pretend to be dead."

"All vital signs show that the ninjas are indeed unconscious," Fox unexpectedly replied.

"Thank you Fox," Crow said as he positioned the ninjas carefully against the wall. Then he took a look around. Weapons of various lengths and designs littered the lab tables. There were a lot of the items Crow couldn't even comprehend how they could be used as weapons.

Boar finished storing the corpse within the scroll. Target acquired.

Now it was just a waiting game.

"Are you sure this plan of yours is working?"

"It is," Fox confirmed as she kept her eyes past the walls.

Suddenly, the alarms stopped.

"One. Headed this way."

The ninja joined the shadows. Crow took a position beside the door which rose with a metal grate.

"Hey guys, hope you haven't been freaking out. The alarm system is malfunctioning. We had to turn the damn thing off." The ninja stopped as he entered the empty room. "Guys?"

Then he fell flat on the ground.

Crow was relieved his plan had worked. The hundreds of clones that were repeatedly created and dispelled in an instant would certainly make it seem like the system was malfunctioning.

With the system off and everyone in the facility focused around the base's center trying to figure out
how to fix it, the Leaf ninjas made their escape with ease, leaving the way they came in.

Disguised in a henge, Crow and his team entered a small flower shop staffed by women that could distract you with a smile. It was odd a little shop lost in a sea of run-down houses and situated against the village wall.

"What can we help you with?" A little girl asked.

Crow smiled as he leaned over the counter. "I think I'd like to buy a bellflower for my lady friend here," Crow teased and pointed at Fox. Fox's henge gave off a red blush.

The little girl giggled. "Follow me, they're in the back."

The rest of the women working in the store kept with their careful arrangements as the little girl brought the three to the back room. There was a man-made hole in the wall. As they approached, two farmers walked from the depths of the earth toward the front of the shop as if nothing was amiss.

Crow sent Fox and Boar ahead through the tunnel. He had already explored it and knew where it led. "I won't be coming back this time around. Take care."

"I will," the little girl, missing most of her front teeth smiled.

Crow entered the earthen tunnel. It was only by sheer luck he found out this tunnel existed. When the Land of Lightning declared war on Sound, no one was permitted to enter or leave the village but whenever Crow talked to the civilians, in passing they mentioned recently visiting family who lived in the outlying villages. After careful inquiry, he found out about the tunnels.

Crow emerged in the waning daylight among bushes of purple bellflowers that expertly hid the tunnel's exit. Crow plucked one of the flowers, planted it in Fox's hair who was focused on the situation in the distant village, and then proclaimed to the team, "Let's go back home."

Fox combed through her hair to retrieve the flower. She placed it in her pocket so it wouldn't be lost by the wind. Then she followed after her two companions.

The team rushed toward the border.

"They know," Fox reported. "The sound ninja who are out in the field are mobilizing at the border."

"How is that possible? They can't possibly learn about us so fast." Crow argued. He ordered his team to stop. "How many are we talking about?" Crow asked.

"A lot," Fox said after a moment.

While Crow tried to think of a plan he was annoyed by the sound of the large bell tower ringing. It was so loud it could even be heard at this distance. Crow whipped around toward the sound. "The bell is ringing during the wrong time of day."

"They must be using it to communicate," Fox concluded.

"I have an idea."

The sound ninja at the border were all at edge. They knew very little about the situation but judging by the bells knew someone had infiltrated the village and had to be stopped. So when a group of unmarked ninja came from the trees, they attacked first and asked questions later.
Their jutsu was gobbled by a large Oodama rasengan that exploded in a display of power. The trees bent at their knees and ninjas clung to the trees as the aftershocks washed over them.

"Shit," the leader of the Sound ninja cursed. "We need reinforcements immediately," He barked into the radio. "Send the east and southern squads."

When the ninjas attempted a united attack, every jutsu missed their opponent. The almost comical and futile battle was drawn out without either side making a dent in the other's numbers.

Then the reinforcements arrived and had the mysterious group of ninja surrounded. The Sound ninja made a coordinated attack and then the forest was shrouded in smoke.

Meanwhile, Crow, Fox, and Boar crossed the southern border with ease. They were home bound.

Crow was charging through the forest, aching to get home and finish the mission, when he realized his comrades were suddenly no longer beside him. Crow gave a perplexed look, until he activated sage mode, and found his teammates leagues behind him. A chill ran down Crow's spine. He turned around, burst through the tree like a jolt of lightning ready for a fight.

Crow's hearing picked up their voices.

"What's wrong?"

"Don't touch me, woman. I'm fine."

"The muscles in your right leg are strained. It's been wounded recently."

"Just on a previous mission," Boar grunted.

"You should rest."

"You should rest. You're barely on your feet yourself. Where the fuck is our speed maniac squad leader?"

"He's noticed. He's on his way." Just as Fox said those words Crow landed in the field.

"What happened?" Crow noticed the two porcelain masks, "Did I do something wrong?"

"We do not have your stamina."

Crow felt like a moron. "I'm sorry guys, you've really got to let me know when I'm pushing too hard." Crow looked at his surroundings. "The Valley of the End is close. We can rest there."

Crow reached out a hand to help Boar onto his feet but it was only slapped away.

"I can handle myself."

Crow felt horrible as he watched his squad mates raggedly push themselves into the trees. They landed in the large and wide valley. Senju Hashirama and Madara Uchicha were eternal rivals etched in stone. The waterfall arced over the valley and captured all sound within the crash of its rapids.

"I'll go ahead and secure the area," Crow assured them and posted sentinels around the valley. When he returned he found Boar already lying in his bedroll. A crackling fire was the center of the meager camp.
"You don't want any dinner?" Crow asked as he crouched and began to take out his cooking materials from his storage scroll.

"I'll take the last watch," Boar grumbled. Crow peeked at the photograph Boar held in his hands caught by the light of the fire.

"Is that your family?"

Boar tucked the picture away, turned over, and went to sleep.

Crow gave a deep sigh and made ramen for two. Hopefully, he'll be able to introduce the wondrous wonders of ramen to his other teammate. He found her sitting at the edge of the lake with her head in her hands. With shaky hands she procured the headache pills and poured out five of them.

"I really don't think it's safe to take that many."

Fox looked up at him and clutched the pills in her palm. Her head felt as if someone had placed the bell tower from the Village Hidden in Rice Paddies inside of her head and continually banged on it. Her Byakugan had been activated nonstop since they entered the facility and she was paying the price.

"The pills aren't helping are they?" Crow inquired as he sat down beside her.

Fox looked down at the pills in her hands. "They help to numb it a little but they're still experimental."

"You can try some ramen? It's always helps me feel better," Crow suggested and then shoved the other bowl of ramen into her hands. "Your head is hurting because of the byakugan?"

Fox nodded.

"You know, I'm a sensor too and mine doesn't have any negative effects. The things my abilities are sufficient for, you don't need to do. We should work together, like a team."

Fox nodded.

"You don't talk much do you?" Crow observed. "Actually I was wondering something about the byakugan. How come when we were first trying to enter the village you didn't see the tunnels? They would have been so much easier to use."

"Imagine using the byakugan is like overlooking an entire forest. Then someone wants you to find a specific leaf. It could take me a lifetime to find it if I don't know where to look. It's sort of like that." Fox explained.

"I see. I'll keep that in mind." Crow nodded sagely. Crow stuffed the noodles within his mouth and finished it in seconds. He watched the henge that Fox chose to eat with, the same she chose during the mission.

Fox ate very little of her ramen. She was too distracted by Crow's closeness. She wondered if she should share her identity so she could apologize. She couldn't get over the fact that the last words she spoke to him was, "I hate you." A lot has happened since then.

But of course, Crow beat her to it. "I was wondering if you could do me a favor? You must know Hinata right, since you have the byakugan and everything. I was wondering if you could give this letter to her?" Crow asked. He was embarrassed to admit he's been working on it whenever he had
spare time during the mission.

Fox blinked. She touched the paper and held it in her hands as if carrying the weight of a kunai. After a few steady moments, she opened it.

"Hey," Crow chuckled nervously. "It's nothing perverted, I swear."

**Hey Hinata,**

*I hope you're doing okay. Never mind I know that is a stupid thing to say. I'm really really sorry for being such a jerk. I tried to tell you this in person but the Hyūga creeps at the gate are too uptight and serious all the time. How about I take you out for ramen to make it up to you sometime? And thanks for the coat.*

**Naruto.**

Fox looked from the letter and then at the bowl of ramen in her lap. "I accept your apology, if you accept mine. I don't hate you, Naruto."

"Hinata?" Naruto questioned.

Hinata activated her byakugan to make sure no one was watching and was surprised to find a ring of Naruto clones keeping sentinel around the camp. Once she assured it was safe, Hinata dispelled the henge. With her hair in the high bun she wore for ANBU, the features in Hinata's face were more prominent. Her eyes were the color of the lake touched by moonlight.

"I'm confused. You smell different. You used to smell like lavenders."

Hinata's voice was a quiet as the flap of a humming bird's wings and only Naruto's hearing could have heard her. "Lavenders grew right outside my window when I lived in the main house. I don't live in that room anymore."

Naruto felt he had stumbled onto a touchy subject. While he tried to find something safer to say, he took off his mask as if it never belonged there.

Hinata's pale eyes focused on the darkened skin that crept up his face like a Nara shadow. Naruto couldn't take his eyes of the branch seal that ringed her forehead.

When they realized both were staring, they turned awkwardly away.

From the corner of his eyes, Naruto watched Hinata as she kept her eyes focused on the water. She was different. He remembered when she used to place her fingers together out of habit and stutter easily, blush easily, and faint easily. But this Hinata kept her emotions as tightly sealed as her words. Hinata finally inherited the icy exterior the Hyūga were infamous for.

There was so much Naruto needed to say but couldn't figure out how. There was history between him and her. It was a divide difficult to traverse but he tried anyways.

"Hinata, I know I make mistakes but I want you to trust me as your squad leader even though I've disappointed you before and I hope you and I are still friends and I know we haven't exactly talked about what you said and I-"

"Naruto," Hinata interrupted his incomprehensible answer. "I'm engaged to be married."

That was a complete lie but it fell from Hinata's lips as if it was truth. Sometimes a lie was easier to
tread than bittersweet feelings long ago abandoned.

"Oh," Naruto scratched the back of his neck. "With who?"

"Neji."

Naruto noticed how she avoided his gaze when she answered. "Is that what you want?"

"It doesn't matter what I want."

"That's not true," Naruto responded defiantly. "You shouldn't let anyone keep you from your dreams."

"You've abandoned yours," Hinata whispered. "I heard you're not becoming Hokage anymore."

Naruto frowned. "I've not abandoned my dreams. They've simply changed."

"So have mine."

Naruto and Hinata looked at each other, with wills like two immovable statues. Naruto never noticed Hinata was so stubborn. His Talk no Jutsu wasn't working. This wasn't the Hinata he remembered.

"What could possibly be more important than Hokage?"

Naruto grinned. "I've never had a family before and all of a sudden I do. I don't need a big hat. I'm a dad and that's more important."

"I'm a Hyūga and that's more important." Hinata picked herself up from the lake and before Naruto could react she placed the pills she held into her mouth. "Thank you for the ramen."

Naruto watched as she neared the fire and settled into her bedroll. Naruto's shoulders sagged. He was beginning to feel the exhaustion himself. He looked out over the smoothness of the lake. This was the place where he had lost his first teammate. Just like Team Seven, his squad had their tensions, their problems, their own goals and objectives. But unlike Team Seven, he wasn't going to lose them. It was a promise he made to himself.

Naruto Uzumaki sat atop the head of Senju Hashirama and watched over his team as they slept.

Crow's ANBU team re-entered the gates of Konoha. As they traveled the rooftops toward the Hokage's Tower, Fox noticed Crow trail behind just for a second. He disappeared in the crevice between two houses and jumped back behind them, but this time it was just a clone. Fox would have never noticed if she hadn't activated her byakugan to spy on any recent developments within the Hyūga estate. The real Naruto was headed home.

It took only a few seconds for Naruto to drop his ANBU equipment at headquarters, leave under an undercover henge, and charge through the window of his house. He had been so excited he had forgotten to check if anyone was home in the first place. The house was empty.

He searched Konoha for their chakra signatures and found them on the training field. Naruto was completely perplexed why they would be on the training field in the first place and Naruto went to find out.

"Okay, okay," he heard Ame's voice first. "Thirteen Naruto's minus four Naruto's is…"

Naruto observed the scene as he landed on a tree branch right over Ame's head. She counted his
Naruto clones and shouted, "Nine!"

Ichigo sucked on his thumb as he sat beside Ame in the grass, but he was more interested in the light spar than the spread of clones.

"This is impossible," Tomu complained as he preferred to dodge Naruto's kicks and punches rather than deflect them.

"You're the one who doesn't want to learn any ninja techniques, the least you can do is sharpen your taijutsu. Even civilians know a little self-defense."

"Whatever."

It seemed his clone finally whittled down Tomu's disdain for anything to do with ninjas to at least do a little training. Tomu could get pretty good if only he applied himself.

"Fifteen Naruto's minus fourteen Naruto's is…"

Naruto smirked and signaled to his clones who had noticed he was there. All of his clones disappeared. Ame scratched her head and tried to count with her fingers. "Is that right?"

"Naruto, I think you got your math wrong again," Tomu told the Naruto clone who was attacking him.

Ame nodded as she held her fingers before her face. "Yeah, fifteen minus fourteen is supposed to be-"

"One Naruto!" Naruto jumped and flipped to the ground in a flashy display.

"Daddy!" Ame screamed as she abandoned her homework and jumped, a jump only a ninja child could haphazardly make, and tackled Naruto in a hug. "You were gone a long time."

"Sorry about that." Naruto apologized. "I missed all of you so much." Then he picked up Ichigo who was tugging on his pants and added him to the hug. Naruto dipped his nose against their hair and took a deep breath of their scents. They smelled like home.

"Mission complete," Crow reported.

The Hokage could feel the metaphorical breath she had been holding since they left finally release.

"No one saw you?"

"No one," Crow said smugly and placed the scroll with the dead corpse on the Hokage's desk. "The dead guy is all there."

"Good, then everyone but Crow is dismissed."

Boar and Fox exited the Hokage's office.

Tsunade smirked. "And this is for you," Crow blanched at the sight of the paperwork the Hokage placed on her desk. "It's procedural. For your first time I want you to sit right here and do it, just in case you have questions."

"This guy better be worth it," Crow grumbled, grabbed the papers and collapsed in one of the office chairs. "Can I use clones?"
"If it will hurry and get you out of my office, then fine."

Crow smirked, made fifty clones and distributed the papers evenly. When the clones began asking questions all at once the Hokage conceded that even she came up with some bad ideas.

"How detailed is this supposed to be?"

"Why if I don't know?"

"What does an unrelated death mean?"

Tsunade was already getting a headache. "Unrelated death refers to any casualties unrelated to the mission's target."

Naruto suddenly realized that no one had died, except for the target. He could have easily killed the two guards at the gate and replaced them with shadow clones, he could have easily killed the other ninjas in the lab, he could have killed the ninjas at the border, but he didn't do any of those things. Leadership may come with greater responsibilities, but there are greater choices as well.

The clones pulled the papers together once they were finished and were glad to get rid of them as he plopped the stack onto the desk.

"There are still a few things I need to discuss with you," Tsunade said quickly before he made a jump for the window.

Just when Crow thought he was done. "Yeah?"

"Are you adjusting to the team dynamic?" The Hokage asked. "I chose them according to your weaknesses."

"They're alright but what's wrong with Boar? He hates me and I don't know why."

"A previous mission of his went bad and as punishment he was demoted from squad leader and placed on your team."

"So I'm the punishment?"

"That's not what I meant. The demotion was his punishment and he just so happens to be more useful to you. He is a genjutsu specialist and he was a capable squad leader."

Which would explained why Boar easily suggested the plans. It was Crow who threw in the weird ideas.

"Is the byakugan useful?"

"What?" That seemed like a silly question. "Of course it is, it can see through walls and stuff."

The Hokage nodded. "You see, a lot of byakugan users don't have set teams because squad leaders aren't willing to accept the responsibility that comes with one. The complications stem from the branch seal that they carry. There are protocols that state if a mission is more than a week late, without any contact, from the time allocated towards the mission then the Hyūga clan will activate the seal."

"Wait, so you're telling me that if I'm only one week late then they're going to kill Hinata?"

The Hokage raised an eyebrow.
"Fox," Crow corrected. "Why didn't you tell me this sooner? What if I had messed up on this mission? What if something had gone wrong?"

The Hokage waited for Crow to calm down before replying, "I didn't want to place undue stress on you during your first mission. This is a choice that I give to every squad leader. They already have enough responsibility; they don't want any added pressure."

"What if I mess up?" Crow replied weakly.

"You don't have to decide now. I'll give you time until the next mission."

And with more choices, came the possibility of choosing the wrong one.

"I've also been thinking of a way to help your teammates keep up with you and I think I've found a solution but there are a few complications. It involves your father's Flying Thunder God technique."

Crow raised an eyebrow, curious.

"The first issue regards your clearance. Technically when a ninja becomes a chuunin they have clearance to all of their clan's records, including restricted jutsu and research. Since you never became a chuunin, I practically forgot to mention your father and mother left a few of their things in inheritance. Since you're on par with chuunin level by now I've finally cleared you to retrieve these items. One of my office assistants will deliver the unclassified items within the week."

"The second issue occurred when I went searching for your father's notes on his infamous jutsu. They are missing." Tsunade leaned over the desk. "Please tell me you have them or we're looking at a security breach."

Crow paused. "I did pick up some of his books on seals. I might have grabbed those as well. I haven't had a chance to look at them."

Tsunade sighed in relief. "At what are you doing taking classified information out of the library?"

"Well, it did have my dad's name on it," Crow said defensively.

Tsunade shook her head. "The third issue is a law regarding clan politics. The Hiraishin technique is labeled as a clan jutsu and therefore its secrets cannot be shared, distributed, or copied without permission from the clan head. In order for my idea to work, you're going to have to share the technique with your team. In this way, you can carry the seal and no matter what speed you're traveling they'll be able to keep up by teleporting beside you."

"It's a pretty cool idea. Yeah, sure, whatever."

"Are you sure? People keep their clan techniques top-secret. It's what keeps a clan relevant and raises their prestige within Konoha."

"Yes," Crow said once again. "My father shared the technique with his guards didn't he? My teammates will be able to keep up and it gives them a way to always get to me. I can keep them safe. If using my Father's technique will help me keep them alive, then yes, I don't mind."

"Alright, Naruto. I want you to start teaching them the technique once you figure it out yourself."

"Right."

"And remember, I still need an answer to the byakugan question."
Naruto hoped he could catch Hinata before she returned home. He spotted her just as she was dropping the henge she used to leave headquarters and landed right in front of her as she traveled down the street.

"Hey Hinata."

"Naruto?" Hinata asked perplexed as she was forced to stop.

"Here, I'll walk you home," Naruto offered. "I sort of have a question to ask you."

"No, you shouldn't come any closer to the Hyūga compound. You shouldn't be any closer to me. Ask your question here."

"Why not? What's their problem anyways? And I can do what I want." Just to be defiant Naruto stepped closer to Hinata than what was appropriately permitted.

"Naruto, please, let it go," Hinata said and took a step back.

"But they placed you in the branch house and now they act like they own you or something. It's not-"

"Naruto." Hinata snapped, impatiently. "I don't need a hero. If you get involved you're only going to end up making things worse. Stay out of it. Hyūga is Hyūga business."

"Yes but-" Naruto's words were shortened by Hinata's expression that cut a dagger through his throat. "I can't watch you get hurt," Naruto mumbled tentatively.

Hinata's eyes warmed, just a little. "Why did you come here?"

"I- oh I wanted to ask a question. It's about… the rule that if the mission is a week late then…"

"I will be terminated." Hinata finished for him. "It is a law that protects the clan and protects our doujutsu. If you think it is too much of a responsibility, it is alright, I will not blame you for being sensible."

"No," Naruto scratched his head. "I came to ask what do you want? I've messed up a lot of times and I want to be honest and tell you that I don't know if I can get you back home, I don't know if I can keep us alive or succeed in every mission."

"It doesn't matter."

"Yes it does. It's not fair for me to decide. It's your life and your choice to serve with me."

Hinata looked down at her hands and Naruto smiled to see her begin to fidget. "Naruto, I trust you with my life."

Naruto brightened, "and I'll try to honor that trust to the best of my ability."

"Now please move, I need to get back before-" Hinata cringed as the emblem on her forehead began to glow. Naruto panicked, snatched Hinata off of her feet, and delivered her home within seconds. It was an innocent attempt to help but he was immediately bombarded by the Hyūga guards who obviously had been watching them.

"Who are you to keep Hinata-sama from getting home?" Tokuma asked. "Don't you understand she could get in trouble?"
"Hey, I was only trying to help," Naruto defended. "Maybe if they weren't trying to hurt her in the first place.-"

"Stop," Hinata demanded of the two bickering young men, but neither one hardly paid her any attention.

"Hinata."

At that voice Tokuma stopped arguing immediately and bowed. Naruto turned to find Hinata bowing. Naruto didn't have to think hard to guess this Hyūga must be a main family member.

"Good morning, Uzumaki-san what brings Konoha's hero to our gates?" Iyashi asked as he folded his arms in his kimono.

"I was just walking Hinata home," Naruto responded warily.

"What a gentlemen of you. You two were in the same academy grade were you not?"

"Yeah."

Iyashi nodded in polite conversation. "I am grateful to your kindness. Women shouldn't travel alone."

"Hinata can take care of herself."

There was a stiff silence. Naruto knew he should leave but was reluctant to. He was afraid that if he let Hinata go she would completely lose everything that had defined her as a little girl. This place was turning her into a Hinata he didn't know.

"Tokuma, help Uzumaki-san out of the gate if you would?" Iyashi ordered.

Naruto reluctantly followed after the branch Hyūga and the gates slammed shut in his face. He didn't even get the chance to tell Hinata to get lots of rest for the next mission.

"Leave, you don't belong here," The branch member demanded.

Naruto frowned and couldn't help but to ask, "What happened to her? She used to be shy and weird and fidgety and blush and faint all the time when she was little."

Tokuma scoffed. The Hinata he knew never fainted or turned red, even as a child. "You know nothing of Hinata."

x

* I'm a Hyūga and that's more important
The weekend at the Uzumaki household was rather calm compared to the weekdays when it was a constant battle to get children to school on time. Naruto appreciated the warm spring day that allowed him to sleep in. The sunlight floated through the window like a warm blanket.

Then suddenly, all in the blink of an eye, Naruto tensed and sprung from the bed as if Konoha was being attacked. His growing attunement with sage chakra created an eighth sense of awareness every time he lay still. A clone had taken Ichigo and Ame to play by the river. Tomu was out with Mushi. There shouldn't be anyone in his house.

The moment the ANBU agent landed on the rooftop of the Uzumaki residence, the agent turned to scout the apartment complex for his target and found himself face to face with Naruto Uzumaki, sitting cross-legged on the rooftop in his boxers.

"What do you want?" Naruto demanded, a little more than annoyed that his sleep had been interrupted. He used to be a deep sleeper but now respite came in light bursts which could be interrupted by any slight sound or movement.

The ANBU tiptoed with his words, as if any wrong sound could arouse the ninja's ire. "The Hokage demands your attention."

Naruto grumbled. He wasn't on-duty nor had he been summoned. "I'll be there once I'm dressed."

The ANBU agent nodded and quickly left the property with the unnerving feeling that he could have just died.

Naruto stretched as he re-entered his apartment through the window. Only once the house was to its normal state did Naruto relax slightly. He knew the most to worry from a messenger ANBU was bad news but that did not keep Naruto from snapping whenever an unknown chakra signature came to his house.

Whatever the Hokage had to say was probably important but not an immediate emergency. Naruto dragged his feet into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. He took his time in the shower and allowed the heat of the water to beat against his shoulders akin to the haunting rhythm that plagued Amegakure.

Naruto ears perked when he heard the children talking excitedly from two streets down. They were coming home. He timed their arrival. Right when he finished putting on fresh clothes, they were walking through the front door. When the clone saw that Naruto was awake he dismissed himself and Naruto received the memory of trying to teach Ame how to walk on water while Ichigo hopped through the river and attempted to catch frogs.

Ichigo ran through the door while holding a frog jumping in a container of dirt and water. "Keep? Keep?"

His clone was unable to say no and neither could he. "Why not?"

Ichigo gave Naruto's leg a sloppy hug and placed the container on the kitchen table. He pressed his face against the plastic and watched with apt attention.
"Did you see?" Ame asked excitedly. She placed the breakfast they had bought while they were coming home onto the table. "I almost stood on water for five whole minutes!"

"You're learning faster than I did." Naruto dove into the breakfast bags, began distributing the pastries, and plucked one into his mouth. "I'm jealous."

Ame stuck out her tongue and then bit down on bread stuffed with strawberry jelly. Then she eyed Naruto's clothes. "Are you going somewhere?"

"I have to meet with the Hokage."

"She's always taking you away," Ame grumbled as she smacked her lips.

"Sometimes she has to. She protects the village and keeps us safe." Naruto casually reached over and shoved a pastry into Ichigo's mouth, which Ichigo preceded to chew while his eyes tracked the frog's every jump.

"You protect the village and keep us safe," Ame said.

"Damn right," Naruto said proudly and Ame returned the expression, as if there was a secret between their smiles. It wasn't a job he'd leave for someone else to handle.

"But I thought we were going to go through the boxes today."

Naruto groaned as he looked at the pile of boxes stacked at the front of the door. They had been delivered last week by the Hokage's assistants. The boxes were full of his father's and mother's possessions. Quite honestly, Naruto didn't want to go through those boxes.

"Alright, let's go see what the old lady in the big hat has to say," Naruto joked as he left a clone to clean up, swung Ichigo over his shoulder who quickly snatched the container that held the frog, and grabbed Ame under his arm. The children hung onto him tightly, already expecting the sudden burst of speed. The next they blinked they were in the Hokage's office.

"Naruto!" The vein that revealed the Hokage's annoyance showed clearly on her forehead. She was about to reach for her bottle of sake but refrained when she noticed the children. "Explain to me how it took the fastest person in the world took so long to get here?"

"Well you see, there was this old lady who needed help with her groceries," Ame repeated one of her father's classics.

"Look little missy, that excuse doesn't work with Kakashi, doesn't work with Naruto, and doesn't work with you."

Ame pouted and Naruto hid behind her large begging eyes. "Ah, come on, how can you be so mean to this sweet face?" Naruto chided.

Tsunade sighed deeply. She was already too soft with Naruto and her reputation would be ruined if the office assistants found out she was a sponge when facing the children. It was extremely difficult not to smile when you watched Naruto interact with the kids. He had a knack of finding the odd ones, the outcasts, and they looked so normal next to him.

Outwardly, Tsunade still tried to look annoyed but Naruto knew he had won.

"What's going on, Granny?"
"It's not exactly a conversation for children."

"That's okay," Ame said as she tugged on Naruto's pants. "Can we go prank the security guards again?"

Naruto smirked, created a clone, and sent them to wreak havoc on the Hokage's Tower. Tsunade finally pulled out the sake. They weren't as worse as an army of mischievous Naruto clones but two cute miniature deviants that no one could say no to was still high on her list. The complaints were going to be flooding her desk all day.

"Yep?"

"I have a mission for you."

Naruto pointed to himself. "Me?"

"Yes you," Tsunade said. "There are circumstances where Naruto is much more effective than Crow. Our objective for this mission is to stop a war."

Naruto blinked. "How?"

"Blackmail," Tsunade answered with a smirk and continued with a smile. "A few weeks ago one of our top ANBU teams recovered the body of an important individual within Sound country-"

"That's going to confuse me." Naruto scrunched his face. Hearing his exploits referred to in the third person was weird. "So you extracted the information from the dead guy?"

"We have and it's enough leverage we can use to our advantage. Konoha has convinced Lightning and Sound to stand down, hopefully we can broker a ceasefire and come to some sort of agreement between the two countries."

"But what do I have to do with it?"

"You are coming with me to the negotiations."

"So I'm helping? What should I say?"

"No," the Hokage practically jumped out of her chair at the thought. She knew Naruto had a habit of saying whatever came to mind with very little tact. "You are not a politician and you are forbidden to say anything. I'll handle it. You're just there as a… show of force."

"Oh," Naruto said as he combed his fingers through his hair. "Right, I'm the jinchūriki."

"I'm sorry Naruto. The situation is too delicate for anyone but me to handle, even more so now that we've finally uncovered the identity of Sound's leader, the self-professed Otokage."

"So who is he?"

"Do you remember the kunoichi we captured but escaped during the Joint Shinobi War?"

"Yeah, her name was Karin. She was a part of Sasuke's team."

"Karin Uzumaki," Tsunade corrected. "Evidently she's taken up Orochimaru's mantle."

Naruto froze. "Uzumaki?"
"Intelligence is fairly certain she's related to you and she's not just using the name for her own motivations," Tsunade responded.

"Well, do you think she might know anything about-"

Tsunade raised a pointed finger. "This is why I'm bringing this up ahead of time. Don't endanger these talks by inquiring about a missing nin. The peace between these two countries is our number one priority. Sasuke comes later."

"I understand," Naruto grumbled. "It's just weird, not knowing what became of him."

"Perhaps it's for the best." Tsunade shrugged her shoulders. For Naruto's sake, hopefully Konoha never finds Sasuke because she would hang him without hesitation.

"The peace summit will convene in the Land of Frost. It takes a lot of preparation when a Kage leaves the village but plan on departing some time next week. Unfortunately, there is a rule that states every time the Hokage officially leaves the village an ANBU Captain must follow so I'll have a squad as my bodyguards. Since you are also a high-profile individual you will also have bodyguards."

Naruto groaned. "Come on Granny, I don't need any bodyguards."

"Calm down. Your regular squad will be behind you. Besides, with Fox's dōjutsu they don't have to watch you directly and she can keep an eye on all your clones."

Naruto frowned. "I guess."

Tsunade's eyes narrowed and the atmosphere in the office turned strict. "Just in case, I want you to bring your ANBU uniform. Its too tempting an opportunity while I'm away from the village and if something happens you're the quickest thing we've got. I want you to keep a clone in the village like you always do but another one in the office, just in case."

"Do you really think something bad is going to happen?"

"Of course, we're ninjas. That's the job of a Hokage: to predict disasters before they happen."

"Hokage-sama?" A hesitant voice came from the radio on the Hokage's desk.

"Yes?" Tsunade asked as she leaned on one arm and pressed the button in reluctance.

A loud crashing noise in the background. "There's umm... a frog causing havoc in the forbidden library."

"Aren't we supposed to be ninjas? Deal with it," Tsunade demanded and then looked up to find a puff of air. "NARUTO!"

All ANBU agents grew anxious whenever a Kage left the village, which meant much more work, pressure, and responsibility on their shoulders to keep the village safe. So while agents waited for the undesignated time of the Hokage's departure, they released tension the best way they knew how: a good sparring match.

And for Crow, he has never had a more frustrating sparring match in his life.

Crow's tactics largely consisted of forcing his opponent to look in one direction, while he attacked from another, but against an opponent that could see all directions at once, this strategy was
practically useless. No amount of shadow clones could distract Fox's attention from the real him.

Crow's chakra reserves were depthless but Fox rationed her chakra to the exact amount it took to execute an attack. With unparalleled chakra control, she wasted nothing. Crow was the exact opposite as each of his attacks flooded the room with chakra.

The fight stretched for hours. If it had been a real fight, and not a sparring match, it would require killing techniques if it was to ever end quickly.

Crow attempted to exploit her blind spot but she never faced the same direction for more than a few seconds. Crow's shadows clones were useless so he attempted to overwhelm her with speed but to no avail. Fox's knowledge of the human anatomy amplified her skill with the byakugan and she could predict his movements with even the slightest twitch of a muscle. Her foresight matched blow to blow with his speed.

Sweat began to gather at Crow's brow as his attacks were slapped away by her hands. Crow stepped back to form an attack. With clones behind him, a rasengan formed in the palm of his hand. He struck forward but it was immediately repelled by Fox's spin which suddenly crackled with lightning. The resulting blast pushed him backwards. He caught himself with his hands and flipped onto his feet.

Fox breathed heavily as she fell to her knees and responded, "I have no more chakra."

Crow smirked in victory and dismissed his Fox cloak. He had been trying to force her to use her more extensive techniques so she would run out of chakra. Exhaustion tackled him when he went to help Fox to her feet. When he offered his hand, he hardly had time to react when he was suddenly peppered with Jyuuken strikes. In a blink, he was on the ground with the tips of Fox's fingers placed atop his beating heart, his life in her hands.

The match was finally over.

"You lied," Crow complained.

"Why didn't you check to make sure I didn't have any chakra left?" Fox asked as she rested her hands on her knees.

"I… well…" Crow had never thought Hinata was the sort of person to do something like that, but as he was still learning, this Hinata was different. Besides a Captain, she was now the only ANBU agent to ever beat him in a sparring match.

"Fox, I can't move."

"Oh, I apologize," Fox's hands moved so fast Crow couldn't comprehend all the places she was touching. She not only cut off his chakra but paralyzed him at the same time. Crow could feel his chakra flowing once again as he stood up and stretched out his stiffened joints.

"Alright, do you think Boar is going to agree to a spar this time?"

Fox collapsed, unable to comprehend Crow's stamina. "He didn't seem inclined to do so last time. Perhaps you should give him more time to warm up to the team?"

Crow crossed his arms. "It's been a month already and we've had three successful missions. We could at least train with each other."

"Patience is a virtue," Fox noted. She sighed deeply when her words seemed to have been swatted
away as Crow began to brainstorm pranks he could pull that would force Boar to spar with him.

Patience was not his virtue.

"Last time I attacked him, he put a genjutsu on me and I didn't realize it until I couldn't find a bathroom."

Fox's attention snapped away from Crow's sweaty torso. She hoped her distraction didn't cost him. "Crow, Snake is around the corner."

"Shit," Crow cursed and in a cloak of red charged out the exit.

"Not that way." Fox warned too late.

Crow blinked, attempted to dig his heels to stop his momentum, but crashed right into Snake and tumbled to the ground. There was a sharp prick in his arm as he landed atop her.

"Hey, what did you-" Crow grabbed his head and watched the hallway twist and turn before he collapsed on the floor.

"I've finally caught you!" Snake declared as she grabbed him by his hair and dragged him back into the training room.

"Sensei, what have you done?" Fox demanded as she shot onto her feet.

"You have exactly thirty seconds to create an antidote to my new poison before he dies."

Fox could only stare in shock. "B-But, you can't."

"Time is ticking."

Fox activated her byakugan and gasped when there was indeed poison coursing through his blood. She didn't have time to think as she swiped the scroll with her poison supplies across the floor.

"Oh well, he's dead."

"What?" Fox pressed her ear to his chest and felt for his heartbeat.

"I forgot. He's a jinchuuruki, you have at least five more minutes."

Fox noted the speed at which the poison was spreading and realized this time her sensei was telling the truth. Her heart was pounding against her chest as hard as a direct attack from a rasengan. She separated and broke down complicated compounds with just her eyes as she snatched and mixed ingredients. The veins etched around her eyes began to protrude further and the omniscient whine quickly turned to a screech clawing against her head.

Crow began to convulse.

"Looks like you're running out of time."

The block of ice around Fox's concentration didn't notice. All her focus and all her attention was dedicated toward the antidote. Nothing else mattered. Her hands moved in a confusing blur to the average eyesight. The moment she was finished, she sucked the antidote in a syringe, and immediately applied it to Crow's bloodstream.

Crow's breathing evened and his body calmed.
Only once he was out of danger, the block of ice exploded into pieces of relief and frustration. Her hands were shaking uncontrollably. Fox looked up at her Sensei with eyes full of fire. "What is wrong with you? You could have killed him."

Snake shrugged her shoulders as she tapped her mask in thought. "So that's what the antidote was missing. I knew you'd figure it out."

"You didn't have the antidote?"

"The best lessons are learned when someone is dying."

Fox was normally a very polite person, normally minded her manners, and very considerate toward other people's feelings but sometimes even she can be sent to the edge. "Y-you," she stuttered, "you Base Incorrigible Terrible Crass… Helcoid!"

Snake tipped her head back and laughed. "This is the closest I have ever come to hearing a Hyuuga curse. Priceless." She looked down at her affronted student with a smirk. "And for our prize we get an unconscious Crow. Isn't that fun?"

"Please, just leave him alone."

"Little Fox," Snake said as she bent down and sat atop Crow. "Eventually, there will come a time when you'll tire of looking. I'm just teaching you to take what you want." Snake said as she peeled the mask off Crow's face and blond hair fell like a curtain around Naruto's shoulders.

"This isn't what I want."

Snake straightened as she teased the mask off her face. "Then what do you want?"

"I-" Fox wanted so many things. She wanted to reform the traditions and laws of the Hyuuga clan. She wanted Hanabi to be happy. She wanted Neji to be happy.

Anko dipped and kissed Naruto's lips. Her tongue slithered into his mouth.

Fox's world turned to ice. The killing intent that suddenly rolled off of her in waves dropped the temperature in the room drastically. "I want you to get off him."

Anko smirked devilishly. "And what are you going to do about it?"

Fox cracked the moment Anko violated Crow's privacy and slipped her hand in his pants to grab at his crotch.

Anko flipped away but hardly fast enough as Fox attacked with a whirlwind of jyuuken strikes. It took five seconds for Fox to render Anko completely paralyzed. Fox breathed deeply as she looked down at her fucking insane sensei.

Before the numbness spread to her jaw Anko bit down on a pill hidden in her molar. It released a chemical into her body that jump started her chakra system and suddenly opened her chakra nodes. Then she used her chakra to overcome the paralysis. With a Hyuuga as a student you can never be too careful.

"That works." Anko said cheerfully as she sat up. She stood and was faced with Fox still in her Jyuukken stance.

Anko smirked as she kept her hands behind her back and carefully moved around her student. She
picked up her mask and refitted it onto her face. All the while, Fox was tracking, every step, every breath, and every heartbeat.

"I've never seen you move that fast before." Fox kept her guard as Snake stepped behind her and whispered into her ear. "I'd say you're even better than that cousin of yours. That speed, that determination, that ruthlessness is in you. You just need the right motivation." Snake twisted on her feet. "He's all yours."

She winked and left the room.

All the tension left Fox's body at once. She collapsed on the ground in utter exhaustion. Her hands scrambled to her pockets and desperately swallowed five pills at once. The only comfort she found was the chill of the floor against her aching head. The pain was like a tumultuous tide rolling over and crashing into her brain. None of the other branch members had it as bad. Sakura determined it was probably because she was sealed later in life instead of as an infant. It was agony.

When the tide finally subsided, Fox managed to drag herself where Naruto lay unconscious. She couldn't leave him like that. She blushed as she quickly fixed the belt on Naruto's pants. Then she picked up his mask but paused as she was about to place it back on his face.

Who was she kidding? She still had feelings for him and what was worse, every day she spent with him the feelings she had known as a child grew ever more twisted. While she was at the compound she wanted nothing more than to be with Naruto on a harrowing life-threatening mission. Facing death was much easier with him at your side.

It wasn't fair. Being with him made it harder for her to return home, harder for her to accept it. She wanted that dream her younger self would fantasize about: how they would be together and they would get married and they would not have to be alone any longer. But she understood that was a dream and sacrifice was her reality.

In her dreams, she always wanted to touch his whisker marks.

Knowing she would never get another chance, she brushed soft fingers along his cheeks. They were deep scars, as if someone had taken a knife to his face. In reality there was nothing cute or adorable about them, it felt like pain underneath her fingertips.

"Ramen!" Crow shouted when he snapped awake. He began eating before he even knew where he was. He looked around and found himself in the training room propped up against the wall with Fox sitting beside him. "What happened?"

"Snake decided to test her new poison on you," Fox replied. "You should fully recover soon."

Naruto slurped a string of noodles into his mouth. "Don't tell her I said this but she scares me."

"Me too," Fox admitted. "Crow, you should put your mask back on."

"I can't eat with my mask on," Naruto complained and Fox placed a henge on him just in case someone walked into the room.

"How is everything going back home?" Naruto asked as he stuffed his face. Naruto noticed how her henge paused with her chopsticks. "Listen, Hinata, if there is anything you've got a problem with, you let me know. I'll handle it."

Fox appreciated the offer but there were some things you had to handle yourself. "Thanks, but it's-"
"Hyuuga clan business," Naruto repeated the phrase she used every time. "Its hard knowing that after we finish with the types of things we do you have to go home to that. I don't like the way they treat you. I don't like it and it bothers me."

Fox had learned the hard way that the determination and persistence she had admired about Naruto when she was younger, quickly turned to stubbornness and relentlessness when it was directed in your direction. Naruto brought up the Hyuuga issue every time they spent time together as if to wear her down and eventually roll over her.

Fox was determined not to move an inch.

"Crow, No."

"I could just-"

"No."

"Just let me talk-"

"No."

Naruto pouted as he leaned back against the wall. How do you help someone who doesn't want any help? Naruto finished his bowl and leaned to peek inside of hers. "Are you going to finish that?"

Fox handed the bowl over without remark.

"Alright, let's spar again? But this time no cheating so you can't use your byakugan."

"But that isn't practical. Why would I ever find myself in a situation that I can't use my byakugan?"

"Maybe someone took them from you?" Fox tapped the top of her forehead. "Oh… I guess you'd be dead. Well, how about you made a bet that you have to fight with your eyes close?"

"I can see through my eyelids."

"That's kind of creepy," Naruto conceded. "You got dirt in your eyes?"

"It'll only take me a few seconds to brush it out."

Naruto straightened. "Yeah, but it only takes a few seconds to die. It could be an important few seconds."

"I suppose."

"It'll be like when I fight with Tiger Sensei. I'm not allowed to use my Fox Cloak and it's when I can't rely on it that's when I realize how slow I really am. Sometimes we have to take away the things we really depend on in order to figure out our weaknesses."

Somehow, that made perfect sense.

Fox agreed reluctantly, "Alright, no byakugan."

Naruto stood up triumphantly, but at that moment, the tattoos on their shoulders began to burn.

"I guess we'll practice later. Looks like its show time."
The Hokage left Fire Country under the cover of darkness and only the top tier Konoha officials knew she had even left.

It's been a long time since Naruto's participated on a mission in his regular ninja uniform. The red sage cloak hung off his shoulders as he traversed the marred landscape of the Land of Frost. The Fourth Shinobi War had been fought here and the recent war seemed to have devastated the region. There was no farmland, no trees, and no homes for miles. It was simply a stretch of barren and charred dirt trying unsuccessfully to hide itself under a soft touch of frost. It looked as if giants had crushed the land underfoot, and then spat on it.

"Why would Sound invade this place? It offers nothing." Naruto questioned.

"Lightning didn't go to war simply because their neighbor was being invaded. This is a direct attack on them," the Hokage explained as she traveled at his side. "They want access to Lightning's borders."

The Village Hidden by Frost is located close to the Lightning border and ever since the alliance establish during the First Shinobi War, the Land of Frost largely depended on Lightning for its security.

Naruto nodded as they neared their destination. The summit was held in the Village Hidden by Frost but it looked like the Village Hidden by War. Even the civilians were armed. The ninjas that greeted them at the gate wore the Cloud symbol.

Even from this distance, he could see the famed mountains that touched the clouds. They seemed to loom over this place like watchful protectors.

A woman surrounded by Cloud ninja greeted them at the gate. Diamonds sparkled in the ornaments she wore in her hair. The only flowers for miles could be found patterned on her expensive blue kimono. The young woman greeted them with a heavy expression, "Hokage."

"Princess Ahiko," the Hokage bowed.

The Frost dynasty was an old family, with a lineage spanning generations into the past and ruled the land in place of a daimyo.

"This is the Fox Sage, Uzumaki Naruto." The Hokage introduced the two as Naruto bowed before the princess.

The Princess did not bow in greeting, but only gave a light sneer. "The jinchūruki," the Princess said as if it was a curse, "So this is the one who destroyed my land."

Naruto was caught off guard by her contempt. "I didn't mean to."

"War is always just an excuse," the princess replied. She motioned for the Hokage and her entourage to follow as they crossed the dead garden to the castle at the village's center.

Tsunade stopped Naruto with a hand on his shoulder. "Try to avoid her. We don't need to distress our host too much. And Naruto, it'll be okay."

Naruto flinched away from her hand. "She's right. I destroyed this place."

"Land heals, the dead don't." Tsunade replied and gave a last pat on his shoulder before she hurried her pace and drew closer to the princess.
"Has the other parties arrived yet?"

"The Raikage and his party have already arrived," the Princess responded. They entered through the large doors of the castle.

"Yo, Naruto!"

Naruto's eyes brightened as he recognized that unmistakable greeting. The grim start of the mission turned around in an instant as Naruto broke out into a grin.

"Bee!" Naruto said in greeting as the two jinchūriki bumped fists.

"Didn't know when I'd see you again. How have you been?" Bee asked as he pulled Naruto into a mock headlock.

The princess watched the display with a raised eyebrow. "I have refreshments prepared for you and your guests, but the dogs are not allowed at the dinner table."

Tsunade gave a harsh frown.

"I'll be alright Granny." Naruto waved her off. He didn't blame her. Some things don't change.

Captain Cat's team followed the Hokage into the dining hall where the Raikage's voice could be heard even from this distance. After Cat's ANBU team passed, Fox paused and placed a soft hand on Naruto's arm.

"If you hadn't been there to stop Madara she wouldn't be alive to complain."

Naruto smirked. "Thanks Fox, but go ahead and watch the Hokage. I'll just stay and talk with Bee... and I won't get in trouble I swear."

Fox nodded and left down the hallway. Killer Bee leaned over and studied Fox's behind with a smirk.

"Hey!" Naruto shoved his hands in Killer Bee's face. "She can see you."

Killer Bee grinned mischievously. "You hittin' that?"

Naruto blinked in confusion. "What? Why would I hit her? We spar if that's what you mean."

Killer Bee's sides were aching as he leaned against a wall and laughed up his insides. "Nah, I mean has the kunai hit its target?"

Naruto looked even more confused.

"You still don't get it? The birds and the bees? Doing it? Bury the Bone? Bush Patrol? Gettin' busy? Bump and grind? This is a waste of time." Killer Bee hit his head against the wall. "Sex, Naruto, sex."

Naruto's face grew red when he realized what the conversation was about all along. "No! I'm not a pervert."

"Perverts, I hate, but I appreciate," Bee explained and dragged Naruto down the hall until they stumbled outside onto a platform.

"That's still being a pervert," Naruto grumbled.
"Sex ain't got nothing to do with being perverted. You must still be a virgin."

Now the tips of Naruto's ears were burning red. This was the last topic of conversation he ever imagined talking about with Bee. Naruto pouted and crossed his arms like a child. "Some of us aren't exactly on good terms with our tailed beasts."

"That's tough," Bee replied as he collapsed in a chair overlooking the balcony, "but some girls like it rough."

"I don't want to accidently kill them!"

When he saw that he hit a nerve, Bee chuckled and attempted to calm Naruto down. "I understand. Back in the day, before Gyuuki and I had come to our agreement, a lot of things didn't go my way. It's not easy, being a jinchuruki."

Naruto leaned over the balcony and couldn't remove the memories of his past sexual encounters, all of them had ended horribly. Naruto has come to an understanding that he's probably going to live like a monk for the rest of his life.

Bee leaned back in his chair, then pointed two fingers at Naruto's scar. "What happened to your face? Looks like someone hit you with a lake."

Naruto grinned. "Lake? Can you even hit someone with a lake?"

Bee grumbled and crossed the rhyme out of his notepad.

"Maybe you should just give up this rap thing?" Naruto joked.

Bee jumped from his chair and declared, "I rhyme everywhere I go, to challenge myself and practice my flow. Maybe there are greater rappers than me, but no one is as dedicated as Killer Bee."

Naruto could easily see himself in Bee's declaration, only he was declaring himself as the next Hokage. Even jinchūriki needed their dreams. Sometimes that's all they had.

Naruto smiled as he leaned backwards against the balcony. "To tell you the truth, I'm still not really sure what happened. Got caught up in a large explosion, and then something about healing factor and hayflick limit."

Bee raised an eyebrow. "I thought that issue didn't affect an Uzumaki. You guys are supposed to live an eternity."

Naruto shrugged his shoulders. "We're not that indestructible. Evidently I've had too many run-ins with the Kyuubi's poisonous chakra before I managed to separate it. So now I have to be careful about my healing ability."

"But you're an Uzumaki, so you'll probably still live longer than me."

Naruto snapped his head up. "What?"

"You don't know? Most jinchūriki's don't live past the age of forty, Naruto," Bee explained as he eagerly wrote in his tiny notepad. "Humans beings were never meant to contain demons. I've been lucky that the Gyuuki and I get along so well but let's just say the Fourth Shinobi War was my last full transformation into the eight-tails. It's difficult on the body to come back from that, hurts as much as getting hit by a gat."
"What's a gat?"

"I don't know, Naruto."

Naruto found it was hard to take a conversation seriously when you threw in made up words. Maybe Bee was doing that on purpose.

Naruto frowned.

"Don't look so down," Bee shrugged his shoulders. "I just try to enjoy my days since ninjas don't live long anyways."

"Naruto."

Naruto snickered as Bee jumped from the chair when Fox called his name. Even with both of their enhanced senses, it was still hard to detect Fox's presence. "Creepy isn't it?"

"Sound has arrived. They are preparing for the summit," Fox relayed the information.

Suddenly Bee jumped over his chair and went to one knee in front of her. He began to serenade her with a melting falsetto, "I may be cloud and you may be leaf, but you've stolen my heart like a thief. Give me a chance girl, for your curves are out of this world. Let me hold yo' hand and I'll be yo' man."

Fox didn't have the heart to outright deny him. In the same moment when Fox looked to Naruto for help, a growl ripped through Naruto's throat. He grabbed Fox's hand and saved her.

"Sorry, he's stupid and an idiot," Naruto apologized as he quickly pushed her out of the door.

"Seriously Bee?"

"Rappers have a soft side too. I know about them rhythm and blues." Bee smirked. Naruto hated to admit that Bee could actually sing better than he could rap. "Women like a man who can sing… and other things." Bee arched his eyebrows suggestively.

"That's disgusting," Naruto sighed as they headed for the meeting.

Killer Bee shook his head. "How about after this we head for Cloud and visit a brothel? You need to get laid. I'll make sure you don't get in trouble and I'll pay."

"That is such a bad idea."

"We'll have us a spar, exhaust most of the Fox's chakra, and go get some girls." Bee explained. "Trust me, it'll be fine. Besides, Cloud women are divine."

Naruto's face was brimming red like a cherry by the time they neared the meeting place. They suddenly passed the Sound ninja.

"Uzumaki."

Naruto stopped and it was only then did he realize that the color of the Otokage's hair was the same color as his mother's.

"Where's Sasuke?" Karin demanded. She still wore her glasses and filled the robes she wore with an impressive presence. Suigetsu snickered at her side and Juugo leaned against the wall in patience. All three have grown and lived a little longer since the last time Naruto met them.
Naruto was a little caught off guard that the question had been asked of him. "I don't know."

Karin narrowed her eyes, studying the fluctuations of his chakra as he spoke. "If you happen to find him first, tell him that Sound is looking for him so I can physically rip his heart out."

Karin turned on her heels and headed toward the door.

"Wait!" Naruto called out instinctively.

Karin looked at him with an annoyed expression and Suigetsu stepped between them with the large sword over his shoulder. "Any step closer and I'll cut you to pieces Fox boy."

"I just- you're an Uzumaki."

"So."

"That means we're family."

Karin raised an eyebrow. "Sharing a last name does not make us family. I do not know you. I do not care to know you. All I want is Sasuke."

The Sound team entered through the meeting door.

Naruto frowned in frustration. He had just found out he had another living relative besides Granny and she was more obsessed with the Uchiha. It was as if the Uchiha had placed some sort of cruel spell on the Uzumaki's a long time ago.

"Never break a woman's heart or they will tear you apart," Killer Bee noted as he placed a comforting hand on Naruto's shoulder and led him inside.

The tense atmosphere within the room immediately prompted Naruto to grow serious. The two jinchūriki went to stand behind their respective Kages.

"Konoha is here to witness the peace treaty between the Land of Sound and Lightning," Tsunade began, "and to put an end to this war."

"I don't understand why I'm here," Karin replied. "I was under the impression this was a surrender on Lightning's part."

"We will never surrender to you," A sneered. "This is a chance for you to surrender and come to a sort of… agreement." A motioned to his secretary. He grabbed the folders she held and slapped them on the desk.

Karin picked them up and paled. The longer she held them, the sicker she looked. Even Suigetsu leaned over her shoulder to snatch a peek.

The muscles bulged from A's biceps as he crossed his arms with a stern expression. "As you can see, we know everything. We know the location of all your bases, your weapons, your numbers, weaknesses, and defenses. Everything. If you don't care to spare the rest of your men we can certainly finish this in an open confrontation but you've already lost this war."

Karin narrowed her eyes and was on the edge of tearing the papers apart but if she did that she would look childish and violate her anger therapy classes. She was still trying to figure out how her top research scientist was smuggled out of the securest base in Sound without notice. "So you were the ones who infiltrated my village."
"This is war little girl and I've been playing it all my life," A said. "Shall we continue to write out the terms of your surrender?"

Karin's fists shook so hard she finally ripped the papers in half. All she wanted to do was bring Orochimaru's last legacy to power. She wanted to continue his dreams of integrating innovation and technology and continue to challenge the conventions of forbidden jutsu. That was the dream Sound was founded on and Karin wanted to see it come to fruition. It was all she truly had left.

Suigetsu bent forward and whispered in her ear. "Keep cool, they want something. If they didn't all of this is pointless."

Karin nodded as she faced the two strongest ninja countries in the world. "There is something you want?"

A's expressions turned grave. "Our intelligence informed us of a weapon built with the intent of killing a jinchūriki."

Karin gave a crooked smile as she sat back in her chair. It was a weapon Orochimaru started and she was determined to bring to completion. It wasn't fair that the two strongest ninja villages had the world's two strongest weapons. It wasn't fair that the most powerful alliance in the world largely existed because of the mutual interest in protecting their jinchūriki. When she fully completes the technology, she could earn Sound honor, power, and respect for destroying the last two living weapons, or she could simply sell the technology. Every country, even Cloud and Leaf's allies would scramble to buy it, just in case the power of the tailed-demons was directed towards them in the future.

"So this is what's it's all about? It's still in its experimental stage but I would be glad to test it right here and right now since you have provided the targets."

A didn't smile at all. "This is the situation. Either you pull out of Frost, hand over all contraband of this weapon so that we may depose of it, contribute 1/4 of your rice harvest this year, and we'll allow you keep Hot Springs. If you disagree, we both lose a lot of good men but you lose everything in the end."

Naruto saw a problem with that solution immediately. There was no one here to represent the Land of Hot Springs. They never had a say in anything.

Karin frowned and knew the situation was looking bleak for her. She refused to be treated as a child. She was the Otokage and the title deserved respect. "I need time to consult with my advisors."

A nodded.

Karin left the room with her bodyguards. Suigetsu left a storm of curses behind him.

"Watch them." A ordered to one of his ANBU. A Cloud ANBU disappeared.

"Granny, can we talk?" Naruto asked.

"Since we have time." The Hokage stood up and left through the opposite door from Sound. They met in the hallway.

"Is all of this alright with you?" Naruto asked. He entered Sage mode curiously and noted that the Raikage did not send an ANBU agent after them. Captain Cat stayed in the meeting room while the rest of the Leaf ANBU patrolled throughout the castle.
"It's perfect Naruto. Not only can we stop this war, for our "contribution" we have an agreement with Lightning to share the harvest. Sound's rice will greatly relieve our own famine crisis out in the countryside. You've seen how bad it is out there. It was a harsh winter."

"But Hot Springs doesn't have a say in anything," Naruto argued.

"We let them keep Hot Springs to make them think they came out of this with something, while knowing that Hot Spring resistance groups will keep them busy and focused on what's inside of their border instead of outside."

"It feels like you're lying to them," Naruto complained, "and forcing Sound to give up their rice it's… the situation in Sound is bad. If the farmers have to give up everything then it'll be a civil war and then there won't be rice for anyone. Why don't we just pay for it?"

"Naruto, if we pay for it where is the money going to go?"

"Probably to support their weapons and military," Naruto grumbled.

"Exactly. We don't want them to just turn around and invade us again."

"But she doesn't care about the people. She only cares about Orochimaru's vision. Wouldn't it be better if she was taken out of office?"

"And in order to do that we'd have to invade and lose ninja in the process. It's simpler this way Naruto. We lose fewer lives. Isn't that what you want?"

"But… but… what about the people of Sound? This punishes them."

"And will their situation get any better if Sound captures Frost and continues this war with Lightning? Naruto, some things have got to give. Someone loses and someone wins." The Hokage placed a hand on his shoulder. "I know it's hard to choose but these are the types of decisions a Kage has to make, even if we must sacrifice the lives of the innocent to save the ones in our own borders. I am not given the luxury to question what is right but given the responsibility to decide what is best."

"I still don't like it." Naruto sighed.

"I never said I didn't either," Tsunade assured him and walked back into the room.

They were bargaining people's lives as if it was some cruel game. The fate of countries was decided without their consent. Lightning and Fire were the giants and they didn't care who they crushed underfoot. And Naruto Uzumaki was supposed to just stand there and remain silent because he's simply just a weapon.

Naruto slammed his fist into the wall.

Naruto finally released the laughter he was holding after he finished giving a mission to a genin team with his best "drunk Tsunade" impression. He leaned back in the chair and placed his feet on the table.

"It sort of scares me how accurate that was," Shizune replied. She was doing the real job. Naruto was simply sitting in the chair.

"Oh, can I play with the crystal ball?"

"No, I agreed to let you play your joke but that's the limit. Come on Naruto, out the chair."
"It's so comfy," Naruto winked as he rotated around like a child.

"Naruto," Shizune complained, "Unless you want to do all of this paperwork…"

Naruto was up in an instant and grumpily returned to his post. He henged into Shizune and tried to appear bossy.

"I don't look like that," Shizune pouted. "Someone has to be the sane one in this office."

Naruto stuck out his tongue but stopped when he sensed a chakra signature rushing toward the office. "Someone's coming."

Shizune quickly covered herself with a henge of Tsunade. Naruto wondered how no one noticed. Even he could see through that henge. Shizune was too uptight to be a good Tsunade.

Shikaku slammed through the doors. He was the only other individual currently within the Hokage Tower who was privy to the information that the Hokage was currently out of the village.

"Hokage, we've just got a message sent from the Village Hidden in the Grass. They request immediate reinforcements. The Village Hidden in the Mountains is invading."

Shizune bit down on the top of her pen. "We tried to keep her absence a secret."

"It could be Sound or Lightning with the spy. It'll be hard to determine where the information was leaked. To attack on the same day our Hokage is out of the village is no coincidence," Shikaku reasoned.

"I agree," Shizune said.

Shikaku examined the newest official map pinned onto the front wall of the office. "We can send messages to the border patrols but we need our ninja to protect the village while the Kage and the real Naruto is gone, not only that, but ninja from Konoha won't arrive until next morning at best. We might have to make a hard decision here."

"We're not going to abandon them when they need our help," Naruto argued.

"No, we don't need to make the decision. The Hokage made preparations in case something like this happened. We can have a team out there in less than thirty minutes." Shizune looked up at Naruto. "Go ahead and inform the Hokage."

Naruto left another clone in his place and disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

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The Otokage and the Raikage were arguing about the exact amount of rice Sound would be forced to surrender when the memories rushed through Naruto's head. Naruto tried to calmly walk up behind the Hokage and tap her on the shoulder. He leaned close to her ear.

"Mountain has invaded Grass and requests help."

The Hokage nodded. "Take care of it. Grass cannot fall. We can't afford Mountain on our borders."

Bee's ears caught the conversation and he watched as Naruto exited the room. Naruto gave the signal he knew Fox would see, made a shadow clone to send back inside with the Hokage, and then jumped out a window and dropped atop the roof of a building.

"What's going on?" Boar asked immediately.
"Naruto, that's improper." Fox gasped and kept an eye on the position of the other ninjas in the vicinity.

"Sorry no time," Naruto apologized as he quickly stripped down to his boxers and summoned his ANBU outfit from his storage scroll.

You'd think Fox would be used to seeing Naruto naked since it had become her favorite pastime but she missed small details through her blue and grey eyesight. She knew he had on polka-dotted boxers but didn't know those polka dots were bright orange until now. She tried to look away to respect his privacy but the attempt was superficial at best. She could still see him through the back of her head and was relieved when he snapped together the last buckles of his flak jacket.

"Mountain is invading Grass and we're the reinforcements. Fox and I have already practiced using these," Naruto explained as he presented one of the special kunai with his Father's seal written on it. It was actually surprisingly easy to tweak the technique. Naruto had made a lot of clones, gave each a kunai with a practice seal, and watched to find which clones survived. He was grateful for the process of elimination.

"I just need you to hold this," Naruto handed over two identical sealed kunai. The one he held was slightly different. "I use my chakra and you space jump time whatever to where my kunai is. Ready?"

"This is the hiraishin technique?" Boar said as he studied the seal.

"Sort of, it's a more advanced version, like the version my dad used to transport the nine-tails out of the village. I'm just transporting you with me so it'll be a drain on my chakra and not yours."

Crow summoned his Fox cloak and raced through the ravaged lands of Frost, through the battle scarred land of Hot Springs, through the rice terraces of Sound, and through the endless ocean of trees that consisted of Fire Country. All the while, he held the specialized kunai between his fingers as they formed a Boar seal and continually focused chakra into the kunai. His squad mates flickered in and out by his side.

They crossed the border of Grass country where plains of flowers and grass drifted in the wind and reached as high as a man's chest. Crow continued forward until he heard the sound of battle and a few moments later found large pockets of confrontations between the ninjas of Grass and Mountain. His speed carried him straight to the gate and landed at the top of the Kage's tower where the Kusakage was currently giving orders.

Crow stopped and all Grass ninja jumped and directed attacks in his direction. Fox and Boar appeared at his side half a second later. "We're the Konoha reinforcements," Crow explained quickly.

The Kusakage, an elder man with wrinkled eyes frowned. "That's fucking it?"

"There are a few border ninja that should be on their way but this is all we can spare right now," Crow apologized. "I understand your frustration but normally it would take a ninja at least a day to reach here from Konoha. We're just trying to help."

The Kusakage placed his hat on the table where maps and battle plans were displayed. He wiped the sweat from his bald head with his sleeve. "I apologize and I appreciate Konoha's assistance."

"Grandpa! Let me fight!" A little boy around the age of nine shoved through the ninja that ringed the Kage.
The Kusakage frowned. "Kusuro, where are you supposed to be?"

The little boy blew lazy green hair out of his eyes as he responded, "Helping fetch supplies for the medics."

"Exactly, go." The Kusakage hit the boy on the butt and shoved him toward the tower's stairs. The Kusakage shook his head as he returned to his advisors.

"Sir, where do you think we will be the most effective?" Crow asked. He didn't know the situation or terrain very well. "We can back up your weakest areas."

"They're attacking every which way. Just pick a place." The Kusakage waved a hand in the air. "You Leaf ANBU better be all you're cracked up to be."

Crow motioned to his squad mates and jumped to the ramparts of the village to survey the battlefield. This battle was different than the Fourth Shinobi War. Many allies had died but their opponents were nothing more than resurrected zombies. Down on this grassy battlefield their opponents were real people, and they bled, and they died, and somewhere out there they have families too.

"What's wrong war hero?" Boar asked. "Too much?"

"Yeah it is," Crow conceded. "You're more experienced with war. What do you think would be most helpful?"

Boar looked at the horizon and noticed the large creatures charging towards them. "Take care of the summons. They create the most damage."

"I don't have a large summon," Fox interjected. "Uchiha Sasuke killed Manda but his counterparts aren't exactly any more amiable."

"I've got you," Crow said as he bit his thumb and spread it across his summoned scroll. Boar did the same.

Crow lifted into the air atop the head of Gamabunta, with Gamaken and Gamahiro at his side.

"Well, you haven't summoned or visited in a while."

Crow chuckled. "Sorry Bunta, I've been busy. Mind giving me a hand here?"

"Who is this other person atop my head?"

"She'll be going with Ken-san," Crow explained. The large magenta toad lifted his webbed hand and Fox leapt to his palm. "Take care of her for me."

"I'll do my best," Gamaken replied and gathered his shield and two-pronged sasumata in his hands. Fox settled atop his head and surveyed the field with her byakugan.

"Crow, there are currently five large summons deployed at the moment." Fox relayed through the radio embedded in their masks.

Crow slightly heard her through the static and adjusted to the frequency.

"They also have an airborne Summon. It'll be best if I engage that one," Boar suggested as he gathered his bearing astride the large falcon that hovered overhead.

"Alright, go handle it. We'll handle the rest. And try not to crush our allies underfoot," Crow warned
his summons and sent a clone to ride atop Gamahiro. The trio of toads hopped through the battlefield.

Both Mountain and Grass ninja looked up only for a moment to watch the shadows overhead engage with one another, before returning to their own life or death battles.

Fox and Gamaken engaged a large sleek black panther. Boar crashed together with a vulture. Gamahiro battled a giant beetle and Gamabunta battled a double-headed lion. Crow jumped from Gamambunta's head and used the momentum to punch a giant bear in the nose.

Crow landed into a chest full of brown hair. He could feel the animal's heart pounding underneath him, rustling like a brush of air through leaves. Tears streaked down Crow's cheeks as the Rasenshuriken plummeted into the large and breathing animal.

Crow shook as the smoke cleared and the bell-like screech faded. He found himself standing in a crater of grass, fur, and blood. The Summon was disintegrated on contact but Crow could still smell the high mountain forest that clung to the Bear's scent. The summoner threw a pair of shuriken in his direction. Crow caught himself on all fours and immediately snapped his hands in a pattern of seals, "Wave wind jutsu." The bounty of wind redirected itself forward and cut the Mountain ninja to pieces.

Crow turned just in time to spot the giant two headed lion bite down on Gamabunta's shoulder. Crow charged like a red bullet through the battlefield and slammed the lion so hard they both went tumbling but the fangs still tore through Gamabunta's skin. Gamabunta quickly jumped to the beast's side and plunged his katana into the lion's chest. Blood squirted upwards like a fountain and coated everything around it. The growl that rumbled through the Lion's chest faded. The summoner was crushed underneath his own summon.

"You alright?" Crow yelled. Gamabunta swooped Crow up in his webbed palm before the earth jutsu that strayed from the nearest battle could hit him.

"This is nothing, you watch yourself kid."

Crow got his bearing as he stood atop Gamabunta's head.

Boar cursed as he overshot his genjutsu and the vulture came right atop of him with claws drawn. His falcon and the vulture clawed at each other while Boar attempted to hold on. Then he slipped with a curse. With his falcon engaged in battle he tried to think of any way he could save himself from the drop.

The idea came to him suddenly. He quickly pressed the side of the mask that extended to the radio. "Crow, a little help here?"

The next time he blinked he was riding atop Crow's summon.

"Need help?" Crow offered.

Boar looked up at the sky where his long-time partner was battling. They've been friends since childhood and Boar did not want to lose him. "I need help."

"Up?" Crow suggested.

Boar was slammed down against Gamabunta's head when the Boss Toad hopped into the air. Crow jumped with an Oodama rasengan and in order to avoid the jutsu the vulture disengaged the falcon.
"Great Fireball Jutsu!" Boar declared. Soot and ash traveled on Boar's tongue as the chakra ignited with the air. The fire enveloped the vulture in a cloud of flames. It smelled like dinner. Hawk swooped down and caught Boar before he fell back to the ground with Crow and Gamabunta.

Boar finally had a chance to survey the battlefield and realized Crow had already taken out two of the enemy summons in an instant while he needed help battling one of his. The Demon Fox had killed his family years ago and now it was saving him.

Boar shook his head and motioned his summon to a squad of long distance enemy fighters. The falcon swooped down and while the summon dodged projectiles, Boar caught them all in his genjutsu cloud. They turned and began attacking one another without remorse.

"Are you alright miss?" Gamaken asked.

Fox gently patted the frog atop his head. "I'm alright. I'm going to jump on the next pass and try to go for the summoner."

"I advise to be careful," Gamaken held his golden shield and lifted the sasumata in his hand as the large panther charged once again towards them. It sounded like earthquakes when its paw dug into the dirt and did not care who it squished underfoot, friend or foe. It pounced forward. Gamaken dipped, caught it atop the sasumata, and slammed it down to the ground.

Fox jumped and clung onto the beast with enhanced chakra as the panther growled, twisted, and snapped its powerful hind legs forward. Gamaken had to jump back to avoid the claws and released the panther from his grip.

Fox stalked along the back with light feet, unknown to the summoned or the summoner. Fox could see every drop of sweat and every pore of skin on her target. The carotid artery was pulsing with blood as she withdrew her fingers. The strike was quick as a snake, the cholesterol plaque was dislodged, the heart rate and blood pressure dropped as her victim fell unconscious, slid from the back of the summon, had a stroke on the way down but died on impact with the ground.

The panther stared down at her fallen dead partner and then snarled in grief. Finally aware of Fox's presence, the panther attempted to buck her off. Fox's foot slipped and she swiftly slammed her hands onto the chakra points atop the summon's head. The panther froze, and at that moment of hesitation, the sasumata plunged into its body.

The panther collapsed on the ground with a purr of grief and attempted to paw the ground to reach her summoner. She died before reaching him. The blood coated her sleek and majestic fur.

Gamaken lifted his hand to retrieve Fox. "Are you alright miss?"

"I'm fine but I'll be more effective on the ground from this point on. It takes a moment for me to prepare this next jutsu. Do you mind defending me?"

"I'll do my best," Gamaken nodded as he placed her on a swathe of trampled grass.

Fox widened her stance and her byakugan revealed the entire battlefield. She counted one hundred and thirty four enemies in her immediate vicinity and range of vision. Fox went through the hand signals of the technique restricted to only members of the Hyuuga main household.

"One trigram, one hundred and thirty four palms!"

Fox jumped in front of an opponent currently embroiled in a battle and with a steady palm struck the
heart, then flipped to the next opponent and struck him down in the same manner. With the positions of her enemies visible all around her, she tore through the battlefield and zigzagged from one enemy to the next. Without warning and without hesitation she ended their life.

She finally came to a stop and one hundred and thirty enemies fell down dead. Her breath hitched as she pulled an Akimichi chakra pill from her pocket and quickly swallowed it before she fell victim to chakra exhaustion. She knew after the battle was done, she would probably hold herself and cry. She had never killed that many so quickly. One trigram, one precise and perfect hit to the heart, was deadly.

"Fox, I'm picking you up."

Fox hardly had any time to react when a falcon swooped down and caught her up in its talons. She didn't understand what was going on as she was flown across the other side of a lake where Crow was waiting.

"Do you remember what we were practicing?"

"Crow, but… it wasn't perfect." Fox replied.

"No time to think about it now. Boar, grab as many people in the way as you can," Crow began the seals. Alarmed, Fox quickly followed suit.

"Naruto, this is stupid," Fox couldn't help but to reply.

Crow snickered, "I know. The idea just came to me. Ready?"

"Ready."

"Here goes nothing. Water Release: Exploding Water Colliding Wave!" They shouted at the same time and placed their hands upon the surface of the lake situated far away from the battlefield.

To be honest, by himself Crow still couldn't do a water jutsu to save his life, but with Fox's help he managed to channel it. It was perfect - Crow provided the chakra and Fox provided the control.

The water in the lake lifted into the air and charged forward as Crow added waves and waves of his chakra.

Everyone on the battlefield stopped and abandoned their weapons as a wave of water arched over their heads. The water slammed into the earth and pooled into the dirt.

Crow breathed heavily as he overlooked a dried valley of flopping fish. He dove and caught Fox as she slipped from her feet. Boar landed beside them. Every stroke of the falcon's wings bowed the plain of grass.

"Did it work?" Crow asked.

"You just moved an entire lake in the middle of a battlefield. Yes, it worked. The Mountain ninja seem to have retreated for the moment. The Grass ninja have returned to the village to regroup. You can bet next time, you'll be the main target."

"Better than the Grass ninja, I guess."

"Your summons are in the newly formed lake keeping watch on the other side."

Crow nodded and then made a clone to go check on them.
Boar reached down and offered a hand to help the two onto his falcon. Crow wrapped one arm around Fox and reached for the extended hand gratefully. They were pulled into the air and landed in the village.

"We should focus on our defenses." One advisor argued.

"We should go after them while they're running."

"No, we were hurt badly in the surprise attack and we need this time to recuperate and regroup." The Kusakage decided. He turned to the leaf ninja as they neared him. "I'll be damned. The rumors of the Leaf ANBU are true and more. Please rest and we'll get you anything you need."

"That's alright, attend to your own men," Crow reassured him.

Crow chose a spot atop the gate to sit down and catch a breath. From here he still had a good view of the battlefield and it was easy to reach Gamabunta from this height when the Boss Toad approached the village.

"Fox, I know this might be asking a lot but do you think you can do something about his shoulder?" Crow asked. Gamaken and Gamahiro only had slight wounds.

"Is this what you called me for? Let the woman rest. We heal faster than a human being anyways."

Crow ignored him and hopped onto Gamabunta's arm. He glided his hand along the bumpy skin. "It looks deep."

Fox picked herself up to take a look. "I don't have a sufficient amount of chakra to fix a wound this large but I can clean it so it won't become infected."

Gamabunta frowned but let the woman take care of him as she began to clean the wound with disinfectant. "I hope there aren't any negative affects since your physiology is different from a human. I haven't studied frogs very much."

"Toad," both Crow and Gamabunta replied at the same time.

"They have identical taxonomy," Fox said underneath her breath.

"And why are you wearing a Crow? Why can't it be a Toad mask?" Gamabunta asked as he withdrew his pipe from the inside of his jacket with his left hand.

"They said it was too obvious," Crow chuckled.

Boar walked over with three bowls of food. "It's best we eat. It's easy to forget the simple things that need to be taken care of during a battle."

"Thank you, Boar," Fox replied and finished the bandaging. Gamabunta was gentle as he placed her back atop the gate. She took the bowl from Boar's hand gratefully.

Boar was disturbed as he looked at Gamabunta. "It is more efficient during a battle that when a summon gets hurt like that they are simply dispelled back home."

"Do you want to go back Gamabunta?" Crow asked as he took the bowl Boar offered.

Gamabunta answered by blowing a puff of smoke into Boar's face.

Crow smirked and return to sit atop of Gamabunta's left shoulder. When he looked into the bowl, he
realized he wasn't very hungry.

Fox noticed. "You should eat."

"I don't want to throw it back up," Crow admitted. It was the same reason why he couldn't let Gamabunta's wound go, not after seeing so many summons, so many beasts who no doubt have lived for hundreds years to reach their size die in an instant, and often in a shower of blood.

Boar scoffed. "You should be used to this by now."

"I'll never get used to it."

Boar shook his head. "Your Father killed hundreds in the blink of an eye during the Third Shinobi War and he never cried about it."

This time Gamabunta breathed a long cloud of smoke that withered Boar's food. "You know nothing of Namikaze Minato."

"I've seen him fight in battle, that is the best manner of knowing your ally," Boar argued.

Crow shrugged his shoulders as he leaned into Gamabunta's arm. "You're only fooling yourself Boar, we all cry."

The bowl that Crow had been holding hit the wooden gates and the contents fell like sloppy rain. Crow sat up as a dispersed clone's memories stormed through his head.

"Naruto, what is it?" Gamabunta asked.

Naruto could only stare for a few moments and make sense of the horrible implications.

After a long night of directing arguments and fussing over specific details, Tsunade crossed her arms as she stood outside of the meeting room. "I don't like the idea of being gone from Konoha for another day but these sorts of things do take time. I just get the impression that she's stalling."

"You think Sound is going to try something?" Naruto asked as the Hokage finally peeled herself from the wall.

"Normally if a country was facing the two most powerful countries in the world they wouldn't dare, but this is Orochimaru's legacy we'll dealing with and I wouldn't put anything past them."

"Should the real me come back?" Naruto asked.

"No, no matter what the circumstances, you are to remain in Grass. We cannot afford to lose that ally nor can we afford to have Mountain so close to our borders. I'm trying to avoid dragging Konoha into a war when we haven't recuperated fully from the last one but it seems to be always on the horizon."

Naruto and a retinue of other ANBU agents who stood in the shadows walked the Hokage to the room provided for her. All of the major factions had separate wings in the castle.

"Go get some rest, Naruto. We'll finish this tomorrow."

"Are you sure it's safe in there?" Naruto asked as he pecked inside of the bedroom. It looked grand and expensive.
Tsunade chuckled. "Cat has already scanned the room thoroughly and deemed it was safe. There will also be guards outside of my door."

"Alright." Naruto nodded and walked to his room, which he soon realized was uncomfortably far away from the Hokage. He was placed in the servant's quarters and Naruto was certain it wasn't an oversight. He wondered if the Hokage had made the right decision by bringing him here. He didn't think his presence made any difference at all. In the end, he was just decoration.

Naruto pushed his cloak off and out of habit, began placing seals along the windows. He stopped when there was a knock on the door and he opened it to reveal Princess Ahiko.

"Oh Princess…" Naruto said surprised.

"I only came by to make sure the accommodations were favorable?"

"I… actually, since you asked, there aren't any rooms closer to the Hokage? I would feel better if-"

"I'm afraid not," the Princess Ahiko cut him off. "Is there something wrong with this room?" The Princess asked as she shoved Naruto back and invited herself inside.

From experience, Naruto knew that having a girl in his room was a horrible idea but at the same time, it bothered him when people didn't like him. "I'm really sorry about what happened."

The Princess eyed Naruto's cloak that was thrown across a chair. She picked it up in interest. "My Father died in that war. No apologies can change that. Do you truly think that monsters like yourself deserve to live?"

"I'm no monster." Naruto said softly.

"A sweet delusion. The craters you left in my land will be unable to be farmed for years. The streaks of ash and dust will forever leave a stain. The pure white snow falls as dirty rain. Only demons are capable of so much destruction. You are a monster."

Ahiko dropped the cloak. "It is time I take my leave." She walked towards the door and stopped right before Naruto, "and it's time for the Age of Demons to finally end."

Naruto's eyes widened as a kunai plunged into his abdomen, where the seal would have been, but he disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

"A shadow clone?" Ahiko questioned. "Oh no."

Princess Ahiko rushed through the palace and frantically knocked on the door. Karin's glasses glinted in annoyance as she threw the door open with nothing but a robe on. "What?"

"I… I… I went ahead with the plan," she whispered, "but it was just a shadow clone."

"What?" Karin screamed and was quickly restrained by a naked Suigetsu.

"Now can we kill her?" Suigetsu asked devilishly. Karin calmed down enough to restrain him and address the Princess.

"You idiot bitch. I told you the plan had changed and that we'd go after Killer Bee only. The real Naruto Uzumaki isn't anywhere in your stupid country."
"I thought… I thought… why didn't you tell me? I just wanted both of them to pay."

Karin rolled her eyes. Double-crossing several countries at once was hard work. "Did you at least send someone after Killer Bee as well?"

Ahiko nodded. "I did. He should be dead at any moment-" As she said the words the castle began to vibrate and crumble. "What's going?"

Eight tentacles twisted and sprouted from the ancient stone of the castle.

"I thought the kunai were supposed to kill them?" Ahiko asked as she fell to the ground.

Karin stood over the ignorant princess. "You really thought it takes just a kunai to kill a jinchuriki? Here's the plan," Karin pressed her foot on Ahiko's throat. "I have developed a forbidden jutsu that will destroy the tailed-beast once and for all but first you must agree to hand over your country."

Ahiko breathed deeply as she looked up at Karin in despair. "I will never hand over my country."

Karin motioned to Suigetsu. His sharp teeth glinted as he smiled and then dissolved into a bubble of water and forced himself into Ahiko's mouth.

"Is that still a no?" Karin questioned.

As Ahiko struggled to claw at her throat she managed to shake her head. Her eyes turned glassy and unfocused. Her futile gasps finally died.

"Too bad." Karin said as she stepped over the corpse and Suigetsu reformed himself behind her. He eagerly stashed the body in a storage scroll so he could cut it up for later.

Karin knocked on the adjacent door and Juugo opened it. "I need your birds to send a few messages," Karin began to explain what she needed.

The walls beside her finally crumbled from the stress. The frantic shouting of other ninjas could be heard down the hall. Orochimaru would be proud of her.

"Let's see how many Kage's we can kill tonight?"


"Oh shut up, Suigetsu, one at a time."

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"We have to go back."

"What?" Boar spat.

"It's a trap. The whole peace treaty was a trap," Crow explained as he shot onto his feet and jumped down to the ramparts. "They just tried to kill me. What if they go after the Hokage? Granny is in trouble-" Crow was interrupted when Boar gripped his shoulders.

"We're talking about the Raikage, the Hokage, an ANBU Captain and an ANBU regiment from both villages. They can handle it. Weren't we ordered here? This battle is our mission. If we leave now I doubt Grass will survive the next wave."

Crow looked around him, at all of the people that would die if they left. "Shit, I don't know what to do."
"We stay here. The Hokage has the best to protect her. You will make little difference," Boar argued.

Crow looked at Fox. She fiddled with her fingers in thought and then finally said, "If you truly believe the Hokage's life is in danger then we should go back. We are ANBU and our dedication is to the protection of the village and the Hokage. This is not our village," then her voice grew shaky, "but that would mean we would be sacrificing all these people for one person." Fox hit on the core of Crow's inner argument. Fox laid a gentle hand on his arm. "Are you okay with that?"

Crow's breath hitched as he remembered the one time he's seen Granny vulnerable before, right after the fight with Pein. He couldn't abandon her but he couldn't abandon these people either.

She told him to remain in Grass at all cost.

"I don't… if I was Hokage I'd want us to stay here. We'll stay," Crow decided softly and the decision broke his heart. Crow closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Then Crow whipped around when he sensed a large killing intent looming over the horizon.

"Fuck, we've got to go!" Crow demanded immediately.

"We've been assigned here," Boar argued.

"The situation has just changed drastically. The eight-tails… Killer Bee… Fuck, I don't know. Something is wrong. I can feel the killing intent from here. I'm the only one who can stop him."

"Crow, villages have been defeating and capturing tailed-beasts since before you were born. The situation hasn't changed."

Crow bit his lip. "Boar, if the eight-tails is on a rampage a whole lot more people will die than the numbers that will be lost here." It seemed like any decision he chose, he was going to lose in the end. He didn't have enough chakra. He couldn't be in two places at once. He couldn't do everything. He couldn't save everyone.

"I can save the most people if I stop the eight-tails."

Boar crossed his arms. "Numbers are meaningless. This village is strategically more important to Konoha's interest than Frost is."

Crow growled as he grabbed Boar by his flak jacket and lifted him off his feet. "And what if it's your family? Shouldn't we save them even if it's not strategically important?"

"Metaphors are pointless. Frost is farther from Konoha's borders than Grass. Protecting Grass is protecting my family," Boar replied.

Crow threw him on the ground in frustration. The seconds were ticking by. He needed to make a decision.

"No matter your decision, we will follow you," Fox assured him.

Which decision was the right one? Was any of them right? Or were all of them just wrong?

Crow sucked in a deep breath and turned on his heels. He interrupted the war meeting among the village officials. "You have to retreat."

The Kusakage frowned. "Not an option."

"Look, there is another situation that requires our immediate attention and Konoha reinforcements
won't arrive until the morning. One of my squad mates has the byakugan and she has seen that Mountain have numbers enough to overrun your forces by the reinforcements arrive. Please, you've got to retreat."

"Coward Leaf ninja," the Kusakage spat. "This is my country and my village. Our ancestors have lived and died on this land and so will we. I wouldn't expect you to understand."

"What about the civilians? Shouldn't they retreat?"

"Those that wanted to retreat already have. Most of them have taken up arms in defense. I did not force that decision on them. We live here, we die here, and we make our last stand here even if that means none of us survives," The Kusakage answered.

"Damn it, listen to me."

The Kusakage eyed Crow. "A few years ago one of the most powerful ninja this world has ever seen invaded Konoha and turned it to ash. I don't remember reading reports of Konoha ninja running away. Where were you that fateful day?"

"I was fighting," Crow said in a broken whisper.

"Then you understand."

"We will not run. We will not cower. We will fight to the last man, woman, and child."

Crow surrendered bitterly. The hard faces of the ninja surrounding him were not going to move.

Naruto knew he did all he could, he tried, but it still pained and crushed his heart as he left all these people to die. He'll hate himself and he'll cry about it later. He turned his back against the village and left Grass Country to its fate.

"What if we try to contain him?" Tsunade yelled over the roar of the eight-tails.

"I've sent my ninja to collect the necessary equipment from Cloud to reseal him but by that time it will be too late," A explained as he stopped to rest.

"I do have that forbidden jutsu you wanted me to destroy. I could take care of this problem permanently," Karin suggested.

"Shut up whore. I have yet to determine whether this was your fault," A snapped.

"Don't blame me for your inability to keep you monster on a leash," Karin sneered.

"That monster is my brother."

Tsunade quickly got between the two Kages who were on the verge of fighting with each other. "That's enough. We have bigger problems than each other right now."

Captain Cat dropped down beside her. "Every time we get close, his tentacles push us away. We're not fast enough to pierce his defenses."

A cracked his neck. "Then I'll handle this," and in a blink of eye he was gone.

"Cat, set up a perimeter to mitigate the damage."

"Yes, Hokage."
"Isn't it ironic that your greatest strength is also a ticking time bomb?" Karin asked. "Just as ironic as the fact that the last time I saw you, I was your prisoner."

Tsunade wished she could pummel this little girl's face in. "You haven't won just yet."

The Raikage weaved in and out of the tangle of tentacles and threw a haymaker right into the eight-tails face. Gyuuki slammed and rolled, creating a crater in the ground where it fell. In an angry and panicked fit, a tentacle slammed right into A and he slid on the ground past Tsunade.

"Oh crap," Karin cursed and began to run.

A dark orb of energy condensed within Gyuuki's mouth. The Hokage knew no matter which way she ran, there would be no escaping the ball of energy large enough to topple mountains. She stepped backwards. Karin hardly ran two leaps when the ball of energy was released.

All sound was temporarily trapped. A cloak flapped in the wind. Two red clawed arms began to condense a ball of chakra.

"Excuse me," Fox said as she gathered the Hokage in her arms. Boar grabbed the Raikage and they were instantly teleported to where the real Crow stood overlooking a ridge.

The clone managed a tail beast ball large enough to cancel out the previous attack. Wind gushed away from the explosion and leveled hills in its path. The frost on the ground fell back down like falling stars.

"What did she do to him?" Crow asked angrily. "All I feel is his bloodlust."

"What are you talking about?" Tsunade asked as Fox helped the Hokage to her feet.

"Princess Ahiko attempted to stick my clone with some sort of special kunai that messed with our seals."

A cursed. "She was always more volatile than her Father. I should have known. I can give a guess where she got technology like that. I remember reading it in the Sound schematics. Where is that little Sound bitch?"

Crow looked at the field. "Suigetsu saved her and dissolved into the ground."

"Hokage-sama, there is an army of ninja approaching from the Sound border," Fox observed.

A punched the ground and rocks flew. "At this rate we're going to lose Frost."

"Let's focus on getting Killer Bee under control before her army is upon us. Crow, can you handle it?" The Hokage asked.

"Maybe, I've used up a lot of my chakra." That was just an excuse. Crow was worried about something else entirely. 'Willing to help here?'

What do I look like? Your friend?

'We owe it to the Eight-tails and Killer Bee to help them,' Crow argued.

Your point?

'Fuck you,' Crow growled. It looks like he wouldn't be transforming into his tailed beast mode. Instead he summoned the chakra cloak. "I'll handle it."
"This is my brother and he's my responsibility as well. Hokage, I need someone to gather Cloud reinforcements to counteract Sound."

Tsunade nodded. "I'll have them here as fast as I can." She quickly ordered Cat to follow her and ordered the rest of the Leaf ninja to stay and help in any capacity.

"Uzumaki I'm guessing?" The Raikage asked.

Crow nodded.

"Well we have to. The Raikage flickered onto the battlefield where the ANBU agents were attempting a jutsu to restrain him, but one tentacle came down and an agent was caught under the weight and power like a squashed bug.

"What do you want us to do?" Fox asked.

"I… uh… I should probably go into this alone."

"But we're your team," Fox argued. "We could provide aerial and medical support."

"This isn't backing me up in a mission or on the battlefield. This is the Eight-tailed beast in his full form going on a rampage while I can't even activate my full form right now. This is dangerous and you should just stay as far away as you can."

Fox stepped in Crow's path. "Crow, your chakra levels are dangerously low. You didn't ration your chakra at all during the battle with Grass. You cannot do this one alone. You can die here." She tapped the side of his mask where his skin was noticeably darker. "You're not invincible."

She stepped back and joined Boar atop his summon. They took off into the sky.

Crow held the side of the mask she had touched. He wasn't afraid of losing his life. The nine-tails would do all he could to keep him alive out of a mutual interest, but Crow didn't know if he had the strength to protect his friends and his comrades. He was afraid of losing them.

Crow shook his head and charged onto the battlefield.

"I'll attack from the right," the Raikage said.

Crow nodded and went to the left. The two fastest people in the world whizzed through the air as tentacles whipped by and missed them. Crow and the Raikage each grabbed a horn and slammed the eight-tails down onto his face.

Then the eight tailed twisted its head in the ground. They let go but as Crow looked up, found one of the horns coming straight towards him. He caught it in his hands. He was unable to find a grip on the smooth horn and slid backwards, the ground ripped apart under his feet until he was lifted in the sky and then plunged back down. Even with his fox cloak protecting him, he felt the pain as he slammed deep into the ground.

The eight-tails was quickly thrown to the side as the Raikage slammed into him with an electrifying pulse. The eight-tails cries of pain rang deeply in Crow's ears. Crow could feel his cracked rib bone beginning to knit back together. He wondered if either one of them would come out of this alive.

"Crow," Fox said into Crow's earphone. "I've been studying his chakra pathways and I've counted three hundred and sixty one nodes, the same number as a human being. Logically, if I manage to close sixty-four specific nodes I believe we can render him immobile without killing him."
Crow frowned. "That sounds like an easy way to get you killed."

"Naruto," Fox snapped. "It's time for you to accept that you can't do everything by yourself. We're your team. Let us help."

Crow closed his eyes and remembered Sai. What if he made a mistake again?

"Naruto!"

Crow charged forward like a bright red meteor and made impact with the hardened skin of the eight-tails. It roared in rage and pain and Naruto hesitated when the blow caused cracks in the wooden skin. He created eight clones and each took a tail.

He didn't have much longer before the Demon Fox finished feeding off his chakra.

He grabbed a hold of each and attempted to reign in the tails. Once he had each pinned, the Raikage charged forward and bolted the Eight tails in the head like lightning. By sheer forced and unadulterated rage, the tails whipped into the air, taking the clones with it, and swatted them like annoying pests.

Crow’s head skid along the ground. He swiped the blood-soaked hair from his eyes as he looked up at the impossible task of subduing the eight-tails without killing him in the process. A few rasenshuriken or a Bijuu bomb will do it but Naruto couldn't guarantee the Eight Tails will ever get up from that.

"Okay," Crow responded with doubt. "What do we need?"

"A distraction," after a pause, "Catch me."

Crow quickly created another shadow clone to relay the plan to the Raikage. Then Crow looked up and caught Fox as she fell from the sky. "There are two behind each horn."

"Alright, but we have to do this quick because the Fox is feeding off my chakra and I didn't start out with a lot so…"

"I understand," Fox climbed atop Crow's back.

"Crow," Boar voice came over the radio. "I will attempt to create a duplicate of the two of you with genjutsu to confuse the eight-tails further."

Crow shoved off the ground as his clone and the Raikage attempted to divert the Eight-tails attention.

Crow landed atop Gyuuki's head and Fox quickly withdrew her fingers and shot a blast of chakra through the thick skin to disrupt the chakra node. Crow quickly jumped her to the next horn.

"There are five along each tentacle." Crow pushed off and flipped backwards to land and stick to one of the tentacles. Crow could feel the sweat drenching his clothes. Crow bit his lip as he faltered and immediately dispelled the clone helping the Raikage. At this point, he needed all the chakra he could get. There was no way in hell he was getting hit by one of those tentacles with Fox on his back, knowing they felt like getting hit by a bar of steel. Crow ran up each tentacle as Fox struck out at the same time. Eventually one of the tentacles went limp.

"Sixty-three," Crow counted the second to last node as they attacked the eight-tails' throat.

"The last is at the base of his neck. Once I close it, we have only thirty seconds to subdue the eight-
tails before the first chakra node recovers."

They could already see that the eight-tails attacks had become sluggish, sort of what you would expect if a tailed beast could become drunk. The Raikage, Boar, and other ANBU agents were plenty to hold the tailed beast's attention.

"Alright," Crow kicked off the throat and then slipped.

"Shit," Crow spat as he threw Fox off of him and crumbled to his knees. His normal chakra cloak began to bubble red.

Fox instantly caught herself on the ground. "Crow?"

"Fox, finish the mission. Boar, pick her up."

Boar swooped down atop his hawk, grabbed Fox within its talons, and dropped her down atop the tailed beast. Fox fell from the skies and struck the final chakra node. The eight-tails roared before it dropped and flailed like a landed fish. The Cloud ANBU converged on the Eight-tails immediately and prepared a joint jutsu to finally immobilize the Eight Tails.

Fox slid to the ground and ran toward Crow who was trying to unsuccessfully prevent himself from sprouting a third tail. He had no more chakra to counteract the Kyuubi.

Fox reached out to help him when she was suddenly thrust to the ground. Claws dug into her shoulders as her clothes began to melt in contact with the poison. The mask had fallen and Fox was paralyzed by the killing intent emanating from Narurto's blood-red eyes.

The Kyūbi leaned forward as he sprouted a fourth tail and licked along the goose-bumps of Fox's neck. He shivered in excitement. "I haven't tasted human flesh in so long."

**Get off of her you stupid Fox!**

The Kyuubi teased his incisors on her fragile neck. Humans were so easy to break.

**No! Stop! Let her go! Stop, stop, please…**

Suddenly the Kyūbi was knocked off by a large boulder. The Kyūbi snarled and dragged the forming bones around his body into the ground as he twisted and faced the little human being who dared to deprive him of his prey.

Boar suddenly realized facing this thing was an idiotic thing to do, but prepared another earth jutsu just in case.

The Raikage crossed his arms. "Here we go again. I will kill him if I have to."

Hearing his words, Fox forced herself to move and pushed herself onto her feet. She was terrified being so close to the Kyūbi. His chakra overpowered her and was growing with every second. Pein suddenly seemed a kitten in comparison.

She entered her Jyuukken stance.

**Hinata run!**

The Kyuubi snarled and charged towards her.

The Kyuubi was as fast as Naruto when he was invoking his chakra cloak. Having grown
accustomed to the speed during their spars, she predicted his movements with ease.

Her hands struck without hesitation. She closed a chakra point but the Kyuubi pumped an ocean of chakra through the node and reopened it. She faltered in surprise and the Kyuubi's tail slammed her into the ground. Her vision blurred and all she saw was the burning chakra that encompassed his body. Four tails flicked through the air playfully as the Kyuubi licked his lips.

"I do love playing with my food."

Several jutsu were thrown in his direction but he flicked them away with a swat of his tails. The Kyūbi plunged two fingers downwards to have a taste of one of her eyes.

Fox found the strength somewhere to roll out of the way and wobble to her feet.

She had promised Naruto that she was a part of his team and that they could depend on each other equally. She had to save him. She knew once the Kyūbi allowed all nine tails to grow nothing would be able to stop him.

She re-entered her Jyūken stance.

Kurama, let her go please.

The Kyūbi laughed. Naruto had resorted to using his name. "Now you know what it feels like to watch. I can't wait to rip apart that shrieking pink-haired banshee, those unbearable rodents of yours, and end the eight-tails myself. I'M FINALLY FUCKING FREE!"

Fox moved faster than she had ever moved in her life. She augmented the speed of her muscles with chakra while at the same time perfectly performing the Jyūken technique. As if it had occurred all at the same time, pathways around the seal were shut closed in a matter of seconds.

The poisonous chakra vanished and Naruto crumbled to the ground.

Fox fell to her knees and carefully reached to check if he was alright. Her byakugan confirmed the beating of his heart. Fox gave a strangled cry as Naruto turned and squeezed his arms around her.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," Naruto begged as he tightened her in a hug.

Next time, she's the first I eat.

"Naruto, it's alright. That wasn't you." Fox whispered. She was beginning to feel very hot and to keep herself from fainting, she leaned her head into his embrace.

"What should we do with it Raikage?"

Naruto looked around and found himself surrounded by ANBU agents, all with hand signs and jutsu poised toward the paralyzed and subdued tentacle-beast beside him.

The Raikage walked forward with arms crossed and looked the eight-tails in the eye. All he saw was a monster. His brother was nowhere to be found.

"Kill him."

"Wait! No!" Naruto cried as he scrambled onto his feet. The ANBU agents looked at each other. It was then that Naruto realized he was completely nude and healing rapidly from burns.

"Just give me a moment," Naruto begged the Raikage and overcame his embarrassment. He walked
up the eight-tails as Gyūki roared in the air.

"Boar, do something," Fox demanded.

"There's no point now. His identity is completely compromised."

"I meant his modesty."

"Women, as if they don't realize there are such things as public baths," Boar used a genjutsu on the vision of those watching and gave the illusion that Naruto was wearing clothes.

Naruto reached out and grabbed the snout of the bull. "Gyūki, it's me Naruto. You've got to calm down."

He blew a puff of smoke from his nostrils. The eight-tails skin was leather tough in Naruto's hands. Naruto knew how hard it was to calm down from blood lust but he pressed his forehead against the grand beast and hoped his words were heard.

The ninjas watched with suspicion.

"Naruto?" The eight-beast suddenly asked as Naruto delved into the mindscape. He found the Gyūki twisted around an unconscious Bee. "What happened?"

Naruto chuckled nervously. "Well, both of us sort of went on a rampage."

"All I remember is feeling very hungry," the Gyūki replied and blood drenched its maw.

"If you don't transform back the guys out here are going to kill you," Naruto warned. "It's okay though, I won't let them. Just calm down and come back."

The Gyūki nodded.

Naruto opened his eyes and watched as the eight-tails began to shrink before him. The tails receded, the bones cracked and compressed to reform Killer Bee. He groaned as he lay unconscious and nude on the flattened ground.

The Raikage immediately came over and threw his cloak around his brother's shoulders. He crouched seriously. "B, are you alright?"

"A little confused in the head, but I ain't dead," Bee responded. Naruto couldn't help notice how Bee was moving slower.

The Raikage dragged the arm of his brother around his shoulder and grunted. "If you can rhyme, you're fine."

One of the ANBU suddenly appeared. "The Hokage has brought our army and they have just engaged Sound."

"Good, call a medic for B."

The Raikage straightened and turned to Naruto. "Thanks for saving our ass out there, again." He lifted his fist in the air.

Naruto grinned as he connected with his fist.

"You have a good team. It's exactly why I've always thought a Byakugan would be useful to the
village."

The silence that followed was a little awkward.

The Raikage smiled slightly at their expense. "Exactly why we're allies. And Naruto, get some clothes on," The Raikage replied and turned to carry Bee closer to the medic.

Naruto blushed red. Fox looked at Boar.

Boar shrugged. "I'm not about to put any genjutsu on the Raikage no matter how harmless it is. I'm not causing a war."

Once Naruto was dressed, he and his team rendezvous with the Hokage. They landed in the ruins of Frost castle where the center of operations for the battle was being held.

"How are you holding up?" The Hokage asked.

"Honestly, my entire team is suffering from chakra exhaustion at this point," Crow admitted.

"Then go and get some rest over by the medic tents. I've re-routed the reinforcements towards Grass to this location. Grass is already lost and we can't lose Frost, but that doesn't mean you should fight all of our battles."

"I know you told me not to abandon Grass but..."

"I respect your decision."

"But what if they're still fighting? Perhaps if I can go back and I can still save them."

"With what chakra? You are to stay here," Tsunade ordered sharply. "We almost had a disaster on our hands if it wasn't for Fox's quick thinking. You are officially done fighting for today."

"But what if I can still save someone?"

"Naruto, I know it's hard but you're only human. Part of being a leader is knowing your own limits. Sometimes we don't have a choice but to let people save themselves and be their own heroes."

"I can't accept that." Naruto clenched his fists as Cloud ninja sped past him to join the battlefield.

"This time it's not your choice. As the Fifth Hokage, I order you to take a nap."

Naruto opened his mouth to argue, but Tsunade raised an eyebrow. Naruto grumbled as he turned on his heels. How was he supposed to get any kind of rest when there was a battle occurring just over the hill between Lightning and Sound? How can he even close his eyes without seeing the faces of all those he left behind in Grass?

Boar obviously didn't have that problem. Naruto passed Boar already asleep in his bedding roll as if the sounds of battle were merely a lullaby. He combed his fingers through his hair and paused just as Fox left the medic's tent covered in bandages.

Naruto took a step backwards as he confronted the consequences of pushing himself to his limit. "I'm sorry for what I did to you."

"You have nothing to be sorry for. That wasn't you. What did the Hokage say? Does she want to deploy us in the battle?" Fox asked.
"No," Naruto hung his head. "She wants us to rest."

Fox nodded and chose a spot out of people's way to sit, underneath the hollow shell of the castle that used to stand. Naruto couldn't sit down as he paced the ground in front of her. Just a few leagues from him people were dying and if he had enough chakra, he could have been saving them.

"You won't miss anything if you close your eyes for just a few seconds," Fox promised him. "There is always more fighting to be done."

Fox flinched as Naruto swiveled on his heels and punched the rubble beside her so hard, the rest of the building collapsed. He hit his head against the cool stone and dropped to his knees. He tried to create a rasengan but the chakra flickered in his hands. He tried to use sage mode but he needed to blend natural energy with his nonexistent own. The Fox has drained it all away and he didn't have the time to recuperate what he had lost. He needed to be out there right now fighting.

"Naruto," Fox called him gently.

Naruto flinched at her voice and dug his nails into stone. He couldn't stop the feelings of fear and helplessness that suddenly washed away his frustration and anger. He had lost control, again. The Kyūbi had almost won, again. Blood dripped down his lip as he remembered the thought of wanting to eat Hinata and slide her warm entrails along his tongue.

Fox slid her hand up Naruto's neck just as he began to hyperventilate and then pressed the last amount of chakra she could muster into the base of his neck. Naruto collapsed unconscious. Fox slid to the ground beside her physically and emotionally exhausted squad leader.

The sound of the Raikage issuing orders began to dim as she scooted over and offered her lap as a pillow for Naruto's head. The screams of those rushed to the medic tents began to fade as she closed her eyes and combed her fingers through the hair of the man that she loved.

Hinata Hyūga fell asleep with a smile.

A slight wind brushed through Naruto's hair as he trudged through the ruins of the Village Hidden in Grass. From this distance he could sense the camp of Mountain Ninja only a few leagues away. He could easily tear through the camp and kill every single one but that would not make his decision any easier to bear. Naruto sat among the dead and watched as the sun began to lift over the horizon.

His ear suddenly perked when he heard a soft sound, almost like fingernails scratching against the dirt. Naruto shot onto his feet and quickly rushed to find the sound's source. He barely sensed a chakra signature beneath a monument of broken rocks, but it was there. Naruto pushed the rocks off of each other until he came upon a smooth mound of earth. It was crafted too smoothly to be natural. When Naruto laid his palm to the cool dirt, it crumbled to the ground and revealed a dirty little boy at its center.

Naruto recognized the strands of green hair. He lifted the Kusakage's grandson in his arms and gave him some water. Naruto remembered how the Kusakage had been so determined to fight to the last man and woman, but in the end, he saved his grandson's life.

The boy's fierce blue eyes snapped open and shoved the canteen out of his way. "Grandpa?" He called with dry lips. His vision focused and noticed the leaf symbol. The boy called Kusuro scowled and tried to crawl away but paused and stared at the dead littered across the ground.

"Tanaka-san?" The boy whispered as he crawled to the nearest corpse and tried to wake the ninja up. Naruto could only watched as the boy stumbled from corpse to corpse trying to see if any of them
had survived. Kusuro gave up in frustration and rushed to the spot where he last saw his grandfather.

"Grandpa!" He called. Only silence echoed. "Grandpa!" the boy called as he ran through the village until his voice grew hoarse and he fell to his knees. His shoulders shook as he looked at the fallen buildings beside him. "Grandpa, where's mom?"

Naruto attempted to near him but Kusuro dug his hand in the ground and lashed out with thrown rocks. A large one hit Naruto in the right eye and blood began to obscure his vision.

"Get away from me you stupid Leaf ninja! You abandoned us!" Kusuro declared and his small hands deftly went through a flurry of hand signs. "Grass Release: Exploding Needle!"

Kusuro brought the small and lonely blade of grass he found on the ground, brought it to his lips and blew. Like a senbon needle, the blade of grass blew forward and Naruto deflected it with a kunai before it could hit his left eye. This kid was really trying to kill him. As the leaf blade made a metal ring when it came into contact with Naruto's kunai, it suddenly exploded in a flash of fire. It was small and the only damage it caused was a few minutes of Naruto choking on the smoke.

Naruto looked up and found the boy running.

Kusuro stumbled and fell backward when he crashed into Naruto's leg.

"Where are you going?"

"To avenge my village!" Kusuro declared.

Naruto was bitterly reminded of Sasuke. The bitterness, the anger, and the darkness that threatened to swallow you whole. "If you defeat me, I'll let you go," Naruto responded softly. "You have to get revenge on me first if you want to truly avenge your village."

Kusuro narrowed his eyes. "Get out of my way."

"I was that ninja in the Crow mask. I was the one who made the decision to abandon this place when I could have saved them. It's my fault."

Kusuro's eyes widened and a scream of pure anguish ripped from his lips as he stormed forward. Naruto deflected the little boy's blows with ease. Naruto blinked when he blocked and Kusuro suddenly turned into a stump of wood. Naruto stepped aside just as Kusuro went flying past and collided with a wooden house standing on its last legs. Kusuro crawled out with a frustrated expression.

"Grass release: Hidden Pathway!" Kusuro yelled as he plunged his hand flat upon the ground. Naruto watched grass in abundance vibrantly sprout from the ground and decorate the immediate vicinity with grass as high as his waist. Naruto realized immediately the boy was using it to cover his escape. Naruto easily caught him before he could get away.

"That's pretty impressive," Naruto noted. His opponent was probably the most skilled nine-year old he's ever faced.

Kusuro grumbled as he attempted to once again use taijutsu to make Naruto move but was shoved down to the ground. Kusuro looked up in the midst of the grass imbued with his chakra and stared at the brightening sky.

Naruto crouched down beside him. "I'm going to take you home with me."
"No, this is my home."

"I can't leave you here. But I have a deal for you," Naruto suggested. "The day you beat me is the day you can come back here and avenge your people."

"Leave me alone." Kusuro spat. Kusuro blinked when Naruto actually backed away, but he returned. "What do you-" his voice froze as Naruto placed a Grass hitai-ite around Kusuro's forehead. The weight of the symbol paralyzed Kusuro as Naruto scooped him up in his arms.

Everything finally dawned on the young nine-year old boy. He was all that was left of Grass. He was his people's legacy and hopes. Only two days ago, he was skipping academy classes with his friends, he was helping his mom cook dinner, and he was yelling at his Grandpa for not having enough time for him. He would never see the faces of his family and friends again. He wouldn't see this land again for a long time.

He broke down and sobbed into the stranger's arms. He wanted to kill this person but if he did then he would be all alone in the world.

Naruto hugged the boy and took him away from all this death and sorrow. The sun lifted over the horizon and spread light on the silent corpses, and the hollow buildings, and barren ground.

Naruto Uzumaki saved what he could.

x

I am not given the luxury to question what is right but given the responsibility to decide what is best.
The Sky between the Clouds and the Leaves

The no man's land between the battle lines of Cloud and Sound was pockmarked by the dead, the dying, and those who were going to die. Naruto observed the ninja who guarded the camp. Naruto could sense the enemy ninja just a few miles away, across the barren and ruined earth, doing much the same. The sun was high but the day was a blanket of chill. At midday, the battle had lulled asleep but everyone knew that the greatest bloodshed was nocturnal. A ninja's war was at night.

"Fox said you wanted to see me?" Naruto asked as he met the Hokage at the edge of camp, staring intently at the declining sun.

"Oi, Naruto."

Naruto leaned forward and was surprised to find Kakashi standing at the Hokage's side. Kakashi lowered his raised hand. His favorite porn series stuck out his back pocket.

"Hey, Kakashi sensei," Naruto greeted with a smile.

Kakashi has never known anyone other than Naruto with such a convincing smile but the scenery, the bags under his eyes, and the loss of his usual flamboyance hinted at the mask he wore.

"You look like you've been busy."

"Too busy," The Hokage claimed with a distasteful frown. "Where have you been for the past few hours? Fox reported that the real you were nowhere to be found."

Naruto flinched. He had forgotten that Boar and Fox were still technically his 'bodyguards.' "I visited Grass," Naruto admitted.

That vein protruded from Tsunade's forehead.

"I did take that nap," Naruto added quickly.

"Naruto, I don't approve of your vigilante antics, especially now. Konoha is at war."

Naruto felt he was being scolded as if he was a child. "I understand but... I... it's something I had to do."

There was some part of Naruto that had hoped he'd find peace of mind, that maybe if he returned he would know if he made the right decision. Those hopes were crushed like the Village hidden in the Grass. He couldn't change the past, couldn't experiment with one choice over another and test which outcome cost the least amount of lives. Choices were forever.

The Hokage looked out over the battlefield. Leaf has already lost ninja to this war. She knew better than most that dwelling on the past never brought one peace. "How is the Kusakage holding up?"

"He's dead," Naruto admitted. "There's nothing left. Everything was destroyed."

"Everything was destroyed?" The Hokage had been hoping after this war with Frost she could curtail her forces to help whatever remained of Grass' resistance, but this was unsettling.
"A ninja village isn't completely destroyed in merely two days," Kakashi replied. "It must have been an inside job."

"Grass was a very tight-knit community. It troubles me to think that Mountain managed to infiltrate them," Tsunade brooded.

"I didn't see any Mountain ninja while I was there."

"A spy is a special category of ninja, Naruto," Kakashi explained. "A spy could very well be the person who looks like they most belong."

If Mountain had spies trained enough to infiltrate Grass, Tsunade was worried about traitors in her own borders. "Naruto, I need to return to Konoha. In my stead, I have decided to appoint you and Kakashi as joint-commanders of Konoha's operation here in Frost."

"What? Why do you need me?" Naruto questioned.

"I don't exactly have a choice. This alliance that Konoha has with Cloud is unprecedented and newly forged. The smallest slight could turn us against each other and you're the only leaf ninja the Raikage respects. That is not an easy thing to obtain. All you have to do is deal with the Raikage and Kakashi will handle the rest."

"But what about ANBU?"

"As the old adage goes: Ninjas fight for peace but Assassins keep the peace. During war, the circumstances change. You will be more effective as liaison for the Raikage but your bodyguards will remain."

"I don't need bodyguards," Naruto stressed and crossed his arms with a pout.

"They are a precaution. Konoha cannot afford to lose you." Tsunade explained. "I have ordered several ninja teams into the area and they will directly report to the two of you. I have assigned Maito Gai to head our force in Fire country and he will apply pressure to Sound's border in the South. With the information we already have on Sound it shouldn't take long to bring them to their knees. Can I place my trust in the two of you to wrap things up here?"

Kakashi bowed and Naruto quickly followed suit.

"Yes, Hokage-sama."

The Raikage stood in silence and stared at a map stretched across the table before him.

Naruto hadn't attended many strategy meetings during his lifetime but he wondered if all of them were as noisy and disorderly as this one. The Raikage's advisors and jounin level ninja were yelling over each other and each person voiced their opinions with fevered passion. There were a few hands slammed down onto the table and spit flying in people's faces. Darui was the only ninja who leaned forward on his elbow and looked as interested in the proceedings as a dozing cat.

"I'm confused." Naruto figured he just wasn't used to these sorts of things.

Kakashi nodded in agreement. This was the most peculiar battle planning he had ever attended. "Me too."

Finally, the Raikage slammed his hands on the table to get the various ninja's attention. "Alright, I
have heard your suggestions and this is what we'll do. I'll lead the main charge toward the border myself. Darui, I want you to take a small unit and travel by sea into Sound and disrupt their supply lines here. Omoi and Karui, you two will take a team and enter the eastern tip of Sound. Collect any Hot Springs resistance and move through the country and cut off all their resources. Any questions?"

Omoi pulled the blue lollipop from his mouth and asked. "You're spreading us out thinly. With this plan the entire operation hinges on the center. If the center fails we might not be able to provide support in time. Then Lightning will fall and then the world will fall into chaos."

"Are you suggesting that I am going to fail?" The Raikage asked.

"Just a thought," Omoi replied. "I have every faith in your abilities Raikage-sama. It's just that your partner, Bee-sensei is currently incapacitated."

"I can fight without two arms just as well as I can fight without Bee," The Raikage said and just to prove his point, the Raikage pivoted with a clothesline and caught Omoi against the neck. The next moment Omoi tore through the tent and went crashing through the camp. A cool breeze swept through the sizeable hole and ruffled the map on the table.

Kakashi nudged Naruto in the arm and like a schoolboy still at the academy, Naruto weakly raised his hand. The Cloud ninja looked at Naruto as if he was mentally challenged.

"Uh, what is Konoha's role in the upcoming battle?" Naruto asked.

The Raikage raised an eyebrow. "You didn't say anything so I figured you were running scared and sitting this one out."

"Hey!" Naruto waved his arms in the air. "Everyone was talking all at once!"

"And I don't have the time to stand here and try to guess what you're thinking. If you got something to say just say it," The Raikage spat as he stretched his neck and rolled his shoulder.

Kakashi took this opportunity to interject and it was quite obvious that his more level voice could not have competed with the Cloud ninja. "We have a regiment in Fire Country that is poised to strike Sound's southern border. I'll send the order to attack the moment we do. Our reinforcements are coming in from the Land of Bones and most of our ninja will be fortifying that location. The rest will remain here and assist you to retain the center, including Naruto."

The Raikage looked over the map with a nod. "That's acceptable. Uzumaki," the Raikage placed a kunai on the map, right atop the area that corresponded with no man's land. "No one gets past us."

There was a chill in the air. Most Cloud ninja walked around camp in their normal attire as if it was too hot. Leaf ninja were bundled in cloaks too cold and anxiously hoping the battle will begin soon.

Naruto approached the medical tent that attended to Bee. Omoi and Karui were exiting as he neared.

"How is he?" Naruto asked.

He was unprepared for the sudden fist that slammed into his face and shoved him to the ground.

Naruto blinked as Karui stepped over his body and continued down the road.

"Sorry, she's in one of her moods," Omoi replied as he helped Naruto to his feet.

"She punches just as hard as I remember," Naruto chuckled nervously and watched her disappear
among the throng of ninja.

Omoi thoughtfully replied, "She could be angry about Bee's condition, or it's that time of the month, or she's pregnant."

"Really? Aren't they supposed to have big tummies or something?" Naruto furrowed his brows in thought.

Omoi had to pause and wonder if Naruto really believed him. "That was an exaggeration."

"Oh, right."

Omoi smiled. "But there's always the possibility. It was good to see you again Naruto Uzumaki," Omoi held out his fist. Naruto grinned as they bumped fists. Then Omoi nodded and said in parting, "Until the day we meet on opposite ends of the battlefield."

Naruto watched Omoi leave and wondered if his last statement had also been an exaggeration. It didn't feel like it. There was an awkward atmosphere within the camp. The Leaf ninja and the Cloud ninja resided on completely opposite sides. They attempted to work together and accommodate each other in the name of being allies but there seemed to be a general understanding that friends were today and enemies tomorrow.

Naruto sighed and finally poked his head inside of Killer Bee's medic tent. "How is it going?"

Killer Bee sat up weakly in his bed. There were bruises on his body that corresponded to every chakra node Hinata had forcefully closed. He was wrapped in bandages but looked as if his wounds were healing so quickly the bandages were soon becoming just for show.

"I wish I was out there instead of in here."

Naruto walked over and jutted out his fist. When Bee's fist connected there was a feeling of gratitude and a friendship that went far beyond just convenient allies.

Naruto knelt down and sat on his knees. "What's the diagnosis?"

"Something called osteoarthritis. It sounds pretty lame. Doctors love their funny names."

"It's not serious, is it?"

"It hurts to move occasionally and the medics say I shouldn't to do much physical activity… and only my ninja career is coming to an end but it's not dire. Thirty-eight isn't a bad age to retire. I imagine Cloud is beginning to train my new successor as we speak and I hope he isn't meek or weak."

Naruto couldn't believe how casually Bee was talking about the situation. That sounded extremely serious. "But you're not going to be a ninja anymore!"

"Being a ninja doesn't define me, not even being the jinchuuruki. My music is my life and I'm a poet in motion. I get the notion that if I can keep dreaming, and hoping, and singing, then my life is full of meaning. I don't need honor or glory. I have not yet reached the end of Killer Bee's story. Now I'll just kill rhymes instead of lives. Even if no one else understands, I define who I am."

Naruto left Bee's tent and was stopped by the call of his name. "Uzumaki."

C had waited patiently to get his chance to talk to Naruto. C was leaning against the wall as Naruto neared him in curiosity. When Naruto recognized him, Naruto couldn't help but to smile.
C nodded his head up in recognition. "From what I understand you're Konoha's Crow?"

"I've been told I'm not too good at keeping my identity a secret. I guess everyone in Cloud knows now," Naruto chuckled awkwardly.

"I wouldn't say that," C replied. "The Raikage and Hokage have come to an agreement to keep it quiet among only the ANBU members that were present during Bee's rampage. It seems there are people in Konoha who disagree with your involvement in ANBU."

"There are a few who would rather that I stay in Konoha."

"A weapon is meant to be used. What's the point of carrying around a sword if it's never unsheathed?" C questioned.

"Fear, status, intimidation, deterrent," Naruto answered. "There are plenty other reasons why weapons exist."

"Is it your nature to always disagree with me? I see you still like to talk." C questioned.

Naruto plunged his hands in his pockets. He had to ask these questions of himself. If he was a mere weapon then what justified his existence? "You started it."

C looked frustrated for a moment, before letting out a deep sigh. "What I've been trying to say is thank you, for saving my life. It was a long time ago but I don't forget."

"I'd do it for anyone."

"That naivety is going to get you killed." C pulled himself from the wall and walked through camp. Naruto followed beside him in protest.

"There are a lot of things that can kill you," Naruto argued.

"I suppose so," C's eyes scanned the air around them, and then suddenly stopped. "There are two ninja who have been following us."

"Probably just my bodyguards," Naruto sighed.

C calmed down only a little. He did not like being followed. "The Great Fox Sage needs bodyguards?"

Naruto knew the Hokage didn't say it openly but, "they're really just there to make sure I don't take unscheduled vacations."

C wondered if all jinchūruki were the same in that regard. The Raikage routinely assigned Killer Bee babysitters because Bee was prone to take vacations from the village without notifying anyone.

C stopped at the section of camp where a few of the genin were stationed at food duty. The line moved quickly as the ninjas thanked and commented on the great work the genin were doing. C leaned over one of the steamed pots and requested a bowl.

"Is it good?" Naruto asked curiously. He didn't feel hungry and knew it was the upcoming battle that kept his belly full with anxiety.

"Of course it is. It's Frost's signature soup," C smiled softly as he waited for the soup to cool. "I was originally born here."
"But I thought you were a Cloud ninja." Naruto asked perplexed.

C looked at Naruto as if he was stupid, just as two Cloud ninja passed them by with dark skin and white hair, a sharp contrast to C's pale skin and blonde hair.

"I am a Cloud ninja and I was born in Frost. The two countries have had such close relations with one another that children in Frost who wish to become a ninja move to and train in Lightning. Lightning didn't get involved in this war just because Sound invaded our neighbor, Sound invaded our family. You Leaf ninja might be here for your own interests but for us, this is personal."

C suddenly pressed his fingers to the radio in his ear. "I copy. I'll be there as soon as I can." C shoved the uneaten bowl into Naruto's hands. "They're ready to send out the intelligence teams. See you on the battlefield, Uzumaki."

Naruto caught a whiff of the soup. His stomach grumbled and he figured he should force himself to eat. He picked up a spoonful.

The spoon never made it to his mouth. Fox suddenly appeared from the shadows and placed a quick hand over his wrist.

It was so sudden Naruto jumped back in surprise. "What did I tell you about giving me some kind of warning first?"

"You can't eat that," Fox whispered urgently.

"Why not?" Naruto questioned with a pout.

"Rule #52 in the ANBU handbook: never drink or eat anything offered to you."

"Fox, you're being silly. They're our allies. We should be able to trust them."

"What if Sound managed to infiltrate this camp in the guise of a Cloud or Leaf ninja?" Fox questioned.

"You're being dramatic," Naruto claimed and before Fox could react, Naruto swallowed the bowl's content in one gulp. It sent a nice feeling of warmth through his body compared with the frigid air. "That was pretty good."

"Naruto!" Fox quickly placed her hand to his forehead and checked his eyes.

"You're serious," Naruto noted grimly. "They're our friends."

"Naruto, imagine for a moment that you are Sound and you are planning to face one of the strongest ninja in the world. What would you do?"

"I would fight him."

For once, the seal was not causing Fox's headache. "We're ninja's Naruto. What's the point of trying to fight you if they can just poison you? The Hokage debriefed me about the circumstances surrounding your last visit to the hospital. That poison from Amegakure was mild and showed that even you can be affected by it. Naruto, you're healing ability only slows it down, not stop it."

Naruto sighed. "Alright, I see your point. I'll try to be more careful."

"No, you still don't understand." Fox casually checked the number of bystanders and pressed her hand against Naruto chest and pushed him backwards into the shadows of the wall.
Suddenly the cold in the air melted as Fox neared him. Naruto blinked confused as Fox pressed against him, slid her arms around his neck and pulled him down. The coldness of her mask touched his ear but he could still hear her voice perfectly. "This is classified information and no one should hear but you," she explained the compromising position.

Ninjas in the camp who walked by assumed they were simply two lovers saying goodbye before a battle.

"The Hokage has been working on a solution to the problem. Anko has just finished developing an antidote to the strongest poison that Fire Country has available." Of which, Fox had inadvertently helped to complete. "If push comes to shove, we're hoping it can combat the worst types of poisons but let's not tempt fate."

Naruto had no idea what Fox was saying. Instead, he was trying not to focus on the fact that even through the standard grey jacket of the ANBU uniform he could still feel her breasts pressed against his chest. He was trying not to focus on the fact her natural scent was extremely overwhelming. He was trying not to focus on how her curves molded into him.

He was hoping she wouldn't notice.

Fox's voice trailed into silence. It was hard not to notice Naruto's erection growing against her belly. Just hoping the possibility that Naruto wanted her in that way quickened her arousal.

The smell tipped Naruto over the edge. His mouth sucked at her neck greedily and he shoved her by her hips into his erection.

The Fox mask fell to the ground.

Hinata and Naruto exchanged sloppy kisses but neither cared as their foreheads accidently hit one another and noses constantly got in each other's way.

With one knee raised against the wall, Hinata rubbed the damp cloth of her pants along Naruto's erection. The dry humping got faster as both parties searched for a release. Hinata released very unlady like groans and hid the sounds further into Naruto's neck.

As far as Naruto was concerned, it wasn't the real thing but it was still amazing. He rubbed harder against her crotch and could feel the climax coming. His tongue licked against her neck and shivered. His incisors teased on the skin of her neck.

Hinata suddenly screamed in pain.

Boar had left the two horny teammates alone. It was quite common for ninjas to hook-up with one another before and after a battle but when he heard Fox's distinct scream he knew something was wrong.

What he found looked more like rape, which was also common before and after a battle.

Fox was struggling to escape after both of her hands were snapped back and broken, rendering her useless to use jutsu to escape. A deep chuckle escaped Naruto's lips as his tongue glided over her neck. "I told you I'd eat you first."

"Let her go," Boar declared and made hand signals behind his back. Naruto's eyes snapped up and his eyes were as red as blood. Boar shivered under the killing intent. This was crossing the line.
Boar attacked with a kunai and Naruto instantly stepped up to defend his territory. He released Hinata and sped forward with a rasengan, only to find he went straight though the genjutsu and plummeted head first into the ground.

Naruto snarled as he twisted and came to his feet. He watched as the real Boar helped a shaky Hinata onto her feet. There was semen splattered across her uniform and blood fell from her lips where he had bitten her. The hot anger faded and Naruto collapsed to his knees.

"What have I done?" Naruto's entire body shook.

Hinata stepped forward but Boar prevented her. "Go change your clothes. I'll deal with him."

Hinata never thought she'd hate anyone more than the elders, but at the moment, the Kyūbi had moved to the top of her list. She nursed her broken wrists and quickly went to change clothes.

Boar stood over Naruto with his arms crossed just as the horns that called ninja to battle began to resound through the air. "Harm another woman like that again and I'll make sure the elders chain you away for the rest of your life. Now, pull yourself together. We have a battle to fight.

"Fox, you're not able to perform any jutsu so just stay on the ramparts and watch the battlefield. I want to keep an eye on everything that's going on, about every ninja that sneaks past our line, on the Raikage, and a special eye on my chakra." Naruto ordered in his radio as he rose into the air atop Gamabunta.

"I understand."

"And Fox, I'm sorry."

"I know. I should not have placed you in such a compromising position. I apologize."

"That just makes me feel more like a bloodthirsty demonic jerk," Naruto grumbled. Suddenly Naruto slipped as Gamabunta dipped his head and a fire jutsu swept above Naruto's head.

"Kid, what the hell are you doing up there?" Gamabunta demanded.

"Sorry," Naruto yelled down and directed Gamabunta toward a unit of charging enemy. When Naruto got close enough to throw a rasengan, he hesitated as the ninjas scattered and tripped over their feet to get away.

"Gamabunta, are they running away from me?" Naruto asked incredulously.

"Yes Naruto, I believe they are," Gamabunta responded.

"What's your problem? Why aren't you attacking them?" Boar's voice asked angrily over their radio.

"What I supposed to do? Hit them in the back?"

A tired sigh came over the radio before Boar swooped down atop his summon with a Fire jutsu. The lucky ones who knew the water elemental were able to avoid most of the damage but others fell down as burnt corpse and some were tearing off the burning parts of their clothes.

"Boar," Naruto growled into the radio. "I didn't tell you to fucking do that. Maybe they don't want to fight."

"Naruto, our forces on the eastern front along the coast are taking massive damage," Fox reported.
Boar stated the obvious. "They're trying to draw you out."

"Everyone else is running away so hopefully it's someone who wants to actually fight me. Boar, stay here and hold down this line."

"Uzumaki, it's a trap," Boar said persistently over the radio.

"And I'm supposed to just let them continue to hurt our forces? They want my attention, they've got it." Naruto spat as Gamabunta hopped into the air and in one bound landed upon the coast of Frost Country. The moment they landed a giant tidal wave swept overhead. Naruto quickly caught a hold of Gamabunta's robes before they were swept out to sea.

"Whoa Naruto. I don't do salt water," Gamabunta grumbled as they found themselves surrounded.

"I'll be your opponent today shark bait," Suigetsu claimed. The bandages from his newly acquired sword fell away to reveal Sameheda in his grip. There were ten other ninja standing on the water surrounding Naruto.

"I'm not going to be much help here." Gamabunta warned as the salt water began to irritate his skin.

Naruto nodded and dismissed his summon. He fell and caught himself on the rocking surface of the ocean.

"Naruto, he's wielding Sameheda, Kisame's old sword. It drains chakra on contact with both the user and jutsu. Ten ninja with the chakra level of chuunin are surrounding you. Also, there are two large shark summons underneath your feet," Fox reported.

Naruto crossed his arms with a smirk. Finally, a battle to take his mind off of more unsettling things. "I've always wanted to kick your ass."

Suigetsu sharpened teeth gleamed as he smiled. "You're on my turf now. I'm the one who's going to cut you into pieces and send the parts back to your big tits Hokage."

Naruto pulled his summon scroll from the inside of his robe but the moment he moved they attacked. Naruto released his chakra and fell into the ocean. The sounds of the jutsu that were meant for him was muffled by the water.

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Suigetsu laughed maniacally as he ripped through the clones easily with Samehada. The smoke cleared from the clones in easy reach and revealed Naruto had thrown his summon scroll into the air and pressed his blood to it as it fell down.

It was general knowledge that toads were ineffective in salt water. Suigetsu watched curiously as waves of water grew increasingly larger underneath his feet.

But there were certain species of toad that lived and thrived in saltwater. Naruto began to rise in the
sky as the ocean parted to accommodate the large brown Cane Toad that fit like a small island in the middle of the sea. It was larger and wider than any of Naruto's more familiar summons.

The remaining Sound ninja who survived the barrage of clones craned their neck in its shadow. A drone the sound of splitting earth whined as Gamabuho sucked in air, and yawned. Then he closed his eyes and went back to sleep.

"Doesn't look like he does much," Suigetsu noted.

"Keeps me from falling in the water," Naruto claimed.

"Not if I push you off!" Half of Suigetsu's body turned to water and he was propelled upwards.

Naruto unsheathed his katana from behind his robe and a slight ring lingered in the air as Sameheda was deflected. Suigetsu landed on the toad's slimy back. Then he threw back his head and laughed at Naruto's use of a katana.

"That's such a joke. I've been fighting with a sword all my life!" Suigetsu exclaimed.

Sweat began to slide down Naruto's forehead as he entered a swordfight with Suigetsu that wasn't to his advantage. Suigetsu was better. Naruto suddenly flared his chakra cloak and used the speed to get behind his opponent. His katana went straight through Suigetsu's liquefied body without harm.

"Water dragon bullet technique!"

Suigetsu's entire body formed the shape of a large water dragon and attempted to shove Naruto off his summon and into the ocean. Until Naruto poofed into a cloud of smoke.

"I hate that fucking technique," Suigetsu snarled angrily as he wielded Sameheda in the air and attempted to use the sword's sensory abilities to to search for Naruto's chakra.

"Come on, work!" Suigetsu cursed. He didn't understand why he couldn't pick up Naruto chakra's signature.

"Make sure he didn't get away," Suigetsu ordered his subordinates and sent them off in different directions to lure him out. Suigetsu jumped into the water and spat as he looked up at the sleeping overarching fortress of a toad. That was the most boring summon he's ever seen. Suigetsu surveyed the horizon and used his radio to check if the other regiments had come across Uzumaki.

Gamabuho coughed and shook the water underneath him until he finally spat the nuisance tickling his throat. Naruto shot out of Gamabuho's mouth and flew towards the unsuspecting Suigetsu with his katana upraised. Naruto managed to knick his neck before Suigetsu activated his jutsu and melted into the water.

Naruto took a quick breath of air and dove into the water. The rasenshuriken he held in his hands funneled the water and created a whirlpool as he drifted downwards and caught the last shark summon's attention. He flung it away from his hands and the color of red dispersed through the ocean as the shark was shredded to pieces. When Naruto pulled himself out of the water, the waves were raining back down.

"Naruto. Juugo has engaged the Raikage, and he's on a killing spree."

"I'll be over there-"

A large funnel of water suddenly exploded straight up towards the sky. The clouds in the sky began
to spin and contributed to the growing water twister. Gamabuho began to drifted away. Naruto attacked with Oodama rasengan but the two spinning entities cancelled one another out and Naruto was thrown with a belly flop onto the ocean. Naruto attempted to use wind but it was ineffective as water only scattered and it reformed.

"Great Whirlpool Enfolding Technique!"

Naruto watched as the jutsu arched over his head and sped towards shore. "Shit," Naruto cursed as he activated his cloak and with two Oodama rasengan's in each hand, attempted to stop the great funnel of water. He attacked but the complimentary spin of each technique instead of cancelling each other out, made both grow. Like a snake, the water grew higher in the sky and plummeted downwards.

Naruto slammed down into the ocean and he lost control of his rasengans as the jutsu sent him further downwards into the ocean. Naruto could barely move as the pressure increased with every second of descent. The water proof radio exploded in his ear. He couldn't hold it any longer and Naruto breathed in a rush of water. Either he was going to drown or the water pressure was going to kill him before he ever reached the sea floor.

The jutsu ran out of chakra and finally ended but Naruto was still sinking. Water flowed into his lungs. The deep blue ocean surrounded him, the place where all rivers and all stream eventually led. The sea was fathomless. He was small and insignificant in the grand scheme of things. Even if he died, the world would still go on.

His chakra began to flow.

The water before him began to gradually form Suigetsu's face. Suigetsu's sharp teeth and eyes smirked cruelly as he sped closer.

I am not going to fucking drown.

An image was suddenly forced into Naruto's mind. Naruto watched small and feminine hands do a combination of seals he had never seen done before. Red hair floated around his face.

Naruto forced his hands together and mimicked the seals. "Water Release: Great Tidal Whirlpool!"

The ocean began to churn.

Suigetsu eyes widened and placed Sameheda before him in an attempt to stem the infamous signature jutsu of the Uzumaki clan that was known to completely submerge entire swathes of land.

Naruto choked on the water that filled his lungs and he fell into unconsciousness.

Naruto's eyes snapped open. The salt water stung his throat as he coughed it up. It clung to his ears and impeded his hearing. The sun was rising over the horizon as he crawled forward on the newly created island in the middle of the sea. Even though he could barely hear, the cursing of the person next to him was loud enough to hear from shore.

His cloak was heavy on his shoulders and Naruto stumbled to his feet the same time Suigetsu did. Naruto could barely see Suigetsu between the blonde strands of soaked hair that fell in front of his eyes.

"When the fuck did you learn water affinity?" Suigetsu spat as leaned against Sameheda as if it was a cane.
"I think, right now," Naruto said marvelously. It was as if he could feel the rush of the ocean flowing through his veins, or maybe that was just his ears.

The ocean sparkled and a backdrop of orange and yellow hues stretched as Naruto and Suigetsu stood across from one another other.

Naruto's breathing was rapid and his movements were languid from the near-death experience.

"You might as well give up," Suigetsu boasted. "None of your attacks effect me."

Naruto smirked. "The moment this battle began you already lost."

Suigetsu snapped his teeth and drew closer with Sameheda. Naruto used the Fox cloak to augment his sluggishness. Naruto had no idea where he had lost his katana and settled for a kunai. The kunai caught the light of the sun and it reflected in Suigetsu's carnivorous eyes. The small weapon was no matched for Sameheda and Naruto was thrown backwards. He created a shadow clone in the air and landed with a rasengan.

Naruto and Suigetsu charged forward. Samehede drained Naruto's technique of chakra instantly and the sharp piercing fins sliced through a shadow clone. At the same time, Naruto came from behind with a kunai in hand and plunged it through Suigetsu back.

Suigetsu smirk turned into a horrified frown as blood began to spread across his clothing. "Why can't I dissolve?" He demanded as he reached behind him and angrily threw the kunai back at Naruto. Naruto caught the weapon in his hand, straightened his stance, and crossed his arms.

Suigetsu attempted to liquefy his arm but instead his hand turned into a thick liquid that sludged down his forearm.

"My summon Buho-san is poisonous. Come into contact with his skin and it's only a matter of time."

Suigetsu quivered in rage before he aimed steel eyes on Naruto. "Next time, you won't be so lucky."

Then he flipped backwards and dived into the water.

Naruto attempted to follow but Suigetsu swam like a fish, and in water he was as fast as Naruto with his Fox Cloak. Naruto gave up the chase and crawled back onto the surface of the island. He collapsed in the dirt.

Poison wasn't necessarily Naruto's weapon of choice but he knew he needed something to counter Suigetsu's unique jutsu.

Naruto closed his eyes and attuned his senses to his surroundings. All he found were small marine lifeforms. If the plan was to get him lost at sea it certainly worked. Naruto created six clones and sent them all in opposing directions. Then Naruto fell asleep while he waited.

"He's the fastest person in the world. He'll get here eventually," Boar replied. "Give it a few more hours. Then we'll go look for him."

Fox leaned further out over the ramparts of the gate as she concentrated and tried to stretch the boundaries of her byakugan. She tried the radio again but all she got was static. "What if he's drowning?"

"Then he would have drowned by now," Boar felt like he was the only sane voice in his entire team.
"Just fly me over the ocean so I can look," Fox said persistently.

"Your doujutsu isn't that strong. If you think you can spot him in the entire ocean you're only fooling yourself."

"Our duty is to be at his side at all times. We're obligated to go find him. I'm going out."

Boar quickly moved to stop her. With eyes in the back of her head she easily evaded his attempt with a side step, swiveled on her heels and her fingers rested against his chest, over his heart. "You can't stop me. You're no match for my taijutsu."

"You need to stop and think rationally. At a time like this, we need to be saving our chakra, not wasting it in a futile search. Here are the possibilities: Crow is dead. Crow is alive and in the enemy hands. Crow is alive and not in the enemy hands. For the first two options, we can't do anything about. If he's dead, there's no point wasting our chakra looking for him and we're not going to go alone into the enemy camp. That's suicide. For the last option, it makes more sense to wait for Crow to come here than for us to go searching without a clue where to look."

Fox turned around and slapped her hands along the wooden bar. "I'll sneak into the enemy camp if I have to."

"And if you're caught you'll be interrogated, beaten, have your eyes ripped out, and bred to create more hyuga freaks. I'm sure Crow will want that," Boar said as he leaned against the railing. "I'm surprised you're this concerned considering he tried to kill you last night."

"Naruto will never try to harm me. He and the Kyūbi are two separate entities."

"Keep fooling yourself but it's a package deal." Boar grumbled.

Fox tightened her grip on the railing and the movement surged a stab of pain through her hands. She knew he was telling her truths she did not want to hear. Naruto and the Kyūbi might be two separate things but they came together.

Boar was never really around the two unless they were on missions, but he knew they sparred together and spent time together. He thought it was all just a passing fling but Boar could see he had stepped into something deeper.

He cleared his throat. "I loved a kunoichi once. Then she stabbed me in the back and left me to die."

"She didn't do a very good job of it," Fox coldly observed.

"Hyūga, never know how to take advice." Boar shook his head. "Love him if you want, but remember we're ninjas, so be sure to kill him before he kills you."

Fox ignored his advice as she attempted to forcibly extend her byakugan further outward. She hasn't deactivated it since Naruto went missing and her body was shaking from the weight of the pain pounding in her head. Blood began to pool around the edges of her mask and when she felt it sliding down her neck did she realize she had popped a few blood vessels in her eyes.

She scrambled into her pockets for her pills but as she reached for them, Boar struck his knee into her abdomen. Fox's body slumped and Boar slung her over his shoulders. There were just some people you just couldn't reason with, especially a Hyūga.

He carried her through the camp and dropped her in Naruto's tent. Naruto was the only member of the team who had one because Kakashi made him erect a tent for Naruto's status as a Joint
Naruto didn't exactly rush back once he found out where he was. He walked fast enough to be on Kakashi's time but slow enough for everyone else. When he returned he knew he would have to deal with what had happened. There was no way he could avoid Hinata like he did last time, they worked together now, and he cared what she thought of him.

"Stop," A Cloud ANBU impeded his path and raised a katana towards him. Naruto stepped at the line of sentries ringed around the camp. "How do we know you're not a spy?"

Naruto's chakra flared and his eyes changed.

"Oh, I apologize Uzumaki. You're cleared to pass."

"I got separated during the battle." Naruto tried to explain.

The Cloud ANBU signaled his comrades and briskly escorted Naruto to the gate. "I understand. We're still getting stranglers coming through."

The moment Naruto walked through the gate he found Boar waiting for him, leaning against the door.

"You took your time to get here."

The mere sight of Boar's mask and an hot uncontrollable anger flared inside of him. Naruto seemed like a mirage as he faded and reappeared right before Boar's face with an unrestrained fist. Boar went flying through the camp, through the partial stone wall on the other side and rolled through the dirt until he finally came to a stop on his back.

There was a crack down the middle of his mask.

Naruto followed with a scowl and picked Boar up by his flak jacket before he could catch his bearings. "You fucking disobeyed me."

"We couldn't just let them run away," Boar spat blood.

"And why not? They weren't threatening anyone. They were just running."

"What if they weren't? What if-"

"Who cares what fucking if!" Naruto snapped as he shoved Boar to the ground.

Boar sneered. "War has no room for morals. You kill your enemy and that's it because the next day the very person you took pity on could be the one who kills you tomorrow."

"I'm not going to kill someone just because they've done nothing other than being born on the other side."

Boar shook his head. "You are an idealistic fool."

Naruto's hands shook as he could feel the Kyūbi whispering in his ear, trying to take advantage of his anger. In frustration Naruto slapped his ears as if that could quiet the demon. He took a deep breath and attempted to cool down. He said as levelly as possible, "The line has to be crossed
somewhere. I would rather die before stabbing someone in the back.”

"We're ninjas! That's what we do."

"No, this isn't the same thing as an assassination mission."

"Isn't it? Often times our targets have no weapons to defend themselves. You can't just apply your fluffy morals selectively. That was a battlefield and anyone who steps on it should be expecting to die."

Naruto pinched the bridge of his nose. Talk no jutsu never worked with this guy. "You still disobeyed a direct order."

"You're still only just a squad leader. You're inexperienced and simply playing at being a ninja."

"I'm trying my best."

"Your best isn't good enough. A ninja isn't a samurai. We don't carry notions of honor and morals into battle. Ninja are ruthless, heartless, and we stab each other in the back the first moment we get. A ninja would notice when he would better benefit his village by placing himself in solitary confinement." Boar held the mask to his bleeding and broken nose. "You might try to hide it with your morals but inside you're a monster. If you think you're in control you're only fooling yourself."

Naruto stabbed his claws through Boar's jacket as he twisted, almost choking him. In a voice mixed with the Kyuubi, Naruto growled into Boar's ear. "I am a monster. I am Naruto Uzumaki and I am the fucking nine-tails jinchūriki."

Naruto took a deep sniff of Boar's scent.

"You have that unique smell of the forest overseen by the Nara clan. You don't have any shadow jutsu so you must have married into the clan to live very close by."

Boar's fist began to tighten.

"The rosemary scent of a woman's perfume still clings to your skin. Do you think your wife will still smell like that after I've killed her?"

"Your heart is too soft."

"You'd be surprised how hard my heart has become and if you ever disobey one of my orders again I'll personally show you."

Naruto finally released him. Boar's white mask stared after him as Naruto re-entered the camp. Naruto had never given such a morbid threat in his life.

**That was fun.**

'Shit up.'

**Will you actually do it?**

Naruto didn't know what he was capable of doing anymore.

Naruto walked around camp to let off some steam. He certainly couldn't go talk Hinata in this sort of mood. There were ninja who detoured from his path to avoid the killing intent stifling the camp.
Naruto walked through the part of the camp that the Leaf ninja occupied. Some were playing cards and others were gambling with dice. A lot were asleep, eating, or cleaning their weapons.

When Naruto entered the Cloud ninja's side of camp it was much louder. A group of people caught his attention and he curiously wandered over. Killer Bee was the center of attention as he traded lyrics with a young Cloud genin.

Naruto noticed C in the crowd and asked, "What's going on?"

C shrugged. "What we do to past the time. We don't like to get complacent so while we wait to battle the enemy, we battle each other with words."

"I see," Naruto observed as the ninja encouraged and rooted on the younger ninja.

"It's an old tradition. When the clans of Cloud were forced to make peace, they could no longer physically fight each other and instead they began to settle disputes with a battle of words. The younger generation began to put music to it and the battles often turned into forms of expression, and we have what it is today. Say what you've got to say, let it go, and keep moving; like a Cloud."

Naruto found it fascinating and his anger was mostly consumed by his curiosity. "I didn't know Cloud had clans."

"Not strictly in the Leaf's sense," C explained. "The Land of Lightning consists of a large mountain range and there are different groups of people who live on each mountain. They were always at war with one another with their own specialized techniques until the Village Hidden in Clouds was founded at the top of the tallest mountain in order to maintain the peace. You can generally tell which clan or mountain a person comes from depending on the color of hair but it's not always so clear-cut among the ninja since they intermingle."

When the genin had finished, suddenly the beat of the drums began to change and everyone in the crowd shouted in excitement.

C answered the question before Naruto could ask. "It's from Bee's latest album."

Bee stood at the center of the group and timed the beat. Finally he put his voice to the mike:

Sometimes I can't tell if there's a wrong or a right
But every day I wake up in the middle of the night
I'm just a ninja on the grind trying to get some sleep
But damn- I've got a demon inside me

I gamble with money like I gamble with lives
There can't be nothing wrong with trying to stay alive
I'm a masochistic pain addicted fucking shinobi
Because damn- I got a demon inside me
My girl wants me to settle and get out of the game
But it ain't about the money and it ain't about the fame
She just don't understand that I'll never be free
Because damn- I got a demon inside me
Bee offered the mike to the crowd and a Cloud ninja accepted it and spit his rhymes with an illogical flow:

Sound lost they sanity
in Frost they kill my mum with brutality
Tonight I found me
the first Sound bastard I could see
and stabbed and stabbed until he could no longer breathe
Then after a while I realized he was a she
and the bitch looked just like my mum's dead body
It's a conspiracy
the enemy
need an autopsy
because the dead are looking all the same morbidly.

Damn-
Everyone in the crowd finished with, "I got a demon inside me."

Then the beat began to change. C smirked. "This one is a classic."

Naruto watched as even the Cloud ninja who weren't participating begin to bob their heads or stop everything they were doing in anticipation of what was coming next. Bee's voice on the mike rang through the entire camp.

Life's a bitch and then you die
And everyone replied:
That's why we so high
Cloud ninja know when you gotta go

"I wonder if the word high is meant to emphasize Cloud? Or is it a drug reference or both?" Fox asked. Naruto jumped as Fox seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. "It's very curious: Cloud's 'say what you got to say' mentality. It's somewhat inspiring."

Naruto looked at her from the corner of his eyes. "Can we talk?" He asked.
Fox nodded and they left the noise behind. Fox paused underneath the shadow of the crushed castle of Frost. The weary stone loomed above them and projected a crippled shadow of what is once was.

The sun was dimmed by fog and the entire land seemed to be covered with a grim sense of foreboding.

Hinata removed the mask from her face. Her hair was pinned back and perfectly fixed into a bun. There weren't any stray pieces of hair but were as straight and rigid as the way she carried her shoulders.

Naruto combed a hand through his messy blonde hair, the same hand that formed his first rasengan, and wielded his katana, and had just punched Boar in the face.

"Hinata, I apologize for what occurred yesterday and I request that you refrain from any close-contact with me in the future." Naruto responded in a level voice. "I consider you a friend and a comrade. I could not live with myself if I ever hurt you again."

"I also apologize. I perpetrated the incident and it was a moment of weakness on my part. I love you, Uzumaki," Hinata watched as Naruto's expression slackened in shock. "I have let my personal feelings impede our mission and it will not occur again."

Naruto felt as unprepared as the first time she said it, but this time there wasn't a battle he had to immediately fight. "Hinata, I-

"You don't owe me anything Naruto." Hinata replied calmly. "Even if you shared my feelings, there is nothing for us. I have a responsibility to my clan and you have a responsibility to the village as the bearer of the nine-tails. As a child I never truly understood your responsibility but I have come to understand it better now. To prevent the risk of hurting others, you must keep your heart closed. You could never give it to me and I do not ask for it."

Naruto shifted uncomfortably. Her byakugan wasn't activated but he felt she could see every dark crevice of his being. "Hinata, I wish- if things were different, I'd try to give us a chance. I owe you that much."

"I ask for nothing more than we continue as before. I am honored to have you as my team leader, and my friend."

Kakashi looked up from the report lazily as Naruto suddenly appeared atop the makeshift desk in his tent.

"What took you so long?"

Naruto sighed deeply and completely ignored the question. "Do you think it could work between Hinata and I?"

Kakashi's answer was immediate. "She's a Hyūga." Kakashi lowered the porn book and suddenly found that his student's love life was much more interesting than the words on the page. "A Hyūga might have relations with other ninja but their loyalties are ultimately to the clan. From what I understand they've been like that since before Senju's generation. Before the seal was invented and the agreement with Senju, the Hyūga were hunted down and suffered wholesale massacres for their doujutsu. The only person they could trust was the family and everyone else was the enemy. To some extent that tradition remains with them to this day. Their duty is always first and foremost to the family."
Naruto brooded in silence. It's always been hard for him to simply accept the way the world works. As he continues to discover, the world works in knots and whenever Naruto attempts to straighten it out, he tends to make things worse or create another knot somewhere else.

Kakashi idly flipped through the page. "Are you going to report so I can get back to my reading?"

"Right," Naruto said as he was jolted from his thoughts. Naruto reported rather casually about what happened on his side of the battlefield. "I feel like I wasn't helpful at all today. I didn't make any significant impact."

"It's just to be expected. If I was our enemy I would have a contingency plan to deal with you as well. To completely throw you out of your element and into the ocean is actually a brilliant piece of strategy. Minimizing the damage you could have caused was their best hope. I'm certain it will be something different tomorrow."

"Sorry Suigetsu got away."

"War isn't won in a day." Kakashi said as he leaned back. "Hopefully with the information we already have on them, this war won't last too long."

"Kakashi-sama," a leaf chūnin quickly rushed into the tent. "There's a situation that needs your attention immediately."

Kakashi just yawned and shoved Naruto off of his table with his foot. "Take care of it."

"What?"

"This is the best part," Kakashi said lazily as he flipped another page.

Naruto shook his head as he followed the chūnin out of the tent towards the commotion at the center of the village.

"What is the Sound bitch planning?" The Raikage demanded as he leaned forward and applied pressured to the arm of a sobbing young girl.

"We-We don't know. We're just genin," One of the more brave ones managed to stutter through his teeth. "We- we just wanted to surrender."

The girl screamed as the Raikage lifted his foot and slammed down on her arm. She cradled herself in the fetal position as her comrades' expression grew sick with horror.

"We don't accept traitors."

"What the fuck is going on?" Naruto demanded as he entered the scene.

The Raikage gave Naruto an annoyed glare. "Just a bunch of Sound ninja we caught."

"They're just kids." Naruto argued.

"And kids make for perfect spies."

"And what if they're not spies?"

"Then they're traitors and ninja who betray their village are never to be trusted," The Raikage responded and his fist suddenly crackled with lightning.
Naruto stepped in the Raikage's path and the entire camp hushed with silence.

"I didn't think I'd see the day the Raikage was scared of a bunch of children."

Naruto activated his fox cloak just in time to evade the Raikage's strike and the two fastest people in the world came to blows. Even with one arm, Naruto's taijutsu could not find any holes in the Raikage's perfected fighting style. The Raikage suddenly used his chakra to gain momentum and Naruto was drop kicked to the ground. The Raikage quickly leaned forward and fell with the full force of his body weight on top of Naruto's chest and then attempted to pin him.

Naruto instantly used his chakra to twist and thrust his knee into the Raikage's stomach. The two literally wrestled on the ground until a gleam of sweat dripped from the tip of Naruto's nose as he pinned down the Raikage's only arm by digging his knee into his back.

The Cloud and Leaf ninja were looking at each other nervously, their fingers twitching and ready to perform jutsu if the need arose.

"Fuck it, get off of me Uzumaki," The Raikage growled after he failed to escape from the hold.

Naruto slowly released him and then helped the Raikage onto his feet. Halfway to his feet, the Raikage suddenly dropped down to his knees and popped his elbow upwards. Naruto collapsed with tears creeping into his eyes and he clutched at his groin.

The Raikage neck made a cracking sound as he stretched it. "Take the little shits, but they're your responsibility and if anything happens it's on you."

There was something special about Naruto Uzumaki. Hinata had noticed it when she was young and she couldn't help but to notice it now. Naruto distributed the camp food among his guests where he had placed them in his own tent. The children were wary of the food at first but Naruto had that smile you could believe in and after a few moments, convinced them to try the food.

Hinate knew if Naruto wasn't so recognizable and his feelings didn't often get in his way, he could be a devastating undercover agent.

Naruto attempted to appeal to the young girl whose arm was broken. "I brought my friend to help too. She's a medic-nin. She can fix your arm and make it better."

The young girl gave Hinata's unassuming henge a suspicious glance and then shook her head.

"I'll show you," Naruto declared as he withdrew a kunai. The children grew tense at the sight of it, but Naruto spun the blade down and stabbed it through his hand. Blood welled through his palm and the tip of the blade could be seen from the other side.

A soft glow of green illuminated the tent as Hinata began to mend Naruto's hand, but it was already healing despite her efforts.

"See?" Naruto stretched out his hand for the little girl to inspect. With a shaky hand she reached out and poked the inside of Naruto's palm. "It's all better."

The little girl looked at her comrades who had watched the entire scene in silence. The only genin who had managed words in front of the Raikage responded. "You're Naruto Uzumaki, the man with the scars that look like whiskers." the genin responded. "Why are you helping us? They say you destroyed Mt. Hyashu with one jutsu, and they say you're supposed to be some sort of bloodthirsty demon?"
"Don't you think you'd be dead by now if I was?" Naruto questioned. "Without my protection you're not going to survive here. I know it's hard but trust me or not, you need help."

Naruto gave them the hard facts. He knew it was pointless to truly treat them like children. They were genin and at the least, have seen someone die.

The more vocal genin nodded, and the little girl lifted her broken arm with a wince. Hinata gently used her chakra to numb the pain before she reset the bone into place.

"And what's your name?" Naruto asked as he eyed the boldest genin in particular.

The genin crossed his arms and relented. "Narita Yosuke."

A few of the other genin piped up with their names and ended with a, "Ueda Yuki," from the little girl Hinata was attending to.

"And why did you decide to run away from Sound?" Naruto questioned gently.

They looked at each other distrustfully. "Are you going to torture us if we don't tell you?"

"No, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to send you back. The ninja around here aren't happy that I'm protecting you and they need more evidence than just my word."

"Don't make us go back," Yuki whispered.

"It's horrible over there," Yosuke finally snapped. "We hardly get any food and the genin teams are always put on the front lines. It's not fair. They don't care for us at all. We're just… numbers." He said angrily and his voice continued to an even feverish pitch. "I didn't even want to become a stupid ninja. My parents were in debt to the stupid landlords but because I was born with chakra the landlord took me away from my family and sold me to the government. I never asked to be out here. People are dying. I thought maybe Lightning or Fire would understand, but you're all just the same. I hate ninjas."

The rest were inspired by Yosuke's boldness and their complaints ran over one another as Naruto listened with attentiveness. Some of them had been orphans and others had been stolen from their families or sold by their families. None of them ever wanted to become ninjas in the first place. They were scared and frightened children, given a kunai and told to go fight.

"I'll try to do everything I can to help you," Naruto replied. He grinned when he got an idea and pulled out one of his storage scrolls.

"What are you doing?" Yosuke asked frightened as a puff of smoke lifted from the scroll.

"You can trust me," Naruto assured them. A pure note of music chimed in the air. Naruto placed a small silver bell in Yosuke's hand.

Yosuke's image reflected in the silver. Then the genin who tried to act tough for the sake of the others, broke down and cried.

A few ninja gave him a wide berth as Naruto stood in line to retrieve some blankets for the children. He had picked one of the kids to help him carry the blankets, who stood close to his side.

The Leaf kunoichi who was rationing out supplies paused and stared at the Sound symbol the kid wore around his waist.
"I need at least five blankets," Naruto requested.

"We don't have blankets enough for them." The kunoichi replied snidely.

"And why not?" Naruto snapped. "They haven't done anything to you."

"It doesn't matter what they've done. They are Konoha's enemy."

"I'm going to ask politely only once. Don't make me take them by force." Naruto's voice deepened with a growl. Suddenly the air around the kunoichi grew tense. With shaky hands, she gave him the blankets.

"Demon," she muttered under her breath as Naruto turned away, but he could still hear her perfectly.

"You didn't have to do that," the genin replied.

"Yes I did, or she would not have listened, but I know it's not her fault. It's hard for a ninja to see someone they don't know as anything other than an enemy."

"Hey, Kaito so where in Sound are you from?" Naruto asked curiously.

"I'm from the capital." Kaito was the smallest of the genin and looked nothing more than a half-starved little boy.

"I hear the Village Hidden in Paddies has really great food. Isn't it supposed to be really famous for its ramen?"

Kaito eyes shifted. "The ramen is good but were better known for Sound's rice."

"Maybe I'll get a chance to try some one day." Naruto commented and continued to describe his favorite dishes as they returned to the other children.

Naruto steps slowed. He had his suspicions when he caught a glimpse of Kaito eyeing the bell with confusion.

While Naruto and Kaito distributed the blankets, Naruto asked Yosuke, "I hear your village has some really great food. Is there any good ramen?"

Yosuke scoffed. "The ramen is disgusting. We're famous for our onigiri. There's no rice in the world like paddy rice."

Kaito stopped in his tracks and for a quick second caught Naruto's eye. There was a lot said in that exchange but both turned and continued to play ignorant.

Kaito coughed and pulled out a senbon needle hidden in his mouth. With terrifying speed he threw the needle towards Naruto's neck and ran for it. Naruto disappeared in a cloud of smoke. Outside of the tent Kaito was roughly shoved to the ground. Naruto immediately broke the kid's wrist and eliminated his ability to use jutsu.

"Wait, what's going on?" Yosuke asked as he ran outside.

"He's a spy," Naruto explained gently. The native people of Sound country were very proud of the quality of their rice and always referred to it as paddy rice.

"But- but- we were in the academy and graduated together. He couldn't-" Yosuke paused. "He suggested the plan to surrender to you in the first place." Yosuke felt as if the world was slipping
from underneath his feet. "Are you- are you going to kill him?"

"You are my responsibility."

Naruto threw Kaito over his shoulder. The sentries watched as Naruto walked through the gate and finally sat the boy down on the bloody battlefield. Night was soon descending.

Snow began to fall from the sky and layer the Land of Frost.

"I guess I should probably question you or something but I don't do torture and interrogation. That's not who I am." Snow landed atop the metal of Naruto's katana as he unsheathed it.

Now that the mask had been lifted, the spy had shed all pretense of childlike innocence. His face was empty of expression and his eyes were like a void. He had no family, no dreams, no hopes, and no name.

The whistle of the katana through the air was like a song, akin to the pitch of a bell. The body slumped. The head rolled and stopped as it bumped into the insignia of a dead leaf ninja. Blood spread upon the white snow.

Naruto sheathed his blade. He reached down and picked up the Sound hitai-ite.

The Raikage had watched the scene from the entrance at the gate. Naruto came to a stop and they stood beside one another. The distance between a cloud and a leaf was insignificant in the grand scheme of things. Peace was so much farther away.

"I took care of your spy."

The Raikage wasn't impressed. "One dead spy won't win a war."

Naruto's grip tightened around the Sound ensignia.

"One dead Otokage will."

x

*I am Naruto Uzumaki and I am the fucking Nine-tails jinchūriki*
Lesson Nineteen

The Illusion of Truth and Lies

Kakashi wondered if this is what getting old felt like.

"The mission is to infiltrate the Sound camp and assassinate the Otokage," Naruto said as he spread the maps he had gathered along the table. "This is what we know: The Otokage and Samehada can pinpoint my chakra, the army is comprised largely of mercenaries who aren't very familiar with one another, and the Kage's tent is located at the center of camp."

"Are you sure these maps are accurate?" Boar questioned as he scanned one of the parchments.

"The Sound genin drew them for me," Naruto replied. "There are a few holes but it's the best they could collectively do. Is that a problem?" Naruto asked as he gave Boar a look that Kakashi knew was a challenge.

"How do you know you can trust them?"

Naruto gave an exasperated expression. "I don't. That's what trust is." He looked up at the three people surrounding him in the tent. "I need ideas."

"I'm surprised you don't already have one of your crazy schemes prepared," Boar noted.

Naruto smirked. "I figured I'd give you a chance to offer a saner idea before I share mine."

"Naruto, I don't see any feasible way how you can get close to that camp. You could exhaust your chakra to make it harder to detect but our files on this particular kunoichi describe her as a skilled sensor who no doubt knows your particular chakra signature. It would be best to send one of us," Fox commented.

"No, I'd prefer it to be me. If something goes wrong I can get out of there fast enough," Naruto replied.

"I'm assuming because she's a sensor you can't do the simple thing and run there?" Boar asked.

Naruto nodded. "If I try to use speed, she'll sense me coming, and I can't afford her trying to escape. All Suigetsu needs to do it disappear with her in the ocean and I will not be able to find them."

"Won't that be enough? If they run away won't this war end?" Fox questioned.

"The battle, not the war," Boar immediately replied. "Naruto is right. We have to kill her here."

Naruto combed his hands through his hair and said. "My plan is to have you close my chakra nodes."

Fox frowned.

"That could work but you're going to have to kill her the traditional way." Boar considered slowly.

"I don't like it," Fox replied. "You won't be able to use your chakra. That could be dangerous."

"If I'm compromised I can simply overload the nodes with chakra and forced them back open, then I
could get out of there. I just need a way to get close to the Otokage. Fox do you think it could work?"

"With your chakra nodes closed, to a sensor you'll be like a ghost. Your body is still producing chakra but it will seem your chakra capacity is on par with a civilian. The problem is you won't be able to form a henge to infiltrate the camp and if you don't want me to permanently destroy the nodes, they'll gradually reopen."

"How long will it take to reopen?"

Fox stumbled. "I- I'd have to factor in the force of the chakra I use to close them, the force of your chakra flow, and how resilient your nodes are. There are a lot of factors to consider."

Fox was truly at a loss. Usually, when a Hyūga succeeded in closing their opponent's chakra nodes, the opponent was dead in the next few seconds. There was rarely a need to make such calculation.

"I need a time Fox."

"Perhaps two or three hours," Fox tried to judge from her training spars with the family.

"More accurate than that," Naruto sighed. "I need the best estimate you've got."

"Then I need your arm."

Naruto stretched his arm out and Fox was careful to avoid his nervous system as she jabbed at the center of his forearm. She used her byakugan and studied the rate in which it healed itself.

She rushed over to one of the maps, turned it over, and quickly wrote down a series of equations.

"While she's doing calculations, we still haven't figured out how you're going to get in," Boar said.

"That's where you come in." A second Naruto suddenly replied as he entered the tent with Yosuke at his side and a dead corpse that they had plucked from the battlefield over his shoulder. Naruto placed the corpse onto the table.

"This is-"

"His name was Hioshi Nagasaki," Yosuke replied and looked sickly as he looked at the corpse of the dead ninja he once knew out of the corner of his eye. "He was a chuunin and really nice to the younger genin. No one really knows much about his past but he came from the Land of Sand. I think he had moved to escape the famine and contracted his abilities with Sound in order to eat. A lot of the older ninja didn't like him. They said he was too naïve."

"You won't have too much problem with that," Boar interjected.

"Try to limit the jokes in front of the kid," Naruto responded as he mechanically began stripping the corpse of its clothes.

"You're not going to-" Yosuke held his stomach.

"It's alright if you want to leave." Naruto's clone said gently. "You don't have to do this."

"No," Yosuke said weakly. "I remember he had a birthday last month. He turned twenty-one. He talked about a brother but I don't know about any other family. That's all I remember."

"Alright, if you remember anything else let me know," Naruto replied. The information might be vital to get him past Sound guards. The clone began to escort Yosuke back out the tent. He stopped.
Yosuke looked back at the Leaf ninja. "Will this make everything better?"

Naruto's hand paused on the hidden Sand hitai-ite within the corpse's bloody flak jacket. "Death doesn't build lives," Naruto finally replied. "No, it won't."

Yosuke inclined his head as he was led out of the tent.

"That was uncharacteristically cynical of you," Boar noted.

"I'm not going to lie to him. He's had enough of that," Naruto replied as he began putting on a dead man's clothes. "The plan is for you to put a genjutsu on my face. Will the Otokage sense that?"

"If it's just your face it will require only a small amount of chakra. It should go unnoticed, although I'd probably dispel it once you're pass the guards and in the camp for safe measure," Boar replied as Naruto snapped the last buckle of the flak jacket and placed the Sound hitai-ite around his neck. "If you cover your hair and whisker marks, you should go unnoticed."

"I have it," Fox reported as she scanned her calculations. Even though she had graduated top of her class, there were ink stains along her hands as she went through the calculations again and again to make sure. Fox straightened as she stared at Naruto.

"You will have exactly three hours and twenty-two minutes to infiltrate the camp and get close to the Otokage before your chakra nodes reopen."

"Thanks," Naruto trusted her calculations. "For the battle tonight I'll largely employ my clones and right before the retreat is called we'll begin our mission."

"I think that's it- oh, Kakashi was there anything you wanted to add?"

Kakashi thought he had been forgotten. He pulled his book down just an inch. "No, I think you've covered everything."

The horns for battle suddenly called the ninja to battle.

"Boar, aerial support. Fox, I need your eyes so I know where to employ my clones."

Boar nodded and left the tent to summon his companion. Kakashi left to supervise the Leaf forces.

"Naruto wait," Fox stopped Naruto from leaving the tent.

Naruto looked back at her with a reassuring smile. "I'll be okay."

"No- I mean, I am concerned about your welfare but- are you sure you can do this? The Otokage is related to you," Fox said softly.

"Someone has to stop her," Naruto replied. He leaned against the entrance of the tent and watched as the ninja rushed passed him to take up their post. "I remember talking to her a few days ago. I remember the bitterness and the anger in her eyes. It was like staring into the eyes of Sasuke. Sasuke wasn't a bad person, just broken, and people who are broken tend to have sharp edges that hurt themselves and others. They don't realize until it's too late that hurt and pain can never fill in those missing pieces."

Her fingernails scraped through the dirt and tumbled on loose rock as she pulled herself from the burrow. She gasped as her head emerged from the ground and swallowed a breath of fresh air in relief. She crawled to her knees, and covered in dirt, got to her feet.
Everyone was dead all around her. The small village had been the battleground in Fire and Rock's proxy war, a secret engagement against those still embittered by the Third Shinobi War.

Karin Uzumaki sniffed as she walked bare feet among just another consequence of just another war.

Karin walked among the ruins of the small orphanage that had once housed her. She stared at the empty eyes of children she had watched playing in the courtyard only a day ago. She remembered how they laughed and how the head mistress had loved them so much. The peasants had loved their fields and Karin was glad that those very fields had been burned to the ground. She had hated this place.

"Look what we have here."

Karin slipped and her frames fell. She quickly scrambled for her glasses and shoved them onto her face. She squeaked as she looked up and stared at the pale face of Orochimaru. A feminine smirk marked the ninja's face.

"What do you want? If you wanted to kill me you would have already."

Orochimaru chuckled. "You're a smart little bird. I find it curious that everyone here is dead and you are alive. How did you survive?"

"I sensed them coming," Karin answered as she stared at the corpses of those who treated her like an outcast. "I could have warned them but I didn't. I'm glad they're dead."

Orochimaru placed his hands in his jacket and stood up. When he began to walk away, Karin crawled forward in a panic. Orochimaru leaned back with eyes narrowed into slits and a smug smirk. "Are you coming or not?"

Karin followed because she had nowhere else to go. She had lost her parents when she was young and hardly remembered their faces. She didn't even know how she had ended up in this small village she had come to despise.

She stumbled over the wreckage as she followed and finally caught up. Karin made the choice to take his hand.

All she ever wanted was to be loved.

The Cloud kunoichi paused and stared at the young child fallen in the road. She cursed when she attempted to ignore the child but to no avail. She had a soft spot for children ever since her stillborn. Eventually, her feet landed lightly in the road. She looked down both ways of the barren road and found nothing. Just in case, she enhanced her ears with chakra and kept her attention on her environment in case it was a trap.

The kunoichi leaned down and gently picked up the small boy. Rags clung from his skin and his enlarged belly was evidence of his malnourishment.

The kunoichi picked him up in her arms and made a small detour towards the closest village. It was a small mining village, inhabited by families who have no doubt mined for generations.

Before she could search for a medic, the boy's feverish eyes snapped open. "No! You have to leave. You're going to die."

"It's alright," the Kunoichi tried to calm him down. The villagers stopped in the street in curiosity to
watch the unfolding scene.

"No, no, you have to run. There's a monster chasing me!"

The kunoichi stole a look behind her. "No one followed us. You're tired and I'm going to find you help."

"No!" the boy screamed as he swiveled his head and looked at all the people who were gathering in the road. "It comes every time I sleep. It comes and kills everyone."

"It'll be-" The kunoichi words were interrupted by the child's hands on her neck. He began frothing at the mouth and his skin turned grey and nails arched into claws.

The villagers began to scream and scatter as the kunoichi struggled to force the hands away from her esophagus, but she wasn't strong enough. The last thing she ever saw was the eyes of a monster.

An hour later, the village was filled with ghosts.

x

Juugo woke up and stared dazed at the sun above him. He refused to get up just yet, refused to see how many people he had killed this time.

Then a shadow with white hair loomed above him. Kimimaro gave Juugo a concerned expression. "You changed back," Kimimaro noted curiously.

For a few moments Juugo's disbelief was choking his voice. No one had ever survived one of his rampages before.

Kimimaro's clothes were torn, wounds peppered his skin, but he was alive. Kimimaro reached out a helping hand.

The faces of the many he had killed flashed through Juugo's mind. No one had ever lived before. Juugo couldn't hold in all of the pain as the tears finally fell.

Suigetsu counted how many sword strokes he could complete before the ninja died of bleeding out.

"Why do you persist in doing that?" Mangetsu asked when Suigetsu was done with his prey.

"Why not?" Suigetsu sneered as he picked up the corpse and shoved it over the rail of the boat with an angry sneer. "It's just a game."

"You never played that game before graduation," Mangetsu noted. "It's alright to be angry about it."

"Fuck you," Suigetsu snapped as he petulantly leaned against the railing of the boat. After the other hidden villages heard of the time when Zabuza had brutally massacred his graduating class before the test had even begun, the tradition went underground.

Suigetsu's graduation from the ninja academy had only been a year ago. He learned that if he just kept cutting, and didn't concentrate on the faces of his classmates, then he would survive. And even when everyone around him was dead, he kept cutting, and kept cutting, until there were whispers that he was the 'Second Coming of the Demon.'

Suigetsu felt the salty air scratch against his skin and breathed in the ocean's scent. It was the best smell in the world. Suigetsu hoped when the day came he would die, that it was the mighty sea that
finally took him away from all this.

Suigetsu stole a look at his older brother and couldn't help but consider the possibility that one day the order will come to kill one another.

Mangetsu looked up. "What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing," Suigetsu replied as he looked back toward the blue expanse.

"We need to be careful," Mangetsu replied in a whisper. "There's a storm coming."

Suigetsu could feel it as well. The darkening clouds were in Kisame's defection, Zabuza's discord, Mei's resistance, and rumors that the Mizukage was not who he appeared to be. None of that mattered to Suigetsu. He was a ninja and orders were orders. He would do anything, kill anyone, to become one of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist.

Mangetsu stiffened and he placed a hand atop his ANBU tattoo. "They're calling me back. Little brother, get the information to our client and finish the mission."

"But-"

"Finish the mission." Mangetsu said solidly as he wielded the sword Hiramekarei over his shoulder.

Suigetsu narrowed his eyes and Mangetsu jumped atop the water and disappeared into the ocean. Suigetsu grumbled as he did what he was ordered.

After Suigetsu finished the mission, he swam back home and noticed how messenger-nin suddenly sped past him. Suigetsu stared after them in confusion and quickly swam through the underwater passage into Kirigakure. He emerged on the other side to smoking buildings.

"What's going?" Suigetsu demanded information from the ninja who guarded the entrance.

"Someone attempted to assassinate the Mizukage. We still haven't gotten all the reports yet. We're trying to close down all exits."

"Fuck," Suigetsu dived back into the water and whistled. The sound vibrated and he wandered through the waters of Kiragakure until he heard a reply. Suigetsu's eyes widened when he received Mangetsu's distress call.

He sped through the water like a torpedo toward his brother's location. He jumped from the water just as Zabuza Momochi stabbed Kubikiribocho through Mangetsu's solid chest pinned together by lightning seals.

"What have you done!" Suigetsu demanded.

Zabuza hefted his sword over his shoulder with emotionless eyes. "He was in my way. Are you going to get in my way?"

Suigetsu snarled as he picked up his brother's double-handed sword. "I'm going to kill you."

"You don't have the strength to wield that sword."

"I'll show you." Suigetsu lifted the handle and felt the weight straining his shoulders. Suigetsu couldn't lift the sword fast enough before Zabuza kicked him in the face and forced the watery sludge that had suddenly formed around his foot to the ground. Zabuza threw three lightning seals atop Suigetsu's body.
Every time Suigetsu attempted to move, the seal activated and spread lightning throughout his body. His body slowly began to solidify under the lightning's force.

"Lightning affinity is even more effective to your clan than other Mist-nin, a lesson your brother learned too late."

"I'm going to kill you!" Suigetsu screamed.

"Why?" Mangetsu asked Zabuza, coughed through his dying breath.

"The Mizukage is a lie. I'm going to return and next time, I'm going to succeed in killing the Mizukage. Anyone who gets in my way will die."

Suddenly a feminine face appeared from the mist. "Zabuza we have to go now," Haku reported. "He's sent the rest of the Swordsmen after us."

Suigetsu snarled in anger, "I'm going to take your sword and then I'm going to kill you with it!"

"You'll never be strong enough to kill me and you'll never be strong enough to wield my sword," Zabuza replied before fading into the mist.

"Brother…" Mangetsu smiled. He reached out with his arm and used water to sweep the seals away from Suigetsu's body.

"Why didn't you do that before!" Suigetsu demanded.

"You were no match for him. He would have killed you. Go back to the village and complete your orders from the mission."

"No," Suigetsu argued. "I'm going to take his sword and I'm going to kill him, then I'm going to take my place as one of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist."

"You never really wanted to be a Swordsman," Mangetsu said softly.

"Of course I did."

"You only wanted it because of me."

"Fuck you."

Mangetsu smiled and his body began to dissolve in Suigetsu's arms. Mangetsu slipped from Suigetsu fingers. His body and tears dripped into the ocean.

x

Suigetsu faced the squad of hunter-nin.

"Suigetsu Hozuki, we have been ordered to kill you for abandoning the village and conspiring with Zabuza."

"What?" Suigetsu snarled. "I'm no missing-nin. I'm trying to kill Zabuza."

"We have our orders," they replied coolly.

Suigetsu was fucking tired of orders. He withdrew his katana and faced his former allies. It was like graduation all over again. It was kill or be killed. If he just kept cutting, and didn't concentrate on
their faces, then he would survive.

"Do you want to play a game?" Suigetsu asked the last ninja left alive with a twisted smile. He watched with a mad glare the way blood spilled from the hands he had amputated from the wrists. He carved through the legs and his fellow ninja soon bled to death.

Suigetsu knew after this he could never return home anymore. He was officially a missing-nin. But none of that mattered. He would just have to gather all the swords himself and form his own Seven Swordsmen of the Mist.

"Aren't you a tad sadistic."

Suigetsu sneered as he looked up from his "game" and at the ninja who had appeared at the center of the road. The ninja wasn't phased by the carnage.

Suigetsu lifted himself and faced the newcomer. "Have you come to play my game?"

Orochimaru responded with curiosity. "And what type of game is this?"

"It's how many times I can cut you before you die," Suigetsu responded.

Orochimaru smiled. "I can offer you power beyond your wildest dreams-"

Suigetsu had heard this speech before. It sounded like the words of a pervert who offered candy to children and led them into dark alleyways. He wasn't about to listen to some ninja who looked like they had escaped an asylum.

"Don't you want to know what true power feels like?"

Suigetsu pointed his katana in Orochimaru's direction and laughed. All he wanted to do was cut everyone in his path until he found Zabuza.

"Fuck you."

After his forty-second bottle of water, Suigetsu was still thirsty. He reached for the forty-third in frustration. Sameheda leaned against Suigetsu's cot and the low sounds coming from the sword suggested it was mocking him. Unfinished, he threw the water bottle on the ground and reached for his shirt.

"You do realize if we hadn't fished you from the sea as soon as we did you would have died?" Karin asked without ever looking up from the documents she meticulously examined.

Suigetsu flashed his canine teeth. "Perhaps I didn't want you to fucking save me. Perhaps you should have just left me out in the ocean."

Karin looked above the rim of her glasses. "I have a war to plan and I don't have time to babysit you or your mood swings." Sometimes he was worse than Juugo.

Suigetsu placed his shirt over his head and demanded, "What's the plan for tonight?"

"Since you couldn't defeat him we're going to have to unleash the Kyūbi."

Karin kept the kunai that contained the Demon Release seal tucked between her breasts. It hadn't been hard to take the schematic Orochimaru had stolen of Naruto's seal and make a counter for it. She was after all a Uzumaki.
"We need to take out Naruto no matter what," Karin replied as she looked at her reports. "Since they know all of our secrets we don't have much time before our army falls under the pressure, but if we can get to Naruto we could win this. Once he's gone, that puts Cloud and Leaf at odds. Not to mention, they'll have a raging nine-tails demon to deal with and get under control."

"This time I'll get him," Suigetsu promised.

"He's outsmarted you before."

"Then I'll cut down every single person on the battlefield until he's the only one left," Suigetsu snapped.

"It doesn't matter how strong you think you are. Power doesn't win wars. Cunning does."

"Cunning my ass. The one with the biggest sword does."

Karin suddenly jumped up from her desk and ran from the tent. She made it as far as the back before she vomited onto the ground. She wiped her mouth angrily with her robe. Morning sickness sucked.

"I bet I have the bigger sword," Suigetsu boasted as he came up behind her and lifted her shirt to place his hands on her belly. "He's going to be the first member of my Seven Swordsmen of the Mist."

"It could be a she."

Suigetsu's hand suddenly pushed against Karin's stomach painfully. "I said Seven Swordsmen. I have no use for a girl. In that case, I'll just have to kill it and try again."

Suigetsu had pinned Karin's arms and reached up until his hand was around her throat. Karin attempted to get away as she gasped for air but his grip tightened around her esophagus.

"Women are weak."

Then he released her and stormed toward the well for more water.

Karin fell to her knees as she gasped for breath. Before her child was born, she was going to kill him. Suigetsu thought he controlled her when in fact it was the other way around. Karin didn't love Suigetsu, she simply used sex to keep him loyal to her. Anything and anyone was a ninja's tool.

Karin wrapped the Kage robe tighter around her body as the chill of this forsaken country began to settle in. She re-entered her tent and collapsed into the chair. The documents on the table began to blur in her exhaustion.

"Karin?" A deep calm voice came from the door.

Karin turned from her schemes and motioned Juugo to enter the tent. His head touched the ceiling and towered over her. The large man handed her a series of reports. "Here is the count of how many we lost today," Jūgo answered.

"Great." Karin perked an eyebrow at the number and then tossed it onto the other side of the desk. "Have your little spies picked up anything for me?"

"Our opponents have been very careful and have shot down any animal that nears their camp in case it is a summon." Jūgo answered. He scratched at the bandages that covered the wounds he received from the Raikage after their recent battle.
"Karin, do I have to kill more people?" Jūgo asked.

Karin smiled sweetly as she looked up at the giant. Karin had always known that Orochimaru had developed pills that repressed Jūgo's violent nature years ago. Orochimaru simply never gave them to him. Karin was beginning to regret doing the same but she couldn't control an enraged Jūgo. Giving Jūgo the ability to tap into the mode intentionally had been to her benefit but now Jūgo wanted to use it less and less.

"Just a few more times Jūgo, I promise. I just need you to continue keeping the Raikage busy."

"And don't kill him?" Jūgo confirmed, a little too hopeful for Karin's taste.

Karin scoffed. "He has one arm. He's no threat to us but his death will be. We will not make a martyr out of him. The entire force of Cloud will come down on our heads and if that happens we won't have a chance."

"I understand."

"Have you heard back from our spy?" Karin asked as she stacked the papers.

"No, nothing."

"Then we assume he has been compromised." Karin stood up and walked outside. The sun was beginning its descent and she was going to have to mobilize everyone soon. Suigetsu was sitting outside of the tent sharpening each scale of Sameheda, which hummed as if it was getting a massage.

Suigetsu grinned maliciously. "Is it time?"

Karin pulled the sealed kunai from the center of her bosom and handed it to Suigetsu. "Don't screw this up."

"How many times should I stab him?"

"You only need to stab him once," Karin responded.

"You have to stab someone at least fifty times before you're sure they're dead and then another fifty just because," Suigetsu answered.

The three walked through camp. When the Sound ninja saw them striding towards the horns they instantly began to prepare for battle.

A few ninja who weren't paying attention talked to each other in low whispers.

"I'm not paid enough to fight both Fire and Lightning. This isn't what I signed up for."

"I know what you mean. We take heavy losses in this battle and I'm running without the money."

"What did you say?" Karin snapped as she interrupted the conversation.

The ninjas jumped and turned around in alarm. They tried to answer her but stuttered in fear.

"Suigetsu, cut their feet off," Karin demanded.

Suigetsu gave a wicked grin. Yells of pain echoed throughout the camp even before the horns for battle were blown.
Karin didn't flinch or have any regrets. These ninja were nothing but tools.

Karin finished taking notes of the battle as the two combatants knocked one another out. Her handwriting flowed in perfect script as she proudly showed Orochimaru her notes. She admired his passion for his work and his daring to seek the forbidden. "What do you think? Are they still useful even after you've studied their techniques?"

"A tool is only as useful as the cunning of its wielder. We'll keep them alive a little bit longer." Orochimaru noted as he stared at the young man who had suddenly shrunk to half his size.

Karin followed Orochimaru down the stairs while carefully holding the notes to her chest. Orochimaru kneeled down and helped Jūgo onto his feet. A small Jūgo whimpered as he stared at the puddle smeared across the floor until it gradually reformed into Suigetsu.

"Have you found a cure yet?" Jūgo asked hopefully.

Orochimaru smiled regretfully. "I'm afraid I haven't but I'm close. I just need to perform a few more tests."

Jūgo nodded without question. Orochimaru nudged Jūgo back into his cage and Jūgo willingly complied as he sat down like an animal that deserved to be chained up.

Orochimaru turned and threw Suigetsu over his shoulder.

"Why did you lie to him? You have the cure." Karin asked as they walked through a long hallway.

"My little treasure, sometimes we have to lie in order to get the things we want." Orochimaru replied as he threw Suigetsu back into his tank. Suigetsu snapped awake and attempted to form in the water. He slammed his hands against the tank and his voice was distorted by the glass.

"Let me go you fucking snake!"

Orochimaru nonchalantly pressed a button and the tank glowed with electricity. Karin watched as the water screamed in pain and finally went silent and looked nothing more than an abandoned aquarium.

"We're going to get a new test subject soon and this one is going to be very special."

"Who is he, Lord Orochimaru?"

"Do you remember the boy who saved you during the genin exams?"

Karin blushed. "I remember."

"He will be my new body. Would you like that?"

Karin nodded. No one had ever gone out of their way and saved her before. Just as Orochimaru had determined Sasuke's fate to become his new body, Karin determined that it was Sasuke's fate to fall in love with her.

Orochimaru stopped at a crossroad of the hallways and Karin followed until they were in his bedroom. She quickly helped him to undress and prepared him for bed. Her favorite part of the night was brushing through his long hair.

Finally Orochimaru crawled to bed and he would always ask, "Are you coming or not?"
Karin nodded as she slipped into the bed from the other side.

Orochimaru had an obsession with immortality and the juxtaposition of youth against his skin always reminded him of the goal he was seeking. He undid the buttons of her shirt with delicate fingers and then slipped her panties from her legs.

Karin knew that all of this was a lie too. She held no illusions that she was the one being used. Sometimes, she realized, a lie was much more bearable than the truth.

Karin bit her fingernails in frustration when she received an increasing number of reports about her army being pushed back. She searched the horizon for any signs of the nine-tails but to no avail. When the sun began to peak back over the horizon she had no choice but to call a retreat. The camp was being pushed back closer and closer toward the Sound border every day.

Karin stomped into her tent furious. Her trump card had failed. She spread out the maps of the battlefield and all the information she had on Naruto. She needed a plan.

She needed a forbidden jutsu.

Karin dipped her brush in ink to begin the process of summoning the Scrolls of Orochimaru.

But before she could begin Suigetsu literally stormed into the tent. He was so angry his skin was boiling. He drank down a bottle of water before he could evaporate himself.

"What happened?" Karin snapped.

"All I found were fucking clones. He wasn't out there," Suigetsu snapped as he snatched Karin by the arm and pushed her past the curtains and onto the bed.

Karin frowned as he undressed her. "Perhaps they were on to us. Keeping him out of the battle is the smart thing to do after what happened at the castle in Frost…” Karin pondered as her legs were shoved open and Suigetsu entered her without hesitation.

"But they couldn't keep Naruto out of the Fourth Shinobi War and they wouldn't be able to keep him out of this one unless he agreed to it. They're plotting something."

"Would you shut up?" Suigetsu demanded and thrust harder. Karin fist the covers as Suigetsu embedded his teeth into her breast and healed his wounds.

Karin rolled her eyes and pondered which jutsu would be most effective against Naruto, all of them cost blood. She needed to figure out her enemy and get in their head. It couldn't be the Raikage's plan; his attacks were usually more direct. It was probably Kakashi. He was an enigma to her. She couldn't fathom what his thoughts were.

Suigetsu finished and melted beside her. Without a word he peeled himself from the bed, shoved on his pants, and picked up an anxious Sameheda. Some poor genin was about to die.

It was almost a compulsion Suigetsu had, to dismember someone after sex. It was as if he couldn't understand being intimate without pain. Karin couldn't help but to wonder as Suigetsu left what types of shadows were hiding in Kirigakure.

Karin gasped as she sat up in bed.

"He's gone…” Karin whispered as she ran from the bed and threw her robe on. She couldn't sense
Naruto's chakra anymore. Even from this distance she could always sense it, standing out like a campfire at night. "I don't fucking believe this. They sent him away." Karin slammed her hands in frustration on the desk. She stared at the map and knew if Naruto was missing the most strategic decision was to send Naruto to the Southern front bordering Fire Country.

She immediately began to write out plans for a daytime assault. Without Naruto, her army had a chance to take the ruined Frost castle. If she acted quickly she could take advantage of the situation.

Cold steel touched Karin's neck.

Karin stiffened and attempted to sense the person behind her. The chakra level was as low as a civilian and barely swept past her notice. She laughed as she swiveled in her chair. "You've got to be kidding me..." Her voice died in her throat when she found herself face to face with the very person she had been planning to kill.

"I have to admit, you're more cunning and more gutsier than I gave you credit for." Karin replied calmly, highly aware the kunai with the seal was a hands-width away on her table.

As Karin tried to subtly shift toward the kunai on the table she kept her voice civil. "You would kill your own cousin?"

Naruto's voice was steel as he replied. "Only a few days ago you said we weren't family. Now that I hold a sword to your throat, you've changed your mind?"

"Just trying to protect the baby," Karin patted her stomach, "Definitely an Uzumaki in there. I haven't decided on the first name though."

"You're lying," Naruto replied.

Karin lifted her hands in the air. "Truths. Lies. I'm not sure I know the difference anymore."

Naruto refrained from sage mode in order to sense the truth. He knew the moment he activated his chakra nodes, Sameheda and Suigetsu would come running.

"I believe you," Naruto responded. "I slipped in when you two were-ahem."

"Sex," Karin amended for him with a sweet smile and shifted so her robe fell away from her breasts. "It's a shame to see how much of a lap dog you've become for Konoha considering the hand they had in Whirlpool's destruction."

Naruto's eyes narrowed.

"You don't know anything do you?" Karin replied as she slowly inched her hand toward the table. "When Konoha demanded the Uzukage to send them his granddaughter to be the next vessel he refused. He refused to give up any of his people to become a weapon. Konoha obviously didn't agree and sent ANBU to assassinate him."

Karin's hand touched the hilt of the kunai. "I don't believe you're really going to kill me. If you do that, you become what they've always wanted, Konoha's perfect weapon. I was under the impression you have more heart than that."

"You are wrong," Naruto answered. "I am here on behalf of the people of Lightning, Fire, and Sound who lives I will save by ending this war right now."

Karin tightened her grip around the kunai's hilt. "I know who you are Naruto Uzumaki, your heart is
much too soft," Karin yelled as she jumped from her chair with kunai in hand.

The kunai dropped to the floor with a metal clang. Karin looked down and stared at the katana plunged into her chest. She looked up with a sneer. "Perhaps you're an Uzumaki after all."

Karin fell to her knees, tumbled against the chair, and collapsed on the ground. Her palms were cut through when she tried to grab the sword as Naruto pulled it out. Her eyes stared blankly at Naruto.

"If you ever see the Uchiha, tell him- tell him- it should have been his child."

Even to Karin's dying breath she believed that Sasuke had loved her. Sometimes a lie was much more bearable than the truth.

Suigetsu whipped his head around as Samehada immediately began to act up.

"What's wrong?" Suigetsu questioned as Samehada began to buzz with excitement. Samehada was only this excited when a jinchūriki's chakra was close. Suigetsu slapped his storage scroll on the ground, retrieved another sword, and then heaved both Samehada and Kubikiribocho over both shoulders. He was going to kill Naruto this time.

Suigetsu stepped toward the source of the chakra and then stopped. The chakra was gone as soon as it had come. Samehada was as angry as Suigetsu was. He raced to Karin's tent to demand where Naruto had gone. He was done with cutting clones.

All of Suigetsu's anger numbed as sudden as a fall in ice water.

"Karin?" Suigetsu asked as he took a step forward. The swords were dropped to the ground. As if wading through water he leaned down and picked up her limp body slow in his arms. He's seen a lot of dead corpses in his life but this was the first one he didn't have an obsession to cut. But he had no choice. Suigetsu stabbed his kunai through her stomach and stabbed through until he held his unborn son.

He wailed in fury as water leaked from his eyes.

Jūgo rushed into the room at the commotion. His expression went blank as he stared at the blood smeared across Karin's naked chest.

"I'm going to kill that bastard." Suigetsu left the bloody mess on the ground and grabbed his swords. Samehada grew excited by the rage that gripped its hilt.

"Suigetsu," Jūgo said calmly. "We need to surrender. Sound can't."

"Do you think I give a damn about Sound?"

"Suigetsu, you're no match for him."

Suigetsu smiled cruelly and his eyes contained a madness that was depthless. "I don't want to just kill him. I want to see him suffer because I am the only one who can take anything away from me. I'm going to teach him a game and see how many things I can cut away from his life before he's begging me to die. But first, I have five more swords to collect."

The white flags were raised.

"I am Jūgo, and in temporary command of the Village Hidden in Rice Paddies, I surrender the
country of Sound. We surrender peacefully and with no resistance."

"And the country of Hot springs regains its independence."

"I also surrender Hot Springs."

"Jūgo, and now the permanent Otokage, I will be moving my ninja to occupy your hidden village for the time being." The Raikage responded.

Juugo gave a perplexed expression. "I'm no-

"I fought you on the battlefield and you're strong enough. All of this is unofficial and meaningless if you're not a Kage. I trust we will have your full cooperation?" The Raikage asked.

"Yeah," Jūgo whispered.

The Raikage came close to Jūgo's ear as he was about to pass him. "And don't mistake this act as a sign of weakness. My people are howling for Sound blood and I was in complete agreement with them. Be grateful someone stepped in on your behalf but if you fuck with Cloud again, I'll show you a thunderstorm." The Raikage shoved Jūgo with his shoulder and Jūgo actually stumbled back as the Raikage continued into the Sound camp. Jūgo sighed as he turned around and greeted the next person.

"I'm Naruto Uzumaki. I don't believe we've officially met." Jūgo was taken aback by Naruto's sincere smile. Jūgo was even more surprised when they bowed at the same level.

As Naruto straightened he had to crane his neck to look up at Jūgo's face. "Wow, you're tall."

"You killed Karin," Jūgo accused softly.

Naruto's face fell. He combed his fingers through his hair nervously and then after a moment, faced the accusation with a calm resolve. "It's something I believe I had to do. Do you hate me? Are you looking for revenge?"

"We all have things we've had to do. I'm done with killing," Jūgo responded.

Naruto nodded and dug his hands in his pockets. "I was hoping I could speak to you about your plans towards the citizens of Sound."

"I haven't exactly-"

"It's alright, I understand," Naruto patted him on the back and quickly pulled him away before Kakashi could interrupt with boring demands from Konoha.

Naruto and Jūgo strolled through the camp. "I was thinking creating laws to limit your landowners with how much they can take away from the peasants. To be frank, your country is bordering on civil war and if we're not careful, this war and the pressures of handing over your harvest could break this country. I don't want to lose any more lives."

Jūgo stared at Naruto speechless and Naruto returned the stare with a perplexed look. "Are you a sage?"

"No."

"It is curious. You're always absorbing natural energy. That seems dangerous."
"It's a condition I have," Jūgo admitted. "I have these pills that help."

Naruto stopped as he heard the distinct sound of someone dying. "What's going on over here?"

Everyone else in the camp was packing under the supervision of Cloud and Leaf ninja, but in this area no one moved.

"It's the medical tents," Jūgo explained as Naruto strayed. There was a shift in Naruto's eyes as he was surrounded by ninja crying out for relief, most of them children.

"Where are your medics?" Naruto asked.

"There are no medics," Juugo responded. "Karin sent every ninja we have into battle."

"And you let her?" Naruto demanded. "You've just let these people suffer?"

Juugo's eyes hardened. "She said just one more fight, one more battle and it would be over. She promised no more bloodshed."

Naruto could see in the man's eyes that he really believed that. Who was he to determine what was a lie and a truth?

"I'll be right back," Naruto's chakra cloak flared around him.

He suddenly appeared before Konoha's head medic in the area. "I need you and your men to treat some of the Sound ninja."

The medic-nin was a little taken aback by Naruto's sudden appearance. "Sound ninja? Why would we help Sound ninja?"

"Because they surrendered and because I ordered you to," Naruto said steely. "And if you have a problem, remember I am the joint-commander of this operation."

The medic ninja went rigid. "Yes sir. We'll be there right away."

Naruto returned to the tents and took out his scrolls of medical supplies. Then he rolled up his sleeves. "Konoha's medic ninja will be here soon," he relayed to Jūgo. "I don't have any medical knowledge but I can help with the simple things." Naruto said as he went to his knees before a boy who had lost his arm. The boy quieted as Naruto touched him on the forehead.

"It's okay," Naruto soothed as he gently brushed the boy's hair. He tightened bandages around the numb and staunched the bleeding.

Jūgo looked around and suddenly realized the gravity of the situation he had just inherited. Thousands of people lives were in his hands. Naruto made clones that quickly scattered and went to those he could fix and consoled those who he couldn't.

Jūgo crouched down. His hands dwarfed that of the small boys and the small hand he held. "I don't think I can do this," Jūgo said softly.

Naruto looked up. "I don't think I could either, but we do what we have to."

Juugo stared into Naruto's eyes and shivered. He only had this feeling once before and that was when he had looked into the eyes of Sasuke Uchiha. He saw an indomitable and unshakeable strength, both with a potential to know greatness.
"I don't want you to go," Yosuke whispered hoarsely as they stood at the gates of the Village Hidden in Rice Paddies.

Naruto smiled as he went down on one knee. "Are you sure you want to stay a ninja?"

"I'm sure," Yosuke said after some thought. "I can't go back home. I can't be the same person my parents want me to be. I'm a ninja and I can't change that. Besides, the big guy isn't so bad."

"Take care of the others."

Naruto stood up and faced Jūgo. "I'll probably have a clone drop in from time to time. It's lucky that the war never touched Sound but you've still got a hard job ahead of you."

Jūgo nodded. "I think I can handle it. I want no more death. I don't want to kill anymore."

Naruto reached his hand out but Jūgo suddenly shoved Naruto into his arms. Jūgo held him close. Away from the eyes of the ninja who were watching, he slipped a scroll into Naruto's hand. "That is the Scroll of Orochimaru. I don't trust villages with it and I don't want it. It's your responsibility."

Naruto quickly slipped it in his cloak. "I'll destroy it."

"It can't be," Juugo replied. "I tried."

Naruto stepped away.

"And Naruto, watch out for Suigetsu. He's going to come for you."

"I understand. I'll be careful." Naruto didn't know if he'd ever succeed in stopping the cycle of vengeance.

This time, Naruto left through the unarmed and open gates of the Village Hidden in Rice Paddies. His departure was accompanied by the melancholy sound of bells. Naruto was ringed by Boar and Fox as he started down the road.

"I guess this time you really are a war hero."

Naruto has yet to clean the dried blood from his katana.

"You continue to mock me Boar. There are no heroes in war."

x

Death doesn't build lives
Lesson Twenty

Family is All that Matters

The scientist was sweating as he rushed above deck and vomited over the railing from sea sickness. He looked into the shadows as if they could come alive at any moment. He hadn't been on deck since he first hired the ninja to see him safely across the sea, but being cooped up so long in his cabin had him seeing things. Sometimes he would walk into walls he swore were shifting and trip over items that weren't there.

He wiped the sweat from his forehead and patted the scroll in his shirt. He hoped the information would sell for a good price, enough to get far away from Sound. He was done working for ninjas.

The wind began to pick up and the sea breeze brushed passed his face. He was grateful for the cool air compared to the stuffiness of the cabin below. He leaned out against the railing to catch the breeze.

The wind wrapped around him like the soft caress of a lover, and like a fickle woman, quickly betrayed him. The invisible blades of wind sharpened. Before the scientist could scream for help, a clean slice, and his head plopped into the ocean as the body fell backward onto deck.

Hound lifted himself up and landed lightly onto the boat. The wind dried his clothing before drops of water could fall on the wooden deck.

"The scroll is in his shirt," Fox's voice whispered through the radio.

Hound retrieved the scroll and slipped the corpse over the railing before diving back into the water.

Hound emerged on shore and the wind rushed passed him to dry his uniform. He tossed the scroll over to Boar and Boar spread it on the ground to make a copy.

"Is this our last mission?" Boar asked with impatience and annoyance in his voice.

The war with Sound had ended two weeks ago but they were still cleaning up the mess. The Hokage had given Hound free reign to complete missions in the area under his own discretion.

"I promise this is the last one. We should have never let that scientist get away."

"We can't keep an eye on everything," Fox said as she watched the hired ninja on the boat scramble to find where their client had disappeared to. "Besides, we didn't know it was a problem until the Otokage began running out."

Boar sarcastically replied, "I can't believe you managed to find the world's first "pacifist ninja", but only if he takes his meds."

Boar finished copying the important document that listed the procedure on how to create Jūgo's medication. Hound handed the original copy to his clone to return to Jūgo. Most of their time in Sound had been spent weeding out corrupt individuals within the government and preventing the flaring tempers of Cloud ninja who were occupying Sound.

"Are we going home now?" Boar asked.

Eventually Sound country was going to have to stand on its own two feet.
"Yes. It's time to go home."

"You three have gone above and beyond my expectation with the affair in Sound. I am very proud. For your achievements I am adding a sizeable bonus to your pay and extending your off-time," The Hokage responded after she listened to their reports. She stacked her folders against the table. "Hound, how are you breaking in the new mask I sent you?"

"It's… weird," Hound answered.

"I'm sure you'll get used to it. The change was necessary. Your identity was compromised during the 'Peace Treaty War.'" Tsunade responded as she relented to the title that the masses in Konoha had begun to use. Even though the war between Sound and Lightning had been raging long before the Peace Treaty, it's always the dramatic titles that tend to catch on.

"You are now dismissed. Hound, will you send for Naruto?"

Hound paused in a moment of disorientation and then answered, "He'll be here at once, right after Naruto takes a shower."

The three ANBU agents left the office and went through the entrance hidden in the Hokage Tower. Boar placed his hands in his pockets. "Let's say hypothetically you've missed your daughter's birthday. What gift would you get her in order to get back in the house?"

"Oh fuck, I'm sorry," Hound apologized.

Boar shrugged his shoulders. "Comes with the job. I need one of your crazy ideas."

Hound was at a complete loss. "I've got nothing."

"Sometimes I wonder if they placed a switch in your head that turns on only when you need it." Boar paused for a second and stared at Hound. "Now I really wonder."

"They wouldn't do that," Hound defended, but found himself doubting Konoha despite his words.

Boar crossed his arms. "A genjutsu master can trick you into believing time travel was possible."

Fox quickly interrupted the growing conspiracy theory. "Naruto is pretty popular with the kids these days. How about a celebrity visit?"

There was a moment of silence before Boar finally replied, "Fuck it. Come by the house tomorrow."

"Are you serious?" Hound asked, but Boar didn't answer as he deviated toward another path in the hallway. "Is he serious?" Hound asked Fox.

"You finally get the bonding time you always wanted."

"I wonder what he looks like. I bet he has a permanent scowl on his face," Hound joked. "So how are you planning to spend off-duty?"

"I have to work."

Hound stopped as he came in front of the door to Fox's room. "You just finished a dangerous mission. They don't let you rest at all?"

"It's alright," Fox said softly as she opened her door.
"You should visit for dinner sometime."

"I can't."

"You're the sneakiest person I know. You can figure out a way to sneak out of the Hyūga compound. Use a shadow clone. It'll look the same to a byakugan if they don't look hard enough."

"Naruto, that's enough. I can't." Fox said solidly and had used more force than intended as the door slammed close behind her. Fox rested her head against the back of the door and slid to the ground. Perhaps she could take a nap before word reached the elders she had returned home. She was so tired.

"I wanted to inform you that the Kazekage is in town. Temari is close to giving birth and since the baby is technically the next heir to the Nara Clan it was decided to have the baby here. Gaara escorted Shikamaru and Temari to Konoha a few days ago. He's been residing in your apartment and will be here until the baby is born."

"At my place?"

"I offered more appropriate accommodations but I can't exactly command the Kazekage around now can I?" Tsunade asked. Tsunade carefully folded her hands together. "And there is something else I want to discuss with you."

Naruto noted the gesture and asked, "I'm not going to like this am I?"

"I'm afraid not. We need to talk about the Kusakage's grandson."

"What of it?"

"Naruto, that boy isn't another orphan you picked off of the street. The Kusakage and his family have one of the strongest kekkai genkai of his country. The child is a political figure and should be in protective custody."

"And what does protective custody mean?"

"Children like him are placed in ANBU."

"What?" Naruto asked in disbelief.

"Children in protective custody aren't sent on any ANBU missions. It's just for their protection. After a few years they are given a choice to decide what they want to do with themselves but not until they're older. From what I understand, protective custody was one of the options they considered when your parents died but you had special circumstances and ANBU would have certainly killed you. I'd like to meet with Kusuro sometime this week and speak with him myself about the matter."

"Why can't he just stay with me? Honestly, I don't trust Konoha with these matters. Konoha left a kid all alone to grow up in the house his entire clan was massacred in. That wasn't the smartest idea. Kusuro just witnessed his entire village murdered. The last thing he needs is to be around a bunch of mentally questionable killers. I'll be his protective custody."

"But that's just it Naruto. I've read your reports and I'm not sure you are mentally stable. You've never had these many incidents with the Kyūbi before and I am worried. Can you look me in the eye and tell me that you're not afraid of hurting the children?"
Naruto's jaw set and focused his eyes on the floor.

"Naruto, look at me."

He gave her a wild-eyed glare.

"I don't have a choice if you pose a danger to their welfare."

Tsunade sat back when Naruto's eyes flickered red. The easy atmosphere in the room quickly turned to one of fire. The two gave each other challenging stares, and almost instinctively, both tensed for a fight.

"I will fight back and I will abandon Konoha if you attempt to take them away from me."

Tsunade's face hardened. She had to quickly signal to the ANBU watching to hold their positions. "Are you threatening me, Uzumaki Naruto?"

"I am tired and I am going home."

"I didn't say you were dismissed yet."

Naruto walked past her desk and toward the window. He exited the Hokage's office through the floor. The force of Tsunade's fist sent him plummeting through every floor of the Hokage's Tower until he finally landed at the bottom. The guards at the entrance looked behind them just as the Hokage landed atop Naruto's back. They shrugged, as if it was just another day at work.

"I'm not going to hit an old lady," Naruto responded as she picked him off the floor with one arm. The vein emerged in her forehead as the word 'old' screeched against her ears like nails on a chalkboard. She smashed her fist into his face.

Naruto went flying out of the Tower and crashed into the forehead of the Fourth Hokage. He had been embedded in the rock so deeply, he stuck to his Father's face. Naruto flinched as Tsunade's fist came toward his face once again but it landed beside his ear and stuck her to the rock with chakra.

"What are you waiting for? You just said you were willing to fight back. I'm right here. " Tsunade patted her cheek. "If you have the balls to walk away from this village then you better fucking have the balls to go through me first."

"They're everything to me. Please," Naruto begged. "I know I've been losing it with the Kyūbi but I'll never hurt them."

"Brat," Tsunade said as she ruffled Naruto's hair. "I think you've let a little power go to your head. The day you make demands and threats at me is the day you become Hokage. Here is the ultimatum, either you attend sessions with me so I can personally ascertain your mental health or you lose the children. Those are your only choices, since you can't take your own."

"Trust me, Naruto. You know I only want the best for you. We will figure this out because you're right, those children need you as much as you need them." Tsunade reached her hand out.

Naruto knew the only choice he had was to trust her and trust was so hard for a ninja. Naruto sighed and took her hand.

The last thing Naruto expected when he walked into his apartment was that it had been transformed into a temporary sandbox. Naruto walked through the door, stunned at the scattering of elaborate
sand castles and buildings.

Kusuro was arguing the practicality of Konoha's elemental system with a Naruto clone that was cooking dinner. Gaara lounged on the couch and watched Ame and Ichigo. Ame topped one of Naruto's hiraishin kunai atop a castle for decoration and Ichigo simply played in the sand.

"Daddy!" Ame screamed in excitement as she jumped towards Gaara. Sand arched over Gaara as Ame used the sand wall as a launching point to throw herself into Naruto's arms. Ichigo frowned as he attempted to wade through the sand until the sand shifted and carried him upwards where Naruto gratefully grabbed him and joined him in the group hug.

"I see you've been having fun with Uncle Gaara," Naruto joked as he placed them back on their feet.

"Children are easier than I thought. I believe I am ready to handle this Uncle thing," Gaara said with the Kazekage hat over his face. He didn't even need to get off the couch. He let the sand do everything.

Naruto dismissed his clone to see what he had missed out on. Almost a month worth of memories rushed through his head.

"Wow, I've missed a lot," Naruto responded. He could have all of the clones' memories he wanted but there was nothing like actually holding them in your arms and smelling their scent.

"Daddy, look at our sand castle."

Naruto didn't even look in Kusuro's direction as he plucked two shuriken out of the air. Naruto threw the shuriken back at Kusuro and Kusuro disappeared in a whirl of Grass. Kusuro dropped from the ceiling with a kunai. Naruto took a step backwards and Kusuro landed lightly on his feet.

Suddenly Kusuro was pulled back as Ame grabbed his green hair. "Kusuro, daddy just got home and he's playing with me," she said as she stomped her feet. Kusuro stumbled backwards and fell right into the large tower of sand. It began to wobble and then collapsed in a dust of smoke. Sand literally covered everything and everyone.

Ame blinked and sniffed as snot and tears began to fall. "I spent all week making that for daddy."

"Wait, wait, I'm sorry," Kusuro flipped onto his feet and tried to calm the little girl.

"How about we make something together?" Naruto suggested with a smile.

Ame instantly brightened. "Let's make Konoha! I'll do the Hokage Mountain," she said and grabbed the pots.

"I'll do the Academy," Naruto smiled as he sat down. "Do you want to help Gaara?"

"I'm on vacation."

Naruto chuckled as Ichigo dived into his lap. "How come you're not over at the Nara compound? They have more room."

"How many pregnant women have you been around?"

"None."

Gaara closed his eyes. "There is something worse than being a Kage."
Gaara and Naruto went their separate ways when Gaara went down the road toward the main Nara complex. Naruto walked toward the more scattered houses perched atop an idyllic field that stretched into the horizon. Naruto wondered just how much land the Nara clan owned.

He followed his nose and curiously walked closer toward a house nestled in the shadow of trees. There were deer grazing on the grass which took flight the moment Naruto approached. He was greeted by a man with brown hair swept into a top knot and sharp grey eyes smoking a cigar on the front porch. Naruto coughed as the cigar smoke was blown into his face.

"Are you just going to stand there looking an idiot?"

That was Boar alright.

"You do have a permanent scowl on your face," Naruto noted with a smug grin.

"Haji, has our guest arrived?" A woman called as she peered out an open window. Her eyes brightened when she looked at Naruto, then she squealed excitedly. "It's really him. He is so adorable."

Naruto blinked as Mrs. Boar pinched his cheeks and then dragged him into the house with a force that revealed she had been a kunoichi earlier in life. Naruto quickly pulled his shoes off as he entered the modest house and sat down on the floor at the table.

"Aneko Nara, but you can just call me Big Sister," Aneko winked. She was a plump woman but wore her curves like diamonds.

"Nara?" Naruto questioned.

"It's best to marry into a clan, not out of it," Haji responded as he entered the home and explained why his wife hadn't inherited his surname.

"No smoking in the house honey," Aneko sang. The sun casted a shadow on the floorboards. It suddenly came alive and plucked the cigar straight from Haji's mouth and threw it in the trash.

Aneko placed the tea on the table and said, "Our daughters are still in school but they should be getting out soon. They're going to be really excited to meet you. Our oldest is a part of your fan club."

"I have a fan club?" Naruto asked slowly.

Haji sat down for tea with the sneer Naruto could always hear in his voice. "It's disgusting."

"We've talked about this already." Aneko replied. "She's a young girl. Let her have her fun before she graduates from the academy."

"I don't approve of fun."

"He only pretends to be mean. Don't believe it," Aneko responded as she combed her fingers through his hair in passing. She smiled widely as she sat down at the table. "Do you have a girlfriend?"

Haji and Naruto shared a look. The longer the look the more ashamed Naruto felt. Finally Haji answered for him. "It's best he doesn't."

Aneko noticed Naruto's expression and patted him comfortingly on the hand. "It's quite normal.
Some ninja just have difficulties being intimate because of their abilities. Like the Aburame clan."
She shivered. "Bugs. Have you met my cousin? He's in one of the confinement chambers in ANBU. Poor
dear hasn't been able to control his shadows since he was little. No one can get close to him.
I've been meaning to send him some sugar cookies. He likes those." She seemed content to talk
while Haji simply nodded his head and pretended he was listening. "Speaking of food, it's our turn to
send dinner to our family friend in the forest. Other than that foul language of his, he can be so
sweet."

Suddenly the sound of bells went off in the house. "They're coming! Asami is going to be so excited.
You have to hide." Aneko attempted to shove Naruto into a closet but found him much heavier than
she anticipated.

Haji sighed and simply placed a genjutsu on Naruto.

The door slammed open.

"How was school?" Haji asked as he calmly drank his tea.

"Fine," Asami replied as she leaned down to take off her shoes.

"What did you do at school?"

"Classes."

"What did you do in classes?"

Asami sighed deeply. "Do we have to go through this every day? I thought they reassigned you from
the Torture and Interrogation unit. Why do you have to continue to interrogate me? This is Torture"

"Ask me, ask me!" the youngest daughter, Ayami asked.

Haji smiled. "How was school?"

"Great!"

"What did you do?"

"We talked about History." Ayami placed her hand behind her back and recited, "During the Fourth
Shinobi War, the Four Great Shinobi nations joined forces against Madara."

Haji scoffed. "The academy-"

"-never teaches real history," Asami replied sarcastically, an exact match of her father.

"There were actually two Madara," Haji began his lecture which Naruto suspected he did often.

Asami rolled her eyes and headed straight for her room.

Haji interrupted his lecture to ask, "Are you going to slam your door and stay in your room all day
again or are you going to let me give you your birthday gift?"

Asami froze. "You remembered? But last night you acted as if," she paused. "You tricked me."

Haji smiled. "Now come over here and let me give you your gift."

Asami ran over and followed Boar's instructions. She looked at the way her hands were set. "But this
is just a genjutsu release. Oh," she immediately performed the technique.

Naruto wasn't exactly sure what he was supposed to do. He waved. "Hey."

Asami's squealed. "It's- It's- It's- Naruto Uzumaki! You're like my hero! You have to see my room," She urged. Naruto followed as she grabbed his hand and she led him to her room.

Naruto's jaw slackened. There were images of him on posters plastered all over the walls. One poster depicted an image of him with a rasengan in hand and another where he stood atop Gamakichi against Pein. You would think because of his clones he would be used to being surrounded by himself, but this felt surreal.

"This one is my favorite," Asami showed him her favorite poster.

"I'm naked," Naruto noticed uncomfortably. The Leaf Hitai-ite was the only article of clothing that covered his groin.

"Hurry and sign, Daddy doesn't know I have that one," Asami insisted urgently.

"Where do you get this stuff from?" Naruto asked as he signed.


"I think Granny and I are going to have a lot to talk about," Naruto grumbled. Suddenly there was a draft of wind against his skin. Naruto snatched his shirt from the shadow that had crept to lift it up.

"You really are that ripped," Asami said with a snicker and studied the poster he had handed back to her.

"Hey, its not nice to lift people's shirts without their permission," Naruto said defensively.

Asami rolled her eyes. "In less than a year I'm going to graduate the Academy and be expected to kill people when my breasts haven't even fully come in yet! Give me a break!"

Naruto hoped Ame wasn't this dramatic when she became a teenager. "They don't give those sorts of missions to genin."

Asami pouted. "You never know. When you were a genin the administration accidently gave you the wrong mission and you had to face Zabuza, the Demon of the Mist."

"Good point," Naruto agreed and wondered what they should do next. "Do you want to spar?"

"YES!" Asami grabbed his hand, grabbed her kunai from the table and ran outside. "Wow, I can't believe this. I'm getting private lessons from the Naruto Uzumaki."

Naruto smiled.

"You hurt her I'm going to kill you!" Boar called as he lit a cigar and sat outside.

"Don't listen to him. He can be dramatic." Asami put her hands together in the signature Nara style and faced Naruto.

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Asami dropped to the ground frustrated. "This is impossible. I can't even get close to you."
Naruto smirked as he leaned down and helped her to her feet.

"How about we take a break?" Naruto suggested. "When I was a genin I was known as Konoha's number one most unpredictable ninja. In my opinion, that's the best way to fight. Sometimes your opponent will be stronger and more skilled than you but if you can do something that can completely catch your opponent off guard you'll get your chance to strike. You have to be unpredictable."

Asami came to her feet in thought. "Do you mean like this?" Asami asked as she withdrew something from her training gi. It was a poster of Naruto... with Gaara.

Naruto's expression slackened into one of disgust and horror. The pink stars and clouds did not help either. Asami calmly pointed her kunai to Naruto's neck. "Like that?"

Naruto gulped. "Like that."

Then Asami collapsed on her shaky knees in exhaustion. With a breathy smile she said, "You're so awesome."

Once Naruto was over his initial shock he straightened. "I think you just gave me nightmares."

Naruto sat on a step of the porch and watched as Asami caught her breath. Then she got up to pick up the kunai thrown across the lawn. When she drew close to the deer, they licked her cheek and searched for food.

"Asami, why do you think I'm so awesome?" Naruto asked curiously. It was hard to see why anyone would idolize him with all the mistakes he's made.

"Because you're the hero of Konoha," Asami said obviously. "And you were dead last at the academy and look what you've become. It gives us kids who aren't prodigies and who didn't come from main families some sort of hope that we can make a difference too. You are proof that we can overcome our weaknesses." Asami blushed, "and you're really cute."

"Alright, that's enough," Haji discarded the stud of his cigar by throwing it against the back of Naruto's head and said, "It's almost time for dinner. Go wash up."

Asami stomped her foot as she stood. "That's not fair! Shouldn't I get all day with him?"

"Do you want me to ground you?" Boar asked. "Dinner. Now."

Asami shoulders hunched. "Thanks, meeting you was the best birthday gift ever." Then Asami winked and quickly rushed inside of the house.

"I didn't know I was so popular with the academy kids," Naruto said surprisingly.

"It's sickening," Haji replied. Naruto was beginning to understand Boar's antagonism towards him.

"You have a beautiful family."

"I know. Who could possibly imagine hurting them?"

Their last confrontation and Naruto's last threat came to mind. Naruto was abruptly reminded that this was Boar, even if his usual abrasiveness wasn't as present around his family. "Does everything you do have to have an agenda?"

The Shinobi shrugged. "Family is all that matters."
Naruto was about to reply when a ninja in Konoha's police department uniform appeared at the outskirts of the property. The abruptness of his appearance sent the deer that were grazing in the lawn running into the woods.

"Naruto Uzumaki? I'm from Konoha's police department."

"Wow, I really thought it was a joke." The ninja who sat at the front desk replied as Naruto came through the door. The ninja pointed behind him to the cell where Tomu sat with his arms crossed.

Naruto had never been in the police department before, the hub of law and order that kept the peace internally inside Konoha. Thankfully, when Naruto got in trouble for his various pranks when he was younger he was sent straight to the Hokage's office.

"What did he do?" Naruto asked.

"He was caught trafficking drugs into Konoha. We get a lot like him working for the drug lords but this is the first time one claimed he knew Uzumaki."

Naruto frowned. "Instead of locking up the children how come you don't go after these drug lords?"

"It's not easy to get to them."

"They walk around the slums of Konoha with bodyguards," Naruto scoffed and then leaned forward. "Either you're incompetent or the police is being paid off."

The policeman at the desk hardened. "The police serve to protect the citizens."

"Let him go," Naruto demanded.

"But there's a fee..."

The police department was fully lit as a rasengan appeared in Naruto's hand.

"Right a way, Uzumaki-sama."

Drugs were legal in Konoha but they were expensive. For those who couldn't afford the price, which were usually career genin, civilians and addicts, went to the drug lords and it was buying from the drug lords that was illegal. The system was complicated. The drug lords benefited, the police benefited, the consumers benefited. It was the children who paid the price.

Tomu was released and followed behind Naruto out of prison. He knew he was in trouble. Naruto wasn't talking and that was unsettling. Tomu honestly didn't know what to expect. His mother would have yelled and cried.

They weren't headed home. Instead, Naruto detoured to the trail that led up to the mountains.

"I'm sorry," Tomu finally cracked in the midst of the tall trees.

Naruto looked back at him. "Why did you do it?"

"I-" Tomu paused. "My friends won't talk to me anymore. Ever since we moved they think we've abandoned them. Sticky got hurt and I was just trying to help… and maybe prove I could still do it."

"Was this the first time?"
Tomu shoved his feet into the ground. "No."

Naruto sighed deeply. "I'm sorry, Tomu."

"What do you have to be sorry for?"

"I've been so busy lately with the war in Sound that I haven't been paying much attention at home."

"There's a war going on?"

Naruto was always surprised by that response. Naruto had returned to Konoha and it was so peaceful that none of the civilians even realized Konoha had been embroiled in a brief war. They were oblivious and their worries were only as large as the problems in their own lives, as if the ninja would always take care of everything.

"Is that where you've been for the past month? You've been in a war?"

"It was mainly between Sound and Lightning but Konoha was involved too. It ended two weeks ago but I've still been really busy."

"But shouldn't you tell me when you're off fighting a war."

"Shouldn't you tell me when you're running drugs?"

Tomu crossed his arms.

"How did you trick my clone?" Naruto asked curiously.

"I knew you had a clone trailing me. You're so freaking paranoid."

"I'm not paranoid."

"How many times do you check the windows and door at night? And you talk to yourself. It's weird. I knew you were monitoring me even though you promised that you wouldn't." Tomu accused.

"And you promised me you would stay off the streets."

"Then I guess we're both two big liars!"

Naruto winced. His dishonesty bred more dishonesty and now they had come to this. There was a sharp feeling of pain and betrayal. He suddenly realized he knew very little about being a parent or taking care of others.

"This is how I tricked you." Tomu angrily put his hands together in seals that Naruto knew too well. Suddenly a second Tomu popped into existence.

"When did you learn the kage bunshin?"

"You do it all the time."

"I thought you didn't like ninja techniques."

"How is cloning yourself a deadly ninja technique? At first I used it to clean. It's useful but it doesn't mean I want to be a ninja."

"Tomu, I do the things I do so you don't have to become a ninja but I come home and find out you're
"We already talked about that," Tomu grumbled.

"What about-" Naruto's eyes brightened, "an apprenticeship? If I had a choice, I'd be a ramen chef. Wouldn't that be great?" Naruto said in excitement.

"I don't want to be a ramen chef." Tomu argued. "I don't know what I want to do."

Naruto and Tomu emerged from the mountain trail atop the heads of the Kages. Naruto sat on the head of his father and invited Tomu to join him.

"Sometimes I come here to think."

"I don't think I've ever been up here," Tomu replied as he looked down at the miniature houses of Konoha. "Everything looks so small from here."

Tomu looked up at Naruto. "I really really am sorry."

"I know."

"Where's the Hokage?" Naruto asked Shizune as he tried the locked doors of the office. "She told me to meet her at this time."

"Naruto, she's at home. She doesn't live in that office you know," Shizune chided.

Naruto had to admit it was weird to knock on the large doors of the Senju residence.

"About time. What took you so long?" Tsunade said as she opened the doors. Naruto had to take a minute to get used to her hair out of her ponytails and the regular civilian garb she wore. She let him in and for the first time Naruto wandered the large Senju estate.

"You live here by yourself?" Naruto asked.

"Shizune is in the guest rooms when she's not at the Tower. Sakura visits sometimes. It's actually smaller than it was before. After Pein destroyed Konoha I tried to make it not so grand, but in some places I got nostalgic," Tsunade responded as she slipped off her slippers before coming into the house. She remembered running up the grand staircase into the arms of her grandfather or how her uncle's favorite room in the house was the kitchen. The Second Hokage had been an exquisite cook. There were some things she could not leave behind in the past.

"Technically, since you are the last living relative of Senju, albeit a distant one, all of this is inherited to you in case I die."

Naruto paused. "This is huge. I can't even imagine living here."

"And you have all that land where Whirlpool used to be and all of the Namikaze assets."

"I do?"

"Naruto, the deed was in those boxes I sent over. Haven't you gone through them yet?"
"I've been busy," Naruto replied softly.

"Busy or don't want to?" Tsunade replied as she led him into the kitchen where she began to thrown open her cabinets in search of the perfect beverage for the early morning, the time with the least amount of traffic to the Tower.

Naruto sat at the kitchen table and frowned. "I don't know how to put it in words."

"I'm not letting you leave until you learn how to talk to people about your problems. I can't help you if I don't know what's wrong. You're like your mother in that aspect. She hated to be a burden."

Naruto hadn't expected the atmosphere to be so casual. "I guess, it's just, I keep hearing how people tell me that I'm so much like my parents. I've even met them in my mindscape. When I go through their things, I'm supposed to feel closer to them but what if it confirms what I've known all along? They're just strangers."

"I see," Tsunade said and sat down at the table and poured two glasses of imported wine. "How many people have actually talked to you about your parents?"

"I can't get anything out of Kakashi and Jiraiya's gone."

"They weren't perfect Naruto. Your grandfather walked out on the Namikaze family when Minato was young and ever since then Minato was always trying to prove something. Your mother was hot-headed and stubborn and loud. Sometimes I think your mother was so loud because she was trying to drown out the voices in her head. She had problems with the Kyūbi as much as you. You need to go through those items Naruto, she might have left you things that could help."

"It's frustrating," Naruto admitted. "I can't win with the Kyūbi. He's not like any other opponent I have ever I faced. I can't defeat him once and that's it. Every moment of my life I am constantly battling him."

"Have you tried meditation?"

"I can't get his voice out of my ear long enough," Naruto complained.

Tsunade nodded. "No matter how strong you are physically, controlling the Kyuubi depends on your mental strength and I'm afraid ANBU is threatening that."

"I can handle it."

"You're only saying that because you're afraid I'm going to take the kids away. Speak with me frankly Naruto and trust that I do have what's best for you in mind. First, is there anything you want to talk about?"

"What the hell is this?" Naruto asked as he slapped a poster on the table. It was the poster of him and Gaara he had pilfered from Asami without her knowing.

Tsunade took one look at it and couldn't stop laughing for a good five minutes. "I was going to tell you about it eventually. It was one of my more drunken ideas. I still needed a way to finish paying off my debts and the children look up to you. I decided why not sell Naruto merchandise? I figured a few action figures and posters couldn't hurt. Let's just say the artists I had hired have taken their own liberties. I'd hate to stifle their creativity," Tsunade smiled as she picked up the poster. "Yaoi is the new big thing with the young girls."

"It's embarrassing."
"I can't believe you hadn't noticed before but sometimes I forget how oblivious you are." She teased as she tasted the wine on her tongue. Tsunade pouted as she looked through the crimson colored glass with her other hand on her cheek.

"I want to apologize about what happened between us earlier."

"No, I'm sorry," Naruto said quickly. "You're the Hokage. I should have trusted you."

"And I shouldn't have treated you like such a child." Tsunade responded. "The reality of it is, I'm predicting that Konoha is going to experience a major shift in power in the next five years. The Jounin exams are looming in the next few months and most of the clan heirs are participating. The clans, and therefore the council, are going to experience a shift in power to the younger generation. Not only that, but these individuals largely come from your generation and are largely influenced by you."

"I don't understand."

"Naruto, in the next five years you can potentially have more political power than I do," Tsunade answered. "When you threatened to abandon Konoha I reacted because I got scared. You have forged such strong personal relations with Sand, Sound, and Lightning that if you decided to renege there is really little that I can do but go to war. Those kids who idolize you are going to be Chunin in the next five years. Your political power is growing exponentially. The question is what are you going to do about it?"

Naruto opened his mouth.

"And don't give me that Hokage bullshit. I can see that you're frustrated because you want decision making power. You want to make a difference. I've run away from Konoha before and believe me it doesn't change a thing."

"You're right," Naruto said softly. "Closing my eyes and ignoring that the problem exists or running away from it isn't going to solve anything." Naruto mused on Tsunade's words. She was right. He hated being pulled by someone else's strings. Naruto Uzumaki wasn't a follower.

Naruto looked up at the Hokage. "I want a position on the council."

Tsunade pursed her lips. "That would be a little complicated. You have to be the head of an established clan, and frankly you have no land within Konoha, you have no established specialized family jutsu, and your numbers are barely just you. At the same time, you do have political and international clout. I'm going to have to bring it to a vote with the council. I'm warning you now, it's boring."

"But I could vote whether or not Kusuro should be placed in protective custody?"

"Ultimately the ninjas are my jurisdiction but if you twist it as a security issue then it can be brought to the council floor." Tsunade responded. "I'm predicting in the future you and I are going to begin butting heads a lot. And you're stubborn and I'm stubborn and the only way we're going to get anywhere is through compromise."

"Compromise," Naruto considered it. "I can accept that. I also wanted to turn in these papers," Naruto responded as he produced a scroll from his belt. "These are the papers for the orphanage. I was wondering if you could go through them and make sure I've completed them right?"

Tsunade's face immediately fell and reluctantly accepted the scroll. "There was always only one rule in this house: no stacks of paper. I'll look at it when I return to the office. It'll take a few weeks for
Tsunade finished her glass of wine and reached for the untouched glass she had poured for Naruto. "You're free to ask me anything that's bothering you."

Naruto leaned back lazily. "I already know what you're going to say, 'Hokage sensitive information'."

Tsunade smirked. "Do you see my Hokage robes and hat? In this place I am no more Hokage than you are. And if I so happen to slip some classified information while a little tipsy," Tsunade shrugged her shoulders. "Oh well."

Naruto leaned forward with a burning fire of curiosity. "Karin mentioned something about the Uzushiogakure civil war. Is it true? Did Konoha send an assassin?"

"I need more wine," Tsunade responded as she refilled her glass. "To understand the civil war you have to first understand the relationship between the Senju and Uzumaki Clans, and to understand that you have to go to the beginning when Hashirama Senju fell in love with Mito Uzumaki."

Hinata checked off another item on her list as she walked through the market and stepped around the current of people without even raising her head. One of her cousins mysteriously got "sick" and Hinata didn't mind filling in and taking on added chores so one of her cousins could get some rest.

"Hinata!"

Hinata swiveled her head and was surprised to find Ino staring at her like vulture. "Ino, it's been a long time. How have you been?" Hinata asked graciously.

"There's a case at the hospital Sakura could really use a byakugan to help with. I was just on my way to request a Hyūga from the Hokage but you'd be perfect."

"Sure, anything to help. Is this going to take a while?" Hinata asked as she looked at the list of all the things she still needed to retrieve.

"Perhaps all day. The case is an anomaly and she really needs someone who can look inside and see what's going on."

Hinata looked at her list and attempted to factor in the time with the rest of her chores. "Perhaps you should request someone else…" Hinata began.

"We don't have much time Hinata. Just create a shadow clone to take care of these things."

Hinata finally relented and halved her chakra in order to make a copy of herself. "Please complete this," Hinata asked her clone kindly as she handed over the list.

"Oh come on." Ino rolled her eyes and then shoved Hinata through the crowd.

"Ino, this isn't the way to the hospital," Hinata replied as she was shoved into a clothing store where she was caught in Sakura's arms.

"Hinata, it's so good to see you." Sakura smiled. "You haven't made an appointment with me in a while."

"I've been on an extended mission," Hinata replied.

"Haven't we all. I was the head medic-nin on the Southern front of the Sound War and I am ready to
pamper myself. What do you think Hinata?” Sakura asked as she lifted a dress to her body.

"I apologize but I'm confused," Hinata said outright.

"I lied," Ino flipped her hair. "We're shopping."

As an ANBU agent Hinata was trained in the art of catching lies even without her Byakugan activated. Ino was good. "I can't possibly-"

"Do you really think you can take on both of us?" Ino asked slyly. "Have fun or die. Those are your options."

Hinata looked from Ino to Sakura. She didn't know whether either woman were in ANBU but given the Yamanaka clan's dominance in ANBU affairs there was a good chance Ino was. Then there was Sakura, you didn't get good at healing a body if you didn't know how to destroy it first. Hinata relaxed. "I suppose you have taken me hostage."

Ino smiled sweetly, she always got her way.

"Don't sound so depressed. Buy something," Sakura laughed.

"Oh no, I would hate to impose." Hinata answered and sat down in one of the stores' chairs.

"You're not. Naruto is paying."

Not even Hinata's stoic expression could hide her frustration. "This abduction was Naruto's idea wasn't it?"

"It was a good idea. A kunoichi has got to pamper herself every once in a while or we'll go stir crazy and kill the first person we see," Sakura sort of half-joked.

Ino forcibly pushed Hinata out of the chair. "When a man wants to spend money on you, don't question it." Ino picked up a knee-length dress against Hinata's figure, shoved it at Hinata, and Hinata instinctively caught it in her arms.

"How about this one?" Sakura grinned as she held up a low-cut top. "Kiba would love this."

"I still don't understand what you see in dog-breath."

"He's sweet," Sakura responded. "And it's nice to be the one chased after."

"How is Kiba?" Hinata asked softly.

Sakura smiled. "He's been killing himself training for the Jounin exams. Wow, it's so soon. I think I'm going to compete."

Ino raised an eyebrow. "Why? You're already head medic-nin of the hospital. It seems pointless to me."

"I think I might want a genin team in the future," Sakura responded. "I thought you were competing as well?"

"Because I don't have a choice. I have to be a jounin in order to inherit the clan and to lead the T&I division. I'm hunting for Ibiki's job." Ino smirked. "That old man is keeping my seat warm."

"What about you Hinata? The deadline to enter is coming up."
Hinata shook her head. There was a sadness in Hinata as she heard of Sakura's and Ino's plans for the future and how they kept trying to better themselves but Hinata felt she would be forever stuck in place.

"Oh have you heard? Kiba just told me."

Ino eyes narrowed at the sound of gossip.

"I hear Shino is engaged."

"What?" Hinata gasped startled. She felt so estranged from her own teammates. She hardly ever took a step out of the Hyuuga compound when she wasn't in ANBU.

Sakura nodded. "She's an Aburame too, second cousin."

"That sounds right. From what I understand, the Aburame Clan Head usually marries in. I'm so glad I don't have those sorts of restrictions. Yamanaka are so full of themselves," Ino teased.

Sakura responded with a laugh. "It makes me glad I come from a civilian family. There are so many clan rules and every clan has different ones. It's so strict."

Ino shrugged. "I couldn't imagine coming from a civilian family at all. In a clan, you live, breathe the ninja way of life. Being a shinobi is hard and to have that support network of individuals who understand is invaluable."

Sakura could see the point. After all, she couldn't imagine talking to her mom or dad about ninja things. That's what Ino was for.

Ino repeated the well-known mantra. "It's the clan first, the village second, and the country third."

In school, children were taught the loyalty rankings from, 'country, village, clan', but that was state indoctrination and this was reality.

"Sometimes I wonder what happens when those lines collide," Hinata said above a bare whisper. "Sometimes I wonder if all those involved in the Uchiha rebellion participated because they truly believed in the cause or it's the old adage of clan loyalty first. For a clan that betrays one another to gain power, do you think it was loyalty to one another that was their ultimate undoing?" Hinata found herself thinking about the Uchiha's fate a lot. "Was Itachi the true traitor after all?"

Both Sakura and Ino gave her an uneasy look.

Sakura, on the other hand, hated thinking about the Uchiha and sought to quickly change the subject. "Look at us talking about politics. We can't seem to get away from our jobs. We're supposed to be shopping."

"But that's just it," Ino said as she looked at Sakura. "That's the difference for a ninja who come from a lower or civilian family and a ninja who come from a clan. To you it's a job but to me it's life ever since I was born."

"It's not just a job," Sakura said angrily. "It means more to me than that." But even to Sakura, her own words seemed rather hollow. She loved Kiba, she truly did, but she couldn't imagine marrying him. Ever since the Fourth Shinobi War she had to admit some hard truths to herself and that was her staunch belief that life wasn't just about being a ninja. If she was to ever have children, she wanted more for them. She wanted them to have a choice and children who came from clans didn't. They became a ninja whether they wanted to or not.
"Oh Sakura, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you." Ino said but there wasn't any regret in her voice. Theirs was a sort of harsh friendship.

"No, it's alright, I was just thinking," Sakura said as she grabbed a pile of clothes and entered the changing room.

Ino turned toward her next victim. "And what's going on between you and Naruto?"


Ino caught the turn in her voice. "But you want it to be something?" Ino picked up a shirt and handed it to Hinata. "This top will definitely make it something."

"I'm not looking to make it anything," Hinata argued. "Naruto and I… have come to an understanding."

"An understanding to do nothing? Absolutely nothing?" Ino asked. She shook her head. "Look Hinata, sooner or later you're going to be married off to one of your cousins because that's how the Hyūga clan works. There's nothing wrong with having something on the side."

"It's more complicated than that Ino," Hinata argued. "When a Hyūga marry we learn to love our spouses."

"Oh come on Hinata, you know the old Konoha saying: If you want to find a branch Hyuuga look inside a whore, if you want to find a main Hyuuga, look inside a branch."

The silence between the two women hardened and froze at the sudden wave of Hinata's killing intent.

Ino moved just in time as two lightning charged fingers passed before her face. Ino quickly formed her hands into a circle. "Mind Body Switch Jutsu."

Hinata's body collapsed on momentum.

_Are you crazy?_

**Get the fuck out of my head!**

_I guess in your mind a Hyūga do curse._

**Get out!**

_You started it._

**My head hurts enough without you in it! Get out!**

Ino blinked as her consciousness was suddenly thrust back into her body. She quickly flipped backwards over the clothes rack and used the clothes to shield her from Hinata's tenketsu.

Ino reached for a high heel shoe on the counter and threw it like a shuriken. Hinata jumped over it and raced after Ino as Ino jumped to the ceiling in an attempt to stay away from Hinata's taijutsu, knowing she was no match. Ino put her hands together for a jutsu.

"What's going on?"

Hinata's breath caught as Hanabi came through the door. "Hanabi?"
Ino dropped from the ceiling and kicked Hinata right in the face and Hinata went skidding across the store.

Hinata flipped onto her feet and looked to the door to find no one was there. She swiveled towards Ino and snapped her hands together for a jutsu. Ino stumbled and clutched her hands to her chest.

"The body is 90% water. I can show you what it is like to have none."

Ino didn't want to test Hinata's chakra control.

"Hinata, you don't want to do this," Hanabi said softly from the door. Hinata stared wide-eyed at Hanabi and then Ino. "Get out of my head."

"Hinata please," Hanabi begged.

Suddenly both Ino and Hinata's faces made craters in the ground. "What is wrong with you two!" Sakura yelled.

The owner of the store screamed as she came from the back. "Get out!" the owner demanded as she surveyed her ruined store. "Damn shinobi! And you wonder why civilians don't want to serve you!"

Sakura picked the two girls up and pushed them out the door.

Ino laughed heartedly as they walked down the road. She smiled as she looked at a moping Hinata. "What's wrong? Never been kicked out of a store before? If you have enough money they'll let you back in."

"What you did-"

Ino rolled her eyes. "I'm a Yamanaka. Fucking with your head is what I do."

"Ino, what did you do?" Sakura asked exasperated. "You can't mess with people like you do with me and expect they won't crack. Hinata's always been a little fragile."

"I'm not fragile," Hinata snapped.

"Oh I'm sorry, I didn't really-" Sakura tried to amend.

"You meant it," Hinata replied coldly. "I believe I am done being your hostage. It's time I go back home."

"Wait, Hinata, we haven't tried the Akimichi clothing stores. They're more likely to kick our ass than to kick us out."

"No, I'm done with all of this frivolity," Hinata answered.

"Look Hinata, we promised Naruto we'd get you to the party tonight."

That calm Hyuuga façade cracked and said in horror, "Party?"

"Naruto and I have been planning a get together for tonight. It's the first time everyone from the original Konoha 11 is in the village at the same time since the Fourth Shinobi War. We might never get this opportunity again," Sakura explained.

Ino quipped, "Never know when one of us will die or become a missing nin."
"Shut up, Ino. Just one night Hinata, come on. It'll be like old times. Kiba is coming and Shino is going to be there with his fiancée."

Hinata really did want to see them again. She wondered if her shadow clone was going to hold all night and if it didn't what were the consequences?

"You're riding the wrong angle," Ino said as she stuck her hands on her hips. "Naruto is going to be there, he's going to expect you to be there, and he's going to be very disappointed if you aren't. And we all know he's just stupid enough to go searching in the Hyūga compound to make sure you get there."

That would be a disaster.

"Alright," Hinata said hoarsely.

Both Ino and Sakura smiled as they grabbed her and dragged her down the road.

"I'm so excited," Naruto commented as he watched the bartenders prepare for the night. He attempted to straighten the cuffs on the dress shirt Sakura picked out for him.

"Are you sure about this?" Gaara asked as he looked around the club. "Why here?"

"The girls were pretty adamant about somewhere with a lot of alcohol and loud music." Naruto shrugged. He watched as the club's regulars began to slowly spill in.

Gaara motioned to the bartender. "I prefer the jazz bar."

Naruto raised an eyebrow. "Jazz?"

"It's relaxing and helps me sleep," Gaara defended.

"NARUTO!"

Naruto looked up and was suddenly bombarded. "Lee!" Naruto exclaimed. Of course Lee would be on time. "Wow, you look different."

Lee had lost the bowl cut but the nickname 'bushy brows' still applied. His hair was twisted in a braid and scaled down his back. He had lost the green jumpsuit and sported a martial arts gi. Lee held his thumb out and flashed a smile. "Gai sensei told me I have to find my own path of youth! I have risen to his challenge and have been following my own path ever since."

Naruto nodded and found Lee's high energy was making him even more anxious. "That sounds… youthful."

"I have heard you have children now. I must meet these new blossoming flames!"

Naruto agreed. "You should drop by for a visit when you have the time."

Lee turned to Gaara. "Ah, my eternal rival. I challenge you to 50 moonwalks back and forth across the dance floor. Ready? Go!"

Gaara blinked. "He tempts me to kill something."

Lee was the first one on the dance floor and moonwalked across the wooden floorboards to the background of technicolored lights.
Naruto laughed. His eyes further brightened when Chouji came through the door, followed by Shikamaru and Temari.

"Naruto!" Chouji exclaimed.

"Chouji! I'm glad you could make it."

"Agreed. I've been so busy with the family business," Chouji explained and his smile widened. "And I'm going to be a godfather soon."

"Hey, Naruto, this was a great idea," Temari exclaimed with a roll of her eyes. "Flaunt alcohol in my face that I can't have."

"You're huge," Naruto exclaimed.

"I know," Shikamaru grumbled and Temari hit him in the back of the head.

"I'm going to join Gaara at the bar," Temari declared and waddled over to Gaara.

"Excited?" Naruto asked.

Shikamaru sighed and replied, "I guess it's worth the trouble."

Shikamaru left to speak with Gaara while Chouji and Naruto took the time to catch up. "So what have you been up to?" Naruto asked.

"I've been working on perfecting our family's food pill and also trying to get approval for the mass production of Sakura and Kiba's new pills. What Sakura has created can really help save a lot of lives," Chouji explained and then offered Naruto a cigar.

"When do you smoke?" Naruto asked curiously.

"Shikamaru and I have always smoked… everything." Chouji laughed. "I heard you played a big part in forcing Sound to surrender?"

Naruto shrugged his shoulders and deflected the question as Shino and his fiancée walked in.

"We'll talk later," Chouji said as he patted Naruto on the shoulder and joined the others at the bar.

"Naruto, I would like to introduce you to Mukade. Why do you ask? She is my fiancée." Shino introduced the woman at his side. Even in the hot club, both were fully covered in clothes.

Mukade bowed. "I have heard so much about you. Perhaps you have heard of me? I am Mushi's older sister. I even have you to thank for bringing Shino and I together. If he wasn't training my sister, we wouldn't have been in close proximity and our beetles would not have begun mating with one another."

Naruto didn't exactly know how to respond to that. Finally he forced a smile and settled for, "I'm glad you could make it."

Mukade nodded and turned to Shino. "Let's dance."

Shino's glasses reflected light from somewhere as they temporarily flashed. "It does not seem like a good idea. Why do you ask? There are too many people and…"

"Dancing isn't going to kill anyone." Mukade dragged Shino toward the dance floor anyways.
Naruto suddenly toppled forward as he was hit heavily on the back. Kiba's elbow lean into Naruto's back as if it was a table. Kiba looked at Naruto with a smug grin. "How's the view?"

"Kiba, get off of him," Sakura demanded.

"He's-" Kiba stumbled as Naruto dipper his shoulder low and slipped from underneath him. Kiba leaned off balance and fell to the floor.

It was Naruto's turn to give a smug grin. "Need help?"

Kiba jumped onto his feet at the blink of an eye. Sakura quickly got between both of them. "Kiba what was our agreement tonight?" she demanded.

Kiba straightened and crossed his arms. "Whatever, I'm going to get shit-faced drunk."

"I'm not carrying you home," Sakura warned.

"Do you know how many Sound ninja I've had to track down and bring back over the border in just the past week? Give me a break." Kiba whined as he sped towards the bar.

Sakura shook her head. "Sorry, Naruto. He means well, really."

"Are you sure about him, Sakura?" Naruto asked concerned. "He can have a temper."

Sakura laughed. "He's the only one not afraid of my temper. He's great Naruto." She kissed Naruto on the cheek before joining Kiba at the bar. Naruto watched sullenly as his first crush walked away from him again. But he knew he had to let her go.

"Where is the bar?" Ino demanded the moment she walked into the club. "You're paying right Naruto? Great."

"Wait what?" Naruto was at a loss as Ino winked at him and then leaned forward against the bar and demanded all her drinks on his tab. At least he got a bonus this paycheck.

"Good evening, Naruto."

Naruto heart skipped a beat as he swiveled at Hinata's voice. He froze and found his eyes nearly bulging out of his head as he looked over curves he never knew she had. He was startled by how much a flak jacket could hide. "Wow."

Hinata's face went red. She knew the low-cut piece of cloth was risky but she had to compromise somewhere with Ino, as long as her back was covered.

Naruto had to force his eyes away from her cleavage. "I'm I'm sorry I didn't mean-"

"I would not have worn it if I didn't want you to look," Hinata said calmly and watched Naruto's face heat up.

'Well, um, you look very pretty tonight." Naruto said softly.

Hinata smiled. "Thanks."

"Hinata!" Naruto was completely shoved across the room as Kiba grabbed Hinata in his arms. If he had a tail he'd be wagging it back and forth.

"Kiba," Hinata smiled warmly as she returned the hug.
"Hinata, I have missed you because it has been too long," Shino said as he appeared at her side. She took both of their hands and a tear fell from her eye. "You two have to tell me everything. I feel so lost."

"And what the fuck are you wearing?" Kiba asked. "Shit Hinata, put some clothes on," Kiba's voice carried throughout the entire club and everyone turned to look at Hinata. Hinata tensed and suddenly realized that she very much was naked, especially compared to what she usually wore. The embarrassment was too much and finally Hinata fainted.

At least she made it through the door.

"What did you do?" Naruto demanded as he physically shoved Kiba out of the way and the Inuzuka went spiraling through the wall.

"Hey!" The bartender called out. "Can't you read the sign? Take the fights outside."

Naruto carefully carried Hinata to one of the booths. Sakura put a hand on his shoulder. "Naruto, she's fine."

Kiba walked back into the club and spat out a block of wood. He was quivering in rage and constantly repeating the phrase, "Fighting means no sex."

"I'm so proud of you," Sakura cooed as Kiba refrained from punching Naruto.

"What's going on?" Tenten exclaimed as she walked right into the commotion.

Sakura pushed the hovering Naruto over to greet Tenten.

"Hey Naruto. It's good to see you. Last time I saw you, you where in the hospital." Tenten claimed.

"Oh, thanks for visiting," Naruto replied as he constantly shifted his eyes to check on Hinata.

"Wow, is that Hinata? I can't believe they let her out. Do you think Neji is coming?" Tenten asked curiously.

Just as she said the words Neji stormed into the club with a frustrated frown and then froze as he looked at his whereabouts confused.

"You look confused, Neji," Naruto noted.

"I received this note to meet someone." Neji showed Naruto the note. "At first I assumed it was a code of some kind but its just bad handwriting. What is the point of my being here?" Then his head snapped up when he saw Hinata. He whirled his head around to look at Tenten. "It seems this is a reunion of sorts."

Then he turned to walk out.

"Neji, are you just going to run away from me again?" Tenten demanded.

"It's complicated," Neji sneered.

"It's not fucking complicated. I want to know how you are doing. I want to know if you're okay. I want you to stop avoiding me. I understand how hard this is for you but Lee and I are still your best friends."

"I can't," Neji said before turning away. Naruto casually reached his hand out and knocked Neji so
hard in the head he collapsed on the floor unconscious. "I guess we'll put him with the other unconscious Hyūga," Naruto suggested.

Naruto looked around and smiled. Everyone was finally back together again.

"Spill it, what happened between you and Neji?" Ino asked as she revolved around Tenten.

Tenten chugged down a shot. She did a nasty expression of a hard-faced Neji, "I'm a Hyūga." Tenten was fucking tired of hearing that line. Tenten came from a family of blacksmiths and as far as she was concerned, clans were stupid and idiotic. "It's as if that clan has them all brainwashed or something."

Ino leaned against the bar as she surveyed the room. Sakura and Kiba were dry humping in a dark corner of the club. Lee had suddenly turned into every girl's best friend and challenged them all to dance.

"If you'd do anyone in this room right now who would it be? No strings attached."

Tenten tapped her chin. "Lee, the kid's got stamina."

"Really?" Ino gasped. "I'd choose Chouji. I mean the man can enlarge any part of his body."

"Or perhaps Naruto," Tenten smirked. "He can make those shadow clones so wouldn't that change the dynamic? I've never had a threesome before."

Ino threw back her head and laughed. "Naruto could do the both of us at the same time." Ino noticed when Naruto suddenly looked at her with a perplexed expression. Ino winked.

Ino turned and looked at Tenten with mischief. "Or I'd do you."

Ino surprised Tenten as she lifted her leg atop Tenten's lap and suddenly gave everyone a show as she sucked at Tenten's lips. Tenten didn't necessarily care. She had been looking for a good time and found one. Tenten did secretly hope Neji was watching.

"Wow, it didn't take Ino long," Temari noticed as the two kunoichi began to make-out.

Chouji and Shikamaru looked at each other.

"She's not drunk," Shikamaru said lazily as he flipped the playing card over.

"Ino is one of those drunks who say 'I love you' every second," Chouji answered as he tentatively flipped the card over and his hand was over twenty-one. "She just likes to mess with people's heads."

"I guess we're all a little messed up in the head," Temari observed. Sometimes a ninja would do anything just to forget. It was the same in Sunagakure. Temari yawned. "Shikamaru, I'm hungry."

"Go ahead," Chouji replied. "I'll make sure Ino gets home."

"You eat too much," Shikamaru said as he gave her a troubled stare and then left the unfinished game of cards. Temari slapped him in the back of his head.

"Should we grab Gaara?"

"No, he looks like he's making a new friend," Temari tossed a laugh as she looked over at the bar.
"It's as if the strings of fate are constantly keeping me down," Neji said as he had yet another drink. "And what is fate anyways? Other than some existential rules that we make up in our own heads just to order the world?"

Gaara respectfully nodded and watched as Neji erupted in yet another fit of tears. "Why do all the world's forces seem so heavy and slide on the scale towards cynicism?"

Gaara nodded and never had to make a spoken response as Neji carried the conversation all by himself.

"Maybe I should get Neji home," Hinata mused as she sat at a booth with Shino, his fiancée, and Naruto. Hinata slowly sipped through the straw of her colorful margarita.

Neji began another discussion on philosophy.

"Even drunk he sounds smart," Naruto observed with an amused grin. "I can just make a clone and get him home."

Before she had a chance to object, Naruto sent over a clone and threw Neji around his shoulder. Gaara sighed in relief. He motioned to Naruto he was out, got up and left to catch up to Temari and Shikamaru as he was staying with them tonight.

"When is the wedding?" Hinata asked politely.

"Once Shino makes it to Jounin and inherit the clan, we'll get married within the month and you know how clan elders are, the sooner I pop out a kid the better."

"Congratulations," Hinata smiled. "I promise I won't miss the wedding for anything in the world."

"We have to celebrate the old fashion way," Mukade insisted as she forced a shot glass into Hinata's hand. Mukade lifted her glass in the air. "May we find happiness, no matter the sorrows life may bring."

All four ninja at the table chugged the sake down in one swallow. Hinata immediately began coughing as she sat the glass down. She didn't feel any different but she noticed her headache was less noticeable. Hinata began drinking her margarita faster.

"I'll see you around, Naruto," Chouji said as he stopped by their table with Ino thrown over his shoulder, which gave a perfect view of the purple thong she was wearing. "It's time for us to go."

"I love you, Choji," Ino hiccupped as she caressed her arms around him.

"I know, Ino."

Suddenly Tenten screamed, "Lee, that's not water! NO!"

Ten minutes later they were all kicked out of the club. Tenten looked exasperated with a Lee that Naruto had been forced to knock out.

"Well that was fun," Naruto said to the last of the partygoers.

"We're going to have to have these get-togethers more often," Tenten agreed and waved goodbye as she dragged Lee behind her.
"Goodnight Naruto, are you sure you'll be alright with her?" Shino asked as he gave Hinata a concerned look when she yelped and held onto Naruto as she fell in her heels.

"I'm fine," Hinata defended.

Naruto chuckled. "I'll take care of her."

Kiba didn't look convinced, and then realized Hinata would probably be glad if she woke up and found out she was taken advantage of by Naruto. He sighed. "Whatever, just make sure she has fun tonight. Don't pull out too soon."

Sakura hit Kiba in the arm. "Good night everyone."

Kiba wiggled his eyebrows. "Good night."

"You're impossible," Sakura laughed as Kiba threw her over his shoulder and they headed to her apartment.

"Those two make a cute couple," Mukade observed.

Naruto watched as they left, watched Sakura's out of breath smile and a happiness she had never expressed around Sasuke as she loudly threatened Kiba to put her down. "Yeah."

"I shall see you later."

Naruto waved to the Aburame couple and watched as they left hand in hand.

"Let's go," Naruto suggested and offered his arm. Hinata gratefully grabbed a hold of it as she watched her feet go in directions she didn't want them to go.

"Maybe you should take those things off." Naruto replied with concern.

Hinata giggled. Ever since that shot, Hinata has been giggling all night. Naruto hoped that was normal. It certainly wasn't normal for a Hyūga.

"That's probably a good idea." Hinata attempted to hop and Naruto laughed as she ungracefully peeled her heels off. Naruto grabbed the shoes as Hinata placed her bare feet on the ground with another giggle.

Naruto smiled as Hinata hung off his arm. She wore perfume that masked the natural scent he preferred on her. Her smooth porcelain legs seemed to have captured the moonlight in her skin. Her perfectly molded hair was freer and messier around her face, which made her look startling younger, and made Naruto feel like an academy student again.

"Did you have fun?"

"I did," Hinata replied and looked up at Naruto with a wide smile.

"I was hoping you would." Naruto grinned. "I knew that coming from the mission everyone was going to get some time to rest but you. I wanted to give you one day, at least. And it was fun getting everyone together." Naruto kicked his feet against the ground and said pessimistically, "You never know when something might happen."

"You never know," Hinata agreed. She was barely listening to him. She was soaking up the brief moment she got to touch him and concentrated all her attention on the strength of his arm.
"You can spend the night at my place until you're feeling up to going home," Naruto explained as he pushed his keys into the door.

The house was completely empty.

"Where are the kids?"

"Iruka is babysitting for me. He insisted that I could use a night all to myself," Naruto explained as he placed Hinata's shoes in front of the door.

He was honestly glad to have Hinata here. He's spent eighteen years of his life all alone to know he never wanted to go back to that. With no one else around, it was just him and the Kyūbi, and that was not a relaxing night at all.

Hinata looked around the apartment. She looked at the children's drawings pinned to the refrigerator and the school books scattered across the floor.

"Do you want some ramen?" Naruto asked. "From what I understand alcohol absorbs better with food. I know I could use some." Naruto went to the kitchen to cook him a late night snack.

"That would be nice," Hinata giggled at the thought of ramen this late at night. Once Naruto was finished he brought over the two bowls and they sat on the floor against the couch.

"What's wrong?" Naruto asked.

Hinata stirred the chopsticks in her bowl. "I don't want to go back home."

"No one's forcing you to go back. You could stay here and if anyone has a problem they can answer to me," Naruto said stoutly.

"I have to, but it's so hard," Hinata dragged her knees upward to her chest and hugged them. "It's all just a lie."

Naruto wandered into territory he knew he wasn't supposed to be in, but he had to know, even when he knew the alcohol was making Hinata say things she wouldn't normally reveal.

"What's a lie?"

"Everything," Hinata whispered. "It wasn't my choice to be in ANBU but it was all the Hokage could do."

"What happened?"

Hinata looked up at Naruto and without thought spilled the highest kept secrets of the Hyuuga clan, secrets only accessible by the Hyuuga Head or heir. "According to clan law, the members of the main family are superior to the branch family because they are more skilled with their doujutsu and they are supposedly directly related to the Sage of Six Paths. That's bullshit."

"Originally, a long time ago, the main family consisted of only the immediate family of the Clan Head, and the Head position was inherited to the member of the family who was the most skilled with their doujutsu. Anyone in the family could compete for the position. Because leadership was dependent on skill and competition the Hyuuga had been a lot more diverse in order to become stronger. My ancestors had summons and used their elemental nature in conjunction with their tenketsu without shame."
Everything changed when the Caged Bird seal was created. The seal had been created with good intentions. It was supposed to protect the clan from external threats but something went terribly wrong. In order to activate the seal from a great distance the technique requires five family members who know how to perform it. Eventually, the creation of the seal coincided with the five strongest people of the clan becoming locked within a position of power and a claim to the main branch. They hoarded the knowledge of the seal to themselves and passed it down to their firstborn. From that moment in history the Hyuuga clan began more rigid and hierarchical. Not long after that this concentration of power began to be abused.

"I was forced into ANBU because I found out exactly how far that abuse of power has become. Not all Hyuuga are born with the Byakugan. It was a few months after father died, and I've witnessed many horrible things, but I bore the silence everyone else seemed accustomed to. Two babies had been born. One from the main and one from the branch. The one from the main didn't have the byakugan and the one from the branch did."

Hinata's fists tightened and snapped the chopsticks in half. That had been the moment Hinata overcame her stuttering, overcame her fainting, and found her voice.

"Are my eyes even mine? None of my cousins did anything because the main has been doing it for years. But I could no longer do nothing. I tried to stop it. I tried to save the baby and I was almost killed by the very people who used to pamper and spoil me when I was a child."

Hinata would never forget how the Caged Bird Seal could burn so hot that blood began to stream down from her forehead. She would never forget how they had beaten her for her disobedience. Months after the death of her Father, she would never forget the moment she realized how strong she really was.

"Because I had to be delivered to the hospital, the Hokage had the authority to step in. She offered ANBU to me as a way to get me out from under the clan's oppression all the time. The clan accepted my offer in ANBU because they wanted to get rid of me. I see it in their eyes every time I leave. They hope I don't make it back. But every time I do, every mission I survive, is one small victory."

Naruto could barely find his breath when Hinata finally looked at him. Hinata slid her hand along Naruto's cheek. "You make every victory worth it," Hinata whispered.

All Naruto suddenly wanted to do was make her the happiest person alive. His attempt was too hard and too eager as Hinata fell backwards and her head thudded against the floor. Hinata giggled against his lips and before Naruto could apologize profusely for being an idiot, she tangled her fingers in his hair and held him against her.

Naruto could taste the tears in her mouth. Naruto felt the great tide constantly pushing them out to sea, but they continued to fight it, continued to struggle until their last futile drowning breath. In the salty kisses was the loneliness neither could bear any longer.

The Kyūbi stirred but Naruto was stronger and abruptly broke off the kiss. They both shivered at the sudden chill. Naruto was acutely aware of how her dress had risen to her stomach and how his erection was pushing against her moist lace panties. It was torturous as Naruto adjusted their position and shoved himself into the floor.

Hinata slid her hand down and corrected her dress. Even though they lay together on the floor without saying a word, it was far from silent. Naruto's heart was like a pounding drum in his ears. Hinata's fluttering breaths and the ache of his dick was Naruto's entire attention.

Suddenly Hinata rolled over in alarm and stumbled to her feet. She tripped over the couch before
crashing into the bathroom. Naruto picked his head up just as he could hear the sound of vomit as it splashed into water.

He forced himself to his feet and gently knocked on the door. "Hinata? Are you alright?"

There was no answer.

Naruto cracked the door open and peeked inside with concern. He found Hinata had fallen asleep, her cheek resting on the toilet seat. Naruto was sure Hinata would die of embarrassment if she was to ever hear of this. He grabbed a towel and cleaned her mouth before picking her up in his arms.

She weighed nothing as Naruto placed her in his bed. Her blue hair fanned out across his pillow and revealed the seal clearly on her forehead. He sat in the darkness of his apartment and watched her sleep. He wondered if she rested as peacefully at home.

He straightened with that same calm resolve he adopted when he decided to kill Karin. The Hyūga have long been a dark blot on Konoha's history. It was time Naruto did something about it.

Tsunade dragged her feet as she answered the pounding on her door. She gave Naruto a dead stare. "What?"

"I want to talk about the Hyūga," Naruto demanded. "I know everything."

"I doubt you know everything."

Naruto described the conversation he had with a drunken Hinata as they walked into the house and toward the kitchen.

"You should do nothing."

"I can't accept that," Naruto replied as he crossed his arms.

"Personally, I'm surprised you're so calm about it." Tsunade noted. Naruto had always been loud and this calm demeanor was a sudden change, albeit rather demanding.

"I'm not but when has yelling about it ever changed anything?" Naruto asked.

Tsunade yawned as she collapsed in a chair. "The Hyūga are entrenched in ANBU just as much as the Yamanaka are because of their abilities. Because of those connections they have information that could ruin anyone. For example, what do you think would happen if it was brought to the council's attention how close you've skimmed with the Kyūbi lately?"

"They'd lock me in confinement in an instant," Naruto admitted. "Don't you have all that information locked and hidden?"

"Naruto, they see through walls. They can see a write my reports. No Kage in history has ever dared to challenge the Hyūga clan. With my gambling history and choices I made when I was much younger, they have so much dirt on me. Change has to be made from the inside and I know it might be too slow for either of us, but this is the most peaceful way of handling it. I don't want another Uchiha massacre during my term in office. I'm doing what I can Naruto."

"And I've decided to do what I can," Naruto responded calmly. "I need access to Jiraiya's studies on seals. If I can combine Jiraiya, my father's, and my clan's knowledge on seals perhaps I can figure out a counter for the Caged Bird Seal."
Tsunade sighed deeply. "Naruto, is this really about the Hyūga? Or about Hinata?"

Naruto frowned. "Hinata is a Hyūga."

"What's rule number #41 in the ANBU handbook?" Tsunade asked and stood up knowing he didn't know. She searched through the books on her bookcase. She grabbed a large tome and retrieved the smaller handbook inside. She threw it at Naruto.

Naruto grumbled as he looked down the list. "Relationships between two ANBU agents in the same team are forbidden."

"It's there for a reason Naruto. I try my best to keep couples off the same team. Love makes people do stupid things and it's highly dangerous in the hands of a ninja. Don't do something stupid over this Naruto. Don't go against the Hyūga clan alone."

"Love?" Naruto asked with an expression as if he had just been struck with his own rasengan. Did he love Hinata? How could he not know? And when did it happen? Was it during a sparring match? Or during a mission? Or when he woke up from her lap the first night of the Sound War?

Tsunade had to snap her fingers to catch his attention. "How about we compromise? I'll give you access to all of Konoha's information on seals but you promise not to act against the Hyūga unless you consult me first?"

It was something, Naruto had to admit. "You'll only try to stop me."

Tsunade crossed her arms as she leaned back in her chair. "If it's a stupid plan, yes I will, but if it's brilliant I'll certainly consider it."

"Fine," Naruto conceded.

Suddenly an ANBU agent slipped in through the small window of the house. Tsunade turned as the ANBU quickly whispered the information in her ear. Naruto could hear the whispered information clearly.

Both individuals stood up from their chairs at the same time.

Then all of Tsunade's doors burst open in a strong gust of wind and Naruto was gone.

"Seriously guys, this is the last time," Tomu said, again. He watched the ninjas guarding the gate and observed as they began to change positions. "Alright, they're switching."

Sticky and Katsu quickly ran out of the bush with the package and slipped through the small fox hole in the gate back into Konoha. Tomu followed with a sigh of relief. He couldn't risk going to jail again. The last thing he wanted was to see that disappointed look on Naruto's face again.

"It's just its easier with you around," Sticky replied. "If you screw up the gangs won't do anything to you. You've got Naruto's protection."

"I haven't screwed up on a drop and we don't know if they do anything or not," Tomu argued.

"Better safe than sorry," Kastuo shrugged. "You're just paranoid since the cops picked you up."

"They're never going to catch me," Sticky bragged.

"I was filling in for your stupid ass," Tomu said as he kicked Sticky. "I just forgot the timing but I
can do my route just fine."

"So did Naruto chew you out?" Sticky asked curiously.

"No, it would have been better if he did." Tomu replied as he kicked against the ground. Tomu knew he had promised Naruto he would stop. He looked up as Sticky and Katsuo teased each other and navigated the alleyways and small crevices of Konoha that they called home. It's as if he couldn't escape. "There are voices in my head confusing right from wrong; They battle and struggle and fight all day long; Living comes at a secret fee."

Then all the boys said at the same time, "Because damn - I've got a demon inside me."

Tomu entered the decrepit house with the others and handed the bags of opium to the Big Man, Genkei. He threw them some cash in their face.

"This is it?" Sticky asked angrily.

Tomu pocketed the cash as he watched the boys turn right around and spend their money on buying the drugs. It was a cruel habit. And Tomu always cracked when one of his friends needed his help making more money because they were on the withdrawal. It was a habit Tomu never formed because he always needed the money to pay for his mom's bills.

"I'm going to go ahead and go."

"Oh come on and have a smoke," Katsuo said as he sat back and spent what could have been his breakfast for tomorrow. Sticky waved goodbye as he sat down at a gambling table. It was the closest thing some of them had to family and when Tomu was on the streets, they were all he had to rely on.

"No, I need to go," Tomu needed to hurry and sneak back into Iruka's house before Iruka woke up.

Everyone cringed and shaded their eyes at a sudden bright flash. Then the windows shattered as a barrage of kunai and shuriken were thrown into the room. People were cursing and throwing themselves to the ground or attempting to deflect the missiles.

Tomu fell and stared at the kunai embedded into his ribcage. Everything around him slowed as people crashed into the room with the markings of a rival gang. The boss and his bodyguards jumped from their position and attempted to fight back. Everyone else was running and attempting to get away.

"Sticky, Katsuo!" Tomu called as he stumbled further and the blood began to spill between his fingers. A stray fire jutsu caught on the wood and Tomu's long struggle to reach the door was suddenly cut off as a flaming beam fell down before him.

Tomu looked up and watched as the rival gang members killed Genkei and took the drugs. Now, they were looking to deal with the leftovers.

Tomu's knew he had to get out of there. His eyes began to sting and he began to cough on the smoke as he attempted to scramble and claw his way to safety. A kick smashed against his side and he was thrown backwards into the bar.

"Sorry kid. Wrong place, wrong time," the man answer as he flipped a kunai in his hand. Tomu stared at the gleaming metal in fear. He should have just listened to Naruto. He was a stupid idiot. Tears began to fall down his eyes as he imagined Naruto waiting for him to come home like Tomu had waited for his father. Tomu didn't want to die.
Tomu blinked and suddenly his surroundings sharpened to finite details. The gang member's began to descend his arm slowly. Tomu could see the sweat on the man's brow, could see every beat of his heart. Tomu was highly aware of the broken alcohol glass beside him. The metal of the kunai gleamed in his eye as it descended.

As if it was happening to someone else, Tomu grasped the glass mechanically and swiped it across the man's neck. Tomu stared in shock as the dead man collapsed on top of him and the fire continued to burn. He stared into the flames and knew he deserved to die.

"Tomu!"

Tomu stirred at the voice.

The man he had killed was rolled off of him and Tomu looked up at Mushi in relief. She had been bugging Tomu, per Naruto's request and for her own reasons. "I came as soon as I could."

Mushi froze and then soon got over her initial shock. She spread her bugs out and lifted Tomu from the ground.

"Tomu, I'm going to take you to the hospital but you've got to close your eyes."

"I killed him Mushi, I killed him. Don't tell Naruto, please."

"It's okay Tomu, just close your eyes. Close your eyes."

"You've got to send for him," Mushi insisted. "My sister arrived a few hours ago so he should be home."

Tomu could only stare. Every speck of dirt stood out to him and his stomach churned in disgust. "I've really messed up this time. What if he doesn't want me around anymore?"

"You know Naruto won't do that," Mushi pushed. "My beetles are saying that the nurses are about to contact the Hokage. You don't want Naruto to find out from her do you?"

There was a deep sense of doom in the pit of his stomach. The knot of fear in his chest was more painful than the wound he had acquired. What if Naruto didn't want him anymore?

"I'll send a beetle for him," Mushi replied evenly.

"Wait-" Without warning, Naruto had arrived in the hospital room.

Tomu looked up, at Naruto, with the red eyes of the Uchiha.

Naruto rushed over into the room and wrapped Tomu into his arms. "I'm so glad you're safe."

Tomu crumbled and began to completely cry in Naruto's arms.

The Hokage finally arrived when Tomu had lulled in his tears. Naruto talked softly with Tomu as Naruto leaned against the bed on his knees. Tsunade couldn't believe the irony. It was as if ever since Hashirama and Madara, Senju and Uchiha were fated to be twisted in one another's lives.

"Do you have a record of his lineage?" Tsunade asked one of the nurses. Tsunade tapped her foot as she began to scan through the records.
"Hey Granny, what's wrong with his eyes?" Naruto asked.

Tomu blinked. "My eyes?"

"You know there's nothing wrong with them Naruto. He's activated his sharingan."

"How it that even possible?"

"Looking at his lineage it seems his great grandfather was an Uchiha, on his mother's side. It's rare but it's been known for distant descendants to activate their kekkai genkai in times of stress. I'm honestly not surprised. Uchiha clan rules consisted of those individuals who never managed to activate their sharingan had free reign to marry outside of the family. As far as the Uchiha were concerned if you couldn't activate it, you weren't an Uchiha. There are quite a few Uchiha descendants among the civilians but after the massacre that lineage largely went underground."

After Konoha had lost Sasuke, the elders even suggested throwing these descendants in a war situation to find out which one had the potential to activate the sharingan. Tsunade outright refused.

"But, I don't want to be an Uchiha," Tomu whispered as he clutched onto Naruto's arms as if it was the only thing keeping him alive. "I've heard the rumors. The Uchiha kill each other."

"It's alright, I'm not going to let that happen to you," Naruto said firmly. Naruto watched with a tense expression as Tsunade reached over and touched Tomu's temples and released the stress on his chakra.

The sharingan deactivated and faded from Tomu's eyes. Tomu breathed easier as he slumped backwards into the pillow. "Don't leave me," Tomu begged. "I don't like it here."

"I know."

Tsunade tapped her foot and unwillingly interrupted the moment. "Naruto, we have to enroll him in the academy immediately. Once the council hears of this-"

"No," Naruto realized exactly where this conversation was going. He didn't waste any time as he began to pull out the medical equipment from Tomu's arms. "He doesn't want to be a ninja."

"Naruto, if you walk out of here with him I'm going to..." Tsunade paused in her threat. What could she do? She wasn't about to kill him and she wasn't about to push him out of the village.

"No one has to know. It could be our secret," Naruto argued.

"He's the last Uchiha. This isn't going to stay a secret for long," Tsunade argued. "Do you know how many people are going to be after his eyes?"

"He's been through a lot right now. We'll talk about his options later."

Naruto picked Tomu up in his arms.

"Naruto, he's a Uchiha. There is no option. He has no choice."

A scathing fury crossed Naruto's face. The window slammed open with a howl. Naruto looked over his shoulder at the Hokage before disappearing in the night.

"Tomu is a Uzumaki. The Uchiha are dead."
It's the clan first, the village second, and the country third.
Chapter Twenty-One

Sex

Bobcat was the last of her squad left standing.

Her teammates had fallen victim to the first moments of the ambush. She held the chain wind staff upon her shoulders and targeted any small movements from the five ninja that had her surrounded.

Rule #14 of the ANBU handbook went through her head: *If mortally wounded in battle, you must destroy your body at all cost to prevent enemy ninja from capturing your corpse.*

Bobcat couldn't believe her first mission as squad leader was going to end like this. She couldn't believe everything was going to end like this.

Bobcat allowed her staff to drop to the ground and held her hands up in surrender.

Then she suddenly snapped her hands together into a seal to perform a jutsu that will destroy her body, her unconscious teammates, and her enemies. She was ready to give everything to Konoha.

But they were just a little bit faster. A mass of rock locked her hands together and prevented her from performing the final seal that would have coated her entire surroundings in a brilliant flame.

Hinata wiped the sweat from her brow and retightened the sleeves gathered around her shoulders. She glided the cleaning rag up and down the wooden floors. A stream of sunlight entered through the small cracks in the wooden window and revealed the dust dancing in the air.

Suddenly, the wooden floors were painted golden as the door slid open. The brief exposure to sun was warm on her skin before the light was once again drowned in darkness.

Hinata could see soft expensive slippers in her periphery vision. She paused in her work and folded her hands in her lap. She kept her head craned to the floor while waiting to be addressed.

"Take your shirt off."

There was a splash of ice cold water in her veins when she heard the command. The voice had a natural cruelty tinged to the falsetto and she knew it was Iyashi. His presence had been absent for the past several weeks as he was called away on a mission. He was certainly not missed by the majority of the Hyūga clan.

"Now."

Hinata respectfully kept her eyes diverted as she straightened in her sitting position. She slid the coat from her shoulders and it fell down around her waist to reveal the undergarments that she wore.

"All of it."

Her hands moved with grace, unflinching and unhesitant. She shed her undergarments and kept her eyes sideways to the floor as was expected of her. Her breasts were on display at his pleasure.

"It's a miracle you're still a virgin. I guess the main family still had some shred of respect for your Father. I plan to remedy that." Iyashi untied his silk belt and his robe slackened.
"On your back."

There were no secrets in the Hyūga compound and Hinata had always known that the branch was called upon to service their main counterparts. It was only a matter of time when her duty to please was tested. And yet there was some small part of her, a small childish part that did not want to believe in the reality Anko had been trying to teach her.

Her innocence wanted to believe this could not be her only choice. Perhaps it was that last shred of innocence she unconsciously tried so hard to hold on to, caused her body to become uncooperative and resisting. An emotion of fear swept across her face as she tried to mentally remind her body of its duty.

It was the first time she couldn't force herself.

"What the fuck are you waiting for?"

Hinata raised her chin in the proud haughtiness of the Hyūga and looked at Iyashi with eyes full of fury.

"Do you hate me?" Iyashi asked with a cruel smirk spiraled onto his lips. "The stoic Hinata finally shows emotion." Iyashi pulled his dick from his pants. "I want to hear you beg for it."

The cracks were increasing in Hinata's calm exterior. The anger was seeping through like lava. The words erupted from her lips.

"I am not your whore."

Iyashi irked an annoyed eyebrow. He wasn't often denied what he wanted. "No, you are not. A whore gets paid," he said as he placed his hands together to form a hand sign.

Hinata buckled under the pain of the caged bird seal. Her arms shook as she attempted to support her weight and deny him the image he wanted: Hinata on her back writhing in pain.

Iyashi intensified the jutsu to a level he knew was deadly.

The Hyuuga working in the yard activated their byakugan when they heard the scream. They hunched their backs and kept working in silence.

Iyashi ended the jutsu before he took it too far and accidently killed her.

Hinata had collapsed under the blinding pain that felt as if her brain had exploded inside of her head. Her eyes were pulsing behind her eyelids. He kicked her in the stomach and she rolled over like a broken little bird unable to fly. Blood poured down from the top of her forehead and underneath her eyelids. He stood over her and watched her breasts fall and rise with a desperate heaving of her chest.

Hinata's eyes crawled open and watched numbly as he masturbated over her. Then he coated her face and body in semen.

"You will be the one who comes to me," Iyashi promised, "and you will beg for it."

Hinata lay on the floor as the door slid close with a slam. The dust fell on her body. Tears slid from her eyes. She picked herself up and used the sleeve from her coat to wipe her face.

Hinata winced when the sun entered the room once again and someone stood at the door.
Auntie began cleaning Hinata with a towel. Then she placed a healing hand to Hinata's forehead. Auntie was always the one to clean up the mess.

"You are lucky you were not punished more severely."

Hinata knew she had skimmed severe repercussions. She took a quivering breath. Hinata had found the line she would not cross. There was still a part of herself she would not sacrifice.

"What are you doing?" Hinata asked as she was pushed to the ground against her will.

Her Aunt didn't answer as she retrieved a tool from a scroll and then shoved it between Hinata's legs. Hinata attempted to escape as her hymen was forcefully stretched open in order to relieve the pain of her first time.

"Hinata, you are no longer the heiress. You are a branch member. Next time, just shut up and open your legs."

Pink cherry blossoms fell in her hair as she dipped her feet in the sparkling blue koi pond. Neji sat down beside her on the bench. He placed a hand over hers, and they sat together, like two timid lovers.

"Ko approached me today. He has agreed to be our inside source."

Ko was a main family member and had devoted his ninja career to being Hinata's caretaker. He had kept his distance from her since she was sealed but Neji knew he was the only main family member they could trust.

The information they sought, the blackmail for the Hokage and members on the council, were locked deep within the forbidden Hyūga library underneath the main compound. All they needed to do was figure out a way in without getting caught in order to steal the information, but in a house where people could see through walls, it was easier said than done.

"Ko doesn't want to get too involved but he agreed to feed us information on the elders' schedule." Neji paused. "Something happened today that changed his mind."

Neji wasn't one to involve himself in the latest gossip. Hinata watched the koi fish as they flowed through the pond.

"Iyashi has targeted me as his next conquest."

Neji's expression was cold and distant.

"It's just like killing someone. It's distasteful but you get it over with," Neji said as he stood up without comfort or sympathy. The cherry blossoms fell as Neji walked away.

The sun began to set and marked the time Hinata had to return to her chores. Hinata got to her feet, but she soon felt as if she was walking through water. She couldn't bear this place any longer.

Hinata's eyes flashed with a spark and began to walk faster the more she made up her mind. She disappeared behind a tree. One Hinata continued through the compound and another had crawled upwards into the branches. She leaned backwards against a bough and flipped downwards until she landed on her feet outside of the Hyuuga compound.

Hinata henged herself into a fox. She crawled through the sprawling compound and hoped the
sentries didn't notice her. When she made it to the crossroads in the road, she knew she had safely snuck away and collapsed on the wooden bench to catch her breath.

"Hello, Hinata-sama."

Hinata jumped as her cousin, Tashiko appeared out of a cloud of smoke. "Are you sneaking out too? I thought they always assigned you both nighttime and daytime chores."

"Shadow clone," Hinata explained softly as the two Hyuuga henged themselves and walked down the road.

"What are you planning to do?" Tashiko asked.

Hinata fiddled with her fingers nervously. "I'm simply out for a stroll."

Tashiko noticed how Hinata's calm demeanor had turned into a bag of nerves. "Sure you are." Tashiko winked. "I won't tell as long as you don't."

"What are your plans?" Hinata asked.

Tashiko smirked. "I'm one of the finalists in the underground cock-fighting tournament."

"Cock-fighting?"

"It's so thrilling and invigorating." Tashiko proudly defended her obsession. Tashiko stopped as their path deviated. "If you need to get back in, Tokuma is a sentry from dusk to midnight on the eastern side. He won't tell anyone."

Hinata knew Tashiko's curiosity compelled her to spy on Hinata even though their paths separated. Hinata attempted to walk down winding streets until she hoped she was out of Tashiko's visual range. Hinata walked into a clothing store and changed out of her work uniform in the dressing room. She replaced it with a casual top and pants.

Hinata's was surprised she didn't feel any regret about sneaking out of the Hyūga compound for the first time.

Naruto barely missed the projectile that flew over his head.

"This is what we're going to have to do," Naruto described the battle plan, "I'll flank them but I need you to cover me."

Ichigo blinked, and then nodded slowly.

"Alright," Naruto looked over the flipped couch and strands of noodles suddenly struck him in his face.

"Got him!" Kusuro exclaimed from the other side of the room behind the kitchen table flipped on its side.

Ame yelled as she did a suicide run to the center of the room with her bowl of what was supposed to be dinner.

Ame yelled as she did a suicide run to the center of the room with her bowl of what was supposed to be dinner.

Naruto smirked as he pounced on her to find he had attacked a substitution jutsu. Naruto dramatically reenacted a fake attempt at dying as Kusuro and Ame slammed noodles into his hair and clothes.
"AH, that tickles," Naruto squirmed as they poured it down the back of his shirt.

Ame stood atop him triumphantly. "We have finally defeated the great Naruto Uzumaki with my great noodly jutsu!" She declared. Kusuro collapsed in a fit of laughter just as Ichigo ran and pushed Ame off and attempted a valiant rescue of Naruto.

Naruto laughed as he grabbed them all in a giant hug.

"I wish I could tell you this isn't normal, but…" Tomu looked at the pretty woman at his side, "this is a normal night in the Uzumaki household."

Naruto blinked as he looked up. "Hinata?"

Naruto quickly tried to scramble to his feet and smiled awkwardly when noodles slid out of his shirt and down his pants.

"Who is the lady?" Ame tried to look intimidating but it was a difficult task with strings of noodle hanging out of her hair.

"This is Hinata. We work together. Introduce yourselves," Naruto encouraged. The kids quickly gave their names, except for Ichigo who hid behind Naruto's leg.

"Ichigo is a little shy around strangers," Naruto explained as leaned down and patted Ichigo encouragingly on the back. "She's not going to hurt you. We Uzumaki men should always greet a lady."

Ichigo fidgeted and said through the thumb in his mouth, "You're pretty."

"Thank you," Hinata replied with a soft smile but as soon as she spoke Ichigo scrambled back into Naruto's arms.

Naruto chuckled but beamed proudly. "Girls are scary, aren't they?" he whispered into Ichigo's ear.

Hinata certainly knew a lot about Naruto's children. Sometimes Naruto would talk about them after breaks between sparring matches but this was the first time she had met them in person. Hinata looked around the house with an amused smile. "Did I miss dinner?"

"I don't think we really got started," Naruto admitted. Somehow ramen noodles were plastered even to the ceiling. "How about I call in dinner?" Naruto suggested.

"Pizza!" Ame exclaimed. Naruto chuckled as he created several clones and sent them to work. Hinata watched as clone recorder the pizza order and left, threw Ame and Ichigo into the bathtub, and several Naruto rushed around to clean up, all at once.

Tomu sat with Hinata at the kitchen table. "You're that lady that was here that night?" Tomu asked. "The one with the hangover?"

A blush crossed Hinata's cheeks as she remembered the embarrassing predicament. She had woken up the morning of the Konoha 11 reunion with a massive hangover. When she finally had the courage to crawl out of Naruto's bed and stepped into his living room, she found Sakura arguing with Naruto over the boy that sat beside her. Except then, he was covered in bandages. She hardly had time to question what was going on when the seal on her forehead began to burn and she had to immediately return home.

Hinata nodded. "You were hurt?"
Tomu wrung his hands. "I don't like to talk about it."

By the time the pizza arrived, everyone and everything was clean. Since there were more people than chairs, Naruto had pushed the couch to the wall and they had a picnic on the floor of the living room.

Naruto's eyes flicked to Hinata constantly as if afraid she could disappear at any moment. "I hope pizza is okay."

"I enjoy it," Hinata replied. The first time Hinata ever had pizza was after a sparring practice with team 8. Pizza wasn't served in the Hyūga household.

Ame was attempting to subtly place as much distance from Hinata and her father as possible while Ichigo was picking off all the toppings on his pizza.

"Naruto, I want to move up a grade in the academy," Kusuro said after he quickly attacked a piece of pizza.

"But you just entered," Naruto complained. After Kusuro's meeting with the Hokage, Kusuro was enrolled in the Academy in exchange for staying in Naruto's custody. There was nothing Naruto could do because it was Kusuro's choice.

"I'm stronger and better than they are. I've heard others have graduated from your academy at even younger ages than I am. I want to move up several grades. I want to graduate. I want to become a ninja now."

"Our agreement still stands. I'm not letting you out of the village until you beat me… without noodles." Naruto replied.

"You don't understand!" Kusuro yelled. He stormed out the living room and slammed the door to his room.

"Daddy I want to-"

Naruto turned around with a resounding, "no" before following Kusuro into his room.

Ame hung her head as she picked at her food. "He's never going to let me go to the Academy."

Naruto cracked open the door and found Kusuro crying under the covers. Naruto sat down on the bed and waited for Kusuro to emerge.

"It's not fair," Kusuro said and wiped the tears from his eyes. "I'm here having fun and being happy while my country has been invaded. I wish I had died with everyone else. I wish I had given my life bravely to the village instead of running away like a coward."

Naruto eye's softened. "Kusuro, dying isn't what your grandfather wanted for you, dying isn't going to please the dead, and dying isn't going to save your village. The only chance you have of accomplishing anything is to stay alive."

"But the more I stay here the more I forget what home smells like, the more I forget my mother and grandfather's face. I can't stay Naruto. I'm going to lose myself here."

"A person can't lose themselves, you're right here," Naruto said as he pointed at Kusuro. "Get some sleep. We've got lots of training to do tomorrow."

"Naruto," Kusuro called. Naruto paused with his hand on the doorknob. "Anyone could have found
I'm glad it was you."

Naruto hoped time was enough to heal Kusuro's volatile stages of grief and anger.

Naruto walked back into the living room. Tomu and Hinata were washing the dishes while Ame was standing upside-down atop the ceiling and teasing Ichigo to follow her. Ichigo jumped and Naruto was there to catch him.

"Bed time," he called above him.

Ame released her chakra. She fell into Naruto's arms. "Can we read the story about the gutsy ninja again?"

"We read that one last night," Naruto complained as he carried Ichigo and Ame into his bedroom.

Hinata watched as she handed a plate for Tomu to dry. "He's really sweet with them. I'm sorry if I'm intruding on your family time."

Tomu shrugged his shoulders as they washed dishes. "There are always people coming in and out. Some of the street kids will stop by and grab something to eat. Sakura or Iruka would come over sometimes. Lee is the worse. Something always breaks when he visits." Tomu paused. "I take that back. Kiba and his dog is the worse. It takes me days to clean out all the fur from the carpet."

Hinata wouldn't know. When team 8 had still been close, Akamaru's hair had always gotten all over her clothes, but she hadn't been the one to clean them. Now, Hinata cleaned every hour of the day but it felt freeing to clean Naruto's dishes of her own volition.

"Since Naruto said you work with him you must be a ninja too?"

Hinata nodded. "Aren't you?" She asked curiously. "Your chakra is chuunin level."

"I am not a ninja," Tomu said angrily and began scrubbing the plate harder than before. "Why would I want to become a ninja and die to leave all the people that love me waiting until someone comes knocking at the door to tell me 'how bravely he died for his country and how bravely he did his duty'. What about his duty to his son and his wife? What about his duty to be there when we needed him the most?"

Hinata gasped as his eyes snapped red in his anger.

Tomu went rigid and curse. "I did it again didn't I?"

"What's going on?" Naruto asked as he walked into the room. He paused when he saw Tomu's red eyes. "You still don't have control over it. You've got to be careful." Naruto insisted.

Tomu put his hands together in a seal and used the seal to concentrate his chakra towards his eyes. After a few moments, he deactivated the sharingan.

"Things would be easier if I could just poke my eyes out," Tomu grumbled as he left the plate in the sink.

"You shouldn't say things like that around other ninja," Naruto warned. "They tend to take things like that literally."

Tomu looked at Naruto. "Perhaps I meant it," he whispered and dragged a blanket over him on the couch.
Hinata was connecting the dots. "He is why you and the Hokage are fighting?"

"We're not fighting," Naruto said slowly, "Just not talking to one another."

Naruto reached for his cloak and told Tomu. "If you need me, Hinata and I are going to be on the roof."

Naruto slipped his hand through his cloak and then held the door open for Hinata. Naruto awkwardly asked, "How did the last mission go?"

Hinata wondered what was going on when she and Boar performed the last mission with a different member. Naruto hasn't been on a mission for the last two months. "It wasn't the same," Hinata admitted. "Naruto, you've got to resolve this issue with the Hokage. What are you planning to do?"

Naruto frowned. "Keep it secret."

"That's not something that can be kept secret," Hinata said softly. "The last Uchiha is living in your house."

"Why can't the Uchiha rest in peace?" Naruto asked. "I'm not going to make Tomu do something he doesn't want to do."

"Naruto, he's not going to survive if he doesn't know how to defend himself. That's simply the world we live in."

"I know," Naruto said frustrated, "but it's too much for him right now. Tomu hasn't left the house since the incident and he still has a lot of animosity toward ninja that he hasn't realize is unresolved issues with his dad. Tomu hasn't forgiven his Father and I understand because I'm not sure I've forgiven mine."

"My father sacrificed his son for the survival of the village. The village wants Tomu because he has one of the last sharingan. Kusuro wants to give his life for his village. Ame wants to enroll in the Academy. As ninjas, we sacrifice everything for the village, why do we have to sacrifice our children as well?"

Hinata and Naruto's hands were bumping against one another, and Hinata finally wrapped her hand in his. "You're just being a parent."

"Being a parent is hard," Naruto responded and glanced at their held hands. Now that he had a hold of her, he was afraid to let go even as they lay atop the roof. Naruto's eyes followed how the moonlight outlined her figure as she looked up at the night sky.

Naruto knew Hinata never did anything on a whim. "You're not going to tell me what's going on, are you?"

"No."

"I don't miss the missions at all," Naruto replied honestly. "But I miss you, Hinata. I can go visit Boar and his family when I want but I can't do the same with you. I've even tracked down some of your cousins over the past month and whenever I ask a little information about you, suddenly it's as if I'm asking them to betray their family."

Hinata frowned. "You've been asking about me?"

"Of course. How else am I supposed to know you're alright?"
"Naruto," Hinata slipped her hand out of his hand and left Naruto with nothing but air and a fading warmth. "You've got to stop."

Naruto pouted. "Maybe if you came over more often I wouldn't have to."

"Maybe if you weren't fighting with the Hokage you could see me on a mission."

"It's not enough," Naruto said in frustration as he sat up and looked over at her. "I care about you. I'm glad you came over today but it's hard knowing you don't break easily. I know you wouldn't sneak out of the compound unless something is going on. You won't tell me, fine, but I'm here. I'm always here if you need me."

Naruto closed his eyes and concentrated on the feeling of her hand on his skin as she reached up to touch him. Her hands were delicate and were as graceful with the way she touched along his cheeks as when they were delivering death.

The kiss was unlike times before which had been drowned by unresolved lust, but was slower, like a calm tide coming to shore. Hinata danced across his lips with her tongue. Naruto sucked into her mouth. Both lingered and savored the taste. Like the moon calling the tide, they both pulled one another.

Hinata's hands combed her fingers through his scalp and Naruto suddenly purred into her mouth. Hinata couldn't help but to break the kiss with a smile.

"I didn't mean to," Naruto said quickly, but Hinata assuaged his fears as she skipped her lips over the scars he was born with.

She whispered in his ear, "Naruto, it's alright if you touch me."

Naruto's hands were rooted solidly to the roof of the house as he leaned over her. Naruto hadn't known what to do with his hands and certainly didn't want to mess things up by putting them places they didn't belong.

"It's alright," Hinata spoke in between kisses placed along his jaw. She was amused by the fact that the strongest ninja in the world was as awkward and clumsy as a teenage boy.

Naruto placed a shy hand on her hip and they continued their kiss.

After every couple of minutes, Hinata would suddenly speed up as her hands clutched harder into his hair and bring her legs around Naruto's waist as she attempted to close the distance Naruto maintained between them. Naruto would pull across her jaw and tug at her neck while Hinata caught her breath and slowed down. Then they would renew, like the rise and fall of a tide.

Hinata slid her hands downwards. Naruto's breath hitched in her mouth as she slipped her bare hands underneath his shirt.

Hinata pulled away with sudden concern. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to overstep boundaries."

"No," Naruto said and marveled at the way her hands slipped across his skin and explored the crevices of his abs. "You just surprised me, no one has ever-" Naruto paused when Hinata tugged on his shirt, asking. Naruto was reluctant. He was finally perfecting this kissing thing without the Fox's interference and feared to go any further.

"I understand," Hinata in disappointment as she slipped her hands from his shirt. She needed to find another way to push Naruto further. "I could close your chakra nodes," Hinata suggested. Then
Hinata saw something in Naruto's eyes she had never considered before. The Fox was just an excuse. "Naruto, what's wrong?"

"I don't know." Naruto straightened and wrung his hands together nervously. Naruto couldn't put into words the looming feeling in his gut. It whispered the irrational fear that everything was going to go wrong, like the others. To Naruto, Hinata was too important to allow things to go wrong.

Hinata and Naruto sat atop the roof in an awkward silence.

Naruto gave her furtive glances out of the corner of his eyes. The cool wind reminded him of the sudden increase in distance between them. Naruto attempted to subtly stretch and then inch his arm down to wrap around her shoulders. Instead, he accidently hit her in the head.

"I'm so sorry," Naruto apologized profusely.

"It's alright," Hinata replied as she rubbed her forehead.

Hinata lay down and Naruto willingly followed. She positioned his arm until it was wrapped against her waist. "Is this better?"

Naruto couldn't believe how tiny she felt in his arm, and Hinata certainly hadn't grown into a tiny woman. She had curves, from the breasts that pressed against Naruto's side, to the hips that led to strong thighs and long legs. Naruto was aware of all these things as he held her.

Hinata couldn't believe how much the tiny half-starved boy she had stalked in her childhood had grown. Somehow a diet of ramen noodles had produced the arm of muscle that held her and the hardened chest that was her pillow. His body reflected the strength of Naruto's stubbornness and headstrong pursuits.

Hinata looked up at the stars. "When I was little my father told me that stars were dreams floating in the sky waiting for us to reach them. Then my mother died and they became nothing more than spheres of hydrogen and helium."

Nothing had ever been the same after her mother died.

"Until I was six, I thought they were trapped fireflies. I could never figure out how they got up there." Naruto admitted. "One day I decided I was going to save them so I climbed atop the Hokage Mountain and jumped."

Hinata looked at him in disbelief.

"The Sandaime said I was lucky to have survived and then told me the truth about them." Naruto smiled. "He told me that the fireflies weren't trapped but they stayed in the sky to light our way and help us see." Naruto pressed his lips against the top of Hinata's head. "You're like a firefly. You choose to stay trapped and no matter how far I jump I can't seem to save you." Naruto paused. "Or you're like a star. I think I've confused myself."

Hinata couldn't help but to smile.

Suddenly Naruto's mouth went dry. "Hinata," Naruto took in a deep breath and he hoped he gulped down a little courage. "There's something I want to tell you."

"I-"

And what if she rejects you?
"-like how your hair smells," Naruto said quickly, then hit his head back against the roof.

**I love watching you screw up.**

"Thanks, Naruto." Hinata sniffed a strand of her hair and wondered what brand of shampoo she had used.

"Wait, no Hinata, I want you to know that-

"Fuck," Naruto's angry curse bounced off the rooftops. Both Hinata and Naruto scrambled to their feet as the tattoos burned on their shoulder.

Granny had to interrupt probably the most important confession of Naruto's life but Naruto knew Granny wouldn't resort to calling him if it wasn't important, especially with the current tension between them.

Naruto left a clone and the two raced towards ANBU headquarters.

When Hound didn't see any alcohol bottles he knew this was serious. The Hokage crossed her arms as she looked at the three ANBU agents. "A few weeks ago we received a report of missing persons in the countryside. I sent a chuunin team to investigate and they disappeared. I sent an ANBU team to investigate and they have disappeared." The Hokage leaned forward with dangerous eyes. "I have lost seven ninja and I am not happy."

"Here are the folders that contain the identities of the ninja you are looking for and the mission details."

Hound retrieved the paperwork. He flipped through the photographs of the missing ninja. He recognized faces from various people he saw around the village. Hound took a sharp intake of breath when he came to the last picture.

"Your number one priority is to find my ninja. Since these incidents have been occurring on the border I suspect Mountain is involved. I want to avoid a war so I trust you will handle the mission with as much discretion as possible."

"You are dismissed."

Fox and Boar quickly disappeared but Hound stayed behind. The Hound and the Hokage looked at each for several hard moments.

"I will not fail, Hokage-sama."

The Hokage nodded and said softly, "Be careful."

Hound surveyed the small village at a distance. He wasn't about to charge in head first when both a chuunin and ANBU team had previously gone missing. Suddenly the memories of the shadow clone he had sent to scout disappeared.

"My clone didn't sense any ninja in the village," Hound reported.

"I don't see any ninja either," Fox replied in turn.

"I'm going to look for a camp in the surrounding area that our ninja might have left." Hound created a few shadow clones and sent them off into the countryside to find the camp site. Perhaps he could
find a scent.

Hound looked in thought upon the seemingly idyllic village. "First we need to investigate the client, the village's mayor, who sent the original mission. According to the report detail he hired Konoha to help find his missing wife."

"He isn't the only one. There is a startling absence of women and children from the population." Fox noted.

Hound nodded. "It's a small village but it'll be easy to sneak in with the number of refugees present. Boar and I will infiltrate the village as Sound refugees and investigate the client. Fox, I want you to stay close but do not enter the village. Keep your byakugan activated and let us know of any suspicious activities."

At night, Hound and Boar entered the village as brothers. Hound only had to walk a few steps before he smelled the fear in the air. Several of the refugees had begun building small shack houses and crowded inside of them like ants in and out of an ant hill. When Hound attempted to enter one of the taverns, he was quickly kicked out and was pointed to the sign nailed to the front that declared the tavern did not serve refugees.

"Perhaps we need another disguise," Boar suggested. "This one isn't going to get much access."

Hound had been through plenty of small villages like this with Jiraiya. "No, in a small village everyone knows each other. This disguise is our safest bet at remaining discreet." Hound replied.

The client lived outside of the village atop a hill that overlooked acres of wheat and barley.

Hound looked through the window of the dark house and activated sage chakra. "Three people." Hound replied. "Fox, any more details?"

"Our client is asleep on the second floor in his bedroom. The second person looks to be a servant. The third is a ninken."

"Seems suspicious how an average-sized landowner can afford to have a ninken dog," Boar replied.

"We'll need to quiet the dog," Hound said as he shoved the window open.

"Permanently?"

And Hound thought he and Boar were finally coming to an understanding. "No, just keep the dog asleep." Hound shook his head as he placed silent feet onto the floorboards. Hound pointed Boar toward the kitchen. "And do the servant while you're at it, just in case."

Boar crept toward the dog and placed a genjutsu that kept the canine asleep. Then, Boar went in search of the servant.

"Hound," Fox said suddenly. "Look in the dining room dresser to your right."

Hound was about to go up the staircase to greet their client but turned on Fox's instructions. He opened the dresser and found a small locked box. Still in sage mode, he forced the lock to give. Golden coins were tied in several neat bags. Hound inspected them. "What currency is this?" he questioned. He had never seen it before.

Boar came up behind him and gave the coins a quick once over. "I believe," Boar showed the face side, "This is the Mountain Daimyo. Our client is working with the enemy. This mission was a trap."
"Without a byakugan I doubt the other ANBU agents caught this," Hound said as he bounded up the stairs. "It looks like our client will be waking up rougher than I expected."

"Torture and Interrogation is my expertise," Boar replied.

"No."

"Are you really going to ask nicely?"

"That's the plan," Hound replied. "Always ask first."

Hound didn't make an attempt to be quiet as he slammed the door open. The landowner jumped in his bed startled as he was surrounded by two Leaf ANBU. The landowner did not understand why these people always had to wake him up in the middle of the night.

Hound sat down on the divan that decorated the bedroom with a imported touch. Hound's mask gleamed in the moonlight that filtered through the window. With his arms crossed, Hound asked, "We're looking for our friends. Where are they?"

The man shook his head. "I don't know. They were supposed to search for my wife but they never came back."

"He's a good liar," Boar said offhandedly. "Most rich men are."

"We want to know where are friends are, who you're working for, and what they are doing with the missing villagers." Hound added as an after thought, "Please."

"If you're going to kill me, you might as well get it over with." The man gulped to realize his lies weren't going to work with this group.

"You tell us what we want to know and we'll let you go," Hound promised.

The landowner knew he was a dead man. He jumped for the window but Boar caught him by his shirt.

"Wrong move." Boar looked at Hound, waiting.

Hound look at the man's quivering and frightened expression. Then he remembered the photograph and the reason why he was here, and who he had to rescue. "Alright."

Boar cracked his knuckles as he looked at his victim. "You are a dead man, but which do you prefer? A quick and painless death or a death that never ends?"

The man began sweating as Boar placed his hands on the man's forehead. Then the landowner's rotund gut flopped as he fell unconscious on the bed. Hound's stomach began to churn as Boar took out a scroll and began spreading his tools out on the bed.

"What are the tools for?"

"I use them to apply pain. The more real the genjutsu, the more effective it is."

"I don't know about this anymore."

Boar looked at Hound as if he wanted to drill a hole through Hound's head.

"I'm going to see what information I can get from the refugees. Get me when you're finished,"
Hound said softly and fled the room. The door closed with a click and Hound leaned against the door as the screams began. The cries of suffering were like a knife through his ears.

**Is that regret? You've heard plenty of people die before.**

Hound's breath hitched and realized the Hokage was right. He had no problem ignoring and refusing the Kyuubi when he was off-duty, but now it was as if the Kyuubi was licking his ear.

"Hound," Fox's voice came over the radio. Hound breathed a sigh of relief. "Should I accompany you into the village?"

"Please," Hound said as he left the house and the screams behind him.

Fox met him at the crossroads. "Hound, are you alright? Your heart rate and blood pressure has-" She was suddenly swept up in Hound's arms. He kissed the only exposed part of her skin, along the upper part of her neck, and moved on.

"We have to figure out what happened to the villagers," Hound replied as he bounded toward the village with a determined stride. Fox gave him a concerned look but quickly adopted the henge Boar had used and followed after.

Hound stopped the first Sound refugee he saw. "I'm looking for my sister. Have you seen her?" Hound asked. "I was supposed to meet her in this village but I can't find her anywhere."

The man shook his head. "Your sister? Probably disappeared with the others."

"What do you mean the others?"

The refugee invited Hound and Fox into the small shanty house where he lived and lit a candle. "Ever since we got here people have been disappearing at night. I lost my wife and son. We just came here looking for work but no matter where we go our sorrows seem to follow."

"Do you know how we might find them or where they've gone?"

"It's those blasted ninja over the border. But what can I do? I can't fight ninja and I don't have money to buy one. Look, if you want more information ask the Grass refugees. I'm getting out of here by morning."

Hound wended his way through the refugee camp asking about his missing sister until he was finally directed to a man named, Daichi, of the Grass refugees.

"I'm sorry to disturb you so late," Hound apologized. "But I'm looking for my lost sister."

"None of us sleep at night anymore. Come in," Daichi replied. Hound entered his small lean-to. Daichi looked like a tired old man with a tired old knee that constantly bothered him.

"I have to find my sister," Hound insisted.

"You should just forget about her and save yourself. Even a few Konoha ANBU came looking for the missing and they've disappeared."

"You have to know something or they would not have sent me to you," Hound insisted.

Daichi sighed. "I used to be the mayor in a small village just like this one in Grass until Mountain invaded. Our Hidden Village was decimated and we were left at Mountain's mercy. They killed our young men and kidnapped our women and children. The story is the same from other Grass
refugees. It's the nature of war but they've followed us and won't let us be."

"Do you know what happens to those they kidnap?"

Daichi pounded against his sore knee and didn't know which he was angry at. "What do you think fucking happens to them? They're prisoners of war." Daichi spat on the ground as his old feeble bones broke down and cried. "My grandchildren are gone."

Hound left the man to his tears and went in search of Fox who had attempted to find someone else who was willing to talk. He met her outside of the refugee camp.

"This is my fault," Hound replied. "The war with Mountain has spilled across the border. They're taking the villagers."

"Hound, this is not your fault."

**You left all those poor helpless little humans to die. What a cruel thing to do.**

"I abandoned Grass," Hound said angrily. "I allowed this to happen."

"We can do nothing to change the past or our choices. You can't save everyone."

**But the idiot will try.**

"I can try," Hound promised.

Fox reasoned, "It seems that Mountain has begun to target our ninja in order to provoke Konoha into action. It's dangerous to do what they want. We need to put an end this quietly."

"Hound," Boar voice came on the radio, "we need to meet back at camp. I've got some information to tell you."

"Understood," Hound replied. Without asking, he scooped Fox into his arms and had returned to camp in seconds. Boar appeared just as quick with the hiraishin technique. All three members held a sealed kunai on them at all times.

"He didn't know much. He was hired by Mountain to commission Konoha in order to lure Leaf ninja here to capture. He doesn't know what they wanted with the ninja. But what is interesting is that he was using the dog to send messages to a drop off. We can follow the dog straight to the people who instrumented this plan."

"Aren't you glad we didn't kill the dog?"

"Don't get too smug."

Hound tilted his head as the memory of a shadow clone popped into his head. "A clone just found a camp. There were four scents so it was probably the four-member chuunin squad. I'll go with Fox and we'll track down the missing chuunin. Boar and I will follow the dog to the drop-off. Hopefully, both leads will take us to the same place. Move out."

Fox and Hound followed the scent to an inn.

"We're looking for our friends," Hound asked the innkeeper. "Four leaf ninja. They were staying here."
"They did come by a few weeks ago looking into this disappearing mess, until they disappeared themselves." The innkeeper shrugged. "But ninja do that all the time… without paying."

The innkeeper smiled. "Since you're friends, surely you wouldn't mind paying for the room fee?"

Hound reached in his pocket and paid the fee. "Can you please show us the room?"

"Sure, it's empty right now." The innkeeper led them up the stairs.

"Did you find it like this?" Fox asked as they entered the neat room. Nothing looked amiss.

"Yep, the beds weren't made but that's it. They and all there stuff was gone."

"No signs of a struggle?"

"Not from I can tell."

"I smell several new scents in here," Hound said as he looked around.

"Thank you," Fox told the innkeeper politely. "They must have been taken in their sleep but what jutsu could possibly do this?"

"What about a genjutsu like Boar does?" Hound suggested.

"Perhaps," Fox agreed, "Or a kekkai genkai."

"They went out the window," Hound said as he jumped out and continued to follow the scent to the border of the village. "The scent is headed toward Grass."

"It's Mountain now." Fox said softly, "and enemy territory."

Fox and Hound crossed the border. Boar and Hound followed the genjutsu drugged dog across the border and watched as he placed a fake letter underneath a rock and automatically ran back home.

"There's no cover here," Boar noted the wide expanse of land. "I could use an earth jutsu."

Hound nodded in agreement. "Take us underground."

Boar created a sizable crater that suddenly covered them and took them under. Small pockets of holes leaked sunlight to allow air to reach them. Boar rested his head against the cool ground.

Hound waited in sage mode. "So, how are the kids?"

"The last thing I want to do is to be stuck in a hole with you for several hours. Spare me."

Hound chuckled as they quieted in the earth. "I have a serious question this time."

"They're going to hear us talking."

"I can sense them way before then. Come on."

"You're not going to shut up are you? What do you want?"

Hound hoped a male perspective would confirm his feelings. "How did you know when you were in
love with your wife?"

"I decided I loved her when the Nara kunoichi told me she was pregnant." Boar could visualize Hound's perplexed expression. "The woman tricked me into marrying her and I've loved her ever since."

"But, I don't understand, how do you know that's what love is?"

Boar scoffed. "There's no such thing as love at first sight or none of that stupid civilian shit. Love is staying with the bitch during the times you can't stand her. Love is coming home from a mission and fucking. Love is the woman who won't let you forget that she carried every single one of your children for nine months. Love is making it work and finding it wherever you can."

"We've got to stop," Naruto said in a panic. "It's harder to control the Kyuubi."

Hound and Fox reached the border that had divided Mountain and Grass before the invasion and it was heavily guarded. They decided to wait until nightfall to slip through the lines but the waiting led to a little more than just waiting.

"Let me close your chakra nodes." Hinata suggested as she placed a flutter of kisses along his cheeks.

"Hinata," Naruto grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled the surprisingly persistent Hinata away, "We really shouldn't be doing this in the first place. We're on a mission."

Hinata knew she didn't have much time left. "You have clones watching for the enemy."

"I don't think that's what the clones are watching," Naruto admitted.

Hinata rested her forehead against his. Naruto was keenly aware of her finger drawing circles on his shirt. "Are you going to let the Kyuubi control your life?"

"No," Naruto said immediately. It was drizzling and the rain drummed just outside of the outcropping they used for shelter, drumming in tandem with Naruto's rising heartbeat. "Alright," Naruto surrendered.

Naruto's eyes followed the movements of Hinata's body as she led him to the rocky ground. She stood above him and entered her tenketsu stance. "Don't move," she warned.

Naruto always loved watching her clan's signature jutsu, it was as if her body moved in a dance. Her palms were steady as they struck at his chakra nodes. It was over in seconds but her movement was enough for Naruto's pants to get uncomfortably tight.

Hinata gave him a hopeful look as she straddled his stomach. She leaned down and they were careful in their kisses, before testily increasing their tempo. Hinata decided to see how far she could push and hoped it didn't kill her.

Hinata tightened her hands in his hair and began to kiss him with increased vigor as she pulled on his lips with her teeth. She stretched out and began grinding her body against his erection.

Naruto growled in her mouth as a number of sensations hit him at all once. Every second the Kyuubi didn't interfere, the more confidence Naruto gained. He began to match every one of her rough kisses with one of his. His hands finally wandered away from her hips and explored down her thighs.
He hadn't noticed when clothing items began coming off. The flak jackets were torn off and his shirt had been the first to disappear.

"Wait," Hinata's forceful command startled him. It wasn't until then he realized his hands were slyly attempting to push the black ANBU undershirt she wore up.

Hinata slid her hands off of him. "I'm a little shy about my breasts," Hinata lied. She couldn't risk Naruto seeing the scars. Hinata knew Naruto was the type of person to leave in the middle of a mission if he thought something else was more important, like beating up all her family members.

"I'm sorry," Naruto apologized. Naruto admitted to himself he got a little too excited without the Kyuubi to hold him back. Naruto gave a dopey smile. "It worked."

"We don't know for sure," Hinata said. "We need to test it before we go any further."

"Further?" he asked thickly.

"Sex," Hinata said it plainly for Naruto. "Are you okay with that?"

Naruto nodded dumbly.

"Just stay still, Naruto," Hinata told him as she situated herself between his legs. Naruto watched mesmerized as her hands glided over the black seal on his stomach and followed the chasm at his hips toward the lining of his pants.

"Hinata?" Naruto's voice went dry. Her eyes flickered up to hold his attention as she slid his pants down from his hips. He watched Hinata look at his hardening erection with none of the squeamishness he assumed girls would have. Her delicate and graceful fingers touch it in reverence.

Aren't we about to get lucky? My last vessels had vaginas. This is a change of pace.

Shut up and mind your own business.

"Is this alright?" Hinata asked as she looked at Naruto with her hand wrapped around his cock. There were no words Naruto's could produce for the image. Hinata took his dumbstruck stare as a yes and continued.

Her hair fell around her shoulders and began to pool on his legs as she descended. For a brief moment of his life, Naruto couldn't speak, as if he had never known words existed. His breath was held as long as the eye contact that was finally broken right before Hinata licked along the head of his penis and then applied soft pressure to the tip.

Naruto's eyes closed as he quivered at the sensation of her wet mouth descending on him.

I've changed my mind. I won't kill her first. I'll save her for last.

For a moment, Naruto was unsettled by the thought that the Kyuubi was enjoying this as much as he was but it quickly fled. Naruto never felt this good in his life.

Hinata never wanted to please anyone as she did in this moment. All the lessons and techniques Anko drilled in her were finally helpful. Hinata came up for air and coordinated her efforts with her hand, easily creating friction from her saliva. She continued to stroke his shaft and peppered soft kisses on his balls until she took one in her mouth.
"Fuck."

Hinata took him in her mouth as he reached orgasm and swallowed to prevent a mess.

When Naruto finally opened his eyes after a few shaky breaths, he gave Hinata a perturbed look. "You swallowed that?"

"It doesn't taste that bad," Hinata answered, surprised by the warmth of it. Hinata was never fazed by what usually repulsed others. She grew up around bugs and Kiba. "Honestly, I think the taste of squid is more abhorrent."

Naruto had no idea what abhorrent meant but hoped it was a good thing as he gave a breathless laugh before pulling her into a long and sincere kiss. Afterwards Naruto gave her a serious look and said, "Hinata, I want to make you feel that good."

Hinata blinked in confusion for a moment and then gave him an amused smile.

It took much longer for Hinata to reach an orgasm. It took her some time to teach Naruto's clumsy fingers the ways how to navigate a vagina, which she would not have been able to teach him how to do if Anko hadn't taught her first.

"It'd be so much easier if we had the same thing, then at least I'd know what to do with it," Naruto said exasperated as he attempted to do what Hinata just performed but the expression on her face was evident he was failing.

"Not too hard," Hinata warned and Naruto let off some pressure as he stroked her clitoris. "You know, Naruto, there was this time everyone thought you and Sasuke-"

"I didn't mean it like that," Naruto said in a panic. "I just meant I would get it faster. I prefer you."

"Naruto, you're going to have to work on your sex talk."

"My what?" Naruto questioned.

"Right there," Hinata said suddenly when Naruto had curled two fingers inside of her. Naruto repeated the motion and watched as Hinata's chest heaved. He smiled mischievously as he added a third finger and hastened the motion. The black tattoo along Hinata's hip swayed as she began to hump his fingers and Naruto watched her thoughtfully.

**I say go for it kid.**

Naruto leaned down and sucked her clitoris into his mouth.

Hinata bit down on her lip to prevent the scream she was aching to release but denied it because she knew they were in enemy territory. Her body shivered as the orgasm swept through her body. Hinata focused her eyes as the blinding light faded. Naruto leaned above her with a smug grin.

"It doesn't taste that bad," Naruto agreed.

Hinata kissed him playfully. They held each other and talked of small nothings, of memories they wanted to share just to her each other's voice. Naruto cuddled her against him and had never been so close to another person.

Naruto frowned when he was rudely interrupted.
"Play time is over. You've got to go." Hound said as he shadowed over the two half naked couple.

Hinata sat up and was slightly perplexed as Hound retrieved her flak jacket, pants, and underwear and presented it to her with a shyness Naruto no longer possessed.

Naruto fumbled around the shelter for his clothes. The two agents quickly got dressed. Naruto looked over with jealous eyes as Hound handed Hinata her tool belt. Without thought, Naruto dismissed his clone.

When Fox and Hound put on their masks, it was back to business.

Tenten couldn't believe this. She always wanted to prove how a kunoichi was just as good as a shinobi but when she had finally been given a squad of her own to lead, she screwed up.

Tenten didn't bother testing and pulling at her chains. She could feel the cool metal on her skin and knew it was strong enough to hold her. Her hip-length hair flowed ragged and dirty over her shoulders. Dried blood caked into her skin. She looked through half-lidded eyes when the door of her cell screeched open.

Her captors unlocked the chains that had held her ankles and shoved her up with the tip of a kunai. Her hands were trapped in metal casings behind her back. The moment she left her cell the coolness of the dark tunnels caused her naked skin to shiver.

"Come on, Leaf bitch."

"Do you hate me because I'm a Leaf ninja or because I'm a girl who can beat your ass if you free me?"

Tenten was shoved against the wall. "You wouldn't be so talkative with my dick in your mouth."

Tenten snapped her teeth. "Try me."

The tip of a kunai kissed her throat and her knees were shoved down onto the stone. "I'll show you."

Her second captor shoved the first away from her. "What is wrong with you? We're not allowed to touch her yet," He said as he lifted Tenten back to her feet and threatened her down the hall.

Tenten walked down the row of metal cell doors. Attached to each door was information that detailed the gender, the clan, the kekkai genkai, and the natural element of the occupant.

"Please, no, I don't want to do this anymore," A young girl screamed as she was dragged down the hall by another ninja. Tenten watched the scene as the ninja slapped the screaming girl.

"Even the civilians have to do their part for the village," he demanded of her as he forced her inside one of the cells. Tenten passed the open door and the scene made her stomach churn. The ninja forced sexual stimulants into the prisoner's mouth. Like breeding together a pair of pigs, the ninja forced the young woman atop the male prisoner.

Tenten looked away and concentrated on the sound of water dripping against the stone. She was forced through more tunnels and finally to a brightly lit room she assumed was their destination. Tenten was greeted two other ninja in white robes. She was shoved atop a table. Her wrist and ankles were snapped in metal claspings. Her escorts left the room once she was secured.

Tenten struggled with her chains as the white robed ninja loomed over her and traced the seal on her
"The seal is intricate, I don't know if we can crack it," The Mountain fuuinjutsu expert replied. "Rumor has it that the seal was created by the Fourth Hokage."

"I don't care who the fuck it was created by, Gantetsu. We have three candidates that we can't use because of this seal." The ninja picked up a clipboard. "This one doesn't have a kekkai genkai, nor does she come from a clan, or have any noteworthy abilities. She's disposable. Use her as your test subject and figure it out." The man demanded as he slammed the door behind him.

"I would take loan sharks over him any day," Gantetsu sighed as he began to trace the patterns of the seal. He looked at Tenten, "I assume you wouldn't know how to crack this seal?"

"Fuck you."

"I'm afraid that's what they want to do to you," he answered. "I assume only Konoha's top medic-nin are the only ones that know how to get this off. The seal is ingenious really. Konoha sure know how to protect their kunoichi."

Gantetsu leaned over and drew a test counter seal over the one on Tenten's hip. He put his fingers together. "Here goes nothing."

Tenten screamed as if someone had melted hot iron into her skin.

"Guess that didn't work." Gantetsu collapsed in his chair and looked at the naked woman that had been given to him to experiment on. "I used to live in Fire Country. Beautiful place, it has its rough spots of course but all countries do."

He had once been known as the legendary dark Shinobi of Iwagakure, before he ran away. Then Gantetsu had been forcibly taken away from the Tanzuku Quarters in order to serve Mountain. It was either that or die. He didn't like this business of forcibly breeding ninja to strengthen the country. "I always say it's better to be a ninja in a wealthy country than a ninja in a poor one."

Hound's limbs cracked as he stretched them. The wait before an ambush certainly wasn't the most exciting part of his job.

Hound stiffened when he felt an approaching chakra signature. He signaled to Boar and got his attention. When the chakra signature was right above Hound's head, he pounced from the ground and slipped a kunai under the neck of the ninja in front of him.

"Where are the leaf ninja and the missing villagers?"

The Mountain ninja felt the kiss of metal on his neck and looked at the Leaf ANBU who held a katana in front of him. "I'd take a shit on your mother."

Hound shoved the ninja toward Boar. "He's all yours."

"Twice in one mission? I must be lucky," Boar said as he slapped his hand against the guy's head. Then the man slumped unconscious.

"I'll go scout and make sure he didn't bring friends," Hound decided as he left Boar at his work. Hound knew it was something he would never be entirely comfortable with, but at times, necessary.

"No! I don't want to be eaten!"
Hound moved further away from the screams and scouted the surroundings but found no other notable chakra signatures.

Boar radioed Hound when he was finished. Hound returned in seconds and stared down at the wide-eyed dead ninja at his feet. It was as if he had seen hell before he had gone there. Hound leaned down and closed the ninja's eyes out of courtesy.

"We have a problem. The targets we're looking for are in two different directions. The villagers are at their base of operations in Grass, at least the ones who haven't died or been sold off, and our ninja are at the Village Hidden by Mountains as a part of their breeding program but they are having difficulty breaking the seal."

"Seal?"

"I forget you don't see many naked kunoichi. When a kunoichi graduates the Academy they get a seal placed on their left hip. The seal uses their chakra to keep them from getting pregnant and since the seal leeches on their life force, as long as they're not dead it works."

"I suspect you and Fox are following the trail to their Hidden Village, which is invaluable because Konoha hasn't been able to locate their hidden village as of yet. The villagers are in the other direction and are closest to us. What do you want to do?"

Hound said as if it was obvious, "We're going to save both of them. We'll save the villagers at their base camp and once they are rescued, we will infiltrate the hidden village and save our ninja."

"Hound, they probably have those ninja in confinement chambers similar to what we have in ANBU. To infiltrate an enemy Hidden Village's ANBU underground is a Captain level mission."

"I've made my decision." Hound said stoutly.

"Listen to me for once. Imagine trying to infiltrate Konoha's ANBU. You can't do that with just a day of planning and some hair-brained idea. We have nothing on this country and information is a ninja's best weapon."

"I'm going to relay the information to Fox," Hound said as the shadow clone dismissed himself.

Boar cursed. The real one always went with the girl.

Fox and Hound snuck into Mountain country. With Fox's byakugan and Hound's sage mode they twisted and weaved through the rocks as they continued to follow the trail. Fox slapped her hand against Hound's chest as a group of ninja suddenly jumped in between the crevice just below them and disappeared inside a cave.

"There are sentries everywhere," Hound whispered. "I think we're close to their Hidden Village."

"No, we're on top of it," Fox said in awe as she crouched down and touched the rock. "There's an entire village underneath this mountain. The caves must be the entrance. It's amazing. It's literally a self-sufficient underground village."

"We need to find a way inside," Hound said. "Do you see any holes?"

"All the entrances are guarded."

"Do you think you can find our ninja?"
Fox shook her head. "I could probably look for a lifetime and never find them. It's like looking for a kunai in a forest."

Hound thought about the option of simply disguising himself and trying to sneak through the entrance but knew most Hidden Villages kept records of those who went in and out of the village, like Konoha.

"The earth element could get us in quietly?"

"Don't think so. This mountain is embedded with chakra. It acts like the barrier around Konoha."

"Didn't they think of everything." Hound began to pace and hoped for that brilliant spark that produced good ideas somewhere in his head. Hidden Villages were built to specifically resist infiltration.

Suddenly, the memories from his clone funneled through his thoughts. Hound crossed his arms and explained the current situation to Fox. "Boar and I are going to free the villagers. I want you to stay here and see if you can find a way in." Hound shuffled through his belt.

"The Grass base is rather far so refrain from using the hiraishin technique to get to me, I'll come to you." The farther the jump, the more chakra needed to be used. Hound embedded a kunai in the dirt so he could get back a few seconds faster in case of an emergency.

"Hound, I think this mission is larger than originally presumed, perhaps we need more time to plan?" Fox suggested.

"You too?" Hound asked in disbelief. "They have our people in there. They have Tenten. I do not leave my friends behind. We are going to save them."

Fox knew Hound could not see what she saw and stared at the immense structure underneath him. But Fox knew she would follow Hound anywhere. "I understand."

Hound created a shadow clone and teleported to the kunai Boar carried.

"It's my lucky day," Hound said as he observed the Houzuki Castle of Grass Country, the prison that held the worst international criminals in the world. Mountain had turned the prison into their base of operations.

"A ninja that relies on luck is a dead ninja," Boar replied.

Hound explained, "I've actually been imprisoned here before. I spent most of my time trying to escape so I know the castle blind spots."

"I have no doubt. It's easy to get into a prison than out of it," Boar replied. "Something is wrong. Under threat of war or an invasion, it is protocol to blow the prison and completely destroy the inhabitants. The Hokage needs to be warned that the place is still intact and that the worst international criminals are possibly running loose or working with Mountain."

"That does sound like a problem." Hound withdrew a scroll and allowed Boar to write the letter for the sake of penmanship. Boar summoned and tied the letter to a falcon and sent it off into the sky.

Then they crawled toward the prison like silent predators. They pasted their chakra against the cliff side and navigated the rocks with whirling rapids below their feet.
Boar looked down and asked, "Did I ever tell you I can't swim?"

"You're a ninja," Hound said in disbelief. "I thought you weren't afraid of anything?"

"I'm afraid of everything, that's how I've survived," Boar said as they climbed upwards. Hound could feel the sweat coating his skin at the physical demands of climbing an entire cliff with nothing but his hands, feet, and chakra. They climbed over the ledge, evaded the light from the guard tower, and slapped themselves against the prison wall.

"Wait," Boar breathed heavily. "I'm not as young as I used to be."

They took a moment to catch their breaths and then began the laborious climb up the smooth prison walls. They stopped beneath the window of a watch tower.

Hound held up two fingers. He peaked inside and found two Mountain ninja playing cards. He motioned for Boar to attack but to leave them alive.

Boar activated his genjutsu. Hound's understanding of genjutsu changed when he met Boar. Boar didn't need to look into someone's eyes but used a person's senses to fool their perception.

Hound watched as the two ninja began to yawn and rub their eyes. Before long both dropped their heads to the table.

Hound and Boar entered through the window.

"Is there a way you can find out where the villagers are, quietly?" Hound asked.

Boar sighed, grabbed one of the ninja roughly and stuck him out the window. Boar shook the ninja awake and the scream was hidden by the roaring rapids below. "Where have you taken the people you have stolen?" Boar asked.

The ninja stared at the ANBU mask in fear. "In- In- the comfort quarters. Eastern jail cells of the castle."

"Who's in charge? Who leads this place?"

"I don't know. I just used to be a prisoner here." Boar sighed, and then let go.

Hound shoved Boar to the side and couldn't reach the ninja in time as he fell hundreds of feet to his death.

"You didn't have to kill him," Hound growled as he turned on Boar.

"He saw us," Boar replied. "We're shadows. We get in and we get out without any the wiser. That's ANBU."

Boar henged himself into the exact likeness of the man he just killed.

Hound turned away from Boar before he snapped. He henged himself into the man still asleep.

Boar and Hound walked through the hallways, unimpeded by the ninja that passed them by as if sent on an important errand. Other ninja were lounging around the base, some playing cards and smoking.

When they arrived at the eastern wing, the ninja at the desk looked up bored. "Any preferences?"
Hound didn't have a chance to speak as Boar stepped up and killed the man with a stroke of his katana. Without any direction, Boar began to set a genjutsu trap along the hallway and turned it into an illusion of a dead end. "I doubt this will fool many for very long."

"After you're done, tunnel underground and we'll sneak the villagers out that way," Hound replied and created a multitude of clones and sent his pack of Hounds to raid the cells down the hallway.

Hound opened a cell door and was met with the bare crack of a man's behind. Hound's breath hitched. The scent was overwhelming. Hound stepped in a puddle of semen as he withdrew his katana. With a powerful swipe of his blade, Hound beheaded the man in one strike. His head rolled one way and his body another. Hound kicked the corpse to the other side of the room.

She was only a child. With dead eyes she curled into herself and shed empty tears. One side of her face was swollen shut. Blood, semen, and dirt covered her legs. Hound cut the chains and scooped the little girl into his arms.

Hound dropped down the tunnel Boar had created in the center of the hallway and brought forty-two broken women and children out of the base.

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Fox examined the Village Hidden in the Mountain. Hound leaned against the rocks and observed the ninja coming in and out of the tunnels.

Fox was so focused on the village she didn't notice the bees that began to flutter around her. Hound slapped his ear as they began to buzz around his person.

Suddenly, a bee stung Hound's arm and Fox's shoulder at the same time. Hound went up in smoke and Fox collapsed immediately to the ground.

"I told you my bees found someone snooping around," A Mountain ANBU peeled herself out of the rock.

"Good job." Another ANBU followed and deactivated the genjutsu that kept him and his comrades' chakra hidden.

"The other one was a shadow clone so the real one can't be far. Spread your bees out and search for him."

"Already on it," the woman replied. "Let's see what we've got here," The Mountain ANBU leaned over her prey and pulled away the mask. "We've just hit gold. A Hyūga."

"It doesn't mean shit if she's got one of those head seals. Konoha is so despicable, who would rather kill their ninja? Can't we have a little fun with her before we turn her in?"

"Do you always think with your dick? I don't give a shit. She's the enemy," the female Mountain ANBU replied as she reached down to search the Hyūga's belongings. The Mountain ANBU screamed as she jerked her hand back. The snake that slid out of Hinata's flack jacket hissed. Poison dripped from its fangs.

The Mountain ANBU collapsed and looked to her comrade for help.

He never made it. His screams were silent as a rasengan was thrust through his throat. The head forcefully flew like a projectile and smattered against a rock formation.

Hound loomed over the ANBU dying of poison. A torrent of bees attempted to rain down upon him.
but a flurry of wind hacked them to pieces.

"Tell me what's wrong with her," Hound demanded.

"Over my dead body," the ANBU spat as she forced her shaky hands together.

Hound reacted. The blade of his katana sliced cleanly across her wrists. The ANBU stared in shock as she watched her severed wrists spit up blood.

"There's most likely an antidote on her belt." Hound shivered for a moment as Hinata's summon slithered up his leg, out of his pants, and around his arm. Hound followed the snake's advice and searched through the Mountain ANBU's items.

The snake wrapped a tail around a small labeled bottle and slid toward Hinata. Hound immediately went to help as the snake administered the antidote and Hinata began to move. Hound picked her up in his arms. "Are you alright?"

He watched uncomfortably as the snake wrapped around her neck and then disappeared inside of her flak jacket to rest between her breasts. "I'll be fine," Hinata replied as she tested her limbs. "The bee sting only induced paralysis."

Hound turned toward the Mountain ANBU and saw it was too late. The poison of Hinata's summon had run its course.

"I'm going to take the bodies back to Konoha. We should be able to get some information from them," Hound responded as he knelt down and spread a scroll across the ground.

Hinata picked up her mask and replaced it against her face. Fox helped him gather the body parts to store them. "It's going to take a while to retrieve the information from the corpses but I believe we've found our way in. I could act as bait."

"No." Hound wouldn't hear of it. "We're not going to infiltrate Mountain. Not today."

Hound turned to look at the Hidden Village. He decided he wasn't going to rush into things and endanger his teammates in the process. But he'll be back. He never leaves anyone behind.

Tenten winced as Gantetsu injected a food supplement into her arm. "On the bright side, the higher-ups have come up with a plan, so we won't have to do this much longer."

"And I'm supposed to look forward to what happens next?" Tenten asked bitterly.

"I suppose not, but they don't have a real specific interest in you. They want the Yamanaka and Inuzuka they captured. I'd imagine you'd be more of a pleasure item."

Tenten had yet another reason why she hated clans. They always got special treatment, even as prisoners.

"If their plan succeeds they certainly won't have a use for me either. If I fail…" Gantetsu paused, "they're not going to take me alive. I had the unfortunate curse of being born with a kekkai genkai and I certainly don't want to be on the other end of this breeding program."

"It would serve you right."

"Perhaps," Gantetsu said softly. "After all, all you need is one bull for a herd. I don't have much time left to crack this seal."
"What's this new plan?" Tenten asked for the sake of conversation. She knew she should primarily be concerned with gathering information in case of the small chance she escaped but lying naked atop a lab table like a science experiment for days had a crippling effect on her dignity.

Gantetsu sat at his desk and began to draw bored scribbles on a sheet of paper. "I believe they are going to attempt to kidnap a medic-nin that would have clearance high enough to know how to de-activate the seal during the Jounin exams. It sounds like something I would rather not be involved in."

"I was supposed to participate in the exams."

"What for? You're more likely to end up dead. A title and a higher pay-grade isn't worth it."

"It's only recently that kunoichi have had the same equality that a shinobi does. The Hokage, the Mizukage, and this seal have been huge stepping stones but even now, there are more women in the hospital and the gender ratio on ninja teams haven't substantially decreased. There needs to be more women who are Jounin. I want prove that a kunoichi is just as a good as a shinobi."

"You don't have to prove anything," Gantetsu replied. "Ninjas deliver death everywhere they go. Anyone can have sex and make a child but only the woman carries them. Women are the only ones who can bring life into this world, and if that's not the greatest ninja technique I've ever seen, I don't know what it is."

"I'm more than just an animal to be bred for making babies," Tenten argued.

"We're all just animals, sweetheart. Cruel, bitter animals."

"We're going to have to request a medical team," Fox reported. They had forcefully taken over a small inn to house the kidnapped villagers. Some of the patients couldn't stop crying, others never said a word.

"Most are suffering from infection, incontinence, or obstetric fistula. I can't even begin to measure the psychological trauma," Fox said as she began to treat the external wounds. Fox couldn't help but to shiver as she looked at the women. They had been taken against their will and she didn't want that to happen to her.

"Hound, you don't have to be here." Fox said. Hound cleaned a cut on a little boy's cheek.

"I can help you with the small stuff until the medic team gets here," Hound said as he lifted the blanket and revealed the little boy's mutilated penis. Hound could feel his anger and his disgust ready to boil but maintained his calm. "How do you fix this?"

"Small things," Fox reminded him.

"Perhaps I should start learning medical ninjutsu," Hound replied as he carried water to the various patients.

Fox watched as Hound bent down and faced a little girl who held the covers close to her. It had been the little girl Hound had first saved. The hardest part had been when his clones dissipated one by one, and the memories of what these people had to endure almost crippled him. The little girl looked at him with wide terrified eyes.

"Is the mask a little scary?" He asked.
"Hound, you shouldn't-"

Hound took off the mask and Naruto gave a wide smile. "I have a little girl just like you, and you're just as cute and adorable."

"Really?" the little girl asked.

Naruto didn't need medical ninjutsu. His aura was a healing force all its own.

"Hound," Fox said quickly, "Boar is about to kill someone."

Naruto quickly replaced his mask and raced outside. Hound had to force Boar's hand away from the neck of a villager.

"What is wrong with you?" Hound demanded.

"You deal with them," Boar said angrily as he walked away.

"I want compensation," The villager demanded.

"What compensation?" Hound asked.

"For my daughters. It's Konoha's fault they were abducted. I can't sell them for a bride price now. They're ruined."

Hound forgot how traditional small villages were. They were far from the more progressive ninja villages.

Another villager mobbed him. "I want retribution for this. I want Konoha to invade Mountain and I want Konoha to rape them like they have raped us."

A Grass refugee asked, "What about the other women they took when they invaded? When are you going to rescue them?"

"The bitch is useless to me now."

"My daughter never came back. Where is she? Where did they take her? What have they done?"

"I will not tolerate this shame on my family honor, if you don't kill her I will."

Hound took a deep breath. This mission was far from over. He still had to deal with the aftermath.

**Humans. You'd think they'd be grateful.**

"You're more short-tempered than normal." Hound observed as he joined Boar who sat atop the roof of a house. Boar's henge was smoking a cigar.

Hound stared down while his clones as they attempted to sort through all of the villager's complaints.

"Want a smoke?" Boar reached into his flak jacket, pulled out a humidor, and offered Hound a cigar.

"No, I don't-"

"It's one of my favorites, a Grass cigar. These have gotten very hard to find nowadays. This," Boar weighed the cigar between his fingers. "This was all I knew about Grass before we were given the
mission to assist them. Grass cigars are famous for their earthiness and the unique smell of fresh cut grass. I'm only offering once."

Hound accepted it and held it curiously in his hands.

Boar blew smoke through his nose into Hound's face. "I'm thinking about the girls. Asami is graduating the Academy this year and it scares me." Boar nodded to the inn that housed the victims. "That could be her. I look at those girls faces and I see my daughter."

Hound thought of Ame and how some of those girls were no older. He almost had a heart attack when Ame first told him she wanted to enroll in the Academy. He couldn't send a clone on every one of her missions. He couldn't be everywhere at once.

"I don't understand how people could be so cruel and heartless."

"Rape is a weapon of war," Boar replied.

"That doesn't excuse it."

"The moment you wear that hitai-ite you give everything to your village. Your dreams, your children, even your morals. War is chaos. Society breaks down, rules no longer matter, and you're just a tool to be wielded for your village." Boar took a moment to taste the cigar, "It's never about the sex. It's about that feeling of being powerless. You want to have power over something, anything, because you realize as a ninja just how much you don't have control over your own life."

Hound's jaw slackened at Boar's haunting words.

"Karma is a fickle bitch. I don't want my daughter paying for my past."

The ANBU returned to Konoha in the early hours of the morning.

"I'll report to the Hokage." Hound dismissed his team. He turned away from the Hokage Tower where he knew there would only be a shadow clone at this hour. Hound landed in front of the Senju residence and knocked on the door.

Then an ANBU agent, Raccoon mask, stepped out of the shadows casted by the gate. "What is your business here?"

"I need to speak with the Hokage," Hound said impatiently.

"Report to the Hokage Tower. You're intruding on the Hokage's personal time. You're not-"

The door of the Senju residence opened with a yawning Hokage. She gave Hound an exasperated expression. "What do you want?"

Hound raised two bottles of very expensive sake. "I've brought a peace offering."

"Hokage-sama, I don't think this is according to protocol," Raccoon said flustered, never in his years of service has he seen an ANBU personally report to the Hokage's home.

"It's alright Raccoon." Tsunade opened the door and invited Hound inside.

Hound walked into the kitchen and found the cabinets where Tsunade kept her drinking glasses. Tsunade watched him in amusement as he prepared her a cup and handed it to her.
"Did you receive the letter?" Hound asked as he pulled the mask off. Now that he was back in Konoha he could finally breathe.

"I did," Tsunade replied with a note of seriousness. "I've notified the Hidden Villages about the incident. Thousands of escaped international prisoners are going to be a problem. Konoha's hunter-nin are going to get very busy in the next few months."

Naruto leaned back in one of the kitchen chairs until his blond hair fell backwards and he was looking up at the ceiling. "It was a long mission."

Tsunade drummed her fingers against the porcelain cup. She could see the lines of weariness that began to trace his face. She could see how distant his eyes were. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No."

Naruto didn't have words for what he had witnessed. What words were sufficient enough to describe the series of abortions Fox had to perform? Or the stories of horror some of the patients needed to tell to mentally free themselves? Or having to look into their eyes before that moment you returned home and know that somehow they had to continue their lives? There were no words to describe the fatal attraction between the depth of human cruelty and the human resiliency of those who bore it.

Naruto reached into his belt and produced the mission report he had completed while waiting for the medic team to arrive. He placed the scroll onto the table.

Tsunade raised an eyebrow and poured herself some extra sake. Sunlight floated through the windows and the morning was heavy with the chirping of birds. Tsunade read the reports.

"I'm going back," Naruto said as he watched the empty expression Tsunade used as she dissected the words before her. "And I won't let you stop me."

Tsunade placed the report back on the table and looked at Naruto's determined blue eyes. "You were right to initially walk away. You did not have sufficient information. But your mission isn't finished yet. This is Konoha and we don't leave anyone behind. You are still going to bring my ninja back home, do you understand?"

Naruto breathed a sigh of relief. "I understand. I left one of my kunai so I could go back and map out the entire area. The corpses I collected were delivered to the intelligence unit."

"Excellent forethought," Tsunade approved. She tapped her fingers in thought and then a smirk touched her lips. "The Jounin exams are going to be next month."

"Excellent forethought," Tsunade approved. She tapped her fingers in thought and then a smirk touched her lips. "The Jounin exams are going to be next month."

Naruto gave her a confused expression. "What does this have to do with the Jounin exams?"

"Mountain is going to participate, which means most of their high-level ninja will be away from the village, leaving it vulnerable," Tsunade leaned forward. "That will be the ideal opportunity to rescue our ninja right under their noses. I'll assign Owl to assist you with the planning. Do you think you'll be ready in a month's time?"

For a moment, Naruto's eyes flickered red and resolve turned to steel. "I'll be ready."

Tsunade and Naruto sat in the warm silence of each other's company. The sun was rising and her kitchen gradually grew brighter as the light cascaded through the windows.

Tsunade analyzed the alcohol bottle she held. "I'm impressed. This is an expensive brew from Sound. I didn't have time to personally splurge last time I was in the country. It's a nice gesture but
this still doesn't change my mind about Tomu."

"What about a compromise?" Naruto suggested. "Tomu needs time. When I think he is ready, I will train him, but enough so he can protect himself if he is attacked and to keep the sharingan from falling into enemy hands. Tomu never graduated the academy, he never placed a hitai-ite on his forehead, and therefore he doesn't have an obligation to die for this village. If he wants to become a ninja, fine, but I'm not going to force him into it. He deserves a choice. That is as far as I'm budging."

Tsunade leaned forward thoughtfully. "When he begins his training I would like reports updating me on his progress, and in the mean time, we'll keep this secret between you and I."

Tsunade and Naruto finally came to some sort of agreement.

Tsunade gave a small chuckle in her sake cup that foretold she was walking on the edge of tipsy. "Now that we're not fighting I should really get you that seat on the council."

"You haven't done that yet?"

"You were being a brat."

"You were the one being a brat, old lady. I'm the one who finally decided to be reasonable."

"I don't have to be reasonable. I'm the Hokage." Tsunade threw back a shot of sake. "Sometimes I have to do things that I don't necessarily agree with. The sharingan has always been a cornerstone of strength for Konoha and as Kage I have to think about the good of the village."

"Sometimes it goes too far," Naruto argued. "Sometimes you end up sacrificing exactly what you're trying to protect. Kids like Tomu are the village."

Tsunade smiled in her sake cup and could almost feel retirement in her hands. Naruto was beginning to sound like a Kage every day.

"Do you think they're going to rescue you?" Gantetsu asked as he sat back in a chair and leaned his feet against the operating table. He twisted the seal of paper.

Tenten blinked in a haze of pain. The flesh along her hip was burned but the seal remained.

"Villages usually only take the trouble of rescuing a ninja that's not replaceable. But everyone else, their just cogs in the machines and are replaced when they're broken."

"Konoha isn't like that," Tenten argued. If no one else, Lee and Neji will try, if they didn't think she was dead.

"Like that boy who ran away and became an international criminal? Konoha only chased him around because he was a Uchiha, one of the last Uchiha. I doubt you're that important." Gantetsu grumbled as he crumpled the paper in his hands and threw it on the other side of the room. "On the other hand, Konoha won't be too happy if I break this seal."

"I don't think Konoha has anything to worry about. You don't seem very good at your job," Tenten scoffed.

"If I want to keep my head... I hope they kill me." Gantetsu paused. "I'm going to have to study the seal when it's activated."

"Don't sound too enthusiastic."
"I would if I knew you wouldn't try to kill me." Gantetsu replied as he prepared a tonic to knock her out. "A year ago I was neatly hidden away within the Tanzuku headquarters and I gambled, fucked, and drank when I wanted. I had run away from this ninja shit for a reason."

"Couldn't handle it?" Tenten asked mockingly.

Gantetsu paused for a moment as the past swelled over him in a haunting memory. "Have you ever been in love?" He asked.

Tenten remembered Neji rejecting every touch. She was done getting her heart broken. A kunoichi didn't need love anyways. "Never again."

"A shame, that's what I ran away to find."

"Did you find it?" Tenten asked the man that was about to rape her.

"There was this geisha," Gantetsu said as he injected the serum into Tenten's neck. "But I don't think she loved me back."

Hound walked through the halls of the ANBU underground to change and shower before he went home. He stopped in front of his new room, emboldened with the symbol of a dog. Hound reached for the key in his belt and found it missing.

"I can't believe I lost it," Hound grumbled.

**If that's what you call lost.**

"If you're not going to tell me where I left it, then be quiet," Hound replied as he broke the lock. He stepped aside the large explosion that triggered when someone forcibly open his door. It wouldn't deter an intruder but it would wake him up if Snake was trying to sneak into his room, and that was enough for Hound.

Hound's room was crowded by paperwork. Books and scrolls on seals littered the floor and in certain areas created small hills. Hound yawned. He didn't bother turning the light on and headed straight for the shower.

Naruto took a quick shower and exited the bathroom as he was drying his hair.

His nostrils were suddenly overwhelmed with a scent that had not been in his room previously. Naruto looked up and Hinata was sitting on his bed – with nothing but a black lace thong and a black bustier with purple highlights.

Naruto blushed red as he snatched the towel from his hair to cover his groin, only to remember that Hinata has seen and tasted it all.

"I hope you don't mind that I borrowed this," Hinata said as the key to his room danced along her fingers before she slipped it in between her upraised bosom.

"I'm dreaming," Naruto said finally. Naruto was certain things like this only happened in Jiraiya's smutty books.

Hinata beckoned him forward with a curl of her finger. Naruto didn't need to be asked twice as he tossed the towel over his shoulder.
Naruto wanted to sweep her up in a passionate kiss but when he had her in his arms, he couldn't find the strength. Instead, he dug his face into her hair and the blanket of her scent. Hinata wiped the tears that slipped unbidden from his eyes.

"We don't have to if it's too much," Hinata told him and brushed his wet hair away from his face.

"No," Naruto said softly. "I don't know what's wrong with me."

Hinata grasped his quaking hand and brought it to her face. "You're tired," she whispered. Now that she thought about it, she didn't think Naruto got any sleep during the mission. "You don't have-"

Her words were interrupted by Naruto's lips. His hands reached down and wrapped her legs around his waist. Naruto wanted nothing but Hinata. They breathed into each other's mouth with need.

Naruto's breath hitched and Hinata began to kiss along his chest with reverence before sucking his nipple between her teeth. In return, he reached down and slipped the piece of cloth to the side to gain access to her vagina. Hinata whined and Naruto caught the sound with his mouth.

They rolled sweaty in the bed as Naruto pumped whimpers from Hinata's lips.

Naruto sucked on the skin of her neck as Hinata stuttered, "N-Now."

"Now what?" Naruto asked perplexed

"In- In- Inside me," Hinata begged in frustrated tears that she couldn't get her voice to work.

"Oh that now," Naruto pulled his hands away from the soaked chasm between her legs. "Are you sure now?" Naruto asked as the sudden nerves began to grow.

Hinata grabbed a hold of his cock and guided him to harbor. It stretched her but it was hardly as painful as she originally assumed. After the initial encouragement, Naruto didn't have any qualms slipping himself further inside until he was completely sheathed.

Naruto and Hinata stared at each other in muted shock.

"You- you," Hinata frowned as she attempted to get her words together, "feel so good."

Naruto didn't want to move. He closed his eyes and savored the maddening sensation of being inside of her.

Hinata began to move her hips. "In and out," Hinata reminded him gently. Naruto nodded against her neck and enacted the suggested motion. Naruto couldn't believe it could feel any better but it did as the friction increased with every thrust.

Hinata was already on edge and sensitive when he penetrated her. Naruto was the fulcrum to push her over. Unbecoming of a Hyuuga, Hinata screamed as the orgasm ripped through her body. Naruto hitched in surprise as he experienced the waves quaking through her and the building tension in Naruto's own body finally erupted. Naruto collapsed at Hinata's side after he had drained himself.

It had only lasted five minutes.

"Wow," Naruto breathed. He had never felt so relaxed and content. His eyelids grew heavy. Naruto turn and placed a testing arm around Hinata's hip. Hinata encouraged him and cuddled closer until her back rested against his chest.

Hinata's eyes snapped open. "Naruto, I forgot to close your chakra nodes."
Naruto's moment of bliss was suddenly frozen for a terrified moment. It could have easily gone terribly wrong. When Naruto attempted to question the Kyuubi, the Demon Fox didn't answer, but instead received a wave of contentment. Naruto's chest constricted as he held Hinata tighter.

But the motion stimulated his cock again and an embarrassed blush crossed Naruto's face when the obvious erection poking against Hinata's back demanded more. The Fox's chakra that normally healed his wounds had instinctively regulated his blood flow and eliminated the wait most men are forced to contend with.

Hinata looked at him with hungry eyes. She began to climb astride him.

"But the Kyuubi-" Naruto warned as he was pushed back and Naruto re-entered that world of bliss as Hinata descended on him.

Hinata held his face with her hands. "Let's enjoy this while we can. It's only you and me Naruto, you and me."

Naruto realized she was right. The only person that mattered, the only person that existed, was her.

Naruto had developed a habit of never sleeping for more than a few hours but was surprised by the time on the clock when he peeked his eyes open. He had been asleep for more than half a day. He rubbed his face and stared at the empty space beside him.

"Hinata?" Naruto called for her as he pulled himself up in bed. He heard no other sound but his own heartbeat. Like a shadow, Hinata was gone.

Naruto almost believed the long hours of constant sex had been a dream but the scent lingered strongly in the air. It had lasted as long as Hinata did, when she admitted she was just too sore, and they both settled in for sleep.

"When did she leave?" Naruto asked as he pulled on a shirt. A dopey grin crossed his face as he wondered what she was doing.

**Soon after you fell asleep. She seemed to really enjoy ripping paper.**

"What are you…" the questioned hung off Naruto's lips. He scrambled over to his writing desk where he had been developing a counter for the caged bird seal. The high Naruto had awoken with took a sudden plummet.

"Shit." Naruto threw papers above his shoulders but all of the hard work that took him two months to complete was gone. All the small components to the seal were torn out of his books and scrolls. He had lost everything.

**You got played.**

"Shut the fuck up," Naruto growled. He activated sage mode and searched for her unique chakra signature in Konoha. He pushed off from the desk and quickly got dressed. "I'm such an idiot. I should not have left this stuff out. I have to explain."

The wind flowed through her hair as Hinata Hyūga stood at the crossroads that separated Konoha from the Hyūga compound. The setting sun danced colors on the horizon behind her. When Naruto landed before her in sage mode, she raised her arm and didn't flinch from the soreness as she entered her Jyūken stance.
"Move any closer and I will kill you."

"I was just trying to help," Naruto attempted to explain immediately.

"You're a fool," Hinata said with an icy stare. "If you were caught with such evidence the Hyūga will destroy you. If you think that they don't know about Tomu then you are an idiot. I am protecting you and the kids."

"I wasn't going to get caught. I was being careful," Naruto argued.

"And then what?" Hinata snapped. "The problem isn't that the caged bird seal needs to be abolished but that every Hyūga needs to wear one. If what you were trying to accomplish fell in the wrong hands it would endanger my entire family. You rush into other people's problems without ever thinking things through."

Naruto was suddenly caught off-guard by the strength of her argument. "I just wanted to help."

"I've submitted the paperwork to the Hokage for a transfer."

Naruto snapped his head up, and the cold fear of losing Hinata from his team and from his life gripped him. "Why? I never meant to hurt you. I never meant- I was just trying- Please, Hinata."

"You've become too involved Naruto. I miscalculated. I should have never had sex with you."

Hinata continued in a voice that sounded accusing, "You've developed feelings for me."

"Of course I have!" Naruto's hands were shaking in anger. "You're my teammate. You're one of my best friends and," Naruto's chest heaved as the two stared at each other defiantly, "I'm in love with you."

Hinata had been waiting to hear those words her entire life but she didn't feel as elated as she thought she would. "Naruto, you didn't really think that it was more than just sex did you? That's all it was. I knew from the beginning that it would be our first and last time. I knew from the beginning that I was going to leave you afterwards. Naruto, I'm a Hyūga."

It was possibly the first time Naruto had truly heard those last three words.

"Walk away Naruto."

Naruto just didn't let people go. Sasuke had become a missing-nin, international criminal, and attempted to kill him on multiple occasions, and Naruto still hasn't let him go.

Naruto stepped forward.

"Don't come any further," Hinata demanded.

Naruto took another step forward, and another, until her palm was resting against his heart. "I'm never going to let you go."

"But I have."

"You don't mean that," Naruto said as he reached to touch her. Lights sparked in front of his eyes as Naruto collapsed backwards from a direct hit. His body twitched with the current of lightning running through his body.

"If you ever take one foot on the Hyūga compound, next time I'll have no choice but to kill you."

Hinata took a testing step backwards.
You're not going to just let her go like that? She's ours.

A blaze of red chakra. A clawed hand snatched Hinata by the arm and twisted her before two furious red eyes. "You belong to us!"

"Naruto, please," Hinata begged as she winced under the burning of Naruto's hand. Naruto gasped as he was engulfed by the fear in her eyes. Naruto took a stumbling step backwards and all the shaking anger crumbled into shame and grief.

"I'm so sorry," Naruto's throat ached as he apologized for his actions. "I won't- I won't ever bother you again."

Hinata couldn't bear to witness the breakdown that was crossing Naruto's face. "Goodbye Naruto Uzumaki."

Hinata turned her back to him and walked away, like Sasuke when he left the village, like Jiraiya when he left to go die. Naruto's closest people always walked away. It felt as if he had jumped from the Hokage Mountain all over again and he was crashing face-first to the ground.

Hinata didn't recognize the person she saw in the mirror. Her eyes were cruel and her face seemed to be frozen in an icy mask. On her left arm was a burn that did not heal.

"Have you ever been in love?" Hinata asked Auntie as she brushed through her hair.

"A ninja cannot afford love," Auntie replied. "Look what happened to your father. All his softness died with his wife. He became cruel to his children, ashamed of the women he called to his bed, and died a lonely man."

Hinata didn't flinch as a puff of perfume was blown into her face. Then Auntie applied the rouge to Hinata's lips.

Aunti stepped back to admire her work but frowned. Looking at Hinata was like watching a flower wither. Hinata had been a sweet little girl once, but along the way, her petals began to fall and there was no sun to help her grow. Like her father, her softness had finally withered away.

Hinata stood up with a sense of duty as she tightened the robe about her waist. Her bare feet walked the main complex until she arrived at her destination.

Hinata forced the bedroom door open.

Iyashi was cradled in the darkness of the room in tears. His pale blue eyes were tinged red with grief. He look up at her and snarled. "Get out of here stupid bitch. I didn't fucking call you."

"The elders have sent me to please you," Hinata reported as she slipped off her robe and revealed the naked body she did not own.

Iyashi couldn't care less and didn't venture from the corner of his room. His teammate had been inducted into the hospital after his last mission and only a few hours ago, Iyashi had received word his best friend had passed away.

Hinata gently grabbed his hands and led Iyashi towards the bed. Iyashi fell backwards onto the pillow as Hinata straddled him.

"It should have been me," Iyashi said to the darkness.
Hinata Hyuuga let go of her innocence, let go of her pride, let go of Naruto, and did her job.

When you become a ninja and wear that hitai-ite you give everything to Konoha. Your body, your life, your dreams - everything that you are. They throw themselves into the fire to keep Konoha burning.

x

*We're all just animals, sweetheart. Cruel, bitter animals*
Lesson Twenty-Two

Each Step Forward

Naruto hadn't entered his mindscape in a long time for fear of what he would find, but in Naruto's grief it had become a cruel haven that offered a morbid sort of comfort.

Naruto sat back against the cell and observed the debilitated state of his mindscape. The wind that had previously leaked in a whisper from the pipes above had become a terrifying screech. The water had turned into a crimson lake of blood. Naruto avoided the faces of those who floated by. A claw reached out from the cell and pinned the flesh, before dragging the dead corpse inside.

"Honestly, I thought you'd be more angry," The Kyūbi said as he absentmindedly tore a piece of flesh from the ghost haunting Naruto's mindscape.

"I'm not letting you out." Naruto's voice carried throughout the sewer.

"She hurt you," The Kyūbi reminded him. Naruto certainly didn't need a reminder. The Kyuubi curled the corpse in his tongue and swallowed it down with a satisfied gulp. "A shame, she's probably the only female who is ever going to love you."

Those words would have easily crumbled Naruto into another round of tears a few days ago, but eventually the sharpness of the Kyūbi's taunts began to dull. The Kyūbi was just background noise as Naruto brooded on the worsening condition of his mind. He was tired of looking at the scenery.

"We need something to brighten this place up," Naruto decided.

"I enjoy the new additions," The Kyuubi replied as he reached out and dragged another floating corpse, one that looked hauntingly similar to the child spy Naruto had killed during the Peace Treaty War, through the bars.

Suddenly there were footsteps in the distance. They grew closer and closer, sloshing through the blood.

Naruto looked up at Hinata's smile.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me. I am not sharing with a figment of your imagination. Don't you think it's crowded enough?"

"He's very talkative," Hinata observed the Kyūbi and he sneered at her. Hinata drenched her ANBU uniform as she sat down. Naruto closed his eyes as she leaned against his shoulder and intertwined their fingers.

Naruto pressed his nose to her hair. The scent he had come to love was akin to the bittersweet ending of a favorite song. "I've missed you."

"You can't miss a coping mechanism," The Kyūbi replied sarcastically.

Naruto's senses were focused on how real she felt.

"Naruto, everyone is worried."

"I know."
"You've got to get up."

"I can't."

Hinata pressed her hands gently against his face and made him look at her. Naruto stared into her moonlit eyes. "Yes you can, Naruto." Then she whispered in Naruto's ear, "Believe it."

For the first time in a long time, Naruto had the strength for a smile. "I don't want to leave you."

"I am a figment of your imagination. I'll always be here when you need me." Hinata promised. "Now, get up."

Naruto Uzumaki's blue eyes snapped opened to the darkness of his bedroom. His fingers moved slightly to test if he was alive. There were concerned whispers outside his bedroom door.

Naruto's chest heaved as he gathered his hands underneath him and attempted to get out of the bed. It was the hardest thing Naruto had ever done, harder than defeating Madara, harder than chasing after Sasuke. The action grew more excruciating, painful, terrifying with every inch gained.

Naruto paused in victory when he managed to place his feet to the floor and was sitting up in bed. Naruto tested the heaviness of his feet and realized the battle had just begun, and the war was far from won. Naruto pushed himself forward even though he didn't know what was ahead of him. Ever since he was little, he's been pushing forward searching for something better, whether it was acknowledgement, attention, or just a little company. Forward was the only direction Naruto knew how to go.

Naruto shoved himself against the door and was submerged in the sunlight streaming through the open window.

"Naruto!" A chair fell as Sakura rammed into Naruto with a choking hug. "I was so worried."

Tomu had run to the kitchen in excitement and began pulling out ingredients, but the rest of the apartment was empty. "Where are the kids?" were the first words from Naruto's mouth.

Sakura smiled as she released him. "I took them to school."

"But you should be at work," Naruto replied. He was ashamed he had bothered her with his problems.

Annoyed, Sakura punched Naruto in the chest and he crumpled over from the sudden blow. "It's alright to let people take care of you every once in a while, Naruto. You can't be everyone's hero all the time."

"And you stink."

Naruto found himself roughly manhandled by Sakura as she twisted him around on his heels, shoved him into the bathroom, and slammed the door behind him.

It was odd to be on his feet again but Naruto gave a great sigh of relief. He went through the mechanical motions as he took a shower.

Naruto almost slipped when he heard Sakura's voice in the bathroom. "I'm placing a pair of clothes for you on the counter," Sakura called. Naruto could see Sakura's pink hair through the foggy shower glass.
"Sakura, I'm in the shower," Naruto whined.

"Nothing I haven't seen before."

When Sakura left the bathroom Naruto finally crept out the shower. He grumbled when he spotted the clothes Sakura had brought to him. The pants were black slacks but the boxers were covered in yellow happy faces and the shirt was orange.

Orange was a bright color, it was exciting, and it made people notice you.

Naruto edged around the crippling orange and mocking smiles to wash his face. Water rinsed his skin but the dark pigment on the right side of his face remained. Naruto grumbled, annoyed at the stubble of blonde that itched at his chin. He took a kunai to his face and cleanly shaved.

"Where are the rest of your clothes?" Sakura asked when Naruto exited the bathroom. He had left the shirt behind and the way his pants fell around his hips suggested he had left the boxers as well.

"It's my house," Naruto answered and was instantly drawn to the steaming bowl of ramen noodles waiting for him on the table. Naruto sat down and felt all eyes on him, observing, watching, waiting for something to crack and break.

"How long?" Naruto asked.

"A week," Tomu answered and brought three cups of coffee. "Exactly how you like it," Tomu reported as he handed the coffee mug to Sakura.

Sakura smirked as she sipped at the hot brew, "I really like this kid."

Naruto glanced in Tomu's direction when Tomu sat down and began drinking Tomu own cup of coffee but quickly returned his attention to his ramen.

Sakura wanted to say something, but she knew nothing would be enough. It had taken her time to get over Sasuke, a long time and an attempt on her life, but she knew that mere words could not heal everything.

Sakura still had a bitter taste in her mouth about the whole situation. She had found out what happened from Hinata herself, who had wanted to make sure someone was taking care of Naruto. It was a conversation that ended with Sakura telling the bitch to get lost and never come near Naruto again.

Hinata last words to Sakura had been, 'It was selfish of me. I let him to get too close. I'm sorry that I had to break him, but I had to, because he is Naruto. He would have kept chasing and he would never have let me go otherwise,' before Sakura had punched Hinata through her apartment wall.

"More, please?" Naruto asked timidly as he offered his empty bowl.

When Naruto had an appetite, things were looking up. Sakura gladly retrieved the bowl and refilled it.

"Has anything significant happened?" Naruto asked. He prepared himself for the worse. He just knew that if he took even one day in seclusion, Konoha would be in danger, the people closest to him would be dead, and the entire world would go to war with each other.

"I got a job," Tomu announced proudly.
Naruto choked on his noodles and looked at the boy in stunned silence before replying, "You didn't need to do that. I make enough money." Naruto's ANBU paychecks were more than sufficient enough to take care of his growing family.

"I wanted to," Tomu insisted. "I start two days from now. It's a construction job, a normal job," Tomu described and Naruto could see a spark returning to Tomu's eyes.

"But, what about your little problem?"

"I haven't had an accident this past week," Tomu said with a smug smile. "Besides, this job will be good practice."

"Practice for what?"

Tomu said in the most obvious way, "For when I help you build the orphanage."

Tomu knew if Naruto had never taken him in, he'd be dead by now. It took small steps, but eventually you move forward.

"I'm proud of you."

Naruto and Tomu exchanged a smile.

"And this troublemaker isn't the only one to be proud of." Sakura announced, "You've been appointed a seat on the council."

"I don't understand how that's a big deal," Tomu interrupted.

"It's a huge deal. Even when Mito-sama was married to the first Hokage, the Whirlpool Clan was represented by the Senju. It means Uzumaki is now a legitimate clan in Konoha," Sakura explained impatiently.

Naruto chuckled at the confused expression still plastered on Tomu's face. "When is the next council meeting?"

Sakura gave him an anxious glare. "In three days but Naruto you really shouldn't attend if you're not feeling up to it. It's alright if you want to sit this one out, facing the clan heads can be a tad stressful."

"No. I'll go."

Dealing with the council was perhaps just the thing to occupy Naruto's mind, even though he knew no matter how much he kept himself busy, he would always think of her. But Naruto Uzumaki didn't have the luxury to wallow in his sorrows. He had neglected his house and his household enough. He had business to attend to.

Naruto finally opened the boxes that had been stacked in the corner of his apartment.

"This stuff is awesome," Kusuro said as he dragged the white robe from the box and read the red kanji threaded onto the back. "Your dad was the fourth Hokage?" Kusuro asked in disbelief and set it aside in reverence in order to search for more hidden treasures.

"Be careful with those," Naruto automatically replied when Kusuro spilled a box of high quality kunai and shuriken.

Naruto found the access numbers to both the Namikaze and Uzumaki accounts and several
banknotes that had not been deposited.

He found scrolls and entire geneology of Namikaze and Uzumaki bloodlines. Naruto opened the Namikaze scroll curiously. He had hoped to find aunts, uncles, or some sort of cousins that were still alive maybe living under another surname but the Namikaze had been a humble ninja family that ended with Minato. Naruto couldn't make out his grandfather's name which had been scratched out completely.

"There are a lot of names scratched out in this box," Tomu observed as he went through several older documents. Tomu showed Naruto a birth certificate for Minato.

"No, I think it's the same name," Naruto said. His dad must have really hated his grandfather.

"I like this one," Ame said as she pulled out a framed photograph. "Your mommy was really pretty." Ame said as she ran her hands over the picture. Naruto leaned over and marveled at the wedding photograph.

Kakashi stood in formal attire beside his former teammate Rin with that same aloof expression he wore today. But what really caught Naruto's attention was the fact Kakashi was without his mask. A pregnant Uchiha Mikoto stood beside her best friend while she attempted to push a leering Jiraiya out of the picture.

"Daddy are you okay?" Ame asked as a tear dropped on the picture.

"Yeah," Naruto quickly tried to brush away the encroaching emotion as he slid his hand over Jiraiya in memory, before arriving at Minato and Kushina. They were smiling and they were happy.

"I want a picture too," Ame demanded. "Of us, of the family."

Naruto chuckled and brushed back Ame's hair. "We'll get us a picture."

Next, Naruto took out a curious red book. Naruto flipped through it and opened it to a random page.

_Stupid, stupid, stupid. Today Mito-sama told me I had to be some stupid cage for some stupid Fox. I don't understand why they can't just let it go free. No one likes to be caged up._

Naruto flipped his mother's diary to another page.

_When Uchiha Obito died, Minato never came back from that mission the same. Today, I made Minato smile._

Naruto stopped on a page littered with tears. The ink was smudged and the hand-writing was hard to read, as if the author could barely put pen to page.

*I'm pregnant.*

_I went to the doctor today and he confirmed what Kurama already told me. I know I should be happy and excited but I can't help but think the worse. Mito-sama already had her children before she trapped the Fox inside of her and I do not know of many other jinchūruki who have given birth. The doctor is concerned over abnormalities. The scans showed that the fetus is too small for three months. Why isn't he growing right? The doctor is worried that the Fox's chakra has leaked to the fetus. Has the Fox corrupted my baby? Will my baby be okay? The Fox has already claimed my life and I refuse to give her my baby too. Should I go through with the abortion? If so, I've decided not to tell Minato. I can only hope my little one does not hate me for the choice I choose._
Naruto shakily placed the diary down.

She would have gone through with it if Minato hadn't found out. That son of a bitch always ruined my plans.

Tomu looked at Naruto's sunken expression and picked up the diary curiously. Tomu read the first page he opened.

Naruto. That's the name we've chosen. At first I was leaning more towards a Whirpool name, but this name inspired by the Grand Perv just struck a perfect chord. What could be better than a ramen topping? Ramen was the first thing I fell in love with when I came to Konoha and it's perfect to reflect the love I have for my little kicker.

"Your mom named you after a ramen topping?" Tomu asked in disbelief. "It certainly runs in the family. At least you know if your mom loved ramen as much as you, she must have loved you a lot."

"Yeah," Naruto said with a thoughtful smile.

Tomu leaned over and turned the book to the date written on the wedding photograph.

We've been through a lot together. We've been through the Third Shinobi War, where Minato lost Obito and he's had to watch his other students grow further and further away, and where I lost the two teammates from my genin team. We've gotten through the dark times when Minato's mother passed away from illness and through my various Fox moments when I've accidently tried to kill Minato. Both the Grand Perv and Tsunade-hime have abandoned the village in the wake of Orochimaru's treachery. Add to all of that, the added stress of Minato's job since he became Hokage. He didn't want to accept the position but I pushed him into it, after all someone has to do it. It's taken us a long road to get here.

Despite being a jinchuuruki, despite all the heartache, and pain, and loss, I am happy. Life is what you make of it.

It was one of those moments at night Naruto couldn't get to sleep. He wandered the apartment that was now decorated with photographs and Whirlpool regalia. Naruto's roaming had led him to the roof. Underneath the stars, Naruto closed his eyes in meditation.

"What are you doing?" Naruto asked curiously.

Hinata looked down at Naruto with a smile. She was stuck to the sewer wall by her chakra, the muscles in her thighs bulged at the stress as sweat began to stain her black undershirt. She returned to her attempt at fixing one of the broken pipes of his mindscape. "The noise is horrendous."

"If you're just a figment of my imagination, how come you know big words I don't know?" Naruto questioned as he leaned against the wall and watched her in more ways than one. He had a dirtier mind than he previously supposed.

Hinata gave that rare playful smile of hers when she noticed the roam of Naruto's eyes. She wiggled her hips for him. Naruto blushed and looked away.

"I know of other things because it's impossible for me to be only just you, Naruto," Hinata answered. "You two are linked."

Naruto grumbled as he looked at the cage with the sleeping Kyuubi. The Kyuubi's ears twitched and yawned.
Hinata moved to push the pipe in place.

"It can't be fixed," Naruto attempted to explain and save her the trouble.

Hinata gave a smug smile when the pipe finally snapped together and wind began to flow gently through. "Have you ever tried?"

With an addled expression Naruto answered, "No. I guess I haven't."

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Naruto wore his sage cloak as he curiously entered the council room. It was much larger than the war room in the Hokage Tower. There were two rows of tables, an upper and lower level that both faced the podium at the head of the room.

A little more than anxious about the meeting, Naruto had arrived early. Naruto was relieved when he saw a friendly face. Naruto waved and gave a smile before finding that the seat next to Kurenai had his name on it.

"Why are there two tables?" Naruto asked.

"The levels are organized by the power distribution among the clans," Kurenai explained. "There are the lesser clans and the greater clans. Your designation is dependent on size and power. For example, the lesser clans consist of Hatake, Yuuhi, Sarutobi, and Senju. And of course the greater clans consist of the much larger ones like the Akimichi and Hyuuga. It shifts over the years depending on circumstances."

Inoichi and Shikaku entered laughing and sat at the top level.

"Uzumaki-san?" Naruto turned and greeted Konohamaru's father. The man had never been a ninja but was in complete command of all Sarutobi affairs. "It is about time they've given you a seat. You've done too many good things for this village not to deserve one."

"Thank you sir," Naruto replied as the burly man sat next to him. Slowly people began to file into the room.

"Is Kakashi going to come?" Naruto asked as he pointed to the only empty chair. Kurenai laughed. "Not likely. That man has never come to a council meeting. All the Hatakes have had that streak about them."

"What clan is she?" Naruto asked as a stranger came into the room. The woman with a tailored suit sat down at the upper level.

"The woman is the civilian representative," Kurenai whispered.

"Pain in the ass," Sarutobi grumbled in the way his father used to do.

Naruto went silent when a feeble old man entered the room. His hands shook as he tapped the ground with the cane he used to walk. He was bent and aged like that of a weary tree. His long hair and beard was as pale as his eyes. Hanabi Hyuuga helped her grandfather, the Clan Head, to his seat.

"Don't let that fool you," Kurenai whispered.

Naruto wondered if that old man was the person he should hate for the state of the Hyūga clan, is he the man he should hate for Hinata? As if knowing there were eyes on him, the Elder Hyūga shifted his pale eyes in Naruto's direction. Hinata's eyes reminded Naruto of the moon, but the Elder's eyes
were a slate of emptiness. They scanned Naruto in search of his faults and weaknesses in order to engulf him in that terrifying nothingness. Naruto shivered and felt his heart race as he turned away.

Finally the Hokage entered with the elders from a side door. She stood at the podium. "I, Tsunade Senju, Godaime Hokage now convene this council meeting." Then she sat down rather bored in a chair.

Koharu feebly came up to the podium. She began with a list of Konoha's expenses.

"Can we cut through all this bullshit," Tsume demanded. "I want to know what the Hokage is going to do about my missing niece."

"We'll arrive to those state of affairs in due time," Koharu said patiently.

"I am also curious. From what I understand seven ninja have gone missing," Inoichi spoke up. "I want to hear from the Hokage."

The Hokage knew she would have to face the council eventually about this matter. "It's true seven of our ninja have gone missing and it has recently been confirmed that they are still alive and are being held captive. I am putting a team together to rescue them within the month."

"Rescue them from who?" Akimichi asked.

The Hokage gravely answered, "Mountain."

Whispers erupted throughout the council. "Kidnapping our ninja is an act of aggression. Konoha should respond in kind," Tsume demanded.

"Konoha can't attack first with a full-scale assault. We'll be violating the peace treaty with the other five great Shinobi countries." Shikaku explained patiently to Tsume. "A discreet team will be the best solution to handle the situation."

Tsume gave Shikaku the middle finger. "All this peace treaty crap is bullshit and has made Konoha look weak. We need to remind our neighbors what fear taste like so that they wouldn't dare touch another one of our shinobi again."

"That type of response is what began the Third Shinobi War," Inoichi argued.

Kurenai leaned over and whispered to Naruto. "This is normal. Any small slight to Konoha and Tsume jumps to war."

"It is only seven ninja." Naruto would have never guessed that the grounded and deep voice came from the frail Hyuuga. "That is not a reason to begin a war where we would lose much more."

"Only seven ninja?" Tsume snarled. "I'm sorry we all don't brand our kin so we can kill them off whenever we want to. If one of your main family members were taken captive you would be doing everything in your power to get them back."

The Hyūga answered with that gaze that looked down on everyone in the room. "Don't be frivolous, woman. I would only retrieve them to protect the clan's doujutsu and then kill them myself for getting captured and being as weak as an Inuzuka."

"Any Inuzuka is worth more than any of your ilk!" Tsume snarled.

The Old Hyūga only raised a slight eyebrow in concern and dismissed her without words.
Sarutobi leaned over and whispered to Naruto, "Dad actually had the bright idea to place the next clan heirs on the same genin team hoping that would ease the tension between the Hyūga and Inuzuka, did not work."

Inoichi took the initiative to continue the conversation. "The Yamanaka Clan offer our full resources to your rescue team."

The Akimichi and Nara quickly followed.

"The alliance between Yamanaka, Nara, and Akimichi was momentous in the history of Konoha." Kurenai explained, "Initially, those three had been lesser clans and aligned with one another to rival the power of the Uchiha and the Hyuuga in the council. Today they have prospered and together they are the most powerful force in Konoha."

Naruto was suddenly surprised when the Hyūga threw in his clan support for the covert rescue mission. The Hokage thanked them for their support and once the issue was settled, Koharu, who was still annoyed at being interrupted, continued her report at a much slower pace than before, as if to make everyone suffer.

"Let me know when we get to the important stuff," Sarutobi whispered. He leaned back and went to sleep during the report of the day to day affairs.

Naruto could begin to feel his ears falling off due to boredom. Naruto leaned over to Kurenai. "I think I'm a little unfamiliar with the clans. I should have paid more attention in school."

"The Akimichi are the wealthiest. They're a business within a clan and own several operations throughout the world, because of their international reach, they are considered the most respected clan by our allies. They are shrewd businessmen but humble and never flaunt their money."

"The Nara owns the most land in Konoha. Their herbal business is crucial to Konoha's medical facilities and is a cornerstone to Konoha's prestigious medical field. A lot of Konoha's tacticians and scholars come out of that clan."

"The Yamanaka control ANBU. Over half of their clan members are inside the organization. The clan that controls ANBU is considered the closest clan to the Hokage, which affords you a measure of pull and influence within the village. When my clan was at full power, we were the genjutsu masters and had rivaled Yamanaka for ANBU control."

"The Inuzuka control the hunter-nin and provide important veterinary services for summons and ninjutsu animals."

"The Aburame clan largely keeps to themselves so you hardly realize that by numbers, they are the largest clan in Konoha."

"The Hyūga control information. And you know the saying: information is a ninja's best weapon."

Naruto attempted the process all the information as he took a brief overview of those that sat above him. It seemed that all the greater clans have found a niche that Konoha could not work without. The clans were a large component that kept Konoha running.

Naruto lifted his eyes after the civilian representative was finished voicing the complaints of the citizens and the police chief walked to the podium. The Police Chief, a respected chunin from a small ninja family and a known distant descendant of the Uchiha Clan, gruffly cleared his throat. "Recently there has been an alarming increase in the crime rate caused by the recent flood of Grass refugees to Konoha. It's a security risk and I'm requesting permission to close our gates."
Naruto was on his feet in an instant. All eyes were suddenly on him. "No. Where are they going to go?"

"Somewhere else," the Police Chief replied.

"It does pose a unique risk. It is quite easy to infiltrate a village as a refugee," Shikaku responded. Naruto was about to argue in turn but suddenly fumbled on his words once he remembered he had infiltrated a village as a refugee in his last mission.

"These Grass refugees have been ruining the state of Konoha," The civilian representative argued. "They are uncomely, loud, and dirty. They are nothing but thieves."

"These people are refugees. They are running from a war that took everything from them - their homes, their livelihood, and their loved ones. Of course people who have nothing are thieves. How else are they supposed to feed themselves?" Naruto questioned.

The Police Chief grumbled, "Uzumaki brings up a good point but unlike Whirlpool in the past, we do not have an obligation to house these refugees."

"We do have the infrastructure already in place," Inoichi noted. "The solution Konoha used to solve the same problem years ago with Whirlpool was to enlist the help of my clan to do a background check of the refugees' mind. Write it up as a C-rank and I'll send a few genin over to assist the police."

"If the refugees are willing to submit to a background check, I don't see a problem with letting them in," The Hokage responded.

"They are a strain on our resources," the civilian representative insisted.

"In the past year Konoha has begun to show signs of positive growth since the Fourth Shinobi War. We had a good harvest this year and I believe we can handle the added pressure," The Hokage replied.

"And they need help adjusting," Naruto knew first hand dealing with Kusuro, "These people came to Konoha because they believe we could protect them, but the food is different, the dialect is different, and the culture is different from what they're used to. I think some kind of program to help them adjust will dramatically decrease the crime rate."

"A community program like that would be under civilian jurisdiction," The Hokage explained, "and need funding, which means higher taxes."

"The taxes are high enough," The civilian complained. "The refugees have been nothing but parasites."

"Perhaps the program can help regulate their numbers and relocate them to the countryside or other villages within Fire country based on their previous profession?" Shikaku suggested. "In this way, they don't become too much of a burden to the village but at the same time Konoha fulfills its moral obligation as a member of Great Shinobi Nations."

The civilian frowned. "As long as it gets some of them out of here, fine. I'll speak to my colleagues. The monks are always willing to jump on a volunteer opportunity of this caliber."

Homura resumed with the next item of business. "We will now begin evaluating petitions brought to the council. The chuunin Lee has submitted a petition for the construction of a dojo on government property, more specifically one of the least used training areas. So far he has received sponsorship
from Maito Gai and the Hatake clan and seeks more sponsorship to fund the project. According to the description, it will be open to both civilian and ninja with a focus on taijutsu. Do we accept, deny, or pass?"

"Why in the world does Konoha need a dojo?" was the first question posed out of Tsume's mouth.

"I accept," Naruto said immediately, and loudly. Naruto didn't need much incentive to help Lee reach his dreams. The rest of the room all gave him dismissive glances.

Chouza Akimichi placed his hands together in thought, and the amiable Akimichi suddenly turned into a businessman. "It doesn't seem like a good investment. A sort of project like this isn't going to make money."

"It seems be more of a cultural investment," Shikaku said. "Konoha's medical expertise attracts ninja from all over the world, acts as an exchange program between us and our allied villages, and foster cooperation with one another. Lee is a capable young man. If allowed to grow and prosper, Lee's expertise could do for Taijutsu what Tsunade did for medicine." Nara placed his bid. "I accept and will add my name as sponsor."

Akimichi rejected and Yamanaka accepted the project but turned down a sponsorship.

Tsunade smirked as she threw her hand in. "Senju accepts and will sponsor the project." Naruto noticed a wink she sent his way. While Naruto attempted to decipher Tsunade's unspoken signal, more clan heads were making their decisions.

Slowly, the project was getting accepted but there weren't enough sponsors to truly help the dojo succeed. Naruto suddenly stood on his feet when something the Hokage said to him during their early morning talks began to ring in his ears.

"Uzumaki, please sit down," Homura said tiredly.

"Wait," Naruto said, "I have something to add. What if I could get some high profile individuals to attend the opening?" Naruto noticed he suddenly had the room's full attention. "Killer Bee is an expert in his style of taijutsu, he could come. I could ask Sound, Sand, and a few other countries to send their taijutsu experts. The Kazekage will come." Naruto paused, "as personal favors."

You could see the shift in their eyes. At one, the entire council began to comprehend the implications of Naruto's play on power. It reminded them that Naruto deserved more than dismissive glances. He might not have a lot of political power in Konoha but he had international leverage and influence.

When the wealthiest clan, Akimichi changed his mind and not only accepted the project but also decided to be a sponsor - There was a shift in power the council hadn't experience in years.

"I still don't see the point," Tsume said as she crossed her arms grumpily.

Naruto grinned with that charismatic smile that always had a way of charming people. "A dojo reveres taijutsu. It would be a shame if the Inuzuka clan wasn't a part of it. Your clan is praised for your unique taijutsu style. The dojo will undoubtedly prove how superior your style really is."

Tsume raised an eyebrow. "Keep flattering."

After all, Naruto was an expert in the rare art of Talk no Jutsu. "The dojo can certainly be another way to prove how the Inuzuka is superior to the Hyuuga…"

"I'm in!" Tsume roared as she slapped her hand on the table as if placing her bets.
Naruto could feel the penetrating stare of the Elder Hyūga. Naruto turned and faced those white orbs head on. Naruto's eyes flickered red in a tease and there was an imperceptible tenseness to the Elder's shoulders.

"The Hyūga will never lower themselves to participate in something so base."

"Or the Hyūga refuse to participate because they're afraid to show how weak and pathetic they are without their byakugan," Naruto remarked with much more bitterness than he had intended.

As Tsune erupted in a roaring laugh Naruto sat back down and didn't bother giving the Elder a last look.

Kurenai squeezed Naruto's arm. "Careful Naruto, you don't want to make enemies with that one."

Naruto sunk in his chair with a pout, "Perhaps I do."

The Elder Hyūga rejected the project but there were enough votes and it passed.

"The next petition is brought to us by Naruto Uzumaki for the construction of an orphanage. He is looking for sponsors to fund the construction and maintenance. Since you are here with us, would you like to explain the purpose of the project?"

Naruto felt emboldened by the recent conflict of words, but when he stood before the council at the podium, he gave a nervous gulp. It felt as if the eyes of the council members were attempting to pick his goals and dreams to pieces.

You're the jinchuuruki. They're never going to give you what you want. They're afraid of you.

"I want to make- build an orphanage because it's- it's better, and will help things, and-" Naruto paused and silently panicked, the speech he had meticulously prepared was falling apart. He had never had a problem with speaking in front of crowds before but Naruto's felt as is his mind had hit a brick wall. He couldn't remember his speech anymore.

Way to fuck up.

"Naruto," Naruto lifted his head and stared at the encouraging eyes of the Hokage. "You don't need a fancy memorized speech, just be you. Why does Konoha need two orphanages?"

Naruto looked at the notes he had written for one of the most important speeches in his life and set them aside. Naruto looked up at the council members and felt the weight of their stares.

"The second after I was born, I was placed in an orphanage. I ran away at the age of five and then lived on the streets of Konoha for two years. I wish I could say that I'm an exception, but I'm the norm. Konoha's orphanage is not sufficient enough to take care of both civilian and ninja children. The ninja children often have physical differences and they are mocked by their peers. Ninja children tend to be more active and energetic due to their stores of chakra, which tend to cause the most trouble for the caretakers, and in turn they are harshly treated. The kids who were traumatized by the death of their ninja parents and want nothing to do with being a shinobi have difficulties melding with normal society. The majority of children with chakra completely fall out of the orphanage system. Because of my heritage the Hokage intervened for me, but all the others fall between the cracks and are forgotten.

These forgotten orphans are preyed on by Konoha's street gangs and criminal underground because their chakra allows them to be more resilient and versatile in jobs like smuggling contraband,
stealing, and are later hired as mercenaries and thugs. The girls are preyed on by pimps or scooped up by brothels. By the time these children are older, it's too late, and it becomes the only life they know.

I know what it's like to have nowhere to call home. You don't know where your next meal is coming from and hope desperately that the nice ramen man will give you what's left of his last batch for the day. You don't know where you're going to go when it rains or snows. You don't know why people pass you as if you were a ghost. The people of Konoha have gotten so used to ignoring the shadows. Many of these children's parents died for Konoha and they certainly deserve more. They just want a little attention, someone to care, to be loved.

"They deserve a home and I am going to give them one." Naruto looked down at the petition papers and began ripping them to pieces. "While waiting forever for this fucking petition to process, I've taken matters into my own hands. I have recently sold all the land inherited to me by the Uzumaki clan where Whirlpool once stood, with both Namikaze and Uzumaki assets I don't need the council's help, I only seek permission." Naruto looked at every one of the council members and knew he had their complete attention.

"I seek permission to buy the entirety of the Uchiha compound, land, and holdings."

Murmurs erupted around the room like wildfire. At his side, Homura stood up. "But that's the Uchiha property. You can't simply buy that."

"But- but the Uchiha," Sarutobi questioned. "It belongs to-"

"Sasuke?" Naruto questioned. "Konoha is still trying to hold onto a ghost. The Uchiha aren't coming back. They aren't rising from the grave. They are dead," Naruto said with finality.

"Unless of course there is the possibility of another Uchiha alive. Then that property would belong to him," The Hyūga responded. Naruto and those sharp blank eyes exchanged battle glares.

"The Uchiha are dead," Tsunade solemnly agreed.

"I believe Uzumaki has a point," Shikaku responded. "That land is serving no purpose and Uzumaki has one for it. Uzumaki has presented a compelling case and I agree that Konoha is desperately in need of the service he is offering. After all, which one of us is willing to invest in that place?"

No one wanted anything to do with the accursed Uchiha ruin.

Aburame, who was easily forgotten in the shadows of the room, spoke more than one word since entering the council room. "I accept Uzumaki's right to buy what once belonged to the Uchiha. Furthermore, I would like to offer a donation to the Uzumaki clan and its pursuits."

Naruto's jaw slackened at the Aburame's generous offer.

Slowly, around the room, the clan heads began to accept and offer donations, all moved by Naruto's passion and resolve.

Finally, it came to the Hyūga. He was slow in his decision. Finally he said, "I accept and I am also offering a sizeable donation to the Uzumaki clan."

Naruto brightened with a grin. He felt light-headed when everything was confirmed and there were no longer any obstacles to keep him from moving forward. Naruto didn't need to be the Hokage to make a difference.
After the council meeting was over, Naruto couldn't help himself as he ran to cut off the Hyūga from the exit. "Why did you do that?"

The elderly Hyūga tapped his walking stick on the floor as if trying to find balance and then suddenly slammed his cane down on Naruto's small toe. Naruto winced in pain as he felt the bone break underneath the precise jab.

"Because I hate the Uchiha more than I hate you and I find the idea of children running unhindered on their property… amusing." Then the Hyūga added, "Don't mistake this for generosity boy, I still don't like you."

As if the cane had flown out from the elder's frail fingers, the metal tip shot upwards and slammed into Naruto's nose, so precise and accurate, the bone broke in a snap. The cane rebounded off of Naruto's face. Naruto had to constantly remind himself that he was supposed to respect his elders. He could have of course avoided the blow, if he had seen it coming in the first place. He didn't usually keep his guard up against frail old men who could barely walk straight.

"Child, I seemed to have dropped my cane again."

"Yes grandfather," Hanabi replied, gave the fracture in Naruto's nose a quick once over with her byakugan, and retrieved the cane.

"Everything has its place. Don't overstep yours," The Elder Hyūga warned, leaned against Hanabi's offered arm, and was helped down the hallway.

Naruto could only stare after him in disbelief and then wiped the blood from his nose with his sleeve. Naruto had become well acquainted with the byakugan and its abilities and Naruto understood immediately that he should be afraid of that old man. The elder had attacked him without the use of his byakugan.

Inoichi chuckled after watching the small exchange. "Welcome to the council, Uzumaki Naruto. I think you're going to challenge Tsume's position for the greatest pain in his ass."

"I'll never understand a Hyūga," Naruto grumbled.

"Grandaddy Hyūga is all about tradition and power. I personally think he's mellowed over the years. He was a tyrant with Hiashi and Hizashi," Inoichi answered. Inoichi didn't even know the first name of the man who was addressed around Konoha as 'Grandfather'.

"Walk with me, I have a proposition."

"Okay," Naruto reluctantly agreed and found himself dragged down the hallway. He hobbled on his broken toe until it was healed.

"Kid, you've really come up recently, no surprise considering who your father is," Inoichi admitted. "I'm thinking about an alliance between Yamanaka and Uzumaki, with all our backing behind you."

Naruto was beginning to understand politics a little better and quickly asked, "What's the catch?"

Inoichi nonchalantly replied as if commenting on the weather, "I need someone to marry my daughter."

Naruto's face fell. "I uh- I really can't. Ino sort of scares me."

Inoichi's face darkened into an ominous cloud. "What do you mean she scares you? Are you
implying that my little princess is ugly?"

"No," Naruto said quickly and backed up, but found himself trapped against a wall. "Not at all, I just meant that she can be a little spoiled and aggressive."

Inoichi’s frown grew even deeper. The sudden killing intent seemed strong enough to crush his chest underfoot.

"Stop scaring him," Chouza Akimichi gave a booming laugh and knocked Inoichi off balance when the lumbering man slapped Inoichi on the shoulder. "Ino is marrying Chouji," Chouza laughed as he continued down the hall.

"I'm just fucking with you," Inoichi said in casual humor, and then gave Naruto a sudden glare that sent shivers up Naruto's spine. "Seriously though, she's perfect."

Naruto nodded wordlessly. He watched Inoichi turn to leave and then remembered there was something Naruto wanted to ask him.

"Wait, I was wondering if I could ask you a question about mindscapes."

It was Inoichi's turn to shiver when he thought of his first and last time in Naruto Uzumaki's head. "I'm not diving in that thing again."

"No, I was just wondering if it's normal to have people in your mindscapes?"

"Of course it is," Inoichi replied as if it was obvious. He took one look at Naruto's perplexed expression. "You didn't have these lessons did you? Normally, a ninja needs to develop defense mechanisms to protect themselves from intrusions and trauma. Our mind often visualizes these defense mechanisms in the form of another person, usually dead or even an alter ego of ourselves. You never really needed the training because of the Kyuubi."

"So it's normal? It's completely safe?"

"Sometimes we visualize people closest to our hearts..." Inoichi said with a smile, "As long as we remember to leave."

"Why didn't I develop one sooner?" Naruto questioned.

Inoichi shrugged. "Defense mechanisms develop naturally when we realize we're broken and we want to be fixed. Some people realize, even less people want."

The grand gates screeched open on its hinges. The red and white fan engraved on the monumental wooden gates welcomed its first guests in years.

"It's sort of creepy," Ame admitted and stayed close to Naruto's leg as he walked them inside. The wind howled in haunting.

"I think it's kind of cool." Naruto chuckled. Suddenly both Ame and Tomu screamed when a stray cat shrieked past them.

Both Ame and Tomu had a death grip on Naruto's leg. Kusuro huffed. "It's just a bunch of old buildings. It's hardly scary at all." Kusuro wandered down the streets and began to explore.

"It needs lots of work," Naruto admitted. "But there is lots of room for you to run around and play, there will be plenty of beds, and this isn't even the half of it, our land extends far beyond just the
compound."

Tomu gave Naruto an uneasy look. Tomu could imagine the potential but all he saw right now was the empty ruin and the bloodstains that spotted the street. He couldn't help but to shiver.

Naruto attempted to coax a frightened Ichigo off his shoulders. Ichigo clung to Ame in turn and both seemed decided to remain at the gate.

"It's not…" Naruto paused. "Where did Tomu go?" Naruto questioned. Naruto activated sage mode and his world suddenly plunged into darkness. He and the kids were the only living souls about this place, but everywhere he looked Naruto saw the restless spirits of the Uchiha Clan.

The lost souls screamed at him to turn away and to leave their nightmarish afterlife in peace. Naruto did not fear them and went in search of Tomu. As Naruto walked further inside, the ghosts became more emboldened and dared to come closer until they passed through his body and left goosebumps on his skin.

Naruto's path led him out the smaller and humbler back gate of the compound. The spirits began to rage at him and screamed even louder as Naruto followed a hidden trail through the forest. Tucked deep within a flourishing grove was the Uchiha family shrine.

At the gate of the shrine he found Tomu, who was staring speechless at a woman kneeling at the shrine's front.

"Please tell me you see her," Tomu begged.

Naruto placed a hand on Tomu's shoulder and knew from the photographs that this was Sasuke's mother. Mikoto Uchiha gave him a forlorn stare as Naruto entered the family tomb.

"It's time to move on," Naruto told the ghosts gently. Past offerings were covered in dust and wilted flower arrangements littered the ground with black tears. At the center of these offerings was a small flame determined to burn for an eternity. Wooden boards of dead names hung against the stone wall.

Naruto produced a brush and a jar of ink. Tomu watched as Naruto write down two names. He lifted them and placed the two boards beside one another.

Then, Naruto leaned forward and blew out the small struggling flame. The tomb was wrapped in darkness and the spirits around him cried at the flames' extinction. Without an anchor to keep them to this world, they disappeared like wisps of smoke and finally knew rest.

"Goodbye Sasuke."

And Naruto finally moved on.

Neji Hyuuga went through his katas like that of a well-practiced dance. Each fluid motion flowed like water, ran as steady as a stream, and coursed with a waterfall's strength.

"Neji!"

Neji breathed as he lifted from his stance and bowed his hands. He opened his eyes when one of his clumsier cousins entered the Hyūga sparring room. He held out a hand, even before she knocked her foot against the mat, and caught her with ease.

"Oh, thank you Neji," she stammered and then added, "Again."
"What troubles you?" Neji asked.

"It's Hanabi. She's in such a mood tonight," Neji's cousin explained. Neji wiped the sweat from his body and covered himself with a robe before turning down the hall toward Hanabi's quarters. Neji found what he considered Hanabi's flock of doves peeking through her door.

"I believe Lady Hanabi would like some time for privacy," Neji told them gently. The girls, their branch seals glowing in the dimness of the candle light, all gave him annoyed complaints.

"But we haven't brushed her teeth yet or seen our lady to bed."

Neji knew there was no arguing with them. Neji compromised, "Give her at least an hour, then you may return to attend your duties."

The flock of doves grumbled but eventually decided to rest from the days toils in the onsen.

Neji entered the room and found Hanabi with her feet atop her writing desk, picking the dirt from her toes with a kunai.

"If I may be so bold, that is very unlady-like," Neji observed.

"You may not be so bold," Hanabi said nonchalantly, "and I don't care. It's my precious fragile toenail and I'll put a kunai to it if I want to," Hanabi said sarcastically. Her long brown hair was uncombed around her face.

Hanabi grumbled when Neji put a brush through the rough tangles in her hair but did not push him away. Hanabi was growing more into rebellious each day. She wasn't born with Hinata's beauty and mirrored the build of her lean father, but whereas Hinata always had to work to master the simplest techniques Hanabi always had been naturally more skilled.

"How was your day?" Neji inquired with an attempt to counter to her brooding thoughts.

"Interesting," Hanabi replied. "I actually paid attention to a council meeting. Naruto Uzumaki bought the Uchiha compound."

"I would not have expected that of him. He continues to surprise me."

"Hinata sure knows how to pick them."

Neji paused. "What do you mean?"

Hanabi gave Neji a dismissive glance. "You really need to start listening to clan gossip. I thought you'd be more interested considering you're courting her," Hanabi gave Neji a suspicious glare. "Are you ever going to make a move and marry her?"

Neji had the sense to know Hinata herself wasn't too keen on the idea. Marriage in the Hyūga clan usually meant the end of a kunoichi's career, besides the fact it was just a cover.

"Truthfully, I should be marrying you," Hanabi replied and Neji remained composed as Hanabi calmly talked about the bitter realities of the clan. "Arranged marriages have long been a tradition of the Hyūga clan in order to breed the strongest doujutsu. You're the strongest but you're a branch." Hanabi shrugged. "It seems rather contradictory."

Hanabi pulled away and threw the kunai over her shoulder, which embedded itself perfectly against the back of the antique chair. Neji averted his eyes as Hanabi threw off her clothes and changed into
Neji recognized his dismissal and bowed. "Goodnight, Lady Hanabi."

Then Hanabi belched loudly as Neji exited the room.

Neji massaged his fingers through the wrinkled mounds of his grandfather's feet. Neji had just finished bathing and preparing his grandfather for bed before caring for the pillars that barely held the old man aloft. Neji remembered a time when the tremors had once been solid stone and the man Neji thought could never yield swayed with every cough.

Grandfather's thinning fingers slipped through strands of Neji's silk hair. It was Grandfather who had forbidden Neji to ever cut his hair. "You've been so loyal to me Neji."

Neji focused on his work, on the loose skin he massaged in his hands, anything to avoid those blank eyes. Neji could feel the weight of guilt in his gut. He's hated the main family since he had learned of his father's sacrifice, but Neji had never hated his Grandfather.

"You should have been my heir, if only your father had been born first," Grandfather Hyūga lamented. But no matter how much he wished for it, the Clan Head refused to denounce the traditions he believe in, even as he stood in silence while his first son remained weak, and his pitiful granddaughter even weaker.

"Neji, I have decided that even though Iyashi will be the one to marry Hanabi, you will be the one to share her marriage bed." Neji looked up into his Grandfather's sincere smile. "My boy, your firstborn will be in the main family, he will be the heir this clan deserves."

It wasn't an decision to be taken lightly. "But what about the other elders? They have agreed to this?"

"They have nothing to disagree to. It is still true that the Clan heir cannot marry a Branch," Grandfather recited one of the many precepts of the Hyuuga clan with ease. "Without the Uchiha to impede us, the Hyūga clan will undoubtedly reach the height of its past. It is our fate."

There was a creeping conflict beginning to battle in Neji's mind. Grandfather will undoubtedly assure that his firstborn will become clan heir. His child will have everything he did not. Then he thought of Hinata and what she was trying to accomplish.

"Aren't you pleased child?" His Grandfather questioned when he took note of Neji's expression.

"I am eternally grateful," Neji answered in earnest. He lowered his head and concentrated on mitigating the aches and pains. "Grandfather," Neji approached carefully, "about Hinata-"

Neji cringed when his Grandfather sneered and suddenly crumbled in a series of coughs. "That parasitic child is worse than the weakling that made her."

It was well known in the Hyūga clan that the Elder Hyūga completely disowned his eldest child when Hiashi had been too weak to prevent his own child from being kidnapped. Grandfather never forgave Hiashi for the offense the Hyūga clan suffered and the unwarranted sacrifice of his second son.

"I told Hiashi the moment it became obvious how weak she was the best she could contribute to the clan was lying on her back. He tried to beat that weakness out of her, but I was only proven right," Grandfather described. "Not only that, but she is disrespectful and refuses to learn her place."
"I assume your interest in her welfare is because you have begun courting her?' Grandfather questioned.

"Yes," Neji admitted and began to fold the covers down. Hinata truly was the black sheep of the family. "She is stronger than you take her for, Grandfather."

"I have yet to be proven wrong."

Neji gently grabbed his legs and placed them in the bed. Grandfather rested his head in the pillow. "I just want to ensure the prosperity of the Clan," The Elder Hyūga said feebly.

Neji tucked him in with a pained smile and grabbed his Grandfather's hand like that of a fleeting shadow.

"I love you, Neji." The dying man whispered.

"Goodnight, Grandfather." Neji placed a kiss atop his grandfather's forehead. Neji had always hated the main family, but he loved his Grandfather.

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Neji closed the bedroom door and hushed the messenger suddenly running down the hall. His uncle stopped before Neji in haste. "Neji, you are requested at the main gate. It's a black envelope."

Neji stomach dropped and he rushed to the gate. He looked at the black envelope with distaste and opened it. He read the information that informed him about Tenten, a mission gone awry, and the belief that she now was being held prisoner.

Neji balled the paper in his fist and left the Hyuuga compound without another word.

The Hokage did not have long to wait when her door slammed open to reveal both Neji and Lee. The Hokage has had to deal with enraged teammates and clan members all day long. Once the information was confirmed to the council, she knew she couldn't withhold the information from the rest of Konoha. The Hokage had no choice but to send out the black letters.

"Is there a rescue team?"

"I must be a part of the valiant rescue!"

"There is a rescue team," The Hokage assured them, "but the mission requires discretion and is under ANBU jurisdiction."

"I'm ANBU," Neji argued with a chilling stare. "Put me on the team."

"You're an undercover operative. Not a field agent Neji," Tsunade reminded him.

"You could write up a fake mission for me," Neji argued. "Let me do just this one."

Tsunade sat in thought. "A space for a byakugan has opened up. I'll send an ANBU to meet you with the details."

Neji sighed in relief but watched as Lee's shoulders slumped in disappointment.

"I'll save her, Lee." Neji assured him as they walked down the stairs.
"I wish I could come with you," but Lee was too explosive and too loud to be in ANBU. "Bring her back Neji."

"I will."

The two old rival and friends exited the Hokage tower. Neji didn't comment when Lee suddenly flipped upside down and began walking on his hands through the streets.

"The council accepted my dojo." Lee grinned like a boy. "All my dreams are coming true."

Neji couldn't help but to smile at Lee's enthusiasm. Neji could never understand how he and Lee had become friends. They were incompatible. Despite the naysayers, the boy who couldn't perform genjutsu or ninjutsu overcame every obstacle and wrote his own fate, but Neji, the prodigy seemed to be narrated by his.

Neji and Lee came to their old training area, the site where Lee's dojo was going to be built. On instinct the two entered fighting stances.

"I continue to doubt myself," Neji admitted as he read Lee's muscle movements which was the only way he could keep up with Lee's taijutsu attacks.

Suddenly it had become more than just a betrayal between the Main and the Branch but a betrayal between Hinata and his Grandfather.

Hinata had uncovered the lies of the Hyūga clan but her lies were Neji's truths. Even though he hated it, he grew up serving the main family. They were his duty and his purpose. What will happen when his betrayal unraveled those truths? Then what would be his purpose?

"It'll work out Neji," Lee encouraged. "Only we can forge our own fates."

"But what if you've been presented with an offer that is more than I ever imagined my fate to be?"

"You're afraid," Lee said as he deflected Neji's strikes. "The tempting path is the easy path. You can see the road ahead of you, your destination, and you feel resigned to follow it to its end. But in order to forge your own path you've got to step off that road into the wilderness, cut a path open for you, and wander in the dark without knowing where you're going or where you'll end up."

Neji had 360 degree vision. Since the day he was born he could always see everything. "It's frightening to wander in the dark."

"Crane, reporting for duty."

"I haven't seen you before." Hound noted as he took Crane's folder. Hound hoped the Hokage didn't send him a new agent for such a dangerous mission. He examined the paperwork. "You haven't been on very many missions."

"Mainly undercover," Crane explained. Crane took a brief look at his surroundings as he activated his byakugan. The entire room was sealed in secrecy to protect the documents inside. Owl was looking over several pieces of paperwork and acknowledged Crane with a nod. Files of other ANBU personalities and their abilities were scattered and patterned across a table in an attempt to form the perfect team.

Crane noticed a slight twitch in Hound hand.
"A byakugan? So you're the one replacing her," Hound grumbled bitterly. "I'll catch you up to speed while we're out," Hound explained as he picked up his flak jacket from the corner of the hot and secluded room.

"We're going out now?" Crane asked confused.

"Just espionage. I've completed the external maps myself but I need someone to map the inside," Hound explained. "I need you to hold onto to me."

Crane gave a perplexed stare. Hound impatiently grabbed him by the arm and activated the hiraishin technique.

The next Crane opened his eyes he was staring at a range of mountains. He breathed the high altitude air in disbelief. "Where are we?"

"Village Hidden in the Mountain."

"Was that some sort of teleportation jutsu?"

"Yes, but I wouldn't recommend you try it at this distance. You would die of chakra exhaustion," Hound answered. "Your file says you can see as far as only 10 km. We're going to have to get closer."

"Only?" Crane asked annoyed. He had one of the best Byakugan of the entire Hyuuga clan. The only person who could see farther than him was Hinata and she was born with that advantage.

"Our target is that Mountain," Hound pointed and they pitched camp on an entirely different mountain range but within Crane's field of vision.

Crane activated his byakugan and then breathed in awe. Tenten was somewhere in that maze of tunnels.

"Map," Hound nudged.

Crane nodded. He began to map the elaborate underground city.

"How long do you think it'll take to finish the map if we come back every night?"

"About a week," Crane answered.

Hound nodded as he went over the numbers in his head. It was enough time for him and his team to memorize the details.

"Here's the situation: We have seven ninja trapped in there, neither confirmed alive nor dead but there is a high possibility that five are alive."

"Which five?" Crane immediately asked. When Crane felt Hound's stare, Crane knew he should not have said anything. A conflict of interest could get him kicked off the mission.

"You have someone in there?" Hound asked.

"No," Crane lied.

"I do," Hound said as he watched the descending fog bathe the towering mountain peaks. "The ninja are being held under a breeding program. According to the Hokage, they most likely kept all the women but spared only men with a kekkai genkai or special abilities. The rest of the men are likely
dead," Hound answered with a passive voice.

"We've recently captured two Mountain ANBU and received valuable information about the village. Konoha has been left in the dark about Iwa's rebellion but evidently it started with the Kamizuru clan. Everyone thought that the clan was extinct but they were in hiding and waiting for the perfect opportunity and the peace treaty between Iwa and Konoha created the perfect discord. The Kamizuru Clan control Mountain and primarily uses bees in their techniques. Some breed of bees are powerful enough to knock you out. It was revealed to us that the reason Mountain invaded Grass was to specifically target the Houzuki prison and break out their sister, Suzumebachi, who Konoha had imprisoned. Any questions?"

"How are we going to get in?"

"That's what we're trying to figure out," Hound replied. "We have until the Jounin Exams to be ready." "Understood."

The moon was high in the sky as Hound remained in sage mode and focused his senses on his surroundings. Now that he was familiar with the bees chakra signature, he wasn't about to get snuck up on again.

"Crane," Hound said suddenly. "You know Hinata right?"

Crane tensed and looked at Hound. He couldn't believe Hinata went around sharing her identity with people in ANBU. "Of course I do."

"She's okay, right? I mean, she's okay?"

Crane gave Hound a curious look. "Whether Hinata is okay or not, it certainly isn't any of your business."

"Hyūgas," Hound said it as if it was a curse.

There was certainly one thing Neji hated more than the main family, and that was rest of Konoha. They had no right to judge.

Kiba had to admit he might have gone a bit overboard this time. He laid his head against the door and winced at the pulsing pain. He placed a comforting hand on the wedding ring in his pocket and sighed in relief when it seemed to be the only thing not broken on his body. He attempted to raise his hand but couldn't find the strength.

"Shit," Kiba cursed as he collapsed in front of her door. Blood dripped in his eyes. He attempted to scratch at the door like a puppy wanting to come inside. His ears twitched when he heard her encroaching footsteps.

"What the hell-" Sakura began and gasped when she almost tripped over Kiba. "You fucking dumbass!!" She yelled and dragged Kiba over to the couch. Sakura immediately began to pull several bloody shuriken out of his skin and then healed his external wounds.

"I can't keep doing this Kiba," Sakura argued as she watched his flesh knit like pieces of a puzzle snapping together.

"Just until the Jounin exams," Kiba explained.
"If you keep this up you're going to end up killing yourself before the exams. You've got to stop this," Sakura argued.

Kiba turned away from her and found a small thread in the couch more interesting. Sakura spoke loud curses into one of his ears as she worked.

Sakura stomped her feet when she finished bandaging him, again. This wasn't the first time Sakura had to fix him after one of his crazy training regimen. Every time afterwards she kicked him out, but accepted him back, limping and broken. She moved to wash the bloody tools she had used. She stopped when she felt something under her foot. Sakura looked down and found a pink diamond ring on the floor. This couldn't be-

When Sakura stopped screaming at him, Kiba grew concerned and craned his neck to see what was wrong. He blanched to see what she was holding and desperately checked his empty pockets. The ring had fallen out. "Wait, I wasn't supposed to give it to you like this."

Sakura looked up at Kiba in stunned silence.

"I was going to do it after the exams were over," Kiba grumbled. "Um- well-" Kiba attempted to sit up but groaned because of his injuries. "Will you marry me?"

"I-" Fear cause Sakura to choke on her words as she looked at the wounded and broken Kiba. Tears began to run down her eyes.

"I can't." Sakura said in a fit of tears. She placed the ring on the counter and ran out of the house.

Sakura collapsed on a park bench and brushed her hair from her face. Why did she always love the wrong ones?

Sakura Haruno was scared. What if one day she didn't get there fast enough to fix him?

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Sakura wandered through the cleaned and fixed gates of the Uzumaki compound. There were several Naruto clones repairing holes in the houses, sweeping through the streets, and blowing dust into the air.

Sakura found Naruto arguing with Tomu at the center of the compound. Ichigo suddenly ran between her legs as he chased after his pet frog. Ame was covered in dirt. Ame's attempt at trying to helped ended with throwing dirt into Kusuro's face.

The compound was already much brighter than when Sasuke had once lived here.

"Naruto, that's impossible. Do you want it to crash down on us?" Tomu asked.

"How is it going?" Sakura inquired about Naruto's progress in the restoration of the property. Sakura could see a happy gleam in his eyes, but Naruto always seemed to be alright when he was moving, and working, and sweating. It was when he slowed down you could see the shadows of hurt.

"I say this house is the perfect storage house for our ramen." Naruto pointed to the one ahead of him. "It's where we'll make huge pots of ramen for everyone."

"I pity the kids," Sakura mumbled.

"Do you want to see the plans?" Naruto asked. "That'll be the main house over there," Naruto
pointed to the house where Sasuke and his family used to live. "I'm going to extend these two houses and make them living quarters. There is going to be a huge ramen house for our huge kitchen, but there's a little bit of a rat problem."

"A little?" Tomu scoffed. "One of these rats can swallow Ichigo whole. This place is dangerous."

"No it isn't," Naruto paused, "Except for the traps in the more remote areas of the compound. Alright, there's a lot of work to do."

Naruto slowed and took a good look at Sakura. Naruto grew defensive so fast Sakura could have sworn Madara had just entered the compound.

"You've been crying. What's wrong?"

Sakura crossed her arms and after a few moments of silence, "Kiba proposed, sort of."

Naruto swept her up in his arms and whirled her through the air. "Congratulations! You must be so… You don't look very happy."

Sakura's pink hair fell in her face as she turned away from him. "I can't do it again. I can feel Kiba slipping through my fingers. I'm going to lose him to this life, Naruto."

"Maybe it's just the stress of the exams?"

"No, it's more than that. I can't explain it but-" Sakura couldn't control the sudden stream of tears. "I'm not strong enough, Naruto. I can't bear for my heart to be broken again. It's not worth it."

Naruto knew the jagged aches of a broken heart but never regretted his choices or his decisions. He'd do it all over again, just to hold her one more time.

"Love is always worth it."

Shikamaru was beginning to question whether or not it truly was. Shikamaru rocked his wailing newborn in his arms but to no avail. He was frustrated. Temari had been recalled to Suna to prepare the village defenses to withstand the Jounin exams and he had been left alone with his daughter.

"This is such a drag," Shikamaru collapsed against the bed while Shikaru cried against chest. He looked at the time and knew he needed to report to ANBU soon. Because of his participation in the exams, Shikamaru was only helping to plan the mission, but that was growing difficult with the constant wailing in his ear.

"Is everything alright?" Yoshino Nara peeked inside her son's bedroom.

"Help," Shikamaru pleaded, relieved his mother had finally come home.

Yoshino laughed at her son's helplessness. Yoshino lifted her granddaughter into her arms. Shikamaru watched with an awed expression as Shikaru quieted in an instant and laughed at her sweet grandmother's face.

For all of Shikamaru's brilliance he could not comprehend the miracle his mother just performed.

"I think she just misses her mother," Yoshino cooed softly as she teasingly poked her finger along the baby's tummy. "You haven't been around very much, you know. Your marriage is hard but it'll only work if you make it work."
Shikamaru felt ashamed. Everyone in the Nara Clan knew of the recent arguments between him and Temari.

"I know," he admitted. "After the exams, I'm retiring from ANBU, I promise." Shikamaru instinctively reached for the pack of cigarettes in his pocket and remembered it was empty. He was trying to quit.

"Can you watch her please?" Shikamaru asked.

"Of course," Yoshino watched her son dress in the ANBU uniform she personally despised. She remembered the nightmarish time when Shikaku had been in ANBU, the stress had almost ruined their marriage.

"I'm proud of you," Yoshino told her son.

Shikamaru kissed her against the forehead. "Nothing means more to me than family," he promised. "I love you mom." Shikamaru kissed his daughter who had fallen asleep in an instant of Yoshino's arrival. "Now you want to be lazy."

Owl arrived at the ANBU underground right before Hound was about to bash Hound's head against a wall.

Hidden Villages were specifically built to withstand infiltration and espionage. Hound knew he had to come up with some brilliant idea that his enemies hadn't thought of but Hound's brilliance was always lacking off the field. Hound knew he would come up would the perfect plan once they were in the midst of the mission, but that wasn't good enough for the Hokage. She wanted a plan now.

"I believe I've finished calculating the perfect team according to your strengths and weaknesses," Owl reported as he entered the room and placed the files of three operative onto the table: Hound, Crane, and Mantis.

"That's great but we still haven't found a way inside," Hound groaned. His eyes were burning from exhaustion after studying the completed maps for the past several days.

"Yes we have," Crane said suddenly. Both Hound and Owl looked at him. "I've been studying your last mission report. You already know a way inside. You're just too afraid to take it."

The Hokage frowned after they briefed her on the mission plan. "If you fail, you do realize I could lose my hat for this?" The Hokage questioned. "Is there no other way?"

"None, unless you want a long undercover mission where we slowly acclimate to the population," Owl answered.

The Hokage didn't like this at all but she hardly had a choice. The Hokage approved the mission.

"You better not fucking fail."

"We won't," Hound promised.

"Be careful." The Hokage warned and could feel a cloud of gloom overhead as the date approached. "Something always goes wrong during the Jounin exams. Let's hope this year it's not us. Remember, while Konoha is scheming, everyone else is scheming too."
Life is what you make of it
Lesson Twenty-Three

Jounin Exams

Gantetsu scribbled a bored seal along the burnt flesh of Tenten's hip, as messy as a child practicing calligraphy.

"Have you ever considered how you want to die?" Gantetsu asked with a grim smile, like a man who knew the only time he had left was that long walk to the gallows. "I know we never get a choice but," his shoulders shrugged. "Fire."

Tenten shifted in her chains in an attempt to relieve the pain and soreness. "Fire is the worst. It's a slow death."

"Exactly. I want live as long as possible, be the last moments pain or pleasure," Gantetsu answered as he dropped the brush into the ink jar.

"Seppuku. I'd rather feel the cold kiss of a blade through my skin, and I would want to do it, to make sure the cut is clean."

"And I thought I was morbid." Gantetsu placed his hands together and activated the seal. Tenten braced herself for the pain. The lab was silent with the beeping of machines and the scurrying of the rats used as test subjects. Both Gantetsu and Tenten watched the small puff of smoke betray the seal's disappearance.

"I did it." Gantetsu said in disbelief. Instead of savoring in his victory, he immediately raced to his desk and proceeded to copy a sketch of the counter seal he had just used.

Gantetsu sorely hoped it wasn't too late to prove his usefulness. The Kage had left for the Jounin Exams only a few days ago and preparations were already underway to capture the Konoha medic-nin. But he hoped the counter seal he had accidently stumbled upon would be enough to convince them to finally let him go.

"You're a fool to think they're going to let you go," Tenten replied with a resigned voice. "You know too much."

The noose tightened. "You can't give me the opportunity to enjoy my short-lived hope?"

"You could let me go."

"They're watching," Gantetsu replied. "Neither of us will leave this place alive."

"I know."

In the end, Gantetsu understood it was a trivial thing the way in which he died. Dead was still dead.

He cursed, walked over to the lab table, and pressed the small key into the shackles. The metal gave way to Tenten's raw and bruised skin. Her long waist-length hair flowed over her shoulder as Gantetsu helped her to sit up. She pushed him away and tipped her toes, then feet against the iron cold floor.

Tenten stood on her own two feet.
"I need a weapon," and Tenten glanced around the room at the medical equipment. She reached out and grabbed a scalpel from the tray of surgical equipment. For a slight brief moment, she considered swiping the small tool across her own neck.

Her grip tightened. She wasn't done fighting just yet.

Tenten looked up and Gantetsu didn't hide the tenseness to his shoulders as he watched the scalpel move across her fingers with apt attention. Tenten remembered the pain in the destroyed skin and tissue of her right hip. She remembered waking up sore and Gantetsu was hunched over his work in order to hide the look of shame. It certainly was an idea that crossed her mind.

Gantetsu didn't offer any help as Tenten gingerly hopped to the lab chair where Gantetsu had hung his coat. Tenten grabbed the white lab coat and shrugged it on.

"You're not going to kill me?" Gantetsu asked.

"I don't know any fire jutsu."

Tenten slipped the scalpel in her lab coat pocket.

"I can get you another weapon," Gantetsu replied.

Gantetsu held out his arm and Tenten braced for a jutsu just in case the man decided to change his mind about letting her go. He applied chakra to his arm and activated his kekkai genkai. He winced when the blade of metal began to grow out of his skin. Blood dripped down the fine edge, the length continued towards the floor, and ended with a hilt made out of bone.

"If only I had met you in a bar in Konoha," Tenten replied seriously. She marveled at the craftsmanship of the tanto he handed to her.

"If only."

Then Tenten plunged the tanto into Gantetsu's gut.

Tenten withdrew the blade, pushed open the door, and hopped down the hall.

She wasn't going to get very far and Tenten knew that.

The jungle was hot and wet. The canopy was full of glaring sunlight, ripened fruit, and birds that populated the towering trees in a whirl of color. The forest floor was the heart of darkness. Predatory cats, poisonous plants, and gliding snakes preyed through this dark abyss. The jungle, the terrain that hosted the Jounin Exams, was as beautiful as it was deadly.

At the center of the jungle rested a large circular stadium. The vines clawed and twisted around the windows. Naruto stood still and could feel the mass amount of life that was hidden in the jungle maze as the participants made their way to their assigned area of the jungle.

For once, Naruto was glad he was missing out on the fun. The title "Fox Sage" was finally beginning to grow on him.

"Did you ever participate in the Jounin Exams? I know Temari and Kankurou are Jounins." Naruto asked Gaara, who joined him in waiting for the exams to begin.

Gaara crossed his arms and said as if it was obvious, "I'm a Kage."
By Gaara's expression, Naruto could tell the Kazekage was struggling under the damp heat of the jungle environment. The sand armor that coated his skin almost seemed to melt off his face. Even though uncomfortable, Gaara wore his gourd despite the formal attire underneath.

To everyone else, Gaara seemed calm and collected, but Naruto saw the anxiousness in his eyes. Naruto leaned over and whispered, "Do you think something is going to happen?"

"There have been rumors," Gaara admitted.

"Gaara! It's about to start." Matsuri pushed herself through the crowd and suddenly interrupted their conversation. Naruto wanted to question Gaara further but a subtle shake of the head let Naruto know Gaara didn't want to say anything in front of his chuunin student.

Instead Naruto grinned. "Wow, Gaara. Where did you find such a beautiful date?"

The way Matsuri eyes lit up further enhanced the fanciful desert attire that she wore. "Well, I couldn't let Sensei go to such a high profile event by himself." To make her point Matsuri attempted to hold Gaara's arm, but on instinct his sand defense encased her wrist. Once Gaara noticed what had occurred, the sand dissolved back into the gourd and Matsuri slowly managed to get her hands around Gaara's arm. "Admittedly, it might have helped that they bribed me by labeling it a C-rank."

Gaara grumbled as he turned to the window in embarrassment. Matsuri patted Gaara's arm. "Sensei is just a little intimidating."

"Well, Gaara is lucky to have a loyal and very pretty student such as yourself," Naruto declared.

Matsuri smiled. "Thank you." Matsuri looked around. "Where is your date?"

Naruto sheepishly scratched his head and replied, "I don't have one."

Naruto hadn't felt like bringing a date. Even though he had received a lot of invitations from fan girls and was one of the most eligible bachelors in Konoha, Naruto had ducked and weaved his way out of bringing a date to the exams.

"It is time for us to join the other Kages," Gaara smoothly replied and saved Naruto any further poking into his love life.

"Are you going to sit with us?" Matsuri asked.

"With the Kages? No. The Hokage 'suggested' I should but I'm not going to give her what she wants that easily. I already made plans to sit with someone else."

"Alright, I hope you'll visit."

"Good luck," Gaara said simply. Then a surprise look crossed Matsuri's expression when Gaara placed a hand on her waist and began to guide her down the hall.

Naruto watched them leave and then turned toward the crowd decorated in a myriad array of clothing, dialects, and mannerisms. But Naruto only had eyes for one person and observed the woman he had literally dragged the Kazekage around the stadium to stalk for the past couple of hours.

She was buying two trays of dumplings from one of the many food booths.

There were a thousand things Naruto wanted to say but when he finally gathered the courage to
approach her, the first words out of his mouth were, "Why did you change your hair color?"

"Uzumaki-san," Hinata acknowledged as she leaned over and paid for the food.

"It's different."

"Yes it is."

"Why did you change it?"

"Naruto," Hinata finally turned to face him and her expression was cold and distant. "What do you want?"

Naruto frowned when he noticed the fading bruise on her face. "Who hit you?"

Hinata reached for the first tray of dumplings and said in exasperation. "Sakura."

"Oh, well, I'm sure you deserved it," Naruto replied and quickly grabbed the second tray of dumplings before she had a chance to reach out for them.

"Naruto, give them to me," Hinata demanded and Naruto smiled smugly when a small crack of annoyance appeared in her frigid demeanor.

"I might as well carry them for you since we're going to the same place. I'm going to join the Hyuuga in their booth." Naruto explained. He winked at her and then walked into the crowd. Hinata quickly followed to retrieve the hostage dumplings.

"You are not sitting with us."

"I don't see why not," Naruto smiled in mischief. "Your grandfather and I have become such great friends since I've been on the council. I'm even planning to buy him a birthday present. Someone really needs to buy him a cane with a better grip."

Naruto watched as Hinata held the tray of dumplings in the air and twisted through the crowd with ease. She winded through the crowd like a snake, whereas Naruto's build was met with more resistance. Hinata stopped in front of him and Naruto purposefully stumbled into her.

Naruto caught her by the waist before her imbalance dropped the tray of food. "Naruto," Hinata breathed his name and their lips seemed distant in their closeness. In a voice begging for reprieve, "what do you want?"

"I'm not doing anything wrong." Naruto whispered against the soft caress of her lips. "Or is touching you trespassing on Hyuuga property as well?"

The silk of her silver kimono slipped through his palms. The beating of his heart sought to fill the cleavage of her breasts. And the protective barrier of ice began to melt away at his heat.

"They're watching." Hinata ached in his nearness, but her words moved against his lips.

"Like a leaf in a forest," and the throng of the crowd raced through the hallways to win their seats, losing the couple in the excitement and the fervor.

Then, someone cleared their throat loudly.

Hinata jumped away like a startled deer.
The hallway was cleared, except for the lone figure of the Mizukage watching the public display. Her deep custom blue kimono contrasted with the luscious green jungle behind the window. Water lilies decorated the dress, with a slit as high as her thigh, and the neckline gathered around her shoulders to showcase her ample bosom.

"I don't mean to interrupt but the Hokage promised me a date."

"Date?" Naruto questioned.

"The Hokage said I could borrow you," Mei Terumi lips curled in a smile, "If of course, you are finished."

Hinata snatched her dumplings and finally freed them from Naruto's grasp. She kept her head respectfully bowed in the Mizukage's presence and like a breeze, floated out of Naruto's reach.

"Wait," Naruto grasped but it was futile. She was gone.

At that moment, Naruto could have put a rasengan through the Mizukage's face. This was the first time he had seen Hinata since she threatened to kill him. "I was busy."

"Are you joining me?" Mei asked knowingly.

Even Naruto knew he couldn't deny the Mizukage. He sighed when she wrapped her arm around his bicep. Naruto gave a brief look behind him, but found nothing more than hope.

Naruto and the Mizukage entered the exclusive section where the Kages and their dates were expected to enjoy the exams.

"I found him," Mei told Ao who had waited for her outside the door.

"Uzumaki," Ao nodded, tapped his fingers on his eye patch to indicate he was always watching and stayed on alert outside of the room.

Tsunade greeted the couple and Shikaku wasn't far on her heels.

Shikaku, the Hokage's Jounin Commander, was in charge of security and followed silent behind Tsunade like the shadows his clan were known for. Naruto was amused by the bored wave Kakashi gave from his exalted seat above the stadium. Kakashi was supposed to be Tsunade's date but many didn't care considering she was more than twice the age of everyone in the room. Kakashi agreed for the view.

"I really appreciate you letting me borrow him," Mei said with a smile. The date she had originally brought, one of the richest merchants in Mist Country, had annoyed her so much she stranded him somewhere in Tea Country.

"Of course, he wasn't doing anything important anyway," Tsunade responded.

"It was very important," Naruto pouted.

While Naruto glowered, Mei continued with small talk. "I hear this year is supposed to go to Konoha."

Tsunade beamed proudly. "Most of the participants are from Naruto's graduating class, which is one of the most skill classes Konoha has ever had. His generation has produced some of Konoha's strongest shinobi and deadliest kunoichi."
"I guess we shall see soon enough," Mei smoothly replied. "My council advises that Konoha and Kiri should strengthen our alliance. I was thinking a political marriage…"

"In your dreams," Tsunade said flatly and lost all pretense of trying to be civil. Naruto suddenly found himself between two intense stares before Mei waved to someone across the room and dragged Naruto behind her.

"Of course Konoha will do anything to keep their favorite toy around," Mei said and leaned toward Naruto. He began feeling uncomfortable when her lips touched his ear and whispered, "If you ever get tired of Konoha, I'll gladly accept you with open arms."

Naruto leaned back, knowing Granny's eyes were on his back. "That's okay, I'll stick to Konoha."

Mei pouted but nevertheless dragged him around the room to make the taxing rounds of small talk with all the important people. Naruto had already met most of the Kages but this was the first time he was meeting their spouses.

"Mizukage, I don't think we've met." The man held himself proudly, as if he had something to prove to everyone in the room. Instead of formal attire, he wore a military uniform. He sported brown sharp sideburns.

"But I have certainly heard of you, grandson of the First Tsuchikage, Kurobachi," Mei replied with a coy smile. "How are you finding the responsibilities of being a Kage over a new country? It must be difficult to manage a country like Mountain."

Naruto's entire mood darkened and couldn't control the killing intent that began to radiate through the room. The sudden pressure brought everyone in the room on edge. All eyes were on Naruto Uzumaki and his obvious dislike of the Mountain's Kage.

Kurobachi studied Naruto calmly. "I believe we have met before Naruto Uzumaki."

To even further add to Naruto's dislike, he remembered that this certainly hadn't been the first time they had met. He had been on a mission when Team 8 back when he was a genin to find the Bikouchuu beetles when he first ran across the Kamizuru siblings. It was he who had incapacitated Suzemabachi and ultimately sent her to prison.

The Hokage joined the foray armed with political tact. She placed a hand on Naruto's arm. "It is truly good to meet you," Tsunade replied as she slipped her hand into a handshake. "I'm sure Mountain and Leaf are strong enough to put our past behind us to create a strong friendship?"

"A strong friendship indeed," Kurobachi answered and didn't make any attempt to hide the fact he was staring down her shirt.

Mei was impressed as the Hokage navigated toward the man's wife and complimented her dress. Mei dragged a rather stiff Naruto to another side of the room, far from the Mountain's Kage. "I do believe that if Tsunade's predecessors had her political savvy we could have avoided so many world wars."

"I don't like him," Naruto admitted.

Mei patted him on the arm, as if keeping bay a rabid dog. "A Kage's job is to smile in their faces and stab them in their backs."

Mei took her seat and brought the steamed Naruto with her. Then his attention was immediately
shifted toward the hand that lingered on the inside of his thigh. He turned startled when the Mizukage was only a hair's breadth away. Her lips which were always upturned in a smile were glossed with fuchsia lipstick.

Naruto's wiped his sweaty hands against the seat and instinctively searched for Hinata in the crowd. He didn't see her amongst the rest of the Hyūga clan.

The Hokage, who seemed to be everywhere in the room at once, came to save him. Tsunade smiled sweetly as she sat down beside Naruto. She took the liberty to grab the Mizukage's hand and corrected it as if reprimanding a little girl.

"Naruto has always been like a grandson to me."

Mei gave an evasive smile as she set back in her seat. "Of course you and your protégé would be very close."

"I'm not-" Naruto began but Tsunade shoved her hand into his face and stuffed him backwards into the seat.

"I have every confidence he will become a respectable Kage."

"No doubt he will. He has you as his role model. I've been meaning to ask, have you finally managed to quit gambling and drinking?"

"What happened to your previous date again?"

"It's a shame you never married or had children of your own."

"You look absolutely stunning for your age."

Mei broke first and her smile finally cracked.

Tsunade smiled smugly and replied, "You two do make quite a couple." Tsunade stood up and patted Naruto on the shoulder.

When the Hokage was out of earshot, Mei settled into her chair and replied, "That woman inspired me to become a ninja."

Suddenly cheers from the crowd erupted when the Daimyo of the country walked to the center of the stadium. He was outgoing and had a presenter personality.

Four giant screens lifted from the floor of the stadium with each facing a cardinal direction. The tangled webs of cables connected the giant screens. Different sections of the jungle began to appear on the screen. Some camera angles captured a few of the contestants' faces while others glimpsed many of the jungles predators passing through the tangled vines.

The television sets within the Kage booth roared to life.

Naruto leaned forward. One screen showed Lee stretching in preparation for the big moment to begin.

The Daimyo announced as the horns that signaled the start of the exams began to blare, "Over 500 participants have entered the competition and only the top ten percent will receive the elusive title of Jounin. The rules are simple: to be one of the last standing."
"I am Rock Lee, student of Maito Gai the Green Sublime Beast of Konoha. Challenge me if you dare!" The declaration echoed over the jungle.

Shikamaru shook his head at Lee's blatant give away of his position.

The Nara Clan heir analyzed his environment. Sunlight labored to breach the dense canopy and down on the jungle floor, Shikamaru was completely enveloped in shadow. This terrain was a Nara Clan dream. Except for the bugs, Shikamaru grumbled when he pulled a centipede from the nape of his neck.

Shikamaru briefly considered hiding somewhere and doing nothing. Anyone who managed to hide from over 500 ninja deserved to be a Jounin. If only he could suppress his chakra, Shikamaru Nara would totally be content to sleep through the entire exams.

Shikamaru. Chouji. Ino's voice navigated Shikamaru's mental defenses with the ease of traveling through her own house at night.

I think I forgot to pack enough snacks. Chouji replied.

I brought extra. Shikamaru assured him. What is everyone's position?

Shikamaru, Chouji, and Ino shared their coordinates and agreed on the place where they were going to meet. Anything was permitted during the Exams, including teamwork, if you could find a friendly face before you were knocked out of the competition. Ninjas from different villages were intentionally scattered in different places of the jungle.

"Shadow Possession jutsu." The shadows around Shikamaru began to move like waves behind Shikamaru's feet as he walked through the jungle.

You got in a fight with Temari again?

Stop messing with my memories. Shikamaru often regretted the fact he had entered the pact with Ino. Using a jutsu, Ino could telepathically access Chouji and Shikamaru's mind from any distance. It was useful during a mission but he had absolutely no privacy.

In Shikamaru's defense, Temari had promised to stay in the village until Shika-chan was weaned.

I told you it wasn't going to work.

Shikamaru let them argue over his marriage life. He didn't want to talk about it. He was still bitter about the fact that Temari had dropped everything she promised the moment Gaara needed her help, without considering Shikamaru and their child might need her more. Shikamaru couldn't decide if Sunagakure really needed Temari to defend the Sand village during the Jounin exams or in actuality she was too accustomed to bending to her spoiled younger brother's every whim.

I've got company. Ino reported. I'll check in after I'm finished.

Be careful, both teammates replied at the same time. Shikamaru could feel when Ino's presence had withdrawn herself in his head and thus taking away his connection with Chouji as well.

Shikamaru didn't have to move an inch as a torrent of kunai and shuriken whirled towards him. The shadows gathered at his feet moved of their own accord and swatted the weapons away like flies.

"Well," A kunoichi stepped from behind one of the large twisted trees, sporting the symbol of Sunagakure on her forehead. Her outfit was primarily composed of cloth wrapped around her body,
of which Shikamaru knew she utilized in her famous Cloth Binding Jutsu. Red tattoos marked her cheeks.

"Of course I'd be the one to bump into Temari's hubby of all people," Maki replied.

"We could simply go our separate ways?" Shikamaru suggested.

"And miss a chance to brag to Temari?" Maki scoffed.

Since they already knew each other's techniques and weaknesses, Shikamaru knew this fight would be troublesome.

"Wind Release: Wind Cutter Jutsu!"

Shikamaru avoided her attack and watched as the shadow he had dispatched to catch her by surprise disappeared when all the surrounding trees were cut in half. The limbs toppled to the ground and Shikamaru was bathed in sunlight.

Shikamaru jumped backwards until he was once again in the safety of the shade. Maki gave him a smug look as she stood at the center of the sunny clearing she had just created. "What's wrong? Scared?"

Shikamaru didn't say a word as he turned on his heels and ran. There were less troublesome fights elsewhere.

"Hey! You get back here!" Maki screamed.

Shikamaru burst through a tangle of vines as he took flight. His foot brushed light against a slick narrow tree, before he fell backwards and evaded the slash of a katana. He willingly fell and landed on the jungle floor. He looked up and his attacker charged down with the speed of a lightning bolt.

"Shadow Sewing Jutsu."

Shadows as sharp as needles collided with the falling star, slid against her dark skin, and bound her to the ground. Shikamaru's newest opponent struggled under the shackles made of shadow.

The Cloud ninja's red hair was as fiery as her expression.

The dark ropes that bound her were suddenly broken when Shikamaru was forced to evade an incoming lightning jutsu. A residue of electricity coursed against his neck.

Shikamaru stood to face the two Cloud ninja, Karui and Omoi.

"Cloth Binding Jutsu!"

Maki jumped into fray. Karui and Omoi turned on their heels and their katanas cut through the cloth that attempted to bind them. The shredded cloth floated down like snow.

Maki landed beside Shikamaru and suggested, "Truce?"

Shikamaru knew immediately not to trust Maki, and knew if he wanted to come out of this alive he would have to capture them all at the same time. He simply needed to put the pieces in place.

"I want the pineapple head," Karui declared as she chakra-enhanced her jump into the air.

Omoi watched as Karui jumped higher than the canopy of the jungle. "Let me know if the moon
really is made of cheese."

Karui drilled downwards and her katana crackled with lightning, akin to the song of a hundred dying birds.

"I'll handle her," Shikamaru told Maki. He had expected such a move, judged by his experience with Cloud ninja and their tendency to be masters of the katana. They had a preference for close-quarters combat.

"Wind Release: Vacuum Serial Waves!" Maki sucked in a deep breath.

Shikamaru cursed and broke off his previous technique to perform another.

Maki breathed wind. The entire area was engulfed in a vacuum. Trees and foliage were uprooted and Karui was thrown out of the air.

Omoi had plunged his katana into the ground and shadows were strapped around Shikamaru's feet to keep the two shinobi from flying away.

Omoi and Shikamaru looked at each other. Omoi's long katana crackled with lightning.


Maki smirked. Her last attack seemed to have been against the Cloud ninja but it had also successfully robbed Shikamaru of his shadow. The cleared field was scorching underneath the sun. Maki grabbed two wind-enhanced kunai from her belt.

Right when Maki was about to attack them both, her hand was pinned in mid-air. Both Omoi and Maki had been captured by their own shadows, twisting and creeping up their bodies to suffocate the life from them.

"Fuck you Shikamaru," Maki cursed at him. She should have known Temari wouldn't marry a pushover, no matter how lazy he seemed off the battlefield.

"I leave for a few seconds and you get yourself captured." The bandana had been lost and Karui's hair blazed around her angry expression when she rejoined the battle.

"I think, perhaps, that is an understatement," Omoi said with a deliberate thought as his own shadow began to wrap around his neck.

Shikamaru had been planning to catch all three of them if it wasn't for Maki's unexpected area attack. In order to capture Karui he would have to break off his present jutsu.

"This is endgame," Shikamaru replied. "Forfeit or your teammate dies."

"I wonder what the afterlife is like," Omoi answered. "Perhaps there is nothing, or perhaps we live again in a never ending cycle, or perhaps-"


"I'm sorry," Shikamaru apologized. He had given her the opportunity to stand down. Omoi began to wheeze as the hands tightened around his neck.

Maki's eyes constantly shifted toward the bowels of the jungle. Before Shikamaru could kill Omoi or
before Karui could finish her jutsu, suddenly two more Sand ninja jumped from the depth of the jungles and many things happened all at once.

Shikamaru failed to plan for chaos.

"I'm starving," Tomu complained as he walked through the streets of Konoha on his lunch break. He was tired and his arms were sore but Tomu didn't mind. He loved his job. He liked doing something normal with normal people. No drugs, no ninjas, and no risking his life every day.

"I know the perfect place," Kusuro said enthusiastically as they walked toward the section of Konoha that had begun to house the Grass refugees. "There is this lady who has set up a small shop, and I swear, it tastes just like home. I'll show you some good Grass food yet!" Kusuro exclaimed.

"That's great," Tomu mumbled. Ame and Ichigo were at school. Kusuro was supposed to be at the Academy but he skipped school regularly because he claimed the lessons were too simple and that they bored him. Kusuro largely did what he wanted.

Kusuro stopped in his tracks. "That's weird."

When you lived in a hidden village, everything was weird. Tomu hardly gave Kusuro's comment any thought and continued walking until he was suddenly jerked into an alleyway. Kusuro peeked out onto the street.

"That man," Kusuro pointed to a richly dressed man. "He's Grass but he's not normal. Why is he so rich?"

"He doesn't look Grass. He's from Konoha," Tomu argued.

Kuso rolled his eyes. "Henge, idiot. It's obvious. He doesn't walk like he's from Konoha."

"How can you tell where a person is from by how they walk?" Tomu asked incredulously. "I think it's all in your head. You're just imagining things."

"We have to follow him."

"Wait, but- what if-" Tomu stuttered.

"Oh come on, **Nii-chan**," Kusuro teased and dragged Tomu behind him.

"But I promised Naruto I'd stay out of trouble, especially while he's gone." Tomu actually felt sort of anxious knowing Naruto wasn't following him around today. From what Tomu understood, Naruto was on an important mission and needed to reserve his chakra, so there were much fewer Naruto clones stalking people around Konoha.

"I don't understand how you even get into trouble. You're so scared of everything."

"Trouble finds me," Tomu said with dread.

Tomu watched as Kusuro scaled the side of the store and then glided atop rooftops as if he was in ANBU. Tomu decided to keep his feet on the ground. He casually followed the "suspicious" man until he disappeared into an alleyway. Tomu did not want to follow and wondered if there was a long line at Ichiraku's. Tomu turned around but his plan backfired when Kusuro lifted him off of his feet with a wind jutsu and pulled him atop the roof.

Tomu swept his wind-blown hair from his face. "Never do that again," Tomu declared, shaken by
the short unwanted experience of flight.

"He's talking to someone," Kusuro whispered and watched the man greet two other people.

"See, it's nothing. They are definitely police." Tomu knew a policeman when he saw one, even when they were undercover and not wearing a uniform. Knowing how to spot the signs had saved Tomu plenty of times before.

"How do you know?" Kusuro asked.

"The way they walk," Tomu paused when Kusuro gave him a smug smile. "Shut up." Tomu leaned over and noted the long way back to the ground. "This certainly isn't any of our business. Let's go." One time in jail was enough for Tomu.

Then the person that looked like a Konoha citizen suddenly dropped his henge.

"That's- That's- Shoya-san! He survived!" Kusuro said ecstatically as he dropped down and breathed a wind jutsu which padded his fall. "Shoya!" Kusuro exclaimed and greeted one of his grandfather's closest advisors.

The police tensed as Shoya whipped around and stared at Kusuro in awe. "You're alive."

"Yeah, grandpa protected me," Kusuro admitted. "I thought no one else survived. How did you get out of there? Where's my mother?"

Shiyo's stuttered, looked behind him at his associates and then turned back toward the young boy before him. "Yes, I am so glad to see you are well. I barely made it out of the village myself," Shiyo approached and his feet scraped against the ground of the alleyway. "I'm sorry, but I don't think your mom made it."

Kusuro's shoulders slumped. He was trying not to cry as his hopes kept getting crushed.

Tomu watched from above when a glint caught by the sun blinded his eyes. Tomu looked more closely and spotted a kunai behind the man's back. Tomu screamed, "Kusuro, he's going to kill you!"

Kusuro reacted to Tomu's warning and flipped backwards as Shiyo struck out with his kunai.

Shiyo turned and commanded the officers, "You two go get the one on the roof. I'll take care of this one. We can't risk our cover being blown."

"This can't be happening," Tomu cried as he stumbled backwards when the two ninja who were supposed to be police jumped towards him. His hands scratched against the shilling, pulled himself onto his feet, and ran.

If there was one thing Tomu had learned how to do in his life, it was run away from the cops. Tomu cursed when a jet of water scratched his arm. Except normal cops didn't throw jutsu to kill him.

For the first time in his life, Tomu purposely activated his sharingan.

Time slowed down as Tomu peeked behind him and like a magnet his vision focused on the series of hand seals performed by the ninja. In slow motion the pattern seemed to burn into his head.

Tomu noticed details. He saw the loose tile, avoided it, and neared closer towards the edge of the roof. Tomu pushed chakra into his legs and jumped. The heat of the fire singed his neck. He landed on the next roof with chakra to pad his fall and the plume of fire blasted over his head.
Tomu slid against the side of the house, caught his hand against the ledge and twisted into the small window of the apartment. He weaved through the darkness, smashed through the door of the balcony, and vaulted over the railing.

His chakra stuck him against the side of the adjacent house. He reached to pull himself up, but whipped his head around and watched in slow motion the fire jutsu hurled towards him.

Tomu knew he couldn't pull himself up in time and let go. He fell backwards, twisted, caught a hold of the fire escape and dropped to the ground.

Tomu briefly weighed his options. It was easy to lose someone in the marketplace but with most of the merchants at the Jounin exams the market was empty and offered little cover. Anyone else would have felt trapped within the closed alleyway, but all you had to do was know what to look for.

Tomu jumped toward the small hole underneath the adjacent building and scurried into the darkness. Tomu grunted as he crawled through the narrow space molded by alley cats.

"You follow him."

"I'm not going in there."

Tomu could hear the two ninja argue. He bit down on his lip as large rats scurried away from his hand. He pushed out to the other side just as the bottom of the house erupted in fire. Tomu scooted backwards and watched as the fire crept around the wood. Then he heard a scream.

Tomu's heart pounded, then rushed back into the house, but this time through the door. He coughed against the black smoke and found an elderly woman trapped in her bed. Black soot covered his face as he carried the old woman out of her house. When he stepped from the door he looked into the faces of the two police officers.

"Officers, my house," the old woman complained.

"Sorry, we need to take the boy."

Tomu sprinted at a run but was caught by the collar. He struggled against the man's arm as he was brought into the alley and shoved against a wall.

"This kid has the sharingan. We could get a lot of money for him."

"No, we don't need him. Kill the boy but take the eyes."

"Wait, no!" Tomu cried as the man's hand neared closer and closer to his face. He could see the dirt that coated every pore of the man's fingers.

"Please, please, please," Tomu begged and then screamed when those disgusting fingers dug into his skull.

The pain caused Tomu to burst into a cloud of smoke.

"Face me and see how brightly your fire of youth burns!"

Shikamaru was forced to release his jutsu to evade the barrage of darts.

"Hand of Lightning God jutsu!"
"Shadow Animation Jutsu!"

"Cloth Binding Jutsu!"

Shikamaru managed to complete his next jutsu right before he was seized in a binding of cloth. He hit the ground entrapped like a mummy and stared up at the darkening clouds.

A bright flash, then a shadow hand dragged him into the jungle, barely missing the bolt of lightning that struck the ground.

Shikamaru heard Maki scream. The terrifying lightning struck the jungle and the foliage sizzled under the crackling heat. Shikamaru looked up at his own shadow, which stood on its own two feet, in the perfect image of Shikamaru. His shadow bent down and attempted to cut through the cloth binding him.

When the storm calmed, Shikamaru could hear the battle sounds caused by the survivors.

Maki was dead. Two puppets lay shattered. Karui had collapsed to the ground due to chakra exhaustion.

The Sand ninja, Korobi and Yaoki faced Omoi.

Without the joint teamwork of their puppets, Korobi and Yaoki faced a large disadvantage against Omoi’s superior agility.

"I'll give you this opportunity to forfeit," Omoi replied and his hands crackled with a lightning jutsu.

They looked at the burnt husk of their former companion, Maki. They knew Gaara and Kankurou Sensei would be disappointed in them but they were willing to live and fight another day. They swiped their blood along the scroll and disappeared in a cloud of smoke, forfeiting from the competition.

"That was a close one." Omoi looked at Karui whose chest was heaving.

"Where is the shadow user?" Karui asked, but at that moment, Shikamaru's shadow strapped itself to Omoi’s back and placed its dark hands around the ninja’s throat.

"It's your turn to forfeit," Shikamaru replied as he emerged from the smoke of the dying fire. He held a bloody wound from the darts thrown at him earlier.

Karui didn't have any tricks up her sleeve this time and watched helpless as Omoi begrudgingly took out the scroll when he couldn't breathe. Omoi forfeited the exams.

Shikamaru's shadow turned to Karui with the hint of a mischievous smile. Shikamaru offered, "I'm willing to let you do the same."

The scroll seemed to weigh heavily on her hip. Karui stared at Shikamaru, finished a one-handed hand sign behind her back, and screamed.

Shikamaru cursed and realized he had underestimated his opponent's will to stay in the competition. No logical person would perform a jutsu at that level of chakra exhaustion.

Lightning shot out of her mouth.

Shikamaru’s shadow jumped into the jutsu’s path and disintegrated on contact. The bolt that continued hit Shikamaru, weaker than it had been previously, but still knocked him off his feet and
against a fallen tree. The current arced through his body and he twitched in response.

The Cloud and Leaf ninja stared at each from their prone position at opposite ends of the field. The impasse lingered into seconds, into minutes, and a long uncomfortable hour.

The onset of chakra exhaustion began to infect her features. Karui grew pale, her fingers tips ice cold but was sweating from the heat.

"You're going to die soon. You should forfeit."

But Karui couldn't. It was up to her to inherit the leadership of her clan. They didn't accept failure. As a creeping shiver ran through her spine, she unconsciously placed her hand on her stomach.

"Troublesome," Shikamaru grumbled. "I have a daughter."

Karui gave him a suspicious looked before briefly realizing her hand had betrayed her weakness to her enemy. She hadn't even told the father yet.

"It's going to be a boy."

Shikamaru had a little bit of chakra left, enough to do a small jutsu. He struggled to put his hands together and each seal was a laborious challenge. By the time he was finished, he was coated in sweat from the effort and the jungle's heat.

A small tendril of a shadow uncurled like a snake, it wafted in the air and slipped through pouches at his belt, until it retrieved a small pill. Then it slithered across the large field.

It was only a mild chakra pill that would not assist her with any jutsu, but it will save her life.

Karui stared at the rather eager shadow and when she didn't make a move, the cool darkness coiled around her skin.

"Why?"

There was no plan, no moves before moves that compelled him to help her in an effort to benefit himself. Was the Will of Fire constrained to just Konoha? Or did it consume without heed of borders or symbols or differences?

Trembling, Karui grabbed the pill and placed it in her mouth. Her taste buds were overwhelmed by a barbeque flavor and the chakra flowed like a calming trickle into her system.

"Thank you."

The Cloud and Leaf ninja stared at each from their prone position at opposite ends of the field. The impasse lingered into seconds, into minutes, and a long uncomfortable hour.

Suddenly three Valley ninja entered the field. They weren't ninja from an allied village and would be less likely to give you an opportunity to forfeit. Their intentions were clear when they placed their hands together into a seal.

In alarm Shikamaru scrambled for the scroll in his pocket, but his arm could only crawl forward and by the time his hand wrapped around the scroll, the hands signals were complete.

Shikamaru knew what the consequences were when he decided to participate in the exams. He knew there was a chance he wouldn't make it back home. At that moment, he had never wanted to live so much in his life.
Instead of the scroll, he grabbed the pack of cigarettes and lifted it only an inch from his pouch before the heat dramatically increased from the incoming fire jutsu. The heat began to lick, taste, and then – nothing.

Shikamaru lifted his eyes when the fire jutsu never came.

The flames withdrew and scattered in the air at the beheading of its caster. Shikamaru watched in disbelief as the Cloud ninja, whom he was sure did not have sufficient chakra to even stand, dismembered the remaining two ninja with her katana.

Shikamaru wondered if he gave her the right chakra pill. He placed the cigarette in his mouth, unlit.

Then the red-haired kunoichi turned to him, her katana poised, and strode towards him.

Of course a moment of kindness would be the end of him.

Shikamaru did not predict when she leaned forward, snatched the cigarette from his lips and threw it over her shoulder. Then his confusion increased even further when her mouth enveloped his with a kiss. When her tongue lingered the realization lit his face.

Their lips parted and Shikamaru said one word, "Ino."

Karui straightened, winked, and then snatched the scroll from her belt and forfeited the competition.

Seconds later, Ino emerged from a tangle of hanging vines. "You should have seen the look on your face."

"Why do you trouble me so?" Shikamaru, the genius, hadn't seen that coming at all and his heartbeat was still trying to get under control.

"Because we're friends," Ino answered. She pressed the heel of her boot against the cigarette thrown on the ground. "I thought you were trying to quit?"

"I thought I was going to die."

Ino kneeled down and her hands glowed green as she placed them to Shikamaru's wounds. "I'm not about to let you die. I promised your wife I'd keep an eye on you. Besides, every little girl needs her daddy to spoil her like a princess."

Shikamaru leaned back as his skin began to knit together. He was way too relieved by the fact he wasn't going to die than to be mad at her about the kiss. Being angry at Ino was always too troublesome. "Ino, I'd kill myself if I was married to you."

"You're too lazy to kill yourself," Ino replied immediately. When she was done, she helped him to his feet. "Come on, we need to find Chouji before he runs out of snacks."

Suddenly two ninja landed in the charred clearing, not a moment had they stepped onto the ground were they bowled over by a spinning boulder.

Chouji found them.

"You look like you've had a rough time," Chouji commented as he decreased to a reasonable size. "What snacks did you bring?"

Shikamaru smiled as he handed over his food scroll in exchange for a high grade chakra pill. Shikamaru bit into it and felt his chakra increase throughout his system.
Shikamaru was never more relieved to see his team, his comrades, and his best friends.

Together, they were the most powerful force in Konoha.

Naruto felt as if a weight had dropped from his chest, relieved Karui had only been Ino. His eyes had been glued toward the hidden camera that showcased Shikamaru's fight. It took every measure of control Naruto has developed over time not to go charging into the jungle at the aid of his friend.

Naruto looked at the scoreboard that kept dropping in numbers. The sensors that were in charge of the scoreboard were focused on the field in order to determine how many were still left in the competition.

"Some of these ninja can't possibly be Jounin level," Naruto replied in frustration as the numbers fell so quickly.

"Decoys," Mei explained. "Villages will enter decoys in order to pad the numbers and give their more skill candidates a higher chance of surviving."

"There are so many things wrong with this exam," Naruto complained. "Some of those ninja have the opportunity to forfeit but they don't."

"They can't. Some villages only offer an ultimatum, you either live or you die."

"But that's not fair. Why isn't there a better way of doing this?"

"Do you really think the strongest ninja in the world wants to be in the same room for any longer than a day?" Mei questioned. "The shorter the better. One day every five years is enough for me."

"That doesn't explain why there are so many blind spots. I can't see everything," Naruto complained.

Mei failed to answer when she turned her eyes toward the door. "Look who's finally arrived."

Naruto recognized the man who entered the Kage booth as Kitsuchi, the son of the Tsuchikage. He brought his wife and the large ninja, Akatsuchi followed behind him. The tension in the room became heated when Kitsuchi and Kurobachi's eyes met. The two men embodied the conflict between Mountain and Iwa.

The Hokage stepped between them and diffused the volatile situation with an amiable greeting.

"Where is Oonoki?" Naruto asked curiously.

"It was just a rumor, but this confirms my suspicions that the Tsuchikage is sick." Mei replied. "His granddaughter is participating in the exams. That stubborn old fool wouldn't have missed this for anything."

Naruto gave a grave expression. "If Oonoki is sick this would be an opportune time for one of his enemies to attack."

Mei gave him a sweet smile. "I would think the same."

Kitsuchi took the seat that was reserved for the Tsuchikage and attended in his father's stead.

"Those blind spots," Mei suddenly replied, "Are on purpose."

Naruto looked around the room and realized every one of these people all had some sort of plan or
"And what schemes is Kirigakure planning?" Naruto asked the Mizukage.

Mei Terumi simply smiled. "Nothing you have to worry about. We're friends with Konoha, for the moment at least."

Ao didn't consider himself as old, but he certainly was old for a ninja. He was head of Kirigakure's sensor division and one of the few sensors skilled enough to suppress his chakra. He has seen many things in his life, lived through two wars, was raised during the terrifying reign of the Bloody Mist, and survived the behind-the-scene machinations of several Jounin Exams. This one would be no different.

Ao patrolled the large stadium, searching for his prey.

For months, Kirigakure have experienced a series of unexplained deaths. Mist ninja have been ambushed and slaughtered beyond recognition by an unknown assailant. It seemed only logical that whoever was targeting them would make a move during the Jounin exams. It was too tempting an opportunity. He had undercover ANBU agents as participants in the exams and in the crowd.

Ao's best guess for the identity of the sneaky bastard was a missing-nin. Kiri always had to deal with missing-nin with grudges from the Bloody Mist era.

Ao activated his byakugan and scanned the hallways for anything suspicious. He pressed his hand to his radio. "Chojuro, all clear?"

"Clear. No one but the exam participants have attempted to attack our ninja. Do you really think he'll show?"

"It's like fishing. We have to be patient and wait for him to take the bait. Contact me if you see anything."

"Copy and out."

A sizeable crowd had gathered in the hallways at the upper levels of the stadium. They eagerly looked outside of the window where a few ninja were battling each other atop the jungle canopy.

Ao indiscreetly joined the bystanders and observed the odd Leaf ninja who had pitched out front the stadium doors and fought every challenger. The green jumpsuit worked to camouflage the ninja in this environment but Ao wondered how it was possible that the ninja survived with such a crippled chakra network.

"You seem to be busy."

Ao had been watching her with his byakugan for a while and wondered when she would finally approach him. He had wondered if she was the prey they were looking for but when he had activated his byakugan, he found her chakra pool was miniscule, marking her as a civilian. He did consider the possibility that she was a master sensor who could suppress her chakra but he doubted a sensor could butcher a Mist ninja.

After determining she was indeed a civilian, he relaxed slightly and analyzed her physical attributes. Her hair was a deep black and carefully patterned atop her head, her lips were deep rouge, and she wore a kimono decorated with lavender flowers. Her obi was tied to the front. Merchants weren't the
only ones who converged on the exams to sell their wares.

"I am on duty and your time is wasted on me. You'd best to take your business elsewhere."

"Men appreciate my business more when they are on duty. Perhaps I am exactly where I need to be."

Ao shifted his eyes towards her, intrigued by her skillful manner of speaking. His eyes took a more heated pass of her body. There were ample curves hidden under her kimono. Ao could tell she was very expensive.

"Shouldn't an oiran of your ranking have the attentions of a daimyo?"

The courtesan grabbed a shy hand to her arm. "You are an observant man. My previous owner devalued me but I assure you it has not lessened my skill."

Ao did notice the burn on her right arm and the scars along her back. It was a tragedy to harm such a beautiful bird.

It was tempting.

She was clean of weapons, poison, and disease.

"Chojuro," Ao activated his radio. "I'm changing shifts but contact me if you see anything regardless."

"Copy."

The courtesan's long eyelashes fluttered and her eyes knew she had caught him in her web. She turned and walked down the hall. Ao followed and watched as she took small dainty steps. Ao followed her into a room that was common for brothel owners or the more expensive courtesans to rent out in order to conduct their business.

While Ao turned to seal and trap the door, the courtesan began to undress. Ao watched her curt movements, the coy glance of her eyes, and the slight pucker of her lips as she untied her pink obi. Her kimono slackened and parted to reveal her milk skin, breasts adorned with a pink flower bud, and legs easy to part.

Ao ached but more important things came first. This was the Jounin Exams. Ao sealed and trapped the door.

"Ninja are cautious people," the courtesan noted.

"We have to be in order to survive."

Kusuro clutched his bloody arm as he fell. Tears stuck his cheek to the ground. "Why?" Kusuro asked the specks of dirt. "Why did you betray us?"

Kusuro could see Shiyo's shadow standing over him like an ominous cloud. He tried to get back up but that fire that kept him going just wasn't there anymore. The cold splash of betrayal had left him burnt out.

"Mountain promised me the village of Grass and even more if I deliver Konoha. I was tired of living in your grandfather's shadow. He was weak and bowed to every whim of the great shinobi nations. He deserved what he got."
Kusuro screamed in terror when Shiyo dug the heel of his boot into Kusuro's hand. Kusuro's hands were his lifeline, the tools he used to channel chakra, and that defined him as a ninja.

"And your mother- you should have heard how she screamed when I raped her and how her blank eyes stared when I slit her throat."

"LIAR!" In the heat of anger, Kusuro snatched the kunai from his pouch and stabbed it into Shiyo's ankle.

Shiyo stepped back with a curse and prepared one last jutsu. Kusuro couldn't move his bloody right hand, couldn't make hand seals, and couldn't get up.

"Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Tomu dropped down from the roof and didn't think, just acted as his hands came together to perform a jutsu he had only seen used once by the policemen who had been following him earlier.

As if a fire whirled in his belly, the heat charred his throat, and the taste of ash enveloped his mouth. The flames were being forcefully tugged out of his being and the entire alleyway erupted in a fiery explosion.

Tomu landed through the flames unscathed, grabbed Kusuro, ran out into the street, skidded on a puddle and slid inside of a grate. The two disappeared inside of Konoha's sewers.

The two boys gave shaky breaths.

"It's a lie," Kusuro muttered as he nursed his hand to his chest. "My mom is alive. I know she is. She's the strongest shinobi in the world."

"Naruto is the strongest shinobi in the world." Tomu instinctively replied.

"You don't know anything!" Kusuro snapped. Like a coiled spring unable to bear any more pressure, Kusuro pounced on Tomu. The two boys wrestled in the darkness and stink of the sewers until they both collapsed in exhaustion.

"Ninjas die, Kusuro," Tomu whispered.

"Everyone dies," Kusuro said bitterly as he picked himself up and wiped away the tears. Kusuro had been trying to forget and refused to come to terms that his mother and grandfather were dead. Everyone he had once known was gone, and the one person who had survived, was a traitor that he just saw burn alive.

Kusuro held his stomach and suddenly vomited. He could still smell burnt flesh. Kusuro wiped his mouth with his unwounded arm and froze when he turned around.

"Tomu, what are you doing?"

Tomu had grabbed a kunai from Kusuro's pouch and held it aloft before his eyes. "If I take them out it'll all be over right?"

"People with a kekkai genkai are born to become ninja, whether we want to or not," Kusuro replied and knew well what the pains of beings raised with one entailed.

"I have a choice!" Tomu screamed angrily as he stared at the dagger point of the kunai.

"You're being stupid. It's not in your eyes. It's in your blood." Kusuro replied. "Your children and
your children's children will have it. It is a legacy we are given to carry. I am all that is left of my village, all that is left of the Grass kekkai genkai bloodline. I am all that is left of my mother, and my grandfather, and all those that have come before me. Cursing what they gave me is dishonoring their memory." Kusuro slid down into the murky sewers. "We are the children of ninja," he said softly and briefly considered what he would have lost if his hands had been taken away from him, "and ours is a legacy of blood."

Tomu moved the kunai from his eyes to his neck. He desperately believed he had a choice, and either path led to tragedy.

Tomu dropped the kunai. The ninja weapon plopped into the murky water and splashed filth over his face. Tomu breathed and his hands shook. "A Uzumaki never gives up."

Tomu strained to pull himself up, got up, and kept going. "Come on, let's go home."

"Tomu, I think Mountain wants to invade Konoha, like they invaded my village. I don't want that to happen again."

"I'm not going to let that happen to Konoha." Tomu replied as he patted the slimy wall, grabbed Kusuro by his left hand and led him through the sewers.

"How about you do that fire thing again so we can see?" Kusuro suggested and jumped at everything that moved in the darkness even if it was his imagination.

Tomu paused. He didn't really know how he did that fire thing. He just did it. "I can get us out just fine. I know these sewers like the back of my hand."

"You really are weird," Kusuro commented for the sake of hearing his own voice. "Who would want to play in the sewers?"

"The type of kid who ran away from people a lot," Tomu admitted. "And I've used them to get away from Naruto's spying clones. Naruto doesn't like the sewer."

"He's Naruto Uzumaki, he's not afraid of anything."

"Everyone is afraid of something," Tomu said softly. The street kid and a Kage's grandson navigated the sewers until they reached the Uzumaki Compound. The grating slid open and both boys breathed in fresh air. They pulled and dragged each other through the gates.

x

The rest of the Compound still needed a lot of work, but the main house had largely remained intact enough to live in.

Naruto was rearranging all the new furniture he had bought. His ears perked at the sound of footsteps. He wondered who was stopping by for a visit and peeked his head out of the door.

When Naruto looked at Tomu's disheveled appearance and at the blood coating Kusuro's arm and hand – Kusuro knew at that moment that Naruto Uzumaki could certainly get scared.

Naruto wrapped them in his arms without question or inquiry. Tomu and Kusuro broke down into tears. Naruto picked them off their feet and carried them into the house. With a surprising amount of patience, Naruto grabbed a first-aid kit and began to tend to their wounds.

It was moments like this Naruto wished he could trade all the strength in the world for the chakra
control enough to heal.

"Naruto," Tomu said softly. "Konoha is in danger."

"I have to make sure you're safe first. Then I'll tend to Konoha." Naruto replied and stuck a mass of band-aids every place he saw blood. He applied salve to both of the boy's burns. Naruto seemed calm about the situation and the boys fed off that energy and were calm in turn.

When Naruto was finished, he looked up at them with soft blue eyes. "I'm listening."

Tomu and Kusuro told their parts of the encounter with the Grass ninja and the police.

His anger and rage was hidden behind the mask of a smile.

Naruto needed to find those policemen and report the incident to Shizune, the stand-in Hokage while Tsunade was out of the village. "We need to figure out why they are here. Perhaps we can find something out from the corpse."

Tomu and Kusuro looked at each other.

"I don't think there's anything left," Kusuro said truthfully.

Tomu hid his eyes from Naruto's inquiring look. "I did see the two policemen's faces."

"Henges," Kuso interjected.

After lurking through the sewer, Naruto couldn't get a scent off of Tomu either. "Shizune will probably go digging into your heads for more information," Naruto said as he stood up and looked down at the two boys.

"Would you like to help me save Konoha?"

Ao didn't consider himself as old, but he certainly was old for a ninja and sometimes, every now and then, he wanted to put the worries behind him. He reveled in the majestic grace of her hands, the soft embrace of her mouth, and the skillful art of her sex.

He was both exhausted and content when he made a final thrust inside.

Suddenly, her obi tightened around his hands.

The cloth snapped his wrists together and he was yanked forcefully backwards. Ao's head hit against the wooden arm of the couch. Before he could comprehend what was happening, the woman he had just been fucking flipped over with the ends of the obi in her hands. She wrapped and knotted the sash around the couch.

With his hands tied awkwardly behind his back, Ao was unable to make hand signs. He was completely tied down by the soft color of pink. The wooden seals on his earrings began to ring in warning, until the woman snatched them off and tore the skin off his ears.

"You're just a civilian," Ao accused.

The woman reached into one of her slippers and produced a small pill between her fingers. It was such a small detail, so easily lost in the larger dangers, that his byakugan had overlooked it.

The woman placed the pill in her mouth and through his activated byakugan, Ao watched as her
darkened chakra network suddenly flared to life. He had never seen such a technique and wished he had thought of it himself. Closing your own chakra nodes, a feat only accomplished by a byakugan, would certainly get you pass a sensor but it was a highly dangerous gamble if you were caught. You would be without your chakra until the nodes reopened.

Ao felt a weight of dread when she peeled the contacts out of her eyes and revealed the pale eyes of the Hyuuga. The naked Hyuuga kunoichi loomed over him with a cold expression. "Your payment is your life."

He attempted to struggle and loosen the tangled belt that held him and his hands captive. All his tools were abandoned with his clothes on the floor. In all his years, all the shit he had lived through, this was the last way he thought he would die. How had he gotten so old and complacent?

Ao was head of the Sensor Division in Kirigakure and this woman had deceived him at every turn. She had exploited the weaknesses of the byakugan, tempted him, and like a snake, deceived him and waited for him to lower his defenses to strike.

"May I ask who is the one to kill me?"

"Student of Yuuhi Kurenai and Mitarashi Anko, I am Hyuuga Hinata."

Before she killed him, Hinata Hyuuga whipped her hand forward and tore the byakugan out of his skull.

"My fire of youth continues to burn bright!"

Shino ignored Lee's constant challenges that echoed loudly over the jungle. A horde of specialized kikaichuu beetles finished consuming the corpse of a defeated ninja. With his hands in his sleeves and hood over his head, Shino walked calmly through the jungle while his beetles warned him of every presence within the perimeter.

Shino exited a thick amount of foliage before he came upon a river. The ninja who had been bent over to drink a handful of water turned at the warning barks of three nin-ken that prowled at her side.

"Who are you?" Hana Inuzuka asked of her opponent.

"Aburame Shino."

Hana raised an eyebrow. The Haimaru brothers tensed and growled deep in warning. Hana knew the smell of her brother's genin teammate. "You are not who you say you are."

"The graves amass in a field of fallen leaves." Shino responded and made no move to attack.

Hana relaxed at his words. "What do you want?"

"You are the first Leaf ninja I have come across. Would you be agreeable to an alliance?"

Hana cautiously agreed but whispered to her nin-ken to remain on alert.

They traveled in silence for several hours and largely used Hana's sense of smell and Shino's beetles to avoid as much fighting as possible.

"I smell death," Hana suddenly reported. "No one else seems to be by the corpse. We could salvage for supplies."
Shino nodded and sent his beetles ahead. Hana and Shino found a body floating along the winding bend of a river. Shino's beetles had dragged the corpse ashore.

The moment they saw the corpse both ninja tensed. After a few moments of nothing happening, Hana leaned down and examined what was unsettling her. She knew immediately that they had stumbled onto something bigger than the exams.

"How does a Mist ninja drown? I've seen this man before during the Fourth Shinobi War. His name was Chojuro, one of the Swordsmen of the Mist."

Shino surveyed the surrounding area.

"If he is a swordsman then where is his sword?"

Naruto watched the setting sun through the window, watched the numbers, and watched the guilt spill in the growing shadows of the room.

"It never happened."

Mei Terumi reached for her white Kage robe and accepted the cloth around her bare shoulders as if accepting the weight of the world.

"Your ANBU will find them."

"This is the Jounin exams. They are dead."

Mei's hair flowed down her back as vast as an ocean. She could not find the strength to return, nor the strength to craft the sweet smile needed to fool everyone. They would sense her weakness, like an encroaching school of sharks and attack without mercy.

"The hardest part of this job is watching the ones who fall. It's as natural as rain, but the raindrops fall cold and bitter on your skin."

"Perhaps I can help find them?" Naruto offered, again.

"This is not your affair Leaf ninja. I do not need your help." The bed grew chill when Mei moved from away. Obviously, she had needed something from him.

He should not have offered to escort her to her room, should not have let a mixture of pity and want persuade him, should not have been the nice guy. The better it felt, the more Naruto hated himself. Even though whatever he and Hinata had was certainly not a relationship, whatever it was he still felt he had betrayed it.

The Kage had paused at the couch and poured her a drink. Only the Kages and top officials were granted rest rooms within the stadium, whereas other members of the audience had to travel back to the resident Hidden Village for respite.

Naruto reached for his clothes. He pulled out of bed and stepped into his underwear.

The wine retired a stain of red on her lips. Mei's lake green eyes flowed toward Naruto's direction. "Tell me, where does a jinchūruki get a scar like that?"

Naruto paused. The dark scar trailed from his right cheek and traveled a steady journey toward his upper thigh. "Bad end of a lightning jutsu." Naruto's voice was smooth as he pulled his pants around his hips.
"A lightning jutsu," Mei scoffed as she leaned backwards against the couch. Her robe messily fell around the naked body Naruto had previously explored with his hands. "Come with me to Kirigakure. I'll give you anything. I'll give you money, and land, and as many women as you want."

Naruto picked up the final clothing item and put on his sage robe. "I want peace. Can you give me that?"

"A ninja knows no peace." Mei certainly wasn't attempting to recruit him so he could retire. She wanted him to fight for her, destroy her enemies, and act on her every whim. And perhaps she wanted a little bit of sunshine before the clouds rolled back in.

She played her last trump card. "Naruto Uzumaki, a word of advice, don't have sex with a kunoichi until you make sure she's wearing a seal."

Naruto stopped at the doorway and gave one final look at the Mizukage of the Village Hidden in the Mist.

"Too bad I'm just a shadow clone," and Naruto pressed his hands into the pockets of his sage cloak. "I'm not that naïve."

"We don't know the entire situation yet," Naruto replied as he conversed with Shizune inside of the Hokage's office. "We shouldn't alert the Hokage unless the situation is dire."

Shizune gave an anxious look at the ANBU Captain Cat who had his hand plastered against Tomu's forehead. Kusuro sat atop the desk and kicked his feet against the wood. All Kage's offices seemed to be a mess of paper and worried people.

"You're right," Shizune agreed. "But I'm going to send a code red to the patrols. Even with that I don't know if our numbers are enough to prevent an invasion."

"I don't sense any large numbers approaching. You're at worst case scenario," Naruto replied.

Shizune had learned in this job to always assume the worst.

Naruto straightened when Cat finally opened his eyes and Naruto did not waste any time to interrogate him. "Is there something we can use?"

"I couldn't identify the intruders but I accessed the boy's olfactory system and got a scent."

"Captain Wolf is in the village." "I advise that we summon Wolf."

Both Naruto and Cat ran over each other's words.

Cat's porcelain mask turned a blank expression towards Naruto, but his voice was an odd mixture of amusement and annoyance. "Are you going to let me do my job?"

Naruto crossed his arms and grumbled, "I was just trying to help."

Kusuro leaned over curiously and watched as Shizune went through several locked items to get to the highly classified ANBU scroll. Somehow, being in this office felt like home.

Shizune laid the scroll out onto the table which revealed every animal name with an ANBU mark underneath it. Shizune applied chakra to the mark underneath the Wolf kanji.

In a fog of smoke, Captain Wolf appeared at once in the room. "What's going on?"
"Mountain has infiltrated Konoha. I have a scent for you." Cat explained and then added, "via your mind."

"Hurry up," Wolf grumbled and removed his mask, but did not waste time putting up a henge for the sake of speed. While Cat placed his hand to Wolf's forehead, Naruto studied Wolf's face with a perplexed expression. The resemblance was uncanny.

Once Cat was done relaying the scent, Wolf replaced his mask. "This kid is a Uchiha? He could be perfect bait to lure out Sasuke."

"The Hokage and I agreed to keep this a secret. He is not bait for anyone." Naruto Uzumaki radiated killing intent toward an ANBU Captain, which was usually a quick way to get you killed. Wolf was enveloped in one of the most interesting killing intent he has ever felt. It had layers. The tip was akin to a dagger - cold, refined, and shaped by hardship to form the perfect edge. But underneath was something even more foreboding, underneath was the unbridled fury of a demon.

"Would you like to transfer to the Hunter-nin division?"

"Later Wolf," Cat interrupted. "Track down the intruders and bring them back to the office."

"Fine." Wolf shrugged.

"I'm going with you," Naruto demanded, without asking for permission.

"If you can keep up."

The Captain crashed through the window without mercy. Naruto was forced to use his chakra cloak as he made chase.

"The moment they realized they were compromised they must have ran for it," Wolf observed as they passed the gates of Konoha. Naruto had never seen anyone so natural or agile than the Hunter-nin Captain on a chase.

It didn't take any time at all for Naruto and Wolf to find the ninja bounding through the trees. Naruto began to pull ahead.

"Don't kill them, we need them to talk."

Naruto nodded. He sent a blade of wind forward. It was so sharp and focused, the wind whistled and sliced clean through the tree the ninja were about to the land their feet. They looked over their shoulder, took one look at the red eyes and whiskered cheeks, and collapsed on the ground in surrender.

Naruto landed at a crouch and the ground ruptured under the weight of Naruto's killing intent. His crimson eyes tracked every movement, every breath, and every twitch.

"What was your purpose here?" Wolf demanded.

"We- we were supposed to gather information on Konoha defenses and sneak the information out during the Jounin exams."

Wolf walked up to the two paralyzed ninja. Wolf leaned forward and smelled fear in the sweat clinging to their necks. Wolf snatched the scroll from one of the ninja's belt. The roll of paper was inscribed with a detailed map of Konoha and the position and shift of the guards at the gate. Wolf grew grim and handed the third set of documents to Naruto.
Naruto sent him a narrowed expression, lifted from his crouch, and grabbed the papers with a crackled tenseness. Naruto looked down at a copy of his own medical records. There were notes added to the bottom that discussed his resistance but susceptibility to poison, the hayflick limit, and the heart as a point of weakness that once was severed could not be healed.

A violent wind blew by and the documents in Naruto's hand were suddenly shredded and fell helpless at Naruto's feet.

Wolf continued to question them. "How did you infiltrate the police? Who is your in?"

The Mountain ninja gave Wolf a name.

"That police lieutenant has always been loyal to Konoha. You're not telling me something."

"We blackmailed him. He had relatives in Grass and they are being held hostage for his cooperation."

"Good enough."

The Wolf Captain circled the two ninja like a headsmen considering which way he should cut through the neck. Wolf's blank mask looked at Naruto. "We should probably bring them in for more questioning but I owe you for looking the other way on that mission with Shiyo. Your choice."

Then Wolf turned his back, the white coat of an ANBU Captain flapped behind him, and walked away.

Naruto Uzumaki looked up and considered the distance from the village.

When he had been younger, the chakra would have burned through his skin and his mind overtaken by the Kyuubi. Four tails sprouted. He towered over the whimpering ninja, his hands in his pocket, and his eyes as red as the sunny side of hell.

They cried and pleaded for mercy.

"I don't give mercy to those who attack my family."

And they both watched the numbers.

Naruto and Tsunade sat at each other's side as the competition reached its half-way mark.

Tsunade leaned over, a small unnoticed movement, and asked, "How far do you think those Mountains are?"

"Not far at all."

Naruto got out of his seat, left the booth of cordial fake smiles, and created a shadow clone to guard over the Hokage.

And finally, Naruto dismissed himself and disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

The frigid air could not move the silent being meditating on the Mountain's peak. Natural energy gathered throughout his pores. And then, ringed in gold, his eyes opened.

"It's time."
Crane could see the Village Hidden in the Mountain in the distance, touched by a soft cover of clouds. Crane was normally a patient person, but he has been waiting a month for this moment.

Hound made the motion to move forward and Crane and his fellow ANBU member, Mantis followed. Crane honestly wished he was leading the mission himself, but he knew he had too many emotional attachments and had not been out in the field for a while.

Knowing these limitations, Crane conceded to the command of his squad leader who seemed to be rather capable but at times could be rather… odd. Hound never looked back to see if his team was following but seemed to assume they were good enough to keep up with his eccentric style at navigating the terrain.

Crane watched as Hound pounced from a tree branch and landed on all fours against the rock below. He continued in that manner until he leaped and plummeted down to the mountain's base but landed as softly as a cat.

Crane and Mantis looked at one another. They applied their chakra and ran down the mountain instead.

When they reached the bottom, they had lost him.

Crane and Mantis used the only jutsu Crane has seen Hound use so far. Applying their chakra, they instantly teleported to the kunai linked to the one Hound carried. They appeared back at Hound's side.

Crane was surprised to find that he was already sitting atop the targeted mountain. He looked over a ridge to find two Mountain ANBU patrolling down below.

Hound made a dipping motion with his hand. There was never any need to talk. They all had memorized the plan, the maps, the signals, and the terrain. They all knew what they were supposed to do.

This ANBU patrol had been chosen for a reason.

Hound grabbed the vial from his belt and drank from it. His other team members did the same.

Mantis laid flat against the ridge and sat back. Hound nodded to his left. Crane activated his byakugan and focused on the ANBU to the left of him. His opponent was a man, had exactly twenty shuriken and ten kunai on his person, and the darkness of his heart suggested disease.

Hound and Crane attacked the two patrols from above.

Crane slammed his palms against his opponent, slightly missing the chakra nodes by mere inches. The Mountain ANBU found his chakra network crippled but he was still able to perform jutsu.

"Eight Trigrams Palms Revolving Heaven."

The massive rock thrown at Crane was grinded into dust against his defense. Crane re-entered his Jyūken stance, but before he could strike out against his opponent a pin prick of pain bit at his neck.

Crane collapsed and he heard when Hound hit the ground a few moments later.

"You okay?" The Mountain ANBU asked of his comrade and helped him to his feet.

"Damn Leaf Ninja. How the hell did they sneak up on us? Let's kill them."
"No, you know the boss - never let anything go to waste." The Mountain ANBU replied and leaned over to grab the mask of his opponent. The porcelain Hound mask was peeled away to reveal the whisker marks.

"Shit. Do you know who this is?"

"Oh, he's in the bingo book. Wait, let me look it up."

"He's Naruto Uzumaki you idiot."

Crane had to wallow in a moment of disbelief before he accepted the fact Naruto Uzumaki was leading an ANBU squad.

For Crane, everything suddenly made sense and the dots began to connect in his head – all the small conversations, all the whispers, all Hound's knowledge of the byakugan and its weaknesses. Hinata had been on Naruto's ANBU squad, before something happened between them, and Crane had come in and taken Hinata's place.

Crane kept perfectly still when they took off his mask.

"And this one is a Hyuuga."

"Is that a guy or girl?"

Crane kept a straight face when the ANBU reached down to check. He replied rather disappointed.

"Guy."

"You could always fuck him in the ass and pretend he's a girl?" The ANBU teased his partner.

"I guess it would be better than the time I fucked your mom and thought I was fucking a bear."

"Hey, mom-jokes are off limits."

"Whatever." The ninja waved his comrade off and looked down at his prize. "At least I'm looking at a good pay raise."

"It was my bees that did all the work!"

"Calm down. I'm sure your bees will get a raise too. Come on, we're going to have to go through the ANBU entrance. We can't let anyone know we've capture the Fox Demon of Konoha. We have to report this directly to the Captain."

Crane was lifted in the air and thrown over a shoulder. He allowed his body weight to slump, careful to maintain the façade that they were unconscious. The serum that they had taken earlier was developed by Sakura to protect them from the bee's sting.

"What kind of guy keeps his hair like that? Are you sure he's a dick?"

"You can strip him later and find out."

"Dude, that's gay."

A hidden entrance concealed by rock began to open.

"Somehow, I figured that the Fox Demon of Konoha would look scarier. He has whiskers."
"A feline fetish?"

"I don't want to know."

Hound and Crane were carried inside the Village Hidden in the Mountain.

"I will do one hundred laps around this jungle when I am finally defeated!"

Sakura Haruno face-palmed at another one of Lee's loud declarations. Her chest heaved as she plastered herself against a tree and healed the cut on her arm from her most recent altercation. She observed her surroundings and realized the mass of unfettered vines were a perfect place for a trap. Sakura grabbed her tripwire and went to work. Right when she was about to create a shadow clone to act as sentinel, she heard the sound of running footsteps. Sakura changed hand seals and finished a genjutsu. She melted into the background of her surroundings and flipped a senbon needle over on her tongue.

She watched incredulously as a total of ten Mountain ninja began to run past her.

Then the last Mountain ninja stopped only a few paces away from her. Sakura jumped from her place to block the fuma shuriken thrown at her from the Mountain sensor. Sakura rolled to her feet with her hands prepared in hands signs.

All ten Mountain ninja stepped out of the jungle.

"What is this?" Sakura demanded.

"Come quietly and we won't hurt you too much."

All these ninja were trying to capture her. Sakura didn't have to think too hard to guess why. She was the head medic of Konoha's hospital. Her mere corpse could reveal the medical records of all the top ninja in Konoha.

Sakura finished her jutsu and a torrent of water flowed through her mouth and crashed over the ninja like a flood. As they attempted to withstand the barrage, Sakura turned and ran. She reached into her pocket and knew she was going to have to call for back-up. This was more than just pride. This was the secrets of Konoha at risk.

Sakura put the dog whistle to her lips and blew. Sakura hadn't talked to Kiba since the ring incident and hoped he heeded her call.

The vines suddenly began to move and reached out to grab her. Sakura attempted to cut through with her kunai but the tangled web grew thicker. The more she struggled the more she seemed make it worse.

When Sakura heard her enemies near, she closed her eyes and limped helpless in the vines.

"That was easy," A Mountain ninja replied.

"She's only a medic-nin."

The jutsu was released and Sakura slipped from the vines into the arms of one of the ninja. As she was being thrown over his shoulder, Sakura stabbed the senbon needle from her mouth into the back of his neck and whipped around to slam her foot into another ninja's face. That ninja went flying to the other side of the jungle.
Sakura flipped backwards to avoid an earth jutsu, and then was forced to do a series of careful footwork to avoid all of the jutsu flying at her at once.

Sakura's chest heaved and hoped her heavy breathing didn't give away her position from behind the tree. She could use a genjutsu to escape but it was useless with that sensor still alive.

Suddenly the very sensor Sakura planned to target screamed. Sakura peeked from behind the tree and watched as the sensor's arm began to grow black and the creeping darkness began to drain him of his chakra. The sensor died of chakra exhaustion.

From the depths of the jungle a growl and three ninjens came barreling through and attacked as a rabid group.

Sakura took advantage of their confusion and prepared a jutsu. She wrapped a genjutsu around the surviving ninja. She twisted and deceived the rods and cones in their irises until they thought they had gone blind.

The ten ninja were quickly decimated to zero.

"You called?" Hana smiled as she patted down her nin-ken for injuries. It wasn't the Inuzuka Sakura had been expecting to come to her aid, but the Inuzuka Sakura gladly preferred.

Shino's beetles buzzed around the corpses of the ninja, and once drained, slipped back into Shino's robes. Sakura would never get used to that sight. Shino nodded, but didn't say a word.

"Sakura, whatever those ninjas want, there are more coming," Hana reported with a worried expression. "We need to go now."

Sakura nodded and followed Hana's vast knowledge in tracking to throw her pursuers off of their trail. They stopped to rest in a large destroyed clearing of the jungle where a battle undoubtedly had taken place just a few hours ago.

"Sakura, perhaps you should forfeit?" Hana suggested seriously. "If they get their hands on you the village could be at risk."

"I know," but Sakura did not want to give up this easily. "If the situation grows worse, I will."

Hana returned to caring for her nin-ken as if they were her own children. The jungle was quiet for right now. Hana gave Sakura a long look and then asked, "When are you going to tell him yes?"

Sakura brushed her shoulder-length hair behind her ear and cringed underneath the sister's stare.

"The answer is no. I just haven't found the courage to tell him yet."

Sakura watched as Hana's tongue swiped across her incisor, and then she finally spat an angry, "What?"

"I can't do it," Sakura said with an aching pain in her chest. She dealt with the sight of blood and the reek of death every day at work. She did not want to come home to that.

"I don't want to marry a ninja."

"Fuck you," Hana snarled and the usual amiable Inuzuka stalked away into the jungle and her three nin-ken followed on her heels.

But Sakura finally knew what she wanted.
Sakura leaned against a mangled root and healed the slight scratches she received from the jungle.

Shino straightened. "We've got company. We need to go."

Sakura looked at Shino for a moment and was a little flustered by the change in his voice.

"Who are you?" Sakura asked the hood covered ninja suspiciously.

"We've got to go," Shino insisted.

"What about Hana?" Sakura questioned as she looked in the direction Hana had taken. This time it was three Mountain ANBU that appeared through the trees. Shino twisted on his heels and insects fluttered out of his robes in a dark mass.

Suddenly one of Hana's nin-ken raced into the clearing with a begging whine.

"I'll take care of these," Shino replied. "Sakura Haruno, you must run."

Sakura knew her duty to the village, but she refused to turn her back on a comrade and a woman who had become like a sister to her. Sakura ran after Hana's nin-ken. Sometimes duty was the hardest thing to do.

Sakura found Hana collapsed and tied to a tree. Her neck was bent at an awkward angle to reveal a bee sting. The other two Haimaru brothers were fallen prone beside her and suffered from a similar wound.

Sakura felt a prick in her skin. She snatched the bee out of the air and the guts crushed in Sakura's gloved hand. The moment Sakura realized she was facing Mountain ninja, she had taken appropriate measures to protect herself. But the remaining nin-ken slumped at her feet.

"I don't know why that didn't work but if you don't come quietly we will hurt her." A Mountain ninja replied as she walked from behind a tree and a hive of bees surrounded her. The Mountain kunoichi pressed a kunai against Hana's neck.

"Alright," Sakura replied as she lifted her hands in surrender.

"Drop all your weapons."

Sakura begrudgingly dropped her belt and pouches.

The ninja motioned to a companion who had been targeting Sakura in the back from high in the branches. He dropped down, yanked Sakura hands backwards, and bound them. Then ninja patted Sakura in search for any hidden weapons and lingered a few seconds longer on her butt.

Sakura racked her brain for a solution, for any way to get her and Hana out of this alive.

"The medic-nin is secure. Kill the other one."

Sakura raced forward but was held back by the ninja twisting her arms.

The kunai descended.

Then a snarl ripped through the jungle.

The Mountain ninja screamed as they were snatched into the air by a large two-headed white wolf. Sakura winced and looked away as the white fangs chewed through the Mountain ninja like chewing
through a snack. In a coating of blood and saliva, they dropped dismembered to the ground. The bees that belonged to the Mountain dispersed without their master.

The beast transformation was dismissed and after the smoke cleared, Kiba stood with blood matted along his clothes and a dark glint in his eye. Akamaru towered over Kiba but soon padded over and greeted Sakura with a lick to the face.

"I'm glad to see you too," Sakura said in relief.

"We set off to find you the moment we heard your call," the deep and gruff voice of Akamaru replied and then added, "He was really worried and even missed out on two battles to get here."

"Traitor," Kiba grumbled under his breath. He still hadn't said a word toward Sakura but leaned down and placed his fingers to Hana's pulse. "What's wrong with her?"

"It's just paralysis, it should wear off," Sakura replied.

Kiba tilted his head at the sounds of battle.

"It's Shino," Sakura replied.

"Akamaru, go grab the other Leaf ninja," Kiba directed. Akamaru barked and bounded back through the jungle.

Sakura struggled with her bindings. "Can you stop being dramatic and please get me out of this?"

Kiba's eyes flickered.

Sakura winced when she was pushed against a tree and without permission, ripped her pants, and Kiba thrust inside of her. Kiba didn't make any attempt at being gentle. The blood of the man he had just killed smeared against her face. His hands marked his property with his long fingernails against her skin. Sakura surrendered to his mercy and rocked her hips to meet every angry thrust. A startled cry left Sakura's lips when he pounded deep, hard, with every intention to leave behind pain, as if to make her never forget who he was.

He parted from her as quickly as he came, and Sakura dropped to the ground. She lifted her freed hands and rubbed her chaff skin.

"Fuck you, Kiba!" and Kiba made a crater in the ground when Sakura's fist impacted his face. "What if that had been caught on camera?"

Kiba plucked himself out of the ground and gave her a disgruntled expression. He pointed to the smell of metal hidden in the bush. The red light was missing from the camera. "The cameras are off."

"That still doesn't give you the right to-" Sakura winced at the sharp pain with every movement. Embarrassed, she pressed her hand between her legs and the green chakra cooled the ache.

Sakura admitted she had initially been with Kiba for the sex. He never minded a quickie or a one-night stand in between her work shift and long hours. And sometime between the ever more frequent overnight stays, feelings got tangled in with all the rest. Why did he have to go and complicate it further with marriage?

"So what the fuck is going on?"

"Mountain is trying to capture me," Sakura answered. Sakura grabbed an extra pair of clothes from
her scroll and snorted when Kiba leaned against the tree to watch.

A few seconds after Sakura was dressed, Akamaru returned to them with Shino on his back.

Kiba's nose cringed and shoved Shino backwards to reveal the blood on his jacket.

The roughness Kiba initially exerted changed after he got a good whiff of the scent. Kiba lifted Shino from Akamaru's back and placed him as gentle as caring for a pup to the ground. "Sakura, she needs your attention."

"Kiba what?" Sakura stopped when the hood fell from Shino's head and revealed long black hair. Sakura knelt down and opened Shino's coat to reveal two pair of protruding breasts. When Sakura placed her healing hands on the wound, the Aburame shifted and fluttered her eyes open.

"It's a secret," Mukade, Shino's fiancée, whispered.

"Where is Shino?" Sakura asked.

"The graves amass in a field of fallen leaves," Mukade answered.

'Great,' Sakura thought, 'Hokage classified shit.' Sakura concentrated on healing Mukade when Kiba asked the question she hoped he wouldn't.

"What's your answer?"

"Seriously Kiba? It's the middle of the exams."

"Your answer will be the same in the middle of exams and at the end of it. Why is it so god-damned hard? Hana said give you some time to think but I've been waiting so fucking long. I know it wasn't the best timing but stab me in the back already if that's what you want to do. Just- fuck- what the hell is it?"

"No," Sakura snapped in frustration at his tirade.

The word spread like a distasteful stench.

"It's because I'm an Inuzuka isn't? Because I can't take you to fancy restaurants without being kicked out or because I'm too loud or because of the mistaken conception that I have dog breath when in actuality a dog's mouth is cleaner than a human being, or any of the other excuses girls give me."

Sakura had never been bothered by those minor habits and appreciated the fact he could bear her abrasive personality. "It's because you're a ninja."

"What?" Kiba questioned. "You want some stupid civilian dick? They're…" Kiba searched for the appropriate word. "Weak."

"Like my father and my mother?" Sakura asked.

"I could snap your dad like a twig if I wanted to." Kiba paced angrily around the clearing and his expression grew darker and more frustrated. "So that's it? I mean, I can't stop being a ninja. That's what I am. I am my mother's son and I've been working all my fucking life to be a ninja she's satisfied with."

"I'm not asking you to choose between your mother and I. I've already made the choice," Sakura replied and finished tightening the bandages around Mukade's ribs.
When Kiba and Akamaru stiffened, Sakura rightfully tensed in turn. "What is it?" She asked, but already knew the answer. She couldn't get any rest from this harrowing chase.

"There are more coming," Kiba reported. "I'm going to go intercept them. Sakura, get everyone away from here. Akamaru, go with them and tear anyone you see to pieces."

"I'll guard them with my life," Akamaru barked.

"Kiba, wait." Sakura grabbed the serum from her belt. "Take this first. It will protect you from their bees."

Kiba smelled it, like he did to everything he put in his mouth, and drank the concoction down with a grimace.

"Kiba, I'm sorry," Sakura apologized before he left.

"Yeah, whatever. That's what they all say."

"The lotus of Konoha blooms twice!"

Kiba stepped in the path of the Mountain ANBU.

"Move, all we want is the medic-nin."

Kiba stretched his neck and then gave a feral grin. He looked as wild as the animals that stalked the jungle. "You'll have to go through me first."

The Mountain ninja gladly obliged him.

They threw kunai, prepared their hands into seals, and unsheathed their katana. And then Kiba disappeared. Their attacks hit nothing but the jungle.

The first died when his neck snapped on collision with the ground, the second died gasping at the broken rib bone puncturing his lung, and the third was found dead hanging off a limb, his throat ripped open.

The remaining ninja pressed their backs together and gave nervous glances around the jungle swallowed by night. A prowling growl rumbled through the dark crevices and stalked the shadows.

"Fuck this," the mountain ninja cursed and slammed a summoning scroll on the ground. The last two ninja followed and three large Summons (Sabertooh, Spider, and Sparrow) crushed the underfloor and towered over the canopy.

Kiba spread his blood across the summoning contract. The clouds darkened as Kiba rose into the air.

All cameras turned toward the giant summons. The clouds darkened as Kiba rose into the air.

People in the stadium rushed from their seat into the upper-level halls. A mass crowd pressed around the windows.

The Hokage clenched the arm rests of the chair. "Tsume," Tsunade spat the word as if it was a bad taste in her mouth.

Naruto leaned forward in his chair at Kiba's summon. The build was the mixture of a dog and wolf. The crack of its whip like-tail was a terrifying sound of thunder. The fur was sleek black and almost
grew lost to the naked eye in the darkness of the night sky. With every breath plumes of smoke wilted and darkened the green landscape. The eyes were as red as freshly spilled blood.

"What is that?" Naruto asked.

"Blood Hound," Kakashi answered in muted awe.

Tsunade crossed her arms angrily. "It's a black-listed summon and as powerful as a tailed-beast. To sign the contract, you agree to give up your soul. No one has truly been able to control that thing. We might need to prepare to evacuate the stadium, just in case."

Kiba stood atop the beast he had spent years trying to tame. He only needed to say one word. "Kill."

Blood Hound snapped its tail, scratched the ground with its hind leg and laid down with the regal posture of someone who couldn't be bothered.

**Not worth my time.**

*Oh come on, think of them as chew toys.*

**Just three?** Blood Hound snarled.

*I'll scratch behind your ears.*

…**Listening.**

*Now that the secret is out, how about I get you that fight with the Kyūbi?*

Blood Hound's tongue slithered over his teeth.

*Unless you're afraid he's going to kick your ass again.*

The scar over the beast's right eye narrowed.

"What the hell is this?" the Mountain ninja scoffed and ordered his summon to attack. The large sparrow raced downward with a pointed beak.

Blood Hound craned it neck in annoyance, and black flames spewed from his mouth, cooking the summon and its summoner. It smelled like burnt barbeque.

All from its sitting position, the black tail whipped around the neck of the large Sabertooth tiger. The large cat twisted to escape the choking hold.

Kiba grinned, ran on four legs, and jumped. He pounced atop the summoner, dug his long sharp nails into his skin, and ripped the ninja apart.

Wind rushed through Kiba's hair as he descended and the summon underneath his feet collapsed from asphyxiation.

**Chew toys.**

Kiba turned his attention to the last one. *Fang Whirling Fang?*

Blood Hound snorted as his tail wrapped around Kiba's waist and Kiba shot upwards in the air like a whirling tornado.
The Mountain ninja fumbled with his hands signs in terror but finally managed to stumble his fingers together. Kiba reached out, spinning through the air, and his nails touch the skin of the ninja's throat.

Then the Spider exploded in a storm of acid.

A mission is always dangerous when you're forced to assume what someone else will do. Humans are unpredictable and you never know all the facts that compose their decisions.

When Crane and Hound were taken into the Village Hidden in the Mountain they had hoped they would be taken straight to the confinement chambers and finally discover the location where their targets were being kept.

They weren't so lucky.

Crane and Hound were brought into a small secretive ANBU chamber, wrists bound by chakra draining handcuffs, and thrown backwards onto a cold slab of metal. They were immediately stripped of their possessions.

"What's so urgent you demand my present at once?" Suzemabachi, followed by an ANBU Captain, stormed into the room after receiving the message. She was acting Kage while her brother was out of the village, although she thought otherwise since she was the oldest.

"Captain, we have caught Uzumaki Naruto and a Hyūga."

"You idiots couldn't catch a-" The ANBU Captain began until he saw the expression that crossed Suzemabachi's face.

Suzemabachi neared the unconscious prisoners on the table. Her fingers felt like claws as she examined the matured face of the boy that had sent her to jail. She snatched his shirt up, applied chakra to his stomach, and revealed the black ominous seal.

"I'll be damned," Suzemabachi lips upturned in a twisted smirk and went to examine the seal on Crane's forehead.

"This one is sealed so we'll have to use him quickly before Konoha realizes he is missing. Place him at highest priority in the breeding program."

"What about Uzumaki?"

"We can't afford Konoha learning of his capture. This," Suzemabachi slapped her hand on Hound's cheek, "is the one person Konoha will undoubtedly go to war for."

"First we need to find out why they were here in the first place." The ANBU Captain inserted reason within Suzemabachi's mad smile.

"You're right. I'll personally oversee the torture and interrogation. Mole Captain, get the needle."

With the intent of separation - Plan B was now in effect: knock out their captors and find the target themselves.

Hound snapped the chakra draining cuffs that were never meant to hold a jinchūruki. He sprung forward from the table right as the Captain was bringing a loaded needle down on his chest. Hound slammed the Captain against the ground. He wasted little time summoning his chakra cloak and snapped the Captain's neck.
Three red claws sprouted from his chakra. Crane was dropped to the floor and kept his cover until Hound finished and freed him from the draining chakra cuffs. The three ninja were lifted into the air, the red chakra covered their mouth to prevent a scream, and began to squeeze like popping an unwanted zit.

Then his red chakra flickered.

Hound stumbled. He looked down and pulled the empty needle out of his chest. The Mountain ninja fell at the same time Hound lurched to the floor.

Crane attempted to break his cuffs while the ninja were getting to their feet. Hound writhed in pain and clutched at his chest. The amount of drugs in Hound’s system would have killed anyone else.

Suzemabachi breathed the sweet taste of air and knew they had gotten lucky. She was going to have to take added precaution.

Imperceptible, two small beetles escaped from their hair and fluttered down the hall.

Plan C was now in effect: Mantis saves them or they save themselves.

Hound opened his eyes and stared rather unfocused at the grainy texture of the floor. The room began to spin when he lifted his head and winced at the light blinding his eyes. His hand was encased in a stronger set of cuffs and his feet were tied to the legs of a chair.

He could feel the chakra in his body battling whatever he was injected with. It was a slow hard uphill battle and it would be a while before his chakra was recovered enough to break these chains.

"I can't believe you're awake so soon," Suzemabachi's voice clawed against Hound's brain. She leaned forward, snatched his hair, and yanked his face upwards by his blonde hair. She examined his dilated pupils and the puffy redness in his eyes. Every short second, he would jerk and spasm.

"I've dreamt of a moment like this every day of my life."

For Hound, it never crossed his mind. He hardly gave thought to the many criminals he had knocked out when he was a genin.

The kunoichi straightened. The metal rod she held in the palm of her hand was cool, smooth, and unbending. Then that metal rod went across Hound's face.

This wasn't just another session with Ibiki. This was real.

Obviously Suzemabachi didn't understand the meaning of 'torture and interrogation'. She hardly cared for the interrogation and focused on the latter.

Blood drooled from his mouth.

Since Hound’s chakra was busy combating the drugs, the wounds didn't heal like they were supposed to. The pain lingered and built upon every new blow. He was too unfocused to escape into his mindscape.

Hound counted the painstaking seconds until he could free himself and rip this bitch apart.

Crane continued to play unconscious, hoping it might provide him an opportunity to escape. He refrained from using his byakugan for fear they would notice the bulged veins around his eyes. He
knew when he had entered the confinement chambers where the program took place by the sudden turn in his captors' conversation.

"I hate it when I have to come down here. Last time they gave me a civilian. Makes me feel like shit when they scream."

"Makes me feel like shit when they don't scream," The Mountain ANBU replied. "Ninjas are just tools. We fuck who they tell us to fuck, then I go back home to my wife."

The ANBU stopped at the registration center, set up similar to the mission desks, except these missions involved creating life instead of taking it. "The Captain says this one goes on high priority."

Crane was looked over by the man at the counter. "Alright, we'll send him through screening and get him started right away."

Crane was handed over to two other ninja, who were more silent, more cold, and more emotionless.

Crane was carried into a lab where his clothes were cut off of him and a needle was stuck into the vein on his arm.

"Sex: Male."

"Natural affinity: Water."

"Kekkai genkai: Byakugan."

The medics scribbled their notes on paper, quills scratching.

"We will now begin to administer the aphrodisiacs."

Crane had to think of something. He could not let the byakugan fall into enemies hands. He'd kill himself before that happened, and that's when he got an idea. Crane gathered the little amount of chakra he had and focused the small drop into a sudden pulse toward his heart. He didn't need a lot of chakra, just a small concentrated strike.

Suddenly the machine began to flat line.

The men in the room began to curse and scrambled for the medical equipment. They freed Crane of his chakra draining cuffs to delay his death. The medics began to pump chakra into his chest like the sudden shock of a defibrillator.

The team of Mountain ninja brought Crane back to life.

But their victory was short lived.

The five ninja in the room were dead in seconds.

Crane slipped of the table and picked up a lab coat, mask, and hat. He dressed in the white of a medic-nin.

It had been a gamble. There was a good chance the ninja could not have revived him before the few seconds the seal recognized he was dead and destroyed his body and everything in the surrounding area.

Crane henged himself into one of the dead ninja and henged the corpses into fallen medical equipment.
He took a moment to gain his bearings. As he scanned his surroundings with the byakugan he pinpointed exactly where he was on his memorized mental map. He was deep underground, far below the Main center of the Hidden Village.

Crane had made it to the targeted destination.

Now, all he had to do was locate the captured Leaf Shinobi in the maze.

He left Hound to his fate. The mission always came first.

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Hound has experienced pain, beyond anything you could imagine, from a chidori to the chest and to the skin burned from his body. But the worst of the pain had gone away in seconds, relieved by instant regeneration.

These wounds continued to bleed out and the broken bones stayed broken.

"Fuck you," Suzemabachi demanded and thrust the metal rod into Hound's groin. Her hair was matted in sweat from the exertion and her heart raced in scorned anger. Five years she had been in jail. Five years she had waited for her revenge.

Hound peeked out the yellow strands of his hair and the crystalline ice of his eyes erupted in red.

Poisonous chakra erupted around him like fire and melted the cuffs off his hands.

Suzemabachi brought her arms up to instinctively shield herself from the overwhelming chakra blaze and the skin peeled away from her forearms. She attempted to run and found her entire body frozen under the pressure of the terrifying killer intent.

Hound lifted from the chair as if he was someone who had chosen to be there.

Suzemabachi stared in horror as the bent and broken bones cracked into place, the wounds closed, and all the pain she inflicted was gone in seconds.

He stepped forward and she took a stumbling step back, tripped on her fear, and fell at his mercy. "Please," she begged.

The Fox Demon of Konoha tore her apart with his bare hands.

He stepped over the dismembered corpse, shoved his hands into his pocket where flesh and caked blood was stuck underneath his fingernails, and continued forward.

---

When Crane had identified the location of their multiple targets, he went about the task of securing the area. After he had killed all the men at the front desk and hid the corpses, Crane heard an ominous buzz flood into the narrow hallways. Crane stilled when the black cloud swept past him, small insects brushing past his skin. The unlucky ninja that had come around the corner was enveloped by the black cloud, and when the storm passed, a rain of bones hit the ground.

Not many in the Aburame clan could control that flesh-eating horde.

Crane and Mantis convened back in the lab.

"Hound has been compromised," Crane informed the other agent and knew the chain of command gave Mantis superiority.
Mantis was silent for a moment, listening to whispers Crane could not hear.

"He's coming."

Mantis sat the equipment that had been confiscated from Crane and Hound earlier back onto the table. Crane redressed in his ANBU outfit and refitted his mask.

Hound came through the room without a care to even apply a henge. His ANBU outfit was torn and bloodied, but he didn't have a scratch.

"Slight detour, but we're back on track," Hound replied coolly and gathered his gear.

Crane examined Hound with the byakugan. On the outside the blue-eyed blonde looked fine but the inside was a different story. His heart didn't beat as loud as it used to, the added labor of his lungs, and the increased brittleness of his bones.

"Naruto," Crane called.

"Hound on a mission," Hound interjected.

"Hound," Crane corrected. "Whatever medical condition you have, it's gotten worse."

Hound shrugged the unimportance of those words away and handed out the radio headsets. "From this point onward we maintain radio contact. Have you located the targets?"

Crane nodded. "Yes. The Yamanaka and Inuzuka are in the southern hall. Tenten is in the northern. I have yet to spot the other leaf ninja."

"How many hostiles?"

"We are currently deep underground and there's only a few enemy ninja. Mantis' horde is currently taking care of them." Crane paused, his byakugan activated as the dark cloud began making its return. "We are now the only ones in this section of the village."

"Mantis, the two ANBU who brought us inside saw our faces, you have a track on them?" Hound asked.

Mantis nodded.

"Kill them."

Mantis left to follow his orders.

"Crane, retrieve Tenten. I will go get the others. Meet in this room when we've acquired the targets."

Hound placed the mask over his face.

The number of cells were many. They wined forever through the ground and held the unlucky in its jaws.

Hound stopped at two cells conveniently labeled as Leaf Shinobi with a big red 'x' crossed over the metal door. With the strength of sage mode he forced it off its hinges.

"You want some more do you? I'll rip your fucking head off." The Inuzuka snapped her teeth when Hound entered the room. There were dead shredded ninja lying on the ground. Her hands were
bound but her sharp toenails and teeth were ringed in blood.

"Leaf ANBU? Well about fucking time, get me the fuck out of here," The Inuzuka demanded.

Hound had braced himself to find a different scene and was relieved when it was otherwise. Hound immediately broke her chains and freed her.

"Sweet chakra," The Inuzuka smirked once the chakra draining shackles were off of her. "What took you so god-fucking long?"

"I am sorry for the wait," Hound replied and offered a helping hand. The Inuzuka shoved him in the chest and walked out of the cell on her own.

Hound broke open the Yamanaka's cell. Instantly he heard a voice in his head, One step closer and I'm going to mind fuck you until you shit blood.

Hound immediately replied, "I'm here to save you."

The Yamanaka lifted her head from the fake helpless position. There were men lying beside her with eyes open so wide they died seeing ghosts. Her blonde hair was a bob around her head. "Really?" She asked.

"Of course really," The Inuzuka replied when she stepped inside. "The Inuzuka clan does not abandon each other."

Hound freed the younger version of Ino.

"Thank you," the Yamanaka breathed with a sincere sweetness Ino did not possess. "Do you have some clothes I can borrow?"

"Seriously, Sayuri? We were born without clothes," The Inuzuka scoffed. She was comfortable in her nakedness.

"Well, I'm sorry everyone can't be savages like you, Akita."

Hound used his clothing scroll and handed one of his ANBU undershirts to Sayuri Yamanaka.

"Perfect," She smiled. "I apologize, I might get it dirty. I'm covered in-" Sayuri blanched.

"Your own shit?" Akita asked and then rolled her eyes. "Shit. Everyone does it."

Akita placed her hands on her naked hips and asked, "Alright tight butts, what is the plan to get out of here?"

Behind his mask, Hound gave a flustered expression at his sudden nickname. He cleared his throat. "We need to find the other Leaf Shinobi."

"I can help you with that," Akita replied, reached to slap his butt in passing, but reflexively Hound caught her wrist. He let her go after a tense moment.

Akita rolled her eyes and scoffed, "ANBU, so damn uptight."

Gantetsu limped down the hallway. A ninja constantly looked over his shoulder. The wound still pained him every time he moved but in the end, Tenten had saved his life. It was assumed she had escaped instead of the truth in which he freed her. They didn't kill Gantetsu, but they didn't let him
The metal cell door opened.

"Hurry up," his escort demanded.

Gantestu stepped inside. The door closed and locked behind him. He gave a deep sigh and stared at the woman chained to the floor.

Tenten weakly turned her head.

He knew if it wasn't him, it would be someone else, someone who didn't care.

His breath whispered across her skin as he knelt down. His hands were careful to avoid the wounds and handled her like a fragile piece of glass. Tenten closed her eyes and revel in the gentleness of his hands and the soft touch of his lips. Her breath hitched as her body reacted in his presence. She hated the fact she looked forward to his coming.

Gantetsu pressed his cheek against her tears.

Then, out of nothing, a scream.

Gantetsu whipped around, left her, and pressed his back against the metal door. A sharp blade grew out of Gantetsu's arm. Gantetsu peeked out the small window of the door and saw nothing but the darkness of the hallway. A creeping sweat fell down his neck.

"What is it?" Tenten asked and wondered what twisted punishment they had devised for her now.

There was a buzz before the storm.

Darkness crept through the cracks between the stone, under the door, and finally crashed through the window.

Gantetsu stepped backed in confused horror as black began to paint the walls. He attempted to strike with his blade but the darkness danced around it.

"Fuck," Gantetsu cursed and threw himself on top of Tenten to shield her from the attack.

Tenten watched in terror as the insects clung to Gantetsu, until his skin, muscles, organs had all been eaten away. His skull fell on Tenten's chest, bounced off, and rolled away. A ninja rarely chooses the way they want to die.

Tenten knew she was going to be next but the cloud simply brushed passed her skin. She took a closer look at the beetles as they scattered back whence they came.

A dark smile cracked on her face. They were coming.

Minutes later, Tenten looked up at a white Crane mask.

"I am still not even with the number of times you have rescued me," Crane replied.

"Neji," Tenten breathed in relief.

Crane unlocked her chains and scooped into his arms one of the only people who could stand being in his presence for any lengthy period of time. He pressed a hand to his ear. "I've acquired the target. Critical condition."
"As have I. Two are fit enough to walk. The other two are in critical condition."

"Targets are dead," Mantis replied after several seconds later.

"Converge on our previous location."

Crane carried her out and Tenten knew she was finally leaving this nightmare of pain, suffering, and mixed emotions behind.

Once all three agents had returned to the lab with their quarry, Hound made several clones to support the wounded. He grabbed three sealed kunai at his belt. The kunai were connected to a safe house on the border where a medic team was waiting.

They applied chakra to the seal and like an unsuspecting shadow, left the Village Hidden in the Mountain.

Mission Complete.

"My fellow ninja the hour is nigh upon us! I beseech you to let our fires of youth burn everlasting!"

The acid consumed like a living organism and began eating at the skin of Kiba's right leg. He had been pulled out of the sky by Blood Hound's tail but he hadn't escaped the shower of acid unscathed. Kiba gritted his teeth in pain as he pulled off his shirt and attempted to wipe the bubbling acid away. But the shirt began to burn and the cloth began melt and stick into his skin.

That wasn't even the worst of Kiba's problems.

He watched as Blood Hound stalked around him, as if circling prey.

**You've promised your soul to me.**

*I'm not dead yet.*

Those red eyes narrowed and struck his tail across Kiba's face like a whip. A long extended tongue licked the blood from Kiba's face, trailing a line of heat against the red tattoo.

**You are dead. You just haven't realized it.**

Then the Blood Hound dismissed himself just as Akamaru burst through the jungle with Sakura.

"Kiba!" She yelled and jumped from Akamaru's back.

"I'm alright," Kiba winced as he sat up, and pretended the fact that the acid was growing as just a scratch.

When Sakura saw the acid creeping up Kiba's leg she blanched. Akamaru pressed his muzzle against Kiba's cheek and moved to wipe the green mass with his paw.

"No," Sakura warned and shoved Akamaru's leg away.

"You're going to heal me right?" Kiba asked mechanically, knowing that she would.

Sakura always took care of him.
"Yeah," Sakura replied with a strained voice. "Yeah, I'm going to heal you Kiba."

Kiba's head slumped against her chest as she pulled the needle out of his arm.

"What are you doing?" Akamaru questioned as he paced around them, his ears flicking downwards.

"Even if he forfeits now and gets to the best medical equipment, there is only one solution a medic can take." A tremor ran through Sakura's hand when she reached for the scroll that contained her medical supplies.

Sakura delved into that cold mask a doctor must wear.

She ligated the artery to prevent hemorrhage, transected the muscles and finally placed the oscillating saw below the knee.

Akamaru whined in pain.

And the sizzling flesh was amputated away.

Sakura filed down the sharp and rough edges of the bone and transposed the remaining skin and muscles flaps over the stumps, just like she has done a hundred times before.

When it was all over, her hands finally shook, her lips quivered, and her heart trembled. And Akamaru howled a haunting hymn.

"I'm so so sorry." Sakura held Kiba in her lap and cried guilty tears against his skin.

The exams would be over soon and eventually Kiba would wake up and realize he was no longer a ninja.

The title of 'Jounin' seemed so stupid and insignificant in the grand scheme of things.

Mantis leaned against the outside of the safe house, where the medic-nin was attending the freed Leaf ninja inside. Crane sat atop the roof and kept guard. Hound was running in and out of the house in an attempt to help, but as agreed on by the medic-nin, was largely in the way. They simply didn't say it aloud to the ANBU operative.

Mantis mentally counted the number of his beetles. His eyes snapped open when one was missing. He reached his hand out and Hound stumbled into it as he carried a bucket of bloodied water to empty.

"Hound, where is the real you?" Mantis asked.

The Hound's mask was a blank expression and after a few moments, finally replied, "Saving the rest."

Crane slipped down from the roof in front of Hound. "That wasn't a part of the plan."

"It was always a part of my plan," Hound answered.

"There were hundreds of people there," Crane argued. "Not even you have enough chakra to transport all of them to the safe house."

"I was going to take the more scenic route," Hound admitted.
"You are risking detection. Just leave those people to their fate."

"What is their fate?" Hound asked angrily. "And what gives you the right to determine that?"

Hound shoved Crane away from him with a rasengan. "The only fate any of us deserve is the one we earn."

Hound wasn't going to involve Crane and Mantis in his personal agenda. Their mission was complete, the other half of his has just begun.

Hound made several hundred clones and they raced through the underground. Cell doors were thrown off their hinges, chains were broken, and hundreds of people were freed.

Hound stopped at the only other door that not only had a red 'x,' but had chains wrapped around it as well. Hound punched through with a rasengan and found a woman hanging from the ceiling. Dried blood spotted her body.

Hound didn't hesitate as he brought her down and broke the chakra constraining cuffs.

Suddenly, Hound was impaled by hundreds of sharp needles and disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

The woman stepped one foot forward and peeked out the curtain of her green hair. Another clone came to the doorway. "I'm trying to rescue you."

"I don't want to be rescued," The woman replied savagely. "I want revenge."

"I can't let you do that. You're going endanger the lives of everyone I'm trying to save. For right now, I need to rescue you."

The woman lifted her hand. Her hair sharpened into needles, they flew and converged on Hound's throat.

She took another step forward, when another clone came to the door.

"How many of you are there?" The woman snapped. "Get out of my way. I have people to kill."

"I know you're angry, but let's get you out of here, your wounds looked at, and then you can go anywhere you want. Promise."

She scoffed. "And I should trust a leaf ninja?"

She picked a needle out of her hair and threatened, "Have you ever wondered what it feels like to have your dick skewered?"

"Trust me," Hound said and took a step inside. "I'll get you back to whatever village you came from."

"My village is gone." The kunoichi said scathingly. "They killed my people, my father, and my son. I demand to be avenged."

Hound realized talking to her was like talking to Sasuke. They were too blinded in their own darkness. With enhanced speed, he evaded the needles thrown at him and punched her in the gut.

She collapsed in his arms. Hound picked her up and carried her out.
The clones began to carry the prisoners through the ANBU entrance Mantis had secured earlier. Several clones were leading the way with sage chakra, careful to avoid the village patrols. It was slow and time consuming, but like a small stream, Hound snuck them away from the Hidden Village and through the land he had spent a month memorizing.

When he had exhausted the natural chakra he had gathered, he used the Kyuubi's chakra.

It was only a matter of time when Hound could feel the scraping of his chakra against his veins, scratching and struggling to maintain the clones. Hound knew he was on the verge of chakra exhaustion.

Hound closed his eyes and entered his mindscape.

Naruto stood with arms crossed before the Kyuubi and demanded, "I need you to stop leeching off my chakra."

"You had sex with the Mizukage." Hinata, who was leaning against one of the caged bars, snapped at him.

Naruto blinked, completely flustered by an incident he had completely pushed in the back of his mind for the mission. "I- that was a clone," Naruto argued. "It wasn't really me."

The Kyuubi chuckled. "Someone is feeling guilty."

"I- this is not the time right now," Naruto told his inner Hinata, self-conscious - whatever. "We'll, I'll sort this out later."

But then Hinata erupted into tears as she wrapped her arms around him. All the wounds he had suffered during the torture were now physically manifested on his skin. The red rose of her lips kissed his broken fingers. Naruto winced as she proceeded to correct the crooked bones straight.

"Let me heal you," she whispered into his ear. Her hands brushed over the wounds and bruises. He could feel his skin knitting underneath her touch.

The Fox was still sucking away at his chakra.

"No." Naruto peeled her away with reluctance and fought that instinctive urge to run away from it all, to give up, to stay here with Hinata, and let the Kyuubi take over. He didn't have enough time to heal the trauma.

Naruto and the Demon Fox faced one another. "Stop absorbing my chakra. I need it."

"Nothing comes without sacrifice."

"I'm not giving you anything."

"Then I guess you're out of luck." The Demon Fox opened its great maw and yawned.

Naruto knew he wasn't going to have enough chakra to save everyone. His chakra had been divided between the clone he left in the village and the one remaining with the Hokage. Aside from that, a large amount of his chakra was used to overcome the drugs and break him out of his shackles. The rest was not sufficient with the Kyuubi intentionally absorbing it.

Naruto frowned. "What do you want?"

"I just want to stretch my legs."
"No."

"Then I guess we have no deal."

"I guess not," Naruto said steely and exited his mindscape.

Hound had learned his limits and had learned the consequences of over-exerting them. Twenty people were left behind. Hound knew those twenty faceless people would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Hound slowed down at the border. He did not have enough chakra to get the prisoners through border patrol. He would have to meditate for hours to regain his natural chakra reserves but he did not have hours before someone in the Village Hidden in the Mountain realized most of the prisoners were missing and raised the alarm.

Hound attempted to create a rasegan but it sputtered and flickered in his hands.

Without another option, he unsheathed his katana and stalked towards the heavily guarded border.

He stopped when a small kikaichuu beetle landed on his hand. It buzzed into the air and Hound followed. He emerged from the rocks and found Crane and Mantis waiting.

"We've already took care of the patrol. Hurry up."

The sun rose as Hound ushered hundreds of Mountain captives across the border into safety.

The Jounin Exams undeniably went to Konoha this year as the remaining participants stood before the crowd, some bloodied, dirtied, injured, and close to death.

Every pose Lee struck, the crowd roared in cheers. Lee single-handedly, the ninjutsu and genjutsu crippled ninja, showed the world that if you tried hard enough you could reach your dreams.

"Lee has proved himself the star of the exams," Kakashi noted.

"He deserves it," Tsunade smile and remembered the surgery that had a fifty percent chance of succeeding, and could have easily gone the other way. She was proud of him and she was proud of all her ninja standing in the end.

The Ina-Shika-Cho trio was practically untouched. Sakura, Hana, Shino, and Kiba, who was admitted in the hospital at the exam's end, were all now Jounin.

"The mountains aren't very far." The ANBU agent Mantis said at her side.

Tsunade smiled smugly.

"Congratulation, Shino Aburame is a Jounin."

And Mantis smiled.

"Where is Hound? He was supposed to be the one to report back to me," Tsunade whispered.

"He judged it would be best if you didn't try to kill him around the other Kages."

Tsunade looked down at the Naruto clone.
"Hey, don't look at me. I didn't do anything," the clone complained.

Nevertheless, this Jounin exam seemed to go off without a hitch.

Suddenly a messenger rushed into the room, and didn't waste any time moving past the exiting Kage's and officials. He dropped down on one knee and whispered into Kitsuchi's ear.

"Naruto," Tsunade demanded, "What did he say?"

Naruto blinked and gave the Hokage an incredulous expression. "The Tsuchikage is dead."

All the Kages in the room gave a collective groan, "Fucking Jounin exams."

x

_Was the Will of Fire constrained to just Konoha? Or did it consume without heed of borders or symbols or differences?_
"Oonoki, the Third Tsuchikage of Iwagakure is dead," Tsunade announced. The moment the Jounin exams had ended and everyone had returned to Konoha, an impromptu council meeting had been called.

It was a grim first council meeting for many in the room.

Naruto took the initiative to begin the conversation as he was still trying to get a grasp on the political ramifications of Oonoki's death. "I don't understand. How does it affect us?"

"It changes everything," Tsunade responded.

"But shouldn't we discuss Mountain?" Naruto questioned. "Not only did they attempt to steal valuable documents from Konoha but also attempted to capture Konoha's head medic-nin during the Jounin exams. Shouldn't we focus on a combined effort with our allies against Mountain? Ever since they seceded from Iwa, they have always had ill intent towards us. And they were probably the ones who killed Oonoki."

Most of the information about Mountain's actions during the Jounin exams had yet to be revealed to the council, which set off a series of questions among the leaders of the village.

"It has been undetermined how or who killed Oonoki," Tsunade answered.

"It wasn't Mountain," Ino, with her hand under her cheek and a bored expression, replied. "Think about it. Mountain killing Oonoki would have been stupid. It could have been anyone using the situation between Mountain and Iwa to mask their own agenda. Really, what were Sand and Lightning up to during the Jounin exams?"

Ino gave a pointed look toward Shikamaru. Shikamaru gave a lazy shrug of his shoulders. If Sand was planning something that big Temari certainly would not have told him. Naruto was fairly sure himself, kind of, perhaps, that Gaara probably would have told him they were planning something.

"With the death of Oonoki, a joint effort against Mountain has been given low priority among our allies. I have received recent reports that Sand, Lightning, and Mountain are all converging on Iwa. Sand is seeking to recapture a contested piece of land the two countries have fought over for centuries, Lightning is seeking to expand their control over the western ocean, and Mountain had already sent out the invading force."

The Hokage looked at all the faces on the council. "We need to decide Konoha's plan of action."

Shikamaru voiced the implications behind the Hokage's words. "If Sand and Lightning are moving toward Earth, then that violates the peace treaty signed after the Fourth Shinobi War. In that case, Konoha is held responsible to uphold the treaty and go to war with both Sand and Lightning."

"That is the case," Tsunade responded gravely.

"A war with both Sand and Lightning would be disastrous for Konoha even if we are the victors," Chouji replied. "Those costs are too great."

"I am obviously against that option as I am a symbol of our Sand alliance," Shikamaru said.
So far the Hyūga clan head had been observing the council in silence, but his voice always demanded the attention of everyone in the room. "The peace treaty was a farce anyways," he claimed. "The treaty was signed by the Five Great Shinobi Nations but ever since Mountain successfully seceded, Earth Country isn't 'Great' anymore."

"Wait," Naruto argued, and you could see the palpable tension between Naruto and the Elder Hyūga who could swear the Hokage placed Naruto in the council just to argue with him. "The peace treaty afforded us at least some small semblance of peace. We didn't outright kill each other on the field of battle without at least pause or hesitation. It was a small reason for us to cooperate. If we break the treaty what is going to hold our alliance? What's going to keep this decision from turning against us in the future?" Naruto asked.

"Boy," and the Elder Hyūga stretched the word. "A peace treaty is just a piece of paper."

"The peace treaty isn't just a piece of paper. It's a symbol and that holds power over people's minds," Ino interjected. "Perhaps the peace treaty is the real target behind Oonoki's death. Breaking the peace treaty creates a greater opportunity that the Great Shinobi nations will begin fighting again. In that light, anyone could have assassinated Oonoki, including the smaller countries who have felt threatened by our alliance. I do agree with Naruto that we should consider what we would lose."

"What we could lose is miniscule compared with the price we would have to pay to go to war with Sand and Lightning. We might win in the end but not without great casualties. I am not endangering my clan to uphold a symbol," The Hyūga elder spat.

"That sounds rather ironic," Naruto replied, "considering your clan lives by traditions. Traditions are ultimately mere symbols of loyalty, status, love, and the other excuses your clan use to do anything other than what makes sense."

Sarutobi suddenly had a terrible coughing fit. Hana hid a smug smile.

"Traditions aren't just symbols," There were veins beginning to protrude from the corner of Hyūga's eyes, as if he no longer had control over the activation of his byakugan. "They are in place to ensure our survival."

"Which is also the same purpose of a peace treaty, if I'm not mistaken," Naruto smoothly replied.

"Enough," Tsunade interrupted the battle of words. Naruto always had an uncanny knack for oration, his Talk no Jutsu rather famous, but over the last month has shown an increased refinement in the way he used his words. And it would suddenly erupt in the council, in a battle of wit, against the Hyūga Elder.

"Naruto, get to your point," Tsunade demanded.

"I don't agree with war against Sand or Lightning either, but I think we're rushing into this. Can't we postpone this decision? I know the Raikage enough to know he's going to do whatever the hell he wants but I could visit Sand and attempt to convince them not to move on Iwa in an effort to preserve the treaty. Let me talk to the Kazekage," Naruto insisted.

"I agree to postpone the council," Ino replied. "Let Naruto talk with Gaara and gauge the political situation in Sand so we can make an informed decision. If a peace treaty has to be broken, we should not break it lightly."

"And we're going to leave such an important diplomatic mission to him?" The Hyūga asked, more so of the Hokage.
"I can vouch that Naruto is the best person suited to influence the Kazekage in any manner," Shikamaru replied, "And I volunteer myself to accompany him."

"I agree that Naruto has presented us with a third option we can consider. Do we all agree to postpone the decision of the peace treaty to allow Uzumaki and Nara to speak with the Kazekage?" Tsunade asked.

The votes were rather overwhelming in Naruto's favor, especially from the new clan heads that were personally aware of Naruto and Gaara's close relationship.

As the council began to scatter, the Hokage motioned Naruto to follow her. They exited from a side door that led toward the Hokage Tower. "I want you to leave first thing in the morning after your doctor's appointment."

Naruto frowned. "I'm fine."

"After that mission report I want you checked out before you go anywhere," the Hokage instructed. "Who knows what could have been in those drugs, how much of it still lingers, and how the exertion affected your body."

The Hokage entered the privacy of her office and when Naruto shut the door behind him, she also added, "I'm also having you sealed."

"Sealed?" Naruto questioned.

The only clan who required males to be sealed was the Inuzuka and as far as Tsunade was concerned should be required of all males as it was of females. Unfortunately, there was a negative stigma attached to the procedure that the male-dominated society of ninja found disrespectful.

"You think that's necessary?"

Tsunade gave Naruto a very pointed look. "I'm not stupid Naruto. You were gone a rather long time with the Mizukage. If you are going to be sexually active, you need to be sealed. Any unwanted pregnancy on your part could be an international disaster."

"I can control myself," Naruto pouted but knew that everything his shadow clones did, he certainly would as well.

"Naruto," The Hokage explained impatiently. She was rather rushed as she began the official letter that would mark Naruto as her ambassador to Suna. "Jinchūriki have a history of landing on two extremes."

"I still have that problem with the Kyūbi," Naruto admitted uncomfortably, "and shadow clones can't get anyone pregnant."

Tsunade sighed and looked up at the boy she considered her grandson. Tsunade knew Naruto was slower in the sexual department because of what he was and no doubt that those two years with Jiraiya probably ruined the boy. The only women Jiraiya could pick were the ones trying to kill him.

"To be honest, this procedure should have been done when you became a genin. Hiruzen was a great man but he had little room for foresight and I've overlooked it because," Tsunade sighed deeply. Seeing him with the Mizukage further brought it home for her. "You're growing up faster than I can handle. A part of being a Kage is to prevent a disaster before it happens. It's better to be safe than sorry. I am having you sealed," Tsunade said with finality.
She gave a last scratch of her pen and handed the finished letter to Naruto.

"Don't linger too long in Suna. Konoha needs to decide on a course of action as soon as possible."

Naruto briefly looked at the scroll and asked, "Things are changing aren't they?"

Tsunade looked out the window of her office. "The Jounin Exams always tend to come before a storm. Thank Kami it's only every five years." Tsunade gave Naruto a soft look under the rim of her heavy hat. "I'm getting too old for this Naruto."

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For Sakura Haruno, becoming Jounin was a bitter sweet victory. She had a higher pay grade but it hadn't changed her daily grind.

Her day had already started off badly with an ANBU call. ANBU had their own medics but when those medics could no longer do anything for the patient, the case was always transferred to Sakura. Within fifteen minutes of stepping into the hospital, someone had already died on her operating table.

Sakura sped down the pristine bleached hallways and gave every medic that ran past her a dose of suspicion. There was a spy in Konoha's hospital, in her hospital. Someone had stolen classified medical documents and she had personally requested Ino to lead the investigation. She almost felt sorry for her medic team, almost.

"Sakura-sama," a sharp young woman with hawkish eyes maintained Sakura's pace. Sakura mentally listed off the woman's credentials: worked in the hospital for seven years, a civilian, but the best damn secretary Sakura had ever seen and could compete with Shizune's level of managing paperwork.

"Name the profession and careers of your immediate family members," Sakura demanded. The civilian, used to this paranoia among ninja, immediately answered the question without hesitation. Once Sakura was satisfied with her interrogation she asked, "What do you need?"

"I need your signature to approve this list of surgeries."

Sakura overlooked the paperwork and signed off on the expensive procedure for a Cloud ninja and a Sound ninja. Sakura had to wonder why the Hokage decided to save all the Mountain hostages, even though the hostages could be used as peace offerings, it was undeniably placing a financial strain on Konoha and required the added assistance of field medics to help the hospital handle the load.

Sakura entered a patient's room in the area of the hospital that required the highest level of clearance. Only Sakura could attend to the highest profile of individuals. She reached to check the patient's vitals, vast blue eyes opened and narrowed in suspicion.

Sakura gave the standard greeting, "My name is Sakura Haruno and I will be your doctor for your stay here in Konoha's hospital."

Sakura didn't bother asking for a name, age, or any family history from the recent group of patients. The ninjas lied. It was simply best to ask no questions and let them go.

Green hair fell forward around her shoulders as she tugged herself by sheer force of will to sit up. With a taste of disgust she asked, "How did I end up in Konoha?"

"You were being held hostage by Mountain and in the process of rescuing some of our own ninja, you were freed and brought to Konoha to be treated."
The civilians who were saved had their memory erased by the Yamanaka, implanted with a false story, and were slowly being reunited with their families. The ninjas were given a choice. Surprisingly, a rare number decided to stay in Konoha than return to their village in shame – but of course they were watched very carefully.

"That's awfully nice of you," The woman said sarcastically and her eyes searched the room, making a mental note of all the exits and entrances.

"Konoha has the best medical facilities in the world. We do have a reputation to uphold. But do not," and steel slipped into Sakura's voice, "entertain the idea of taking advantage of our kindness or it can be easily arranged you will never make it out of this hospital."

"Then hurry and sign your paper and let me out of here," the woman demanded.

"Normally, once you are cleared from the hospital you are free to do whatever you want or go wherever you want to go but your case is slightly different."

Sakura could see the woman watching her with hawkish eyes.

"Kagome, as the daughter of the former Kusakage you are being confined to Konoha as a political prisoner."

With the speed and aim of a skilled marksman, the lengthened needle embedded itself in the soft flesh of Sakura's neck.

Kagome attempted to jump out of bed and make a run for the window, but then her body began to resist. Kagome collapsed atop the bed at an awkward angle, her eyes were lit with fire as they stared out the curtain of her hair at the dissolving genjutsu.

Sakura calmly finished injecting the serum into the patient's IV. She was unfortunately accustomed to being attacked by unreasonable ninja.

Sakura explained, "Your confinement is standard procedure and after you meet with the Hokage I'm certain Konoha will let you go. Therefore, I suggest you relax or I will not give you clearance to see your son."

Sakura recibed a deadly gleam in the kunoichi's eyes, as cold and dark of one who has been in this life for far too long. Sakura didn't take her eyes off of her patient when she yelled, "Alright Naruto, now you can come in."

Blonde hair peeked into the doorway, and then green hair. Naruto had to literally restrain Kusuro from storming the hospital.

"What did you do to her?" Kusuro asked angrily as he rushed into the room.

"It's just paralysis."

"Mom," Kusuro straightened his mother in the bed and fluffed her pillow. Then he gave Naruto a nervous look before he dug into his pocket and produced a pack of cigarettes. "I brought your favorite and I have so much to tell you."

Sakura plucked the pack right out of the boy's hand. "Not allowed in the hospital. I'm about to release her, I suggest you step back."

Kusuro did as he was instructed and exchanged a nervous glance at the second needle Sakura
injected into the IV.

The moment she could move, Kagome performed a genjutsu release. When nothing happened she asked immediately, "Last year you went to the hospital, what happened and what injury did you sustain?"

Kusuro's face went red. "I went in the part of the garden where I wasn't supposed to go and I accidently touched the ivy and then when I went to use the bathroom... I thought my peewee was going to burn off."

Kagome's eyes softened.

"I missed you so much," Kusuro cried as he jumped into his mother's arms.

The kunoichi who had been prepared to kill everyone in Konoha, broke into tears.

"Good job," Sakura whispered. This was one of the small joys of her job: one more evasion of death, one more day, and one more moment to live. She had the privilege to see those overwhelming moments of happiness and it was not deterred or dimmed by the fickleness of tomorrow.

Naruto smiled as he leaned against the door. He brought a family back together, and to him that was a feat akin to defeating Madara.

"Don't forget your appointment with me later tonight," Sakura reminded him.

"But I have so much to do: council meetings, saving people, feeding ramen to hungry children – I'm such a busy person you know."

"Don't make me hunt you down Naruto Uzumaki, or I will convince Teuchi-san to put something in your ramen and you'll be shitting your way to the hospital," and Sakura's saccharine smile could frighten the toughest ninja. "And it better not be a clone."

Naruto nodded his head in apt fear. "Anything you say Sakura."

On any other occasion, Tenten would have easily been exhausted by Lee's overpowering exuberance but for once she fed off his energy and excitement as Lee mimed all his fights from the Jounin exams.

"Neji, you don't have to hide your youthfulness outside of the window!"

Lee did a triple cartwheel, flying roundhouse kick that slammed the window open and shattered the glass. There was a small oomph.

"My eternal rival," Lee poked his head out of the hole, "How did you end up all the way down there? Are you exercising without me?"

Neji, with that dark scowl that always loomed over his face, finally crawled through the window. Tenten couldn't believe she missed that scowl. "It took you long enough," Tenten knew Neji had been watching her the moment she had been rescued.

Neji bowed. "I humbly apologize for disturbing you."

"You know I'd kick you out if I was being disturbed," Tenten assured him. In comparison, Lee was actually tamer than when her four brothers had clamored into the room earlier.
"Have they told you yet?" Neji asked.

"Told me what?"

But at that moment, Sakura walked through the door.

"My vibrant cherry blossom," Lee exclaimed. "You are looking as beautiful as ever."

"Thank you, Lee." Sakura replied automatically and said in her medic voice, "I'm afraid I need to talk with Tenten alone."

Lee's face fell in worry. "I can't possibly leave the side of my steadfast comrade."

It was Neji who grabbed Lee by his long black braid and dragged him out of the room. Tenten straightened and faced Sakura as she pulled up a chair and sat down to establish a sense of trust.

"How are feeling?" Sakura asked.

"Just tell me," Tenten whispered and placed a hand to her right hip. She feared it had been too damaged. "Can I continue my career as a kunoichi?"

"Your hip will heal. It will hurt at times but you will be capable to perform in the field."

"When can I return to active duty?" Tenten asked immediately. She needed to get out of this hospital. She knew they would send her through psych evaluations first, but she wanted to throw herself into her work and forget.

"Tenten, you're pregnant."

Tenten didn't cry about it. She was under no illusions that it was probably likely. "What are my options?"

And they discussed options as if choosing a piece of furniture from a store.

"We can abort the child," Sakura answered, "at your discretion. You can choose to abort at any time during the pregnancy but the longer you take to decide, the higher the health risk. You can also have the baby and put it up for adoption or you can keep the baby."

In some ninja villages, kunoichi weren't allowed to have abortions in an effort to bolster the villages' ninja population. In Konoha unwanted pregnancy was rarely an issue among kunoichi because of the seal, it was more rampant among the civilian women who did not know which ninjas were best not to approach. Sakura knew the statistics. A civilian is most likely to keep the child, but a kunoichi's life was short and often didn't see the point of bringing a child into the world.

"What is your recommendation?"

Sakura was about to recommend abortion but paused in thought and then finally replied with, "Adoption."

"Naruto has begun a new program in Konoha for an orphanage specifically for the children of ninja. It isn't operational yet and certainly does not have the functions to accommodate a small baby but I predict when the child has reached five years of age he or she will then transfer into Naruto's custody. It won't be your responsibility but you still have the opportunity to see the child grow and become a potential contribution to Konoha."

Tenten frowned. "But that means I'm going to have to carry it for nine months."
"With the injury and trauma you've sustained you'll most likely be out from active duty for at least that long. After you get some rest, you should be well enough to be discharged home. There is no rush and you have plenty of time to think about it."

Out of all Tenten's siblings she had always found her niche as the kunoichi – the one who had it all planned out, every step, every promotion, until she made it to the coveted role of first female Jounin Commander. Tenten had always aspired to make history. She wasn't about to put her dreams on hold for a child she never asked for.

"It's not the end of the world," Sakura said tiredly as Naruto looked down at the third seal embedded into his body, apart from the one on his stomach and the ANBU tattoo on his arm. It rested just mere centimeters above his dick.

"You shaved me," Naruto said incredulously.

"The hair will grow back right over the seal and you won't even be able to see it. Men can be so dramatic," Sakura replied but found herself referring to one male in specific.

Naruto scratched his head, embarrassed. "I still work down there right?"

"Naruto," Sakura explained patiently. "I didn't cut it off. If it gives you any consolation, your parents created this seal. It will render your sperm null and keep you from getting any woman pregnant. You can always request to take it off when you are ready to settle down."

"Do you really think this is necessary?" Naruto asked.

"Naruto, sit." Sakura said impatiently, in her medic voice that often meant life or death.

Naruto blinked and looked at the dark rings under Sakura's eyes. He followed her instructions and sat down without any more complaints.

"We have managed to flush out any drugs that were still lingering in your body but we need to go over your test results from the chakra scans. Naruto your condition has gotten worse."

"I feel fine." Naruto pouted.

"You have been diagnosed with left-sided congestive cardiac failure."

Naruto scratched his head. "Sakura, stupid people speak please?"

"It's basically heart failure."

"Oh, that doesn't sound that bad."

"Naruto, Heart failure is a long-term condition and can thankfully be managed. Symptoms include fatigue, shortness of breath, sleep difficulties, and an irregular pulse." Sakura reached in her pocket and produced a capsule of medicine. "I want you to take this medicine once a day and make sure you're fully stocked before a mission. From now on, there is absolutely no salt in your diet and I want you to increase your intake of fruits and vegetables. I am going to notify Teuchi and Tomu of your new diet restrictions."

"But I can still eat ramen?"

"Yes, Naruto. You can still eat ramen. If you're feeling fatigue or a dizzy spell during training I want you to stop. You can take care of everyone else but you have such a bad habit of not taking care of
yourself. I want you to promise me you'll follow the rules and try to cut back on using the Kyuubi's chakra?" Sakura suggested.

Look at the mess you've got us into.

It's your fault.

You were the one who decided to go for the overkill.

You didn't seem inclined to stop me either.

...It was fun.

"Naruto, if you want to mitigate the damage and to prevent this from getting worse you have to promise you'll follow my instructions." It was always hard to get patients to heed to the health restrictions of a long-term illness. In most cases, patients did whatever they wanted and figured they'd die from a kunai first.

"I promise," Naruto agreed and took his clothes from Sakura. He dressed and grumbled. "Why do I always have the problems?"

Sakura rested her head against the wall and wondered how much alcohol she had left in the apartment. "Naruto, I work in a hospital. Believe me when I say everyone has problems."

"Either way the Council decides, we need to start pulling our investments out of Iwa."

Her footsteps whispered across the floor, hardly unheard, until the grand doors slammed open.

Grandfather Hyūga set aside the financial reports and his blank eyes narrowed in subtle disgust. "Who are you to interrupt our meeting?"

Hinata Hyūga bowed before the Elders and placed a jar at the old man's feet. "I present to you the eye of your deceased younger brother, Hinashi Hyuuga as a symbol of my love and dedication to the Hyūga clan."

Grandfather raised his cane to silence the startled whispers. His hand trembled, not of his own command, and picked up the jar. He examined the blank iris of the eye inside. "And the fate of Ao, ninja of Kirigakure?"

"He is dead. I saw an opportunity during the Jounin Exams and I could not let this blatant travesty of the Hyūga clan continue."

Hinata's head was bowed so close to the floor she could not see the expression crossing his face, only waited with bated breath, until he finally said, "Dismissed."

"What have you done?" Neji demanded once the latest gossip found him. He didn't waste any time searching for Hinata who waited knowingly inside of his room. She didn't answer as she leaned against the door. "What if you had started a war between Kiri and Konoha?"

"I didn't. They have yet and will not find the body. I decided to get in Grandfather's favor because I can't help you with my current position in the clan."

"That isn't a part of the plan!" Neji whispered harshly. His long sleeves billowed behind him as he
paced the room. Neji did not like the idea of deviating from the plan. "We had agreed you were to lay low. You were supposed to keep your head down so if we get caught, I am the one to get in trouble. You are going to ruin everything." Neji leaned against the dresser and tried to reign in his anger. The crickets hummed a song outside of the window.

"Hinata, this is not acceptable. If you get caught, grandfather will punish you much more severely than I. What you've done is reckless and selfish. You went outside the supervision of the Hokage, the village, and the clan."

"I am tired Neji." Hinata whispered softly in the darkness, as soft as the quiet before a kill. "I am tired of your doubts and waiting on you. I am tired of being powerless, of hurting the people I love, and I am fucking tired of enduring."

A messenger knocked on the door. Neji received the messenger and they were informed of the consequences of Hinata's decisions.

Neji gave Hinata a frigid stare, which matched the unyielding ice of her own.

"It seems you've finally gotten your opportunity. Don't disappoint him."

Generations of Hyūga have sweat and bled on the dojo floor. At the height of midnight it was enveloped in a blend of shadow and light. The stars were a soft luminescent glow that caressed the ceremonial armor and artifacts of the Shinto shrine. The shadows were a plague that crept through cracks and stained everything it touched.

The oldest Hyūga alive sat under the pale moon of the Hyūga Crest.

Hinata and Neji Hyūga faced one another, poised as still water, in opposing Jyūken stances.

Hinata Hyūga wore tightened bandages around her arms and her chakra flowed underneath the wrappings. She wore a simple training gi, embroidered with the crest she had worn against her breast all her life. She wore the scars that reached down her back like falling stars. She wore the knowledge of knowing this was the only chance she was ever going to get.

As she breathed, she couldn't help to remember that match a long time ago during the chūnin exams. It was one match, but it was the match she should have never lost. It took only one match, one moment in time, to change her fate.

"Begin."

At the same time Hinata activated her byakugan, her heart skipped a beat as Neji's palm slammed into her chest. The first hit was a direct attack, and Hinata recovered only enough to barely avoid the next barrage from closing her nodes off completely.

Hinata was thrown backwards onto the floor in pain. Her chest heaved in sudden doubt and fear.

"Stay down," Neji insisted, but never relaxed his stance, knowing Hinata never listened to him.

Hinata pushed herself through the pain and forced herself on her feet. She could feel the crippling effect in her chakra system. Hinata looked at Neji and suddenly felt that vast void of skill between them. Neji had never even activated his byakugan.

The ultimate goal of the Jyūken style was to reach that rare level of skill that did not require the use of the Byakugan, which saved the user the chakra drain and the crucial seconds of activation. Only
few Hyūga ever reach that pinnacle.

Neji was a Master.

"It is admirable that you managed to take only one direct hit," Neji complimented. Hinata knew he was attempting to soften the look of disgust on her Grandfather's face but it never broke. Neji's words did more to mock her.

Hinata wasn't that little girl anymore and in her lifetime have faced giants. But Hinata knew that she had already lost this match in the first few seconds. She couldn't defeat Neji, but that didn't mean she wouldn't try, even if it killed her. She had nothing left to lose.

Her bare feet brushed across the floor, and they circled one another, waiting for the first strike.

Hinata stepped forward and with ease Neji slapped away her attacks, until she suddenly twisted on her foot and slammed her knee into his stomach, then flipped completely backwards and closed another chakra node with the flat of her foot as her kick swiped against his shoulder.

Those two blank eyes of the Elder narrowed.

Neji finally activated his byakugan.

He read her muscle movements to deflect and avoid the next series of attacks from her bastardized form of the Jyūken style – but those few seconds had cost him. Hinata had managed to catch him with two direct hits and the chakra flowing to his right arm wasn't as powerful as before.

Hinata whipped her hand forward and Neji didn't even bother to move knowing the length of her arm didn't cover the distance between them. As her arm struck forward, the steady flow of her chakra began to tense.

Neji's byakugan widened in surprised horror at the sudden change in her chakra and attempted to fall back and evade the attack.

Lightning danced from her fingertips.

A brilliant flash and the sound of thunder as lightning crashed against Neji's shoulder and he was catapulted into the air, flipped around sideways, and crashed against the wooden panel of the dojo.

Neji groaned as he attempted to recover and knew if he hadn't began to evade the attack he would have been knocked unconscious. He attempted to stand just as Hinata finished the last hand sign of a series.

Then the water natural to Neji's body snapped ice cold and he was jerked out of the wreckage against his will.

He wafted in the air and found himself at Hinata's complete control. He studied the attack with his byakugan and attempted to find a weakness. It was a jutsu that only a medic-nin, someone with an immense amount of chakra control, and the precision of a byakugan could perform without outright killing the captured opponent.

Neji's feet touched the ground. He attempted to resist her influence to no avail. Like an unwilling tree, he bowed in the force of the storm. An unwilling puppet, Neji placed his fist to his palm and bowed out of the match.

Then he was released from the jutsu and fell to the floor. At once, Neji found a weakness and
noticed the heavy toil of chakra the jutsu placed on her system. If Neji had found a way to escape the jutsu, he would have won easily. Neji was an over-achiever and was determined to develop a method to escape the jutsu by the end of the week.

Hinata placed her fist to her palm, bowed, and waited for her death sentence.

Hinata had made a gamble. Because of inbreeding more than 80% of the Hyuuga clan's natural affinity was water and just learning lightning could be interpreted as treacherous. She hoped her Grandfather's respect of power was stronger than his hold on tradition.

"Neji, ten."

Hinata gritted her teeth as Grandfather's cane beat against her back. It wasn't a fragile cane either, the wood encompassed a steel center. The force of the last blow propelled Hinata to the ground and she caught herself with her hands.

When it was done, "Come Neji, prepare me for bed."

The bloody cane made a sharp thud against the ground as Neji helped Grandfather to his feet and out the dojo. As he passed, her Grandfather, the Hyuuga Clan Head, and the oldest living Master, replied begrudgingly, "You're not as worthless as I thought."

When their footsteps receded, Hinata trembled and tears of relief flooded her face as she bent before the Hyūga family crest which hung majestically from the ceiling.

She deactivated her byakugan, and the moment she did so a searing pain knifed through her head. Her chest heaved and blood spattered on the floor. She collapsed, and the ringing in her head was like a clap of thunder in the darkness of the night. A blend of shadow and starlight rotated around her bloody smile.

Hinata Hyūga won.

When Naruto returned home from the hospital the compound was quiet. The clone had put the children to sleep and Tomu always went to sleep early on the days he worked. Naruto nose scrunched in disgust and followed the smell to the bathroom. He opened the door and the small room was enveloped in the dark smoke of a cigarette slowly filtered out the small window pane.

Kagome sat on the lidded toilet, smoking, and her green hair littered the bathroom floor. Her hair was now only as long as her shoulders. She was wearing nothing but one of Naruto's black undershirts and when she moved, the shirt slipped upwards and showed more and more skin.

She didn't looked up at him when she replied, "Don't people usually knock?"

"If you plan on staying here no smoking in the house."

Her blue eyes flicked towards him, and then bitterly put out the cigarette by burning the bud into the flesh of her wrist. She tossed it over her shoulder and it fell into the trashcan. She stood up, the black undershirt hung off her petite breasts and Naruto watched her with wariness as her feet padded against the wooden floor like a cat.

As his body heat grew closer, her hands began to twitch and her breath crumbled in frustration. "I haven't killed someone in a long time."

Naruto slammed his hand out and blocked her exit, and Kagome reacted to the sudden movement. A
senbon needle was placed underneath Naruto's neck.

She cringed when the red aura of his killing intent burned against her skin. All she could think of was how his eyes was the color of fresh kill.

Naruto's growl rolled over her. "Are you a danger to my family?"

Kagome slid the needle down Naruto's throat and watched as it left a trail of blood across his skin. She whispered as she slapped her hand against his neck and smeared the blood. "Blood looks pretty on you."

She dipped underneath Naruto's arm and disappeared in the darkness of the hallway. Naruto stilled and tracked her until she walked into Kusuro's room, wrapped her arm around her son, and took one crawling calm breath.

For the first time Naruto began to regret his penchant for extending his hospitality. You should always think twice before offering your house to a ninja.

Naruto was awake at dawn, but he wasn't the only one. Naruto could sense Kagome's presence as she sat atop the roof and smoked a cigarette. Naruto did what he always did at this time and trained. The sun rose as he performed the set of katas long ago taught to him by Jiraiya. He went through the motions and often added his own additions on instinct.

Ame yawned as she stepped out of the house and winced at the glare of the sun. She was still in her pajamas and scratched the cotton against her stomach. After watching Naruto for a few minutes she dragged her feet in the dirt, stopped beside Naruto, and lifted her foot in the air and mirrored his high kick.

The sun shadowed the two figures in a brilliant awash of golden hues. Their movements were in perfect synchronization. It ended when Ame collapsed on the ground in exhaustion. Naruto threw her on his back and carried her into the house. It was their morning routine and Naruto had tried to stop it at first but sometimes, in the midst of the council meetings, missions, and clones, it was a small moment that they shared.

"I'll start breakfast. Go wake up Ichigo and get dressed."

"Alright," Ame nodded as she raced up the stairs.

Naruto shoved the recipe books off the countertop and placed a pot on the stove and began making okayu, a rice porridge. He wasn't as good as Tomu or Sakura, but he could accomplish simple things.

The backdoor slid open.

"I can give you some money to buy the things that you need," Naruto suggested. The woman still hadn't dressed in anything else but his undershirt.

Kagome leaned against the table and stared at the photographs tacked to the wall. "You're too young to have kids that age."

"Adopted," Naruto replied and removed the porridge to let it cool.

"You need more plants," she said offhandedly. "The oxygen makes it easier to breathe."
Ame dragged Ichigo down from the stairs whom was always grumpy in the morning. Then someone knocked on the front door. Ichigo bolted upright and grasped onto Naruto's leg. Naruto attempted to sense the chakra signature of his visitor and was rather surprised by who it was. He opened the door.

"Hey, Tenten," Naruto greeted and invited her inside. "I was just making breakfast. Do you want some?"

"The last time I heard about your cooking, you supposedly burned the house down," Tenten replied as she entered and paused when she noticed the half-naked woman in the room. "Oh I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt-

"Who are you?" Ame asked with a direct tone of voice as she poured herself a bowl for breakfast.

"My name is Tenten. I just came by for a visit."

Naruto quickly introduced everyone and then pulled a chair out for Tenten to sit. "I'll be back, I'm going to go wake up the boys."

Kagome saved him the trouble and suddenly yelled, "Kusuro, breakfast, now!"

Kusuro literally jumped down the stairs, raced to the table, and sat down with a straightened posture in mere seconds. "Good morning," He greeted with a smile. Kagome sauntered over, slid behind Kusuro in the chair and began to comb through the tangles of his hair with her fingers. "Mom," he fussed but after he was done eating, rested backwards against her breasts.

Tomu came down minutes later dressed, grabbed the boxed bento lunch he had prepared last night, said his good mornings, and went to work.

"When your day at school is over I'm going to talk to your academy teachers." Kusuro's expression fell into one of horror. "I do hope you have been representing Grass Country well in all your classes."

"See you later mom, got to go to school," Kusuro rushed as he jumped from the chair and sped out of the house.

Naruto admitted he was amazed by what Kusuro's mom could get him to do. Kagome smirked smugly, pulled out a cigarette from the pack she carried and went outside.

"Kusuro's mom is kind of scary," Ame whispered.

All of the new faces were obviously putting Ichigo on edge and he wouldn't even eat his food until Naruto was forced to feed him.

"What's wrong with him?" Tenten asked, rather concerned. She had never seen such a frightful child.

"He doesn't like strangers," Naruto answered. "It takes him a while to get used to people."

Once Naruto was done, he scooped the children into his arms in a big hug and said, "I'll be right back. I have to take them to school."

Then Naruto disappeared before Tenten's eyes.

Tenten took the time to look around what once was the Uchiha compound. The main house was much brighter than it had been before. The furniture was different and the people who lived here
were different. Tenten stopped at a few pictures hanging on the wall of Naruto and the children who lived with him. They didn't look like orphans, they looked like a family.

Naruto reappeared. "Sorry for the wait."

"If the little one doesn't like strangers how does he go to school?"

"Ichigo goes to school with Kurenai," Naruto answered. "She is home schooling her daughter until she reaches Academy age and has agreed to teach Ichigo for me as well. I would keep him but, I have no idea what sort of things kids his age are supposed to know, and I don't want him to be behind in school when he is ready to go."

"That's thoughtful," Tenten replied. "I hear you're going to turn this place into an orphanage?"

Naruto frowned. "I don't really like the word, 'orphanage.' I like to think of it as more of a 'home.' Children who have no one where else can stay here, eat here, and be taken care of."

Naruto picked up the dirty dishes off the table and dumped them into the sink, and after a moment's thought, decided he could take a moment to wash them before he left for Suna. "I want to give these children a home, not a temporary dwelling that once they reach a certain age kicks them out to face the world alone."

"You're very passionate about this."

Naruto scrubbed the dishes. "It's important to me."

When he was finished with the dishes, he found Tenten perusing her eyes over every detail of the house. "How are you doing?"

"I'm okay," Tenten whispered and wondered if that was really true. Tenten stood and winced when the sudden movement breached her hip. "It's time for me to go but it was nice talking to you."

When Naruto walked her to the compound's gates she turned and asked. "Naruto, will you keep this visit just between us?"

Naruto gave her a perplexed look but agreed nonetheless. Tenten waved goodbye. She wondered why she had stopped when she should have kept going to the market.

Naruto walked back into the house, shed his training clothes, and took a quick shower. Then he tugged on his regular shinobi uniform but did not bother to take his sage cloak. It was too hot in Suna.

Naruto whipped around when he heard a clash of metal and rushed outside to find Kagome and Neji poised at a stalemate.

"You can't kill him either," Naruto quickly added. Kagome sneered and the blades of grass that had suddenly blossomed at her feet disappeared back into the ground. She stomped her feet on the fallen cigarette.

Neji didn't seem fazed by her lack of wardrobe, ready to kill her. Neji took a step back and gave her a cold expression.

Kagome stalked towards Naruto and he steeled himself when she didn't stop and continued until her breasts were pressed against his chest. Her hand slipped around his waist and rather blatantly pressed her nails against his butt before pulling his wallet out of his back pocket. She took the entire thing
and left the compound.

Naruto instantly sent a shadow clone to follow her and make sure she didn't get into any trouble. He turned and was rather caught off-guard when Neji was still there. "Fuck, Neji why the hell are you here?" Naruto asked, embarrassed as he reached down and adjusted his pants.

"What did Tenten talk to you about?"

"Nothing. She just joined me for breakfast," Naruto answered. He brushed his hands through his hair before exiting the compound and headed towards the gates of Konoha where he had agreed to meet Shikamaru.

"Nothing?" Neji questioned as he kept pace. "She didn't talk to you about anything?"

"No. She asked me about the kids and the compound."

Neji's white eyes narrowed in thought and stepped onto a branching road. Naruto reached out and snatched Neji's long billowing sleeve.

"My turn. I have a question. The Aburame wedding is in a few days and all the clan heads are invited. The old man going?"

Neji tensed and gave Naruto a stern look. "Are you planning something?"

"It was just a question."

"Yes, he will be in attendance."

"And Hinata is going to be…"

"It is none of your concern."

"Come on Neji, don't give me that bullshit. Is she going or not?" Naruto demanded.

"No, she is not authorized to attend the wedding."

"But- she promised Shino she would be there. It means a lot to her. You can't talk to your Grandfather or something to make an exception?"

Neji paused, and then repeated the very words Naruto had told him a few days ago. "The only fate you deserve is the one you earn."

Naruto watched the changing fall leaves rustle in the wind. He leaned against the gate of Konoha and waited for Shikamaru.

"Ready?" Shikamaru asked.

"Oh I forgot to tell you," Naruto apologized when he noticed Shikamaru's travel bags. "It's only going to take a few seconds to get there."

"I can't keep up with your speed," Shikamaru lazily replied.

Naruto smirked as he spun the circle end of a kunai along his finger. Naruto grabbed Shikamaru by the arm and teleported the distance between Konoha and Suna.
They appeared inside the Sand siblings household, connected to the hiraishin kunai that decorated a window sill in the kitchen. Kankuro's face paint was messily thrown on the kitchen table and several different size gourds that Gaara favored rested against the kitchen wall.

"No one is here," Naruto reported. He roamed toward the refrigerator and checked its content.

"That's efficient," Shikamaru noted once the disorientation passed. "Could I have one of those?"

"Don't bother." Naruto asked as he stuffed some of the Desert flatbread into his mouth. "The distance of the jump will kill you."

"Troublesome. There's always a catch. Could you find Temari's location for me?" Shikamaru asked.

With his cheeks stuffed full of bread like a hamster, Naruto shook his head. When he finally swallowed he answered. "I don't have Temari's chakra signature memorized. She's probably with Gaara."

Naruto motioned for Shikamaru and they tackled the roof traffic toward the Kage's domed tower.

"You're not here for the peace treaty are you?"

"No, I am here to get my wife."

For once, Naruto didn't have to sneak into the Tower. He literally shoved the official and sealed paper into the secretary's face, then walked straight through the Kazekage's door.

"What's up Gaara?" Naruto asked as he walked into an office crowded by a few council members and advisors. Five ninja, turned perturbed. Before they could complain, Naruto smugly showed them the scroll. "I'm actually here on official business."

Gaara sat in the large chair that engulfed him and ordered. "You're all dismissed."

Shikamaru stopped Temari at the door. "We need to talk."

Temari sighed deeply. "Fine, Come on."

Gaara watched them all leave and then faced Naruto, "I knew they'd send you."

"What's going on?"

"This is the perfect time to break the cease fire and regain the land we have fought with Iwa for generations," Gaara answered.

"You're going to break the peace treaty for a strip of land?" Naruto asked incredulously. "It can't be that important. I didn't think you of all people would bend to the will of your advisors."

"I proposed it," Gaara replied as he looked out over the stucco houses of his village. "The land is along the river banks and it's fertile." He gave Naruto a tired sigh. "I don't want to see my people starve again."

"But- everything turned out okay didn't? Temari and Shikamaru had improved the irrigation systems and- and-" Naruto racked his brain.

"You can't predict the weather Naruto," Gaara answered. "I'm not moving from this path. Is Konoha going to uphold the peace treaty?"

"I'm not going to go to war with you," Naruto said bitterly. "If the peace treaty is broken there is
nothing keeping the shinobi nations from turning on one another. We could enter another Shinobi World War."

"You are wrong." Gaara looked at Naruto, at his closest friend. "As long as there is us, at the very least the Leaf and Sand alliance will remain."

Naruto shoulders were heavy. "And what about after? What will happen when we are gone?"

"Hope that what we have accomplished is enough."

Temari knew she was going to have to face Shikamaru eventually. She stopped inside the office where mission reports were processed. She ordered all of the office aids out.

"Alright, talk."

"This wasn't our agreement," Shikamaru argued. "At the very least you agreed to stay in Konoha until she was weaned."

"I was going to come back but no one knew that Iwa was going to fall," Temari argued. "My home is going to war Shikamaru."

"So you're just going to leave our child?"

"I can't possibly bring her here. Konoha is stable and you have an entire clan to take care of her. All I have is Kankurou and Gaara, and it's sad when Gaara is the preferred babysitter. I can't keep Shikachan here." It pained Temari to say those words.

Shikamaru rubbed his temples and needed a smoke. "Temari, we have a child now. You should have considered situations like this. Our daughter is more important than this war."

"Our daughter was an accident."

"I didn't push you to have her against your will. You decided to keep her. We got married. We said our vows."

"Shikamaru, I am as important to Suna as Naruto is to Konoha." Temari argued. "I know we didn't plan for this but," she sighed deeply. "I'm sorry. I love you but this place, these sands, it's in my blood. I can't abandon them."

"I retired from ANBU," Shikamaru replied. "I value us, our family, over my village."

"I do too," Temari swore, "but the other half of my family is here. I know you will be safe in Konoha, I know my daughter will be safe with you, but there is no one here looking out for my brothers."

Temari could not get out that mindset of being the oldest sibling. She was too used to taking care of everyone. "Once it is all over, I'll come back and we'll be a family, I promise."

"Until there is another crisis," Shikamaru predicted. They looked away from another bitterly.

Shikamaru had planned everything in his life to be simple. But he had fallen in love and everything was so much more complicated.

After a stubborn moment of silence, Temari asked, "What is Konoha going to do? They're not planning on attacking us for that peace treaty are they?"
"It would be a strategically idiotic move," Shikamaru answered. "But I don't think Konoha is as safe as you want to believe. There are storm clouds coming."

Shikamaru stepped forward and Temari smirked as she sat backward atop one of the desks.

"Is this your next move Nara?" Temari asked amused. She lifted her shirt and threw it behind her. "Are you trying to get me pregnant to keep me from the war?"

"Worth a gamble," Shikamaru replied and appreciated the fact Temari had a tendency to wear skirts. He pushed her skirt up and began to slip her underwear down her legs. "If you are going into this war I want you get Konoha's pregnancy seal."

"What for?" Temari questioned as she undid Shikamaru's pants. "Suna has pills."

"And that obviously doesn't work all the time," Shikamaru said pointedly.

Temari rolled her eyes. "I just forgot to take them that week, and I was really hot and-" Temari groaned when Shikamaru entered her and was reminded why she loved this man so much.

"Temari, it's always hot in Suna."

The desk screeched against the floor as Shikamaru and Temari had sex across its wooden surface. The reports scattered. There were times when Shikamaru certainly was not lazy. Temari came first, followed by her husband.

Shikamaru's heavy breath touched her ear. "We should always plan for the worst."

"The worst would be death. If the worst happens please do not let Kankurou babysit."

Shikamaru's smile was strained at her dark humor. Death was always at the back of his mind, and casted a shadow over every aspect of a ninja's life.

"And Shikamaru, if you get bored while I'm gone, you can sleep with anyone but Ino."

"What happened during the Jounin Exams was not my idea," Shikamaru quickly added.

Temari refused to believe she was jealous. She just hated how close they were.

"Temari, for all of Ino's bravado, she has never had sex with either me or Chouji. Trust me."

"Husband or not, you are a shinobi," Temari scoffed. "I trust you as far as I can throw you. I swear, put your cock anywhere near that bitch and I'm going to kill her." Temari didn't care whether Shikamaru fucked half of Konoha, as long as it wasn't Ino. What made Ino different from everyone else is that Shikamaru did on some level love that woman and that made all the difference.

"Troublesome." Shikamaru's usual lazy expression was serious as he looked into her green eyes. "Temari, I love you and I will always be yours."

"At least until the day we die."

In a world of ninja, love was hard, and marriage even harder.

The metal was cold against Tenten's skin as she lay atop the table. She was blinded by the white of the room. Everything was clean and pristine and devoid of any color. It reminded her of another metal table and another lab. Why did they all have to look the same?
To one side was a tray with a weird tool. She couldn't help but to wonder in which way it was going to poke or prod her.

"What's that?" Tenten asked.

Sakura wore a surgical mask and had tied her pink hair out of her face, but it was her pink hair that had Tenten's attention. It stood out among the white, almost an anchor in the insanity.

"It's a manual vacuum aspiration," Sakura replied and filled a needle to induce numbness.

"What does that thing do?" Tenten asked.

"I'm going to insert it in your uterus and suction out the fetus."

"Can't you just cut me open or something?" Tenten asked with a frustrated expression, "With something normal like a knife?"

That was perhaps one of the most morbid suggestions Sakura had ever heard. Sakura lowered her hand that held the needle. "Tenten, are you certain?"

"I wouldn't be here if I wasn't certain," Tenten snapped. She just wanted to get this over with, get out of here, and away from this all encompassing white as soon as possible.

"Alright," Sakura responded and moved around the table. She took the top off the needle end and the point reflected the blinding light.

Tenten screamed. The table suddenly flipped and flew across the room, crashing Sakura into the wall. Sakura groaned as she peeled the metal edge from underneath her breast bone and threw the table off of her.

"I can't do it," Tenten sobbed. Her tears were muffled by her hands as she was crouched in the corner of the room.

Sakura approached her gently. "We don't have to do it this way. There are herbs and pills. I could also put you to sleep and you'll wake up as if it was all just a bad dream."

"No," Tenten said hoarsely, "I'm done being a lab rat. I don't want your medicine or your needles and I do not want to be put to sleep."

"Tenten," Sakura said softly as she pulled the mask off her face, peeled the white gloves from her hands. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"He didn't want to hurt me either." Tenten's puffy eyes looked up from her arms. "I want my clothes."

"Alright," Sakura said. She gave Tenten space and left the room to inform the nurses and grab the release forms.

"Fuck," Tenten spat as she placed her head in her hands. She wanted to forget. She wanted to put the past behind her, but it haunted her like an unwanted pregnancy.

"Here," Sakura handed Tenten her clothes and then filled out the release forms herself.

Tenten was slightly relieved when she put her clothes back on, she felt slightly less exposed, and slightly more human. Tenten held herself while she waited for Sakura to release her.
"This isn't how I had planned everything to turn out," Tenten muttered bitterly to herself.

Sakura gave Tenten a smile. "Well, I had planned to marry Sasuke and have his ten kids. I'm actually sort of grateful things don't go according to plan."

"Thankfully," Tenten grumbled. "That guy was a jerk."

Sakura finished the papers. "Come on, let me take you home. After all, we kunoichi have to stick together."

"Aren't you busy?"

"I'm always busy."

Sakura and Tenten walked through the quiet streets of Konoha. Winter had come early that night and the girls huddled beside each other for warmth.

"You know Sakura," Tenten replied softly. "I hated you. You had become such a strong kunoichi and I couldn't understand why you would waste away your talents as a medic ninja. I felt as if you betrayed us when you decided to cater to the stereotype that the only thing girls were good at was medical ninjutsu."

"I guess I see your point," Sakura said softly. "I constantly thought that I had to be as strong as Naruto to ever make a difference. But I'm never going to be as strong as Naruto, I'm never going to be as fast as Lee, or as smart as Shikamaru. But I've found something I'm good at, and no one, not any other boy or any other girl, can do what I do."

Their feet slid across the pavement and the wind chilled them.

"Tenten, it's not a shameful thing to be pregnant. It is more common for kunoichi to settle down after having children, but some do return to the field and make it work. Honestly, I'd give anything for a little girl."

"Still going for the ten kids?" Tenten's joke was humorless.

"Probably just two," Sakura answered and then admitted, "I hear people tell me all the time how I'm just like Tsunade, and every day I realize how much I don't want to be her. I don't want to wake up one day and find that all my loved ones are dead, my teammates are dead, and I'm the only one left.

My dad is a carpenter. My mom is a librarian. They came home to dinner every night, we attended every festival, they was always there, and I didn't have to grow up wondering if my parents would ever make it back alive.

Fuck, I love Kiba but I can't live like that and I can't let my children live like that. It took me too long to figure out what I wanted and I hope it's not too late."

Tenten touched a hand to her stomach, to the life that was growing inside of her. "I don't know what I want anymore."

"It is not only possible for us to strike through our palms, but to also release our tenketsu through other striking joints such as our elbows, knees, and feet," Hinata instructed as she corrected Hanabi's stance in the secrecy of the private dojo. "It allows for greater flexibility of movement."

Hanabi shifted per instructions but her form was sloppy. Hinata frowned. Hanabi was always a fast
"You are purposefully stalling your lessons Hanabi-sama."

"I am not," Hanabi said indignantly. "Perhaps I am not as good as everyone says I am."

Hanabi stood from her stance, swiped the sweat from her brow, and declared, "I am tired."

Hanabi bowed before leaving the training mat and walked down the hallway. Hinata followed behind her at a distance with her head bowed until they entered Hanabi’s room.

The hot steaming bath was already prepared. Their movements were silent and mechanical as Hinata undressed Hanabi, bathed her, and dressed her afterwards.

Hanabi sat at her dresser and Hinata put a brush through the wet strands of Hanabi's hair. Hinata began to hum softly, the same song she used to sing when she had brushed Hanabi's hair as a child, the same song her mother used to sing. It was a moment Hinata had been willing to sacrifice everything for.

"Excuse me," one of the attendants knocked on the door and entered with a bow "Iyashi-sama has requested Hinata to his bed."

"Tell Iyashi to go fuck himself!" Hanabi yelled, shattering the comfortable silence.

The attendant trembled under the weight of Hanabi's temper and quickly rushed from the room to deliver the message.

Hinata placed a soft hand on Hanabi's shoulder. "If I deny him he will simply get angry and take out his aggression on others."

"I forbid you," Hanabi said at once. "You should not have to lower yourself as some base branch member."

Hinata placed the brush down. She unpinned her hair and let it fall straight down her shoulders. "It is only sex and it is something you must do when you marry and produce heirs for this clan."

"I do not wish to marry Iyashi."

Hinata kneeled and kissed Hanabi on her cheek, then whispered, "Iyashi is not worthy of leading this clan."

Hanabi watched Hinata, watched her feet slither across the floor like a shadow, watched her body move with purpose, watched the chill in her eyes. "What are you planning?"

Hinata gave her an impassive stare, a mask of ice and guarded secrets.

"I have traveled to Sunagakura and talked with the Kazekage-" Naruto began but was soon interrupted. Naruto stopped in concern and everyone looked in the Hyūga Clan Head's direction. Today, his robes seemed to swallow him and he shook with every quaking cough.

"Hanabi, get me some water," The Hyūga requested. Hanabi briefly looked at Tsunade, one of the best medics in the room, and quickly rushed out of the council.

"And did you kiss the Kazekage too?" The Hyūga Elder cleared his throat and attempted to recover. "Continue what you started, boy."
Naruto continued but kept a close eye on his arch enemy of the council. "I was unable to persuade the Kazekage from moving towards Iwa. They are not going to budge and have asked Konoha to turn the other cheek."

The Hokage took to the podium. "Since the Kazekage has decided not to turn away from their course of action, we will begin the vote to decide whether to dissolve or uphold the peace treaty."

The vote was unanimous. Konoha was not ready for war against both Sand and Lightning.

"Now that the issue is resolved how is Konoha planning to take advantage of our current political situation?" Sarutobi asked.

"Iwa is too far from Konoha to really take advantage of," Shikamaru replied.

The civilian representative added, "I personally think Konoha should let them fight for Iwa and sit back and gather our strength. We should be kept out of the fighting as much as possible, even in regards to helping."

The Hokage announced from the podium, "Konoha has received a proposal that I believe is in the best interest of the council to hear. Allow me to introduce, Kagome, the Kusakage's granddaughter."

Naruto watched as Kagome walked up to the podium in a traditional Grass attire. She wore a hemp halter and her skirt was decorated with beads. The two front strands of her hair were in braids and the woman faced the council with deadly pride.

"I have come before you to beseech Konoha to wage war on Mountain. With Mountain's attentions turned toward Iwa, and the peace treaty dissolved, now is the perfect opportunity to attack. I could lead you into Grass Country. I know the land and how to best use it against Mountain. With your help, I can be avenged."

"But with Mountain turned toward Iwa, all we have to do is wait. Iwa is a stubborn country and it will be a long war between the two. Mountain will no doubt fall without us," Kurenai reasoned.

"They kidnapped our ninja," Ino reminded the council. "I've seen Mountain through my cousin's memories and they hate us. Not to mention the other travesties we have suffered because of them."

"Is it enough for war?" Shikamaru questioned. "Or should we, like Kurenai suggested, wait it out and hit them when they're weaker?"

"We don't know how Iwa will turn out, for all we know it's a ploy and we're the bigger fish on the bait," Ino explained. "And what if Mountain prevails and it is our allies that come out the weaker?"

"War affects business," Chouji replied. There was only a few certain kinds of business war was good for.

Kagome cleared her throat. "I completely understand that nothing is for free and in exchange for Konoha's cooperation, I will secede Grass to Konoha and give up my rights to the country. It is fertile land and is famous for its agriculture. It will be a profitable investment."

"You can't give up something you don't have girl," the Hyūga replied.

"And," Kagome continued. "I will give Konoha the Grass kekkai genkai through two political marriages between both I and my son."

"And what is preventing us from keeping you hostage and simply taking the Grass kekkai genkai?"
the Hyūga replied through ragged coughs.

"Because I wouldn't allow it," Naruto snapped, "because Konoha should at least pretend it doesn't stoop to such lows to obtain power. She is offering us her kekkai genkai and her lands to go to war. Sure we can just take these things but if we do, without the Kusakage's daughter blessing there will be resistance in Grass and if you have forgotten, there are Grass refugees in Konoha that do not need to be angered while we are in the midst of a crucial political time."

"Another kekkai genkai will strengthen the village. That alone is worth it."

"War always cost us."

Tsunade had to admit begrudgingly it was easier to get things done during war. In a time of crisis, the Hokage had authority to bypass the council completely in order to make the tough decisions in a timely manner. It is at that time a Kage is at the height of their power. A Kage always thrived during war.

"I will give you all time to convene with your clans and the people you represent. I dismiss this council and we will convene at the end of the week to decide in a majority vote."

Naruto picked himself out of the chair with his mind in a cloud. He had no idea what his decision was going to be.

Then a cane slipped.

Naruto caught Grandfather Hyūga before he fell down the council room's steps. Naruto could hear the tenseness of his breath, the tension in the room at losing one of the greatest Hyūga in history to the fall of some stairs.

"Grandfather," Tsunade responded respectfully as she leaned down and pressed two fingers to check his heartbeat. "Perhaps it is time you transfer leadership."

"I did once and that fool died."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Naruto asked.

"Stop talking. Your voice makes my head hurt," the old man grumbled as Hanabi gingerly placed his arm on her shoulder and per instructions of the Hokage, carefully lifted him back onto his feet.

His shoulders seemed weary but there was a spark in his eyes that would never die. "Konoha does not need another war," he told them and left slowly with Hanabi out of the council room.

"Is he okay?" Naruto asked the Hokage.

"He's had that condition for a while now but I'm worried. He shouldn't be deteriorating that fast." Tsunade answered. "I hate to say it but the Hyūga clan is not ready for his death."

"Why not?"

"Hanabi has no power without the other Four Elders support and she won't get their support unless she marries her cousin, Iyashi. Hanabi does not want to lead and Iyashi does not know how to lead. It is a bad combination. There was a saying my grandfather was always keen on telling me: a leader is made not only with the pieces they are born with, but the heat that have tempered them, and the way in which those pieces come together."
"How do I look?" Naruto asked the crowded living room.

The red spiral of the Uzumaki crest was emboldened on the back of his orange haori jacket. He wore flowing black hakama pants and setta sandals. The traditional outfit was perhaps the most expensive thing he had ever worn.

"It's perfect," Sakura smiled and moved to fix the hem of Naruto's kimono, "but an orange haori Naruto? Really?"

"I didn't want to go to a wedding in boring black," Naruto pouted.

"It's not your wedding. You're not the one who's supposed to stand out," Sakura reprimanded him with shake of her head, and the movement bounced the white cherry blossoms pinned to her hair.

"Daddy stands out no matter where he goes," Ame teased as she jumped up and down, rustling the two red buns Sakura had attempted to tame. Ame was dazzling in the orange kimono that matched Naruto's jacket.

"Do I have to go?" Kusuro asked grumpily as he sat on the couch in his own formal attire.

"Of course you do," Kagome replied and began an attempt to structure his hair. "We are representing Grass and it is our duty to attend such a high profile wedding in our host country. Make sure you say a word to all the children of your age in attendance, especially the young girls."

"What's the point?" Kusuro grumbled bitterly, "you gave our country away."

"We already lost our country," Kagome's hands turned tender as she softly told her son, "I did what I had to do to continue our survival."

"And what are we going to do if the vote turns against us?" Kusuro questioned.

Kagome looked up at Naruto. "I'm sure I'll think of something."

Sakura cleared her throat. "Enough talk of war, let's just enjoy the wedding?" Sakura suggested.

"Kiba is going right?" Naruto asked, knowing Kiba hasn't made a formal appearance since his injury.

"Of course he is. He is not going to miss Shino's wedding. Because of his mom, he's been with the clan but he should be coming with Hana." Sakura answered as she tucked her purse and a kunai inside of her obi – you never know.

Tomu watched as they began to leave from the top of the stairs. He certainly didn't mind not going. Mushi had invited him but even she had admitted it would be kind of boring since the Clan head was getting married and everything had to be traditional. Ichigo watched the commotion with a curious stare but never joined. He was content in the corner of the stairs where Tomu sat.

Naruto wasn't going to bring Ichigo into a crowd full of strangers and had planned to leave a clone behind to watch him.

"Alright, I think we're ready." Sakura replied and readjusted her light blue kimono one last time.

"Ready?" Naruto leaned down and asked Ame as he took her hand.

Ame smiled. "I feel like a princess."
Naruto had once been told that the Aburame was the largest clan in Konoha and now he truly believed it as he witnessed the entire clan gathered en masse, like that of a large hive. The wedding took place at Konoha's Shinto shrine at sunset. Naruto was a little caught off guard that the Aburame didn't wear anything unique or alterations in their clothing to hide their faces like they were accustomed to do.

"I can see their faces," Naruto marveled.

"Naruto, we have been invited to their clan event as friends of the clan. They have no need to cover up around their own clan members. They only do so around the rest of Konoha to be respectful."

"Some are still wearing their glasses."

"Wait until the sun sets," Sakura explained. "Half of the Aburame compound is underground because their beetle's natural habitat is in darkness. Aburame are very sensitive to sunlight."

"I didn't know that, and you've been to their clan events before?"

"Not personally," Sakura answered. "Kiba has. The Aburame and Inuzuka have had a long alliance with one another. I thought you're supposed to know this stuff by now."

"Do you know how much stuff there is?" Naruto asked in frustration. "Every single clan has had their own history, apart from other notable ninja names, that I am supposed to know. It's so hard to keep up with."

"These are great seats," Sakura commented. They sat only a row behind the main family. "I didn't know you had such standing with the Aburame clan."

"I didn't either," Naruto replied. The only other clan head that sat as close as Naruto were the Inuzuka. He realized all of this was a pain. Even seating placements were politics.

"Daddy," Ame whispered. "There are bugs everywhere."

There were beetles crawling out of people's hair, in chairs, and buzzing in the air as if they were in attendance just as everyone else.

Naruto's breath caught as the Hyūga made their procession into the wedding. Naruto continually looked at the empty stretch of seats next to him, counted, and then counted the number of Hyūga in attendance.

"Great," Sakura grumbled.

Naruto couldn't keep his eyes off her, even though she kept her head bowed, he followed her with his eyes until Hinata sat two chairs away from him. In between were Hanabi and Iyashi Hyūga.

"Naruto Uzumaki," Iyashi greeted amiably.

"I thought the old man was supposed to come?" Naruto asked.

Iyashi frowned. "Yes, well, he is old."

Without a word, Hanabi reached out and punched Iyashi in the shoulder. Iyashi in turned squeezed his hand on her thigh. And they looked at one another as if they truly wanted to gut each other's eyes out.

"These are great seats, Hanabi-sama," Hinata cut in to diffuse the tension.
"Of course, we are Hyūga," Iyashi said as if it was obvious.

"I was under the impression it had more to do with the fact Hinata was on Shino's genin team," Naruto added.

Then Ame leaned forward in Naruto's lap and asked Hinata, "When are you going to come and visit again-" Naruto slapped his hand over Ame's mouth.

Naruto quickly offered. "Visit? I've been meaning to invite the future clan head over for ramen."

"Real smooth," Sakura coughed from behind him.

"Ramen?" Iyashi asked in distaste.

"Or tea. Whatever you people eat." Naruto quickly replied.

After a pause Iyashi answered, "Of course it would be in the best interest of Konoha's newest clan to vie for the Hyūga's favor. Perhaps I will take you up on your offer."

"Wait what?" Both Naruto and Hanabi asked.

Before a date and time could be determined the wedding procession marched in. It was the first time he had seen Shino without his glasses or anything obstructing the view of his face. If Sakura didn't tell him that was Shino, he would never have guessed. Mukade had shed the green common of the Aburame and wore white from head to toe.

The wedding was long and boring.

As it dragged on Ame slowly began to place her head in Naruto's lap and Naruto didn't move to correct her. He wondered how all the other children in attendance could possibly sit so straight for so long. Even Naruto began to slouch in his seat. Sakura hit him in the back of his head to quickly correct him.

After the sake ceremony was performed between the couple and their immediate family members, the wedding ended with what the Aburame considered the most important part.

Shino took Mukade's hands and then dipped down to kiss her. Then all of the "guests" of the clan attempted to hide their disturbed or disgusted faces, as Shino's hive of beetles began to pour out of his clothing and disappeared in the crevices of Mukade's wedding gown. For several long seconds, her pure white dress was covered in black. What they couldn't see were the beetles crawling up Shino's mouth into Mukade's throat, absorbing her chakra as if it was a treat, and then attacked and decimated her own hive until Shino's kikaichuu remained in them both.

The kiss was finished as Mukade slumped against him in exhaustion. Shino lifted her in his arms and carried his new wife down the aisle.

"That was um, interesting," Naruto admitted to Shino at the wedding reception. "I've never been to an Aburame wedding before."

"Our weddings are always interesting. Why? Because it is tradition."

Naruto chuckled. "Well congratulations." He reached in his pocket and produced a small jar. "Remember that mission I sort of screwed up by umm… can I say fart at a wedding? Anyways, it's the egg of one of those bikochuu beetles. I'd figure I'd make it up to you."
"Most people are supposed to give money," Sakura chided.

"It is a rare, delicate, interesting specimen. I accept," Shino said. He said much more rush than his usual calm demeanor and snatched the jar from Naruto's hands.

Mukade peeked out of her sleeves to see the jar and gave Naruto a wink before quickly hiding her face again.

"I don't understand. Why do you look like you're crying?" Naruto asked.

Mukade peeked from behind her robes. "I'm supposed to. I just lost my hive. It's not becoming of me to be happy. It wouldn't be unseemly."

Naruto was so confused. "And you seem very exhausted."

"I'm still acclimating to Shino's hive. They absorb much more chakra than mine did," Mukade explained. "Hopefully I'll be recovered enough for later tonight."

"What's later tonight?"

Sakura yanked down on Naruto's ear and quickly replied with a rushed, "That was a beautiful wedding" before dragging him away so the next person could get a turn with the newlyweds.

"Hey," Naruto complained as he rubbed his ear. "What was that about?"

"You can be so dense," Sakura huffed. "What do you think they're going to do tonight?"

"I don't know. Geez, Sakura this is the first wedding I have ever been to. I didn't get to go to Shikamaru's because I was on a mission. So no Sakura, I have no idea what they're going to do."

"Consume the marriage."

Naruto groaned. "Big words," and then his attention were distracted as he caught sight of the Hyūgas in the crowded reception hall.

"Oh come on," Sakura complained. "Are you still hung up over her? She is a dead end, Naruto. Move on."

"I have. I'm just going to talk to her," Naruto replied. "It's just a friendly conversation."

Sakura shook her head as she watched him push through the crowd. Naruto didn't know when to give up.

Hinata followed behind Hanabi and Iyashi at a distance as they greeted and formally conversed with the clan heads. Naruto swooped in, grabbed her hand, and pulled her through the crowd.

"Hey Hinata," Naruto quipped and was rather surprised she willingly followed. She could have easily slipped out of his grasp.

"Hello Naruto," Hinata replied in kind, with one eye on Iyashi and Hanabi. Hinata's kimono was a delicate balance of being less than Hanabi's but better than everyone else in the room, as usual of a branch family member.

Naruto opened his mouth, and then at the most inopportune time there was nothing in his head. "I- um-"
"It was a beautiful wedding," Hinata assisted the conversation.

"Yeah, it was. I'm glad that you came. I know that you really wanted to come and-" Naruto's shoulders dipped. "How have you been?"

"I've been promoted," Hinata answered, "in both areas. I am attending Hanabi now and I have my own squad."

"Wow, that's awesome."

"What about you?"

"I'm on the council and I bought the old Uchiha compound. You really should see it, I've been fixing it up and-" Naruto drew his eyebrows together mischievously. "Do you want to see it?"

"Yes."

"Wait, yes, really yes?" Naruto asked. "None of that 'I have duties to attend to' and crap?"

"Yes."

Naruto grinned and rushed toward the food table. He lifted the tablecloth and peeked underneath to where Ame was being decorated in jewels of bugs. "Hey Ame," Naruto whispered.

"Hey daddy look, they're not afraid of my eyes!" she exclaimed. The Aburame children smiled and obviously couldn't control their hives as well as their adult counterparts as bugs crawled out from between missing teeth.

"That's great," Naruto replied. "I'm going to go give Hinata a tour of the compound. I'm going to leave a shadow clone okay?"

Ame nodded, and then grinned mischievously, "Good luck."

"Hey," Naruto said as he kissed her cheek and crawled from underneath the table. Several Aburame gave him a look as if he was the weird one as Naruto straightened his shoulders, created a shadow clone and left toward the exit.

The shadow clone stood beside Sakura.

Sakura's hair bobbed as she looked at him with curt eyes. "You're pathetic."

Naruto brushed his hand against Hinata's as they walked down the road. He wondered if he grabbed her hand would she pull away. By the time he determined he should try, they were suddenly already at the Uzumaki compound.

"So this is your official seal?" Hinata asked as she touched the new crest emblazoned on the door.

"Yeah, I decided to keep the traditional Uzumaki symbol," Naruto answered. He absentmindedly checked for Tomu's and Ichigo's chakra signatures and found them with a clone at Ichiraku's.

"It looks like we're the only ones here," Naruto replied as he opened the gate and welcomed her to his new home. "Here, I'll show you everything."

Naruto gave Hinata the grand tour and took her around the compound. Naruto grinned like a child as he declared, "and this is the training area."
Hinata raised an eyebrow as she stepped onto the large shuriken and kunai target range. There were various practice dummies and sections of the area where even time could not heal the streaks of soot and ash. "This is larger than the Hyūga compound."

Naruto grinned smugly. "Evidently it's only second to the Inuzuka... well first now since Tsume destroyed it. It's great isn't?" he asked.

Behind him, Hinata scanned the area with her byakugan and stared at the adjacent shed populated by various weapons. "All those are yours?" Hinata asked.

"Not really. I'll show you." Naruto stopped at the seal on the door and deactivated it. The doors opened and revealed stacked boxes of kunai and shuriken. "Some of these were already here but there was a lot of private collection in the various houses that I've gathered. I think I've found everything but," Naruto furrowed his eyebrows. "Half the compound is underground and I haven't explored all of it yet.

It said a lot about the prestige of the Uchiha clan that even after all these years, treasure hunters wouldn't dare touch this place.

"When you bought this place you really got a good deal," Hinata noted.

"I don't think Sasuke walked any further than his own house," Naruto replied and then paused and reached into a corner and picked up a stray cat. "There are a lot of these guys around," Naruto held the cats paws in front of his face and swiped at Hinata playfully.

"They seem to like you."

"It's because I feed them," Naruto allowed the cat to drop to the ground.

"What is all this here?" Hinata asked as she walked to the other side of the shed where seals decorated cases and cabinets.

"Those are seals I made myself," Naruto said proudly. "The more dangerous weapons that I don't want Kusuro getting into are in there."

Hinata slid her hand along the drawer, the drawer that sealed Naruto's hiraishin kunai. She examined the intricacies of the seal.

"Come on, I really want to show you the backyard."

"Wait," Hinata said slowly. "What is in there?" Hinata suddenly pointed to a large cabinet.

"Oh, that?" Naruto knew Hinata could see through the wood and was probably really curious. Naruto cut his palm and spread the blood along the seal. The doors snapped open and revealed a set of black and red armor decorated with the Uchiha crest.

"That's exquisite," Hinata replied and quickly grew bored. "Let's continue?"

Naruto obliged her, resealed the doors, and gave her a tour of the rest of the compound. He ended with the main house. "It's all new furniture," Naruto described. "Are you hungry or would you rather see the upstairs?"

"I'd like to see upstairs. When the Uchiha were in charge, I've never set foot in this place. Old rivalries." Hinata answered as Naruto showed her the kids' rooms even though they refused to sleep there. "Hey, Hinata has the Hyūga clan decided about the war?" Naruto asked curiously.
"They've decided against it," Hinata answered as she peeked into the various living quarters. This place was as old as the Hyuuga compound. "The Hyūga clan is an important cornerstone of Konoha and our kekkai genkai is particularly useful. We lose a lot of people to war." Hinata answered and turned to look at Naruto, "Have you decided?"

"I don't know," Naruto answered truthfully, and finally felt as if he was having a real conversation with her. So far, she had been rather distant and polite and not the Hinata he wanted. "A lot of the things that Mountain does disgusts me but war affects a lot of people. Drug flow increases, the number of orphans increases, and often times the people who are hurt the most never ask for it."

Hinata paused and leaned against the hallway. "I know its wishful thinking but I want this peace to last as long as possible." She tilted her head slightly, "You haven't showed me your bedroom yet."

Naruto's breath hitched. "Are you saying what I think you're saying because you know I'm not very good at figuring these things out."

"I am saying that the wedding reception just began and," Hinata's pale eyes courted him from under her lashes, "We still have lots of time."

Naruto's heart leapt and leaned forward with hungry kisses. Hinata served him with willingly. Naruto walked backwards and pulled her along into his room. At this point he didn't care whether or not she left him afterwards, he just really needed her.

Naruto moved to close the door in case his clone came home and he wasn't paying attention. Naruto's room was rather sparse compared to the liveliness of the rest of the house. He had a king size bed now, unmade, and there was clothes on the floor. It looked like his room in his apartment but bigger.

Naruto stumbled against and sat back on the bed, pulling Hinata between his legs. Hinata slid the haori off his shoulders and pulled his kimono off of him as well, until she pressed her hands on his bare chest, and they slid like falling raindrops on his skin. "I'm really proud of you Naruto, you've accomplished so much."

"I still have a long way to go." Naruto pulled from the exposed skin of her neck and wanted to ask about the Hyūga clan and how much she was accomplishing but was afraid if he did, she would pull away.

When her obi was finally off, Hinata's purple kimono slacked. She pulled forward and straddled his lap, then twisted her lips onto his mouth.

Then behind Naruto's head, Hinata withdrew a needle from the sleeve of her kimono. A soft gasping breath wafted from her lips as she pressed her body into his erection, and poised the needle at his neck.

She craned back as Naruto sucked on the soft tender flesh, inadvertently creating hickies on her pale skin. Hinata pressed her free hand through his hair and encouraged his attentions on her neck. Hinata subtly activated her byakugan in order to strike the vein true.

Then Naruto was suddenly yanked away, her hand pulling the strands of his hair back until Naruto looked at her confused.

"Naruto, what's wrong with you heart?" Hinata demanded, in anger.

"Nothing," Naruto said quickly and before she could ask another question, pressed himself to her
Hinata's hand wavered and slipped the needle back into her sleeve. The last thing she wanted to do was worsen his condition. She subtly pulled off the outer robe and allowed the needle to drop hidden within the silk to the floor.

Hinata racked her brain for another solution as the layers of her undergarments were quickly shed under Naruto's anxious hands. The white juban fell to the floor and for the first time, Naruto laid eyes on her breasts. Testing, he placed careful reverent kisses upon them.

The koshimaki hung off her hips and Naruto pulled his hands from her waist and up her back. Then, unbidden, a seethe of pain left Hinata's lips.

Naruto stopped.

The pain snapped Hinata back to the present. Naruto's fingers trembled as he lined the scars of her back and skirted the healing bruises. Naruto's eyes were storming when they looked at her, "What happened?"

And Hinata replied with his same answer. "Nothing."

Naruto and Hinata looked at each another, both with a heft amount of stubbornness. Both knew if they wanted to pursue the subject it would only push each other away. As if to shut each other up, they both attacked one another with equal fervor, no questions asked.

Naruto didn't dare place her on her back and fell backwards onto the bed, pulling her on top of him. Naruto leaned upwards and kicked off his pants. He caressed his lengthened nails over her skin, pulled her waist forward, and-

"Naruto, I can't do this."

"Huh?" Naruto said numbly as Hinata rushed off of him with a sudden panic.

"I can't- I can't do this with you." Hinata snatched her clothes off the floor and her hands were literally trembling.

Without any of the grace she usually carried she tripped over his clothes and lurched out of the room. Hinata closed her eyes as she slammed herself against the wall, her heart racing, her chest tightening painfully. She was a medic-nin and recognized the onslaught of a panic attack.

Hinata couldn't break now. She still had a mission to accomplish.

"Wait Hinata!"

She heard his voice call out for her as he came out of the room. Hinata grimaced. She was going to have to do this the hard way.

Naruto sighed in relief when he saw she had only made it as far as the hallway. The terrified expression he had caught on her face in those few seconds had been replaced with a cool mask. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you, I just-"

Then Hinata struck her palm into Naruto's stomach, and followed with a barrage of Jyuuken strikes. Naruto fell like a wooden board to the floor. He couldn't feel his chakra nor could he move. She had completely cut off his chakra flow to certain areas, including the seal. He couldn't even use the Kyuubi's chakra to overload his nodes.
Before he could attempt to figure out what was going on, she straddled him, grabbed her clothes, and then pressed them to his face. Naruto suddenly couldn't breathe and could do anything to stop it. The darkness enveloped him and he was helpless.

When Naruto's face stopped moving, Hinata quickly lifted the clothes and checked his breathing.

Hinata grabbed a senbon needle hidden in her sock and drew a line of blood from his arm. She quickly wiped it with the tip of her obi and tucked the blood away. Then she stood up, stepped over him, and took a shower in his bathroom.

Naruto groaned as he sat up in bed, a little disoriented.

That seems like a very unhealthy relationship.

"Oh shut up."

You always let that bitch get too close. At least Minato never fucking tried to suffocate me. What did they call you? The Fox Demon of Konoha? You have entire countries afraid of you and you almost die by suffocation.

"I didn't almost die. If she wanted to kill me, I'd be dead already."

When a woman knows all of your weaknesses it's time to kill her.

Naruto didn't miss the fact she had struck his seal first and cut him off from the Kyuubi's chakra. He searched for her chakra signature. She was all the way back at the Hyūga compound and everyone else was home.

He got out of bed, put on some clothes, and attempted to figure out why Hinata was here in the first place. It obviously wasn't for a tour or a quick fling. Naruto curiously followed her scent into his bathroom, and realized she had washed and masked her scent underneath the perfume she wore to the wedding. He couldn't follow her trail at all.

She's thorough I give her that.

Naruto went downstairs where his shadow clone was reading a book to two sleeping children on his chest. Tomu was cleaning. Tomu looked at Naruto as he wiped the kitchen table.

"Do I really want to ask why I found you naked lying in the middle of the hallway?"

"It's a ninja thing," Naruto answered and knew Tomu was never going to ask about it again.

Aren't you going to do something about it?

"Like what?" Naruto questioned. He couldn't forget the bruises along her back, "Like beat her? I think she's had enough of that."

"Naruto, you're talking to yourself again," Tomu offhandedly replied.

Yes. Beat her, rape her, torture her - make her afraid of you.

You know what I think? I think you're still bitter about that time she got the better of you.

You know what I think? I think you've got serious abandonment issues. You can't blame
everything on me.

"I was abandoned- orphaned because of you in the first place!"

I didn't force Minato or Kushina into it.

"Fuck you," Naruto said as he bit into an apple. "You and I are a prime example of an unhealthy relationship. Our goal in life is to make each other miserable, and yet I can't die without you, I can't even have sex without you."

Naruto looked up and realized Tomu was looking at him. Tomu quickly began to wipe at the wood furiously. "I didn't say anything."

You know you love me.

"I'm going to go train."

"Of course you are," Tomu answered.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You always train when something is bothering you, or you're angry, or you're depressed," Tomu paused and looked at Naruto. "You know, that can't be very healthy."

"Oh you shut up too," Naruto grumbled as he exited the house and went to the training ground to let off some steam.

When Naruto finished it was early in the morning. He picked up a towel and wiped his forehead. "How long are you going to sit there?" Naruto asked.

Kagome sat atop the weapons shed, smoking a cigarette. "Until I figure you out," she answered. She watched Naruto with an intense stare and he continued to walk past, but Kagome slid down from the roof and landed in front of him. Naruto tensed when he felt her body heat.

"What do you want?" Naruto demanded.

Naruto shifted uncomfortable as her hand teased the hem of his pants. Her lips twisted into a smirk upon his ear. "A lonely woman from Grass could always use an ally," she responded, "especially in Konoha's council."

"Then why can't you just ask?" Naruto asked frustrated.

"You can't trust anyone, especially those closest to you," and Kagome touched her hands along his sweaty chest.

"There is nothing you can do to influence my decision," Naruto told her. "Your efforts are wasted on me."

Kagome leaned backwards in distaste, and then dug in her pockets for a cigarette. Her demeanor changed in an instant. "You didn't seem the type."

She lit the rolled tobacco with a fire jutsu and placed it to her lips. Her eyes flicked upwards with metal in the iris. "What do I have to do to get you to say yes tomorrow?"

"My decision is my own," Naruto replied as he grabbed his shirt from the ground where he had left it
"I even considered threatening the children-" Naruto whipped his head around with a growl, "-but you've had those damn shadow clones watching me all the time." Kagome inhaled the smoke in her lungs and looked up into the vastness of the stars. "You're right not to trust me. I'd do anything for this war."

"You'd do anything for your revenge," Naruto answered. "Other than your son, you don't care about anyone else."

"Do you truly love your children?"

"Of course I love them."

"Do you love that woman? The one you left with at the wedding?"

Naruto crossed his arms, and his aura was deadly. He was not in the mood for games. Kagome sensed his impatience and wisely stepped back.

"Just consider what Mountain did to Grass. Grass did not fight some long drawn out war, we fell to a surprise attack. We were betrayed from the inside and our defenses compromised. No one ever saw it coming.

One day you're going to be out on a mission and it'll be too late. That woman will have her eyes plucked out and raped until she dies of too many childbirths. Your little boy will be gutted with a sword and his body trampled over, your little girl taken to the comfort camps, and the older one sent to work his lifetime as a slave in the mines. That is what happened to my people, and do not for a second think they will not do any worse. How much do you love the ones closest to you Naruto Uzumaki?"

Kagome flicked a cigarette at Naruto's feet.

"You can never predict the weather."

The council was tense and the atmosphere was grim as the Hokage convened the council and got straight to the point. "We have one important decision to make: to either accept or decline the proposal to go to war with Mountain. We will now commence the voting."

"The Nara Clan declines."

"The Akimichi Clan declines."

"The Yamanaka Clan accepts."

"The Inuzuka Clan accepts."

"The Sarutobi Clan accepts."

"The Civilian Committee declines."

"The Aburame Clan accepts."

"The Yuuhi Clan declines."

"The Hyuuga Clan declines."
"The Senju Clan accepts."

All eyes were on Naruto, the deciding vote. In many ways, he felt as if he was once again on that border between Grass and Sound. Was there ever a right choice?

"The Uzumaki Clan accepts."

x

A peace treaty is just a piece of paper
Twenty-Five

Fangs, Blood, and Loyalty

If Sakura Haruno was going to get a free meal out of this, she chose the most expensive restaurant in town.

She abandoned the drab white of her medical uniform for the vibrant green dress that flattered her figure. She was more than willing to leave the boring, flat, but oh-so-comfortable work shoes at home. After all, her high-heels needed some practice.

It all went wrong the moment she entered the restaurant.

"What do you mean I need a reservation?!

"Sir- you need to notify us a month ahead and-

Kiba threw the hostess bodily against the wall. "If you don't want me rip your throat out, get me a table now."

The manager of the restaurant, an Akimichi, brilliant chef, and a former ninja stepped in to intervene. "Inuzuka," the Akimichi said amiably with a smile as sweet as his desserts. "I have a table prepared for you."

"Finally," Kiba growled and dropped the hostess to the ground.

Sakura didn't think dinner was worth it anymore. She attempted to step back and cringed when Kiba turned and spotted her. His eyes lit up and quickly attempted to hide his excitement under a cocky swagger. He smirked and his eyes leered at her figure.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," Sakura grumbled as she shoved past Kiba and demanded the Akimichi to take them to their table. They followed the chef all the way to the back of the restaurant.

Sakura felt embarrassed when she sat down, separated from the rest of the customers.

Akimichi handed both of them the meals. "I will be honored to make anything you desire."

"Why is this shit so expensive?" Kiba demanded loudly, and Sakura further sunk in her chair. She knew the Inuzuka clan had the money. "I could hunt this stuff with my bare hands."

The Akimichi amiably rubbed his hands together. "And the Inuzuka Clan are my best meat suppliers. Can I suggest the tenderloin?"

"Yeah, whatever," Kiba grumbled as he handed back the menu. "And make it rare."

"Of course," The Akimichi turned toward Sakura. "It is not proper for a young woman like yourself to slouch so."

Sakura gave a weak smile and straightened in her chair. "I'll have the most expensive item on the menu," Sakura said without looking and handed over the menu, "and alcohol, please."

The Akimichi smiled. "I'll bring you strongest we've got." He walked away and left Sakura to her so-called date.
"You smell disgusting."

"Excuse me?" Sakura asked as she tightened her fist. She promised herself she wouldn't tear this dress. Why couldn't he have complimented her appearance like normal people?

"It's perfume dumbass," Sakura replied. "It's what's you wear to fancy places like this," she said, "You're not even dressed right."

Kiba looked down at his long-sleeve shirt and training pants. He looked around and observed the other people in tuxedo with a twitch in his eye. "I don't even have one of those. Why did you pick this stupid place anyways?"

"Because it's supposed to be a date," Sakura snapped impatiently. "My one shift of the day off and I'm stuck here spending it with you."

"It's not my fault you're scared of my mom."

"Everyone is scared of your mom." Sakura sat back with her arms crossed. She sighed in relief and thanked the waiter when he brought the drinks.

Kiba sniffed the fruity drink, swallowed the lemon and followed it with the entire glass as if it was a shot. Sakura was almost tempted to do the same.

Then there was silence.

Sakura tapped her fingers along the dinner table, and gave an exasperated sigh to fill the silence, a hint really, but the man across the table wasn't catching on. Kiba's cockiness suddenly wilted under the pressure of nerves. Kiba looked out of place, as if the richness of the environment was choking around his neck like a collar.

Sakura cleared her throat but couldn't find anything to begin the conversation. She decided something safe. The one thing they had in common was that they were ninja. "Anything interesting other than the mission grind?"

"Training," Kiba answered as if that should be obvious.

Desperate to grasp onto anything, Sakura took hold of her medic side. "You know, Kiba you've never once been to the hospital for a check-up. There is hardly anything on your files." Yes, Sakura admitted, she checked the medical files of everyone she went on a date with. It was a bad habit.

"The hospital is for wimps," Kiba sneered, "and I don't understand why you work there anyways. You can pummel my face in but you choose to work in a hospital."

Sakura pursed her lips. It was a conversation often brought up by other ninja and sometimes you get tired of putting on that smile while hearing about everything what you could do, what you should do, or what she ought to do. Sakura Haruno didn't give a shit about the opinions of other people and refused to follow anyone like the sad little puppy dog girl she used to be.

"You're right," Sakura replied. "I choose to work there. Let me tell you something Kiba Inuzuka, Death is a more frightening enemy that you could ever face because no amount of strategies, no amount of jutsu in your arsenal, no amount of strength or wisdom will be enough. I fight Death and sometimes I win. What have you ever accomplished?"

Kiba smirked at the fire in her voice.
The waiter passed by the table and Sakura desperately requested a refill on her drink. She couldn't believe she was talking about death on her date. She couldn't get away from it and the stench of it followed her from work to every aspect of her life.

"Because shitting on yourself and farting as your body decomposes is a wonderful process," Sakura said sarcastically. The alcohol was beginning to get to her. The food needed to come out soon before the entire evening was filled with dead jokes.

"That doesn't seem any different that when you're alive," Kiba scoffed. "People everywhere always has this fear of it but," Kiba shrugged his shoulders, "it's as natural as walking butt-naked in the skin you were born in. Death should be a celebration. We don't have to deal with this shit anymore."

Sakura reached for the glass of alcohol the waiter brought and toasted it in the air. "To the shit we deal with."

Kiba gave a feral grin, glad they had finally found common ground. But when Kiba attempted to toast the glass shattered, the alcohol sloshed, and spilled all over Sakura's dress. Kiba found himself vaulted across the restaurants and crashed into the closest table.

"This was my favorite dress!" Sakura screeched as she stormed from the restaurant.

Kiba looked up as the Akimichi arched over him. "I know, I know," Kiba grunted and kicked himself out of the restaurant. "It wasn't even my fault that time."

Kiba raced to catch up to Sakura.

"Do not talk to me, Kiba," Sakura snapped.

"It was an accident," Kiba said as he followed on her heels like a puppy kicked but determined to follow her to a home. Sakura stomped so hard on the ground the heel on her high-heels broke off.

She turned to Kiba breathing fire as she hopped to take of her shoe. "A chūnin on average accepts two missions a month. I work 24/7. Was asking for a nice dinner too much to ask?!" Sakura finally got off her broken heels and threw them at Kiba's head, "And I hate those fucking heels!"

Rather used to women yelling at him, Kiba easily stood his ground. "Want to have sex and just call it a date?"

Sakura hadn't had sex in a long time and she certainly wasn't going to turn him down.

In minutes they were back at her apartment taking off clothes.

Kiba pulled off his shirt and the urgency of the moment suddenly disappeared. Sakura stared at the scars that surrounded Kiba's body. The medic in her was imagining how each scar was formed.

"Training," Kiba replied.

"Training?!" Sakura replied in concerned and pulled away when Kiba dived in to kiss her. Sakura has treated a lot of people and have never seen so many scars. His chest was riddled with them as if they had attacked his body. Suddenly she wondered if the coat and long sleeve shirts Kiba always wore meant more.

It was Kiba's turn to be annoyed by the disaster that was this date. "Are you going to diagnose me or are we going to fuck?" He demanded.
Where was the thin line between training and abuse?

"Kiba, this is serious. Does your mother always "train" you this hard?" Sakura asked dead serious.

Kiba pounced away from her with a repulsive glare. "It's training," Kiba angrily grabbed his clothes and slammed the door of her apartment as he left.

Sakura should have just kept her big mouth shut. Sakura sat in the loneliness of her apartment, sometimes you'll take anyone, no matter who. Sakura raced out into the hallway. "Kiba, wait."

"What?!" Kiba snapped.

"I have thirty minutes before my next shift at the hospital. This date isn't over yet."

In hindsight, Sakura should have never asked Kiba to come back into her apartment. Sometimes you don't give a shit.

Sakura had finally found some time to take a small break. She rested against the entrance of the patient's door. The lights in the room had all been broken and in the darkness she could see the outline of a figure in the bed.

"Kiba?" Sakura voice carried her exhaustion, with this place, with this room, and with this man.

A low growl rumbled through the vibrations in the air, audible even though Kiba faced towards the wall with the covers drawn over his head. "What the fuck do you want? Came to take another leg?"

It was past visiting hours and Kiba was long past his stay. His wounds had been minor and he was taking up space someone else could use, but no one was willing to tell him that.

Sakura closed the door before walking into the room and launched herself over Kiba and sat in the bed. Her back rested against the back of the wall, her legs spread out over his hips, and her feet hung over the edge of the bed.

"I am going to nap here for five minutes," Sakura whispered and closed her eyes.

She could feel when Kiba shifted and finally emerged from the covers. Sakura smirked knowingly when Kiba snatched her arm and pulled her down into the bed. He wrapped the covers around her but turned over.

"Make sure you wake me up, I can't miss Naruto's appointment."

"This late at night?"

"Jinchūriki."

Sakura yawned and fell asleep.

Kiba did not wake her up but she had an alarm on her watch. Sakura's eyes snapped open and felt even more tired than before. She stretched and then her hands crept through the opening in the back of the patient's uniform. Kiba's skin was riddled with scars.

Kiba growled when Sakura reached around toward his groin. When there was no reaction Sakura sat up incredulously. "I didn't think that could happen to an Inuzuka."

"Shut up," Kiba grumbled.
Sakura sighed. Her usual plan of action whenever Kiba was in a bad mood had backfired. They actually didn't talk very much, they just had sex. "Kiba, you've got to get out of this bed."

"I've got no fucking leg."

"That's why I brought you the cane yesterday but you threw it out of the window."

"Fuck the cane."

Sakura hit her head against the wall and could easily move Kiba out the bed by sheer force alone, but she didn't.

"I'm sorry," Sakura said finally. The weight of guilt was killing her. "It's my fault. I should have forfeited the moment the situation stepped outside the boundaries of the exams. If I had just forfeited, you wouldn't have helped me. I did this to you."

"Let me be, woman," Kiba's voice was practically begging. She could hear the tears he was trying to hold. As far as Kiba was concerned, men did not cry.

Sakura rolled her eyes and left the bed in defeat. She felt helpless to prevent him from becoming another statistic. She wanted to help but couldn't get past his stupid tough exterior. She swore the only function his tough exterior served is to hide the fact he's a momma's boy.

Sakura stopped in her tracks and tried to remember the list of visitors. Several Inuzuka had come by, Hana had taken Akamaru to give him a bath, but... "Tsume hasn't come to visit has she?" Sakura finally understood. "You're afraid to go back home."

Sakura didn't expect an answer and didn't receive one.

Sakura brushed her hair behind her ear, bit her lip, and finally suggested, "Ino is moving back to the compound. Move in with me, it's not big enough to fit Akamaru but... it's somewhere to go."

"I'm not going to freeload off of you," he said stubbornly.

"Kiba, consider my offer. I'm going to be forced to call your sister to get you out of here soon. The hospital doesn't have room for you."

"Sakura," Kiba said from the bed, hidden in the depths of his darkness. "You can keep the ring."

The IV monitor crashed against his head as Sakura stormed out of the room.

Tsume Inuzuka nursed a bottle of alcohol.

She snarled at the sudden scent that had come onto her property. The alcohol in her hand was crushed. The door fell off the hinges. She stalked through the vast green fields.

The hairs on Tsume body bristled in anger.

"Get off my land."

The ANBU Captain Wolf crossed his arms and did not flinch under the matron of the Inuzuka's stare. "I heard what happened at the Jounin exams. You lied to me. I want my summoning scroll back, the one you supposedly burned."

"Fuck you."
"I'm not leaving until I get it back."

"Then I'll make you leave," Tsume said as her nails extended.

Wolf scoffed as he leaned over the woman, "You couldn't hit me even this close, you drunk bitch."

The porcelain mask fell to the ground.

To the visible eye, the two disappeared. Tsume shot through the air with the flexibility and speed signature of the Inuzuka and the ground caved as she landed all on fours on top of him. "I should have killed you when I had the chance, Ookami."

Tsume twisted to avoid his katana, caught his shoulder in her rib as she plummeted to form a crater as large as the one she had created. Tsume clawed out of the ground. "I'm going to fucking kill you."

Hana wore glasses as she attempted to thread the needle through the wound. The small puppy on her table yipped and playfully clawed through her white coat. She was supposed to be attending to clan head duties, but she never really wanted them. Working with animals is what she knew she wanted to do in life.

When she finished and cut the string of the stitching, the ground beneath her feet began to shake. She didn't think anything more of it than a few of the kids playing tag, until someone bodily flew through the wall of the veterinary and out the other side.

Hana scooped the puppy in her arms, and as she turned the entire building began to crumble. Dust permeated the air from the wreckage. Hana rushed to unlock all of the kennels and cages and shoo the animals out of the building. She ran back for some rare herbs but before she could take a step further the support beam collapsed.

Hana coughed in the dust, and when she opened her eyes, she found herself in the arms of the one person she least expected. She was placed on her feet and pushed to the side by his forearm as if she was a rock that needed to be cleared away from an arena.

He had untamed silver hair that almost blended with the white coat he wore on his shoulders. The Inuzuka tattoos were still inked into his skin, a permanent reminder of his past.

Hana stared at him in disbelief. She hadn't seen him in years due to the restraining order issued by the Fourth Hokage that prohibited her mother and father to ever be in each other's proximity.

"Dad?"

Akita Inuzuka raced through Konoha hospital at a frightening pace without any regard to the people she knocked down. She sniffed her way to her target and slammed open the door. Akamaru jumped to his feet when Akita charged into the room, she brushed past with a scratch behind the large canine's ears, and continued straight to lift Kiba out of the bed with one arm.

"Get up," Akita demanded.

Kiba groaned, "What do you want?"

"He stinks. Akamaru, do you think he needs a bath?"

Akamaru tongue lolled out of his mouth in a mischievous form of a grin. He barked in agreement.

And then Akita threw Kiba straight through the stone wall of Konoha's hospital. Kiba flipped to land
on his feet, remembered too late, slipped unbalance and fell face first on the grass. Kiba was thrown backwards by his hair, dragged through the hospital courtyard, and literally shoved into the pond.

"Hey Akamaru?" Akita questioned, her foot on Kiba's face. "How long do you think he can breathe under there?"

"For a while," Akamaru grinned as he padded towards the pond. When Akita finally let Kiba go, Akamaru dipped his snout into the pond and shoved his muzzle into Kiba's back, raising him from the water.

"I'm going to fucking kill you!" Kiba snapped and coughed up water.

Akita snorted. "You couldn't kill me even if you still had two legs."

Kiba growled and angrily slapped Akamaru away when his best friend attempted to comfort him.

"Get up, we've got a problem."

"Get up?" Kiba snarled. "If you're here to just mock me then-"

"WHO THE HELL IS GOING TO PAY FOR THE HOLE IN MY HOSPITAL!"

Even Akita flinched when Sakura marched outside. Even though Sakura knew Hana was busy with her new duties over the clan, Sakura highly preferred the milder sibling than the rougher cousins to handle Kiba. Not that Sakura didn't think Kiba needed a good punch to the face, but she had the safety of her patients to be concerned about.

Akita placed her hands on her hips. "Pinkie, I'm taking him home."


Kiba crossed his arms as he sat in the grass of the courtyard and pouted like a child, "I'm not going anywhere."

"Seriously Kiba, you are the only one who can talk some sense into your mother. She even summoned the Wolf Pack."

Kiba's brows furrowed. "What's going on?"

Suddenly the ground beneath their feet began to shake.

"That's her," Akita said knowingly.

"And what am I supposed to do about it? Mom can fight her own battles. She obviously had plenty of things better to do."

"It's him."

"You mean him?" For a few moment's all Kiba saw was red. Kiba clawed at Akamaru's fur and pulled himself up with his arms. "What the fuck does he want?"

"A fight, it seems," Akita answered and threw a pair of clothes at Kiba. Kiba threw off the medical robe.

"Kiba, we are on hospital grounds," Sakura reminded him, but quickly rushed to help him with his pants once she saw he was having trouble.
Kiba angrily pushed her away. "Stop treating me like a fucking child, I am a grown- FUCK," Kiba yelled as he tipped unbalanced and fell. In frustration his claws shredded through the pants.

Kiba looked at the stump that his leg had become. Sometimes he could feel the pain of the acid ripping through his skin, sometimes he could feel Akamaru's fur brushing against it, sometime he swore it was still there.

But it wasn't.

"What's going on?" The Hokage demanded. She had been trying to ignore it, hoping the problem will solve itself eventually… but well, any reason to get out of the office. Of course, the backdrop of trembling houses and a summon-sized pack of canines brutally attacking one another outside her window was an important reason too.

The vast land holdings of the Inuzuka were completely decimated and had become a battleground. Most of the Inuzuka clan had been evacuated onto Nara clan territory.

Hana Inuzuka winced and gave the Hokage a reluctant welcome. So far she had been trying to mitigate the damage and keep the fight restrained only to their lands but it was difficult because hardly anyone in Konoha could match their speed. "It's a slight marital dispute."

"Just five more minutes," Hana begged, hoping they would just tire themselves before they had a chance to kill each other.

At a time like this, the Hokage wished Naruto was in the village and not in Sunagakure. She wondered how fast it would take him to get here and diffuse the situation. The Hokage decided, "We don't have five minutes, either you have a way to make them stop or I'm sending in the ANBU to put them down."

Tsunade whipped his head back and forth at the sound of the collisions but she could barely follow them with her eyes. She hated dealing with marital issues, especially between two ninja.

"SIT! NOW!"

The Hokage didn't get a chance to follow through on her plan when a voice bellowed across the landscape. Immediately three of the four summons, the large grey Wolf Pack sat on their haunches and whimpered at the command.

But the large Snow Wolf did not back down and was frothing at the mouth as he went for the summons throat.

Kiba, astride Akamaru, jump into the air and suddenly transform into a large three headed dog, tore into the white wolf's neck and forced the beast to the ground.

The transformation ended and Kiba commanded with one word, "SIT." The Snow Wolf pulled his ears back and laid on the ground in submission. "STAY."

Finally Ookami stopped in wild bewilderment. "Are you going to listen to him?"

Tsume paused in her attack when Kiba rode in between.

"I don't know that the fuck is going on, but that's enough." Kiba demanded.

"Give me back my summoning scroll you bitch."
"It's mine now," Tsume taunted.

Both looked worse for wear, covered in blood and shredded cloth.

"You stole it."

"You left it."

"I left you."

"And I didn't fucking need you," Tsume spat. "My Kiba is stronger than you ever could be."

"Wake up woman, that thing you call a son is a fucking cripple. He's your fucking failure, not mine."

"Wait mom," Kiba attempted to grab her but Tsume bounded over Akamaru and landed on Ookami with an enraged roar, "I HATE YOU!"

"BITCH."

"BASTARD."

Kiba nudged Akamaru forward and quickly bit down on what was left of Tsume's shirt and dragged her away.

"Mom," Kiba said solidly. "Dad left us. We don't need him. We never needed him."

Ookami suddenly erupted in a fit of mad laughter. "Oh come on Tsume, don't tell me you've been lying to the boy this entire time."

Tsume spat as she came to her feet and quickly pushed Akamaru away. "Mom, what is he talking about?"

"Nothing," Tsume snapped. "He's a liar. Don't listen to him."

"I bet she never told you why I left."

"Shut up," Tsume warned and Kiba wrapped an arm around her waist. He knew she was barely on her feet.

"Ask her who your father is."

Kiba fell into an expression of confusion. "Mom, what is he talking about? Isn't it that jerk over there my father?"

"You're no son of mine," Ookami sneered. "All of Konoha could be your father."

"He's your son, you fool!" Tsume screamed.

Kiba's expression hardened. "Are you done tearing this family apart? Are you satisfied?"

"I came for my summoning scroll."

Kiba didn't hesitate to throw Blood Hound's summoning contract at the man's feet.

Ookami straightened as he picked up the scroll. "Your mother might wish for it all she wants, but you will never be my equal."
The Snow Wolf summon disappeared in a cloud of smoke, and the ANBU Captain disappeared in a flurry of leaves.

"Come on," Kiba whispered as he tugged his mom onto Akamaru's back. "Let's get you to the hospital."

"Don't believe him," Tsume said softly, delirious from her blood loss as she pressed her hand to Kiba's face. "You look just like him."

Sakura watched from the doorway as Kiba placed a cup of water to Tsume's lips.

"Stop that," the matron ordered. "I'm not a fucking baby."

Sakura smirked. Those two were just alike.

"You acted like one," Kiba replied. "Seriously mom, you destroyed the entire compound."

Tsume scoffed. "Houses can be rebuilt. I trust Hana got everyone out?"

"Everyone is fine." Kiba said as he sat back in the chair.

"Kiba, come back home," Tsume whispered and turned to look at her son.

Kiba didn't answer.

"You were supposed to become clan head and protect the clan."

"I only have one leg. I can't protect anyone. I couldn't protect you."

"But- but- you can take your sister's position. You're smart. Your sister taught you everything about the business. You have to stay." Tsume's nails dug into Kiba's wrist when she snatched it, "You were always better than him."

Kiba hung his head. He licked his incisors and asked, "Mom, who is my father?"

After a few heavy moments Tsume finally replied. "I don't know," she whispered and tightened her hands around him. "But you're mine. You'll always be my little boy – my strong and tough and fierce little boy."

All he ever wanted to do was make her proud of him. Kiba felt the numb that was his leg and as his mother drifted to sleep he whispered, "Mom, I'm sorry I failed you. I couldn't be who you wanted me to be."

Kiba reached for the wooden cane that leaned against the chair and pressed his weight against it with bitterness. He winced, not because of the strain or pain, but because of the shame.

"She'll be fine, Kiba. She's tough."

Kiba sat back against the doorway and looked at Sakura. "Akamaru doesn't fit in your apartment."

"We can figure something out." Sakura said softly. "I don't know about the future and the only thing I can honestly promise you is one day at a time."

Kiba gave small shake of his head. "I honestly thought I was better him, that I was what you deserve but-" Kiba leaned away, "you deserve so much better than what I could give you.
"What is this?" Sakura asked angrily. "So you're officially breaking up with me?"

"Sakura, you broke up with me first."

"You idiot," and Sakura's hand turned into a fist, but her attack turned into a limp hug as she pressed her head against his chest. "You stupid fucking idiot."

"This is a stupid idea," Sakura replied. She's felt like she's been here before, under these very stars, under this very gate.

"It's something I have to do. I can't- I don't-" Kiba was secretly hoping that if he could finally catch him, everything would make sense again. Perhaps it would finally make him whole, even if his body no longer will.

"I didn't come here to stop you. Go," Sakura shooed Kiba off as if shooing a dog that had unintentionally gotten too attached.

Kiba paused, unconsciously reached down to massage the emptiness of his right leg. Kiba grinned wolfishly before he leaned forward and kissed Sakura on the belly. "I'll be back."

"You're an idiot," Sakura replied again. "If you truly loved me, you wouldn't leave."

"I do love you but… it's something I have to do," Kiba attempted to explain. That was all the words he could muster to explain the pull of loyalties in his heart. He knew there was always the chance that he wouldn't come back, but well, death was as natural as walking butt-naked in the skin you were born in.

Kiba looked down the road out of Konoha that led to the title of missing nin. No Inuzuka in Konoha's history has ever abandoned the village.

The fact that he left, was the moment Sakura knew he had always been the wrong one. It was at that moment she knew what she wanted and promised herself that she wouldn't be left standing at a gate ever again.

"You want me to do what?" The ANBU Captain Wolf asked with a taste of disgust in his mouth. "I have missing international criminals to find and you want me to chase after a cripple?"

Tsunade sighed with her frown. Tsunade had tried to wait patiently, but in the end, she had no choice but to declare Kiba a missing-nin.

"Look, Kiba was one of the best trackers Konoha has had. Even you know it requires a great tracker to find a good tracker. Find him, bring him back, and place him in custody."

"It would save us all the trouble if I kill him," Wolf grumbled.

"You are to bring him back alive," Tsunade stressed. What made the Blood Hound summon so dangerous is that he appears whenever his contractor dies to take his soul. And then afterwards there was no master to control him. She did not want that thing loose in her borders.

The door slammed close as Wolf exited the office. He didn't immediately head towards the gates of Konoha. Instead he turned toward the Inuzuka compound and crossed the border without hesitation.

"You shouldn't be training so soon," Wolf replied as he crossed his arms.
Tsume rolled her eyes as she landed on her feet. Her nest of brown hair stuck to her sweaty face. She was lean, and mostly made of muscle. A few of her stitches had reopened. Tsume's personal nin-ken, Kuromaru growled.

The large white nin-ken that trailed Wolf growled in return

"Your boy is missing."

Tsume scoffed. "I know that. Does he need his mommy to look over his shoulder all the time?"

"Obviously, since he runs away like a lost child."

"His choices are his own," Tsume shrugged her shoulders and walked over to pull the kunai out of the targets. Wolf watched her, always defensive in her presence.

Tsume looked over her shoulder and said, "He is your son… I'm about eighty percent sure."

"I've stop believing anything that comes out of your mouth."

"Look, I've reasoned it out. Both of your natural affinity is wind. I mean, Hakumo was lightning, Sarutobi was fire, Uchiha was obviously fire, why am I even going through the list? Look even if I might have fucked half of Konoha, wind is rare."

"Minato had wind."

"Oh I fucked him when he was a chuunin. I wasn't messing with him at the time."

"I don't believe you."

"And what was I supposed to do? Wait?" Tsume asked angrily. "You were gone on an extended undercover mission for years."

"But when I came back you didn't stop fooling around."

"And you didn't stop drinking either. Who the fuck cares? No one is perfect."

"I care whether or not my son is my own."

"You care whether or not he is your son," Tsume corrected him, "Because you want him to be."

They stared at one another with a hatred the years have not tempered.

"I love you."

"So much I could kill you."

The ANBU Captain Wolf placed his hands in his pocket as he walked along the road. His trusted companion padded alongside him and Wolf placed his hand through her fur. This mission was a joke. The boy had left a trail even a genin could follow.

The ANBU Captain walked up the grassy hill. Kiba sat at its top, leaning against the white fur of Akamaru, as lazy as someone who had just woken from a nap. The stars sparkled down as witness.

"What took you so long?" Kiba asked.

"I don't have time to play your games boy."
"I'm not playing games," Kiba answered and his incisors gleamed in the night as he swiped his tongue along them. "I've been waiting to kill you."

Wolf scoffed. "You're just a cripple."

"But I'm still an Inuzuka," Kiba replied, "and fuck it, I will die an Inuzuka. You trespassed on our territory, embarrassed the clan, and attacked my mom. You're not leaving here alive."

Whether Kiba lived or died, whether he wanted to or not, if he didn't try, he didn't deserve the name Inuzuka, and that was the only name he has ever had. The Hyūga and Inuzuka might hate each other, but they certainly understood one another. A Hyuuga's pride and Inuzuka's loyalty ran deep as the blood in their veins.

Kiba placed his hands together to activate his jutsu. Pillars of earth rose from the ground and surrounded the area with tripwire and explosive tags.

The east wind swept through and the talking was finally over and Kiba activated the explosive tag at Wolf's feet.

Wolf jumped away and then paused as the explosion swept a cloud of stench into the air. Wolf coughed, his eyes were tears, the pepper stung his nose, and landed awkwardly on another tag akin to a flashbang.

Wolf whimpered as the sound alone drilled into his ears. Without his ears, nose, and his eyes, Wolf was literally blind. He called his nin-ken to his side but when he attempted to move from his position he activated an explosive tag.

Kiba sat back and watched the fireworks. It had taken him three days to set up this elaborate trap.

"Ready Akamaru?" Kiba asked.

Akamaru barked.

Wolf looked up in frustrated anger, feeling stupid, and fuck it, when he was getting out of this mess he was going to snap Tsume's neck. A shadow loomed over his feet and he looked up at a large three headed dog that navigated the minefield with ease.

And Wolf placed his hands in his coat with resolved calm. He was tired. Ever since Shiyo's death it's as if he's been living with a missing leg, living life at the pace of a limp, and a broken heart. Even Captains burn out eventually.

And the large White three-headed beast leaned down and swallowed the ANBU Captain whole.

Kiba pulled a bone from his teeth and chunked it over in the pile of his Father's remains. The Captain cloak was coated with saliva and decorated by a mosaic of bones.

It was hard for Kiba to consider this man not his father, no matter how much he personally hated him. This was the man who had shaped Kiba by his absence, the man's whose shadow Kiba has been chasing all his life, and the man his mother still loved.

"How much do you think we have to grovel and beg the Hokage to let us back in?" Kiba asked Akamaru. "It's not like she's going to give me any missions. I'm not a ninja anymore," Kiba said bitterly as he rode atop Akamaru.
"Community service?"

Then Kiba blanched when the sky began to darken. Kiba stared at the telltale signs and whipped around as the clouds coalesced.

"Oh fuck," Kiba cursed. "He signed the contract."

Blood Hound's sleek legs appeared, his tail cracked in the sky, and his red eyes craned forward. His teeth caught the apparition of a spirit and swallowed it. Then Blood Hound licked his lips and looked at Kiba.

**What do we have here? A bird with a broken wing.**

"Dismiss yourself. You've gorged on your soul."

**Why? When I feel a whole village of souls close by? You're not strong enough to control me anymore.**

Blood Hound grinned and stepped toward Konoha.

Akamaru raced to get between Blood Hound and the village. Kiba didn't hesitate to use a wind jutsu, but it swatted past like nothing more than a gust of wind.

Blood Hound's tail cracked and Akamaru wasn't fast enough to avoid it. Akamaru whimpered as he was flung forward and Kiba was tossed from his back. A streak of red matted Akamaru's white fur.

Kiba rolled and slid in the dirt. When Kiba came to a stop he activated all of the seals hidden underneath the ground and his surroundings exploded. The heat touched Kiba's face and when he opened his eyes, Blood Hound stepped from the fire with a smile and moved in the direction of his next prey.

"Wait no!" Kiba cried as he crawled forward to where Akamaru lay. Blood Hound slipped his claws into Akamaru's fur, like plunging into water, and the nin-ken whimpered in pain.

"No, fuck let him go." Kiba attempted to crawl, attempted to pick himself up, but only fell onto one knee. His stump slid along the ground. "Please."

Blood Hound sucked in a breath.

As bright as a comet falling out of the sky, a rasengan plunged downwards and crashed Blood Hound into the ground.

Kiba slapped his hands to the dirt and in desperation activated a jutsu without seals. Akamaru lifted on a raised pillar of earth and slid towards Kiba. Kiba dug his head in Akamaru's white fur in panicked relief.

Naruto landed in the clearing.

"Seriously? Kiba what were you thinking?"

"I didn't summon him," Kiba said in a rush as he felt for Akamaru's heartbeat. Kiba cursed, his hands trembled. He grabbed the scroll from his belt and summoned medical supplies. Since the mission against the Sound ninja when Akamaru had first been critically injured, Kiba had taken to the medical field much more seriously.
"Naruto I need your help." Kiba said as he began to clean Akamaru's wound.

"Yeah, that's why I'm here, on off-duty, because I'm such a great friend," Naruto said with more sarcasm than he intended. "You take care of Akamaru, I guess I'll handle this thing." Naruto replied as Blood Hound lifted onto his haunches. "That thing is much bigger than I remembered at the exams."

"Give me time to tend to Akamaru," Kiba responded, "and after I know an Inuzuka secret technique we can use if you provide a distraction."

**Oh, I want to fight this one.** The Kyuubi interrupted.

*Now you want to help? You can't just help when you want to.* Naruto argued. Naruto suddenly activated sage mode to avoid the flick of Blood Hound's tail, which created a crevice when it impacted with the ground.

**You can't take this thing on by yourself.**

*Watch me.*

Blood Hound sucked in a breath and Naruto did the same. Black flame and waves of water collided with one another, until steam covered the surrounding area and the flames slowly began to win. Naruto flipped out of the way and the entire forest shriveled into dead husks.

Naruto created a rasenshuriken and threw it as he jumped into the air. The tail swatted it away like a rubber ball.

"Oh you've got to be kidding me," Naruto groaned.

**Of course you need my help. We can combine like when we were fighting Tobi.**

*I needed your help when we were saving those prisoners. I needed your help to stop sucking on my chakra. Fuck. You.*

Naruto deactivated sage mode and created a thousand shadows clones. He hoped he could trust Kiba to know what he was doing. He didn't want to take the risk of transforming into Kyuubi mode and the Kyuubi double-crossing him afterwards.

**I wouldn't do that.** And there was a rumbling deep laughter.

Naruto observed from the trees as his clones were being swatted away like flies, but he was attempting to process the information, looking for any blind spots to his opponent. When he found none, Naruto reached for his summoning scroll.

Kiba trembled in relief after he closed and stitched the wound. "You're going to be alright, buddy," Kiba whispered and combed his hand through Akamaru's fur.

"Naruto, I need that distraction."

"Coming up," Naruto replied as he swiped his blood and slammed his hand on the ground to summon Gamabunta.

"Why can't you ever summon me just to say hi?" Gamabunta grumbled.

Blood Hound stalked around the Gamabunta with red eyes. "What's wrong Kyuubi, don't want to
He used to have three of those tails. Come on kid, let's transform.

"Gamabunta, let's go." Naruto commanded.

Blood Hound was much faster than Gamabunta could move. The katana clashed against a swipe from the claws. Naruto jumped into the air with two large Oodama rasengan.

Gamabunta and Naruto effectively coordinated their attacks to put Blood Hound on the defensive.

Kiba watched and shook his head. Naruto would always be on another level Kiba could never reach.

Kiba pressed his hands to the ground and hoped he timed this right. With a wind jutsu, he blasted himself into the air, steadied his claws and clung himself onto Blood Hound's back. Blood Hound was too distracted by the double team of Naruto and Gamabunta to notice.

Kiba crawled forward as he pinned his claws into the slick black flesh and dragged himself upwards, like climbing a tall steep hill with one leg. Finally Kiba reached the top in a drench of sweat, applied chakra to his hand, and with a technique secret to the Inuzuka, scratched his claws behind the ear.

Blood Hound squirmed, his tail twitched, and then rolled to the ground with an excited yelp.

If Naruto hadn't seen it, he wouldn't have believed it. Naruto dived down with two large rasenshurikens spinning in each hand, two direct hits, and right into Blood Hound's flesh.

The surrounding area burst into a flash of light and screeching birds. When the jutsu cleared, Blood Hound was collapsed on the ground. The mighty beast trembled with every breath and attempted to get up until it no longer had enough chakra to retain its presence in this plane of existence.

It disappeared in a cloud of smoke. The smoke cleared and left a body behind.

"Kiba!" Naruto rushed forward. Kiba had fallen underneath Blood Hound's weight and could not save himself. His troubled breathing scraped against Naruto's ears. Naruto begged forgiveness for what he had done, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

"Why can't I ever catch up to you?" Kiba grinned as blood fell from his lips. "Where is Akamaru?"

"He'll be fine," Naruto assured him and directed Gamabunta to pick up the unconscious nin-ken and deliver him to the Inuzuka compound at once. "Just hold on Kiba, I'll get you some help," Naruto replied as he scrambled for his hiraishin kunai and teleported to Konoha.

Sakura had been in her apartment, overlooking Ino's official report on the investigation of her medical staff when her window shattered.

"Sakura!" Naruto called her immediately, swiped everything off the kitchen table and placed Kiba onto the flat surface.

Sakura could only stare. This wasn't supposed to happen. She had nightmares that looked like this.

"Sakura!" Naruto yelled at her and knew enough to try and staunch the bleeding.

Sakura snapped from her numbness and rushed for her storage scrolls full of medical supplies. Sakura tore open Kiba's shirt and pressed green chakra against his rib fractures and collapsed chest.

"Come on Kiba," Sakura begged when Kiba's breath stalled in intervals.
Kiba patted his hand along the table until he reached Sakura's hand and pressed it to his nose. "I've always liked how you smelled of cherry blossoms."

"Shut up," Sakura yelled at him and pumped more of her chakra into his body. "Shut up you fucking idiot."

Naruto squeezed his hands over his ears and attempted to dull Sakura's wrenching cries that ripped from her throat. Naruto closed his eyes as he sat on the couch and refused to see the limp arm hanging off the table, and the guilt.

When he had woken up today, this was the last thing he had expected. He was supposed to be on off-duty, but death followed him like a stench, like a shadow.

You never stop burying your friends until it's time for them to bury you.

The two strongest kunoichi in Konoha sat across the room from one another. Tsunade leaned forward, her hands folded under her chin, and her wide rimmed hat shadowed her serious expression. On the other side, Tsume sat lazily, with a bored expression and a bored posture as she slumped in the opposing chair.

"Did you aid a missing-nin in time of war?"

"Guilty," Tsume's head rolled with a mad grin. "I gave him an encouraging kiss on his forehead before he went off to kill his father."

Tsunade rubbed her eyes with the palm of her hands. Sometimes keeping Konoha intact internally was just as hard as protecting it externally. And unlike her grandfather, she didn't even have the Uchiha to deal with.

Tsunade couldn't believe that woman used to be such a sweet little girl. This life changes everyone. Tsunade slowly watched the cup fill with sake and it flowed bitter down her throat.

"Frankly Tsume, someone needs to punished."

Tsume shrugged her shoulders. "Lock me up, whatever."

"I am officially assigning you to the warfront until this war is over, specifically to Chouza's unit on the Sand border. After that, the council will decide what to do with you depending on your performance."

"Are we done?" Tsume scoffed.

"Ookami was in ANBU. He cut ties to you and your family when he entered the organization. The Inuzuka had no right to take this matter into their hands."

And Tsume's brunette hair framed her feral expression. "The Inuzuka had every right. It was unfinished business."

"Unfinished business?! We are in a time of war. I expect you to keep your petty rivalries and grudges to a minimum while our country is in danger."

"I don't think you know who I am. I don't massacre my entire family, or backstab, or lie. Inuzuka don't do that shit." Tsume craned her neck and the tattoos were the color of drying blood. "It was Ookami's time."
"At the sacrifice of your son?"

Tsume's head whipped around, her body tensed, and looked serious for the first time since she came into the office. Her lip curled into a sneer. "Don't you dare lecture me on my choices, until you've lost a child then I don't expect you to fucking understand."

Tsunade knew she had touched something tender in the otherwise tough woman. "Tsume," Tsunade said as gentle as a comforting hand.

The chair fell backwards by the force she used to stand and walked from the office, with the predatory swagger only a Inuzuka could carry.

"I'm sorry. His name cannot go on the memorial stone since he died a missing-nin."

"He died an Inuzuka," Tsume corrected, because it made a difference.

x

She swore the only function his tough exterior served is to hide the fact he's a momma's boy
Lesson Twenty-Six

Absolutely Nothing

Anko cackled madly, like the laugh at the slow stop of a ride, reminiscing over the experience without realizing the rush had come to an end. She wiped the tears from the edge of her eyes and with an ache realized that this time, she couldn't go back and ride one more time. It was over.

The sudden disappointment welled in the silence.

Kakashi buckled his pants and slipped on his shirt until he was fully dressed in his uniform. He placed Icha Icha Tactics into his back pocket and pulled his mask over his face.

There were rules. They were never written down or even agreed upon but had developed into sacraments over the years that without, Kakashi and Anko would have never worked. You never show concern. You never want answers. You never ask the other to stay.

Anko swiveled suddenly and the motioned creaked the bed and interrupted the silence. Kakashi paused, tilted his head over his shoulder, as if waiting for her to say what he couldn't.

The words never came.

Kakashi placed his hands in his pockets and left. He slowly meandered toward Grass country. He took his time, stopped to smell the roses, until not even time kept him from the Grass border.

Kakashi Hatake was a man who preferred to keep people at a distance. It had never been a conscious choice on Kakashi's part, but as people slowly began to flicker away from his life, he grew accustomed to the darkness left behind.

Even his genin team, he had watched them grow farther and farther away.

Kakashi didn't want someone else in his life, evidently the council deemed otherwise.

He arrived at the war camp where Leaf ninja and Grass resistance fighters had begun to congregate. As everyone rushed around him, Kakashi seemed to move on his own time. It was like watching the world turn and still retaining some semblance of control.

"Kakashi Hatake! You were supposed to be here a week ago!"

Kagome had to wonder if Konoha thought her war was a joke. She had yet to be introduced to Kakashi's peculiarities. It was the first time either had been introduced to one another besides the rumors left by infamy.

Kakashi defended himself with the usual excuse, "I apologize. I got lost on the road of life."

Kagome narrowed her eyes and was hardly impressed with the thin waif before her. She attacked with a threat, "Then next time you decide to get lost again, I'm going to draw a map on the underside of your balls."

"My honorable comrades." Kagome's eyes twitched as Maito Gai jumped between them and with a shimmering smile wrapped his arms around the two. "I see you are already bickering with the passions of an old couple."
The people on Kagome's list to kill was always getting longer and always shuffling to accommodate her newest nuisance.

Kakashi was more than willing to just kill himself.

Gai ignored the gloomy stares of the two underneath his arms and said with a congratulatory pat on their backs. "I demand to be the best man at your wedding!"

The rain obscured the metal behemoths that coughed out smoke just outside the window. Hound sat in the sill and pressed his head to the cool glass.

"Fucking showers, the water isn't getting cold," Boar cursed.

"Kick the pipes," Hound replied offhandedly.

Boar re-entered the bathroom, determined to take a hot shower before he had to kill someone.

The mission details were sparse.

Mantis sat covered by darkness in the corner of the room, then straightened at the sound of urgent whispers. "Hound, I have received word that the warlord has left his stronghold. Why? I am not sure yet."

"This might be the lead we're looking for." Both Hound and Mantis stood. Hound moved toward the bathroom and rapped his fist on the door. "Boar, change of plan. Time to go."

Boar hadn't even gotten undressed yet. He grumpily pulled his uniform back over his scarred shoulder. Hound pushed open the window and the glass creaked, inviting the rain into the warmth of the inn room. Hound's team followed him into the cold wet harshness of Rain Country.

When they first arrived in Rain, the warlord certainly hadn't been hard to find. He was extravagant. He held regular parties, dined on food most could only dream of, and showcased power in the number of bodyguards he could hire.

Hound placed his chakra careful against the metal plating and crept atop the ceiling of an abandoned business building. He and his team observed the ninja guarding every exit and entrance of the casino.

"This has got to be to be the meeting place. He brought all his bodyguards."

Rain pounded atop their heads and slid like careless tears down their masks. A small beetle landed on Mantis' neck and disappeared within the pores. "I have confirmation that he is meeting with someone."

"Sounds like our target," Hound answered. "Boar and I will infiltrate the casino. Mantis, stay here and observe the meeting."

Mantis nodded and then put his hands together to activate a jutsu, "A Thousand Sight jutsu."

Mantis flew around the flickering overhanging light in the dim room. Underneath him, two men sat a poker table and neither one had a very good hand. The guards were posted outside the room, not in an act of trust, but to prove that the men were not afraid of each other. It was all just a show.

A window that ran the length of the wall sat behind the warlord, the collage of smattered blue hues was the only crest he has ever known.
The Mountain envoy placed a card face-down on the table. "Mountain has a proposal for you. We will help you keep control of Rain if you agree to assist us in our endeavors."

The warlord drew a card. "Like what sort of endeavors?"

"We would like to use Rain as a sort of base of operations, to store supplies and reinforcements in case Konoha breach our Southern border."

The warlord called his bluff. "You've found yourselves fighting both Iwa and Konoha. That sounds like a bad investment to me. Look, I might not lead as many men as your Kage but I can predict the weather of power when I see a storm coming."

"Don't you want to maintain permanent control over this village? You could be a Kage of your own."

"The only thing that is permanent in this country is the rain. I'll be out of power soon enough, but at least I won't be dead."

The Warlord spread his cards over the table and won the hand. "This deal isn't sweet enough for me."

The envoy slapped his cards on the green in anger, and stood to reveal the trick up his sleeve: The one-handed jutsu he had been preparing behind his back. "Then perhaps the next warlord will find the deal more to his cravings."

The warlord lifted his hand in the air. There was a glimmer of steel outside the window. "One move and my snipers will kill you."

"How about a bet? I bet my jutsu reach you before your snipers reach me?" The envoy claimed. All he had to do was say the words and his chakra would react. "Are you willing to bet your life?"

Mantis immediately cancelled his jutsu. "Hound, there is a situation. Because Rain has refused the deal, they're at a stand down."

The rain had begun to come down harder and Hound had to continually wipe the blonde strands of his hair away from his face.

"I'm on it," Hound replied and disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

"I cannot comprehend how women wear high heels. They are not appropriate to walk in, anywhere," Boar grumbled. He wore a fluffy black dress decorated by bows, and his demeanor betrayed it wasn't the first time. You do what you've got to do for the mission.

Hound wore a similar attire and two blonde pigtails sprouted from his head. He had to honestly admit that while sneaking in he had never been groped so much in his life. There was a disturbing updraft of wind across his behind as he leaned against the corner. He observed two retinues of guards posted before the grand double doors that barred entry to the meeting.

Hound received the memories from his shadow clone. "Boar, I'm going in. Cover me."

There was a sudden breeze in the top level of the casino, as if some idiot had left a window open. The guards looked at each other distrustfully, until without warning, there was a strangled yelp. A red line was drawn against the guard's neck, until his head slip off and tumbled like the roll of a dice to the floor.
The startled guards from Rain and Mountain looked at one another for a few seconds, before taking battle stances and attacking one another. In an instant the entire hallway was filled with the smoke of explosions.

"Take out the leftovers." Hound released his henge, entered sage mode, and with ease slid between the two warring parties.

The warlord and Mountain envoy never took their eyes off of each other. Neither could hear the explosions just outside the door, which were deafened by the rolling thunder. Lightning streaked across the sky and lit the room in a brilliant flash.

When the light had vanished, and the room had returned to shadows, the cold blade of a katana protruded from the envoy's chest.

The warlord watched as the blade slid out as if through silk. The corpse fell to reveal the white mask of a Leaf ANBU.

The warlord lowered his hand, but the snipers never fired. Their flesh stripped bones had fallen like rain to the pavement.

Hound decided not to kill him. There was no telling what the warlord that came after him would choose to do. For now, Konoha at least knew this one's position. "While you continue to resist Mountain, you will live."

"Do you gamble assassin?" The warlord asked as he reached over and began to shuffle a new hand of cards.

"This is Konoha," the warlord replied as he presented a playing card: The King.

"And this is Rain," he showed another card: The Jester.

"I'll dance to your tune as long as you're King," and the rain beat against the glass behind his head, "but you better not lose that crown."

"I don't gamble," Hound replied and sheathed his katana. He left by walking over the pile of dead corpses at the door.

Hound and his team had just reached the outskirts of the village when a falcon cawed in the sky to a patterned tune. Boar whistled the continuation of the song. The falcon dived into the trees and landed on Boar's arm. Boar didn't hide a groan when he snatched the paper from his summon's leg and handed it over his shoulder to Hound.

"I am seriously considering transferring from your team," Boar replied. "Sure everyone is overworked during war but you always get the tough shit."

Even Mantis had a gloom hanging over his head that he didn't have before

"Fox had the right of it. Get out before you find yourself six feet in the ground."

Hound suddenly couldn't focus on breaking the locked seal. "If Fox has nothing to do with our current mission, then there is no reason to discuss her."

Boar paused in his usual tirade of complaints and recognized when he had stepped on something messy. "Technically we're not on a mission until you decode the seal on that scroll," Boar replied,
"and second, I for one approve that you've finally gotten your relationship issues out of the mission."

Hound attempted to focus as Boar continued, "Getting out was the best thing that woman has done for this squad. You are finally more focused on the mission than focused on watching her."

Hound misread and the seal suddenly blew up in his face.

"Point proven." Boar reached out and snatched the scroll away from Hound. The first mistake was a warning. The second was big enough to kill you.

Embarrassed, Hound turned and leaned against the dampened bark of the tree. Rain dripped softly against the leaves, and trailed, crawled, and dripped, to form puddles on the ground.

Boar broke the seal and threw the scroll. Hound reached behind and caught the scroll before it hit the back of his head. Mantis watched the small exchange and showed as much interest as one of the trees in the background.

Hound read the mission details with a sigh. He didn't want to admit he was tired, and refused to show it, after all, he did ask for this war.

"Sand has requested a team of ANBU on their northern border. We'll be debriefed by the Commander of Sand's frontal force. It doesn't sound too bad."

"When that's all the information we have to go on, yes it is," Boar grumbled. He had been in this business long enough to know no matter how many skilled ninja, technical gadgets, newest equipment, or even a jinchūriki he had on his team, information will always be a ninja's best weapon.

Hound jumped up to the tree limbs and the movement shook a shower of loose water to the ground. As he traveled he lingered on bitter thoughts and after a while pulled back beside Boar.

"Do you think she was a lie?"

Boar turned to look at Hound and replied, "We're on a mission."

Then Hound punched Boar in the face with a lightning right hook and slammed his teammate to the ground. Hound landed crouched on a branch and watched as Boar picked himself out of the mud.

"You know what Boar, you are never transferring from this team because you take too much pleasure pissing me off."

"Yes," Boar said after a moment, as if realizing it for himself. "Yes, I do."

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 Temari's rough blonde hair was matted down her shoulders. She held her newborn in her arms and after the labor her usual cruel smirk only had energy enough for a smile.

"Temari-san, the Leaf ANBU you requested are here."

Temari kissed the photograph and placed it within the safety of her bra. She turned while carrying the weight of her fan on her shoulders. The Sand siblings were accustomed to carrying extra weight, be it puppets, gourds, or the abuse they suffered under their father. Sometimes Temari had a deep paranoia that she was turning into him, the father who always put his village before his family.

Matsuri escorted the team of three Leaf ANBU into the privacy the large central tent.
"That was fast," Temari admitted and the squad leader gave a respectful bow.

"What's going on?" Hound asked.

"Here's the problem: There is a Mountain operation just a few kilometers out but once we arrived they began packing up. I don't know what they're doing all the way out in the middle of nowhere but it can't be any good. I figured whatever it is Konoha would like to know about it."

"Thanks for the tip. Do you have any more information on the layout or anything?"

"Sorry, we just got here. I was planning to send out a few scouts but you came sooner than expected. And don't forget to leave one ninja alive who has seen you so Mountain knows it wasn't Sand who cleared them out."

There was an agreement between Suna and Konoha that once Suna got what it wanted from Iwa, then they would assist in the war with Mountain, but no sooner. Suna didn't want to fight both Mountain and Iwa at the same time.

"Alright, no problem," then the ANBU paused, "That was a nice picture."

"Oh, that," Temari shrugged her shoulders as if it meant nothing. She hadn't realized the ANBU had been close enough to see it. "You know how it is, got to make it home to the kids. Good hunting."

The terrain was flat and dotted with shrubbery. The Leaf ANBU lay on their stomachs as they scouted out the operation while covered by a henge that camouflaged them to the environment.

Hound was more than a little concerned. Something wasn't right. When he entered sage mode he could feel something rotten contaminating the natural energy in the surroundings. Unsure of what it was or how it would affect him, he deactivated sage mode.

One of Mantis' scouting beetles returned and wavered. Mantis snatched the beetle out of the air and crushed it without warning.

"We've got a problem. Why? Because they are working on biological and chemical weapons. I can't go in there under any circumstances," Mantis replied grimly. "If even one of my thousands of kikaichuu beetles are infected without my notice, the rate of infection among my clan will be... catastrophic."

"This is beyond our jurisdiction," Boar said immediately. "We aren't equipped to battle disease and toxins."

"I'm rather resistant to it," Hound replied. "I've never had a cold or fever so I think I'm safe enough. I'll take this one alone."

"Resistant to disease, but what about radiation poisoning or toxic chemicals?" Boar asked. "No, call in reinforcements. With your hiraishin technique, they should be able to get here in time before Mountain leaves."

Hound had to admit that at times his father's technique came in handy.

"I'll be back. Boar and Mantis, keep an eye on everything here." Hound created a shadow clone, "I'm sending a clone to tell Temari to move her campsite father away, just in case anything happens."

Hound went through his collection of kunai that were slowly growing. He grabbed the one he
labeled, "Granny's Office." He pumped chakra into the kunai and in a blink appeared within the
desk a group of genin. The Jounin Instructor had been called to the warfront. Mushi stood as team
leader and listened with apt attention to the instructions detailing a delivery of medicine and supplies
to the warfront.

The genin at Mushi side gave startled screams at Hound's appearance. Mushi simply tilted her head
in acknowledgement.

"You are dismissed," Hokage replied after she had finished carefully going over the instructions.
When the children left the office, Tsunade turned to her ANBU agent and finally expressed the
worried concern she refused to show to the children.

"What's going on?"

"My team and I have found a Mountain facility developing biological and chemical weapons. We
aren’t equipped to handle it."

"I see," The Hokage mused on the implications and finally decided on a course of action. Then she
swiped her hand over the ANBU scroll and a cloud of smoke appeared in the office. When the
smoke cleared, a woman leaned against the desk, a mesh shirt underneath the white Captain's cloak
that she wore.

Snake's mask tilted in curiosity. "Who am I killing today?"

"It's a Code Green. Handle it."

"Oh what fun," Captain Snake replied gleefully. She skipped over and wrapped her arms around
Hound's waist, then slapped her hands on his butt cheeks. "Honey, I'm ready."

"Snake, I swear if anymore sexual harassment complaints are filed against you-" Tsunade threatened
as they vanished. Once they appeared back in Iwa, Hound forcefully pulled the woman off of him.

"We're on a mission," Hound insisted.

"That's what makes it exciting," Snake claimed.

"Shit," Boar grumbled under his breath once he saw the reinforcements.

"Alright boys, let's see what we've got." A snake slithered down from the Captain's white sleeve and
went to scout the area. In the meantime, Mantis debriefed her on the information his beetles has
gathered.

"Don't you people have hives that cleanse poisons?" Snake asked.

"We don't choose our hives. They choose us." Mantis answered. "The hives designed for poison
cater to specialized missions but they aren't equipped to cleanse an entire area or village before
people start dying."

"Yeah whatever."

Snake Captain removed a scroll from her belt and produced two black masks and protective uniform.
"I need a volunteer," Snake claimed. Boar and Hound looked at one another. "You!" Snake pointed
to Hound.
"Do I have to?" Hound asked.

"Yes Captain," Snake corrected him.

"Yes Captain," Hound muttered embarrassed as Snake helped him put on the protective uniform that covered every measure of skin. Hound held his arms out, embarrassed, while Snake used the opportunity to openly grope him in front of his team.

Then she reached up and adjusted the mask on his face. "Can you breathe all right?"

Hound nodded.

"What about now?" Snake asked after she tightened her grip around his scrotum.

"It's fine." Hound snapped and shoved her off of him.

"Are you sure these are safe?" Boar asked as he equipped the mask. While Snake had been busy with her "demonstration," Boar had taken the initiative to dress himself before he became the next volunteer.

"They worked against Hanzo." Snake gave Boar a disappointed pout to see he was already dressed.

Snake didn't bother putting on any protective gear. The summon she had sent to scout slithered back up her arm. "There are about twenty-five ninja, ten scientists, and thirty experiments."

"We should target the ninja first," Hound decided.

"Oh," Snake tilted her mask back towards Hound. "Let's make this more fun. If I kill more people I choose the position. If you kill more, you get to choose."

"Position?" Hound questioned. "I was thinking I'd take point and enter the facility first and Boar should position himself at the exits."

Snake laughed madly. "You are so funny."

Snake lifted into the air atop a large summon and casted a growing shadow over the valley. Unsure how the toxins will affect him in sage mode, Hound reached up and rode along. Boar did the same and complained, "When I said reinforcements, this is not what I meant."

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"Wind Barrier Rasengan!"

Hound activated the barrier of wind in the narrow hallway as a barrage of fire jutsu attacked him. Fanned by the wind, the fire exploded and created a cover for Hound to leap and press himself to the ceiling. He threw a crowd of kunai and hidden in their midst was a seal.

The three ninja who had been shielding themselves from the backfired fire jutsu, immediately attempted to deflect and dodge the falling kunai. The seal fell past unnoticed and stuck to the ground at their feet.

Hound activated the seal he had created. He straightened, calmly walked past his paralyzed victims, and swiped his katana through their necks.

Without the advantage of sage mode's sensory abilities, the moment he entered the next room by way of the ceiling, he began his next attack without hesitation. "Hiding in Mist Jutsu."
Mist spewed from his mouth and filled the entire room in seconds.

There were panicked shouts from the scientist and stray jutsu from the ninja in the room. It was an abyss of confusion as those caught within the mist attempted to find their way out.

"Wave Wind Jutsu."

And the mist was laced with wind. Screams erupted throughout the room. The sound of blood splattered and hearts stopped.

When the mist cleared, detached body parts littered the ground. Hound landed and blood stained his boots. Hound walked towards the next room.

But the occupants were already dead.

Snake tilted her head and the nest of snakes slithered from their victims and returned to the sleeves of her coat.

"I win," Snake gleefully replied.

Hound paused for a moment as a shadow clone caught two scientists escaping outside. He let one go.

"I win."

"Oh no fun," Snake pouted.

Other than the dead, boxes and lab equipment crowded the room. Hound neared one of the cells. The prisoners were covered in boils and a green rash, evidence that Mountain was experimenting on human beings. The men, woman, and infants were freshly dead.

"You killed them," Hound accused.

"I put them out of their misery," Snake corrected. "I'm not running the risk of bringing them to Konoha and infecting the village. There was no helping them."

Hound stared at their twisted and grotesque expressions, the frames of their body withered away as if something had eaten them from the inside. Suddenly, in the shifting mass of flesh, there was movement. Hound watched as a man breached the bodies on top of him and crawled forward.

His fingernails were blackened, puss gathered at the exposed wounds on his face, and groaned like the incessant wailing of a ghost. The man reached out towards Hound.

"Save me," he moaned.

Hound's kunai was flung through the bars and injected into the dying man's throat.

"I've sent for a team to clean up and handle the contamination," Snake said. Her cleavage increased under her mesh shirt as she leaned forward onto the planning table.

"We've also received details for another mission," Mantis said and handed the scroll to Hound.

Hound read the details of the mission. "We need to meet with the sabotage force after sunset, which gives us a few hours to rest."
If he wasn't on-duty, he certainly would have spent those hours at home.

"Suna is rather close," Temari suggested. "I can give you three passes."

"Four," Snake replied.

Temari pursed her lips. "I'm sorry. It takes a Kage's authorization to allow an ANBU Captain of any village through our gates."

Snake slipped her white coat off her shoulders. "Not anymore. I'm a regular member of the squad today."

"You've got to be kidding me," Boar grumbled.

"I'm sure you boys are tired. I'll be happy to help pick up the load."

Hound did not understand her innuendo but knew Snake was his responsibility. He was the one who decided to call in reinforcements. Hound leaned over to whisper in Temari's ear, "You have a plushie doll of Tsunade-baachan in your room."

An embarrassed red swiped across Temari's face and her grip tightened on the handle of her fan. "How the hell-" Tenten paused as she studied Hound more closely – his blonde hair and his physical build.

"I'll keep a watch on her, promise."

"You better," Temari threatened. "And if you tell anyone about that doll I'll beat your brains in with my fan."

Temari wrote the passes that will safely see the ANBU through the gates of Sunagakure.

The first item on the Leaf ANBU agenda when they reached Suna was to find a bed.

"I'll meet you later," Snake pressed her finger against Hound's chest, "but I have an old friend I need to see first."

"Are you sure it's alright to let her go off alone like that?" Boar questioned.

"I feel like I'm babysitting," Hound admitted as he created a clone to follow her. The shadow clone quickly disappeared in the direction Snake had gone.

When they reached the first inn, Hound paid for two rooms with mission finances and placed the rest back into his shirt.

"You bought two?" Boar asked as they began to ascend the stairs.

"I have somewhere to crash but I have to take my uniform off first," Hound answered. Mantis disappeared inside of his room and Hound followed Boar into his. Immediately Hound began to strip himself of his clothes.

Boar started a hot shower. "You do realize Snake is here only because she wants to fuck you?"

"Is that what she's been talking about?" Hound asked incredulously. "Why doesn't she just say that?"

Finally Hound took off his mask, sometimes he forgot how easier it was to breathe without it.
Naruto signaled to the ANBU he knew were watching the Kazekage's house before he placed the keys into the door. Naruto walked in and instantly raided the fridge. He knew Gaara wouldn't mind, who practically lived in his office.

"Kankurou, is that you?"

Naruto straightened from the refrigerator. Two naked twin women stared curiously from the hallway. Naruto found his eyes roaming them shamelessly and their thighs pressed together under his gaze.

"You're not Kankurou," one of the pair of twins replied softly. Naruto could tell they weren't ninja. Kankurou always had women in and out of the house when Temari was away, which was probably another reason Gaara preferred his office.

"Friend of the family," Naruto explained.

The twins yawned and nodded their heads, content with Naruto's answer. They turned back towards Kankurou's room to wait for him to get out of his meeting. As they receded down the hall, Naruto leaned back and watched the movement of their behinds. One stopped and tilted her head toward him with a coy smile.

Follow them.

Naruto knew better. He did not have control enough for a civilian.

Naruto finished eating and went up the stairs to one of the guest rooms that he had laid a claim to. He collapsed on the bed and sunk into the softness of the pillow. He could feel the exhaustion aching through his body and closed his eyes in relief.

"Surprise!"

Naruto didn't move when a weight fell on his back. He grumbled into the pillow, "Anko, I've got a mission in a few hours."

"And?"

Then there was a snap that cracked through the air. Naruto jerked up and rolled out of bed in defense. He placed a hand on his left butt cheek.

"What is wrong with you?" Naruto questioned and looked up to find Anko in black leather and chains. The chains barely functioned to hold the black leather piece together and only succeeded in showing as much skin as possible. The way the material hugged her was as if black was painted across her nipples and lower body.

Anko wore a wicked smirk as she snapped the whip in the palm of her hand.

Suddenly Naruto was wide awake.

He was reminded of a scene straight out of Icha Icha, which he had finally gotten around to reading…for research purposes. The book hadn't been as perverted as he thought it would be, or perhaps his definition of perverted has changed.

"I should really thank my good luck. This mission really saves me the trouble of looking for you." Anko prowled off the bed and slithered onto Naruto's chest. Her tongue curled against his earlobe and mewled, "I need a new sex toy."
It wasn't that Anko couldn't have sex with Kakashi even while he was married, it's just wasn't fun anymore. Kakashi was no longer at her beck and call, no longer with nothing else better to do, no longer hers. She needed to find someone else to fill the void she has spent a lifetime trying to satisfy.

The end of the leather whip slid down the gulp of Naruto's neck.

She couldn't help but tease, "I know my tits aren't as big as Hinata's but I promise I can get just as wet. After all," Anko vibrated against Naruto's erection, like the end of a rattlesnake. "I'm the one who taught her everything she knows."

The black whip stopped in Naruto's grip.

"Do you want to talk or do you want to have sex?" Naruto asked and gave his one condition, "No mention of Hinata. I do not want to hear it."

Anko gave a gleeful smirk. "That can certainly be arranged."

Then Naruto snatched the whip out of her hand and threw it over his shoulder.

"Hey, that was-" Anko didn't finish her complaint as her head hit against the floor. Naruto didn't have time to make it to the bed. This need was torturous.

Sometimes Naruto thought being a jinchūriki was the punch line of some cruel joke. They were ostracized for what they were and more often than not outcast from society but every one of a jinchūriki's senses – every smell, taste, sound, and touch were hypersensitive and found the greatest pleasure in the most intimate act you can have with another human being.

Enhanced by fox chakra, the chains of Anko's attire popped into the air in Naruto feverish attempt to take it off. The black leather was shed from her skin until Naruto's teeth tasted her breasts, her leg hooked around his shoulder, and he thrust inside.

Anko arched and took sadistic pleasure in the sudden pain as he rode her, hard, fast, and brutal.

There wasn't much need for talking, or kissing, or cuddling, as Naruto thrust with a mad hunger. Naruto knew if he concentrated on the feeling, on her heat, he could ignore the smell of her blood pulsing in the veins of her neck, the red flickering around the edges of his vision, and the way her hands slithered like scales against his skin.

Anko had always placed herself in control of the situation, but lost herself, and found it again when her toes curled and her body shook as the tension exploded between them.

Naruto's head hit the wooden floor and after several moments to catch his breath, picked himself up to find a smattered grin plastered across Anko's face. Her outfit was destroyed and there was blood along her skin where his nails had clawed too deeply but she was alive.

Naruto turned over and collapsed backwards against the floor.

"That was fun," Anko gave a gleeful laugh, but there was a lie in it, an attempt to fool herself that this ride was the same as the last.

The two breathed in the heavy silence. Anko didn't find what she was looking for. The amount of pleasure Naruto received during the act left a short aftertaste. That moment was gone as soon as it had come.

"Anko," Naruto asked softly. "Do you know what Hinata is up to?"
"You're not good at following your own rules are you?"

Naruto grumbled, "I was just wondering. You are her sensei."

"Some undercover mission in Mountain."

"Huh? No, that's not what I meant." He was hoping something on the Hyūga clan.

Naruto sighed and mentally slapped himself. In the Icha Icha series, after a sex scene, the ninja were always happy and content. It wasn't supposed to make him feel like this. Naruto turned to Anko and asked, "Do you want to go again?"

Anko didn't hesitate to agree. After all, that's why Kakashi had been bearable to her for any length of time. She could laugh at his loneliness while she tried to forget hers.

"Sometimes I think you only pretend to be crazy."

Anko laughed at herself. "Crazy is the only safe place to be."

At sunset, Hound and his ANBU team, along with his tagalong member arrived at the small sabotage force led by Shikamaru. The camp was positioned over a strategic mountain pass.

They entered the camp and found the ninja much more relaxed than Konoha's main force in Grass, which was further emphasize when he found both Shikamaru and Chouji sitting outside the commander's tent smoking a blunt. Hound's sharp sense of smell grew flustered at the overwhelming scent of marijuana.

Hound waved the smoke out of his face and asked, "You sent for us?"

Shikamaru nodded and handed the rest of the cannabis to Chouji. Other than the slight tint in his eyes, with Shikamaru's usual lazy demeanor you really couldn't tell if he had been smoking at all.

Shikamaru showed them a tent filled with boxes of weapon caches.

"We've been raiding Mountain's supply lines and storing the supplies here but," Shikamaru leaned down and showed them the seal pressed against the boxes. "There is a password. We've tracked down the location of the facility where they manufacture their weapons. I need you to sneak in there and steal the password. I'd do it myself but I need to keep an eye on things here, if anything ever does happen."

"You don't want us to sabotage or destroy the plant?" Hound asked.

"Why? When Mountain just keeps "giving" us all these weapons?" Shikamaru asked with a shrug.

They paused when a streak of green suddenly tore into camp. "I have procured more equipment for our efforts!" Lee proclaimed and dumped the chests he held in his arms with the rest of the pile.

"This shipment was medicine. Good job Lee."

Lee raised his hand as if saluting a captain. "No problem Shikamaru. What is next? Should I kill over a 100 Mountain ninja to prove my youthfulness?"

Shikamaru took a list from his pocket and crossed another item off. "Umm, there is a village close by that could use some help."
"Right away!" Lee cried and raced out of the area.

Hound had memorized the terrain of Mountain himself. "There is no village close by."

"Well, Lee doesn't understand what it means to sit down and wait. I have to give him something to do. Eventually he'll run far enough until he does find a village, forces his help on them, and be back in thirty minutes." Shikamaru shook his head and grumbled. "His stamina doesn't end."

"Where did Snake go?" Boar asked.

In alarm Hound rushed to find her and hoped she was staying out of trouble. He found her back in front of the Commander's tent passing around a blunt with Chouji. Snake laughed in a henge as she blew a cloud of smoke from her lips.

"Snake, are you coming with us?" Hound asked.

"Nah, I'm going to stay here and roll a few." Snake turned and nudged Chouji in the arm. "I'm glad for a good old fashioned war. Just like the good old days. I swear, there was nothing more embarrassing than losing to a group of guys who thought it was cool to wear red clouds on their bath robes."

"And purple nail polish," Chouji added, the swirls on his cheeks stretched along his grin.

Snake slapped Chouji on the shoulder. "Oh I love Akimichi's. They know how to have fun."

"That's unfair," Hound replied as he reminisced over the laxed attitude in Shikamaru's camp. "They get to do nothing."

"They're waiting," Boar replied. "There's a big difference. Half of war is a waiting game."

They overlooked the valley that held one of Mountain's weapon production centers. Mantis beetles returned, Mantis reported the situation. "Most of the occupants are slaves that work for Mountain. I'm assuming the password is in the overseer's room, located on the southern side."

"Alright, let's go." Hound replied. He created a camouflage henge and led them toward the iron structure tucked away in the crevice of the mountains. Without many ninja, it was rather easy for the Leaf ANBU to slip pass their defenses.

"Stay and look out," Hound commanded Boar.

Mantis followed Hound into the building that smelled heavy of forge and machinery. Hound henged himself into a Mountain ninja and Mantis followed. They reached the operator's room, jostled the door softly and walked inside.

They found the overseer of the operation leaned against the back of his chair, asleep, snoring loudly with his head thrown back.

Mantis' beetles quietly exited his sleeves and scanned the room. Hound kept an eye on their surroundings in sage mode. The insects slipped through the cracks in the desk, on the bookshelf, and anywhere that could be hiding the password.

"Someone is coming," Hound whispered urgently.

"Sir," the doors of the office slammed open. The overseer, startled, jumped from his chair and wiped his eyes as if he was doing something. "Yes, yes, yes what is it?"
"Another shipment has been stolen," the ninja reported. "The main camp messaged us that they never received the shipment."

"Shit," The Mountain curse as he rubbed his eyes. "What the hell were we thinking messing with Konoha alone? They're fucking everywhere."

"Sir what should we do about it?"

"Double the guard for the next shipment."

"Yes sir." The ninja bowed and rushed from the room.

The overseer stood and walked to the glass case where he kept his best bottles of alcohol locked away. He gulped when the cold steel of a katana touched his throat.

"I want the password for the shipments. Do you see my friend over there?"

The overseer moved for the kunai at his belt but the katana slid into his throat, and blood slid from the metal. The Mountain ninja turned his eyes and watched a second Leaf ANBU appear from the shadows of the room, but what looked like shadows scattered in a cloud of insects.

"He's an Aburame. Do you know what they're known for?"

The ninja gulped. "Bugs."

"Not just bugs, flesh eating bugs," Hound threatened with a touch of the Kyūbi in his voice. "Have you ever wondered what it felt like to have each patch of skin eaten off one at a time?"

"It's in the left drawer of the desk." The ninja revealed in a sweat.

Mantis walked over and forced the drawer open. He studied the paper that showed a hand sign combination. Mantis nodded, created a copy, and replaced it in the drawer.

Hound slid his katana across the man's neck. "Make it disappear."

The beetles flew and buzzed in anticipation. Then they attacked the corpse as if it was a snack, until only the bones were left. Then Mantis made a ticking noise with his tongue and teeth. The beetles continued, grinding the bones into dust and then there was nothing.

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Tomu was cleaning. At first it was habit, but after he activated his sharingan it had turned into an obsession. Tomu cleaned vigorously at speckles of dirt that went beyond what the visible eye could see.

When Mushi silently walked in through the window, she looked up and found Tomu stuck to the ceiling, muttering to himself as he cleaned. "That's a little excessive."

So focused on his task, Tomu was startled and lost grip on his chakra. He fell but landed in a bed of buzzing insects. Tomu gave Mushi an incomprehensible stare. "Why are you here? It's late."

"I wanted to talk to Naruto," Mushi said as she sat down at the kitchen table. "I spoke with one of the clones watching the gate."

"Why?" Tomu asked.

Mushi gave Tomu a careful look and then finally replied. "I've been assigned my first mission
since…” she shrugged her shoulders. "Naruto gives encouraging pep talks."

"But you can't go. Did you know there is a war going on?"

Mushi smiled softly. "Yes, Tomu I did know there is a war going on. Genin aren't placed on the front lines unless a war turns really bad. I'll be fulfilling a support role."

"But you could die!"

Mushi turned and her expression was unfathomable from the darkness of her hood. "It is preferable than being taken prisoner."

Tomu paused and looked down at his hands. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean-"

"It's alright," Mushi replied. Her grey eyes gleamed from the darkness of the hood she wore. "I'm afraid that I'm going to mess up again."

Tomu knew he didn't give very good pep talks like Naruto and absolutely had no idea what to say to make everything better. Tomu collapsed in the chair bitterly. "You're just a genin. You're only thirteen years old. You shouldn't have to be out there. And clones are alright but Naruto hasn't been home for weeks. This war is stupid."

Mushi shrugged her shoulders. "We're ninja."

"I'm not." And there were times when Tomu woke up and he felt blood on his skin. Then he would rush to the shower and try to get it off, keep scrubbing, until the blood that marked him for what he was washed away. But it was still there. It was always still there.

Mushi looked at Tomu. "You've killed more people than I have."

Tomu remembered the man he had burned away with fire.

"No," Tomu argued as he shot up from the table. "No, I'm not- I'm-" Tomu stilled with a lost expression. "I'm a killer aren't I?"

"Yes, you are," Mushi answered calmly.

Tomu reached out for the cleaning supplies but Mushi grabbed them and placed them behind her back. "You have work tomorrow. Go to sleep."

"You don't tell me what to do," Tomu argued and attempted to grab for the rag and spray when he suddenly tripped on her foot, fell into Mushi, and crashed against the table.

Tomu blinked when the hood had fallen from her head, at the light, the insects immediately disappeared into her pores. She had high cheekbones, framed by neat black hair, and misty grey eyes.

Mushi leaned up, and after a pause of insecurity, placed a quick peck on Tomu's lips.

"I wanted to stop by and tell you thank you, for being my first friend outside of the clan. Please, don't get in trouble while I'm gone."

Mushi attempted to pull away until Tomu stopped her. He leaned forward and the second kiss was much longer. Then slowly Tomu brought his hands up and undid the knots of her jacket.

Mushi stared at Tomu with wide eyes. "Aren't you scared of my bugs?"
"You're cleaner than me," Tomu answered and pushed the coat off of her shoulders and revealed the growing curves of her body. Once Mushi realized he wasn't afraid, she actually released a very un-Aburame like squeal and immediately began to shed the rest of her clothing. She audibly threatened her beetles to stay inside the hive for fear even one would scare him away.

Clothes fell on the floor and left a trail towards Tomu's bedroom.

Mushi landed backwards onto Tomu's pillow. The bed was soft under her skin, and she flushed red at the first naked boy she had ever seen. "Tomu, I haven't done this before."

"Yeah," Tomu admitted with a shy smile. "It's my first time too."

And the two teenagers said goodbye to one another before war tore them apart.

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"I already know what you did. But do you know what you did?"

"I didn't do anything," the medic-nin sweated underneath the gaze of Ino Yamanaka. She paced the room with the purpose of a tigress and eyed her prey.

"I've already seen everything," Ino said sweetly. "Everything."

"I didn't do it," the medic-nin argued.

Ino sat down at a chair, at his level. "You're right, you didn't," she whispered. "You lay in the bed while your father came in every night and touched your little sister. You didn't say anything did you? You didn't stop him did you?"

"Get out of my head," the medic ninja groaned as he rocked tied to the chair.

"What else didn't you do?" Ino asked as she leaned closer and pressed her lips on his ear in a cruel kiss. "You didn't listen when your girlfriend begged you to stop beating her. You didn't hit her face because she was a pretty little thing so you bruised her arms and her legs instead. You didn't know, didn't realize until that moment that you had become your father."

The medic-ninja screamed. "I did it. I did it."

"What did you do?" Ino asked sweetly.

"I stole the documents, I brought them to the police station, just please, please, I didn't mean to do it," the Mountain spy begged.

Ino turned to her assistant who watched from the glass panel outside the room.

"Did you record his confession?" Ino asked.

Sayuri Yamanaka nodded. "I did Onee-sama."

"No wait, no-" The spy cried as Ino slapped her hand on his forehead, checked her nails, and the spy's head exploded in blood and guts. She snatched off the bloody coat she always wore in case of a mess and tossed it to the floor.

"Such a dead end," Ino grumbled. She had finally found the medic nin who had infiltrated the hospital but he didn't know anything important. He was given orders and followed them.

"Clean up the mess for me?" Ino asked her cousin sweetly.
"At once," Sayuri piped and entered the room with a cleaning jutsu prepared.

Ino walked through the Torture and Interrogation Unit shifting through the minds of those closest to her when she suddenly stopped. She changed direction.

"How is it going uncle?" Ino asked as she slipped between the two men. Ino imagined her uncle was frowning at her.

"Have you finished?" Ibiki asked her.

"Dead end, Sensei. But I did get a confession so I could hurry up and kill him for wasting my time," Ino replied.

While she was talking with Ibiki, another conversation was occurring simultaneously as Ino attacked Captain Cat's mental defenses as fast as he was erecting them. She feinted and slipped to the side.

"Fuck," Cat suddenly cursed.

"You're getting old Uncle," Ino replied with a smug smirk, and then left the T&I building with a haughty saunter.

Naruto collapsed in his bed and pressed his face into the pillow. Ichigo naturally shifted and landed his foot on Naruto's ear. Naruto was too tired to push the kid off and simply laid there willing himself to sleep.

Only a few minutes later, Ame yawned and stretched. She reached over and hit the alarm clock. "Daddy, it's time for school."

Naruto only groaned, and instinctively placed his hands together to create a shadow clone. Then the shadow clone crowded the bed as it collapsed on the next pillow. That Uzumaki stamina wasn't working for him today.

"It's okay daddy," Ame said softly and studied Naruto's face before she padded downstairs.

Ame opened Tomu's room.

Ame reached out to shake him when Tomu's eyes snapped open in red. Tomu watched as Ame's fingers moved towards him in slow motion. Tomu caught her hand and breathed when the world suddenly regained its speed.

Tomu let go of her wrist and sat up. He looked around the room and gave a disappointed sigh when he only found Ame. "What's going on?"

"Make breakfast." Ame pouted.

"It's Naruto's turn," Tomu complained and turned back into bed.

"Daddy just got back home. He's tired." When Tomu didn't move, Ame walked to the kitchen, grabbed a pot and filled it with cold water.

"AME!" Tomu screamed as he woke up freezing and wet. Ame ran out of the room in a sprint. Tomu pulled himself out of bed and knew Naruto was usually up by now. He dragged his feet across the floor, kicked his clothes under the couch to get later, and then cracked three eggs into a pan. He watched the food sizzle on the stove with a yawn.
Ame came in the house after attempting to practice her morning katas but it was no fun without Daddy. She sat at the table and waited for Tomu to serve breakfast. It was unusually quiet this morning.

"I'll drop you off at school on my way to work," Tomu replied and shared the plate of eggs.

Ame kicked her legs. "I wish I didn't have to go to school like Ichigo," she sighed.

"You shouldn't say that. Ichigo isn't going to school anymore because Kurenai is in the war." Tomu responded.

Sometimes it unnerved Tomu. He felt as if he lived on the border of two worlds. The men that he worked with lived as they have before. They came to work every day, got paid, and returned home to their families without the war really touching their lives. But Mushi was gone, Kurenai was gone, and all of Naruto's ninja friends didn't stop by anymore. The village seemed empty and Tomu never thought he'd missed the ninja and their colorful personalities.

Tomu peeked inside Kusuro's room and dragged him from the bed. "Come on, you need to go to school."

Kusuro opened his eyes with a frown. "What's the point? No matter how strong I get mom is just going to make me stay here."

"You would get yourself killed," Tomu said reasonably and dragged Kusuro by his feet and placed him at the table before breakfast.

"Where's Naruto?" Kusuro looked around and noticed a presence missing.

"Sleep," Tomu replied. "He just got in."

"Is he hurt?" Kusuro asked. Ame's eyes widened in worry, jumped from the chair, and rushed upstairs.

"Why would you say that?" Tomu questioned. "Don't make her worry."

"I take care of my mom when she comes home from a mission," Kusuro replied and leaned his head in his arms. "You take care of them as much as they take care of you."

"He's not hurt," Ame proclaimed in victory as she came down the stairs.

"I guess I'll go to school," Kusuro said. He hated going to school. He couldn't stop thinking what his mom was doing, but he wasn't the only one. All his classmates were preoccupied and could hardly keep up with their studies or threw themselves into it. The Academy had become a depressing place.

"Come on." Tomu placed the dishes in the sink to wash for later and wrote a note to Naruto telling him that everything was all right and he would get everyone where they needed to go.

Unfortunately, Ame Uzumaki did not go to school that day.

Ame peeked around the corner and watched as Tomu left for work. The bell for school began to ring and the teachers began to usher all of the children inside. But they missed one.

Ame climbed atop the school house and watched until the teachers declared her absent and everyone disappeared inside. She made a running jump, her chakra slipped on the roof of the next building, and she scratched at the shilling until she caught hold of the edge.
She gulped and saw it was a long way down. She pulled herself forward and ran across the roof and jumped onto the next one with ease. Her goal was the great big Hokage Tower at the center of the village.

Ame raced towards it and stopped when she neared. She watched as all kinds of ninja ran in and out of the tower. She snuck to the back and used the special secret entrance her Daddy used when he was a kid.

Ame jumped and wiggled herself inside the mail shoot, until she fell down the dark tube and landed in a basket full of mail and packages. Ame peeked over the edge and watched as assistants sorted through the various items.

When their backs were turned, Ame vaulted over the basket and raced out the door. She was hardly noticed in the hallway full of ninja rushing to and fro. Ame pushed between their legs until she made it to the secretary's desk in front of the Hokage's office.

Daddy had warned her about the secretary. She was a sensor that knew you were in the building the moment you stepped inside. Ame had to find a way around her. Ame smirked and then created a shadow clone, but only one, because Daddy told her to never do more than one.

"Stop." The Secretary said suddenly and looked over her desk at the red-eyed little girl. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To see the Hokage," Ame said with a great big smile.

"I don't think so. She is in a meeting, you need an appointment, and you should be in school. Go away before I call a guard."

"Make me!" Ame demanded and raced for the doors. She was caught by the shirt and Ame watched the secretary carry her clone down the hallway towards one of the guards. Ame raced to her goal.

Ame slammed the large double doors of the Hokage's office wide open.

The pale white masks of two ANBU stared at her when Ame walked inside. The Hokage looked up, about to yell at Shizune for interrupting her meeting, when she noticed her unexpected visitor.

Ame cleared her throat and pointed at the Hokage.

"I want you to stop this war and leave Daddy alone! Daddy is so tired he couldn't even take me to school today. It's not fair. You can't take him away from me and Ichigo. Stop this war right now because you are the Hokage. He's our Daddy and he doesn't belong to you!"

There was silence after her declaration. Tsunade rubbed her tired eyes.

"I'll handle it," Tsunade created a shadow clone, the clone grabbed the young girl under her arm, and marched her down to the Uzumaki residence.

Naruto didn't hear the knocking but he did feel the tug on his hair. Naruto woke with a startled jerk, snapped awake, and Ichigo tumbled from his chest into his lap.

"I'm sorry," Naruto whispered as he picked up Ichigo who tugged onto his shirt with frightened eyes. Naruto's head snapped up when there was heaving pounding and each strike sent Ichigo cowering deeper and deeper into his chest.
"Oh, it's just the door."

Naruto scooped Ichigo into his arms. He dragged himself through the house, opened the door, and revealed the Hokage and Ame who stood at her side avoiding his gaze.

"What's going on?" Naruto asked sluggishly.

"Your little girl here decided to skip school, sneak into my office, and protest the war," Tsunade answered.

"Wow Granny, if a little girl like her can sneak into your office at an important time like this you really need to re-evaluate your security."

"Naruto I swear," Tsunade threatened. Ame cracked a smile.

Naruto motioned her forward and Ame rushed inside of the house. All jokes aside, "Thanks for dropping her off and making sure she got home."

"I figured you were tired enough," Tsunade stepped forward and placed a hand to his cheek. There were dark circle under his eyes. "I'm sorry for working you so hard. It's just things keep coming up and your team is so fast and-"

"And most people are stuck on the war front and they don't get much time back home," Naruto answered. "I'm fine Granny, promise."

"Alright, get some rest." Then Tsunade disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

Naruto leaned his head over his shoulder and watched Ame kick her feet at the chair. "What did you say?"

Ame sighed as she repeated her speech. Naruto smiled as he slid Ichigo onto the table and pulled out all the ingredients to make a sandwich. "To stand up to the Hokage like that required a lot of guts," Naruto said approvingly.

Ame jumped from her chair and began to mix the ingredients together. "But I don't think she was very happy with what I said."

"You do know that I love you right?"

"Of course."

"Right Ichigo?"

Ichigo nodded.

"I know it's hard adjusting that I'm not at home as much as I used to be, but I'm fighting this war for you, to keep you out of danger."

"But we're not in danger," Ame argued. "We're safe, right here, in our big new home."

"But Daddy has lots of enemies," Naruto responded gravely. "And no matter what, I'm going to make sure you're always safe." Naruto grinned when Ichigo had gotten mustard on his nose. Naruto leaned over and licked it off.

"Eww," Ame and Ichigo laughed.
Naruto sat down and bit into his sandwich. "After the war how about we take a vacation to Mount Myoboku? You both will love it."

"I've never been on a vacation before," Ame said excitedly and sat down with her messy lunch in her hands.

Naruto easily slid into a softness around them, and could smile, and could laugh no matter how tired he was.

As Naruto took a large bite, he noticed the blood encrusted underneath his nails, and tucked his fingers under his palm. He had taken a shower back at ANBU headquarters but even that wasn't enough.

Sometimes it felt as if he was two people, two sides of one coin.

Tomu rushed through the door, followed behind Kusuro. Tomu gave one big sigh of relief when he saw Ame. "Her teachers said she never came to school!"

"The Hokage found her," Naruto teased and watched Tomu blanch.

"How was school?"

"Boring," Kusuro answered. "Can we train?"

"Yeah, go on and head outside. I need to talk to Tomu first," Naruto replied. It was a routine they had formed. They would train after Kusuro came from school while Ame did her homework, and then afterwards they would play a game of ninja tag.

Ame jumped up from her half-eaten sandwich, grabbed Ichigo from the chair and dragged him outside still in his pajamas.

"This isn't about Ame is it?" Tomu asked nervously.

Naruto got up and began cleaning away the table. "One of my clones saw Mushi come over last night... all night. Don't you think you're a little young?"

"Don't you think she's a little young to be going off to war?" Tomu asked in turn with a stubborn pout. "It's alright when I kill someone but I can't have sex? There are whores younger than I am, and I have it from a good source that some ninja parents take their kids to a brothel when they graduate the Academy."

"Hey," Naruto leaned backwards against the sink, "I'm not one to judge. All I'm saying is if an Aburame visits for any reason, I'm not saving you." Then Naruto grinned and then teased. "So what did the bugs do?"

"You pervert," Tomu claimed

"But seriously, if you're old enough to have a girl over then you're old enough to throw around some kunai with Kusuro. Understand?"

"Yeah," Tomu grumbled. "I understand."

Naruto examined the sparring match between Tomu and Kusuro. Kusuro obviously knew more jutsu, but Tomu was rather good at running away from things.
"Would you stay still!" Kusuro demanded.

"You're going to kill me!" Tomu screeched as he avoided another kunai. "Why did I agree to do this?"

Kusuro reached for another kunai, and felt around in his empty belt confused. Tomu looked up at Naruto and Naruto nodded. Then the real Tomu that had been hiding in a tree the entire time jumped atop Kusuro and sat on him.

Kusuro pounded his fist on the ground in frustration. "That's not fair. How did he beat me?!"

Naruto crouched with a chuckled. "I know it doesn't seem very important but you've got to know everything that is in your belt. You have to know how many of every item that you have and where it is. In battle you don't have time to remember which pocket you put your kunai, or how many you have left, you need to know."

Naruto motioned to Tomu and he stood up. Kusuro dusted himself off angrily.

"Go pick up your kunai and reorganize your tool belt. Then I want you to bring it back and tell me how many and what is in each pocket."

Kusuro grumbled, slapped his tool belt over his shoulder, and went to pick up his kunai around the training field.

"And Tomu, you can't work on your taijutsu if you keep running away," Naruto complained.

"He was trying to kill me."

"The kunai were dull. It was a spar."

"He was still trying to kill me," Tomu argued.

"You were in the tree the entire time," Naruto said exasperated. "Go practice the katas I showed you."

It was a nice fall afternoon. Ame was practicing her tree climbing while the boys were doing the chores Naruto had set for them. Ichigo sat tucked at Naruto's side. Within the sphere of their own personal training area, Naruto felt relaxed and the world did really seem far away.

Naruto sat against the shed and was going through his own pouches. He cleaned and sharpened his kunai. Suddenly Ichigo reached over him and pointed. Naruto picked up the hiraishin kunai Ichigo had pointed to. It was loose.

"Good catch." The metal was rusted out of the handle. "I'll be back. I'm going to get another one."

Naruto entered the weapon's shed and even though he had told Ichigo he would be back, the little boy followed him around like a shadow. Naruto neared the drawer where he kept the kunai he was working on. His hand paused when he noticed the seal was broken.

He touched the dried blood along the wood. Naruto sniffed it. It was his blood and a few weeks old.

Naruto opened the drawer curiously. Naruto frowned. He was going to have to make another seal, again. He had to be certain Kusuro wasn't going to break through this one.

"Kusuro," Naruto called when he walked outside. "Did you take my hiraishin kunai?"
Kusuro looked up confused. "No."

"Hey, I won't be mad if you did, but there's six missing and it's important I know where they are."

"No, I didn't take them," Kusuro said frustrated and then said, still bitter about the match. "Maybe Tomu stole them. He's the thief."

"I'm not a thief." Tomu argued. "Kusuro, if you took them just say something."

"I didn't take them. Mom was right, the only people we can trust is ourselves!" Kusuro angrily yelled and ran off.

"I'll be back," Naruto sighed, left a clone to keep Ichigo occupied, and followed after the frustrated young ninja. Naruto joined Kusuro on the roof of the house.

"Hey, I probably just lost them," Naruto said. "I'm sorry I blamed you but you did try to play with my katana."

"I wasn't playing. I was practicing."

"Whatever you say," Naruto chuckled. "You looked like Ame with a butter knife."

Kusuro pouted and then after a moment replied, "And I know what you're thinking. Mom didn't take them either. She would have told me."

"I wasn't thinking that."

"Yes you were," Kusuro accused. "She says I shouldn't trust you. She says you're using me."

Naruto sighed as he asked, "Do you believe that?"

Kusuro stared down at his toes. "No, but I feel so helpless," he whispered. "I just got her back. What if I lose her again?"

"If there is one thing I learned about your mom while she was here is that she loves you very much," Naruto answered honestly, "and I'm sure she'll try her best to make it back to you."

Kusuro picked at his toes. "I wish you were becoming my dad. You're cool."

Naruto laughed and tried to say with a straight face. "Kakashi isn't so bad once you get to know him." The council had rather unanimously agreed that Kakashi wasn't doing anything with his life and decided to marry the poor Hatake bachelor off. Naruto figured Kagome wouldn't attempt to kill Kakashi until at least the war was over.

"You know," Kusuro said softly. "I don't care about revenge anymore. I just want my mom to come home."

"I just wanted to stop by and make sure you're okay," Naruto said as he leaned into the surgery door.

"Naruto," Sakura said patiently. "I know you're supposed to be the hero of Konoha, but even your reputation does not give you access to my surgery room. Get out."

Naruto's foot tapped impatiently against the wall as he waited. One of the nurses smiled and chuckled, "Told you."
"Has she taken any days off?" Naruto asked.

"I'm afraid not." The nurse replied, "I've seen a lot of people come through the doors of Konoha's hospital and have seen many of them deal with death. We all have different ways of coping."

He was getting better at it but Naruto hated waiting. Eventually the light above the surgery door turned off and signaled the operation had come to an end. When Sakura exited, Sakura pulled off her mask, bypassed him and went straight to the family who sat with bated breaths.

Naruto watched as Sakura spoke to them with a smile that lit her face. The breath of air the family was holding finally released in happy tears. When Sakura was finished, she took off her gloves and gave Naruto a look he knew well.

"Sorry?" Naruto replied immediately as he followed her through the hallway.

"Seriously Naruto? I'm working," Sakura said annoyed as she pushed open the door labeled 'employees only.' Naruto followed her into the small break room.

"I just wanted to come by and check on you," Naruto answered and watched as she put on a cup of coffee. Sakura tapped her fingers on the countertop while waiting impatient for the magic elixir that kept her on her feet.

"I'm fine. I'm a big girl Naruto and I don't need you to babysit me. We're in the middle of a war. I don't have time to feel sorry for myself."

"Well, if I remember correctly, when I was feeling down, I couldn't get you to leave me alone. Your turn," Naruto said.

"Well," Sakura retrieved the full coffee mug and sat down at the table. "I want to drink my coffee in peace."

"Sakura really-"

"You know," Sakura said calmly. "We had sex on this table."

"Agh Sakura," Naruto said disgusted. He did not want that mental picture in his head. "Yeah I get it, I'll leave you alone. I'll see you when I get back."

Naruto reached over the table and in revenge for her earlier comment, moved to playfully place a kiss on Sakura's forehead which she had a habit of hiding with her bangs

And Sakura lifted her chin.

Naruto tasted the coffee on her lips. He reflexively snapped away and spat out the bitter taste.

"Wow, that was horrible."

"Hey, you caught me by surprise!" Naruto argued. "Gah, that stuff is disgusting- wait, did you just try to kiss me?"

Sakura swirled her index finger around the rim of her coffee cup. "I shouldn't have- I'm sorry. I just-horrible lapse of judgment... Sometimes I wonder if you and I had-" Sakura choked up and looked from underneath her pink bangs. "Just make it back home, okay?"

Naruto hooked his hands in his pocket and watched as Sakura refused to meet his eyes. "Perhaps when the war is over and you're ready and not just being weird because of Kiba, we could try, us, I
"Yeah Naruto, perhaps we could," Sakura whispered. She lifted her eyes just in time to watch Naruto wave goodbye. She wiped the tear fallen stray from her eye. "When the war is over…"

"The grass in these fields grows as tall as a human being. The terrain provides excellent cover for our surprise attack if you know how to navigate it," Kagome stated and circled the suspected position of Mountain’s base camp.

"I think it is a brilliant plan of cunning and deception!" Maito Gai exclaimed.

"Would you shut up before our surprise attack is no longer a surprise," Kagome snapped. She leaned against the strategy table with her arms. "Sperm donor, any input?"

Kakashi pulled his porn book slightly from his face, fairly sure she was talking to him. He shrugged his shoulders. He just did whatever she told him to do, kept his head down, and most of the time hoped he went unnoticed.

Suddenly Neji rushed into the room, at least as dignified and rigid as Hyūga could rush. He brushed his hair back into place and reported, "Commander, my squad of scouts has spotted Mountain pulling catapults over the hill."

"Hill? What fucking hill? We have the high ground."

"They created one," Neji replied.

Kagome cursed and rushed outside

"We must investigate this at once. Good work on your youthful vigilance, my student," Maito Gai declared as he rushed passed Neji out the tent and Neji followed as he was resigned to do.

Kakashi placed his book into his back pocket, leisurely placed his hands in his flak jacket, and the moment he stepped outside, black smoke bombs rained from the sky and exploded at their feet.

Neji immediately activated his byakugan and found the smoke laced with chakra, no doubt intentional to render the Hyūga blind and add to the confusion.

Kagome coughed as the smoke stung her throat, placed her hands together and with a wind jutsu, dispersed the angry black cloud.

The leaders of the camp immediately gathered, Kakashi grew serious as he crouched. "We need to take out those catapults."

"I'm not very effective in this smoke, therefore I volunteer to go after the catapults," Neji replied.

"I want those Mountain ninja," Kagome said immediately.

"We need you here," Kakashi argued. "There aren't many wind users in camp."

"Not my problem," Kagome said as more bombs began to rain down. Without another word, Kagome turned and raced towards the catapults lined on the hill.

"Do not fear my comrade!" Gai declared. "I shall gather all of our wind users and blow this smoke away."
"I'll stay here," Kakashi said. "I'm sure Mountain has more surprises." For now he needed to concentrate getting everyone calm and avoid panic.

Neji sprinted after Kagome.

Then in the mist of the smoke thickening the air, a second type of bomb fell and the tent where they were previously convened, shot into the air in an explosive blast.

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Neji immediately realized that his sudden partner had no regards for the safety of her own life. Once they cleared the smoke-filled camp, Kagome ran a straight line towards the catapults, plowing any bomb thrown her way with a fierce gust of wind.

Neji activated his byakugan. "There are Mountain ninja tunneling underground into camp."

"Well, Gai is going to have to fucking deal with it," Kagome spat. The tendrils of green hairs flew freely away from her face. As they neared, the Mountain ninja manning the cannons began to add elemental jutsu to their arsenal.

A large boulder rumbled towards Neji, and in the short seconds it took for the massive rock to reach him, he had already pinpointed its weak areas. With one solid gentle fist, a dust of earth and rock swept pass.

Kagome lifted into the air as grass molded underneath her feet. Like riding waves of green, she crashed against the catapult and the tide carried it downhill. Kagome landed surrounded by Mountain ninja, and a similar scene, months ago flashed before her eyes. With a fury and ruthless determination, the grass at her feet shriveled as the water was sucked from the green plants and flowed at her will.

The wall of water spun around her and knocked the surrounding ninja off their feet. She snatched a handful of hair from her scalp and jumped atop a Mountain ninja with needles between every finger. They stabbed into the unlucky ninja's neck and for Kagome, it felt glorious – to the choke on his last moment of life to the way the red flowed over his skin. With a fury she stabbed into his body again and again, until her country, her precious country was watered with his blood.

Mushi's throat burned on the smoke. She crawled on the ground with her hands, covering her head every few minutes when someone threatened to trample her.

"Mushi!"

Mushi turned and crawled toward the voice of her genin teammate, Hohei Hyūga. He carried a travel pack strapped to his shoulders. They had just delivered the shipment and had only been a few hours from turning back down the road toward Konoha.

"What's going on?" Mushi asked.

And with a high-pitched voice unwarranted by a Hyūga he yelled, "I can't see! I can't- I can't- they did something to my eyes. I'm blind!" and Mushi watched as her Hyūga teammate panicked, genuinely convinced his doujutsu had been taken away.

Then Mushi was forced to hold her ears when an explosion rang out around the camp.

"We have to find Kosuke," Mushi said as she lifted her head. She couldn't get a track on the
whereabouts of her other teammate. Even Mushi's beetles were acting weird and would rather consume the smoke than follow her orders.

Suddenly a man in green leotard rushed past them. Mushi recognized him by his eccentric style of dress as the Green Beast of Konoha and Commander of the main force.

Maito Gai slid to a stop when he saw the genin struggling in the smoke. He raced towards them. "The camp is under attack. Go and assist the medic-nin on the east side. You'll be protected there."

A bomb plummeted from the air towards their feet. The dwindling fuse sizzled in a tense race. Without thought, Gai jumped atop the genin and was blown, slammed, rolled across the ground.

Gai was knocked unconscious by the devastating force of the blast and his green leotard was burned and showed the tender cooked skin underneath.

Mushi screamed against the dirt ground. Her leg had also been caught in the explosion. Tears slipped from her eyes and knew she had lost some beetles and the rest were panicking inside of her body.

Mushi was dragged from underneath Gai.

Hohei wiped the dirt from his eyes, and even though he was just in training and couldn't see, began to heal the distorted skin on her leg.

"No," Mushi gritted through the pain. "Heal him."

"But-" Hohei scanned the pain on her face and Mushi pushed him towards Gai. Hohei did what he could on the severe burns along Gai's skin.

"That's all I can do," The Hyūga genin whispered.

Mushi consoled her beetles and attempted to get them under her control again. She managed to convince them to create a bed and pull Gai towards the medics.

"It's taking too long to carry him," Hohei said as Leaf ninja rushed passed them to attempt a charge toward the catapults.

"I'm not leaving anyone else," Mushi decided. Every step back as she dragged Gai through the camp burned through her muscles. Her leg was agonized flesh.

Then a hand protruded out of the ground. The Hyūga winced through the smoke, trying to catch the insignia on their hitai-ite, but it was blurry to his normal eyesight.

"Mountain ninja!" Mushi warned and Hohei jumped out of the way of a sudden attack. Mushi countered and with an outstretched hand, her beetles charged towards the ninja halfway out of the ground and invaded his mouth, ears, and noise until he was sucked dry of his chakra.

Hohei flipped a kunai in his hand, awkward, unable to use his byakugan for his Jyūken stance. He was scared. Mushi was scared. And the Mountain ninja sprouted from the ground like plants.

The Mountain ninja attacked and was suddenly deflected by a high kick. Maito Gai stood and wavered on his feet as he entered a taijutsu stance, his clothing torn off his skin to reveal his soot and blood covered eight-pack abs.

The black bowl cut swiveled as Gai turned his head with a flashing smile and raised thumb. "Go now, you've still got all of your youths ahead of you."
And Maito Gai, barely on his feet, and excited for a challenge of overwhelming odds began fending off the Mountain ninja.

"It's impossible, he shouldn't be on his feet." Hohei stared, before Mushi snatched at his hand and sprinted toward the medics.

A blazing fire smeared the field as Kakashi jumped into the fray.

And Gai leaned against Kakashi's back as if it was a pillar.

"Hey Kakashi, my dear eternal rival" Gai coughed blood which ran down his shirt. There was a pain in his chest every time he breathed… oh, there was a shard of shrapnel poking out of the mushy wound, puncturing a lung he needed to breathe. How unlucky.

"I challenge you to one last test of skill, will, and heart!"

Kagome never looked good in any other make-up but blood. She walked among the remains of the camp, among the aftermath of the Leaf force's last rally to push the Mountain ninja back, but it had not been quick enough to prevent a sizeable death toll.

There was death in every war and Kagome knew they had fended the Mountain ninja off well. She pushed herself through camp, passed the strewn debris, and the ninja checking the faces of the dead and wounded.

And Kakashi crouched, with an empty stare, at the fallen body of Maito Gai.

Kagome stopped, stumbled in her flak jacket for her pack of cigarettes and pressed one to her mouth. Tobacco coated the stench of death in a bitter aroma of perfume.

"You win, friend." Kakashi said with a crack to his usual cool voice.

Kagome has seen a lot of dead corpses in her lifetime. "He was a good man, annoying, but a good man."

Kakashi hung his head with an empty stare. And Kagome sat beside him. The only thing they had in common was the cloud of grief and loss they wore like wedding bands.

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_Crazy is the only safe place to be_
Lesson Twenty-Seven

Becoming the Mask

Hound opened the folder which detailed the specifics of his first undercover mission.

"Undercover?" Hound questioned. He knew well his own strengths and weaknesses. "Are you sure?"

"I don't have a choice and it's certainly not the ideal mission for you," Tsunade sighed, "but you match the height and age of the profile and have some background with Sound. This ANBU mission is very important and if successful could be critical to the war effort. It is a joint-operation. In exchange for an agreement to keep Sound neutral during the war, Sound has agreed to collaborate with us on this mission."

"Is this a solo mission?" Hound asked. He had been the only member from his team summoned.

"No, but I wanted to go over the details with you and give you enough time to memorize the information."

Hound nodded and sat in the usual chair reserved for meetings. He leaned back and placed his feet onto the Hokage's table. Tsunade winced at the mud encrusted on the bottom of his boots and angrily shoved them off, only for Hound to return them.

"I swear I'm going to throw you out of that window."

"If you think you can," Hound said coolly as he shuffled through the documents and stopped at a picture of the man he was supposed to be impersonating. "What are we going to do about my whiskers and scar? Henge?"

"There are seals specifically made for undercover missions, such as one that will mask all physical marks on your body. It will help you masquerade as the Sound envoy and infiltrate Mountain under the pretense of forming an alliance. The hard part is getting to our contact inside Mountain, who will give us information that will help us win this war."

"That's it?" Hound questioned. "If I'm already in Mountain I could kill the Kage while I'm there."

"No," Tsunade said immediately. "It takes more than just one death to destroy a country. Tell me, what would happen if I was assassinated right now?"

Hound didn't like that question. "I'd destroy them."

"Yes, you and everyone else in Konoha," Tsunade answered. "The last thing we need is to create a martyr the Mountain people can rally behind. Instead, I have another plan. A Kage cannot stand alone. A Kage stands on pillars, on the people whose support he depends on to keep the country running. We are going to crush the pillars and watch the Kage fall."

"I think I understand," Hound said, "but I still don't understand why I'm going through all this trouble for information when I can do so much more."

"I don't need you to do more right now," Tsunade explained patiently to the man she genuinely considered her pupil. "Remember, information is always a ninja's best weapon."
"What is your name?"

"Akira Nakagawa, the oldest son of Akito Nakagawa who is a Sound council member and the wealthiest merchant in Sound."

"What is your goal?"

"To travel to Mountain and formulate a secret alliance."

"Why?"

"Because my father wants Mountain's help in overthrowing the current pacifist Kage of Sound in exchange for helping Mountain in the war."

Boar nodded, finally approving the content and speed of Hound's answers. Throughout the entire journey toward Mountain, Boar had drill Hound's new identity as if literally boring it into his head. Ever since the Hokage assigned the mission, Hound had done nothing but study the documents, the bios, and the cover story. He dreamt about it and even now after being tested, ran the story several times over in his head.

Boar and Mantis acted as Hound's bodyguards and wore attire more accustomed to Sound ninja. Mantis still wore his sunglasses but his insects remained inside the hive with envious control.

Hound's hair was dyed brown and the only defining characteristics that remained were the blue of his eyes. His whisker-like scars and even the discoloration of his skin was hidden by the seal drawn on his back. A seal he had designed himself effectively suppressed his chakra without having to close his chakra nodes or create a thousand shadow clones. He seemed to be swallowed by his clothes and the bells whistled a tune each time he stepped.

Despite the extraneous additions, Hound felt naked. He didn't even have a kunai on his person and was devoid of all weapons, scrolls, and equipment. He knew he could always use sage mode or chakra cloak to make a quit exit, but that was no guarantee for his teammates. One mistake and he could easily get his teammates killed.

"And remember, you are a civilian," Boar stressed. "Stop walking like a ninja."

And when Hound thought he had remembered everything, there was always some small adjustment, some small thing that reminded him how difficult it was to be someone else.

"I'm trying," Hound said exasperated and knew Boar was enjoying berating him. He attempted to slow his pace and seemed as if he did not understand the meaning of rushing. He was beginning to think the Hokage picked the wrong person for the job. He was afraid he was going to say the wrong thing, do the wrong word, or simply look the wrong way. When Hound finally thought he was getting used to ANBU, the Hokage thrust him into a mission completely out of his element.

"You're a merchant, a businessman," Boar attempted to explain, "think like an Akimichi."

"But they're so nice." Hound said frustrated.

Boar paused and gave Hound an incredulous look. "Nice until you mess with their money. You do realize the Akimichi is the largest crime family in the Land of Fire? They own half the businesses in Konoha, primary income is from protection racketeering, is Konoha's most dominant drug supplier, and even the Fire Daimyo owes them money. We can only do this mission because the "richest merchant in Sound" is deeply indebted to the Akimichi family. Where else do you think we get this information from?"
"...Chouji isn't like that."

"Now you're not only breaking your identity but you're breaking your ANBU identity as well. You have to maintain the mask no matter what."

Hound sighed deeply and then attempted to encourage himself by pumping his fist into the air. "Alright fine, think like an Akimichi."

Boar grumbled, "We are so fucked."

Akira Nakagawa slowed his mount to a halt as he neared the secret meeting place. Midnight shadowed the two ninja that melted away from the rugged terrain and solidified onto the road. One wore a mask that covered his mouth and the other had a patch over his right eye. The Mountain ninja immediately demanded a password and Akira Nakagawa answered, "A Mountain never bows."

Satisfied with his reply, the Mountain ninja said, "We are to escort you to your meeting with Kamizuru-sama. First we need all of your bodyguard's weapons."

Akira pouted. "They wouldn't be very good bodyguards if they didn't have any weapons and I did hire them to guard my body."

The one-eyed Mountain ninja replied with a scowl. "Look pretty boy, either they give up their weapons or we take all your expensive clothing and you walk back home naked. I'm sure there are plenty Leaf ninja around who would love to take advantage of you."

"But-" and Hound suddenly caught the protest in his throat. This was not the time to defend a Leaf's ninja honor, instead he swallowed and motioned to his hired guards to do as the Mountain ninja directed.

Akira's bodyguards gave up their weapons without a struggle.

"And from this point forward you've got to get rid of those bells. I am not dying because of you."

Akira looked affronted. "But they are a part of the outfit. It wouldn't be complete without them."

"You will go no further until you are no longer giving away our position."

"My Lord," the bodyguard replied. "We do not have a choice."

Akira winced and as if cutting his own wrist, he awkwardly cut through the thread holding the bells with the kunai given to him. They took his bells and put them into a storage scroll.

Akira wore an expression of gloom as they followed the ninja over the mountainous terrain. It was a long journey for a civilian and they set up camp in a hidden cave even Hound hadn't discovered through his several passes of the country.

Akira leaned over and took in the warmth of the fire. Then he motioned to one of his bodyguards. "I am so tired, will you rub my feet?"

And Boar deftly hid his death stare and asked, "Am I getting paid extra?"

"Of course of course," Akira bragged loudly, "As you know, my dad is the richest person in Sound country."

And the Mountain ninja rolled their eyes.
"So," Akira asked as he leaned over, closer towards the fire. "Is it fun being a ninja?"

"Oh it's a party," one of the Mountain ninja replied sarcastically, "Every day you hear the sound of battle, whether you're in the mist of it or it's in your head. Every night you watch the shadows hoping it's just a trick of your mind. And every morning, you wake up knowing some Leaf ninja wants to stab you in the back. It's the time of your life."

The ninja's companion shoved him deeply in the shoulder.

"Then why do it? It's not like you make very much money," Akira observed.

The one-eyed ninja shrugged. "I was an orphan and a man has got to eat. They pay me to kill, as simple as that. But I'm sure your lordship wouldn't know what it's like to go even a day with hunger."

And a soft expression crossed Hound's face.

It was easy to keep your expressions hidden behind a mask but on this mission he was not afforded one. Seeing Hound completely betray his emotions, Boar quickly forced Hound's foot forward and Hound winced in response.

"I'm going to sleep," and Hound barely managed to keep his voice level as he turned to the ground. It was so easy to kill when they were just obstacles standing in the way. It was much harder when they were people very much like you.

The Mountain ninja and Akira's bodyguards never slept. Akira woke up in the middle of a tense staring match between the two ninja teams, as if ready to kill one another at any stray movement.

"That was the worse sleep I have ever had," Akira complained to the sleep deprived ninja and received daggers in the form of their steel glinted eyes.

"Let's hurry and finish this," The Mountain ninja replied as he stood. "From this point forward, we are going to have to blindfold all of you."

"Is that safe?" Akira questioned and pouted as he brushed the dirt from his robes.

"You don't have a choice."

Akira looked questioningly at his bodyguards.

"Are you paying extra?" Behind the question Boar nodded slightly, and agreed they were going to go with it for now.

"Fine," Akira reluctantly agreed. A blindfold was placed over his eyes but he was far from blind. Hound was forced to hide the fact he could hear every footstep and taste their sweat in the air. When they began moving, he further hid his confusion when the smell of surrounding flora was different than what he expected. Then he suddenly realized they were not headed to the Village Hidden in the Mountain.

When the blindfold was taken off, Akira looked at an old and ruined monastery high in the mountains long abandoned. The air was thin and colder than he was dressed for. Akira continued to follow Mountain ninja into the monastery and took several twists and turns until they reached a grand staircase guarded by a team of ninja.
"We've brought the package," Akira's escorts responded. The Mountain ninja nodded and allowed them to pass. They descended and the darkness was dotted by torchlight until the cave mouth opened and revealed a small underground city.

Akira took the expression of a tourist but Hound was studying the area with a critical eye. It did not compare to the size of the hidden village. There weren't many ninja and what it lacked in ninja made up with the number of onsen, brothels, and casinos.

Akira and his bodyguards were checked into a really expensive inn that threatened the size of a Kage's house. They were requested to stay there until further notice.

No one said anything until Mantis checked whether or not the room was bugged. He shook his head.

"What is this place?" Hound asked as he peeked outside of the window. It was surreal enough to feel he had entered a different world. The people here were scholars, businessmen, politicians, and those born with simply more money than others. "I had no idea there was another underground city out here."

"I have a suspicion it's where the daimyo lives," Boar answered. "It seems we have stumbled upon the political and entertainment center of Mountain."

"How important is a daimyo to the war effort?" Hound asked curiously.

"Not very important in this country. According to our intelligence so far, the daimyo is largely a figurehead. There isn't much damage we can do here even if we wanted to. Now is a good time to go over the second part of the plan."

Hound moved from the window and huddled close to his team, just in case. "I'm supposed to meet with the younger brother of the Kage, Jibachi Kamizuru. We have an agent on the inside spying on him. We are to establish contact with the agent, get whatever information he has, and walk right back out."

"I'm guessing there are no added details to the cover of the agent?" Boar questioned.

"We weren't allowed the information. In case we were caught before we made it to this point, the enemy couldn't torture the identity of the spy out of us," It was a reality Hound had come to accept. "All I have are code words."

"I'm honestly still surprised we managed to get an agent on the inside," Boar commented. "Come on, we need to go over your cover story again. The real test is coming up soon."

Boar and Hound went over all of the information once again as Mantis veered into the other room for some privacy. When they were finished Hound asked, "Do you think I have a chance?"

"If things go to plan they will. But they won't because things rarely go to plan. It's the things we don't plan for I'm concerned about," Boar replied honestly. "You break your cover too easily."

Hound sighed. "This Akira is far from who I am."

"Listen to me," Boar said as he grabbed Hound by his shirt. "You, under no circumstances, are to break your cover. Understand?"

"Yeah," Hound grumbled.

Boar rose from his crouch and went to take a shower. Hound raised from the bed and combed his
fingers through his brown hair. He entered the front room where Mantis sat in the corner whispering rather urgently to his insects. It was an image Hound regularly stumbled upon during down-time.

With a jutsu, Mantis could telepathically communicate with his shared hive through his beetles. Mantis finished and settled against the darkened part of the wall, always unconsciously searching for the most shadowed corner where he could fade into the background.

"How is the wife?" Hound asked.

"I am… happy." Mantis answered against the wall. "Why? The doctors have confirmed my wife's pregnancy."

Hound grinned. "Congrats. When we get back home we'll get some drinks... do Aburame drink?"

"Not especially, it's harder to control our hives but there are always exceptions. Just as this case." Mantis agreed. "Are you prepared for tomorrow?"

"I can do this," Hound said as he leaned forward. Even other agents agreed that Hound has accomplished some rather extraordinary things in his career. The Jounin exams had given him a silent respect in the organization. "I promise to get you back home to your family. I'm not going to fail you."

Hound wasn't asleep, he was on watch when a quick rapt knocked on his door at the middle of the night. Hound jumped in the bed and Boar answered the door.

It was a woman, with a smile. Her dress and fashion was elaborate, certainly more expensive than a brothel whore but less than the stylized dressings of a geisha. "Kamizuru-sama will see you now."

"Of course," Boar slyly answered. "Please allow my patron a few minutes to prepare himself."

The woman bowed and waited.

"She's a kunoichi," was the first words Boar said when he closed the door.

"How can you tell?" Hound dressed and prepared to meet with the brother of the most powerful man in Mountain.

"It's a survival skill trained through years of mistakes," Boar answered. "Are you ready?"

Hound looked at himself oddly in the mirror, at the man he was supposed to be. He didn't look like himself and never thought he'd miss the scars on his cheeks that had always identified him. But for the next few hours he wasn't Naruto anymore, he wasn't Hound, he was Akira Nakigawa – the spoiled son of an ambitious and rich merchant of Sound.

"You are so funny," the escort laughed as she slid her hand along Akira's arm. "You are surprisingly very well-muscled. Do you work out?"

Boar didn't show any of his nervousness but knew it was a situation they hadn't gone over.

"Just a little," Akira bragged. "I've taken a few Judo classes. Just let me know if you need anyone to protect you."

"That's so sweet," the woman smiled and landed furtive touches along his skin. "I've always been curious about the bells you wear. What do they mean?"
"Have you ever been to Sound?" Akira asked and the escort shook her head. "Then you wouldn't understand."

They paused in front of a mansion which was stretched over a large area and even built impressively upwards to vertically hug the mountain's walls. They were forced to wait outside and admire the grand structure until the host finally came to greet them. Blue lanterns were like stars shining around elaborate wooden walls. It arched around an underground spring and reflected off the silent waters. It was an impressive display of taste, aesthetics, and power.

Jibachi Kamizuru bowed in greeting and Akira returned the same. Jibachi's long blond hair fell to his waist and wore glasses that easily fooled his guests to a rather unassuming nature. "Welcome Nakagawa to my vacation house of elegance and beauty."

"It's impressive," Akira answered. "I've never seen anything of its like."

Jibachi glowed at the compliment. "Right this way. Oh, I'm sorry but you're guards must stay out here. I can't allow peasants into my house. But do not be afraid, I will take personal responsibility for your safety as long as you are my guest."

"I appreciate it," Akira answered. "I am looking forward to enjoying your hospitality."

"That you will," Jibachi promised and motioned to his security to kindly see to the bodyguards.

As Mantis and Boar passed Akira, Mantis bumped his hand against Akira and a message was quickly exchanged. Then Mantis and Boar were led to an outhouse that had a great view over the premises, and there they sat, while two of Jibachi's own Mountain ninja watched their every move. Boar could feel the sweat running down his neck as keenly as the bee that landed on his hand. The bee teased his skin as it walked along its arm, as if on patrol, as if waiting for them to make a mistake.

Akira Nakagawa followed behind Jibachi into his house. Subtly, as if rubbing his nose, he took a quick peek of the message. 'The bees are a different type. Serum will not work.'

Akira quickly swallowed it.

One moment of standing still and he instantly made the decision to abort Plan A. He could feel infinitesimal chakra signatures brimming through the walls of this place as if the entire house was a hive. Plan A was to send shadow clones throughout the house to search for the Konoha spy while Akira kept appearances with Jibachi but there were bees everywhere, watching, and would undoubtedly find and report his clones.

"What do you think?" Jibachi asked smugly.

Akira observed the breathtaking beauty of the house. Paintings from famous artists decorated the walls and told stories of cherry blossoms and lovers, of pagodas and intrigue. Objects that were considered antiques from the age when Samurai ruled were on display. It was like walking through a museum that paid special attention to how the light danced.

"It's tasteful," Akira answered, trying not to sound too impressed.

"Do you like to gamble?"

"There's nothing I love better than to play with money," Akira answered with a smirk, and Hound secretly hoped the money delegated towards the mission was enough.
Jibachi grinned. "Good, I'm looking forward to taking it from you."

Jibachi led him to a room and Akira was introduced to four of Jibachi's business associates. They all sat across from the dealer, a sharp-eyed older woman who wore one sleeve and displayed the elaborate and colorful tattoos splayed across her shoulder and her bare breast. In every corner of the room was a nude statue of a woman.

"Wait, are they real?" Akira asked incredulously and could hear a heartbeat from the frozen gold covered woman with green trees spiraled along her skin.

"Of course they are," Jibachi bragged. "I have traveled around the world to collect rare and exotic beauties to decorate my home and harem. The world is such an ugly place but who wants to live in such ugliness?"

"Well, I'm surprise you let me in," One of the men laughed, the oldest in the room. He wore a limp sleeve hanging off his arm and at first glance Hound knew this man was or still is a ninja. Jibachi introduced the man as Daichi, the ninja who rose to fame during the Iwa rebellion.

Kin was a merchant, who wore the clothing style of the Village Hidden by a Waterfall and owned the company Mountain hired to produce their weapons.

And the last two, Ryo and Kyo, were brothers and sons of the leading commander of Mountain's army.

There were important people in this room and all of them Konoha's enemy.

Akira sat down and joined the men at a game of Chou-Han. The dealer shook the dice in a bamboo cup to a chorus of "Cho" and "Han" before they were rolled along the floor. The guests cheered as money spread around the room.

Akira seemed to have inherited Tsunade's bad luck that night and found himself quickly losing money.

Two women scurried around the room filling alcohol cups. They both wore elaborate outfits, one in the attire of a geisha and the other in a modified version of samurai armor. It was a surreal experience as the women were playful in their various costumes.

"Dad said those smoke bombs you made to get past the Hyūga were ingenious. We just got the reports this morning." Ryo replied.

Hound placed the alcohol to his lips to hide his rather disturbed expression. What bombs? What Hyūga? What the fuck happened this morning?

The merchant chuckled smugly. "I assume the surprise attack worked?"

"According to our reports. We even managed to get the leader. That crazy one, you know, the green spandex guy."

"The Green Beast of Konoha," The old ninja, Daichi said gravely. "He's not one you wanted to meet on the battlefield. Good ninja, about time he was dead."

Akira accidently spilled his cup of alcohol on the floor. "Oh, I'm sorry," Akira stammered as one of the girls quickly came and cleaned up the spill.

Maito Gai couldn't be dead.
"A little too much to drink?" Kyo asked as he lifted his cup jovially. "A toast, to one more Leaf ninja out the fucking way."

The bee that landed on Hound's hand reminded him what was at stake. Hound couldn't break his cover.

"To dead Leaf ninja," Akira agreed as he toasted and drank to Gai's death.

"Eventually we'll add all of them to our list. The fucking Copy Cat ninja and that fucking pet of theirs."

"Pet?" Kin questioned and corrected his glasses as he counted his money.

"Konoha's fucking pet, the Kyūbi. I remember in my day when that thing was something to be feared, what sort of demon allows itself to be controlled?"

**No one controls me. Let me out. I'll show him a thing or two.**

*I really don't need your interference right now. I'm kind of in the middle of something.*

**He dared to suggest I'm no longer feared.**

*Well, I'm sorry that the pride of the almighty demonic Kyūbi was hurt so easily.*

**Fuck you, kid. Fuck you.**

"I'm not afraid of some demon," Akira bragged loudly to the room. "I bet even I could beat that thing."

"To fucking the Kyūbi in the ass!" Kyo toasted. Akira happily toasted to that.

**You do realize when they're referring to me they are referring to the both of us and when they are fucking you in the ass I am not going to do anything about it.**

**When do you ever do anything remotely in my benefit?**

"You can do whatever you want," the Kin replied. "As long as I get my end of the deal. Those chakra trees can make me the richest man in the world."

"I can't wait to have a taste of some Fire country women," Kyo grinned. "Tell me you've never considered the Hokage?"

The ninja gave a disgusted expression. "That woman is older than me."

"Doesn't look like it, and her tits don't look like it either," Kyo claimed. "You can bounce off of those hills."

Akira wisely decided not to add to the conversation that began to get more obscene as even more alcohol was consumed.

"That's it, I'm out." Ryo said when he spent all of his money. Akira soon followed.

"How about I request some entertainment?" Jibachi declared and motioned to his servants behind him. "Bring music and Tsugi."

Then Kyo groaned. "That's no surprise. You bring her out every time you have company."
"But Akira hasn't met my most exquisite flower. You must see her dance."

A line of women paraded into the room. The first was a blind shamimasen player, with the wind blown skin of Sand Country. The second played the shakuhachi with deep ebony skin the color of charcoal. The third was a koto player with red hair and freckles. Each one was beautiful and unique in their own way.

"Ah, and here is my favorite," Jibachi announced as Tsugi entered.

Tsugi held a decorative fan to partly cover her face, long silver hair fell down to her shoulders, and green eyes peeked from under long black lashes. She stopped at the front of the room and leaned into a modest position like that of a majestic tree.

Akira noticed the sudden quiet in the room.

Tsugi's feet glided across the floor no harder than a whisper and the tune, Moon of the Desereted Castle, began to play. The melody carried her into a dance.

As if hit by an emotional bolt of lightning, Hound was suddenly thrown from his careful act. His jaw went slack in disbelief and recognition. Even with the different hair and eyes, Hound knew that graceful control anywhere.

And the Kyuubi laughed. **Oh, now it's gotten interesting.**

As Tsugi moved, her kimono would often slip from her shoulders, although it seemed like accident, it was always on purpose. It was a tease, just as much as the slit which slipped up with every movement and exposed her thigh.

Her body was thrown back and caught by the haunting tune of the folk song. Her feet balanced along the music notes. There was something about her grace that captured the attention of everyone in the room. The tempo rose and her movements quickened into a rise, then fall. As softly as the music floated to an end, she floated to the ground. Her silver hair spread across the floor and silk caressed her skin with a jealousy. Green eyes invited the audience to test her submission.

At its end, clapping erupted through the room. Hound could feel the chill she sent creeping through his body. He wanted to pressed her underneath him and finish their dance.

"Beautiful isn't she?" Jibachi asked, watching Hound's face with a smug look.

"Yeah," Hound said as he watched the rise and fall of her chest with her exertion. So many in the room was undressing her with their eyes, but only one understood the strength and will that bred her unrivaled grace. "She really is beautiful."

"She wasn't cheap either. I bought her while I was visiting the Land of Lightning. The moment I saw her I knew I had to collect her."

"Collect," Hound lingered on the word and hated the taste of it in his mouth.

Tsugi never gave him a passing glance as she bowed deeply before Jibachi. He motioned her forward, and Tsugi answered his summons. She crossed the room to sit on Jibachi's lap.

Hound watched as the red on her lips was sucked into Jibachi's mouth. Jibachi slid his hand along her pale skin and roughly groped at her breasts as if signaling to everyone in the room that he owned her.
Hound took a deep breath and attempted to regain his composure. He entered his mindscape.

The sewers of his mindscape had darkened considerably. The Kyuubi chuckled and Hinata leaned against his cage. "You're just going to sit and watch as he touches her?"

"I don't have a choice," Hound argued.

"Yes you do. We always have a choice." Then Hinata asked the question he had been running away from. "How much more of yourself are you going to sacrifice? When are you going to stop crossing the line?"

"If I mess up, everyone could die. They are depending on me."

Hinata looked at Hound. "You're not Naruto."

"Then deal with it," Hound said angrily. "I'll do what I have to."

The Kyūbi sat back and watched as if watching a favorite television show. It is very amusing to watch you argue with yourself.

Hound ignored the voices and attempted to find his center, that place deep within himself where he could leave his attachments behind to become the person he needed to be, even if it wasn't the person he wanted to be.

Akira Nakigawa opened his eyes.

"I admit she is a delight every time I come here. Her dance is exquisite." Kin replied. "After the war is over and I do become the richest man in the world, I am certainly buying her from you."

Jibachi grinned. "Yes well, we'll see about that." He clapped his hands and the musicians left the podium. "Now, we will get to the final event of the evening."

Everyone turned as two servants dragged a woman by the rope tied to her wrist. Hound tensed as the woman's bare feet were pulled along the ground and she finally fell from a final yank at the front of the room. Wide terrified eyes looked at the mass of faces that watched her.

"What is this?" Ryo asked curiously.

"This," Jibachi announced, "Is the daughter of a prominent politician, Suki Takukawa of Fire Country and our final entertainment for the evening."

"Please let me go," Suki begged as she tugged at the ropes. The dress she wore was in tatters, the same one she wore when she had been captured during her travels. She was clean, but only because they've kept her clean for the evening.

"I'm sorry my dear," Jibachi replied as he took the stage and grabbed her chin. "You have the unfortunate fate of being born in Fire Country. You are the enemy."

"I haven't done anything," Suki cried. "I'm not even a ninja. Please, please." She whimpered as her sentence was cut off with the back of Jibachi's hand to her face. Blood dripped from a cut down her lip. The alcohol filled Mountain allies cheered in response, except one.

"What is this?!" Akira demanded as he stood to his feet. "I was promised a night of pleasure, not this sort of bloody entertainment."
"Too bloody for you?" Jibachi questioned. "And yet you come here asking Mountain for the blood of your Kage. Come, show us your resolve against the Leaf."

"She is not leaf. She is a politician's daughter. How does this make any sense?"

All eyes were on Akira. Jibachi grinned smugly. "Look around you," Jibachi challenged. "Do you notice the bees?" Akira frowned. The bees were everywhere, crawling into the cleavage of Tsugi's breast, crawling on his hand and the back of his neck. "Their sting will kill a man in five seconds. I can assure you this, you deny Mountain what it wants, you will not be leaving here alive. Now, pretty boy, ready to get a little blood on your hands?"

At that moment Akira realized this night hadn't been about gambling at all. It was a test, to see if he was a Leaf sympathizer or not. He looked for relief and glanced slightly at Tsugi, but Jibachi noticed this stare and grinned.

"Tsugi, perhaps you can show our guest how it's done?"

"Yes, Master," Tsugi replied as she went to her feet and walked unflinchingly toward the front.

"You don't like Leaf ninja do you?" Jibachi asked into her ear.

"I hate leaf ninja," Tsugi replied automatically. Jibachi showed her how to properly hold a kunai and stepped back to watch. Tsugi knew she was putting on a show, it was always a careful act. Without hesitation, Tsugi ripped the kunai from Suki's collar to her waist. Suki's bare breasts spilled from the restraining cloth.

"Please," Suki begged, "Please, you can't do this--" Her screams grew more frantic when the kunai was placed on her skin. She held her breath as the kunai traveled toward her breasts, and with a flick of Tsugi's wrist, the kunai cut across. The pink nipple fell to the floor like a lost jewel.

Jibachi smiled at the way blood stroked across the woman's skin and reveled in the music of her screams. Then he shoved Tsugi's head forward, and under his direction, Tsugi took the sobbing woman's breast into her mouth and lapped at the blood. When she was finally allowed to stand, Tsugi bowed and exited the stage.

Akira watched the scene with frozen horror.

Tsugi stopped in front of him, and for the first time their eyes met in recognition. Her eyes narrowed in warning, and he could read the obvious words. *Never break your cover.*

Tsugi placed the kunai in Akira's hand.

Akira swallowed as he gripped the unfamiliar item. He stumbled towards the front, towards the stage. Akira hands were shaking.

"Do you hate Leaf ninja?"

"I hate them," Akira said weakly. "I hate Leaf ninja," he said over and over again, as if to convince himself. The audience waited, watched as the main character crossed the line, to a point of no return. Frantic, sobbing screams ripped through the room, reflected through the eyes of a monster.

"You were rather admirable tonight."

Akira Nakagawa sat on the tatami floor of the chashitsu room and gratefully consumed the tea
prepared by his host. "It was a distasteful matter but it had to be done. I agree it wouldn't have been fair to ask so much of you without showing my resolve for the cause. The Leaf girl had it coming to her anyways."

"Agreed. Normally I wouldn't allow such ugliness in my house, but after all, I am trying to win a war." Jibachi commented. He had cleaned and wielded a more serious expression than he wore when they first met. Play time was over. Now it was time for business.

"Your father's wealth will be a great boon to Mountain," Jibachi said after a few moments of savoring his tea.

"And Mountain will be a great boon to my father and Sound," Akira answered. "I believe an alliance will benefit both our countries."

"As do I," Jibachi answered. "I have spoken with my older brother and he has agreed to these terms: Your father will secretly tunnel money to Mountain through Kin's business and in exchange we will provide you the ninja to assassinate the Kage of Sound. Once he is dead, and we place a puppet as the new Kage, then Sound will officially join Mountain."

"I will bring these terms to my father and he will send a reply as soon as possible. Nevertheless, I am confident he will accept."

Jibachi crinkled his eyes in amusement. "You remind me of myself when I was younger: ambitious and driven. One day history will remember us as the men who carried Mountain to greatness. It'll be just as my grandfather, the first Tsuchikage envisioned. As he had a habit of saying: The end always justifies the means."

"Your grandfather sounds like a smart man."

Jibachi paused. "He was. He died in an invasion attempt against Konoha during the Second Shinobi war. The loss of that war was blamed on our clan, we were kicked out of Iwa, and we've been trying to regain our honor ever since. I've been on the run and fighting since the moment I was born. This is the first time for the family we've had some place to settle and when we're finally done fighting, perhaps, just perhaps, we can take the time to enjoy the pretty things in life." Jibachi snapped out of his contemplation and gently laughed at himself. "You have to know the ugly to truly understand what's beautiful."

Akira laid in the bathwater that had been prepared for him after the longest night of his life. He stayed until the water turned cold. He had been hoping that eventually the screams in his head would fade but they never did. The cold turned painful and he was forced to lift himself from the tub. He grabbed a towel to wipe himself dry, before he went to bed, woke up, and got the hell out here.

He entered the darkened bedroom. It wasn't as grand as the furnishing in his father's mansion but it would be enough for tonight. When he reached for the night robe placed on the bed, the door to his room opened and closed with a click.

Akira turned and was greeted by the woman he had met for the first time tonight. Tsugi bowed, a simple kimono slipped down her shoulders with the movement and hinted she wasn't wearing anything underneath.

"I have been sent by master to please you."

Akira snarled as he moved and ripped the kimono from her shoulders. The exhaustion was on her face, she smelled fresh of Jibachi's sweat, and his sex lingered on her body. "He expects me to accept
his leftovers?"

"He wishes to share me with you, as a symbol of good faith to the alliance."

Akira could feel the predatory crawl of a bee on the back of his shoulder. Another crawled on her leg. He touched a hand to his failing heart and knew he had no choice. Akira grabbed the woman and threw her on the bed. She landed face down into the covers and was grateful she didn't have to look at his expression.

His expression was more than a frown, it was almost undulated fury that threatened to crack the mask. Bent over, Tsugi's position revealed the raw red of her swollen lips. Dried semen was splattered across her behind and legs.

Akira reached down and placed his mouth up her spine. His hands traveled her body in a caress and brushed his hands along the bite marks on her breasts. He attempted to make it easier, but Tsugi stopped him when her sore breasts were held in his hands.

"Please," Tsugi said softly to the blankness of the covers. "Just get it over with." She knew no matter how wet he was trying to make her, the pain would still be excruciating.

Akira gritted his teeth as he lifted his hands from her breasts and placed them on her waist. He hated the fact that he was turned on by some part of this illusion because his erection had been growing the moment she entered the room.

He lathered himself with the precum from the tip and then placed the head at her swollen lips. He watched as her hands tightened against the covers as he forced himself into her dry cavernous walls. Her legs and blue pubic hair parted further at the intrusion. Her body shivered at the force of the pain.

It wasn't a pleasurable experience for him either. Tsugi reached between her legs and stroked his balls to help him along. Akira thrust in an out of her used body, and eventually blood began to stain his unsatisfied prick.

Akira didn't want to drag out her torture. He was forced to thrust into her harder and harder, the blood proving a surprising lubricant. Tsugi tightened her teeth onto the cloth of the covers and felt as if she was being torn in two. Akira didn't fight the climax and thrust his hips one final time into the beaten flesh of her ass. He ejaculated inside of her. His load mixed with the blood and the other man's semen.

They did what was required of them.

Akira pulled away and gave her room so she could pull herself up. Tsugi winced as she balanced on her feet. Akira immediately helped and supported her with his arm. He didn't get any warning, as her mouth overcame his. Akira paused when she suddenly pushed a small black ball, the size of a pellet, into his mouth. In confusion, he resisted at first, but her tongue encouraged, and eventually he swallowed the offering.

Tsugi pulled away, but before she could limp over to her robe, Akira grasped her wrist. "Stay, for as long as I can have you tonight."

Tsugi paused and then answered, "I have not been given any other appointments. I can remain here, if that is your wish."

"I wish it," Akira answered as he reached for her robe and wrapped it around her shoulders. He dressed for bed to show he wanted nothing more from her than her presence. He rested his head on
the pillow. Tsugi faced away from him, curled into a fetal position in an effort to curb the pulsing pain.

Akira traced the black tattoo along her back, which cleverly hid two seals: the one he had created to suppress chakra and a second to mask physical scars.

Akira attempted to slide his hand around her waist but the moment he touched her, she turned and for the first time that night, their eyes truly recognized each other. He dug his face into her shoulder, and somewhere underneath the false identity, the lies, and the illusion, was the scent he knew all too well.

He placed his lips to her ear and in careful softness, whispered her name, "Hinata."

She returned the gesture, the kiss of her lips on his ear. "Naruto."

As if to remind each other who they were.

Naruto woke up that morning, the first time he had ever woken up next to Hinata. He eyed the bees fluttering in the room in utter annoyance and whispered low as not to be overheard by the small spies. "Does it still hurt?"

Underneath the covers, their hands were intertwined.

"Not as bad as last night," Hinata answered but kept her back facing away. There was a fierce refusal to look each other in the eyes, afraid of the shame and guilt they would find reflected within them.

They rested against one another, pressing their bodies together. A body was nothing more than tools to be used for the village. Naruto never understood until now how much of himself the village owned. He gave the Leaf everything, even what he treasured the most, his morals and his beliefs.

Naruto couldn't have cared about the success of the mission. But it was the lives of those who depended on him to succeed that were more important to him than his principles.

A knock came at the door.

"What!" Naruto snapped angrily. Hinata tightened her grip around his hand. Naruto knew he had to be Akira but he didn't have the energy to, and didn't try to keep up the façade when a servant entered the room.

"The ninja who is to escort you back out of the Country will arrive soon. Master suggests that you get dressed." The servant left after she delivered her message.

Naruto tightened his hold around Hinata. The way he held her was words enough to express how he didn't want to leave her behind. He closed his eyes as images of last night filtered through his head. The women's screams rang through his ears. As if she could feel his distress, Hinata leaned into their final embrace.

"We did what we had to do."

Naruto kissed the top of her head. He no longer knew who he was anymore and her scent was the only reminder. Hinata had forgotten what it was like to be held. It was an unwelcome reminder of the person she could no longer be.

Neither could afford to break.
They moved from the bed at the same time. Fox limped over to her robe and made the bed, while Hound dressed for the road. They peeked at one another from opposite sides of the bed.

"I hope you enjoyed your stay here," Tsugi smoothly replied.

Akira answered in return, "It was the best night I've ever had."

The journey back to Konoha was quiet. It wasn't until they passed the border, did they feel some of the heaviness brush from their shoulders.

Boar finally asked after Mantis checked to make sure no one was following. "Did you get the information?"

"Huh?" Hound said as he stared at the ground underneath his feet. "What?"

"The information? Please tell me you got it?"

"Oh yeah yeah, I got it," Hound mumbled and then shrugged his shoulders, "After I shit it out."

Boar sighed in relief and didn't push any further. He knew the moment they crossed the border, left the presence of the Mountain ninja, Hound's lost expression ended the smug persona of Akira.

"Boar," Hound said after a while. "Do you ever feel like you're two different people?"

Boar shoved his hands into his flak jacket. "It doesn't matter, as long as what you believe helps you sleep at night."

Tsunade yawned as she dragged herself down the staircase. She knew it was time to go to the office or Shizune would make a personal visit to make sure she did. When she reached the bottom step, she turned on the light to reveal a Leaf ANBU sitting at her kitchen table. She wasn't alarmed and as she passed him by towards the cabinets, pulled the Hound mask off of his face and threw it back.

She placed two sake bottles on the table. It was about time for her breakfast drink anyways. Tsunade knew something bad had happened. "You failed the mission?"

"No," Naruto said after a moment of silence. "I succeeded." To prove it, he rolled the black ball he had swallowed during the mission onto the table. It stopped underneath Tsunade's hand.

"What happened?" She asked as she began to analyze the black ball.

The mission report slapped the table. Naruto combed a shaky hand through his blonde freshly washed hair. He really didn't want to talk about it.

His eyes frightened Tsunade. She knew exactly what she was demanding of her agents, she knew exactly what they were going through. She had been at that point in her career. She had done things that she certainly was not proud of. The hardest part of this job was knowing exactly what you were asking your ninja to do and watching them come back, a little broken every time.

"I wanted to tell you about Hinata. I knew you two had a history." Tsunade answered, attempting to guess at what was wrong.

Naruto crossed his arms and looked out the window. "That was a long time ago."

"It wasn't that long ago," Tsunade replied. "Naruto, you were the only candidate for the mission who
had a chance at succeeding. I wouldn't have done it if I didn't have to."

"I just- I don't know why I thought Konoha was any better than her clan. I'm so fucking naïve and stupid." Naruto sighed, "Why Hinata?"

Tsunade pursed her lips. "You answer that. Why did I pick Hinata for one of the most important missions of the war?"

Naruto frowned bitterly and finally answered, "She doesn't break easily. She's the strongest person that I know. Sometimes too strong, too proud. Men want her, but they can never have her. I can never have her."

Tsunade began to regret asking the question. He obviously couldn't look at it objectively, which is what he would need to do if he was to ever become Hokage. "She's a poison specialist, which should protect her from any specialized hives Mountain might have, her natural element is water and lightning which are two elements useful against earth, she has learned how to read lips, which is a useful ability combined with her byakugan as she is able to spy on a conversation without being in the same room, and her Sensei said she was physically prepared."

"Yeah," Naruto grumbled. "That too." He tapped his hands impatiently on the table. "Would you hurry up with that?"

Tsunade tapped the small black ball three times and opened it to reveal the smallest storage scroll Naruto has ever seen. It was only a thin sheet of paper as long as his finger. She poured chakra into it, a small puff of smoke, and a sealed encrypted scroll appeared onto the table.

Naruto watched the expression cross Tsunade's face. "Was it worth it?" He had to know.

Tsunade turned the paper over and showed him.

"It's just a list of names," Naruto said in disbelief. "How is this going to help us win the war?"

"It's an assassination list of Mountain's high profile individuals and secret backers. This list is invaluable. This could win us the war."

Naruto took a closer look at the list and pointed to a name, time, and location. "This is today."

"And it's all the way in Waterfall Country." Tsunade gave Naruto a sly look. "I'm going to need a really fast team."

Naruto slammed onto his feet, grabbed his mask, and snatched the paper out of Tsunade's hand.

"Naruto, you are not going to do all those names on that paper. That's what other ANBU teams are for."

Naruto placed the paper in his pocket. "Honestly, I really just want to kill someone right now."

He really, really, wanted to kill someone who deserved all the hatred boiling inside of him. Hound began to climb over the counter and slid open the window. He paused with one foot through the will.

"And Granny, after the war, I'm done. I'm retiring from ANBU."

Blood arced in the air as the Mountain ninja tumbled to the ground. Kagome seethed as she slammed her foot on the prisoner's head. Kagome twisted and made sure the ninja saw her face. "Are you afraid?"
She flipped a kunai in her hand and as her arm descended it was frozen by the hand that enclosed around her wrist. Kagome snapped around with a scowl and came face to face with Kakashi.

"That is enough. Anymore and you'd kill them before they are interrogated."

Four prisoners laid around them, limp, beaten, and covered in Kagome's cruel revenge.

"Let go of me," And the tenseness in Kagome's body was threat enough. Kakashi let go of her and she calmed slightly at the absence of his touch. "Go read your fucking book."

"Hurting them is not going to bring them back."

Kagome leaned, completely intruding on his space and her words was a harbor of hatred and pain, "But it makes me feel better. You may wear your mask and hide behind your book to distance yourself from it, but pain is the only thing that makes us feel alive."

Kagome craned her neck and looked fearless into the expression Kakashi reserved for battles. "Are you alive, Kakashi Hatake?"

Kakashi Hatake died a long time ago, each piece of his heart placed in the ground along with his father, his teammates, his teacher, his student, and his friends. And there was nothing left, nothing left beating in his chest.

"Am I interrupting?"

Kagome and Kakashi suddenly took a step backwards from one another, suddenly released from the tension binding them.

Kagome tilted her head with a sneer. "Who are you?"

"Ino Yamanaka," Ino walked into the tent and observed the prisoners. "Great, now I have to be gentle."

"Whatever, I need a smoke anyways," Kagome snarled as she marched outside.

"And Kakashi," Ino smirked as she looked in the lean ninja's direction. "You're going to have to be much more charming than that if you don't want her to kill you after this war is over." Then Ino raised an eyebrow with a devilish smile. "And secretly, she is really curious what's under the mask."

The music increased in tempo, as the heron spirit entered her final death throes. White paper fell from the ceiling to create the illusion of snow. A layer of powder coated the dying kabuki actor as he finally spread across the stage to a held tone. The lights darkened to a finish.

The crowd erupted in cheers as the light began to come on in the darkened theatre. Then there was a scream. The guards climbed over the chairs into the private booth and found their most frequent customer, Kin Irie, the richest man in Waterfall Country leaned over his chair, red staining his expensive robes like a bib, and a kunai in his throat.

The corpses waited patiently in line until it was their turn to be placed in the mass grave. And as the hours drew on, and more were found in and outside of the camp, the line grew longer.

Mushi held her tears. She finally found her third teammate. "We should say something," Mushi insisted who leaned against a crutch to take weight off her bandaged and injured leg.
Hohei placed his hands in his pockets and stared passively down at the corpse of a boy he hadn't known for very long. "What's the point?" Hohei questioned. "This team was only thrown together for this mission. I barely knew him."

"Can't a Hyūga have the decency to think of someone other than themselves?" Mushi questioned the boy, her voice laced with anger. She was tired and in her exhaustion, her emotions were more prominent.

Hohei raised an eyebrow. "Why? He's the lucky one." And the small Hyūga genin angrily stomped away.

"Fucking Hyūga," Mushi whispered the oft common curse in Konoha.

Mushi wrung her hands. "I'm sorry I wasn't a good leader," Mushi whispered to yet another teammate. "It's not fair. It was my responsibility. I failed and I should have been the one." Suddenly a hand landed on her shoulder.

Mushi looked up into the eyes of the man she recognized as the Copy cat ninja of Konoha.

"I lost a teammate when I was young too," Kakashi couldn't watch the genin beat herself up any longer.

"I should have been the one to die. I should not have lived." Mushi muttered.

Perhaps that's where Kakashi had gone wrong. He should have died all those years ago, but Obito had saved him. Sometimes Kakashi wondered if he remembered it wrong, if he had been the one to die and he's just been living this life as a ghost.

Kakashi tried for some comforting words or a wise phrase of wisdom but he was never very good at it.

"Thanks," Mushi told the man weakly. Then she placed her crutch underneath her and limped away from the line of corpses. She found an empty spot in the shadow of the gate and hoped no one would bother her. She tucked into her hood and faded into the background.

She was stuck here, unable to go home until her leg healed.

Mushi brooded on the night she left home. Her first time had been horrible. Neither Tomu nor her knew what they were doing, it hurt, and Tomu cried after she told him it was sort of like being stabbed with a kunai. Those perhaps weren't the best words to use. But even looking pass the disaster that it was, she could be a teenage girl for a night.

At least it made her feel alive.

In the darkness, Hound waited.

"Ryo!"

"Dad!"

The wife screamed when her husband finally came through the door. Her hair was a rope that kept her bound to Hound's tight grip. The son was tied and struggled to escape his binds.

"Don't make any move or your wife dies," Hound threatened.
Ryo tried his luck and placed his hands together for a jutsu. The katana lit briefly from the stream of moonlight before it was covered in red. Ryo's wife gurgled, Hound released her hair, and she slumped to the ground.

Ryo released his jutsu when Hound reached for his son.

"Now that you understand I am serious, drop all your weapons to the floor."

"Fucking Leaf ninja." Ryo bitterly allowed his kunai, shuriken, and scrolls to drop at the entrance of his house. He hadn't even had time to take off his shoes.

"Do not resist."

The shadows began to move, and then buzzed louder as they closed in on the Jounin. Then in one last moment of defiance, Ryo put his hands together but never managed to form a seal as the insects began to eat at his skin. He attempted to reach for the kunai on the floor, but the bones of his fingers found the floor first.

"Boar."

Boar released the genjutsu. The little boy Hound had held in his arms disappeared like a trail of winding smoke. Hound stood, opened the cabinet where he had stashed the real wife and child. They hadn't even realized what had happened until it was too late.

Hound picked up the unconscious wife and child in his arms and then placed them in the bed as soft as he would his own children.

Hohei played the scene over and over again in his head. Mushi saw the Mountain symbol on the ninja's hitai-ite and he didn't. He tried to not let the fear overwhelm him as he watched the sun rise with his byakugan a kilometer over the horizon.

Hohei tensed when he noticed who was approaching from behind him.

"Hohei?"

Hohei turned at Neji's questioning stare.

"What are you doing here?" Neji demanded. It was a myth that the Hyūga never portrayed emotion. It was subtle, but they could see it with their byakugan. The small frown and wrinkle above Neji's brow betrayed his anger.

Hohei explained the situation, why he was here, and what had happened.

Neji activated his byakugan and went over Hohei for injuries. Hohei was rather relieved to be with Neji and also rather scared.

"Neji," Hohei whispered. "There's something I really need to tell you. Alone."

Neji didn't have a choice whether he wanted to or not. Hohei was a main branch member. Neji motioned for the genin to follow and Neji closed the flaps to his personal tent. "I'm listening."

Hohei broke his composure and began to fiddle with his hands. "I think- I think- I might need glasses."

Neji's expression was blank. He had never heard of a Hyūga needing glasses. But of course, if they
did, no one would admit to it. They would simply use the byakugan to see everything. Neji activated his doujutsu and went to his knee to take a closer look at Hohei eyes.

"And your byakugan works normally?"

Hohei nodded.

Neji focused and studied his retina and finally came to the conclusion. "You are near-sighted."

Hohei gave Neji a terrified expression and asked the question that has occupied his mind since the moment it occurred. "Are they going to brand me?"

Grandfather did not accept any impurities in the main branch family, and certainly not a Hyūga who needed glasses.

"Yes," Neji replied without remorse, and then watched as the boy broke down in tears. The genin had probably just survived one of the most traumatic battles of his life but it was nothing to the pressures of being a member of the most prestigious clan in Konoha.

"That is not becoming of a Hyūga," Neji disapproved but his attempt to end the crying only created more. Neji sighed and was beginning to think he never wanted kids. "Being a branch member is certainly nothing to cry about. We dedicate our lives to servitude. That is our place in the world. We serve, give ourselves, and aim to please the main branch family in any capacity that we are capable of. The will to serve is an admirable trait."

"That's bullshit," cried the thirteen year old Hyūga. "People choose to serve. What have you ever chosen?"

Neji's shoulders went rigid. He turned with his arms crossed. "Of course, you are still a main branch member. If you were to order me to keep this conversation a secret, then I'd have no choice but to obey."

Hohei wiped his tears and looked at Neji speechless. He honestly felt like crap as he said the words. "Neji Hyūga, I order you to keep this conversation between us."

"As you wish," Neji answered. "If you are tired, you are welcomed to remain here."

Hohei looked at the cot and it was certainly attractive. "Thank you, you didn't have to."


And when Neji stepped out of the tent, he pulled an item out of his pocket. Neji Hyūga, the new Commander of Konoha's frontal assault force, stared at Gai's bloody Leaf hitai-ite in stubborn silence.

The Mountain Jounin stepped into the house where he thought he had stashed his family safely from the war.

"I want security everywhere around this building," Kyo demanded.

The Security Captain only nodded, and didn't bother reminding the man that he knew how to do his job, but he was used to dealing with men with over inflated egos. The Captain watched as his client disappeared into his room.

The Captain has had luck over the years. He had never once lost one of his clients, but the small
village wasn't well known and its obscurity largely kept ninja away. Deep in the night, the Captain made his rounds, but it was a night like every other. Even so, when he walked around the grand pagoda, he eyed the shadows carefully, but he hated to admit his vision had been dwindling in his old age.

The Captain turned around a corner and never came out the other side.

Behind the bedroom door guarded by three guards, a window creaked open and the Leaf ANBU stepped into the shadows of the room, toward the sleeping figure in the bed.

"You know I'm no good at these types of things," Shikamaru gave Chouji a troubled stare. Shikamaru could do amazing things. He could outsmart anyone, come up with a strategy that would have most people's heads spinning, but this was certainly not his forte.

"I'll do it," Chouji said as he patted Shikamaru on the back. Lee had just return to camp from his last mission and someone needed to tell him.

Chouji was rather used to telling people bad things. It came with the territory of being an Akimichi. He lumbered out of the tent and watched the ninja joke, gamble, eat, and catch what sleep they could. But beneath the nonchalant expression was a tenseness hidden underneath their eyes. Chouji could spot the signs of anxiousness, of nervousness, of trying to find anything to do to keep busy and keep their minds off of comrades dying in the next unit over.

"Hey Chouji!" Lee exclaimed as he lifted himself up with one finger. "Would you like to train with me?"

Chouji placed the empty chip bag in his back pocket. He had to constantly eat to store his power and an Akimichi was the only clan who could get away with a serious conversation while munching on food with their mouths open, but this time Chouji decided to forego another snack.

"Not right now Lee. But do you think we can talk?"

"Yeah sure, what do you need?" Lee asked eagerly as he flipped forward on his finger and landed on the balance of one foot. He then began to jog in place, ready for a conversation.

"We got a message while you were away on a mission. Our main force suffered a surprise attack."

"Is everything alright? Should I go and assist them?" Lee asked.

"No, we've been ordered to remain here until we're given the signal." Chouji overlooked the gorge beneath their feet, where they were stationed to catch Mountain ninja coming through the mountain pass. "Lee, Gai Sensei has passed away. He fell in battle. The reports say he was critically wounded after a saving a genin team and a few hours later fell to Mountain ninja."

Lee was made of energy, but as the words sunk in, the energy he was famous for drained away. His larger-than-life personality dwindled. Lee held his forearm to his eyes as the tears began to stream down in a flood.

"I'm sorry," Chouji attempted to console him. He knew what it felt like to lose a teacher.

"No need to be sorry!" Lee sniffed. "Death is as natural as training. It is inevitable and I am proud Sensei has found the final blaze of his youth's fire! I could only wish to die as bravely! What more could any man ask for?"
Lee knew everyone couldn't die defending against a thousand ninja or Madara or some other large battle of epic proportions, sometimes you take a piece of shrapnel in the wrong part of the body when attempting to save two genin. Gai would be okay with that.

Chouji had to admit, you never know what you're going to get when talking with Lee.

"This means his spirit is watching me right now. I must train. I cannot let him down!" Lee declared with a fist pump.

Before Chouji could blink Lee started off at a sprint around camp. Chouji reached in his pocket and grabbed a bag of chips. They crunched in his mouth when a messenger bird suddenly cawed in the sky. He turned and followed it inside of camp, until he found the crow sitting atop Shikamaru's arm, and a scroll in Shikamaru's hand.

"What's up?" Chouji asked and only received a muttered, 'troublesome.' That's all Chouji needed to know. He turned and began to round up the camp. They were done waiting.

Neji traveled through the tall grass, careful where he placed his feet and motioned the team behind him forward. Kagome crawled up toward his shoulder, regulating the stilled grass with her kekkai genkai. Neji kept a careful watch on his surroundings with his byakugan. Kakashi came up over the other side of the large gorge with his own team of ninja.

The Mountain camp was strategically positioned in a gorge of sharp rocks that were raised towards the sky at different levels and even more deadly to navigate by the fog that covered them. The fog was cleverly laced with chakra and kept Neji from seeing the details of the camp he knew to be hidden within. Often during war, ninja would shape the landscape to benefit their uses.

Once everyone was position, there was only one more person missing from the battle. Neji took the three pronged kunai out of his belt, sent to him by the Hokage once he had notified her of his plans. He rubbed the black seal with his thumb and waited as the seconds dipped to the designated time.

Then Neji threw the kunai straight into the gorge. Naruto Uzumaki landed on the precarious rocks. Konoha's strongest wind user opened his eyes in sage mode, and with the kamikaze power of the divine, sent a tumult of wind crashing through the gorge. The fog gave way and cleared.

Neji smirked. So far everything was going to plan. He didn't even need to tell Kagome to charge, she took lead of her own initiative and slid down the rocks and raced downwards with a blood-thirsty cry.


"Wait."

Naruto tapped his fingers impatiently as Kakashi's fire squad charged into the gorge with a line of flames. Neji watched the camp as the Mountain ninja scrambled in confusion. Some attempted to fight back and some attempted to run as Kagome's cry came ever nearer and the signature attack of Fire Country threatened to entrap them in an environment that had once kept them safe.

"They are attempting to retreat underground. A rasengan as big as you can make it directly at the center," Neji relayed.

Naruto made a running jump into the air and formed a Rasenshuriken the size of a small sun. He aimed straight towards the middle, in between Konoha's advancing units and directly at the center of camp. He drilled and ripped into the earth, exposing the ninja attempting to escape underneath.
Dust and rocks swept in the air. Naruto landed on the ground, rolled, and threw a pair of kunai at a Mountain ninja. Naruto didn't have time to see if it connected as he created several clones. Then he craned his neck when a large shadow arced over him. He stared up at the massive size of Chouji Akimichi at the mouth of the gorge with a fiery Lee on his shoulder, making it very clear there was no path of escape on that end.

Shikamaru's voice came over the headset in Neji's ear. "Congratulations Neji, this one is yours."

Neji watched as the leaf ninja destroyed and routed the enemy at their main camp. Blood cut through his palm as he tightened his fist around the Leaf hitai-ite. "No, this is for Gai Sensei."

Tsugi was rather used to staring at blank spaces, whether it was a wall, the floor, or the ceiling. This time it was the wall. Her hands were pressed against the wooden wall as if it was the only thing keeping her aloft. A hand on her back refrained her from adjusting her balance to relieving the muscles that had even her body screaming.

As Jibachi reached the height of his momentum and continued to impale his member, Tsugi rolled her eyes and mentally counted down toward his climax. There was no point in attempting to fake an orgasm, he didn't really care how much pleasure the woman received from the act, as long as they were wet enough to get in.

As if it was a handhold, he clutched her left breast, harder and harder until he climaxed and released his load up her ass. Jibachi plucked away from her and swept his sweat soaked hair from his forehead. He watched as his sudden absence caused Tsugi to lose her balance and fall upon the floor. She cringed as she lifted and moved her leg. She kept her head bowed and asked. "Master, is there anyway else I might be able to please you?"

"No, Go and-" Jibachi paused as a bee landed in his ear. "Why the hell is he here? I haven't invited him."

Jibachi quickly dressed to greet his uninvited visitor. As he reached to slide the door open, it slammed open.

"Jibachi!" Daichi yelled. "This is your fucking fault! Haven't you heard the damn reports or have you been too busy fucking?"

"What are you talking about?!"

"The chain of mass assassinations! Kyo and Ryo are dead. Kin is dead. We've lost nine within the last week. Now our main camp has been taken by the enemy. No one has yet to realize the severity of the situation we are in. Mountain is lost and it's all your fucking fault!"

"Everyone is dead?" Jibachi asked in disbelief. "How is this my fault?"

"Kin was killed in a Kabuki theater. Ryo was killed in his home in Stone. Who else did they tell that information to but us? There is a fucking spy in your house!"

"That's impossible. I had all of their background stories checked myself, everyone is watched, and none of the girls have left the house since I have bought them."

"I don't give a shit. I'm going to kill every single one of your whores until our leak is closed." Daichi honed his sight on Tsugi cowering in the corner. "Starting with your favorite."

Tsugi screamed in fright as he twisted her hair to crane her face to look at him. His breath was a
wave of heat burning her skin. "Are you the spy?" he demanded.

"Hey wait, do you know how much money I paid for her?"

"I-I-I-" Tsugi stuttered and watched in fright as the one-armed ninja's mouth began to froth. With several seconds of spasms he dropped to the ground and died of one bee sting.

"Idiot," Jibachi answered and looked at the dead body, "to think I have a spy in my house."

And then Fox stood up behind him, with a tilt of her head. Her identity compromised. She reached behind her back to activate the seal that suppressed her chakra, and activated her byakugan. The moment her chakra flared to life Jibachi whipped his head around, and the timid and submissive expression he was familiar with, had turned into one of chilling cold.

"FUCK!" He screeched in anger and the entire house buzzed. The hive was summoned from out of the walls, outside, and out of his body, all raced towards Fox in a yellow and black mask.

"Thundering Eight Trigrams Palm Revolving chakra."

Fox rotated on her heels and the chakra released from every tenketsu in her body was laced with lightning. The barrier crackled outwards and like a bug zapper, shocked every bee that attempted to near her. When she finished the entire room was coated with burnt black bugs.

Jibachi snarled at the dead hive it took him years to breed. "You fucking bitch!"

Fox took a step, crunched broken wings underneath her feet, and struck forward. She slipped between his defenses with ease and in sweet vengeance, her palm did a straight arc towards his most prized possession.

Jibachi collapsed on impact, screaming, as he held his busted and bleeding balls in his hands. Fox stepped over him, tired of the screaming, and slammed her hand into his throat, completely cutting of his ability to breath. He died at her feet while his semen had yet to dry on her skin.

Fox frowned as her byakugan caught the sight of the remaining bees running to alert the authorities. She quickly stripped the corpse of his shirt and pants and quickly threw on clothes that allowed for better movement. Then she raced down the hall, slammed open the door to the basement, and Jyūken kicked the bars off its hinges.

Suki cowered at the shadow that loomed over, and further attempted to hide within the corner "Please, don't hurt me anymore…" from a hoarse throat. "Please, just leave me alone."

Fox reached out her hand, toward the busted black eye and broken nose, and her fingers slammed into the woman's throat. Fox caught the bloody rags in her arms and gently placed the woman to the ground.

If Fox could save her she would, but she would never be able to escape the hunter-nin carrying the extra weight. When it came down to it, in the moment, it was never about the mission, or the village, or the clan. You simply did what you had to in order to survive.

The Leaf ninja camp was caught up in the elation of victory. Everyone knew this was a momentous turning point, one step closer to finishing this war.

"Why aren't you out celebrating?" Ino asked as she leaned against the inn room. The Leaf ninja had laid claim to a nearby village and was using the space to celebrate. Ino leaned her head as Naruto
stared up at the ceiling where he had sectioned himself off. Even from inside the wooden walls, the popping of fireworks and cheers were loud.

Ino herself thought it was bad luck to celebrate too early. They still needed to seize the hidden village if Mountain refused to surrender after this loss.

"I don't feel like celebrating." Naruto told the dark ceiling above him.

Ino walked inside the room, and took only a moment to recognize that expression on Naruto's face. She has seen it in many ninja before. She sat on the edge of the bed and broke Naruto's line of sight with the ceiling as she leaned over and intruded on his space. "Do you know what your problem is Naruto? You believe that you have to be perfect, that any less than, you will disappoint those who rely on you. Everyone breaks eventually. Take the time to be selfish every once in a while."

"Leave Ino," Naruto said as a wave of killing intent brushed against Ino's face. He didn't like the way her words drilled into every tender space.

Ino reached down and whispered in Naruto's ear. "I can erase it if you want."

Naruto's attention was finally captured by the fellow blonde. To have the screams, the taste of her fear, the touch of her beaten skin, gone was tempting.

"You don't have to be strong all the time," Ino assured him.

After a strained silence, Naruto finally replied, "I can't live with myself anymore. I can't go home and see what I've become in my children's eyes. Please."

Ino hands slid through his hair and rested against each temple. It was a skill frequently demanded of her by many ninja, even more than sex. Most would kill for a little respite from their nightmares.

"My services aren't cheap. I'm not about to give away the most coveted skill of my clan away for free."

"I'll give you anything… reasonable," Naruto added last minute to hide the desperation.

"I'll hold you to that," Ino replied with her thoughts to the future. After all, she was the Yamanaka clan head, and having a favor from the prospective Hokage candidate was invaluable. Friend or foe, it was always a mind game for a Yamanaka.

"I'm going to need you to keep you furry friend at bay understand? The moment you lose control of him I'm bolting."

Naruto nodded. Ino concentrated. The next she opened her eyes she was inside of his mindscape.

Ino knew some of what to expect but the condition she found was rather worrisome. The pipes were screeching loudly and increasing in volume. The red water, which on second inspection she realized was blood came to her waist. Ino knew something was wrong, but Naruto had hid the severity of the situation. He was on the edge of a mental breakdown. She was surprised he managed to make it through the battle, which proved how resilient his mind actually was.

Ino waded through the mindscape and battled her way forward. There were several branching paths but she knew they all led to the same place. Ino had to admit, out of all the mindscapes she has ever delved in to, this one was by far the strangest.

The river of blood receded a bit and hit her thigh when she came upon the center, to a dark cage that
spanned the width of the narrow sewer. She jumped back when molten eyes and a maw slammed against the cell suddenly.

The Nine-tailed Fox grinned in a mischievous manner. Bubbling red chakra slipped out from the floor and began to creep out of the cell towards her. Ino stepped a foot backwards and placed her hands together, ready to bail.

Suddenly Naruto stepped on the red chakra and it receded back into the cage.

"I don't think you should come any closer," Naruto said honestly as he looked at Ino. "But you've got to help me. She's hurt."

Ino watched as Naruto neared, carrying a woman in his arms. Her blue hair coated his arms.

"Hinata is your defense mechanism?" Ino asked. Then again, it still wasn't as weird as Sakura's thunderous alter ego.

"Can you help her or not?" Naruto demanded, not in the mood for games.

Ino reached and checked the beaten and bloodied woman. This was not good. His defense was in no condition to protect his mind. "What have you done to yourself Naruto?"

The Kyuubi chuckled. **He's finally become the monster.**

Naruto quickly attempted to explain, "It was for the mission. It was to win the war."

Ino quickly diagnosed the situation. "After I am done here, I want you to visit your mindscape frequently and nurse Hinata back to health. It is important that you rebuild. And make love to her every once in a while."

Naruto's cheeks blushed. "But- but that's like fucking myself."

"My point exactly Naruto. You've got to learn to love yourself. Come on, take me the memory you want erased."

Naruto nodded and continued to carry Hinata in his arms, unwilling to allow the lake of blood to touch her. He led Ino down a branching hallway and stopped at the door he had sectioned off. It was an unimposing door but Ino could feel a darkness emanating from it. Ino had to admit she was curious what Naruto had done, but in order for Ino to keep her emotions out of the job she would have to forego her curiosity.

Ino went through a series of hand signs and then placed her hand on the door. Under the kekkai genkai of the Yamanaka the door disappeared. The absence of the door didn't lighten the dark and shadowed hallway. It was simply forgotten but its darkness would always remain.

The entire hallway was a mass of shadows and locked doors. She didn't have to ask to know what types of memories were kept here.

They were Naruto's regrets, mistakes, and nightmares. It was the darkness he delved deep inside to capture in order to accomplish the things he normally wouldn't have the heart to.

It was a darkness that has made him who he was.

Naruto's eyes snapped open with a deep breath. The morning was quiet and the sun leaked through
the window. He was more than a little confused when he found Ino lying atop him naked. Naruto shifted and shook her awake. "What the hell?"

"Ugh, go back to sleep," Ino muttered as she turned into the pillow.

"Ino what the hell did you do?" Naruto demanded.

Ino rolled her eyes. "I might have borrowed your body while I was in your head. Damn, your fucking senses are amazing."

Naruto sat up and counted this as one of his more surreal mornings he has ever had in his life. "Why were you in my head?" He demanded and then paused as he searched his memories. "Where is Hinata?" Naruto asked frantically.

"Really?" Ino asked. "You wake up next to me and you asked about her?"

"I-" Naruto held his head in utter horror. There was something about Hinata, but he couldn't remember. He was still angry at her wasn't he?

"You'll get over it after a while," Ino yawned. She never understood why people automatically regretted it once it was done. They get over it eventually and learn not to ask any questions. "Just remember, it's what you asked for."

Naruto snarled as he stumbled from the bed and threw on his clothes shivering. No matter how hard he tried to remember, he couldn't-

"What happened?" Naruto demanded out loud.

**Hell if I know. That bitch messed with my head.**

"*My head," Naruto corrected.

Ino watched rather bored as Naruto collapsed on the ground. He was afraid to know why he had resorted to Ino's specialty. He was afraid of himself and what he has become.

"What have I done?"

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Every day you hear the sound of battle, whether you're in the mist of it or it's in your head. Every night you watch the shadows hoping it's just a trick of your mind. And every morning, you wake up knowing some Leaf ninja wants to stab you in the back. It's the time of your life.
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Lessons Twenty-eight

Changing Tides

Naruto Uzumaki stoutly believed that the warmth of the sun's touch on his skin was the best feeling in the world. Grass softened around his feet and curled between his toes. A slight weight rested on his stomach and he could feel the lightness of his son's beating heart against his chest.

Naruto didn't flinch when Ame vaulted over him with a laugh that embodied mischief. Kusuro soon followed with honey dripping in globs down his face, leaping over Naruto, and capturing Ame in a cocoon of grass.

Then Ame disappeared in a puff of smoke.

"Agh! What is with this family and shadow clones?!" Kusuro yelled as he scoured the grassy hill.

The Uzumaki family decided to take advantage of the warm day of a waning winter. It couldn't have been a more perfect day for a picnic.

Tomu laid out the food across the picnic blanket, taking extra care to stack the sandwiches perfectly, arrange the fruits, and spread the chips. If he showed as much viciousness against the ants as he did in his training, he would be a terrifying ninja.

Naruto laughed when he peeked over and Tomu crushed a line of ants in quick succession. "The ants have to eat too."

"I did not make food for them," Tomu complained.

"But what about when Mushi gets here?" Naruto asked.

"First off, Mushi's beetles do not steal my food and-" Tomu dropped the juices and the sandwiches towered over. Naruto reached out and grabbed one. "You invited Mushi?!"

"Yeah, what's wrong with that? I figured since she was back she'd like to join us."

"You can't invite her," Tomu argued.

Naruto frowned after he shoved the sandwich into his mouth. "Why not? I thought you two were going out or something."

A blush came across Tomu's cheeks and he actually generated a small amount of killing intent, which only succeeded in amusing Naruto.

"Mind explaining to me what I did wrong?" Naruto asked.

"Ugh, I blew it okay?" Tomu said angrily. "The night we umm," Tomu's entire face grew as red as the apple he was holding. "It didn't go so well. She probably never wants to see me again."

"Tomu," Naruto said seriously, all joking aside. "She's been through a lot. You are not about to hurt her because you're scared. Believe me, being too scared to face them only makes it worse. Man up and talk to her."

"I don't know what to say," Tomu whispered.
"Well," Naruto scrunched his eyebrows and realized just how hard this was. "I just kind of... go with it."

"That is the worst advice you have ever given," Tomu grumbled.

Naruto had never planned out a conversation, no matter how tough it was. He was always better in the pressure of the moment, which didn't always work to his advantage. "For what it's worth, my first attempted try, I almost killed the girl."

"That makes me feel a lot better," Tomu said sarcastically.

"Better about what?" Ame asked as she topped the hill atop Kusuro's back.

"Nothing," Naruto quickly replied as Kusuro dropped Ame and she landed on the picnic blanket.

"I definitely do not want to have any siblings," Kusuro said rather adamantly as he crossed his arms.

"Don't you love me Nii-chan?" Ame pouted as she clutched his leg.

"I woke up this morning with bows in my hair," Kusuro complained. Ame gave him a look of unbridled innocence.

"I don't like picnics. They're boring," Kusuro complained. "Can't we train or something?"

"We are training," Naruto yawned and stretched like a cat. "Relaxation strengthens your spiritual energy."

"You just made that up. I've never learned that in school."

"You're questioning the strongest ninja in the world?" Naruto asked, hiding a grin. He watched as Kusuro groaned and then collapsed on the ground in the grass. He blew out a frustrated breath.

"Ame, you can't bite a sandwich and put it back," Tomu complained.

All Kusuro wanted to do was train. He didn't like to take the time to pause and think about how his life had changed so drastically. "Naruto," Kusuro said as soft as the wind through grass. "Do you know when my mom is coming home?"

"I don't know," Naruto answered honestly.

Konoha was slowly returning to normal. Chouza and Tsume's unit were laying siege to Mountain's hidden village, and what Naruto understood from the Hokage's explanation, a siege was a long and lengthy process but hardly required as many ninja out in the field.

But Kagome had decided to stay on the front until this war was officially over. Kagome had ghosts to confront before she could even entertain the idea of settling down. Naruto sure wasn't the person to criticize someone's ghosts.

Naruto didn't warn Tomu when he sensed Mushi coming up the hill.

"Nee-san!" Ame exclaimed. After Ame slid down from a hug, Mushi and Tomu exchanged a furtive glance.

Tomu had stumbled to his feet, quickly deflected his eyes and stared intently at the grass. "I um- you know... I'm really sorry and-" Tomu's voice faltered when Mushi neared him with a weak smile, then fell into his arms, breaking down in tears.
"Hey," Tomu whispered and pressed his face against the side of her hood. He didn't even mind when her beetles came out to greet him and tickled his skin.

When Mushi's tears subsided, she further pulled her hood over her face, as if it could protect her from the sudden rush of emotions.

Naruto reached over toward the pouch of water they had brought for the picnic, upended it, and water fell glistening into the grass. Then he threw the empty pouch at Tomu. "Go get some more water."

"Very subtle," Tomu grumbled as he slung it over his shoulder. The two teenagers caught the obvious hint. Mushi reluctantly followed and they walked towards the river. She held herself inwardly, keeping her long sleeves tucked to her body. The sun didn't touch her skin.

"I heard you hurt your leg," Tomu said softly.

"It's better now." But the rest was left unsaid. She didn't limp anymore. It wasn't serious enough to end her ninja career. It wasn't pretty to look at.

They approached the river and Tomu kicked a rock into the water. "I'm glad you're safe." There was awkwardness in the silence. "While everyone was gone, I've been thinking… everyone is putting their lives on the line and that maybe, perhaps… the sharingan, it could protect people right?"

Mushi's head snapped up. Her hood hid the horror on her face. "No, I don't want you to become a ninja. You have a choice. I never did. An Aburame knows their path in life the moment we are chosen by a hive. I knew since I was a baby I was going to live and die a ninja. You have no idea what it means."

"I know what it means," Tomu said angrily. "You didn't see the way Naruto looked when he finally came back home. He cried. It hurts because I know he's doing it for us. It's not fair that the entire village expects him to protect everyone. They only see him as the hero who will get anything done. They don't see him at night when he comes home, they don't see. No one comprehends how much he sacrifices because he loves this village."

Tomu watched the flow of the river, which winded around Konoha and eventually found its purpose to the sea. "A ninja means sacrifice."

"I don't want to watch you grow hard and bitter and angry."

Tomu scoffed, "I'm already bitter and angry."

"Not all the time," Mushi whispered. "Not with me."

Tomu blushed as he looked away. Mushi reached and dared to place her hand in his. They savored the touch. "Tomu, be my boyfriend," the Aburame demanded.

Tomu gave her a startled look. "But I'm just a street rat and I've never finished school or anything-"

"I do not understand how any of that matters."

"It matters. What would your family say?"

"I do not understand why they would say anything. If you are worried about meeting my father I can assure he will me amiable. He already knows about you, your background, and our tryst."
"Your dad knows all that stuff?" Tomu blanched.

"Of course he does, he's my dad," Mushi explained patiently. "He just wants me to be happy." Mushi pulled her hood from her face. The sun danced on her skin and lit her smoky eyes. She looked at Tomu with a smile, "and you make me happy Tomu Uzumaki."

Then Tomu wrapped his girlfriend in his arms and savored every touch of her skin, every smile on her lips, and every moment that they had. Because in a world of ninja, you never know.

His light brunette hair was slicked back and tucked neatly behind his ears. His glasses hid the laugh lines at the corner of his eyes. His natural scent was a fresh breath of cinnamon and had an easy smile.

"Wow, I admit I was really nervous to meet you Uzumaki. I've heard so much about you." The man bumped against the corner of the table as he attempted to bow, and then quickly reached to shake Naruto's hand in his nervousness. His palm was soft in comparison to Naruto's rough calloused hands.

"Nice to meet you too," Naruto greeted amiably. "If you've got ramen on the menu that would be perfect. No salt, please."

Sakura groaned as she placed her head in her hands. In the first few seconds, Sakura knew this meeting was going to be a disaster. "I told you to bring the kids."

"Yeah, but I thought-" Naruto noticed the difficult expression on Sakura's face. She wasn't dressed up, but wore a comfortable loose dress with flats. Then Naruto realized stupidly that this wasn't a date.

"Naruto," Sakura said gently. Naruto's expression grew more perplexed when Sakura slid her hand down the arm of the person who Naruto assumed was the waiter and grabbed his hand. "I want you to meet Kohei Uchimura, my fiancée."

Naruto sucked in a constricting breath.

"Your what?"

"I know this might seem a little sudden," Kohei attempted to explain but was completely brushed to the side when Naruto moved him out the way as if rearranging the room.

"He's my fiancée Naruto. We are going to get married," Sakura explained as if to a child.

"Is this some kind of damn joke?" Naruto demanded. His rising voice caught the attention of everyone in the restaurant. Before they were asked to leave, Sakura quickly snatched Naruto's shirt and dragged him outside to the soft patters of rain on the ground.

"No, this isn't a joke. I am serious. Look, he's really nervous about meeting you and he hasn't even met Ino yet. I was hoping you'd be the easy one."

"But fiancée Sakura? Kiba isn't even three months dead yet. You're not thinking straight. You're taking this way too fast."

"No, I am tired of people thinking that I'm crazy just because Kiba is dead. I know exactly what I am doing. This war is winding down and I want a family."
"But you can't love him."

"Love is overrated." Sakura shrugged, dismissing the word as nothing more than myth.

"But this isn't right!" Naruto insisted. "You're disrespecting Kiba's memory and-" A slap suddenly popped in the air, and a slap from Sakura meant Naruto suddenly found himself stuck to the ground. "Don't you dare think you have the balls to tell me how I should respect Kiba's memory!" Sakura snapped at him. "You listen to me Uzumaki, you are going to go in there, you are going to sit down, and you going to act like your fucking happy for me!"

"This is insane Sakura!" Naruto yelled as he stood. He gave her a frustrated expression as rain dripped down the corners of his frown. He asked softly, "What about us?"

Sakura's expressions softened. "There was never an us."

"I just thought since," Naruto shrugged his shoulders, attempting to capture the right words. "We're best friends and we've known each other for a long time and we get along well, I thought it made sense. I was willing to wait however long you needed, but this- I don't understand."

"We were never going to work the same reasons why Kiba and I weren't going to work. You're a ninja Naruto and that's not what I'm looking for. I've tried that route and I've been hurt enough times to know it's not what I want. I want safe and I don't care if that means I settle for the next best thing."

Naruto sucked in a disheartened breath. "Look at him, he can't even protect you."

"I don't need anyone to protect me Naruto. Kohei is a good guy. I want someone to come home to at night when I get home from work or a mission. That is all I want," Sakura bit her lip. "I want this Naruto."

Naruto placed his hands in the pockets of his sage cloak. He should have known it was never going to work. He knew what he felt for Sakura had turned platonic over the years. He was just wanted something.

"Would you please come inside and try to be nice to him? Besides, I'm starving."

"Alright," Naruto finally agreed. "I'll try."

Sakura's face brightened and eagerly shoved Naruto into the restaurant. They found their food already waiting for them on the table.

Kohei smiled nervously. "I hope you don't mind. I already went ahead and ordered for you. I seem to remember you wanted ramen."

"Yeah thanks," Naruto grumbled as he sat down. Sakura kicked Naruto's leg as he sat down. Sakura kicked Naruto's leg on the way to her chair. "And I'm sorry about earlier."

"It's no problem. I was forewarned," Kohei assured him, when there was an awkward pause, he continued to keep the conversation alive. "You should have seen the list of things she gave me to prepare. Do not say anything negative about ramen, do not wear any cologne, do not grumble, do not..." His voice wound down when he noticed Sakura's threatening expression. "I hope I'm doing good so far," he peeped.

Naruto shrugged his shoulders. "Well, we haven't gotten very far. How did you two meet because I have never seen you around before, ever."
Kohei gulped. "Well-" Then he accidently knocked over his cup of water and Sakura nonchalantly reached to catch it.

"We've known each other for years, Naruto." Sakura answered. "He owns a small business that I commission to create my custom medical tools."

"And how come you haven't gotten married before now?"

Kohei coughed into his napkin, taken aback by the sudden personal question. "I suffer from a medical condition that has made relationships sort of difficult."

Naruto looked at Sakura in alarm. "Medical condition? What medical condition?"

"None of your business Naruto," Sakura snapped.

"But-"

"It's not life-threatening," Kohei assured him. "It's rather embarrassing actually. On another note, I hear you have children?"

Naruto didn't miss the way the man changed the subject. Naruto didn't answer and turned to Sakura. "And Ino hasn't met him?"

"No," Sakura admitted. "She hasn't gotten in from the war yet."

"You do realize she's going to tear him apart and have him weeping in seconds?"

"Naruto I would appreciate it if you stop scaring him. Ino isn't that frightening." Sakura said as she patted Kohei on the arm.

Kohei grumbled under his breath, and Naruto's ears caught his tossed away comment, "That's what you said about Uzumaki."

Suddenly Sakura frowned as she held a napkin to her mouth. "Excuse me I'm going to go to the bathroom. Naruto, be nice." She quickly said before she rushed from the table.

The silence was deafening.

Kohei's nervousness showed through every motion, how he stirred his chopsticks through the noodles, the drops of sweat down his neck, the way he deflected his eyes. A ninja would never give away emotions so easily.

Then it truly dawned on Naruto that this man had never killed anyone in his life, never felt blood on his skin.

"So," Kohei said slowly. "That's an odd scar you have there. I've never seen anything heal like that before."

The chair screeched back. "Tell Sakura I'm sorry, I can't."

"Wait was it something I said?"

Naruto didn't blame Sakura. He wouldn't want someone as tainted as himself either. Naruto placed his hands in his pockets and walked out of the restaurant into the rain.
"Free ramen!" Ame yelled. Naruto hefted the large pot of ramen onto the table, which groaned at the weight. It was Saturday morning and time for the Uzumaki's clan's weekly community service project, sponsored by Ichiraku Ramen.

"Thank you so much," An elderly woman replied, as she led her tiny grandchildren to the line. They were grass refugees and came to Konoha with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

"Of course," Naruto grinned brightly and whispered as if it was a secret, "I'm on a mission to officially make Saturday ramen day."

The old woman chuckled. "Bless you."

Her two grandsons peeked over the table and grabbed the warm bowl of ramen. Tomu handed them as he served the portions. Tomu usually did all the hard work, attempting to keep up as the line grew longer, while Naruto had a habit of getting caught up talking to people.

"I never noticed how many refugees there were," Mushi replied. She was attending the community service event for the first time and helping Tomu serve the meals.

"No one really does," Tomu explained as more people joined the line for food or for the rare opportunity to talk with the Great Naruto Uzumaki. The crowd gathered, helped by Kusuro's effort who knocked on people's doors and gathered people from the street. He was well-known among the grass community of refugees.

"Ame, ramen!" Tomu shouted. Ame saluted and sprinted toward Ichiraku's where more pots of hot ramen were waiting.

Naruto never turned anyone away. He gave food to the construction workers who were working nearby, to the homeless, to the unclean, or to anyone walking by, with a smile on his face. Naruto felt compelled to give back.

"Great," Tomu grumbled when he noticed a messenger ANBU on the roof of the closest building.

"No skipping," Naruto chided when the ANBU dropped down.

"The Hokage requires your attention."

Naruto knew if the Hokage hadn't called him by his tattoo, it wasn't urgent. "Ramen?" Naruto asked.

"I'll pass."

Naruto suddenly threw a bowl of ramen in the ANBU direction and the ninja instinctively caught it. Naruto grinned, "I'll be there eventually."

"Sometimes you're worse than Kakashi," Tsunade rolled her eyes when Naruto finally arrived in the office. "That's why I always have to tell you hours ahead of time."

"First of all, I'm on vacation. I was under the impression that for at least the next couple of weeks I was not on your leash," Naruto replied.

"I know and I apologize but this mission is literally one no one else can do."

Naruto pouted, scattered the papers on the floor as he sat on her desk. He sighed. "What is it?"

"I've lost all contact with all our spies in Kirigakure. There has been some civil unrest but as of two
weeks ago, the country was completely locked down. I'm very worried that whatever is going on can reach a level more serious than Mountain. I am sending you to Kirigakure under the cover of conducting a marriage alliance between you and the Mizukage in order to find out what really is going on."

"So I'm not killing anyone?" Naruto asked.

"No. Just make appearances with the Mizukage and gather what information you can." Tsunade handed him a mission debriefing. "The details of a few people you can get in contact with are in there."

"This actually sounds rather easy. I'm surprised the Mizukage agreed to this."

"I am too. Quite honestly I was grabbing at straws for any excuse to get someone in the country. Agreeing to entertain what she knows is a farce means she wants something. I'm curious to know what she's up to."

Naruto slid from the desk with the folder in hand.

"And Naruto..." Tsunade pursed her lips and folded her hands, then said with resolved calm. "I know how Mei operates. Don't let her seduce you, Don't fall into her trap. Can I trust you to do that? I know you've had relations with her in the past."

Naruto knew how the game was played by now. "I won't do anything stupid that will endanger Konoha."

"That wasn't a no, Naruto."

Her breath landed across his ear like a wind at sea and every time he pivoted forward was an inch closer.

"Uzumaki..." Mei Terumi panted, her hands stuck to the slickness of golden skin, her legs tightened around his waist like an embrace. One perfect thrust, that greeted her sex-starved loins, sent her over the edge. The pulsing began at the tip of her toes and continued as the walls of her vagina massaged the welcome visitor.

Naruto breathed through his nose with a hitch, fought through the tide threatening to take him over, and continued to pound at her shore. His tongue lapped at the salty skin of her breasts and demanded more from the woman who had dominated him before.

The exhaustion that began to etch into Mei's face quickly dissolved as she was turn over, without severing their connection, Naruto's arm hooked around her leg and his hand was granted better access to her clit. Mei's hold on his hair, his arm, the sheets, tightened as she was assaulted from two fronts.

"Uzumaki!" Mei screamed as a second orgasm struck her like the force of a typhoon. Naruto was drowned in her wetness that demanded him to pull home and finally dock. Naruto conceded, thrust forward deep, hitting against the back of her cervix and in turn, drowned her body in his warmth and fluids.

"You've certainly gotten better at this," Mei noted when Naruto pulled out and left behind an emptiness.

"Lots of practice," Naruto admitted. In the last few months, he was more likely to deal with stress
through sex than his usual method of training till he dropped from exhaustion. The adrenaline was higher, the sensations were better, and it was more satisfying. He either found a partner through Anko or any kunoichi willing in the ANBU underground and most were always willing after a mission. Often times, it was nothing but masks and naked bodies bumping against each other.

They both lay back in the bed, flushed with red, attempting to recover from the rendezvous.

"Why am I here Mei Terumi?" Naruto asked, as he stared at the domed ceiling above him, decorated with elaborate paintings of ships swallowed by the sea.

"To negotiate a marriage alliance, obviously."

Naruto turned to the woman beside him, who no doubt trusted him any less than he trusted her.

"Must we play this game? You and I both know that if a marriage alliance should occur between Konoha and Kiri, it won't be between us. Is honesty too much to ask for?"

Ninjas lie, to protect their mission, their village, but ultimately themselves.

"You are here because your dear grandmother sent you here to spy on my village," Mei answered.

Naruto turned and arced over the Mizukage who watched his every move. There was a kunai underneath her pillow. His lips traveled down her skin. Her breasts courted gravity. Scars decorated her seasoned body like jewelry.

"You are wrong. I am here to convince you to marry me."

Naruto searched for water between her legs. She called his name as she arched her body further into his mouth, wanting to be pleased.

If she was going to play this game, he could play it too.

A shadow clone traveled through the Village Hidden in Mist under the darkness of midnight. It was a difficult village to navigate if you were an unwanted guest. The mist obscured the sight of any buildings until you were close enough to walk into it. The village was not bound by land and entire neighborhoods were often built on top the water.

But was what curious and immediately caught the clone's attention, was that there were no civilians wandering the streets at night. Ninja patrolled the streets and more security than Naruto thought was necessary guarded the village's borders.

There was certainly something going on in Kirigakure.

Nothing seemed amiss in the early morning. Fishermen were already out on the water. Children took advantage of their weekend off from school and were already chasing each other around the village. Businesses were opening, prepared to barter their way into a profit.

Mei was giving Naruto a tour of Kirigakure but Naruto was under no illusions that she was only doing it to watch him.

"Does it ever get sunny?" Naruto asked. So far he had spied only a sliver of sun through the mist but the rest were varied shades of grey. It was cool but his clothing already seemed drenched by the dampness.
"This is a normal day," Mei explained with her hands wrapped around his arm. Naruto didn't miss the way her breasts would push against his bicep. With a constructed smile she pointed, "And over there is the Academy where our children will graduate after you move to Kirigakure."

Naruto replied coolly, "You should see the room I have prepared for them when you move to Konoha."

Naruto could see the annoyance behind her smile. Naruto had to admit he was having too much fun at this charade. "How many children do you think we should have?"

"One or two," Mei answered. "A boy and a girl."

"I already have two children but I wouldn't mind two more," Naruto answered truthfully.

Mei suddenly stopped and gave Naruto a flustered look. "I thought that was just rumors. You really do have two children?"

Naruto chuckled. "I adopted them. Ame and Ichigo."

"Why would you adopt?" Mei asked. "They can't carry on your bloodline."

"Why not? Everyone needs a home."

Mei stopped in front of a small beach house built along the shore. "Uzumaki, can we stop pretending while we are visiting? I don't want to get their hopes up."

"Who said I was pretending?" Naruto asked. When Mei dropped her smile, Naruto quickly nodded and agreed he would stop.

Mei walked into the house without knocking but did not surprise the pregnant young woman cooking in the kitchen.

"Is that you Mei? Breakfast is almost ready."

"I've brought a guest," Mei said before she reached the woman and kissed her on both cheeks. "This is Uzumaki Naruto. Naruto, this is my younger sister, Bai."

Bai turned with a startled gasp. "Oh wow, Mei. He's hot."

Naruto chuckled. "Thanks? You're stunning yourself."

"And he's charming. Please tell me this is what you call a date?"

"Sorry to disappoint. Naruto is a rather celebrity in the ninja world. I'm his chaperone while he's visiting Kiri."

"I didn't know ninja had celebrities," Bai said impressed. "What do you have to do to get that sort of status?"

Mei looked at Naruto awkwardly. Win a few wars, hold a demon, and kill a lot of people, but Mei decided not to say that. "It's ninja stuff. I'll go wake up the boys," Mei said as Bai motioned Naruto to sit at the table in the other room.

"Thanks for the breakfast," Naruto said eagerly.

Bai sniggered. "It was the only way you were going to eat. Mei can't cook at all. Have her in the
kitchen for more than a few minutes and you're sure to get a fire."

Naruto smiled and watched as Mei ushered twin boys to the table, who sat down on the floor with grumpy expressions. "These are my nephews," Mei introduced. "Boys, this is Naruto Uzumaki."

The twins snapped awake. "The Naruto Uzumaki?!

"The very one," Naruto answered and watched as Mei and Bai walked from the kitchen and set the food onto the table.

"They say you can turn into a giant fox demon."

Bai paused when she entered the room and chided, "No ninja conversation at the table, mind your manners."

"Good morning, Mei."

Naruto turned when a man walked into the house with a fishing pole slung over his shoulder. He slipped off his sandals and leaned the pole against the wall.

"That's my husband Ko," Bai introduced.

When everyone was sitting at the table, an eager, "Itadakimasu" rang out through the room and everyone moved for the food. Naruto took a bite and soured when he got a taste full of salt.

"Do you like it?" Bai asked enthusiastically.

Not wanting to be a bad guest and not willing to admit he had diet restrictions to the Mizukage, Naruto nodded his head and swallowed. It couldn't hurt him this once.

"So how would you feel about dating my sister Mei?" Bai confronted Naruto eagerly.

"Bai, I can take care of myself."

"Obviously not, your biological clock is ticking! You need to start popping out babies or it will be too late."

Mei had accustomed to wearing long bangs for these moments in particular where she needed some place to hide. "Can we please get through breakfast once without getting into my dating life?"

"See you later Aunt Mei." In seconds the twins had finished eating and were racing each other outside.

"Don't go too far out!" Bai yelled and then turned back to the table, picking up her conversation as if she had never left. "Please tell me she hasn't slept with you yet?" Naruto avoided her gaze and focused on the food on his plate. "Mei! You can't expect to keep a man if you keep giving it up the first night. It's not respectable of a woman."

"Do we have to do this now when we have company?" Mei asked exasperated.

The husband drank his tea, rather familiar with the conversation.

"I'm telling you, if you want to keep a man, you've got to make him chase it." Bai was undeniably the only person who could criticize the Mizukage's love life and live. Family can get away with a lot of things.
"Right honey?" Bai asked her husband.

Ko nodded into his newspaper. "Yes, babe, I chased that ass."

"See? And now I'm popping out babies. It's that easy."

"It's not that easy," Mei sighed and refrained from using the old 'You're not a ninja' adage. It was hard to date when you couldn't trust the person you slept with, and even harder to trust when an entire village's protection was dependent on the secrets you kept.

"Naruto, would you marry my sister?"

Naruto grinned, looked over at Mei who shook her head. "Yes, but I don't think its going to work between us. We're from two different villages."

"So, just move here," Bai said as if it was simple.

"We're from two different hidden villages," But Naruto saw she didn't understand what that meant either. "I can't just move and uproot my entire family." But that was the easy answer. The hard one was an answer Naruto could not express in words. He couldn't leave Konoha. At this point, he's invested too much, given too much to Konoha to turn back now.

"I see," Bai said sadly, "and I'm sorry to say Mei loves that big hat of hers to go anywhere else. A shame, I think you two would have made a cute couple."

Mei emptied her plate. "I have meetings to attend at the tower. I was wondering if Ko would take Naruto out on the water?"

"Hmm," Ko answered.

Mei got up and pointed at Naruto. "I'll be back to pick you up in a few hours." Naruto didn't need to be told he was being watched.

After breakfast, Naruto went out in the boat with Ko and dropped a fishing line. He sat back against the boat and watched Kiragakure come alive. Fishermen were checking nets, academy students were mock fighting, and civilian and ninja alike, enjoyed the cool day on the misty water.

It hadn't been a hard task to slip away from Ko unnoticed, who had fallen asleep in the first several minutes. It was even easier to lose the ANBU Mei had ordered to babysit him. These ANBU had no idea the difficulty of the task handed to them.

Naruto was henged in an outfit similar to the civilians and continued to Kirigakure's market. He stopped in front of one of the many fish stalls. A green piece of cloth winded around one of the poles.

Naruto looked over the merchant's selection. "Do you have anything flame-broiled?"

The merchant nodded, prepared a piece of raw fish and packaged it for Naruto. When Naruto walked away he searched the package and found directions to a location scrawled across the paper.

Naruto navigated the dampness of Kiri until he sat down on a bench. The bench overlooked the Academy grounds vacated by the weekend. Five minutes later a man, different from the merchant, sat down beside Naruto.

"I never really liked the snow," Naruto responded nonchalantly, hoping this was the contact.
"But you can make snowmen out of mist," The contact replied. The man looked around, searching.

"There are no other chakra signatures in the vicinity," Naruto assured him.

The contact relaxed. "I'm surprised Konoha managed to get someone inside. They've set up checkpoints along the road and increased security. I've been afraid to send out any message at the risk of compromising my cover."

"Do you have any idea what's going on?" Naruto questioned.

"It is my opinion that Kirigakure is on the verge of a civil war."

"But it seems rather peaceful."

"The Mizukage has done a good job of keeping it largely hidden from the civilians but they've become anxious since she's established the curfew. There are a group of rebels attempting to overthrow her, not exactly new for Kiri but could be a problem for Konoha considering limited options in succession since Terumi's heir apparent, Chojuro was killed at the exams."

"What can you tell me about these rebels?"

"I haven't had personal contact with them because so far they seem to confine their activities to the ninja. They've certainly proven to be a thorn in the Mizukage's side. Because of them Mist ninja have gone missing and Terumi has already survived two assassination attempts."

"What do they want?"

The contact frowned, rubbed his hand together as if a nervous fishermen searching for signs of the weather. "They want to bring back the Bloody Mist."

Naruto could feel the unsettled dread in his stomach. The last thing Konoha needed was a Bloody Mist while they were still finishing business with Mountain. Not to mention, Mist was a Great Country and undeniably a greater enemy. No one in history has ever successfully attacked the Hidden Village of Mist. It was located on an archipelago surrounded on all sides by water, hidden in mist, and protected by prestigious water elemental users. Mist has always fallen from the inside, not the outside.

"Perhaps Konoha needs to intervene."

"Mist could use the help but the moment Leaf ninja show up in numbers you'll have ninja who don't believe in the Bloody Mist ideal joining the fight against you. Once the situation has become so extreme that a Kage needs foreign ninja to secure the village, it's already over. Mist is lost."

Now that Naruto knew what was going on, he of course needed to do something about it.

Mei Terumi crumpled the paper in her fist, tossed it to the floor, then stomped towards her office. Since the day Ao and Chojuro died, she's literally been living in a nest of sharks. She couldn't trust her own ninja, she couldn't trust her advisors, she couldn't trust anyone. She never knew who was in allegiance with the rebels. Before the exams it was just one person. Afterwards, treachery has spread through her ranks like a debilitating disease.

Then molten lava covered the room when Mei whipped around. It hardened against the melted wall. She could have sworn-
"I just came by for a visit."

Mei cursed as she turned to find Naruto sitting in her Kage's chair.

"Where are the ANBU that are supposed to be following you?" Mei demanded. This was absolutely not acceptable.

"Probably following one of several shadow clones," Naruto answered and then said more seriously, "You need to be more careful. I could have assassinated you."

Mei scowled. Now she had Leaf spies in her village.

"What are you going to do about these rebels?"

"None of your business," Mei replied as she leaned to snatched the papers from her desk and tuck them from his view. Naruto leaned back and didn't make any effort to look at the documents.

"Mei, Konoha isn't going to sit back and watch. We can't afford a civil war if you lose."

"I don't care what Konoha thinks." Mei replied after she stashed everything in a drawer. "Now get out of my seat."

Naruto spun around in the chair and looked at the scenery through the window as a school of orange fish swam by. The Kage's office was completely submerged under water which colored the room in fluorescent blue.

"Konoha is going to get involved in your affairs and it's up to you to decide if we are going to help each other or not."

"Konoha steps one foot into my village and I'll see they never step out," Mei threatened. "I do not want Konoha's help."

"What about my help?" Naruto suggested. "You have to trust me a little to have allowed me here."

Mei slammed her hands on the armrests of the chair and stopped Naruto's spinning. She leaned into Naruto's face with a crooked smile. "You are only here because I need something from you, no more."

Naruto sighed. "What I had in mind isn't going to be successful without your help. I wanted to infiltrate your ANBU and gather information. All I need is for you to give me a mask."

"Don't you think I already have people on the inside of ANBU?" Mei questioned. "Second, to infiltrate my ANBU underground you're going to have to know how to hold your breath underwater for at least two hours. Without Kiri's secret underwater breathing technique it is impossible for you to infiltrate my ANBU and I am not sharing that secret with you."

Naruto could imagine how much a technique like that protected the village. With a sigh he realized that any attempts to help would have to be without Mei's knowledge or he was going to have to find a way to earn her trust.

Naruto looked up into the eyes of the woman adorned with the large hat and white cloak of Kiri. She wasn't Gaara who trusted him without question. Mei and Naruto were allies, but they could easily become enemies. Kiri was willing to trust Konoha when it came to teaming up against outside enemies but not when dealing with their own internal affairs.
"Is there anything I can do to earn your trust?"

"You can start off by being where you are supposed to be and stop sending my ANBU off on a wild goose chase." Mei responded as she straightened and crossed her arms. "Second, the spy in my village who told you these things? What is his identity?"

Naruto's eyes hardened. "And what are you going to do to him?"

"Kill him of course," Mei smiled as she leaned over, displaying her cleavage and trailed her finger down his shirt, "I do not tolerate spies. Give up your contact and perhaps I'll start trusting you more."

"You know I can't do that," Naruto answered.

Mei snapped away as if the touch suddenly burned. She moved away from her desk and stared out of her window, to her unrivaled domain of the sea. "Then leave, I was wrong to call you here."

"Mei," Naruto left the chair and crept behind her, placing his arms around her waist. "I'm supposed to be visiting for a week. If I leave too early what would everyone think of the state of our alliance?"

He asked.

"I don't care," Mei answered. "Everything is all going to shit anyways."

"You don't really want me to leave," Naruto attempted to convince her.

Mei turned in his arms, looked up into the piercing blue of his eyes. "And why would I want you to stay?"

Naruto gave a stunning grin before he leaned in to kiss her. "I haven't given up trying to make you my wife."

Mei pulled away, tasting him when he swiped her tongue along her lips. Sometimes the charade was easier than the truth and Mei was willing to play along a little more.

Naruto pulled her up to his hips and carried her to the desk where he eagerly stripped her off her clothes until she wore nothing more than the white Kage's robe. The ANBU monitoring the office placed a much needed obscurity and silence jutsu on the room.

"Will you be on your best behavior and stay here?" Mei asked after she spread the purple pastel along her lips. Naruto watched in curiosity from the bed as she stared closely into the mirror and lined her eyes in black.

"But who is going to protect you?"

"My ANBU," Mei said obviously. "Besides, I am the Mizukage of Kirigakure. If I can't protect myself then I deserve to get assassinated."

Naruto pouted. "I won't listen in on anything important. I just don't feel-"

"Naruto, I'll be right back. Then we'll go over my sister's house for dinner," Mei answered as she finished her make-up. "Are you this overbearing with all the women you sleep with?"

"No," Naruto answered. Naruto did not consider himself as overbearing at all, just protective. There was nothing wrong with that. "I could just send a shadow clone-"

"Naruto," Mei interrupted. "Don't try my patience."
"Alright, fine, I'll stay."

After fretting over every new wrinkle, Mei stood from the mirror, her heels tapped against the glass floor. She walked across the two swirling sharks that patrolled the waters underneath the glass. Mei Terumi left her house.

Naruto stayed still until he sensed her leave. Then he climbed out of bed. Naruto got dressed and then paused. Naruto sniffed through his pants until he reached his tool belt and smelled Mei's scent all over it.

She had gone through his stuff while he was asleep. Naruto cursed, he admitted he had let his guard down after the several other times they've slept together. He went through all of his items to make sure they were there but felt a sense of dread when a scroll was missing. It was the only scroll he carried locked with a seal.

Naruto decided barging in during a council meeting was the wrong time to confront her about it. He was going to have to wait until she came back. Naruto climbed through a window of the house and when he reached the roof, two ANBU stepped in his path.

"Want to talk?" Naruto asked as he crossed his arms and leaned against the railing.

The ANBU looked at one another. "You think we're going to talk with you just because you're fucking the Mizukage?"

"No. By the way, what happened to the two that were following me around a few days ago?"

"She had them killed," The ANBU answered.

"Oh," Naruto sighed, "Look, I won't run off and get you guys in trouble if you sit and keep me company. Do you play cards?" Naruto asked.

Shrimp and Piranha silently conceded that it would be cool to say they beat the Naruto Uzumaki at cards. They certainly didn't want Uzumaki running away because they knew they wouldn't be able to catch him.

"Do you know how to play goldfish?" Piranha asked as he sat down and shuffled the cards.

"You're going to have to teach me that one," Naruto answered. Sometimes he wondered how he managed to talk his way into things, like a card game with two Kirigakure ANBU.

"What do you two think about these rebels and assassinations? Do you guys really want a return to the Bloody Mist?"

"We did get paid better," Piranha answered. "The leader of the rebels claims to be a new coming of the Seven Swordsmen."

Shrimp scoffed. "Those fools know nothing about the age of the Seven Swordsmen. No one claiming to be one, is one."

"Well, Mizukage-sama sure hasn't announced a new Swordsmen of her own."

"Who the fuck do we have right now to be one?" Shrimp asked angrily. "Mist isn't what it used to be. That's why those fools are chasing the Bloody Mist ideal. They want the old glory back."

"What if this guy really is good enough to be a Swordsmen?" Naruto asked curiously.
"If he's that strong, if he's the real deal," Shrimp shook his head. "Then the Mizukage doesn't have a chance. I've spent a few years spying in Konoha and the difference between our villages could be night and day. In Konoha your clans share power with the Hokage. In Kiri, it is the Swordsmen that share power with the Mizukage. They are the power, they are the respect, a good team of swordsmen faithful to the Kage is the only thing that can keep Kiri together for so long. I knew this day was going to come, it was only a matter of time."

"So you don't care if Mei dies or not?"

"Mizukage-sama," Shrimp corrected.

Piranha answered, "An assassination, a coup, a mutiny, its not exactly anything new. Peace never lasts in Kirigakure. Unrest is like a storm. You can prepare for one but trying to fight it will only get you washed out to sea. Most ANBU are rather ambivalent. It's a force of nature that would be pointless to stop. Kiri has been through so many upheavals one more would hardly matter."

Then the air shook with a violent noise. Naruto turned in alarm as smoke began to waft from the direction of the Kage's building.

Naruto dropped his cards and raced towards the fallen ruins of the left side of the building. ANBU were attempting to throw off the rubble. Naruto helped with ease, digging towards the chakra signatures he sense underneath. When he arrived and hit a hardened hump of molten lava, he knocked on it. The ground crumbled and Mei coughed as she brushed the dust from her face.

"The council elders," she coughed, "Get them out."

"Mei, I don't sense anymore chakra signatures. They're dead."

"Fuck," She screamed. Naruto could feel the dangerous heat coming off her as he helped Mei to her feet. She turned to her ANBU. "I want every single one of the ANBU that were guarding the tower today in front of me this instant."

Seven ANBU lined up in front of Mei. Naruto realized too late what she was intending to do. With a terrifying smile, Mei Terumi breathed a stream of lava from her mouth and the ANBU before her was drowned in heat.

"Next time, I'm killing all of you." Mei spat and then turned on her heels angrily.

"What was that?!" Naruto demanded as he followed.

"There is nothing that motivates people more than fear. Next time, they'll try a little harder to protect me."


Mei stopped and turned to Naruto. "Who are you to determine how I should run my country, Fox Demon of Konoha?"

Naruto frowned at the spiteful nickname. He wanted to argue and yell at her that it was wrong but he simply placed his hands in the pockets of his cloak. He's done worse.

When the Mizukage was angry she went for a swim. It had taken several shadow clones until he came across her chakra signature and even then he couldn't hold his breath long enough to find her in the water. Naruto waited impatiently on the sandy shore of the small island where she had left behind
her clothes. Naruto eventually fell asleep against the coconut tree.

Naruto woke up to the splash of water and the first sight he saw when he opened his eyes was Mei Terumi emerging from the ocean in a blue bathing suit. Naruto's chest constricted as he watched the water hug her body.

Mei pulled her hair over her shoulder and leaned to rinse it out, leaning in a suggestive curve, knowing Naruto was ogling her. Mei lips pursed together when she asked, "What are you doing here?"

This was Mei's place, her island where she came to get away.

Naruto straightened when she neared him, his mouth was dry as he attempted to explain, "I'm here to protect you since your ANBU aren't efficient enough to do so."

"Really?" Mei asked as she pulled closer, Naruto smirked, and Mei sat down wet atop of his lap. She pulled off his shirt and her damp breasts pressed against his chest.

But first, Naruto had business to attend to.

Naruto caught her waist. Before she could counter, slammed her against the sandy beach, and twisted her hands above her head to prevent her from using jutsu. "You stole something from me and I want it back."

Mei bucked her hips into Naruto's sensitive erection with a tease. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Naruto slammed his knee into her stomach to keep her still. "Where is the scroll you stole?"

Mei's lips turned into a cruel smile. She could feel the heat of her anger boiling in her chest. "Or what? You're going to kill the Mizukage? I obviously do not have it with me unless you want to strip me of my bathing suit but I think you were already doing that."

"Enough games. Tell me where you've put my medicine and I'll release you, the rest of your fingers intact."

Mei smiled. "I'm not telling you until you do something for me first."

The Hokage had warned Naruto about falling into the web.

"I can't trust anyone in Kirigakure. I can't trust my advisors, I can't trust my ninja, I can't trust my ANBU for fear that they are in league with the people that want me killed. I need someone not connected with the village."

"What do you want?" Naruto asked.

"When you leave from here I want you to take my family to a contact in Tea. I am losing control of Kiri and I need my family out the country completely when I plan to make my move against the rebels. Once I have received word from my family that they are safe, I will give you back your scroll but if you dare try to use my family as hostage in one of Konoha's schemes, I will sell your scroll to the highest bidder."

Naruto released her. Mei watched from the sand, studying his response as Naruto crossed his arms. "I would have done it without the blackmail. You want to protect your family, I get that."
"I needed collateral to be sure." Mei said as she sat up and nurtured her aching wrists. "Would you really entrust your children to me on blind faith?"

"No," Naruto answered. "But once I do this for you, how do I know you're going to give it back?"

"I guess your going to have to trust me," Mei said slyly with a twist to her lips.

Naruto slapped his hands against his face. "I'm so fucking stupid."

"I wouldn't say that," Mei said softly as she watched him, enjoying the way how the sun played on his skin. "We can't keep our guard up all the time. We're only human." Mei looked at Naruto slyly.

"So, medicine is in that sealed scroll?"

Naruto tensed.

"I was wondering what was so important that you'd have to lock it up. I sent it to my fuuinjutsu team this morning but they haven't cracked it yet. Konoha has gotten a rather good fuuinjutsu expert."

Naruto looked at her with a smug smirk, "It's just a prototype but thanks for the compliment."

Naruto never would have gotten into making seals if it wasn't for Hinata and that had been a disastrous attempt at trying to help.

"How sick are you?" Mei asked curiously.

Naruto scoffed. "I'm not telling you that but I would really appreciate my medicine as soon as possible."

Mei smiled and knew she had found a weakness. "I wonder, was the Fourth Shinobi War Uzumaki Naruto's prime?"

That question suddenly caught Naruto off-guard. Since the war he's certainly experimented with various different things like seals and elemental jutsu, but he's never felt as if he was getting stronger.

Mei caught Naruto's expression. "You've never asked that question of yourself have you? They say a ninja's prime is their late teens and everything goes downhill from there. You get slower, and weaker, and your body just can't keep up with what you want it to do. Then suddenly it's our experience that's more valued. I don't like to see the wrinkles. I don't like to feel myself withering away. Getting old sucks."

Naruto chuckled. "You're not old." Mei laughed, genuinely laughed as Naruto playfully pressed her into the sand and left kisses along her skin. "You're like the sexiest woman I have ever met."

Mei smile and enjoyed the way he lavished his attention on her. "I am vain. I can make a few heads spin sure but what about in a few years? Who wants to die ugly? Half a kunoichi's power is in their looks. Why do you think the Hokage never looks her age?"

Naruto paused as he pressed his cheek against the inside of her thigh. "I don't think it's because she's afraid of looking old. When she looks her age, people want to help her up the stairs. Granny is the most powerful kunoichi in the world and I think she hates being treated as weak."

"Naruto, Tsunade Senju is old whether you want to believe it or not. All the Kages made a bet during the exams on how much longer she was going to last. Everyone is waiting for her to die."

"Hey," Naruto said affronted. "I can assure you Granny is plenty healthy."
"Would she really tell you if she wasn't?"

"No," Naruto mumbled.

Mei tilted her head, her auburn hair spilling over her shoulders like water. She analyzed the disturbed expression on his handsome face. "You two are really close, aren't you?"

"Yeah," Naruto said softly. "I don't know what I would do without her. I don't know what Konoha would do without her. My job is to keep her alive at all cost."

"You don't want the title of Kage?"

"Did you want the title of Kage?" Naruto asked in turn.

Mei smirked as she turned into the breeze. "Yes, I wanted the power. I was a scrawny little kid but I was good at jutsu and it made me feel powerful. I loved that feeling and I wanted more."

"Wow. That's very selfish."

"Ao straightened me out soon enough. He was the best teacher I could have ever had." In her voice, Naruto could tell she missed him. "He was the one who should have been Kage."

"Did you ever find out who killed him?"

"We never even found the damn body," Mei spat. "The person who killed Ao wasn't the same person who killed Chojuro. Chojuro was a message, Ao was..." Mei sighed, "bad luck. I wouldn't put it past Konoha if they had a hand in it. Konoha certainly had a motive."

"Konoha wouldn't," Naruto paused. "I admit it could have been Konoha. Granny doesn't tell me everything. I'm sorry."

"People die. I've seen my entire graduating class die. When you get to be my age it hardly fazes you anymore. You grow numb to it and sometimes you want to feel something, but-" There were tears in her voice when she replied, "I don't feel anything."

Naruto's hands washed against her skin and Mei leaned into his touch. Naruto took in her scent – like the salt breeze across the ocean. They melted into each other's touch and consumed each other in something more than lust.

Naruto's blue intensity pierced into her chest. "You feel me don't you?"

"Uzumaki," Mei admitted, "You're the only thing I've felt in a long time."

The waves of the ocean lapped at their skin as the clothing and the lies and the fear were abandoned into the brilliant white sand. Their bodies rocked like the tide.

When the sun set below the horizon and stars sparkled through the misty sky, Naruto and Mei laid in the sand, still, hearts beating in terrified rhythm.

Naruto soaked in the experience he had been chasing since the moment Hinata had left him cold in the bed. He hadn't felt like this since Hinata and it was that comparison that made him realize he really liked the Mizukage. He could slap himself in the face. What was wrong with him? Why did he always go for women he couldn't have?

"I don't think we should do this again."
Because it was all just a game, until it was real.

"I've just received confirmation from my contact in Tea Country that my sister and her family have made it there safely."

"My scroll?" Naruto asked.

Mei reached for a summoning scroll, applied chakra, and summoned Naruto's scroll from an undisclosed location. She handed it to him and Naruto checked to make sure it was authentic. The seal on the scroll had obviously been tampered with but unbroken.

"Well," Mei said as she leaned forward at her desk. "It sure has been an interesting week. Be sure to tell the Hokage that I'm sorry but I don't think a marriage alliance will work between us."

"I'll be sure to let her know," Naruto replied. He turned for the door and paused. "Mei, you should come with me to Konoha. It's not safe here for you."

Mei smiled at the man who couldn't help but to save people.

"The Captain goes down with her ship," Mei said fearlessly. "Let the mist be my grave."

"You could have just returned to Konoha in an instant and retrieved more medicine from Sakura."

"Mei didn't know that," Naruto said as he sat atop the Kage's desk. "But her request wasn't unreasonable. I figure I'd let her believe she had the upper hand."

Tsunade shook her head. Naruto was beginning to get good at playing this game. "I am worried about the situation in Kiri. The Mizukage obviously isn't going to accept our help. I might need to send in a byakugan or Yamanaka. If we find the rebel leader we could contain the situation."

"Those were my thoughts exactly," Naruto answered. "Should I get together a custom team?"

"That probably would be best."

Naruto hated to ask, "Is Butterfly back from the war?"

Naruto still hasn't forgiven her for hijacking his body without his permission.

"She has returned while you were away. And its Wasp now, her mask has changed. You should also bring someone else who can manipulate chakra."

Naruto cringed when he suggested, "Is Fox back from her mission?" Naruto paused suddenly. He didn't know what made him think she was on a mission when he could obviously sense her in the village. Naruto found only a blank.

"Not Fox, I need her in the village for something."

Naruto swiveled his head around. "What something?"

"Oh what do you know, look at all this paperwork?" Tsunade suddenly focused on the papers Naruto was sitting on.

"What about Crane?" Naruto asked slyly.
"Busy."

"He's in the village."

"Busy."

Naruto leaned in unrelenting, "Are you about to make a move against the Hyūga?"

"This has been carefully planned out. Naruto, I don't need you to do anything that can compromise the situation." Tsunade pushed Naruto off her desk.

Suddenly ANBU Captain Cat arrived in the office. "Hokage-sama."

Tsunade snapped up. "Yeah what is it?"

"We've just received the reports and I've already sent someone to confirm-"

"What is it?" Tsunade demanded.

Cat straightened and took a step backwards.

"The Daimyo's palace has been bombed."

Naruto's face dropped. He could see the anger creep into the Hokage's face.

"The Daimyo?"

"He's dead."

Naruto jumped out the way when Tsunade threw her desk out the window in a rage, as heated as the Country she protected. After she indulged in the moment to vent, she straightened the cloak on her shoulders and turned to Naruto.

"The capital, now."

Naruto leaned down until he had hefted the Hokage onto his back.

"You better not drop me."

"Perhaps if your boobs didn't weigh- ow," Naruto staggered from the force she used to hit him in the head. He activated his chakra cloak and blasted out of the office.

"How did bombs get in?" Naruto questioned. "From what I remember the security is really… thorough."

"It has to be an inside job. I'm suspecting Mountain, probably something they had in plan before the siege."

"If the Daimyo is dead what happens?"

"I have to stay in the capital until the next Daimyo succeeds him, which means I'm away from the village until this entire mess is sorted out. I'm sorry Naruto, but Kiri has officially dropped to a priority two. While I'm gone, I need all your chakra concentrated on protecting the village."

Naruto's jaw dropped when they arrived at the capital and took in the extent of the damage to the palace. The moment Naruto landed Tsunade dropped from his back and hounded through the
wreckage. Naruto followed the rampaging Hokage until she charged forward and swept the Captain of the Twelve Guardians into her fist.

"Is anyone of the royal family fucking alive?!" She demanded. "And what the fuck were you doing?! How the hell could you have allowed this to happen!"

Naruto quickly pulled the Kage off the man before she punched him into the rubble.

"Hokage-sama," the Captain bowed immediately. "We hadn't expected your arrival so soon. We're still trying to survey the extent of the damage ourselves."

"Then give it your best fucking guess."

"Well, the Daimyo was hosting a party among his closest family members for his birthday and- we might have lost all of them."

Then the Captain paled when his focus shifted passed the Hokage.

The Hokage and Naruto turned, when a palisade pulled up. A fanciful golden slipper stepped from the curtain, until it was drawn back. "What happened? Am I too late for the party?"

"Are you related to the Daimyo?" The Hokage asked urgently.

The small chubby man attempted to straightened, as if his title could add to his height. "Of course I am. I am Tahiko Yamamato, the Fire Daimyo's great nephew."

Naruto could feel the sinking in his stomach when Tsunade went to her knee and bowed. "As of now you are the next heir to the throne and ruler over all of Fire Country."

"I heard someone killed the Fire Daimyo," Mei Terumi said in bed as if political intrigue was pillow talk.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Naruto grumbled.

"Sure you don't." Mei rolled her eyes. Mei slipped on her silk night gown and braided her hair to avoid tangles in the morning.

"But curiously," Naruto said as if he lifted his head from the pillow and watched Mei's nightly ritual. "Let's say the Fire Damyo is dead, what would a hidden village like Kiri do?"

"Well," Mei said as she sucked on her bottom lip. "The Princess is most likely confined to the capital until at least the coronation ceremony is finished. She probably also has to bolster security in the capital with her own ninja. Konoha would be vulnerable, but since I'm busy with people trying to assassinate me right now, I'll just use the opportunity to implant more spies."

"More spies?" Naruto said incredulously.

"Did that slip?" Mei chuckled with a quirk of her lips. She crawled into bed and stared at the kunai embedded in her headboard.

"I'm still trying to wrap my head around this. Konoha can send its best asset to anywhere in the world in a matter of seconds with one kunai?"

Naruto chuckled. "I can run to anywhere in the world in a matter of seconds, but it saves time."
"And what would happen-" Naruto jumped over and snatched her hand away from the kunai before she poured chakra into it.

Naruto looked at her very seriously. "You will die. You do not have sufficient chakra to make it to the kunai it's connected to."

"So basically only a jinchūruki can use this technique?" Mei asked with a frown. "There's always a damn catch."

It was much more complicated than that, but Naruto decided to let her make her own assumptions. If the paired kunai were close enough anyone could make the jump, but there were so many different types of seals used that only a fūinjutsu user would be able to differentiate what the kunai did in the first place. Some were paired, some were connected to a specific place, multiple were connected to one, or one connected to multiple.

Mei stretched in the bed and curled next to Naruto before she asked, "I wonder what your Granny will do when she finds out we've been having a secret affair?"

"To have an affair I'd have to be married," Naruto grumbled.

"You're married to Konoha. Is she a better lover than Kiri?" Mei playfully asked.

Naruto really should be in the capital with the Hokage but Naruto figured a clone was enough to go through the tiring rigors of court. Naruto knew if Granny found out he's been in Kiri without her permission and sharing the Mizukage's bed… "Granny would probably neuter me."

"I could only imagine. She has a temper on her."

"You can't talk about anyone's temper. I honestly don't know which of you are worse."

Mei playfully hit Naruto's chest. "Oh you have not yet seen the extent of my temper."

Naruto smiled and placed kisses along her neck and trickled down her spine. "You can only imagine mine."

Mei twisted in his arms. "And what makes you angry, Naruto Uzumaki?"

"When someone I care about is threatened," Naruto said seriously. Mei's breath hitched at the intensity of his stare. Mei jerked away and moved to her side of the bed, tucking the covers underneath her.

But even from where he lay, Naruto could hear the rapid beating of her heart. "Good night, Mei."

"Why do you come here if you're not going to have sex with me?" Mei turned and asked angrily.

"You were the one who said you had a meeting in the morning. Did you want to have sex?"

"No, I have a meeting in the morning," Mei said exasperated.

"I'm confused."

"Go to damn sleep," Mei snapped as she tightened the covers around her. Naruto had to admit he didn't understand women sometimes.

He dared to cross the chasm in bed and attempted to slip his arm around her waist. When she didn't resist, he tightened his hold and pressed his face into her hair. "I like the way you smell."

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"I am the hottest woman in the Land of Water and you come all the way here every night, risk the Hokage's wrath, and your village because of the way I smell?"

Naruto chuckled into her hair. "Yes."

"I think that's enough," Naruto replied as he retrieved the cup of alcohol from the Kage's hand.

"Have you talked to that little prick?" Tsunade snarled during the reception after the coronation ceremony.

Naruto crossed his arms. "This isn't my first time running into him," then turned suddenly when Tsunade snatched the cup from his hand and quickly chugged it down.

The scathing frown on her face corrected as the Captain of the Guardians neared. With a deceiving sweet face that welcomed him, Tsunade punched him in the stomach. "What have you found out about the attack?"

The Captain held his stomach and wheeze. After he managed to catch his breath he answered, "We haven't been able to trace the bombs but it was certainly an inside job."

Tsunade knew that the moment she stepped into the capital. "And let's say, hypothetically, Tahiko was the culprit, hypothetically."

The Captain frowned. "Then hypothetically there is nothing we can do. The guardians protect the Daimyo whoever it is. We will give our lives. I swear on my honor that I will protect him with my life."

"Of course," Tsunade smiled sweetly, "Of course."

"You think he did it?" Naruto asked under his breath after Tsunade dismissed the Captain as if he was an annoying fly.

"I don't think this is a coincidence," Tsunade replied. "If you believe in coincidences, you're not a fucking ninja."

The next day was hours and hours of meetings. Naruto stood behind Tsunade and half-listened to the conversation about security and their plan of action for the state of affairs. He straightened when the Fire Daimyo suddenly interrupted the meeting.

Tsunade smiled sweetly. "It is nice for you to join us," she said even though he was supposed to have been here hours ago.

The Fire Daimyo stopped before the table of the most important people in all of Fire Country. "I've been thinking that this country needs a few changes."

"Oh," Tsunade raised an eyebrow. "And what type of changes do you suggest?"

"Most of the taxes that the Daimyo collects goes to the military. Fire Country has never had a war on its soil. Why should we still pay Konoha so much to defend us?"

Naruto could feel the frown Tsunade was hiding. "You're suggesting cutting Konoha's budget?"

"The money that Konoha needs is exorbitant!" The Daimyo claimed. "I could use it for more useful purposes like building a second castle."
"I can assure you that the money is spent responsibly. I have sent you the reports detailing Konoha's finances. Nothing is extraneous."

The Fire Daimyo scoffed. "I have seen the reports. I think the village is using my money for its own purposes. Look at this, Uzumaki Naruto is the highest paid ninja on the payroll."

"I can assure you that Naruto deserves every bit he earns for what he does for this country." Tsunade replied. "And we are currently still laying siege to the Village Hidden in the Mountain."

"You've said yourself Mountain is all but done," The Daimyo argued. "And look at how much money Konoha has given Suna, just given away!"

"Suna was undergoing a famine and the protection of Konoha's closest ally is a security issue."

"Suna is a parasite," The Daimyo declared. "Perhaps this alliance is weakening us."

"We now have ninja intermarrying freely between the two villages. It's taken years to get to that level of trust," Tsunade argued.

"I order that the military budget be cut to half of what is used to be."

Tsunade looked aghast. Naruto peeled himself from the wall and decided to get the Hokage out of here before she attacked the Fire Daimyo. Naruto dipped and said loudly into her ear. "There has been an urgent message from Konoha."

Tsunade smiled weakly and bowed, "Excuse me."

"Wait." The Fire Daimyo said as if wanting to rub the salt into the wound, "and I want Uzumaki's reassignment. If he the strongest ninja in the world, then that's the person I want protecting me. Surely Uzumaki, you will accept the invitation to become one of my Twelve Guardians?"

Before the resounding 'No' came out of Naruto's mouth, Tsunade shoved her hand into his face.

"Of course he will," Tsunade said sweetly. "He would love the honor."

When they exited the room Naruto gave her a horrified look. "What?"

Tsunade snatched Naruto's sleeve and pulled him close. "You have just been assigned a new mission," Tsunade couldn't believe the words that were about to come out of her mouth.

"I want you to assassinate the Fire Daimyo."

x

They say a ninja's prime is their late teens and everything goes downhill from there. You get slower, and weaker, and your body just can't keep up with what you want it to do. Then suddenly it's our experience that's more valued. I don't like to see the wrinkles. I don't like to feel myself withering away. Getting old sucks.
Lesson Twenty-Nine

Coup D'état

Pink intestines swept across the castle steps like fallen cherry blossoms. Beside the empty sake cup, the brush strokes of ink was not yet dry on the poem written by loyalty. Crimson drenched the stark white. The Captain of the Twelve Guardians tightened his grip on his resolve and the blade that sliced through his stomach. Then the sword swiped across his shoulders, leaving that pained expression dangling a skin thread away from indecency and dishonor.

Only a few hours after the seppuku ceremony, on those very steps, a large crowd had gathered to watch one of Konoha's most infamous ninja accept the highest honor that Fire Country could bestow.

"I, Uzumaki Naruto, swear on my honor to abandon all former allegiances. I swear my fealty and service to the security, aspirations, and protection to the Highest Lord of Fire Country."

Naruto abandoned the hitai-ite that had marked him as a ninja of the Leaf. Atop the bloodied steps, Naruto accepted the white sash and became a Guardian of Fire.

"I honestly thought I'd never see you again."

Amaru had to constantly peek at the person walking beside her, in case Naruto would morph into someone else as ninja often did. She hadn't seen him since her village was destroyed by Sky ninja and her sensei, Shinno had betrayed her.

"I had no idea you were a Guardian," Naruto replied.

Amaru blushed at his bright grin and attempted to straighten her uniform in the moments he looked away. Even now, Amaru still looked tomboyish and was often mistaken for male by those who did not know her. Still, she attempted to sway her hips just a little bit more.

Naruto hardly noticed, but he noticed everything else. People usually marveled when they traveled the famed halls of the Guardians, instead he recorded every shadowed corner, every blind spot, every entrance and exit in the vicinity.

"You really taught me the importance of valuing life," Amaru said after a pause. In her memory she remembered that Naruto always commandeered a conversation. Instead, Naruto was careful with his words and careful where to place them.

"How did you become a Guardian?" Naruto asked.

"After we parted ways, I decided to travel through Fire Country and offer my medical services. I'm no Haruno Sakura of course but after a few years the Daimyo heard of my good work and invited me to become his personal doctor. I've been a Guardian for a year now."

"What's this?" Naruto asked curiously as he studied a large painting hemmed in gold.

"This is a painting of the original Twelve Guardians. Did you know the Guardians were originally founded not to protect the Daimyo from Fire Country's outside enemies but to protect the Daimyo from his internal enemies?"
Somehow, Naruto wasn't surprised.

"There were rumors that the Niidaiime did not approve of the Daimyo so the Daimyo decided to hire his own personal bodyguards from ninja who did not owe allegiance to any village. The Daimyo gave those ninja a purpose and they fell in love with him so much that they dedicated their lives to him. That's how the Twelve Guardians were born."

Amaru smiled as she looked at Naruto. "I sort of understand those Guardians. I feel like I finally have a sense of purpose now. I feel so dishonored that I have failed our previous Daimyo but I will redeem myself and protect this new Daimyo with my life."

Naruto's thoughts lingered on the seppuku ceremony, a relic left behind by the age of Samurai. He held great respect for the former disgraced Captain, but Naruto realized he could never go quietly into the abyss. You could regain honor, you couldn't regain a life. He was a fighter and would remain a fighter until he could no longer force his body to move.

"We should hurry or we're going to be late for the meeting," Naruto replied and rushed his colleague down the hall.

Naruto and Amaru entered the meeting room. There were only ten Guardians present; two had died in the bombing and the third from shame. They had yet to be replaced. Naruto sat at the table with a folder waiting at the seats.

"In the folders I have given you a copy of the new schedule. There will be a two person guard on the Daimyo at all times. We are never going to let him out of our sight. We will follow him into the bathroom if we have to. Under no circumstances will we ever allow this travesty to happen again."

Naruto read through the strict set of instructions that included long hours on his feet. The security at every entrance and at the front gate of the capital had increased drastically. With the constant surveillance this mission was going to be a lot harder than he thought. Under no circumstances could Leaf be implicated in the murder. Naruto was going to have to call in for specialized help.

Naruto was tired of parties. The money the Daimyo cut from Konoha's budget went to lavishing the court with an extravagant celebration every night. Besides the Fire Daimyo, Naruto always found himself as the second guest of honor. He was always mobbed by men and women eager to meet, touch, and talk to him, especially the women.

Naruto, disguised by a henge, planted himself beside the buffet. It was easy to watch for any threats to the Daimyo's life but uncomfortable to watch how shallow crowds were magnetized toward his shadow clone. It was only a few years ago when he had been the resident outcast and was always startled to find how now people wanted to cast him in the spotlight. He craved attention since he was a child but didn't really know what to do with it once he got it and found himself more comfortable watching from the sidelines.

The current bodyguards on watch were Amaru and the new Captain who never left Tahiko's side as he mingled and generally ordered the guests' attention toward himself.

"You sure are popular."

Naruto didn't outwardly acknowledge the woman who stood beside him. She held a cup of alcohol and blond curls skipped down her back. A fanciful butterfly masquerade mask hid the details of her face, but her green eyes shone through like emeralds.

The voice that cut through his thoughts was far from the soft flutter of a butterfly. It was a far more
sharper sting.

This has to be the easiest ANBU mission I have ever seen. I heard this is your last one?

"If everything goes to plan," Naruto told Ino as he grabbed a plate of chicken from the buffet. It was time to leave the dirty business to someone else. He wanted to focus more on his family and complete the remodeling of the compound that had slowed to a crawl since the war.

Unconsciously Naruto wiped chicken grease on the white cloth at his waist and cursed when he realized he had left a streak of grease along the fire symbol on his Guardian's sash.

Naruto attempted to wash it out with water, which only made it worse. Ino shook her head and finally reached to adjust Naruto's pants until the sash was neatly tucked and the stain hidden.

When her hands left his waist, Ino's eyes flickered over his shoulder with a smirk. "I don't think she likes me very much."

Naruto turned just as Amaru blushed and looked away. Standing beside the Daimyo, Amaru deflected her eyes to the kanji on her pure white sash.

"You mean Amaru?"

And then Ino remembered who she was talking to. "She's sweet on you. You're single and she seems comely… enough."

"I don't know."

Ino chuckled as she interpreted his hesitation. "You don't want to fuck her?"

Naruto blushed. "It's more than that," he attempted to argue but arguing with Ino was like getting crushed by an enormous summon.

"You've got a problem," Ino diagnosed as she scanned the party-goers. Then she leaned into his ear as if flirting. "You only go for women you can't have because unconsciously you don't think you deserve to be with anyone. You hurt yourself. Who else would chase a Hyūga who have married in clan since they have been established? Who else would put themselves through that sort of pain?"

Naruto snatched away from her sting. "I don't appreciate you opening old wounds."

"I think you've never allowed those wounds to close."

"Ino, shut up."

The two Leaf ninja stood beside one another like strangers. The silence was aching. Naruto hadn't meant to snap at her like that, but Ino had the tendency to bring out the worse in him.

"I did it again didn't I?" Ino asked softly. "I went too far again."

Naruto didn't realize how tense he was until the tension left his shoulders. With Ino, you always needed to have your guard up. "Is this your way of apologizing?"

Ino shrugged her shoulders. "I don't apologize for who I am."

When the Daimyo stepped outside toward the balcony, both ninja straightened. They put their differences aside for the mission.
"Can I have this dance?" Naruto asked as he reached out a hand.

Ino slipped her hand into his palm as if her glove was made of diamonds and she should be treated like so.

*Just curious, but why did you decide to complete the mission this way?*

Naruto led Ino to the dance floor at the start of a song and began adjust his feet, unleashing weeks of practice in order to get this moment right. "I chose to do it this way in order to respect the Guardians. This way it won't be their fault."

Ino smirked knowingly. *Always have to be the hero.*

The music increased as Naruto spiraled across the floor. As they passed the balcony doors, Ino slumped against his chest. Naruto gripped her close in support and they were lost in the cloud of swirling bodies.

The Guardians watched as the Fire Daimyo showed off the view to his guests, which stretched across the blazing glory of Fire Country. The chords of the music danced and reached its climax as the Daimyo laughed, toasting his wine in the air, tripped over his robe, and fell backwards.

The dance ended in a stunning crescendo. Amaru danced through the crowd of terrified onlookers and attempted to leap over the railing. Ino opened her eyes in Naruto's arms as frightened shouts demanded an encore.

The Fire Daimyo died on the same steps stained by the blood of loyalty.

"I just don't understand," Amaru wept. "He just fell."

"Alcohol ruins the best of us, even a Daimyo. Here," Naruto offered a bowl of ramen. He sat down on the floor before the low table within his massive Guardian room that dwarfed an entire apartment complex.

Amaru wiped the tears from her eyes and felt the heat from the ramen touch her skin.

"I think I'm going to retire the Guardian sash," Naruto said regretfully.

"But why?"

"Standing around and guarding someone is boring. I help Fire Country more by being in Konoha," Naruto answered. "This incident just helped me realize that's where I truly belong."

Amaru didn't enjoy her ramen anymore and swirled her chopsticks wistfully in the bowl. "I don't know what I should do."

"You should stay," Naruto encouraged. "The next heir is only four years old. He is a child and he'll need someone like you to protect him. You won't be alone either, I believe the Hokage is going to permanently assign Shikaku to the capital to help advise the new Daimyo. Shikaku is really smart."

Amaru shook her head. "The Hokage is moving more and more of her people into the capital. It sounds like a military takeover to me."

"Can you blame her?" Naruto asked. "She just wants to make sure the capital is protected."

Amaru looked up at Naruto. "Naruto," she said softly. "Can you honestly tell me that the Hokage
didn't have a hand in this? I just, I saw it happen but it was so surreal you kind of hope a ninja did have their hand in it. At least then it would make sense."

"The Hokage is like a grandmother to me. I can assure you that she only has Fire Country best interests at heart. Accidents happen."

Amaru nodded and knew Naruto would never lie to her. He knew how much the betrayal of her sensei had hurt her.

"Thank you," Amaru whispered and finally attempted to eat the ramen. When she finished she looked up and blushed at Naruto's stunning smile. "I was wondering," she gulped and found her mouth dry. "Do you really like all those women you bring back to your room?"

Naruto blushed and looked away but only found the rich excess of the large room that did not fit him.

"Not really," Naruto admitted. "But most of them came all this way to see me and I feel obligated to make their night."

Amaru bit her lip. This was the Uzumaki Naruto. She knew she didn't have a chance with him and certainly didn't want him to feel obligated to please her. Naruto could literally have any woman in the world if he wanted her. "I don't have a chance do I?"

Naruto straightened in alarm. "No, I mean if you want, we can certainly-"

"I don't mean to fuck Naruto," Amaru quickly corrected. "I mean to be with you."

Naruto's shoulders dropped and found himself afraid of looking in her eyes. It wouldn't work. He knew that one day she was going to wake up beside him and see him for the monster he was.

"I'm sorry," Naruto whispered. "You really don't want to be with me."

"Why not?" Amaru questioned. "You've helped me so much. You're such a good person."

"No," Naruto said hoarsely and looked up into her hopeful eyes. "That little boy you knew a long time ago doesn't exist anymore. I'm not who you think I am."

"But-" Amaru reached across the table and Naruto pulled his hand out of her reach.

His voice suddenly grew dark. "I would like you to leave please."

"I'm sorry," Amaru answered and found herself fearful of his change of voice. She quickly stood to her feet and in silence Naruto led her to his bedroom door. He opened it to let her out.

"Naruto, it was really nice to see you again." Then Amaru smiled softly and knew some things never changed, "and thanks for the ramen."

Mei Terumi woke up suddenly, reached for the kunai underneath her pillow, and pounced to the floor ready for battle. She stilled when a loud cacophony of clashing metal echoed through her house. Mei relaxed. Any kind of assassin worth his salt would never make such noise.

Mei reached for a night gown in her closet to protect her bare skin from the chill. She walked toward the bedroom, passed the warm empty space in the bed and kicked the clothes littering the glass floor.

"You better give me a good reason why you've interrupted my beauty sleep," Mei threatened when
she walked into the kitchen and found Naruto stooped over the counter. Naruto chuckled nervously when he stood.

"I was trying to make you breakfast."

The edges of her frown softened. "Why?"

"I'm not trying to poison you." Naruto chuckled and dismissed her guarded expression. Other people were usually grumpy or cranky in the mornings, Mei was paranoid. Naruto turned in alarm when the water began to boil over.

Mei had to admit breakfast did smell good. Mei told herself she was simply watching to make sure he didn't slip anything in her food but found her eyes stalking the way he moved. He wore nothing more than the happy face boxers that hugged his hips.

"Who in the world buys your clothes?" Mei asked and pointed to the happy faces.

Naruto pouted. "I haven't washed clothes in a while."

The truthful answer was Tomu hadn't washed clothes in a while. Naruto was glad Mushi was distracting Tomu from his cleaning obsession but Naruto's underwear had begun to dwindle to his more embarrassing ones.

Mei pursed her lips as cooked fish tempted her nose. "I guess it doesn't matter. You look better without clothes anyways."

Naruto laughed at her tease, and in a humble manner deflected the compliment right back. Naruto Uzumaki was a handsome man and didn't realize it. He personified the concept of how a smile could be someone's best feature. But when Naruto looked in the mirror, all he saw was the scar and the whiskers and couldn't possibly comprehend how anyone could be attracted to him.

"It's finished," Naruto declared proudly and placed the plates on the table. Naruto admitted, "The fish might be burned a little on the bottom."

Mei shrugged. It was better than what she could do. Naruto watched her take a bite of the food. "It's edible."

Naruto gave a humming smile. Mei scanned his expression and noted how easy it was to read him when his guard was down. Like a shark spotting a sign of weakness, she first considered how she could take advantage but then held back her natural urges to eat her prey. "What are we celebrating?"

"I've just completed my last ANBU mission."

"I'm surprise the princess is letting you retire. I wouldn't." Mei could imagine the power at her disposal if Naruto worked for her. With his terrifying power she'd have all the Great Countries on their knees. She'd use him until he broke. Power was such a sweet and seductive sort of breakfast.

It was at these moments that Naruto was worried about the machinations in her eyes. Mei's lake green eyes washed over him. "I'll give you anything."

"I already named my price," Naruto tensed and the sweet joy of the early morning gave way to a hard cruelty in his voice.

Mei scowled and hated being spurned. "You were born with a fucking demon in your gut. You were
born to be a weapon. You're too invaluable to retire. Work for me and I will give you anything else. If you're sick we can steal Haruno from Konoha to be your medic, we can marry and you can help me to rule, and your children can-

"Don't bring my children into your schemes," Naruto snapped. Suddenly his entire morning had been ruined as he grabbed his plate with the food he had labored to cook and slammed the plate and its contents into the sink. The porcelain shattered. "I don't even know why I come back here. Can't you just forget how to be a Kage for once?"

Mei looked at him blankly. She wasn't sure how to be anything else anymore. Her eyes followed Naruto as he moved to get his clothes and go home, the only man she ever allowed to sleepover at her house in a long time.

"Wait," Mei replied softly. "Don't go."

Naruto paused at the kitchen entrance.

"I should not have brought up the children."

Everyone had buttons to be pushed and Naruto's children were one of them. The thought had crossed Mei's mind that if she kidnapped the children she could get Naruto to stay but doubted she'd live very long afterwards. Then Mei realized why she was so insistent, why her bribery heightened every time she attempted to offer the world to him.

Mei wanted Naruto to stay. Without her sensei Ao, Chojuro who she considered as a little brother, or her family, she felt like a stranger in her own village. She was alone with knives pointed at her in every direction.

Mei and Naruto looked at one another in discomfort. Mei smiled weakly. "Would you join me for breakfast? I'll try to turn the Kage off."

Naruto knew that was impossible but found his feet drawn to the table nevertheless. He sat down and stared at the empty space where his food used to be.

"I guess I can try to cook you something…” Mei suggested slowly.

"No!" Naruto practically yelled at her. "I'll eat when I get back home."

"I'm not that bad," Mei grumbled.

As an orphan, Naruto has eaten a lot of bad things in his life and one of them was Mei's cooking.

Mei attempted to look for a subject that was safe, instead of having to suffer Naruto watching her eat breakfast. "The weather looks to be nice today," she said as she motioned toward her foggy window.

Naruto winced. "Weather in Kiri ranges from misty to very misty. There is hardly any sunlight."

Mei frowned. "Do you know how easily it is to get sunburn in Fire Country? It's so dry and the sun is bad for the skin. The weather in Konoha is horrible."

"At least we have four seasons."

"We have a rainy season."

"That's even worse," Naruto argued. "The people aren't any better. Any mention of a coup and they shrug their shoulders and look to the sky as if expecting rain. Say that word in Konoha and people
would be outraged."

"Everyone is so dramatic in Leaf. If it rains it rains just get an umbrella."

"I don't even understand what that saying means," Naruto pouted, "You have to admit that people in Kiri are too nonchalant about things."

Mei sighed. "Konoha has always had a tradition of reasonable Kages, in Kiri on the other hand, the Kages tend to be much more akin to a dictator. People have learned to keep their heads down. If it keeps them alive who blames them? It's the ones that stick out that get killed first."

Naruto couldn't understand this odd culture of doing nothing while your Kage's life was threatened. "The clans certainly wouldn't go for it especially when they have a stake in the system."

Mei scoffed. "I don't understand why Konoha has so many clans in the first place. I'm surprised it doesn't tear itself up from the inside. Hyūga, Aburame, Inuzuka - I could make a list of them. Do you know how many clans Kiri has? Seven. Seven is a good number, it's a lucky number, and easy to manage."

"What is it with Kiri's infatuation with the number seven anyways?" He questioned.

"You have a lot of work before you ever become a Kage. You don't even know the country you're spying on."

"I'm not spying."

Mei could sniff out lies like a shark to blood. "Kirigakure is surrounded by seven smaller islands, the seven jewels of the sea. Each of those islands is controlled by a head achingly infuriating clan."

"Your clans can't possibly be that bad. Have you met a Hyūga?"

"I've killed a few. Didn't care to talk to one." Mei shrugged her shoulders and in turn replied, "Have you met a Houzuki?"

Naruto straightened. "That's the clan Suigetsu comes from, isn't he?"

"He's not a Houzuki," Mei corrected. "Suigetsu was a prisoner of Orochimaru for years. If anything he's more leaf than mist. He is not one of us."

"But that wasn't his fault."

"Tell his family that. He could become the next Mizukage and his family still won't claim him." Mei finally finished her meal and found more enjoyment complaining about the clans than she meant to. Mei went to put her dishes in the sink and caught a reflection of herself in the window.

"Ugh, I look like crap in the morning."

"I think you look prettier without your make-up."

Mei smiled with a shake of her head. She picked up the pieces of the plate Naruto had broken and placed them in the trash. She turned and leaned backwards in thought. "Whatever happened to that girl you were all over at the exams?"

Mei watched Naruto's smile drop as if it had plunged off a mountain. "She's a kunoichi. You can't trust any of them."
Mei smirked. "You trust me?"

"Fuck no," Naruto answered as he leaned back against the chair. After some thought, Naruto asked, "Have you ever been in love before?"

"Love is a selfish emotion. It's too risky, especially for a Kage."

"So you've never been in love?"

"I never said that. I was stupid once. I learned my lesson. You can't trust a shinobi."

Mei and Naruto shared a look. Mei turned when her chest constricted and that flutter in her stomach always caught her off-guard. "Congratulations," Mei said sincerely, "Not many people survive ANBU."

Naruto smiled and couldn't express how beautiful he thought she was. She wore a sheer robe, braided auburn hair over one shoulder, and the soft expression she held surrounded by the foggy morning. It was the white hat and coat that truly added years to her spirit.

Mei turned to him with a smirk on her full lips. "How about we move this celebration to the shower?"

Naruto grinned in that sexy way Mei found irresistible. He knew Mei had a thing for water and sex. She sauntered up to him, hooked her finger in the band of his happy boxers, and like a fish caught on a hook, dragged him towards the shower.

The secretary paused mid-writing. Then she leaned over the desk when Mei strolled into her office several hours late for the third time that week.

"Were there any emergencies?" Mei asked.

"Nothing I couldn't handle," the secretary responded and then with sly eyes. "Are you hiding a guy somewhere?"

Mei licked her lips and smiled. "What could possibly make you think that?"

Mei disappeared in her office and hooked her coat on her chair. There were plenty of preparations she should complete to protect herself from the next assassination attempt but her mind kept wandering to what nefarious plan she could attempt in order to keep Naruto in Kiri.

Mei jumped in her chair when there was a knock on the door. She allowed the ANBU in her office and smiled at the good news he brought.

"Are you sure?" Mei asked the ANBU agent who had determined the location and time of the rebel's next meeting.

"I am positive."

There was never a more dangerous smile. "Thank you and you will receive a hefty bonus for this."

When the ANBU bowed and disappeared from her office, Mei tossed her notes to the side and automatically wrote off the situation as a trap.

Mei could see it unfolding in her head. She would send the ANBU she trusted the most to infiltrate the meeting, they would get captured, and she would be defenseless for their next assassination
attempt.

Mei Terumi certainly wasn't about to oblige them.

The secretary threw her feet off the table and snapped her Icha Icha series in the drawer of her desk. "Mizukage-sama, I thought you had turned in for the night," the secretary replied startled.

Mei smiled. "What made you think that?"

"Well, for the past few weeks you have been… you don't have plans tonight?" The secretary asked hopefully. "Don't worry I won't tell anyone."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Mei denied the accusations and entered her office. Then Mei Terumi was swallowed in a cloud of smoke and Naruto stepped from the henge.

Naruto had come to know Mei enough over the past few weeks in order to emulate her little habits and easily get pass the secretary. The blue glow of the ocean washed over the floor as Naruto casually searched through her desk for any new developments on the rebels.

Naruto broke the seal that protected her most important documents and found a new mission report she had recently written.

Naruto sat back and was drowned by her large Kage's chair. He read through the folder that ordered a group of ANBU to infiltrate a secret meeting between the rebels.

This is exactly what he was looking for. Naruto would infiltrate the meeting, take out the leader, and save both Konoha and the Mizukage the trouble.

He grabbed a blank scroll from his pocket and began to quickly copy down the information of code words, location and time.

When Naruto was finished he summoned a small toad, who swallowed the copied scroll into his body. Then the toad was dismissed back to Myoboku and in turn, the shadow clone disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Naruto paused for a moment as the information funneled through his head. There was a deep rumbling in his chest as Mei's fingers combed across his scalp.

"I've never met a guy who purrs before," Mei teased.

"I do not," Naruto admonished.

Mei reached over on her nightstand and grabbed the glass of wine. It left crimson gloss along her lips.

Naruto looked up, his head lying against her thigh. "How was work today?"

"Nothing exciting like someone trying to kill me," Mei answered.

"You're heard nothing more about the rebels?"

Mei hid a smile behind her wine cup and knew Naruto had taken the bait. She might as well make him do her dirty work while he was snooping around. "Nothing," she answered without a pause.

Mei leaned down and Naruto sucked the taste of wine from her lips. There was a fine art to wine
tasting, a slow, lingering, way of tasting.

"I like that one," Naruto said when she pulled away.

"It's one of Kiri's better vintages," Mei answered and watched the divine red of the wine swirl inside of the glass. "The only thing better with age is wine."

"I'm going to go ahead and go home early tonight."

Mei attempted to hide her look of alarm. "Why? Is there another woman?" The words were laced with hints of jealousy.

"Of course there is," Naruto answered. "Ame and Ichigo. Ame keeps asking where I disappear to at night and I hate lying to her. It's hard to explain this."

"I thought you leave shadow clones to watch the kids?"

"Yeah, but she knows."

There was no thought when a shark dived for prey, just instinct, and it was that instinct that propelled Mei to say, "She has a kekkai genkai?"

Naruto realized he had made a misstep. "No," he attempted to answer smoothly and moved from her leg. He reached for his clothes but could feel Mei's eyes eating into his back.

Mei could taste the blood on her tongue. "How old did you say she was? She'll be starting the Academy soon won't she? With a kekkai genkai of course she is." Mei smiled when his shoulders tensed. "You know, if you move to Kiri she wouldn't have to."

For the first time, Mei could see her words biting into him, catching hold of skin and blood and possibilities.

"She wants to be a ninja," Naruto said with an aching heart. "This isn't the life I want for her."

A ninja was waking up in the middle of the night with the inability to go back to sleep and face your nightmares. It was the fear that kept you up at night until you finally submit to the loneliness and teleport all the way to Kirigakure just to have someone to hold and someone to hold you. It was holding someone you didn't know would greet you with kisses or a kunai in the back.

Mei rested her head on Naruto's back and her whisper clawed into his skin. "She could be safe here. She wouldn't have to be a ninja."

"Mei," Naruto said with a cold edge when he reached down and pulled on his shirt. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Wait."

Naruto stood and her hand slipped from his arm. Naruto should not have turned around, but he did. He saw years of loneliness in her eyes, a throbbing, aching loneliness that made you clutch to whatever you had left.

Mei pulled Naruto's waist between her legs. "I'm sorry," she whispered and attempted to kiss away the wounds she had just inflicted.

Naruto fell into her snare, because a ninja was that gentle touch, that taste of wine on soft lips, the smell of ocean in strands of hair, anything to remind the monster what it felt like to be human.
"...and you will give Neji your marital bed. It is imperative that the heir to the clan is the strongest we can breed."

There were times when even a Hyūga couldn't keep his composure. Iyashi displeasure was oozing out of every pore in his body to hang a toxic cloud over the heads of everyone in the room.

"Is there a problem?" Grandfather Hyūga asked after a sip of tea.

Iyashi bit his tongue and the words he said was disgusting enough to vomit on. "I understand, Grandfather. The strength of the clan is of the utmost importance."

"You are dismissed."

Iyashi’s melted the moment he slid the door close behind him. The extent of his fury showed in the quakes of his arms, a sign that there would be worse to come.

This was not what Iyashi wanted to hear only a week before the wedding. His dreams of finally proving he was worthy had been brutally crushed by Neji, again. There was no one Iyashi hated more than Neji Hyūga.

All Iyashi’s life he's had to watch Neji become the favorite. He was helpless as the branch member grew stronger, faster, and eventually into the uncontested power of the Hyūga clan. Now Iyashi had to suffer this dishonor. He wasn't even good enough to fuck the heiress, the woman who was supposed to become his wife, but a stupid branch member was.

Iyashi stormed through the main compound. The servants with their byakugan quickly detoured out the way of his path, unwilling to be toppled by his anger. The hallways were empty, except for one who did not fear him.

Neji was delivering Grandfather's dinner. Both Hyūga stopped beside one another, shoulder to shoulder, of the same height, and the same empty white eyes.

"I guess if I have been butt-fucking you since you were a boy, you'd be my favorite too," Iyashi snarled.

Neji did not fold nor entertain Iyashi anger. "I do my duty, nothing more."

As if the word 'duty' was an insult, Iyashi lost himself.

The porcelain tea cups shattered against the wood. Neji held his hands to his head, the seal growing in intensity as if someone had place a drill spinning through his skull. The strongest Hyūga of his generation was helpless against the jutsu he had no counter for. Neji was brought to his knees with the ease of a boot on an ant.

"Iyashi." The voice carried the weight of threat, authority, and command with ease.

Iyashi jerked his hands behind his back like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

Hinata Hyūga kept her head bowed properly with respect and submission, but slid between the two men with purpose and subtle ease.

"Iyashi-sama, you must be careful who you take your anger out on." In an instant, her voice had changed to a fearful pleading and Iyashi wondered if he imagined the strength in her voice.

"Grandfather will punish you severely if you kill Neji and he will no doubt never allow you to marry..."
Hinata was the voice of reason and Iyashi calmed, slightly. She was right. Iyashi knew Grandfather would probably destroy him in the most painful way imaginable if he killed Grandfather's favorite butt-toy.

Iyashi's breath hitched when Hinata's hand slid along his chest. "Iyashi-sama," she mewled. "I would hate to see harm come to your person. Allow me the privilege of pleasing you to calm your mind."

In many ways, it hurt Neji more to see Hinata act this way in order to save his life.

Iyashi noticed the fine details of Neji's brooding expression. Neji's eyes followed Iyashi hands that strayed underneath Hinata's shirt.

"Yes," Iyashi said as he whispered to Hinata. "I will have you please me tonight."

Iyashi gave Neji a smug look as he led Hinata down the hall. Hinata had become used to such displays of dominance between the two men. They couldn't harm each other and instead she often became the object in their game of hatred. Neji watched with a dark expression when Iyashi led Hinata down the hallway towards Iyashi's room.

Neji could still feel the burn along his forehead, as if it longed to reach a boiling point and melt everything it touched. He was still a branch member.

Nihei never really liked Hinata Hyūga.

Nevertheless, her personal feelings could not detriment her duty. As a branch member who never excelled at the Jyuuken style, Nihei did what she was ordered even if that meant lapping her tongue at Hinata's pink folds.

Nihei look over pale hills of butt cheeks and could see Hinata's head bobbing up and down. Iyashi leaned backwards against the headboard, clawing his hand through blue silk strands.

"Tell me how much you like it," Iyashi demanded.

"I like it so much I want more," Hinata begged.

Iyashi caught Nihei's eyes and ordered, "I want her soaking."

Nihei acknowledged and vigorously sucked her mouth between Hinata's legs and pumped the woman into a bountiful lather.

Nihei didn't understand why the main members always chose Hinata first to please them. The moment Grandfather had opened Hinata to the clan everyone was scrambling to fuck her. Hinata was always more likely to be whipped than killed. Not only that, but Hinata was the only branch member to ever receive a promotion. Once you were assigned a station, you stayed there for life and somehow Hinata had been promoted to the heiress's personal attendant, the most prized position of any branch member. Even as a branch member, Hinata still had status, she was still special.

"Is she ready?"

Nihei had done her job well and looked at the glistening pussy with pride. "Yes, Iyashi-sama, she is ready for you."

Iyashi peeled Hinata up while Nihei waited patiently for her next set of instructions. Iyashi's hot
breath whispered against Hinata's face, a cruel smirk on his lips. "You owe me a life."

"Iyashi, no-

Nihei screamed and looked for anyone's help to relieve the pain. Her hand outstretched toward Hinata's blank stare. The glowing green burned into Nihei's skin until her eyes splattered in a white rain. It was nothing more than her fate.

Iyashi though Hinata Hyūga was perfect.

"Do you have a problem?" Iyashi asked as he teased his lips along Hinata's seal. He held her life in his hands and always loved reminding her how fragile it was, like clipping the wings of a bird.

"All I want to do is serve you," Hinata answered.

Iyashi moved and kicked the dead corpse off his bed like trash into a trash bin. He shoved Hinata forward into the bed and her hair flooded over her pale skin. Iyashi had plans for her. When he came to power, he was going make Hinata his personal mistress. Everything about her, her body, her demeanor, the way she did everything he ordered, was perfect.

Iyashi tempted her cock along the crack of her ass. "Do you care about Neji?"

Hinata winced as his nails dug into her skin. "I only care about you Iyashi-sama."

And she gave perfect answers. Iyashi kissed along her neck until he journeyed to her lips. He paused and for a moment, wished there was a spark of life in her blank eyes. "Show me."

To show her commitment, Hinata widened her legs underneath him in invitation. As far as Iyashi was concerned, he never needed an invitation to enter his own house. He hoped Neji was watching. Before Iyashi managed to pleasure the pussy he had meticulously prepared, the door knocked.

"What?!" Iyashi demanded.

A frightened servant entered the room. "Excuse me Iyashi-sama, Elder Grandfather requests Hinata to serve Neji tonight."

Iyashi went rigid and knew the timing hadn't been a coincidence. The interruption was an unspoken punishment for acting out against Neji. In a burst of anger, there was suddenly another dead branch member as the servant dropped to the ground.

In the blink of an eye, Hinata slipped from underneath Iyashi as if always looking for an exit. In seconds a robe hugged her skin. "I am truly sorry," Hinata replied with an even voice and didn't look back when she left the room.

He had lost yet again to Neji. Iyashi's best was never enough. He was tired of chasing perfection.

Neji could not reject a gift, especially from his Grandfather. He unwrapped Hinata of her clothes and held her like a piece of treasure. He rode her as gentle as a prince with his prized mount and was rewarded by her moans of pleasure.

Neji quickened, the squelch when he pulled in an out, the warmth of her around him. Neji ejaculated as if handing his load over for safekeeping. He lay in the bed with Hinata safely underneath him. He was so relieve he didn't have to watch Iyashi fuck her tonight.
"I'm going to kill Iyashi," Neji promised her, angry over the way Hinata was treated more than the burning seal. Over the last few months, they had gotten closer and Neji prided himself on the fact that after the nights Hinata finished attending to Hanabi, she willingly entered his bed.

"Neji, you never told me about Grandfather's offer."

Neji tensed and replied impassively, "It wasn't important."

"He gave you everything you wanted. He gave you an heir in the main family."

She voiced the small doubts that Neji swat away with steel resolve. No one had made Neji place a placebo in his grandfather's medicine so that he naturally got too weak to handle many of the daily affairs of the clan. No one made him choose Hinata.

"I choose my own fate, not one given to me."

Fate was just the excuse that justified keeping the branch family in their place.

Neji wasn't one to voice his emotions aloud and usually kept them guarded behind a frigid and brooding expression. But Neji wanted Hinata to know exactly how dedicated to the cause he was.


"I love you too."

In the middle of the night, Hinata slithered from underneath Neji's arm. She gathered her clothing and navigated the branch living quarters until she reached the small cabin style beds where the branch members slept. She shuffled through her utility belt and grabbed a seal kunai.

First, she made sure no one was watching and activated her byakugan. Grandfather was coughing in his sleep, Hanabi was in the dojo, Iyashi had left the compound to terrorize a cup of sake, and the guards were not paying attention to her.

Hinata disappeared and in a blink she opened her eyes inside of her room in the ANBU underground. The room was stacked with towers of large tomes and fortresses of scrolls. A pen scratched in the darkness of the room and a figure sat hunched underneath the lamp light at the desk.

"Boss." The shadow clone replied.

Hinata Hyuuga put down her quill, without pause, dismissed the shadow clone, created another one and sent her back. The hiraishin kunai she had "borrowed" from Naruto was useful in increasing her mobility in and out of the compound. Even though she could only make one, the shadow clone technique had become invaluable over the past few weeks.

Hinata pursed her lips as the memories sped through her head. She dipped her quill in the ink jar and added two more ticks to the body count. Iyashi was growing worse the closer the wedding neared. Iyashi was the bitter and angry result of a social system that needed to be broken.

Hinata's breath hitched when the memories ended with the clone's night with Neji. Hinata hated having sex with Neji. He always wanted to prolong the act and attempt to pleasure her. It has been a long time since Hinata took pleasure from sex. She would rather just get it over with.

But she wore her smile, placing it on as easily as a mask.

She dipped the quill and continued to copy the last tome. It had been a slow process sneaking them
out of the compound unawares. To be truly subtle takes time. The old weary paper was suddenly spotted with blood. Hinata paused and automatically wiped away the blood that dripped from her nose.

The scratching of the pen didn't miss a beat when the door to her room suddenly slammed open.

"My little Fox," Snake cooed and greeted her student by giving a handshake to Hinata's breasts.

"Snake Sensei," Hinata said patiently, even while Snake slid her hand downwards and inside the hem of Hinata's ANBU pants. "I will not be your entertainment tonight."

Anko peeled off her mask in order to taste Hinata's milky pale skin, to taste the fruit she had nurtured and raised.

Anko flipped backwards and landed with a numbness in her right arm. Hinata stood in front of her desk wearing only the black ANBU undershirt and pants. Anko didn't mind the challenge. It was better when they struggled anyways.

Her left arm shot forwards and three snakes leapt in the air. Hinata was not intimidated by their fangs, three snaps of her leg in the air, and the snakes had been kicked to the other side of the room.

Anko spun in the air like a wrecking ball, a maniacal laugh as she twisted between Hinata's Jyūken strikes. Their speed was an even match as they whipped around the room. Anko jumped and evaded a low kick by falling backwards against the desk and grabbed the jar of ink. Hinata looked up and a rain of black descended.

Anko was impressed that Hinata maintained her stance even while Hinata's eyes was burning. Even so, Hinata had slowed and Anko eagerly took advantage. Hinata was slammed backwards against the floor, her breasts wobbled, the stacks of books wobbled and fell to the floor.

A rip and tear as the black undershirt was torn away. Hinata was rapidly blinking the dark intruder from her eyes, tears slid from the sting.

Anko's long tongue traced Hinata's body and tasted how ruined she was. Hinata was no longer pure and innocent, but had been dragged through the dirt, tainted, stained, and knew what darkness tasted like. This was the body Anko took pride in creating.

"You are mine."

"Sensei," and Anko recognized those eyes. They were the eyes of someone tired of being weighed down by other people. They were the eyes of Anko right before she dug her fangs into Orochimaru and ran. "My body belongs to me. I choose who I give myself to."

Anko's body went cold as if she had been dipped in a tub of ice. She clutched a hand to her neck. "What poison is this?"

"The antidote is in your room," Hinata eyes narrowed. "You have five minutes."

Anko was immune to several different types of poisons and could feel the deadliness of it in her system. Anko stood with a smirk and picked up her mask. She stopped at the door and released a mad cackled. "Who knew a Hyūga would be my best student."

Hinata watched Anko intensely as she left, watched when Anko found the antidote, watched when Anko went to find new prey to stalk. Then, Hinata picked herself up and ran toward the bathroom. She splashed cold water and attempted to rinse out her stinging eyes. She sighed in relief when she
picked herself up and looked at the stranger in the mirror.

Hinata braced herself for the worse part. She tightened her grip on the counter when she finally deactivated her byakugan. The pain hit her like a strike to an anvil. Her hand slipped, she wilted toward the floor, and clutched her ringing head. Blood leaked from her nose.

She honestly couldn't figure out what was wrong with her. Her headaches had turned into migraines and her migraines had turned into ringing bells of hell. Now there was blood every time she used her byakugan.

Instinctively her hand scrambled into her pocket. Hinata stared at the empty medicine bottle. She tightened her grip on the empty bottle as if that could relieve the pain. It had been empty for months but Hinata would not go groveling to Sakura for more.

Hinata Hyūga did not beg.

Her pride was the only thing she had left to hold onto, and she clung to it like the dying for air.

"Have a good day at work," Naruto said lazily as he rolled over in the bed. "Don't get killed," he half-teased, half serious.

Mei shook her head, leaned forward, evaded his morning breath, and kissed him on the cheek. Naruto pouted.

Mei pulled away from his side of the bed and asked, "What are your plans today?"

Naruto stretched out on the wavy water bed. "There's a council meeting back at Konoha I should probably attend but I'll just send a shadow clone." Naruto yawned. "I was going to do some fixing around the compound today."

Mei knew better than that. "Have fun cleaning," Mei teased before she left the house and went to work.

Naruto waited until she was gone to turn over and shuffle through his bags on the floor. He never took his medicine in front of her. He was well aware that being around Mei was like dancing around fire. Naruto got out of bed and dressed. He combed his hands through his blonde hair and decided he should stake out the location even before the meeting. He slipped out through the window, gave the ANBU on the roof a quick wave, and disappeared in a speed of red chakra.

Naruto decided if he was ever going to have a secret meeting, it would not be in the inside of a volcano. He stood at the highest point in Kirigakure and could see the seven islands that dotted the distance.

Naruto sensed several chakra signatures already inside that large lava behemoth. He scouted the terrain around the volcano and noted any environmental advantages he could use in case he had to make a quick exit.

Ninja began to converge on the volcano.

It wasn't hard for Naruto to catch one unawares. He targeted a ninja separate from the rest of the pack, who seemed to have the idea of scouting the terrain like Naruto had done before. Naruto charged forward with the speed of sage mode and kneed the ninja in the back. A misfired jutsu went off and rocks tumbled downhill. He pulled the Mist hitai-ite from the ninja's forehead.
Naruto stole his identity and then bound the unconscious Mist ninja and hid him against the rocks with a henge.

Naruto jumped over the rim of the volcano and quickly stuck his chakra against the rocks as molten lava bubble only a few feet beneath him.

Henged as the Mist ninja he had subdued, Naruto crawled toward the opening of the tunnel. A ninja stopped him at the entrance and demanded the password.

Naruto repeated the words he copied from the mission folders. The ninja nodded in confirmation. "I'm going to need all of your weapon and scrolls."

Without complaint Naruto gave up his tool belt, scrolls, and weapons. He watched as the ninja searched through them for anything suspicious, placed a tag on them, and then stacked them with a pile of equipment.

"Keep going straight through this tunnel and you will find the meeting place."

Naruto followed the ninja's directions and went straight into the heated darkness. He was eager to save Kirigakure and still have enough time to be back home for dinner.

It had started off as a normal council meeting.

The Hokage stood before the podium. "We are all very much saddened by the Late Daimyo's death," The Hokage began. "I have sent Shikaku to handle the situation in the capital on my behalf and the sanctions placed on Konoha by the Fire Daimyo have been lifted. We can now continue business as usual."

No one in the council room was fooled and the Hokage didn't attempt to fool anyone. None of the clan leaders cared about politicians unless their money was involved.

The Hokage continued to the first item of important business and relayed Chouza's report on the progress of the siege. After she was finished and everyone seemed satisfied, "Lastly, we have one more item of business that needs to be taken care of. This last item is a serious matter and an accusation of treason. I invite Hinata Hyūga to the podium."

Naruto's shadow clone had been swapping notes with Kurenai like two school children until he heard Hinata's name. Naruto straightened in his seat. The front of the council room suddenly had his full attention.

Hinata traveled into the room with measured steps as if everyone in the room had been waiting all day for her. Hinata's hair was swept back in a sleek bun which boldly revealed the seal on her forehead. She raised her chin and did not waver before the clan heads, like an unyielding rock against the tide.

"I have come before you today to present evidence of treasonous acts committed by the Hyūga clan head and elders against the Hokage, the village of the Leaf, and its citizens."

A tap of wood on floor, and Grandfather Hyūga used his cane to lift himself to his feet. Hanabi cowered beside the fury of her Grandfather as his expression twisted. He demanded, "I order you back to the compound this instant."

Hinata faced the white storm in his eyes. "I have transcripts and copies of a deal between the Hyuuga clan head and Danzou, a known Konoha traitor, that willingly agreed to hand over the byakugan of"
several branch member's in exchange for Danzou's increased cooperation in the fall of the Uchiha clan."

The green of her seal glowed but Hinata did not bend to the pain.

Tsunade stood immediately. "Grandfather, as long as Hinata stands on this podium she is protected by the Leaf Village, I beseech you to stand down or you will be arrested."

Grandfather Hyuuga narrowed his eyes. There were other ways to get rid of this nuisance. "Come Hanabi."

Hanabi faced her grandfather and sat down coolly in his council seat. She said with logical reason, "Someone from the Hyūga Clan needs to vote whether or not you are guilty."

"You all will pay for this," Grandfather Hyūga thundered. The floor cracked underneath the force of his cane as he exited the council room.

Naruto wondered if he should send a shadow clone to trail him. The Hokage caught his eye and shook her head. This was not his battle to fight.

Hinata was a pillar of determination as she listed the various crimes, including blackmail, financing Orochimaru and his experiments before he was banned from the village, and the murder of hundreds of branch members.

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Grandfather Hyūga was boiling with rage once he made it back to the compound. He turned to the branch members guarding the gate. In order to ensure their cooperation he threatened, "Lock down the compound. Pass along the message to kill Hinata on sight and if any should hesitate, I will kill your children."

Every clan had secrets they kept in the shadows. It was all a matter of not getting caught.

Grandfather did what he had to do. He would have rather given the byakugan to Danzou than have his entire clan massacred for it, Orochimaru had promised to make the doujutsu stronger, and it was a branch member's duty to give their life for the betterment of the clan. He did what he did to protect his clan.

He should have killed the little bitch the moment she was out of her mother's womb. He knew she was going to be trouble, always going on about change like her mother.

The moment he reached the doors of the main quarters, he sent a branch member to gather together all the elders. If he couldn't kill Hinata from inside the council room, then he'll do it from the outside.

Grandfather hobbled toward the private vault only the highest members of the clan could gain access to. Ko was guarding the door and opened them at Grandfather's order. Grandfather entered the vault of dusty documents and old relics. Nothing seemed amiss. He reached for the tome that recorded the time period when the contract with Danzou had been signed. He opened the ledger and found the pages empty.

The book was dropped to the ground. He picked another, and another. Everything was blank. All of their history, secret jutsu, and documents were gone. Grandfather's anger suddenly turned against him and attacked him with a fit of coughs. He crashed into a box of ceremonial kunai which scattered across the ground.

How could she have possibly snuck all these books out without anyone in the clan noticing?
Grandfather narrowed his eyes and stalked to the entrance toward Ko. Ko had been Hinata's attendant when she was younger. He had to be in on it, and even if he wasn't, he was going to kill him just because he needed to see someone die.

"Grandfather, I'm sorry."

Grandfather froze as he turned and faced Neji who suddenly appeared in the room. He eyed the entrance and attempted to understand what had just happened.

"A teleportation jutsu," Neji explained. "It allowed Hinata and I to come in and out in a matter of seconds before anyone ever realized we were here."

Grandfather's wrinkled old finger pointed in accusation. "You've betrayed me. I was going to give you everything."

"Hinata and I are going to take over the clan," Neji explained as if they were having a casual conversation and not on the verge of killing each other. "Hinata wanted me to offer you the choice of being sealed and thus sparing your life but," Neji looked his Grandfather in the eye and knew the man all too well, "you would rather die."

"I am the most powerful Hyūga in history. I have made this clan strong," Grandfather declared and then challenged, "You won't kill me."

Grandfather turned his back to Neji, offering Neji the opportunity. Neji raised his hand but could not stab the old man in the back. He prided himself on being a more respectable ninja than that.

Grandfather walked to the far wall of the vault and hidden within the decorative mural on the wall was a seal. It had not been broken since the time it was first drawn. It was the ultimate secret that only the clan head could access.

Neji knew the seal was there but did not know what it was. Neji had not wanted to attempt to break the seal in case he failed to unlock it and the resulting explosion would alert the clan to what they were doing in the vault. "What is it?"

Grandfather unlocked the seal with an intricate pattern of blood, pulled back the stone, and retrieved the aged scroll. Then he dropped the scroll to the floor. Grandfather was one of the rare Hyūga born unnatural to water. With one last spiteful vengeance, the small fragile scroll was helpless against the rage of fire that erupted through the vault.

"That was the only scroll in existence with the instructions on how to take the seal off." The flames reflected in the deep pool of his white eyes. "You will always be sealed, Neji Hyūga."

In alarm, Neji's attempted to wade through the fire. That scroll was too important to lose. The dust shifted through Neji's fingers and the room clouded in smoke. The fire caught on the fake books and paperwork.

Grandfather stepped through fire as if stepping through nothing more troublesome than snow. Neji followed Grandfather out with anger gnarling at his heels. "We're trying to change the clan for the better."

"That woman has poisoned your mind," Grandfather snapped as they exited the vault and closed the door on the fire. The specialized door was enough to contain the flames.

"No," Neji argued. "She is the antidote. We have poisoned ourselves. Look at the clan, Grandfather. The branch members are more than your toys."
"Know your place," Grandfather commanded. "You have grown arrogant and I see I have spoiled you too much. Your fate is as a branch member."

"Fuck fate," Neji spat, and surprised himself with the curse word. He was unused to how base they tasted.

"Now you want to sound like a peasant too?" Grandfather reprimanded, suddenly angrier at Neji for his diction than his betrayal. "At least talk like you're intelligent."

Neji straightened his shoulders. "This clan has to change."

Grandfather narrowed his eyes. The tap of his cane preceded his footsteps until he was right before Neji and looked into his grandson's eyes. "Then do it. Kill me."

Killing was supposed to come easy to ninja. Neji had never hesitated but no amount of willpower could move the block of ice that was his arm.

Grandfather whipped around and struck Neji with the end of his cane, a precise strike against the temple that slammed Neji against the ground.

"Stupid boy," Grandfather spat as he turned, cane tapping as he walked down the hall to kill Hinata.

Hinata winced as her migraine was beginning to flare up at the most inopportune time. She held her ground at the podium until she finished presenting the evidence to the council.

"Thank you," The Hokage replied when Hinata finished. The Hokage returned to the podium. "I have personally overlooked all of the documents myself and they are indeed authentic. I would like to begin a vote to convict the Hyūga Clan Head and Elders for treason."

"The Hyūga clan approves." Hanabi did not hesitate to pass judgment.

The rest of the clans followed. After a majority vote, the Hyūga Clan Head and elders were officially criminals. When their fates were decided, Hinata Hyūga's shadow clone disappeared from the council room in a puff of smoke.

"Uzumaki," Naruto was literally twitching in his chair, like a crackhead addicted to being needed. "Would you please escort the police force and Hanabi Hyūga into the Compound to apprehend the traitors? Kill anyone who resist."

"Finally," Naruto sighed in relief.

Naruto Uzumaki never hesitated at the chance to help someone to their feet, but eventually, people had to pull themselves up.

The four elders of the Hyuuga clan converged on the rarely used room. It was as bare as a torturer's cell and the only item of any note was the large rune drawn on the floor in blood. It had five points and needed five elders to activate the caged bird seal from afar.

But Hinata saved them the trouble. She stood at the center of the arcanic seal, waiting. All four elders brought their hands to court the familiar hands signs. Before fingers could touch, lightning blinded the room.

With her byakugan active she only had to turn her head and looked into the blank eyes of her
Grandfather. She waited as they watched each other through the walls until eventually he stepped over the burnt husks and brushed them away like dead insects.

"You think you can beat me?" Grandfather declared. "I am a master."

Hinata calmly replied in turn, "And you are old."

Hinata frowned. This wasn't a part of her plan. Neji was supposed to have taken care of him.

"I have great respect for you Grandfather but I do not believe in your ways. Submit and I will spare your life."

"I am a Hyūga. I will never submit."

In a slow crawl he began to take off his robes. The mass of white cloth plummeted like a rock to the floor, shedding his hidden training weights. Scars traveled over the hills and valleys of his wrinkled skin. His back popped as he straightened his shoulders and gently rested his cane against the wall as if sitting down a dying lover.

Then Grandfather Hyūga, the first to ever master the Jyūken style, entered his stance.

Hinata did the same and two generations of different ideals faced each other. They circled along the runes.

"I assume you already know that I killed your mother."

"I know," Hinata said, careful not to let the conversation keep her off-guard.

"She had poisoned my son. Made him weak and soft. She spat on our traditions. And so while your father was out on a mission, I killed her. She was a treasonous bitch trying to destroy the clan."

Hinata answered, "It is our traditions that are destroying us. If you truly believe in them then why do you keep attempting to work around them for the sake of power? You are too stubborn to see that there can be other ways of doing things. There is no one right answer."

When you got to be Grandfather's age, there was only one right way of doing things – the old way, the traditional way, the only way he knew.

Hinata stepped back when he whipped his hand forward. She was faster and immediately took advantage of her speed as she slipped in and out of his strikes. She spun on her heels, and with both palms, lightning sprouted from her hands.

Grandfather took one step to the side and evaded the large crackle of chakra with the least amount of effort.

Hinata struck forward. Grandfather's expression turned smug when he stepped backwards and she missed him completely, until two pointed fangs uncoiled out her sleeve. Venom bit deep into the wrinkled skin and snatched it away like paper when Grandfather ripped the bright red snake from his skin. He cooked it alive in a burning glow between his hands.

Hinata watched as her favorite summon shriveled and cooked. She struck in an attempt to save the wily snake, had the remains were thrown in her face, and Grandfather wavered backwards toward the wall.

Blindly Hinata struck forward, Grandfather shifted his head to the side and she missed by inches.
Still attempting to shake the cooked remnants from her eyes, she didn't see the cane.

Grandfather snatched the cane from behind his back and countered.

Hinata winced as the chakra enhanced cane went straight through her flesh, muscle, and bone, and out the other side of her thigh.

Both Hyuuga's fell to the ground.

Hinata wiped her eyes and then pulled the cane from her leg. It squelched, moving through skin and sinew and as if unplugging a hole, blood rushed over her pants. Hinata reached to heal the wound, but she was forced to pause.

"Make another move and I'll burn you to dust." Grandfather had only one more seal to complete. Any kind of movement, and Grandfather will send an inferno to heal her pain.

Grandfather was dying from poison and Hinata was growing dizzy from the blood loss. Each wondered who would give out first. They watched each other hawkishly. Their bykugan studied every weakness, every slight movement, every dying breath.

Blood began to run down Hinata's nose and the migraine she had managed to ignore so far demanded to be heard.

"I always knew you'd be trouble, which is why I put safeguards in place in case you did miraculously survive ANBU."

"What have you done to me?" Hinata asked, finally understanding that the headaches were not just headaches.

Grandfather was smug even as the venom circulated in his body. "I never put your seal on correctly. Every time you activate your byakugan chakra leaks from the chakra nodes in your temples and builds pressure against your brain. It's an ingenious manipulation of the seal, a slow sort of poison. From the looks of it, you don't have very long either."

"Long enough to watch you die." Hinata spat blood onto his white pants.

Suddenly there were footsteps but neither Hyūga broke their stare as Neji rounded the corner.

"Neji, help me up and take me to the hospital," Grandfather demanded.

Hinata slouched against the wall and fluttered her eyes as her head lolled to the side. "Neji," she begged his name.

Neji looked between both his Grandfather and Hinata.

"Stop hesitating and help me. I'm dying."

"Neji," Hinata breathed as she looked at him from under her lashes. As if they would be her last words, "I've always loved you."

"Hinata," Neji said startled as he rushed to her side and began to tend to her wounds. Cooling green chakra flowed over Hinata's thigh.

"I don't know if I'm going to make it," Hinata whispered and yearned thirsty for his touch. Her lips tread lightly and Neji pressed into her mouth. She moaned as their tongues dance and breathed quivering into his mouth. "I'm so scared."
Neji pulled away. He pressed his seal to her seal, a sign of his affection. "Don't worry. I'll take care of you."

Grandfather vomited blood as he watched the sickening display of melodrama. For a brief second, Grandfather caught Hinata's eyes before they entered another long drawn out kiss while he was sitting there dying. Hinata's smile was smug. Grandfather suddenly realized that all this time Hinata had been taking Neji slowly away from him, the pillar he leaned on for strength - That fucking conniving deceitful bitch.

Neji wrapped her thigh with his torn sleeve and helped Hinata to stand. "Do you think you're strong enough for the next phase?"

"I'll be fine," Hinata said as she leaned down and picked up the cane, lingering her hand on Neji's chest as if hesitant to leave. "Take care of your Grandfather."

The cane tapped as Hinata Hyūga forced herself down the hallway.

"I'm sorry," Neji whispered.

"I don't want to hear your fucking apologies," Grandfather snapped as his body grew numb, without pain. It was a rather sweet sort of poison, as sweet and deadly as its maker.

Neji sat down in the seiza position, and respectfully joined his Grandfather's dying moments. Neji attempted not to crack but tears ran away from his eyes.

"Stop crying, that's disgusting," Grandfather snapped as the chill blanketed his body. "You better take good care of this clan."

"I will," Neji promised.

Then the sweet poison sang him a lullaby into a painless sleep.

Neji tightened his arms around the man who had been the first to recognize his strength, his potential, and made him feel as if he mattered. He was the one who taught Neji about power and that power was not always wielded by the strongest. No matter how much Neji trained or studied he had been fated to always be nothing more than a mere branch member.

Neji Hyūga was more than. He was in love with Hinata, he was a born prodigy, student of Maito Gai, and he was the grandson of the greatest Hyuuga who has ever lived. Neji Hyūga refused to be labeled any longer by the seal he wore on his forehead.

Naruto and Hanabi entered the compound. Hanabi had made it quite clear that Naruto was to follow her orders and nothing more. The moment Hanabi entered she ordered the branch members at the gate, who were watching the inside of the main building with apt attention, to gather all of the Hyūga into the courtyard.

Hinata emerged onto the steps and both Hanabi and Naruto raced to meet her. Naruto slowed his frantic pace and attempted not to burden her with his concerns.

"The Elders and Clan Heads are inside. Hanabi, would you please show Uzumaki and the police where their corpses are?"

"All of them? The old man is dead?" Naruto questioned.
Hinata gave Naruto a blank look. "He resisted."

Naruto might not have agreed with Grandfather Hyūga very often, but the old man had earned Naruto's respect.

The police easily apprehended the corpses as a crowd of Hyūga gathered to watch the bodies of their Elders carried out of the building. Hinata stopped the chief of police. "You have confirmed that they are dead. Where are you taking the bodies?"

"It is customary to take the corpses of criminals to the T&I unit to be examined for anymore secrets."

Hinata frowned. The chief cringed as if you could hear the crack of lightning in the distance.

"I will not have you defile the corpses of our Elders. You will take them directly to the Buddhist temple to be prepared for burial and they will be buried on Hyūga land."

"I apologize but we cannot-" the chief suddenly hesitated at the force of the ice cold killer intent. "Right away."

Hinata smiled sweetly. "Thank you for your cooperation."

After the corpses were taken out of the compound, Hanabi addressed the crowded courtyard filled with Hyūga. Naruto realized he was very much in the way, and hung back against the gate – just in case.

Hanabi declared, "Today our Clan Head and Elders were convicted of treason by the Council. It has been revealed that the people we trusted to lead the clan are traitors of Konoha. At the death of our dear Grandfather, and as heiress, I inherit the title of Clan Head." Hanabi overlooked the crowd of moon drop eyes. "My first act as Clan Head is to abdicate my title and bestow it upon Hinata Hyūga who has proved her loyalty, her love, and dedication to this clan time and time again."

Instantly there was resistance from the clan who couldn't comprehend any other way of doing things. "She is a branch member."

Hinata handed Hanabi the cane, blood spread across the white bandage on her thigh, but she treated it like nothing more than a scratch. Hinata stood at the top of the stairs and took center stage.

"If the branch family was really that inferior to the main how do you explain Neji, the strongest Hyuuga among us?" Hinata challenged. "If the branch is so inferior how do you explain taking the eyes of babes and implanting their byakugan into the main of those born without them? How do you explain the use of seals to keep the branch in their place?"

"That's how things are," A main member argued.

"Everything we have been taught, our traditions, and our ways are wrong. I come before you as one who has seen both sides. I have been forced to compete against my own sister, forced to become stronger, under the threat of that terrifying fear of being branded. The Main fear because we know the truth even if we won't admit it to ourselves - being branded means becoming a slave. What other clan in Konoha forces their branch family to serve them under threat of death?"

"We have justified our traditions because they make us stronger. Are we truly stronger? During the war our enemy created specialized bombs just to get pass our byakugan. Our aunts and uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, fathers, and mothers died because without their sight, they couldn't do anything else. They didn't know elemental chakra, they didn't know summons, and without their byakugan they couldn't even use what we are famed for, our Jyūken taijutsu."
It is time that you ask yourselves are we really stronger? It is time that we were all equal, time that we all wear a seal to mark the burden we carry, and time that we accept that the Hyūga are not perfect because we can do better than this."

"And what if we refuse?" A woman asked as she held her first-born against her chest. "I refuse to allow you to brand my son."

"If you refuse, I will take your eyes and banish you from the clan."

Several branch members shouted. Iyashi stepped from the crowd. "This is idiotic. A main member does not take orders from a branch. If Hanabi abdicates her position I am the next rightful heir."

Hinata tilted her head. "Neji, would you please?"

"Of course Hinata-sama," Neji answered as he walked in to the crowd and pulled Iyashi onto the steps.

"Let go of me you filthy insect," Iyashi spat. Neji reached down and broke Iyashi's wrists with two quick precise strike, disabling him of using jutsu. Neji forced Iyashi to his knees. Iyashi looked up into the fathomless depths of Hinata's blank eyes.

"You traitorous bitch," Iyashi spat.

Hinata leaned down and move forward, placing her lips softly against Iyashi's ear with a kiss. There was nothing soft and submissive about her voice, but akin to the sharp edge of glass. "You owe me a life."

Lightning cracked from her fingertips and lit the stairs in a brilliance of fireworks. The entire courtyard went quiet as they watched the lightning combined Jyuukan strike. If there was anything that caught a Hyūga's attention it was a display of power.

Hinata reached in her belt and grabbed a scroll she had found in the vault. Hanabi knelt fearless before Hinata on the steps. The ink was cold on Hanabi's skin as Hinata brushed the ink along her forehead. The family watched on in horror as the ink dried.

In order to apply the seal, Hinata needed to activate her byakugan and concentrate her chakra directly to the nodes that instructed the eyes. Only a byakugan could correctly apply the seal.

The black ink began to glow green as it mixed with chakra until it finally settled on Hanabi's forehead. Hanabi could feel the added weight as she stood and displayed her seal to the family. It certainly wasn't the end of the world.

"Are there any more volunteers?" Hinata asked.

Every branch turned to a main member. There was a tense unwilling silence.

"I will," a soft voice replied. Hinata watched as a boy the age of a genin parted the crowd and journeyed to the stairs. Hohei Hyūga felt his mouth go dry when all eyes were on him. His mother had grasped his shirt but the fine silk slipped from her fingers.

Hohei stood before Hinata. "I'll do it."

Hinata leaned and brushed his hair from his face. "You are very brave."

"I'm scared," Hohei countered, "But it's true, so many of us died."
Hohei had been there, during the battle against Mountain. He had seen the line of corpses and the Hyūga who had joined it. He would have been killed himself if someone else hadn't interfered. The little Hyūga who needed glasses could see clearer than all the rest.

Hohei briefly looked at Neji who nodded in encouragement. Hinata dipped the ink and brushed it against his head. Hohei closed his eyes. It didn't hurt as much as he thought it would.

When it was done, Hinata raised his chin and had the young boy look at her. Hohei blushed instantly as she pressed her lips to his seal.

"May it always protect you and never keep you caged."

Even though unwilling, the rest of the main family eventually came forward. They preferred to be sealed than to give up their eyes. Without their eyes they were no longer a Hyūga and that was unacceptable.

Hinata's chakra was almost depleted when she finished and stood before the clan at the cusp of change. It had been a long grueling process to work through the system. It was a different course than Itachi, but hopefully the better one.

"For generations we have called it the caged bird seal but we were the ones keeping ourselves caged. It is time for us to free ourselves."

Naruto jerked from his position at the gate when he sensed something wrong with Hinata's chakra as if the energy of her life force was beginning to panic. Hinata wavered and couldn't hide the blood when she coughed. The blood splattered in contrast with her white sleeve.

There were shouts and gasps, but all Hinata heard was her satisfied smile.

Hinata Hyūga collapsed in a blossoming flower of red.

Mei Terumi did not rush.

Mist ninja, secretaries, and attendants swept past her to escape the tower. Mei was the only person moving against the tide. One of the rebel ninja rounded the corner, marked by the blood streaked across his hitai-ite. He stumbled and stared at Mei who arched one eyebrow. She studied him as a fisherman would study a fish in order to determine if he was good enough to cook or small enough to throw back to sea.

The blood streaked Mist ninja turned and ran back the way he came.

"Pathetic," Mei sneered as she continued unhindered down the hallway. A ninja that cowardly didn't deserve to live, but the irony was it was the cowards who outlived the heroes.

There were still two guards who had kept their post in the midst of the chaos. These guards didn't owe their allegiance to the Mizukage but to the precious items they protected. Even if she died, she knew these guards would still be standing.

Mei stopped at the large sealed door. She swiped her blood along the seal and applied her chakra. The iron slid heavy against the floor and revealed a dark room with seven podiums.

Six were empty.

Mei touched the hilt of the last sword in Kirigakure's possession. She hefted the sword 'Kiba' over
her shoulder which crackled with lightning at the touch of her chakra. As if tired of being cooped up, Fang was ready for the taste of blood.

Mei Terumi entered her darkened office. It glowed in fluorescent blue and a shadow swam across the floor as a great white shark passed across the window.

"They say you used to change my diapers."

Incisors gleamed like the sharp edge of a sword when Suigetsu smiled. The sword Hiramekarei sat across his lap, both Chojuro and Mangetsu's sword, as if mocking her. Suigetsu's mother had been on Mei's genin team. Mei knew that Suigetsu once used to be a shy little boy that crawled after his mother's breasts. The years have twisted him. He was a vessel of darkness that was born in Kiri and nurtured every year he had been a prisoner of Orochimaru.

"What do you want?" Mei asked. "Do you want the title of swordsmen? I think you've earned that." Mei tried to reason with him, trick him to put his guard down before she stabbed him in the back.

Suigetsu sneered as he remembered the past. "I never really wanted to be a swordsmen. I just want to kill."

The elongated glass window began to crack until the ocean entered the room. Jets of water clashed against one another.

Mei's sword lit the deep blue with lightning and Suigetsu evaded each attack with the speed of a missile. Mei realized that for the first time in her life, she had the disadvantage underwater. Mei felt every creak of age as Suigetsu swept around her like a darting piranha.

She finished a series of hands seals and the water coalesced until she was propelled to the surface. Suigetsu followed and pulled himself from the ocean with an eerie smile.

Both riders rode waves as if they had been born on one.

"If I were you, I'd hurry up before Konoha blames Kiri for killing their wonder boy."

Mei realized suddenly with Samehada in Suigetsu's possession, he knew Naruto was in Kiri. The trap hadn't been for her.

"What did you do with Uzumaki?" Mei questioned.

Suigetsu chuckled. "Exploring our volcano."

Naruto groaned. There was no way this tunnel was this long. The chakra signatures in the distance seemed to be forever out of his reach. Eventually he sat down against the rocks. He was drenched in his own sweat and abandoned his soaked shirt on the ground. Sitting in this volcano felt as if he was being cooked alive.

Strands of his hair slipped through his fingers as he brushed the blonde strands back.

"There's no way this should be this fucking long."

Naruto's eyes widened suddenly. "Kyūbi? Are you there?" Naruto asked and when he didn't receive an answer he hit his hand back against the rocks. Fucking genjutsu.

It was easy to get out of a genjutsu, if at first you knew you were in one.
Naruto hadn't fallen for a genjutsu in a long time, not with Boar on his team. Naruto used the technique with the Kyūbi's chakra to disrupt the genjutsu.

**About damn time you figured it out.** The Kyūbi snarled.

"It wasn't that obvious."

Naruto's expression dropped once he realized the situation he had just gotten himself into. He was caged in all sides by rock. Naruto reached for his hiraishin kunai and cursed when he found no weapons on his person. He stilled and sensed for chakra signatures but didn't find any in the vicinity.

**Congratulations, you walked into a trap.**

"Yeah, but this trap couldn't have been made for me. The only person who knows I'm in Kiri is Mei. I didn't think she wanted to get rid of me so soon."

Naruto created a shadow clone. It was a tight squeeze to form a rasengan. The whirling ball of chakra blasted into the rocks and dissipated the moment lava touched skin. Naruto jerked his hand away as crimson ooze began to leak into the small space.

He dismissed his clone and pressed his back against the rocks. "Do you think we can survive being burned alive by lava?"

**Sometimes your idiocy has no bounds. If you let me loose I can get us out of here.**

"You'd think you would have learned by now I'm never going to fall for that."

**Sometimes I think you're purposefully trying to get us killed.**

"I'll figure something out."

Naruto finished a series of hand signs. Water spewed from his mouth. It turned to steam when it touched the creeping lava. The heat swept across Naruto's skin. Naruto realized bitterly that he should not have tackled a mission of this size alone. He should have never been in Kirigakure.

"How the hell did they do this anyways?" Naruto asked as he examined the smooth surface of rock. It mirrored the inside of rock cages commonly used by those with earth nature.

"It's as if there is Mountain ninja in Kiri…" Naruto's heart thudded against his chest. "Oh shit."

Kagome tasted the smoke on her tongue before it wafted into the air. She leaned back against the sculpted six-pack. The sheets slipped between her bare skin. Beneath her, smoke caressed Kakashi's pale face and white hair splayed across their small cot.

Kagome was rather disappointed when she finally got the mask off. He wasn't hiding any hideous deformity or scars, simply two lips that preferred not to be kissed.

Kagome took the cigarette bud from her mouth and pressed it against the tender skin of her wrists. She arched into the pain, just to remind her that she was alive.

Both Kagome and Kakashi were rather comfortable. The only home they have ever truly known was that of a battlefield.

Kagome snapped up when the dark smoke began to disperse and thicken into a foggy blue. She
reached, in seconds she couldn't see the clothes before her face. Her heartbeat quickened as she blindly searched the cloth for a shuriken.

"Sperm-sac," Kagome said with a sense of urgency in her voice.

Kakashi woke in an instant, used to waking at a moment's notice. His eyes opened with his red sharingan spinning.

Kagome was jerked backwards when Kakashi suddenly pulled her away from the kunai that came out of the mist. He caught the kunai in his thigh, twisted and kicked the Mist assassin to the ground. Kagome reached through the mist toward the sound, pounced on the assassin, and pinned four needles into his neck.

Kagome didn't argue when she was forced to rely on Kakashi's sight. Kakashi helped her dress, grabbed what weapons they could, and rushed out of the tent.

"They probably targeted the leaders first," Kakashi said as shouts and alarms rang out through the camp. He guided Kagome through the mist until they reached the designated meeting place in case of an emergency.

Tsume crouched down in a coat of red and a crazed grin. She has already tasted the blood of Mist ninja, easily able to locate them by smell alone. Chouza and Naruto materialized out of the mist at the same time.

"What are Mist ninja doing here?" Naruto asked. "Do we kill them?"

"From this point forward we assume they're in league with Mountain," Kakashi answered.

Naruto attempted to disperse the mist with a wind jutsu, but it quickly thickened in seconds.

"There are several ninja keeping this mist intact. A wind jutsu won't be strong enough to end it," Kakashi said.

"We can't fight here under these conditions. We have no choice but to lead a retreat." Chouza determined.

Tsume agreed. "Fox boy and I will cover your backs. Chouza and Kakashi should lead the retreat. Make sure you take your little girlfriend with you."

"I'm not fucking running," Kagome argued.

"I know this little bitch is not talking back to me," Tsume snarled.

Chouza placed his immense weight between the two kunoichi who seemed more incline to kill each other than the enemy. "We don to have time to argue. Go."

"I'm not leaving," Kagome insisted.

Kakashi grabbed her hand and jerked her forward. "We retreat to fight another day."

Chouza grew to the size of a mountain and was the beacon that directed the army south.

Tsume turned to Naruto. "I'll deal with the ninja holding this mist together. You need to give them time enough get the fuck out of here."

Naruto nodded and honestly didn't know if he had enough chakra in this shadow clone to do the job.
He entered sage mode and targeted the chakra signatures of the mist ninja in the camp.

When the mist finally dissolved, Naruto was able to survey the extent of the situation. He sucked in his teeth as Mountain ninja spilled from their mountain like a frenzy of ants.

"Shit," Tsume said as he joined him, fresh blood coating her clothes.

"Go ahead and leave. I'm not going to have enough chakra but I'll try to distract them long enough to give us a head start."

"Good fight," Tsume said, and then went on all fours to catch up to the army and collect any stranglers along the way.

Alone on the field of battle, Naruto watched as both Mountain and Mist ninja charged his position. He had to be careful how he allotted his chakra.

Naruto's nimble hands sped through a series of hands seals and prepared the strongest wind jutsu he had in his arsenal.

"Spiraling Wind Dragon Jutsu!"

The clouds darkened, wind whipped around in a fury and snapped and twisted into a terrifying tornado. Naruto directed its movement as it swiped back and forth across the enemy lines and impeded any advancement. The wind gathered ninja off of their feet and threw them lost to the sky.

Naruto Uzumaki held his ground until there was no more chakra left. Uncontrolled, the tornado streaked across the terrain, leaving behind a ruin of broken bodies, until it disappeared in a wisp of smoke.

"How is she?" Naruto asked urgently, completely shoving Neji out of the way as Sakura walked from the emergency room. Neji didn't have to ask. He could see through the door, along with the rest of the Hyūga who sat in the hospital.

Sakura knew Naruto wasn't the best person to have in her waiting room. On a good day, he was overly concerned and cared about everyone's well-being. One a bad day, this was Hinata.

"It's not good," Sakura said honestly as she addressed the two men, who both were pushed to the side as Hanabi slid between them.

"Hinata can't die," Hanabi stated as fact, underneath a wave of killing intent more massive than her smaller frame.

Sakura could sigh inwardly. Hyūgas…

"There's nothing I can do with that seal. It's applying too much chakra to her brain. Perhaps if there was a way to take the seal off I could operate properly, if not, Hinata isn't going to last through the night."

It took a lot of skillful maneuvering for Sakura to dodge Hanabi who raced forward and slammed through the emergency room doors. Neji held his rigid silence but it was a mask for his horror. His thoughts flashed to that scroll crumpled in dust.

"It can't be removed," Neji said, steady. "Is there any other way?"

"I think you should take this time to say goodbye." Sakura knew well enough many people weren't
granted even that much.

"I might be able to get the seal off."

Almost all Hyūga in the room turned toward Naruto as if looking at a sudden overgrowth about his head.

"You can get it off?" Neji asked in awe.

"Maybe," Naruto answered and suddenly found himself underneath Neji's stare, "but I might accidentally kill her."

"She dies anyways." Neji replied. "What do you need?"

"Ink and a byakugan," Naruto replied honestly. "It requires another byakugan to get it off."

Naruto and Neji filed into the emergency room where Hinata laid on the operating table with nothing but a white sheet that covered her body. The smell of sterilization was worse than the rotting smell of death. At least a corpse knew it was dead, the sharp clean of a hospital room hinted at story of someone waiting on the cliff edge of life and death.

"Why didn't you tell me, Nee-chan?" Hanabi asked.

"I didn't want to worry you."

Hinata shifted her head weakly when Naruto and Neji entered the room.

Hanabi's demanded an answer, "Have you figured something out?"

"Naruto thinks he can get the seal off," Neji replied. "Hanabi-sama-" Neji stopped when the honorific rolled from him tongue and attempted to correct himself. "Hanabi, please wait in the sitting room."

Hanabi turned to Naruto. "If you kill her I swear I will Jyūken you so hard I will bust a ball."

"That is not a dignified way of speaking," Hinata whispered.

"I apologize Nee-chan," Hanabi said softly and turned to Naruto with the same threat. "If you kill her I swear I will destroy your scrotum."

"I got it," Naruto replied. The meaning and weight behind her threat stayed even when she left.

Naruto looked down and nothing could have been more frightening than Hinata's sick smile. She slipped her hand around his, as if he needed the strength to continue. Neji watched the display with narrowed eyes, but kept his composure.

Ink dripped on her skin.

"Stop shaking," Neji snapped.

Naruto couldn't stop the shakes in his arm as he drew the counterseal over the caged bird. He was suddenly second-guessing everything he had known. It was always like putting together the pieces of a puzzle, like a perfectly executed prank, except now it was a life or death situation and the pieces had to fit exactly right. Hinata's life couldn't have been a worse punishment for failure.

Once the design was finished, all that was left was to apply the chakra.
"I can't do it," Naruto breathed hoarsely as if someone was choking him. He could hardly understand the torrent of emotions that tossed him every which way. He was angry at her, he was happy and proud and scared and felt like a little boy grasping at fireflies, too stupid to understand they were stars.

Hinata tightened her grip around his hand. The touch of her skin brought back vivid emotions, there was a memory tickling at the edge of his skull, but it could not reach. His eyes wandered to the burn on her right arm, the one he had unintentionally made and scarred her for life. She had left a scar on him, across the organ that what his heart. Even though it was stitched and healed, it was still there. Hinata was like the moon and the darkness would be unbearable without it.

Hinata said three words that ripped him open.

"I trust you."

She handed over her life and placed it within Naruto's calloused and bloody and caring hands. Naruto checked the counter seal one more time. All of his studying and knowledge of seals had come to this moment.

Naruto pointed to the chakra nodes where Neji needed to focus his chakra. Neji activated his byakugan, as steady as the metal table, he placed his hands along Hinata's temples. Neji didn't hesitate and touched her with chakra.

The usual green glow burned a brilliant red like the tail-end of a falling star. The seal fizzled until it seared a dark scar into her forehead.

"I'm going to live?" Hinata asked in wonder, as if she had been given a second chance at life, a second chance to start over.

"You have a better chance of it," Sakura replied and needed to operate immediately to stabilize her chakra networks. Sakura grabbed the back of Naruto and Neji's shirt and shoved the men out of her operating room.

The heavy door slammed shut, the fate of the woman that they both loved hanging in the balance.

Neji crossed his arms, narrowed his eyes, and hoped. Neji said to Naruto, "Thank you for saving her."

"No, she saved herself."

It was as if two hurricanes were battling for space over Kirigakure.

Molten lava spewed across the surface of the ocean, cutting off Suigetsu's escape as he landed and narrowly dodged the lightning enhanced blade. Mei caught herself on the waves as Suigetsu flipped backwards and dove a perfect ten into the water.

"Stop running you little punk," Mei threatened with a smile. Her opponent was being careful. She understood why Suigetsu had waited to take this sword last. One direct hit from the lightning imbued blade would finish him.

He was playing with her like a dolphin on a mischievous day, continually bouncing and skidding away from her attacks.

Suigetsu condensed out of the water. "I don't know Granny, I think old age is slowing you down."
Mei snapped her hands together and activated her boiling kekkai genkai. The mist that layered Kirigakure began to sizzle but Suigetsu was unaffected and with a mad grin he naturally evaporated and disappeared among the mist.

"I've always hated the Houzuki clan," Mei muttered. They were always tricky bastards to catch. Mei stilled and attempted to sense his chakra weaving through the mist. She turned suddenly and her twin Fang sword glanced off his fin blade.

Both combatants wielded their swords with a finesse legendary to the Seven Swordsmen. Mei turned suddenly when a water clone materialized behind her and scratched Hiramekarei through her arm, but that was the only opening she gave him when lava spewed from her mouth. Lava melted over a water clone.

The Suigetsu she had been fighting also splashed back into the water. Mei created a spread of land underneath her in defense. She tensed and waited for him to attack. After several tense minutes of waiting she realize he was gone, fled when the water got too hot for him to handle.

"Little punk," Mei spat and touched the blood on the small wound she received on her shoulder. It was a petty thing and nothing as worrisome as a shark bite. Her water-proof make-up was perfect on her triumphant smile. Fourth assassination attempt failed and now that she knew the mastermind behind the attacks and what he wanted, Mei could now plan accordingly.

Mei rode the wave back to land and knew he'll be back. She raced through Kirigakure and enhanced her speed with chakra. She sincerely hoped Naruto wasn't dead yet. She was not looking forward to a war with Konoha or an empty bed. Mei jumped to the mouth of the volcano and activated a jutsu which formed plated armor that protected her from the lava terrain. She jumped straight into the lake of lava and the heat passed her by harmlessly. She swam through the lava as easy as if it was water.

Mei cracked open the hardened molten lava that encased Naruto inside it. The moment she broke through the rock she shielded him with the same jutsu and carried him to the surface. They pulled out at the top of the volcano.

Naruto's skin was red. He sucked in a fresh breath as he collapsed on his back to the ground. "I really thought I wasn't going to survive that," Naruto said honestly. Instantly, his cracked and burned skin began to heal. Any longer and there would not have been enough room for him and the lava to share.

"What's going on?"

"The rebels have aligned themselves with Konoha's best friends the Mountain ninja and Suigetsu ran like a frightened blowfish."

"Suigetsu? Fuck." Naruto picked himself up and knew Suigetsu's involvement was much more serious than he imagined. "Thanks for coming to save me."

"I only did it because I need your help taking back my village."

"Whatever you say," Naruto replied.

Mei winced as she pressed her hand against her arm.

"You're hurt," Naruto noticed.

"Something isn't right," Mei whispered when she suddenly had to steady herself against his forearm. She felt as if she was undergoing the worst period of her life. The cramps incapacitated her.
"I need to get to the tower," Mei begged, determined despite the pain. "I need to organize a counterstrike."

"I think I'm taking you to a doctor instead," Naruto answered as he scooped her in his arms. In a flash of chakra he raced down the volcano and into Kirigakure. Naruto could feel her body temperature drop. He could smell a taint in her scent.

"Stop," Mei said, "I don't think I'm going to make it."

Naruto stopped in his tracks on the streets of Kiri. "No, I am taking you to the hospital."

"I don't want to die in a hospital," Mei answered. She was the Mizukage of Kirigakure, she would make it to her tower, even if she died getting there.

"What are you talking about? That's not a fatal wound. You're going to be fine," Naruto already knew. He could smell it. Poison was the great equalizer and could bring even the strongest to their knees.

Mei's lips grew pale, as if smeared with blue lipstick. The strength to reach her tower was fleeting. She surrendered to the pain in Naruto's arms on the streets. Mei could smell the fragrance of the ocean and the mist was a lover's touch.

"Mei." Disbelief scratched at Naruto's voice. Naruto realized Mei was right, eventually you grow numb. You lose too many people in this profession, you watch too many die, and the worst part of it was, you begin to grow accustomed to it.

Mei Terumi believed in rebirth, believed her spirit would someday return to this plane of existence. Perhaps next time, she and Naruto would meet under fairer weather.

Mei Terumi's last breath was a smile.

"He killed the Mizukage."

Whispers traveled along the streets of Kirigakure. The whispers crept through cracks, sprawled along the streets, and wound through buildings like mist.

Naruto looked up in alarm. Naruto sucked in a breath when he was surrounded by civilians, ANBU, Mist ninja, rebels or not, who all believe he was the one who had killed the Mizukage of Kirigakure.

"Wait no," Naruto said as he came away with her blood on his hands. "I didn't-"

A mad laugh bounced off the cobblestone. Suigetsu appeared out of the mist and eyed Naruto like a butcher eyeing his kill.

"I guess it's true what they say, never trust a Leaf ninja."

Naruto eyes flickered in red. Suigetsu ignored the red warning lights and reached out toward the wide rimmed hat on Mei's head.

"I guess it's true what they say, never trust a Leaf ninja."

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"Don't you dare," Naruto threatened.

"Or what?" Suigetsu questioned. "You're going for the world record of two Mizukage's in one day? Even that's a new one for Kiri."

Suigetsu reached out his hand and Naruto in returned gave him a rasengan to the face. The rasengan
scattered Suigetsu like raindrops, then he drizzled on the ground and coalesced back to solid. Suigetsu gave a smug and knowing smile. This was Kirigakure and water lived in the air. No one, not even Uzumaki, could kill him here.

But Naruto saw nothing but Mei's death and attacked Suigetsu recklessly. He had no weapons on him and spent his arsenal of jutsu. The wind went straight through. Water was useless. His speed meant nothing if his attacks never made contact. Naruto refrained from using his bigger attacks, unwilling to kill the innocent civilians watching. Fighting Suigetsu was like fighting with the mist, futile.

The residents of Kiri watched the Naruto Uzumaki helpless against the man who had orchestrated this entire act just to prove his power. The shouts began low, until they rose into a chant thundering as loud as a storm coming through.

_Bloody Mist, Bloody Mist, Bloody Mist…_

The shouts sickened Naruto and were vivid enough to snap him back to his senses and realize he had to get out of here. He was in enemy territory, and even though it was hard for him to die, Naruto could surely drown.

Naruto closed his eyes and calmed the rage inside of him. Anger could not solve every situation. Naruto forced a smile, "Congratulations Suigetsu. Good luck running a country."

Suigetsu was put off by Naruto's forced calm. Suigetsu wanted to cut deeply into Naruto and he wanted Naruto feel it. Cutting with his words, "I will take everything you have. I will take everything you love and treasure. I will take your family-"

There was an instant reaction. Naruto was close enough to feel the dampness on Suigetsu skin. They were of similar height but each tried to get an upper hand with the tower of their killing intent. They were as tense as two animals about to attack.

"If you touch my family…" the Kyūbi voice had leaked into his throat.

"I'm only being fair," Suigetsu responded. "You killed mine."

For Naruto it was that terrifying moment when you realized ghosts were real and they did come howling out of your past to haunt you.

"I'm coming for Konoha."

"Not if I kill you first."

It was as if Suigetsu delighted in the sound of a challenge. A mad grin filled with the sharp edge of daggers. "Let the games begin."

x

_They were the eyes of someone tired of being weighed down by other people_
Lesson Thirty

The Will of Fire

It was as if they needed someone to acknowledge the end of their existence. The moans of the dying are the only constant in battle. The rest is chaos.

Naruto Uzumaki jumped above a jutsu so fast he was nothing more than a mirage. Ten shadow clones appeared at his side and rained rasengan down onto the battlefield, destroying the enemy lines and the ground beneath their feet. Naruto landed upon the pock-marked landscape. His katana cut deeply into the gut of a dying ninja. It wasn't even to be merciful, sometimes you could no longer stand the struggle of someone clinging to the life you had taken away from them.

Before a Mountain ninja could sneak behind a Leaf engaged in a battle of crumbling rocks, Naruto landed atop the ninja. A sharp gleam slid across the aloft katana. Naruto's breath stumbled in hesitation. He found himself face to face with Mei Terumi.

Her coy lips twisted into a deadly smile.

Naruto blinked and her vivid auburn hair turned a dull brown and her lake eyes turned a swamp green. In Naruto's hesitation, the Mountain kunoichi attacked.

Naruto was thrown back towards the ground with a sharp stake of rock thrust into his chest. As he attempted to get the foreign presence out of his body a shadow clone jumped into the path of a water jutsu and deflected it with a wall of wind. The clone cut down the kunoichi with the slippery ease of cutting through ghosts.

Naruto finally managed to yank the stake from his chest, unplugging a well of blood. The wound bled profusely down the thirsty fabric of his uniform.

"Naruto, the Mountain ninja are retreating," Kakashi's voice came over the radio plugged into his ear. A clone dissipated and Naruto suddenly retrieved memories of Mountain ninja disappearing into the ground.

"Are you sure?" Naruto asked. Mountain ninja were more likely to regroup for a surprise attack.

"A Byakugan has confirmed it. They are retreating."

Naruto sat among the corpses. He watched as the night stilled and wondered if this time, they had truly given up trying to break the Leaf's defenses. The shadow clone reached out a hand. Naruto grasped it and was lifted from the mass grave.

"What happened out there, boss?" The shadow clone asked.

Naruto turned his head as if the question could slip past his ears. He stared at a Mountain ninja a few meters away who was gasping for breath. Naruto meandered towards the ninja and studied the wound. It wasn't fatal but Naruto didn't think the ninja had yet to realize that. The wounded ninja looked expectant, as if Naruto was the shinigami to usher him down the winding river.

Naruto crouched down and used his own bandages to wrap the wound. When he was finished, Naruto created several clones and ordered. "Gather those who will live and give mercy to the dying."

Naruto could sharply feel the chakra drain from the creation of this new set of clones. He wavered as
his chakra reached a critical low. He hardly had time to replenish over the past few weeks. It seemed that there was never an end to the Mountain ninja but there was only one of him and he could only stretch so far.

Naruto scrambled in his pocket and swallowed an Akimichi chakra pill. Then he reached down and lifted the Mountain ninja onto his back. After a battle, everyone looked the same, no matter what insignia you wore.

Naruto carried the man passed the trenches and passed the heavily defended position at the Grass border.

The genin that had been assigned to Naruto met him at the gate. "Put this one with the rest of the prisoners," Naruto instructed.

"At once," Tomu replied. Tomu lifted the Mountain ninja and carried him towards the other side of camp.

Naruto continued to drag himself through the camp to convene with the leaders. Naruto paused when he heard the caw of a falcon. The bird of prey whistled a child's song and Naruto continued the rest.

Naruto lifted out his arm and waited until his arm was weighed down. Naruto used a genjutsu release to reveal the brown feathers of Boar's falcon. He grabbed the message tied to the leg and had to inform the Captain of Defense before he released the bird into the air. Naruto wouldn't want someone to accidentally shoot down one of their own.

Naruto unfurled the message and sighed in relief when Boar confirmed that the Mountain ninja were indeed retreating back to their Hidden village. With Boar's earth affinity, he was serving as a spy in the enemy camp.

Naruto entered the tent where Tsume, Chouza, and Kakashi were discussing their options.

"I've gotten confirmation from one of our spies that they are retreating all the way back to their hidden village."

"I've gotten the same from my contacts," Chouza answered. For many operations, a spy did not know the identity of another spy in the case that he is caught. Naruto himself didn't know exactly how many people they have inside Mountain. Only the Hokage knew that.

Tsume's feral grin gleamed. "They're finally running scared."

"Their supplies are running low and most of their ninja have fallen ill," Chouza said.

Naruto thought it was one of the worst crimes of war. The corpses of the dead infected the living with a cruel sort of vengeance.

"We have them on the run now, we should pursue," Tsume insisted.

"We still don't know what Kiri is planning," Kakashi added. "It could be a risk."

That was the problem. No one had any idea what was going on in Kiri since the coup.

"We should stay here and hold this border. We lost Mountain but at least we've still kept a hold of Grass." Chouza said.

The indecision held them.
"The Hokage most likely has a wider understanding of the situation. We need to consult her."

Everyone in the tent turned towards Naruto. It seemed like such a trifle thing during war but the speed in which a message could be delivered sometimes meant everything.

"Yeah, alright, I'll report back at once." Naruto rubbed his eyes. He certainly wasn't looking forward to a meeting with the Hokage.

Chouza nodded, "We will pursue or hold on the Hokage's order."

The meeting was dismissed. Naruto's shoulders were set as if gravity had a vendetta against them. When Naruto entered his tent, he surrendered and collapsed on the cot.

Tomu was waiting for him. Tomu dipped a cloth in warm water and began to wipe the blood from Naruto's skin. The water soothed like balm over bad burns.

"You're wounded," Tomu said after a mute pause. Usually, he was wiping other people's blood off him.

"It'll heal," Naruto whispered. Then he felt the onslaught of the aftereffects of the chakra pill. Naruto turned his head, grabbed for the bucket of water, and vomited inside.

"Are you okay?" Tomu asked.

"Just a pill." Naruto wiped his mouth on his sleeve and then forced himself onto his feet. "I'll be back soon. I have to go report to the Hokage."

"Do you want me to prepare your bags?" The genin asked.

"I don't think you need to," Naruto grabbed the new shirt Tomu offered and replaced the ripped shreds stuck to his blood and sweat. He searched for his hiraishin kunai but they were missing. Naruto had to do it the old-fashioned way.

Naruto set out from the gate and suddenly no matter which direction he went the scenery was the same.

There were a mass of dead bodies with eyes open, looking at him with a terrifying smile. His new shirt began to flood with blood. Naruto looked down at his chest perplexed. The wound persisted and bled. Naruto attempted to stop it, plug the hole, but he couldn't keep the blood from spilling and satiating the thirsty bones.

He jerked when one of the corpses moved and snatched at his leg. His heart pounded in a frantic struggle. He looked down at the shade of blue rot on Mei Terumi's dark smile, and she gripped him, as if she wanted to drag him into the next realm with her.

Naruto Uzumaki snapped awake in the darkness of his bedroom.

Sweat clung to his skin, every breath was sharp, and Naruto held onto the pain in his chest. Naruto's hand trembled when he tore open his shirt but the skin was flawless. There was no scar, no trace that the wound had even occurred except for the nightmares.

"Daddy?" Ame rolled over in bed with a yawn. She peeked open her eyes. She was getting worried. The nightmares were worsening. She crawled over Ichigo and curled into Naruto's lap. "You're not fine."
"I'm fine," Naruto said automatically and then paused when her words finally registered in his head. He looked down into Ame's worried face and her expression punched him in the gut. He never wanted to see that look on her face.

"I just need a little time. You don't have to worry about me because you know, your daddy is the strongest person in the world."

"I know."

Ame smiled and Naruto's heart did the same. When she yawned, Naruto tucked her under the covers.

"I will always protect you."

Naruto kissed his daughter back to bed. He left a shadow clone as a pillow and closed the bedroom door with a light touch. Once the door closed, he could feel the tension build once again in his shoulders.

Naruto went to prowl through his territory. It was an instinctive need to make sure nothing was amiss. Naruto tilted his head curiously as he traveled the hallway and heard voices below in the living room.

"It can't be that bad. I promise I won't be disgusted by it."

"No. I don't want you to see."

"You two are still up?" Naruto questioned when he came down the stairs.

At Naruto's voice, Mushi jumped away from Tomu's lap.

"I was just leaving." Mushi snatched her cloak from the floor and shoved it over her clothes. The blush across her face hid under the shadow of her hood. The kunoichi hardly gave Tomu a chance to say goodbye before she was out the window.

"Great timing," Tomu grumbled.

"What was that about?"

"She won't let me see her leg since it's been burned. I don't get it. She has bugs living inside of her body and she more worried about her leg."

Naruto leaned against the stairs thoughtfully. "For an Aburame bugs are normal, her leg isn't. Some ninjas are sensitive about their scars. Sometimes they're nothing more than bad memories."

"I know she's uncomfortable when I bring up the subject but," Tomu hunched his shoulders in his own embarrassment. "Because of her scar she doesn't want to do anything."

For Tomu it was frustrating. He wanted to touch his girlfriend but anything beyond a kiss was off-limits because of her insecurities.

Naruto chuckled at the boy's frustration. "If you like her, you'll wait until she's ready. Don't push," Naruto paused at his wording, "literally."

Tomu pouted.

Tomu had the same hair color as the genin who had attended to Naruto when he had been fighting on the Grass border. During those long nights when exhaustion tricked his eyes Naruto would turn
and find Tomu surrounded by war.

Tomu looked up and noticed Naruto's brooding expression. "How long are you staying this time?"

"I don't know," Naruto said honestly. "The Hokage said she'll send for me when she wants me back out onto the front. For right now, I guess I'm home."

"We've lost Mountain but have successfully held the Grass border."

It was eerily quiet after Naruto reported to the Hokage. Her desk was buried underneath paperwork. The stacks and towers proved to be a barrier that separated Naruto.

"Granny, I-"

"Hokage," Tsunade quickly corrected him.

They were going through another one of their "phases". Naruto asked as he slid his hands in his pockets, "How long are we going to keep doing this?"

"Where did I order you to be?"

Naruto regretted his previous question. He knew exactly where this was leading and had no choice but to follow. "At the siege."

"And were you there?"

"No, it was just a shadow clone."

"And where were you instead, against my orders?"

With every answer Naruto's voice got lower and lower until the last barely scratched higher than the floor. "Kiri...Kirigakure."

The Hokage slammed down her pen and it accidentally shattered in her anger. "You were in Kirigakure fucking the Mizukage. What happened in Kiri probably would have happened no matter what. Mei just didn't have the control over the country that she used to but not only did you disobey my orders, your involvement worsened the situation. Not only that but you were in Kiri alone. Everyone works in a unit. Something could have happened to you and no one would have known until it was too late."

"I understand," Naruto replied with his shoulders squared. It took Naruto more courage to stand in front of the Hokage's dissapointment and own his mistakes than run away from them to war. "I will never do it again. I've been trying to make everything up to you."

Tsunade's anger faded with the sincerity in his voice. She knew Naruto was trying hard to redeem himself, she could see that. There were rings of shadow surrounding his eyes that rivaled a raccoon. The usual healthy gold of his skin was pale. He looked as if he had seen a ghost and it's been haunting him ever since.

"Report back to the front. I want them to hold their position. Then I want you to return to Konoha. I'm ordering you off-duty until further notice."

Naruto gave her a horrified expression. "But Mist-

Tsunade waved a dismissive hand. "Konoha has always been an enemy of Mist, it's only once in a
lifetime we're friends."

"But Granny—"

"Hokage," Tsunade corrected him and turned to the next tower of paperwork that she had to overcome. "You are dismissed."

Naruto's shoulders dropped and knew Granny needed more time to forgive him. He knew she wasn't angry because he had messed up but because he had betrayed her trust and the village that they both loved.

Sakura Haruno stuffed a hill of ice cream into her mouth as she scanned a set of x-rays and attempted to find the anomaly. She had been working from home a lot more lately and only went into the hospital when called for emergencies.

Sakura paused when there was a heavy knock on her door. "What?!" she yelled. Her voice could penetrate any wall. It was a very useful ability when Sakura was nice and comfortable and did not feel like getting up from the couch.

"Sakura?" Naruto's voice came from behind the door.

The spoon in Sakura's mouth fell in her lap. It's been a long time and a lot of things have changed. She hadn't seen Naruto or a clone since Hinata had been rushed to the hospital. "Shit," Sakura cursed. She was horribly unprepared.

Sakura shoved against the cushions and pushed herself off the couch. She was in her pajamas and dragged her swollen feet across the floor. Sakura peeked open the door slightly.

"Sakura, what's wrong, why won't you let me in?" Naruto asked.

Sakura's expression soured. "Do you have any idea what time it is? Of course you don't, when do ninjas ever care about time?!"

Naruto chuckled. "It's good to see you too Sakura." Naruto shrugged his shoulders. "I couldn't get back to sleep so I thought I'd come visit."

"I haven't seen you in weeks, Naruto."

Naruto scratched the back of his head. "I just got back from the Grass front. I've needed all my chakra for the war so the few clones I have in Konoha are concentrated on the compound. Sorry I haven't been around."

"That's the biggest lie I have ever heard," Sakura scoffed. If Naruto wanted to be around, he'd be around. He made time for people. "Something else is going on with you."

Naruto could feel the weight of Sakura's scrutiny. "I just haven't felt like being around people okay? It's not like you missed me, you have Kohei," and Naruto said his name with a sting of contempt.

"That doesn't keep you from being my best friend, Naruto." Sakura sighed. This wasn't how she was hoping to break the news. She opened the door. "Come in."

Naruto was startled, expecting the arrangement of Sakura's old apartment but was greeted with a modern and upscale living room. Naruto replied as he slipped off his shoes and walked into the house, "Wow, Sakura, you've gotten fat. You've got to stop eating all that ice cream."
"FAT?! CAN YOU BE ANY MORE OF AN IDIOT?! I'M PREGNANT!"

Naruto's eyes threatened to bulge from his sockets as he whipped around and studied Sakura more closely. She wore a loose fitting gown that curved outwards.

"Are you sure that's not just the ice cream?"

"Oh shut up Naruto," Sakura threatened to punch him through her wall. "I was going to tell you but I didn't want to throw both Kohei and a baby on your shoulders at the same time. You're still trying to figure out how to process Kohei."

"That's not true," Naruto pouted as he crossed his arms. Then, as if it suddenly hit him like lightning. "You're pregnant?!"

Sakura walked back over to her comfortable place on the couch. "I didn't think I'd blow up so fast over the past few weeks. I can't even fit my shoes anymore."

Naruto was still stuck on the pregnant part. "I- wow… that was quick," he squeaked, "But you just got married."

"I'm five months pregnant. Women do not get this big in a month Naruto."

Naruto frowned at what that time frame implied. "What? Were you fucking Kohei behind Kiba's back? Five months ago was back during the Jounin exams."

"Sometimes you should really think before you open your mouth. Of course I wasn't with Kohei behind Kiba's back."

"I don't understand," Naruto whined. "Then you'd have to be…" Sakura could see the light bulb turn on in Naruto's head. "You're pregnant with Kiba's baby?"

"It was an accident really. I was testing some new medicine that affected life force chakra and I needed to take off the seal. I wasn't wearing it during the exams. Sakura certainly hadn't expected to have sex during the exams."

"Did Kiba know?"

Sakura's movements slowed. "It doesn't matter."

"Does Kohei know?"

"Of course he knows," Sakura chided. "He's really excited."

When Naruto decided to come by for a visit the last thing he expected was this. He leaned back against the couch as if the information could soak into his pores. "Sakura," Naruto asked softly. "Did you marry Kohei because you were pregnant?"

Sakura looked at Naruto sharply. "I loved Kiba but pregnant or not, I would not have married him. Kiba was a ninja until the day he died. Kiba was still trying to cope with the loss of his leg. He was physically broken and in turn, he was trying to fix himself. All his life, Tsume compared him to his father and I guess Kiba was hoping when he finally killed the man, Kiba could finally define his own life and finally move on. I don't think Kiba realized that even if he killed his father or not, in the end, he still had one leg and he still had to deal with that."

"It's sort of ironic because I understand Sasuke a little bit better now. Sometimes our ghosts weigh us
down so much it's impossible to move forward. And quite frankly Naruto, that's not the sort of person I want to be the father to my children."

Naruto chewed on her words as if the taste would help him to better understand.

"I wish you would give Kohei a chance. He's a sweet guy, a bit socially awkward, but I really want to make this work."

Naruto finally understood Kohei wasn't the second choice, he wasn't the default. He was the person Sakura chose no matter what the circumstances might have been.

"Okay," then Naruto complained with a smirk, "but I can't even invite him to train with me."

Naruto avoided the couch pillow that was thrown at his head.

"And don't go around telling people I'm five months. As far as everyone else is concerned I'm three."

Sakura wasn't working at the hospital anymore because she was telling everyone she was three months pregnant. She wanted the date to coincide when she and Kohei had gotten together.

"Why?"

"I don't want the Inuzuka clan to know. More specifically, I don't want Tsume to know. That's a confrontation I would rather save until after the birth."

"I still can't believe it. There is going to be another little pink-haired Sakura running around." He remembered Sakura quite clearly as a child and cringed, "That's frightening."

"Pink hair is a recessive gene. The chance my kids are coming out with pink is infinitesimal." Sakura finished her ice cream with a pout and hoped Kohei got back soon. "You know Naruto, I need to get you married."

Naruto blinked. "I can't, there is a war going on. Maybe when it's over…"

"Naruto," Sakura said gently. "Some wars take days, some weeks, and some years. With Kiri involved this isn't going to be the short war that we had first imagined. Don't let the war consume your life, Naruto."

Suddenly the door opened.

"Hey babe, I don't remember what flavor chips you wanted so I bought five different flavors." Kohei stopped when he entered the house and found the blond ninja sitting on his couch in the middle of the night. "Hello, Uzumaki. I haven't seen you since the wedding."

"I've been busy with the war," It was as if Naruto always had to remind people that there was a war going on.

"Oh, is everything good? I mean of course it's not good it's a war," Kohei chuckled nervously and then realized nothing he said was funny.

Sakura gave him a helpful smile. "What flavors did you get?"

Kohei grabbed them and displayed the choices. After a moment of pondering Sakura decided, "I'll take these two."

"Hey babe," Kohei said suddenly, then pointed to a spot on the x-rays abandoned on the table.
Sakura looked over. "There it is." She picked up the x-ray in one hand and a bag of chips in the other. "You should have been a doctor."

Kohei smiled. "Well, going into business for doctors makes more money."

"Crap, I've got to go pee. Help me up, hurry," Sakura demanded. Both Kohei and Naruto moved at the same time, each managed to grab an arm and helped Sakura off the couch. She rushed to the bathroom and slammed the door behind her.

Kohei watched with a brilliant smile, then he turned to Naruto and it faded. In Naruto's presence, Kohei often felt as if he was hanging from a noose.

"Sakura is like a younger sister to me-" Naruto began.

"Older sister!" Sakura shouted from the bathroom. "I think you need to re-evaluate our relationship."

Naruto sighed. "Older sister," he corrected. "She's family and I'd do anything to protect my family, do you understand?"

Kohei gulped, looking Naruto in the eyes was harder than staring down Sakura's father. Naruto's eyes were the color of hard steel.

"I understand. I promise to take care of her and the twins."

Suddenly the color drained from Naruto's face and his attempt at being intimidating fizzled out. "Twins?!"

Hohei Hyūga wiped the blood from his nose.

"What's wrong? Now that you're not a main member you don't want to fight back?" Hohei's nephew, who was Hohei's exact age, punched Hohei to the ground. They used to play tag with each other when they were toddlers.

Hohei looked around him at the odds, surrounded by five branch members. Things were easier when they wouldn't dare touch him.

"I can still beat you, main member or not." Hohei spat at their feet.

The ability to see in every direction did not mean he was fast enough to counter every attack. Hohei flailed to the ground when the flow of his chakra was abruptly closed and bruises were forming at every chakra node. He landed hard into the grass with a crunch of glass from his front pocket.

"A branch member isn't a branch member until he knows what this feels like."

Hohei looked up in fear as the hand signals flashed before his eyes. His arm reached out but retracted when the pain blazed along his forehead. Hohei screamed and writhed in agony.

The children looked at his pain in contempt, as if it was only fair. They released the jutsu and left Hohei trying to blink back tears.

"What are you doing?" Hohei questioned when a foot slammed onto his back. Hohei attempted to fight but found himself helpless without his chakra.

"Initiating you as a branch member," Hohei's nephew replied snidely. He reached and picked up a long stick.
Hohei attempted to look back but could only see their unsympathetic faces in his periphery vision. Then Hohei yelped when the stick whipped across his back and tore apart his shirt.

"What's going on?"

The stick fell across Hohei's back. The children scattered and raced away in fear of getting in trouble. Hohei could barely make out the face of the Hyūga Clan Head through his teary eyes.

He was too embarrassed to say a word as Hinata picked him up from the ground, pulled up his pants, and unclosed his chakra nodes.

"I will make sure they are punished."

"No," Hohei said quickly. "Then everyone will know what happened." Even though he had come close to getting raped by a stick, Hohei held onto that pride Hyūga were infamous for. "I don't want anyone to know."

Hinata gave him a gentle smile. "I apologize that this has happened and I honestly do not know if I can save you in time if this happens again."

The idea of a next time caused Hohei to shiver. Ever since he's gotten this stupid seal on his forehead he's had to look behind him every step. He never realized how many branch members there were until he was one of them, nor did he realize how many branch members hated him because of what he used to be.

Hinata had taken a large step in the effort to change the Hyūga Clan. She had overthrown the elders but that was just the beginning. She still had to overcome the ever growing hatred, the bitterness, the distrust and the distance between the two branches. She knew that challenge would take years.

Hinata suggested, "Perhaps you should spend the rest of the day out of the compound?"

"Yes, Honorable Sister," Hohei muttered and wiped stray tears from his eyes.

He angrily walked down the road out of the compound, hoping the physical distance would distance himself from the memory, from the way their cold hands held him down.

Hohei stopped when he was out of the guard's range of vision, afraid if anyone knew his secret, life would get even worse. He grabbed the glasses that broke when he fell and threw the ruins into the bushes. He didn't need them anyways.

Hohei hung his head but looked up suddenly when he heard talk come up the road. Hohei activated his byakugan. It was Mushi and a boy he had never met before. Hohei briefly considered jumping into the bushes so he could avoid them. Then he remembered he was a Hyūga. He straightened his shoulders and faced them head on.

Mushi looked up in surprise when she saw Hohei walking towards them, with a busted lip, blooded nose, and messed up hair. A Hyūga who looked that out of sorts was certainly unusual.

"Who's that?" Tomu asked when he noticed Mushi's expression.

"He was my teammate on my last mission," Mushi answered and stopped when they met on the road. "Good afternoon, Hohei. Did you just come from a training session?" Mushi wisely allowed him an out and Hohei took the exit.

"Yes, I just came from a training session," Hohei answered when he wiped his nose. "Who's that? I
haven't seen him before."

"This is Tomu, my boyfriend," Mushi said proudly. Tomu found himself grinning at the introduction.

Hohei's disgust was hidden behind a stoic expression. First, he couldn't fathom why anyone would date an Aburame. Second, "Are you a ninja?" Hohei instinctively examined Tomu with his byakugan and found stores of chakra. "Did you graduate the Academy?"

Tomu hated this question. It was as if every ninja could not comprehend his existence. "No I'm not a ninja. I'm a construction worker."

Hohei suddenly grew in size with the way he upturned his nose. "Oh a civilian," Hohei said as if studying the contents of the dirt.

Tomu tensed. "And what's wrong with civilians?"

"Civilians are parasites. They suck on this village while we ninjas have to protect them."

Mushi wisely interrupted the conversation. She typically was uncomfortable with public displays of affection but intertwined her fingers in Tomu's hand to keep him calm.

"Tomu and I were about to do some training. If you're not tired would you like to join us?"

Hohei was flustered. "Is he a ninja or not?"

"Why can't I be both?" Tomu asked annoyed.

Hohei crossed his arms and challenged, "Have you ever killed someone?"

"If you wish to define me by a body count then you can kiss my ass."

Hohei was offended by Tomu's use of diction. "I will not be spoken to in this manner by a commoner."

Mushi sighed. Sometimes she wished people were as logical and reasonable as an Aburame. "We're going to train in the Uzumaki compound. I assumed you would appreciate the chance to tear up the old Uchiha training grounds."

Hohei raised an eyebrow. He couldn't pass up the opportunity to be the first Hyūga on Uchiha coveted land. After all, forward was better than backward, especially since Hohei no longer belonged in his own compound.

"Fine."

Tomu grumbled. "Perfect. You really didn't have to invite him."

"I only offered the most logical course of action," Mushi answered. "You never know who you have to rely on to save your life during a mission."

When they entered the compound Naruto was making several repairs. Shadow clones armed with hammers pounded like heavy rain. He sat atop the weapons shed and surveyed the amount of construction he still had to do within the compound.

Naruto turned curiously when he didn't recognize the chakra signature that entered through the gate. Naruto flipped upside down and landed when Mushi and Tomu entered the training grounds with a guest. Naruto hadn't met this Hyūga before.
"How is it going?" Naruto asked.

"Naruto, this is Hohei Hyūga," Mushi introduced. "He was my teammate on my last mission."

"Oh wait, I remember you," Naruto exclaimed, "you were one of the first to receive the seal."

Hohei answered as if Naruto had just insulted him, "I was just one of the first to realize we didn't have a choice."

Hohei stepped onto the training field, where years of ninja boots have trampled the ground. "Mushi are we going to train or not?"

"I'll take this one," Tomu interrupted and stepped onto the field. Tomu entered his fighting stance.

"At least you know how to stand right," Hohei mocked.

Hohei lifted his hands to activate his byakugan and then fell straight to the ground as a plume of fire passed over his singed hair. Hohei looked up in disbelief with his byakugan activated.

"Can't defeat a civilian?" Tomu called.

Naruto chuckled as he watched the sparring match. Leave it to a Hyuuga to finally get under a Uzumaki's skin.

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The tapping preceded Hinata's footsteps. She paused at the open gates of the Uzumaki compound. Anyone else would have assumed the compound was lacking in security but there were clones hiding in every shadow. No one stepped a foot in the Uzumaki compound without Naruto knowing.

Hinata walked into the compound with the aid of her grandfather's cane. She limped inside the empty house and found the room where it was proper to receive guests. She leaned the cane against the low table, sat down in the seiza position and waited.

She didn't have to wait for long.

Naruto walked into the room flustered. His bare torso was sweating and had been exercising while the kids were at school. "Hinata?"

She turned and her pale lavender eyes struck him like a bolt of lightning, for one infinitesimal moment her eyes were soft and charged with emotion, then it was gone in a flash.

"Uzumaki," Hinata acknowledged. "I have come to commission your fūinjutsu abilities."

Hinata wore a haori and pants that were more common to man's formal attire. The pale moon of the Hyuuga crest embroidered the back of the cloak. The volume of clothes reminded Naruto of when they were children and Hinata would wear her baggy grey coat to hide behind. Unlike before, it seemed the clothes hid behind her. Hinata's hair was swept back from her face and revealed the cage bird seal reapplied on her forehead. The seal rested as delicately as a tiara.

"Hinata," Naruto breathed as if he hadn't heard a word she said, as if he was trying to apply the person that sat before him to the name.

"Uzumaki," Hinata repeated in an attempt to get his attention. The name had the desired effect and scratched against Naruto's ear. In an instant Naruto went from dumbstruck to angry.

"What the fuck Hinata? Stop calling me by my last name. You and I are far past that."
"The meeting of two clan heads is a formal matter," Hinata replied and eyed his bare torso with disapproval. "I can wait if you wish to get ready and properly receive me."

"Fuck that," Naruto replied and with a stubborn pout, "This is my house and I'll walk around naked if I want to."

Hinata narrowed her eyes sharply. "Surely you will not receive a Kage or another Clan Head in this manner? If you wish for your clan to succeed you have to learn the proper manners and customs that now belong with your station. You could accidentally offend someone important."

Naruto rolled his sore shoulders. He knew from experience this wasn't going to end well unless someone gave an inch. "How about a compromise? I take a shower and you stop calling me by my last name?"

Hinata considered his offer. "That is acceptable."

"I don't understand why it really matters to you. You can just see through my clothes."

"It's disrespectful. As another clan head, I deserve your respect."

"You've always had my respect Hinata," Naruto replied before he went to take a shower. Naruto took his time underneath the warm water and allowed it to glisten down his skin. Naruto couldn't help but to laugh at himself.

Naruto left the shower, got dressed, and to indulge Hinata further, he threw on his clan's cloak and returned to the room where Hinata waited patiently.

Naruto sat down on the floor with a mischievous grin. "Were you watching?"

Hinata turned to stare at the barren wall. "I would never betray your privacy."

But the blush on her cheeks betrayed she was lying. "That's too bad. I had put on quite a show for you," Naruto admitted. Naruto leaned against his hand and studied the curves of her face as one would evaluate a piece of art, the same way he would watch from her bedside the three days she had spent in the hospital.

Desperate to change the subject, Hinata placed a copy of the caged bird deal onto the table. "I was wondering if there is a possibility you can modify the seal to keep anyone who know the correct hand signs from activating it? Could you also change the hand seals that are used?"

Naruto tapped his fingers on the table. "I think I can but I don't have anything to test it on. Usually I test seals on my clones but I can't determine how effective the seal is without a byakugan. When I applied that counterseal on your forehead I was literally shooting in the dark and hoping for the best."

"You can test them on me."

"No," Naruto said immediately. "You are not becoming a test subject."

"I'm certainly not going to send someone else to do it in my place. Naruto, I need these seals. I can keep the adults from hurting each other but children are cruel. I've already had incidents of them using the seal against one another. I need a modified version of the seal soon."

Naruto shook his head. "Hinata, you almost died. I can't take that risk again. I can't watch someone die in my arms again."
Hinata paused and tilted her head. "What happened?"

Naruto looked away from her question. Hinata saw he was creeping upon something personal and decided to respect his space. "I've noticed Hohei has begun to spend a lot of time here. I know you've been increasing security but I would really appreciate it if he could stay here for a while? He is one of the youngest main members. The transition has been really tough on him."

"He can stay. I don't close my doors to people who need help. He and Tomu have been really going at it. I think a little rivalry is good for the both of them."

Hinata nodded. "Hohei lost his entire genin team a year ago. He's been through a lot. I really want to protect him but I can't without a new seal. All my hard work might be for nothing if I can't get a new one made."

Naruto knew Hinata was trying to subtly guilt-trip him and it was pathetically working. Naruto hung his shoulders. "I'll see what I can do but the moment it becomes too much we're done."

Hinata smiled. Naruto hadn't seen that smile in so long and realized he'd say anything to see it. Even though she had just inherited the responsibility of an entire clan it seemed there was a weight lifted from her lips. "How much do you charge for your services?"

Naruto blinked in confusion and had to take a moment to absorb her question. "I'm not charging you for anything. You know I'll do it for free."

"Naruto," Hinata said patiently. "You have become one the best fūinjutsu experts in Konoha. Your skills are valuable." Hinata reached in the sleeve of her robe, procured a wad of wrapped money, and placed it on the table. "I am going to pay you how much I believe the seal is worth. Here is 30% up-front and I will pay you the rest once it is finished."

Naruto eyes bulged when he saw the amount of money that was placed on his table. "If this is just 30% how much is the rest?" He said in disgusted awe. "Hinata, I really can't take this."

"Naruto, you want to open an orphanage correct?"

"Yes."

"An orphanage requires constant maintenance and I don't think you really comprehend how much money that requires. You need to start making regular income besides your ANBU paychecks. Konoha is lacking in a specialize store focused on seals for purchase. Build a business Naruto, that's how clans last. If you think this money is too much, see the rest as a donation from the Hyūga to the orphanage."

Naruto shook his head. He felt dirty for taking her money.

"Naruto," Hinata could see the reluctance on his face. "Look at is this way, the Hokage orders you to kill someone and she pays you in turn. I'm asking you to create a seal that can do a lot of good for the Hyūga clan. Which one is the dirty money?"

Naruto never needed an incentive to do good but he did need some kind of justification or excuse to why he killed people. Hinata was offering him money without the stain of blood.

"Alright," Naruto said weakly.

"I also borrowed these," Hinata reached into her sleeve. Naruto blinked in surprised when she revealed his missing hiraishin kunai.
"That was you?!"

"I apologize for hurting and deceiving you," Hinata answered.

Naruto didn't care about the hurting part, he was tougher than that. He didn't care about the deceiving part, ninjas did that. But there was one thing in particular that made him frustrated and furious - "Why didn't you fucking ask? I would have given you anything Hinata."

"I couldn't afford loose ends. You're a bad liar, especially to a byakugan. If I had failed, if Grandfather had suspected what I was doing, there would have been horrible consequences. He is not a forgiving man. I'm sorry, I couldn't take that chance."

Naruto leaned across the table. He didn't believe her in the least. "Pride can get you killed Hinata. You don't have to do everything by yourself."

The two shared a look and both were caught up by how far they've come.

"You've changed Hinata. You're not the person I once knew."

She said three words that shook Naruto's core, "Neither are you."

Naruto has yet to come to terms with the person he has become. The haori with the Uzumaki clan crest seemed tailored to his shoulders. The scar down his face revealed more than the easy smile he preferred to give.

A small paper slid across the table, decorated with bows and lavender and a softness he did not expect from her.

"What is this?" Naruto asked as he reached for it.

Hinata faced Naruto as if she would a row of judges ready to condemn her to a life of banishment. But she was determined to break the news to Naruto herself.

It was a wedding invitation.

"You're getting married?" Naruto's voice was as weak as the struggle of his next heartbeat.

"Next week," Hinata confirmed and suddenly as if she had to explain herself, "Neji is a branch member and I am the former heiress. Our marriage will bind the two houses together and strengthen the ties."

Naruto let the invitation fall back onto the table and realized with startling clarity how different he had become. A few years ago he would have demanded from the world why it was so unfair. He would have challenged Hinata, asked her if she still loved him, but now, Naruto really didn't want to know the answer to that. No amount of fighting, or yelling, or shouting, was going to prevent Hinata from getting married. She was going to do what she thought she had to do.

The distance and the formalities meant little to Naruto anymore. He just wanted to be close to her. Naruto prowled over the table, the flimsy barrier that separated them, and flushed his entire body against her. His breath hitched with the way she trembled at his touch. He smothered her breasts with the strength of his chest to feel every beating of her heart.

"Hinata," Naruto was asking for permission.

Hinata nodded without hesitation. With permission granted, a blink of the eye revealed they had left
the lone and dusty room behind. The belt slipped from around her waist. The pillows of Naruto's bed caught her fall backwards. The carefully presented bun collapsed into a blanket of midnight blue hair.

"It's just a scar," Hinata whispered.

"I know," but Naruto couldn't pull his eyes away from the long jagged crevice that crossed her right thigh, where the cane she was currently using had gone straight through. "Why are you using the cane? It's healed."

"It was Grandfather's cane. Sometimes symbols are more important than the truth."

Hinata leaned upwards and pulled off her pants. Clothes were shed with the care and delicacy of a shared lullaby. Purple lace underwear and happy face boxers were revealed underneath the layers of clothing. Naruto froze. He hadn't taken these boxers off since Mei died.

"Is there something wrong?" Hinata asked.

"No," Naruto lied, but he was too embarrassed to explain how long he's worn this underwear in the memory of a dead lover.

Naruto charged forward in an effort to forget but the sudden speed, his hand on her bare breasts and another along her thigh, the taste of her belly button in his mouth, caused her to tense. It felt as if she was being held down, like the edge of a knife traveling through her skin. "Naruto, I can't- I can't breathe."

Hinata knew the symptoms, she knew what was happening to her, but none of her medical expertise could prepare her for actually experiencing it. Her pallor was turning blue, the hyperventilation was quickening, a knot was growing in her chest that prevented any access to air.

Naruto had seen it before on the battlefield. Naruto grabbed a hold of Hinata's face gently and directed her towards his eyes. "Hinata," Naruto said gently. "Count with me. Ten."

"Ten," Hinata followed in a trembling voice, followed the tempo of Naruto's words until her breathing leveled and she had escaped from the sudden anxiety attack.

"Are you alright?"

Hinata's eyes focused on Naruto, their clothes still half stripped off. "I don't know." Tears gathered at the corner of her eyes. "I don't know."

"Here, I'll go make us some ramen," Naruto suggested but it was just an excuse to give Hinata some time and space.

Hinata sat up in the bed and stared at her hands with a frown that hid the disgust she had for herself. She remained in that position when Naruto returned with two steaming bowls of ramen. He sat down beside her, broke apart the chopsticks and began eating.

"I'm sorry," Hinata whispered.

"It's probably for the best," Naruto shrugged and stared past the bowl to the boxers he had put back on. "I don't think I'm ready either."

"Did you love her?" Hinata asked suddenly, then broke apart her chopsticks and began to eat the
"Never mind, I don't mean to pry."

"I was falling for her," Naruto whispered. "She died in my arms and everyone thinks I killed her."

Hinata's chopsticks loosen from her fingers. "The Mizukage?"

"Mei," Naruto said her name just to say it, as if the name could keep fading memories alive. "People congratulate me on killing her, as if it was some grand accomplishment, as if I'm someone to be proud of," Naruto sneaked a peak at Hinata, "and I wonder why I get so much praise when people like you deserve so much more. In the grand scheme of things, war and coups and change of government happens every day, to change the Hyūga clan is only once in a life time."

"I don't deserve anyone's praises," Hinata whispered. Every waking moment, Hinata had this feeling of wearing a mask, as if she was simply pretending to be Clan Head, but inside she was that trembling fainting little girl who wished to be strong.

"I still see Mei sometimes, in the corner of my eyes and in my nightmares. It's quite frankly driving me insane."

"You're afraid."

Naruto's breath hitched when Hinata hit the nail on the head. At first he couldn't believe it, and then he understood she was right.

"Because her death makes you question whether or not you can protect others, because you know you are not invincible," Hinata whispered. She lifted her hand and touched a finger to Naruto's left pectoral. "There has been a wound here recently, very close to your heart."

There was no scar. The skin was flawless. He touched the spot targeted by his nightmares. "I wasn't paying attention," Naruto whispered. "It was a mass of rock straight through my chest. If it had only been inches closer…"

Naruto would have died, by a fucking piece of rock, from an unknown Mountain kunoichi.

"I'm retiring from ANBU. I heard that you were going to as well?" Hinata asked. Fox was a mask she was all too eager to shed. Hinata was afraid of herself.

"I was going to retire until I fucked up in Kiri. I feel too responsible for everything that has happened. When the war is over, then I'll quit."

"There are two ways someone quits ANBU, either you choose to…"

"…or it's chosen for you," Naruto finished her sentence. "I know. I'll be careful."

"I do not wish to go to your funeral."

"I do not wish to go to your wedding," Naruto said in turn. There was an awkward silence followed by the slurping of ramen noodles until both stared at empty bowls.

"Do you love him?"

"Sometimes marriage isn't about love. Sometimes it's about…" Hinata paused to grasp for the word.

"Sacrifices," Naruto finished. "For your clan and for Konoha."

Naruto knew how far he would go to protect Konoha equaled an empty memory in his head. "What
happens when we've given everything? What happens when there is nothing more left to give? Do we start becoming ghosts ourselves?

Naruto snatched a glimpse at Hinata, almost like a little boy at lunch with his childhood crush. He leaned over, the movement caught Hinata's attention as her eyes followed his intentions. His lips landed on hers in a soft moment. They tasted better than wine, like ramen with a flavoring of tears. What was most important was that they felt real and caused him a storm of emotions too violent and too human.

Naruto took the ramen bowl from Hinata's hand and placed it on the bedside table, using the stacked bowls to hide the clock's time.

Naruto reached out timidly until he wrapped an arm around her waist. "Is this okay?" He leaned his head against her shoulder and they laid down in bed.

"It's fine," Hinata whispered.

Naruto gave a conspiratorial whisper, "Marry me. I'll take us somewhere far away, like Iron Country where there are no ninja or even farther where there is no war. Ame won't have to become a ninja, Tomu won't have to kill anymore, and maybe Ichigo will stop having nightmares. Come away with me, Hinata Hyūga."

Hinata intertwined her fingers in his hand. Naruto stared at the small connection, his large rough fingers around her delicate sharp ones. He liked the way they fit together.

Naruto asked hoarsely at the realization, "There isn't anything better than this is there?"

Hinata smiled as she leaned into Naruto's shoulder. She couldn't imagine how there was anything better in the world than Naruto's arms around you. "No, there isn't."

"Are you happy?" Naruto whispered into her smile. "Did you finally get everything you ever wanted?"

"No one gets everything they want."

"This is the gyokushou piece," Shikamaru instructed. Shikaru seemed more interested in using her chubby fingers to claim the rest of the pieces on the Shogi board. Shikamaru peeled away the piece she grabbed, "and this one is--"

"The hisha piece."

Shikamaru's head snapped up at the sound of that voice. Temari leaned across the doorway with a smirk. "Really Shikamaru? Don't you think you should wait a few years?"

Shikamaru calmly reached to take the piece from his daughter's hand before she placed it in her mouth. Then Shikaru finally looked up, briefly looked up at her prodigal mother. With an expression as if trying to decide which was easier to get to, Shikaru finally reached for another Shogi tile.

"Missed me?" Temari asked as she entered and took her daughter from Shikamaru's arms. Shikaru began to cry when Temari removed the tile from her hand. With a sigh, Temari gave it back.

"Look what you've done to her."

Shikamaru lazily sat back and arched an eyebrow. "You've been gone a long time."
"Just blowing in with the wind. You don't look too happy to see me."

"Of course I'm happy to see my wife," Shikamaru answered. "But Temari you haven't- Temari!" Shikamaru yelled as Shikaru began to choke. Both ninjas were suddenly more frightened than they have ever been in their entire lives. Their chests constricted. It was the fastest Shikamaru had ever moved. Shikamaru ripped his daughter away from Temari and placed his arm underneath Shikaru's chest. Shikamaru pounded onto her back. The pallor of her skin grew increasingly red until the little Nara coughed out the shogi tile which fell wet onto the surface of the board.

When the scare was finally over and the rush of adrenaline passed, Shikamaru pressed his daughter into his shoulder and bounced her in his arms.

Temari was quivering in disbelief, tears formed at the corner of her eyes, then she sobbed, "I'm such a horrible mother."

"Temari," Shikamaru grabbed her by the waist and pulled both his wife and daughter into the hug. "Accidents happen."

Temari shook her head. "No, I've been away for too long."

"That doesn't matter anymore," Shikamaru said he pressed his lips to his wife. "We're together now."

Once Shikaru quieted, Shikamaru handed over his daughter. This time Temari was much more careful and attentive, as if making up for all the days she missed. Temari smiled as she brushed ebony hair from Shikaru's eyes.

"I've missed you," Temari said hoarsely. "I've missed you so much. I'm so sorry."

Temari forgot how much she loved the weight of rocking her daughter in her arms. "She's gotten so big."

"She's crawling now but," Shikamaru shrugged. "She's sort of lazy. She just wants everyone to pick her up."

Temari smiled.

"How about a game?" Shikamaru suggested. He leaned over and welcomed Temari with a kiss back home before he reached for the wet tile and wiped it dry with his shirt. Shikamaru rearranged the tiles, carefully placing them on the board Asuma had bought him.

Temari sat down as Shikaru began to doze into her shoulder.

"How long are you going to be here?" Shikamaru asked.

"Sand has captured what we wanted from Iwa. Looks like Konoha could use a little bit of help now that Mist is targeting you. I'm here as mediator between the two countries."

"So you're here for a while?"

"Hopefully. It's nice to be back," Temari replied. She would never consider Konoha as home but the Nara Clan has become a familiar setting. "I still can't believe Naruto was fucking the Mizukage."

Shikamaru's hovering hand above the Shogi board paused, "What?"

"You don't know?" Temari asked.
Shikamaru shook his head. He could care less for gossip, but he was rather curious. "The official statement released to the council reported that the Hokage found out Mist was targeting Konoha so she decided to act first and sent Naruto to assassinate the Mizukage."

"She only did that to protect him. I overheard Gaara and Naruto talking about it. It was a set-up."

"That certainly makes more sense," Shikamaru mused. "Still, despite the way you look at it, most people are going to believe that the Hokage started this war. It looks like we betrayed Mist and other countries are beginning to re-evaluate their relationship with us. Diplomatic relations have gotten a lot more complicated."

Temari nodded. "The Hokage is literally taking the fall for Naruto's mistakes. I'd hate to say it but if the Hokage was smart she'd marry Naruto off. That's one way of forming alliances."

"She's not going to do that," Shikamaru replied. "He calls her grandmother but in reality, Naruto is the only son she's ever had. We've all got our weaknesses."

"I've missed talking strategy with you."

Shikamaru smirked. "Is that all you've missed?"

The shogi board fell and the tiles scattered on the ground. Shikaru was wedged peacefully between them as the two young parents entered into heated kisses. Shikamaru slid his hand up Temari skirt. Before he reached the zipper, a cry startled everyone in the room. Shikaru demanded their attention.

Temari chuckled as she placed her head against Shikamaru's shoulder. "I love you."

"I love you too."

---

Choji Akimichi puffed on a cigar as he waited. He was usually an amiable person but he was not in a happy mood. He was starving. On Saturdays the entire Akimichi clan came together to have one big dinner and Chouji was missing it.

Ino's limp body suddenly snapped awake. She pulled herself up and looked around at her surroundings. She was rather unsurprised to find herself in Chouji's bedroom. Ino held her head before she met with Chouji's angry stare.

"You left your body in the bathroom of a bar?" Chouji questioned.

Ino shrugged her shoulders. "Nothing happened." Ino had a tendency to flirt with danger and everyone in Konoha knew of the infamous Yamanaka Clan Head. Eventually either someone would get Chouji, Shikamaru, or her father. Inoichi hardly ever disciplined Ino and it showed even when she was older.

"You can't just go surfing in other people's bodies, Ino." Chouji reprimanded her.

Ino shrugged. She threw the small sequined dress over her shoulder and revealed the butterfly tattoo fluttering on her back. She walked around Chouji's room naked until she reached the drawer where she usually kept spare clothes. "Did you know that Hinata and Neji are getting married?" Ino asked.

"Ino, don't you think it's time for you to stop caring about everyone else and start focusing on yourself?"

"Fine," Ino snapped, tired of Chouji constantly chastising her to change. "Let's get married."
Chouji crossed his arms. "I'm not marrying you Ino."

"What did you say?" Ino demanded as she whipped around. She swore she misheard him.

Chouji sighed. "Ino, what's the point? I can't make you happy. No one can make you happy."

Ino scowled. "We're engaged!"

"Not anymore," Chouji replied. "Not until you learn how to let all that bitterness go."

Ino stabbed in return, "I never wanted to marry a fat fucking oaf like you anyways."

Chouji left the room and closed the door to create a barrier between himself and her rage. He placed his hands in his pocket and traveled down the hallways toward the smell of food.

Ino Yamanaka always got what she wanted. In a temper tantrum that rivaled a spoiled young girl, she knocked over his dresser and snatched the vase from the bedside. Her arm paused in mid-throw, right before she broke the family heirloom.

Her feet slipped underneath her and fell to the floor lifeless as a doll.

Lee snapped awake, startled by the sudden knock. He sprang from his bed, vaulted over the couch, and rushed to the door in excitement.

"Lee, take your time to put on your clothes before you open the door," Tenten said in exasperation and then waddled inside Gai's old apartment.

"Yosh," Lee responded in red embarrassment and hurdled over the table to put on some clothes.

Tenten took a brief look around the apartment. All of Gai's pictures had been turned face-down, but everything else was as messy as Gai had left it. It still smelled like him.

"I'm surprised you're not up training this morning."

"I overdid it last night," Lee admitted and then yawned, and then with forced excitement. "But I have accidently slept in for two hours. I must make up the time."

"Lee," Tenten said his name forcefully to catch the attention of his ADHD nature. "Sit down."

Lee managed to sit, only for a few minutes, and then began looking for something to do.

Tenten sighed. "Perhaps you should start taking your medicine again." Gai Sensei had the extraordinary knack of focusing Lee's attention on one activity but it has gotten progressively worse since Gai's death. Lee can't seem to finish things anymore.

"I feel better than ever before," Lee responded. "Do you want to eat?"

Then there was another knock on the door. Lee instantly opened it and Neji appeared. Neji always had a knack for timing.

"Hey Neji," Tenten responded.

Neji took one look around the house. "Lee, this place is a mess."

Lee put down the frying pan. "You are very observant Neji. It is a tad bit messy. I shall fix it at
"Lee," Neji replied from the doorframe. "You need to start taking your medicine again."

"I am fine, my loyal comrades," Lee insisted.

"Lee, your oven is burning," Neji responded.

"Yosh!" Lee dropped his dirty underwear back onto the floor. He ran to take care of the pan left burning on the stove. Neji and Tenten had to check on Lee every day. They knew Lee was going to take it the hardest out of all of them.

Neji looked around for a space to sit down but when he couldn't find a clear surface he continued to stand. "I wanted to invite you Lee to be the best man at my wedding."

Tenten looked at Neji incredulously. No one outside of the clan had ever participated in a Hyūga wedding.

Lee's eyes lit up like fireflies and a waterfall of tears streamed from his eyes. "Really Neji?! You would allow me to be there for you at such an important occasion?"

Neji crossed his arms. "If you start taking your medicine."

Lee paused, "alright, alright," then tunneled through his entire house until he found the bottle of pills inside of the couch. Lee swallowed the pills and then turned to Neji. "What am I going to wear?!"

"I will take you to a fitting tomorrow." Neji replied. "Tenten would you like-"

"No, I look like a fucking whale," Tenten spat.

"Tenten, I would appreciate it. Everything is changing in the Hyūga clan, I'm sure they can bear a pregnant woman in my wedding."

Tenten snarled. "So everyone can see and mock the unmarried pregnant kunoichi?"

"I never knew you to be one who cared what other people thought," Neji replied.

Tenten sighed just as Lee finally finished making something to eat.

"I'm going to give the baby up for adoption," Tenten looked up at Neji. "Does that make me a bad person?"

"You're the best person in the world!" Lee claimed.

Tenten, Lee, and Neji sat down to eat breakfast inside of Gai's apartment like old times, as if it was nothing more than preparation for their morning training regimen.

Kusuro sat underneath the shadow of the giant oak and watched the other Academy students run around the field. Kusuro hunched his shoulders over his lunch and ignored the playful shouts of the other students.

"Stupid," Kusuro grumbled. There was a war going on and they were playing. He hated all of those kids. He couldn't wait to graduate and defend his land side by side with his mother. He had worked hard just so he could graduate a year early, the youngest in his class. Even Naruto couldn't stop him from leaving the village if he was given a mission.
"Kusuro."

Kusuro snapped out of his reverie when Asami suddenly jumped out of the tree and landed in his space. "I could have killed you," Kusuro snapped.

"Right," Asami scoffed. "Look, I need a favor."

"No," Kusuro said automatically.

Asami Nara shoved a camera into Kusuro's face. "I need you to get three really good shots of Naruto naked in the shower."

"You're sick," Kusuro complained. "I don't want anything to do with Naruto's crazy fan club."

"We're not crazy," Asami huffed and then declared, "Naruto Uzumaki is awesome. Not only is he strong but he helps people. I'm going to marry him when I grow up."

Kusuro sighed and looked at Asami. "You need a better pastime."

"When I am found rotting in a ditch from an enemy shuriken it will only be my fantastical and lofty dreams that will help me cling to my pitiful existence."

Kusuro's eyes twitched. "You are sort of morbid."

"They say I get it from my dad. Come on, please take the picture."

"No, take it yourself."

"Please?"

Kusuro snapped, snatched the camera out of her hand and smashed it on the ground, then stepped on it. "I don't care about any stupid fucking pictures, I don't care about you and I don't care about this stupid village. I just want to graduate so I can go home!"

Asami stared at the shattered pieces of her broken camera. "My dad bought me that."

"I'm sure he can buy you another one," Kusuro spat.

Asami picked up the wreckage of her camera. "You're the idiot," She whispered. "You want to go home? What home? From what I understand your hidden village is gone. Since you don't care much about dreams, perhaps you should stick your head out of our ass and realize the truth of yours. This is your home now."

Kusuro's hand snapped together out of anger, but before he could make a hand sign, his wrists were captured frozen but a length of dark rope that sprouted from his own shadow.

"Anger, second only to stupidity, is what gets a ninja killed on the field of battle." Asami turned when the bells that marked the end of lunch began to ring.

She hardly paid attention in class, distracted by the broken camera in her lap. When she walked down the road toward her house, she wondered how many genin missions it would take to buy another camera.

When Asami entered the house her mother turned to greet her. "Hello darling, how was school?"

"Fine."
Unconsciously Asami looked around the porch for her father and remembered that her dad was on a mission. She knew how wars went, especially when you had a father in ANBU. He probably wouldn't be home for a long time.

Asami went straight to her room. She collapsed onto the bed with her broken camera to her chest. Her father had bought her this camera when he had missed her entrance ceremony into the Academy. He had given her the gift as if it could substitute his presence.

"Never show your weaknesses," Asami whispered to herself as tears fell down her cheeks. Her father was going to miss her graduation and she wouldn't even be able to show him pictures.

It was nothing more than another mission.

Hinata's eyes slid toward the large bed, the large reminder that even though the words were spoken aloud, and the sake cups emptied, none of it meant anything if she didn't consummate the marriage.

But every time she attempted to summon the barrier that prevented her emotions from getting in the way of her duty, every brush of the skin served to remind her that this time was different. It wasn't just a lie but as startling a reality as the unlocked seal on her hip.

The white kimono that symbolized a bride's purity mocked the dirt within the creases of her skin. Neji took off the white as if they themselves were ready to flee the lie that she was. She did not love Neji, she did not want to marry him, and she did not want to have his child.

Hinata opened her legs, prepared to welcome her husband and the new life they shared together, until death do they part. His flesh was soft, supple, and easy to sink two fingers charged with chakra. Instead, her hand brushed against the back of his neck with thoughts of murder between every touch of intimacy.

A snake's hiss slithered from Hinata's mouth when Neji thrust inside of her with all the confidence of a flag staked to claim ground. Every thrust was a stitch to repair the relations between the main and branch house, but always at the cost of thrusting the needle into the cloth.

Neji was a silent lover. The only sounds of his love making were concentrated grunts, which increased in frequency the closer to climax.

Hinata didn't need a warning, she knew the rhythm of this act so well she knew what was about to happened. Suddenly her stomach clenched, her throat tightened in fear. The mask broke, "Wait, Neji no."

It was too late. Jets of warm semen shot into her body.

Neji spent himself and then collapsed beside her in exhaustion. "Did you say something?" Neji asked her after he had finished the final act of claiming her as his wife.

"No," Hinata whispered. "I didn't say anything."

Soon, in the emptiness of her bedroom Neji fell asleep while Hinata stayed awake wide-eyed and her byakugan activated. She stayed up through the late hours of the night into the morning, until the sperm wriggled its way into her egg.

Hinata sat up in a cold sweat. She wasn't ready to become a mother. This wasn't supposed to happen so soon, perhaps years from now when she was ready to give the Hyūga clan an heir but not now.
Without disturbing Neji's rest, she jumped from the bed, grabbed a robe, and entered the adjoining bathroom of which she immediately closed the door. Hinata lifted her robe and stared at her pale skin in the mirror.

Without hesitation, two fingers formed a sharp point. Hinata winced when she sent a Jyūken strike straight into her womb, again and again, until she forced the egg to drop. Blood slid down her legs.

Hinata took a bath and washed away the blood from the murder she had committed that night. After she was finished, Hinata trudged to the bed exhausted. Rising dawn was creeping in through the windows unwelcome. Hinata pulled the covers over her head and the movement tugged Neji from his sleep.

Hinata bit her lip when his hands slid around her waist, his lips slid along her neck, and his erection arced into her back.

"Get the fuck away from me."

The words surprised both Hinata and Neji equally. But once they were said, you couldn't simply pluck them back out of the air. Hinata slipped from Neji's grip. She couldn't stay in this suffocating room any longer.

"Hinata?" Neji questioned, before the bedroom door slammed shut.

Hinata knew it wasn't fair for Neji to inherit her bitterness and her hate. Hinata leaned against the railing of the compound and attempted to digest what had just occurred.

"I'm not ready," Hinata whispered, trying to convince herself. She kept the truth tucked behind her carefully woven lies.

She would never be ready.

Asami peeked outside of the curtain, searching and searching the crowd. She could feel her shoulders drop when she spotted her mother and little sister with an apologetic smile. But her mother could not apologize for her father. He was missing again. He had missed her birthday and now he was missing her graduation.

Asami fixed her kimono and withdrew the curtain to join the line with everyone else. But she tried to take her disappointment in stride. There were plenty of other kids who had missing parents and some of them dead. It was nothing for her to cry over.

Kusuro noticed Asami's expression from the line. Other kids were scrambling over each other to see if their loved ones had made it. Kusuro already knew. There was nothing that could keep his mother from the battlefield.

"Your mother's here," Asami said bitterly when she entered back in line.

"That's impossible," Kusuro scoffed.

"Well, green hair tends to stand out in Konoha."

Kusuro gave her a flustered expression and then rushed to peek out behind the curtain. His jaw dropped. His was mother was here, arguing with Iruka Sensei to put out her cigarette.

The Hokage stood on the stage in the Academy auditorium. "Please welcome our graduating class."
The line of graduates filed across the stage. They were the ones who had passed their final exams and were prepared to make their mark on Konoha's history. Friends and loved ones clapped for them. Kagome didn't clap. All she did was nod her head when her eyes met with Kusuro's. After the children bowed they were directed towards chairs that faced the podium.

"Tonight we have a very special guest that has come to make the closing speech. Let me welcome one of Konoha's strongest ninjas to ever come out of this Academy, Naruto Uzumaki."

The crowd cheered as Naruto came out on stage and stood at the podium. He reached for the microphone and grinned when he was forced to raise it. "Getting a little short, Hokage?"

The audience laughed at his comment, but when Naruto looked at the row of graduates, the row of new genin that would enter this age of war, his face hardened. The clean undented hitai-ite gleamed eagerly on their foreheads.

"Believe it or not, I was the dead last of my graduating class and I believe it took me," Naruto shrugged his shoulders, "Three tries on that stupid clone test to sit where you are sitting today."

"I couldn't wait to graduate. I couldn't wait to prove myself and have people to acknowledge me. Not much has changed since I was sitting there. Finally earning your hitai-ite will still be one of the best moments of your life, Jounin instructors still put their team through a bell test, and Iruka is still teaching even though he's like an old Grandpa now."

"Hey!" Iruka Sensei shouted from the crowd and there were scattered chuckles across the room.

"But there is one big important difference," Naruto leaned forward, the Uzumaki orange cloak wavered around his shoulders like a cape, "I graduated in a time of peace and you are graduating in a time of war."

"In ten years some of your peers would have retired and settled down to create families, some will be missing, and some will be dead. To be quite frank, it's a fucked up profession we've chosen. Which begs the question, why are we ninja? Why do we put ourselves through so much pain and suffering?"

"The Sandaime once attempted to explain to me what the 'Will of Fire' was. I didn't really understand it when I was younger but I believe I do now. The Will of Fire is that fire inside of us that keeps burning even when we think all hope is lost. It's a fire born out of our shared loved for this village. It keeps us going and keeps us fighting even when there are times it will be hard just to get out of bed. It is that fire that tells us there is something about Konoha worth protecting. Konoha isn't by all means perfect but there is something about this village that makes you not only want to fight for it, but to live for it, make a family here, and to die for it.

You're young, you're excited, you're anxious, and you're scared. You will make mistakes and you will have successes. Value each other, treasure yourselves, seize the day, and keep moving forward because life is too short to be caught standing still. Konoha is built stick by stick, twig by twig, by your flames.

That is the Will of Fire.

Kusuro ran to his mother the moment they were allowed. He had pushed over his classmates to be the first out the doors after the ceremony had come to an end. He raced into her arms and practically cried into her shirt. "I thought you were fighting."

Kagome leaned forward into the hug. "Kusuro, I fight for Grass because of you. Everything I do is
because of you."

"I'm glad you're okay," Kusuro sobbed and wiped his face. Then he instantly straightened, trying to show her the hitai-ite that now marked him as a man. It was a special hitai-ite, with the symbolic three lines of Grass on his forehead. Kagome couldn't have been more proud.

"Naruto is cooking a big ramen dinner in celebration. Are you coming?"

Kagome scowled. "Ramen on my son's graduation day? You might not have graduated in Grass Country but you will have some of it in your stomach."

Kusuro smiled in excitement. There were plenty of things he missed about home but food was certainly one of them.

Kusuro turned and saw Asami talking softly with her family.

"Mom, can you excuse me?" Kusuro asked and then walked over to Asami.

"Hey Asami, I was wondering if I could talk to you."

Asami looked over her shoulder.

"Of course she can talk to you," Asami's mom greeted and pushed her in the back with an encouraging smile. Asami hid her face in her hands embarrassed at her mother's suggestive wink.

"When I broke your camera, I was having a bad day."

Asami scoffed. "Then you have a bad day every day."

Kusuro pouted. "I'm trying to apologize. You don't have to make it so difficult."

Asami shrugged and looked down at her feet. "It's not important. We're adults now. I have left those petty dreams behind."

Kusuro sighed. "Look, I kind of want to make it up to you." Kusuro reached into his pocket and handed Asami a picture.

Asami's bottom jaw dropped and her eyes almost rolled out of her head to get a closer look at what she held. She quickly stashed it for safekeeping in the front of her shirt. She whispered conspiratorially. "How did you get this?"

"Do not ask."

"Thank you so much, I don't."

Asami paused when she looked passed Kusuro's shoulder. Her breath hitched and suddenly Asami wasn't the annoying girl Kusuro knew from school, wasn't one of his annoying and stupid Leaf classmates. She had a story and history all her own.

Asami raced passed Kusuro, straight into her father's waiting arms. He still had his ANBU uniform on, there was dried blood that stained the cloth, nevertheless Asami tucked her head into his shoulder without restraint.

"Dad! You made it."

"Sorry I'm late. I'd blame the Mountain ninja in my way but they're dead." Asami smiled when her father reached and adjusted the hitai-ite on her forehead. "It's a good fit."
"As good as yours," Asami acknowledged.

Then after a pause her father asked, "Who's the boy?"

"Dad," Asami groaned. "He's just a classmate. Do you have to interrogate me already? I'm an adult now."

He scoffed. "You're not an adult until you kill someone."

Asami rolled her eyes and smiled.

Kusuro watched the interaction. A father was a foreign concept to him. He never had one and knowing his mother probably would never find out if he did. With his scores settled, Kusuro caught up with his mother.

"Who was that little tramp?"

"What?" Kusuro blinked and hadn't expected his mother would care. "She's just a classmate."

"I wasn't born yesterday," Kagome poked her finger into Kusuro's chest, "And I am too young to be a grandmother. Keep your prick in your hand or your pants."

"Yes, mom," Kusuro hunched his shoulders in embarrassment.

"Oi," Kakashi waved from a tree as he waited on the road toward the Uzumaki compound. He hadn't bothered coming to the ceremony. His own graduation ceremony had been enough for him.

"Who's that?" Kusuro asked as he eyed Kakashi up and down. "Why is he wearing a mask?"

Kagome flicked the end of her cigarette at Kakashi's feet. "Kusuro, that's sperm sac. Don't worry about it. I'll kill him after the war is over."

"Oh okay," Kusuro said without question.

Kakashi hung his head and dragged his feet after her. Kakashi was a man who followed the path of least resistance. It was just easier to do whatever she told him to. Marriage was actually rather simple in that way.

"I think it was a great speech," Ame said as she clutched Naruto's hand. Ichigo and Tomu were at home with a clone but Ame wanted to come and watch the graduation ceremony.

"Thanks, I hope I didn't scare them," Naruto said honestly. He had been attempting to voice the truth but even he didn't know what words would come out of his mouth until the time came.

"I think it was just right." They paused in the cool air as they walked along the road. "When are you becoming the Hokage?"

Naruto chuckled. "Who said I was doing that?"

Ame swung their hands. "I think you'd make a great Hokage."

"Thanks kiddo but hopefully the old lady has some more years in her."

Ame fiddled with her fingers, looked up at her father, and then back down at their hands.
Naruto tilted his head towards her. She had been excited during the entire walk and now he could hear the cicadas playing background music. "What is it?"

"I was wondering, if maybe when the school year starts again, you'd enroll me in the Academy?"

Naruto paused. "Ame we talked about this."

"I know, but," Ame nudged her foot into the ground, "before I met you, before you came to the orphanage I really didn't have any reason to live. I never felt special before and you taught me so much and that this isn't such a bad place to live." Ame looked up at Naruto. "I have the Will of Fire and I want to protect Konoha with you. If you don't do it, I'll be the next Hokage."

Despite his best efforts a smile hooked onto his lips. Naruto scooped Ame into his arms. "I love you so much and I want to the world for you."

"Daddy, you can't protect me from everything."

"I'm going to try," Naruto promised. "And for the times I can't be there I'm going to teach you how to protect yourself," Naruto whispered in her ear. "You're going to kick all their butts at the Academy."

Ame's smile healed scars made along his heart. Her little arms wrapped around his neck. "Thank you thank you so much. Can we go shopping for ninja boots? I want boots."

Naruto chuckled. "The Academy doesn't start back for another few months. We have plenty of time before then."

"And when are you going to adopt a mommy? I know our family isn't normal but most have mommies."

Naruto wasn't surprised by her sudden shift in questioning. Being around all of the ninja families at the closing ceremony must have made the hole acutely aware to them both.

"I don't think I can go to the orphanage and get one of those. Do you really think we need one? I think we've been doing fine so far."

"But what happened to that lady were you seeing at night?"

Naruto stopped in his tracks. Naruto lied to Mei, but he never lied to his daughter. "She's dead, Ame."

"Oh," Ame said softly. She gave him a hug because it looked like he could use one. "Are you sad?"

"No," and the answer surprised him, "Just numb."

Naruto held his red-eyed daughter in one arm, as she leaned against his whiskered cheeks, Naruto looked down the road toward the Uzumaki compound, toward a bowl of ramen, and Tomu, and Ichigo, and a change of underwear. It shined like a beacon in the darkness to those who had lost their way, built twig by twig and stick by stick.

"That was a good speech you gave at the graduation." Tsunade replied when she looked up from her paperwork.

Naruto shrugged his shoulders, "Just words I wish I had heard when I was younger." He hadn't been in her office in a while and wondered if he was being reassigned back to the war front. He wanted to
ask but feared the answer, instead he asked hopefully, "You've forgiven me?"

"I guess I have," Tsunade answered, officially ending the impasse between the two. She tapped her fingers on the desk. "It's time we've returned to business."

"What's the situation?" Naruto asked immediately.

"Ame has thrown its support behind Kiri and Mountain."

Naruto took the news with an expression as if he had eaten a cold bowl of ramen. This was worse than returning to the battlefield, it was an entire new enemy to fight.

"What of our allies?" Naruto asked.

"Suna is with us of course but fucking Lightning has decided they want to sit on the sidelines."

"The Raikage sitting out from a fight?" Naruto questioned with his eyes narrowed. Naruto knew the Raikage well enough. If he had to be honest with himself, it was a smart move on Lightning's part but a bad move for Konoha. "The Raikage wants to see how this war ends and throw his weight behind the winner."

"And Lightning carries a lot of weight," Tsunade rubbed her aching temples. "We're on the brink of a Fifth Shinobi War and it's a war we can't afford to lose."

"What do you need me to do?" Naruto asked without hesitation.

Tsunade threw a piece of cloth at Naruto. Automatically, he snatched it out of the air. His breath caught when he turned over the white fabric in his hands. "But- but- I'm not qualified for this."

"Naruto, besides Kiri, you are more than qualified for this job. Consider your last mission. You made the assassination of the Daimyo look easy. You went in, determined when and where he would be most vulnerable, called in the jutsu and abilities you needed to get the job done, and executed the mission flawlessly.

An ANBU Captain needs to know how to lead, how to make decisions, and how to execute them. I'm not giving you this job, you've earned it."

Naruto could feel the fibers of chakra hidden within the white Captain's cloak.

"This is a lot of responsibility," Naruto whispered. "Are you sure? I mean, I've made so many mistakes."

"Everyone makes mistakes, only a few seek redemption."

Naruto felt many things in that moment but none so keen as the thought that he didn't deserve the honor and that he could never live up to the legends that surrounded the ANBU Captains. But they were on the cusp of the Fifth Shinobi War and he wasn't going to stand on the sidelines and watch it happen.

The fabric slipped over his shoulders as soft as a blade through skin.

"You're going to need a new mask."

"What are you thinking of?"

"It is tradition that a Captain chooses his own mask. At this point in your career, any enemy that sees
your mask shouldn't live long enough to tell anyone about it."

"Anything I want?" Naruto asked.

"Anything."

Naruto told the Hokage the mask he wanted. He was going to protect this village with all it problems and successes, and all the people who lived, dreamed, and fought for this place.

In the whispers of both his enemies and his allies they called him the Demon Fox of Konoha.

Naruto reached for the Fox mask and placed it over his face.

It was a perfect fit.

x

Konoha is built stick by stick, twig by twig, by your flames
Lesson Thirty-One

The Captain

Since Konohamaru was a child he always wondered what the masks were made of. The chakra imbued into the material simmered against his skin. Rumor whispered that the masks were made when the organization was first founded, from the bones of the dead during the First Shinobi war. But Konohamaru determined the masks were made from tougher material, he knew from experience that bones were fragile. Who knew what these masks have seen that have hardened them so?

His movements weren't silent enough as his girlfriend began to adjust her position in bed. Ever since that mission a year ago, his movements were never silent enough. Moegi lifted her eyes, targeted the outline of his frame in the darkness of the room.

"You should have told her no," Moegi whispered.

It was a conversation, or argument depending on Moegi's mood, that they had often. But Konohamaru couldn't deny the Hokage. He was the grandchild of the Sandaime, much was expected of him to protect the village.

"BBQ later?" Konohamaru asked.

"Hmm..." It was a sound Moegi used for everything when she was too tired for words. She turned over in bed and closed her eyes.

He snapped together the last buckle on his flak jacket. He strapped the newly minted katana onto his back. Konohamaru would never know what the masks were made of unless he someday became Hokage.

Konohamaru Sarutobi placed the Hound mask over his face.

Hound entered the dark shadows of the ANBU underground. It was a suffocating sort of darkness, without any moonlight to guide you through. The tunnels could have easily been inspired by the twisting roots that make up its ceiling.

Hound found the private training room that had been assigned as the meeting place. There were already quite a few that had gathered. Hound immediately identified Crane. She was the only one he knew. They never really liked each other but stood close in the mutual understanding that, despite their long and bitter rivalry, they trusted each other more than they trusted the rest of the unknowns in the room.

Hound asked after several minutes ticked by, "How long have you been waiting?"

He didn't really care for the answer, just wanted to hear someone else's voice in the eerily quiet room of ANBU. His question multiplied in the silence and he couldn't help but to cringe at the volume of his own voice.

"Long enough," Crane snapped impatiently. "He was supposed to be here ten minutes ago."

"I'm assuming he's making us wait on purpose," Bobcat replied, an ANBU Hound had never worked with before. Two blonde braids stuck out the back of her mask. She talked like a Yamanaka.
"Whatever, I'm leaving," Crane replied and pushed herself off from the wall. Crane's intolerance of disrespect easily betrayed her as a Hyūga.

"Our orders were to meet in this room." Cincada replied from a corner of the wall. "Our orders did not contain a condition to leave." He was harder to place, but if Hound had to guess, an Aburame. Hound couldn't help but wonder if his own habits gave away his identity just as easily.

"He'll probably be here eventually," Another ANBU replied, Rabbit. Hound couldn't get a good read on his character, but seemed more relaxed than most ANBU he had come across. This one, like himself, hadn't seen field experience yet.

"He might be a Captain but he can't expect us to wait all day," Crane said finally.

Her waning figure was lost in a sudden thickening of haze. Even the sound of Crane's footsteps faded into a heavy silence. Hound could see nothing, not even his own hands. It was as if being lost in a cloud.

Hound blinked. Then he was suddenly studying the intricate patterns that decorated the bottom of a ninja's bright blue boots. Hound's head snapped backwards, on instinct, he reflexively tucked his body to avoid the full impact of the ground. If there was one class in the Academy he never regretted, it was the one that taught you how to fall.

Hound rolled backwards and onto his feet, with a dissipated shadow clone and a rasengan in hand. He searched the mist for his opponent, saw a bright red flash deep within the sea of blue. Before he had a chance to draw back his arm, his head was spinning and his face was kissing the floor. Blood dirtied his freshly cleaned ANBU uniform.

Hound tucked his arm around the wound, pushed himself to stand, but could not find the conviction to raise himself to his knees. He stared in disbelief at the spiral imprint of a rasengan burnt into his skin. How did he manage to hit himself with his own rasengan?

The haze cleared. All ANBU had fallen in seconds.

The edges of a white coat fluttered in Hound's periphery vision. His gaze followed the outlines of the unblemished cloak, upwards past the broad shoulders, shoulder-length blonde hair, until he was face to face with the callous stare of the Fox mask.

Fox Captain moved to the center of the room, stepped onto Hound's back without pause, as if crossing over a corpse.

"Hiding in the Mist Technique is the favored jutsu among Mist ninja. It creates a miniscule field of vision and the mist is laced with chakra which renders doujutsu like the byakugan and sharingan useless. A Mist ninja will not give you warning before he attacks and will just as likely pull you into the water where no matter how strong, how fast, or how many jutsu you know will save you from a wet grave."

Fox Captain looked at the ANBU as they rose from the floor, nursing wounds that would have killed them if the Captain had been in a bad mood. "Our job isn't on a battlefield but it's just as important and even more likely to get you killed. Kirigakure has never in its history fallen from the outside. This team was created for the sole purpose of getting on the inside."

Then Fox Captain tilted his head at the ANBU as they rose from the floor, nursing wounds that would have killed them if the Captain had been in a bad mood. "Our job isn't on a battlefield but it's just as important and even more likely to get you killed. Kirigakure has never in its history fallen from the outside. This team was created for the sole purpose of getting on the inside."

Of course most occupants in the room had killed a Mist ninja before but due to their poor
performance just a few moments ago, they wisely kept their mouths shut.

"I just kicked your ass. If I didn't want you to answer my questions I would have cut your tongue out instead."

Rabbit spoke up, decided to go for the obvious, "Kill them before they kill you."

"You didn't do a very good job of that a few minutes ago and there was only one of me."

Hound highly doubted that. He was fairly sure the mist was populated by shadow clones. Then it struck Hound like the foot he received in the face only a few moments before. He hadn't hit himself with his own rasengan after all. He studied the Captain's blonde hair, his height, and the way he carried himself. There was no mistaking it.

"The highest chance of surviving an unexpected encounter with a Mist ninja is to learn how to fight blind. We rely too much on our sight and not enough on our ears, smell, taste, touch and sense of chakra. From this day on we will practice fighting with our eyes closed…" The way the Captain tilted his head betrayed a hint of mischievousness, "try not to kill each other."

Crane was so used to being the best at everything, she couldn't get used to being the worst.

"This is stupid," Crane tore the blindfold off her eyes after she landed on her butt, again. Apparently she was deaf to all but Hound's justified cockiness. She couldn't even land a hit against her sparring partner. Every strike had flailed into empty air. Crane twisted her foot on the blindfold when she stood from the floor.

"You're leaving?" Hound asked.

Crane didn't answer, didn't care to and no longer cared enough to stay.

She didn't step one foot out of the room before she crashed into the Captains's chest, literally recoiled off his hardness, but was steadied by the hand he placed on her shoulder. At first, in the mist, Crane had assumed it was a transportation jutsu but the soft brush of her hair revealed that no, he was indeed that fast.

"Captain," Crane acknowledged. Her annoyance at the unintended contact was evident in her voice. She rolled her shoulder and slid underneath his hand. She attempted to slide through the holes his large frame did not fill in the narrow hallway but those holes were merely an illusion at escape.

"Where are you going?" It was a simple question that implied more than just the direction Crane's feet pointed her.

"My inclusion on this team is pointless. I am valued for my eyes, not the use without them."

"Perhaps you're not on this team because of your eyes," The Captain replied. "Have you ever considered that I was the only Captain willing to take a chance on you? If I remember correctly, your files have been marked several times for disobedience, failure to abide orders, and inconsideration for your teammates."

Crane recoiled ever further at the considered insult. "I have no time for a Captain who takes pity on their subordinates. That's weak leadership."

Crane finally managed to slide past but only because he had allowed her to. Even though Crane knew she was probably going to get pulled from ANBU after rejecting yet another team assignment,
but how did they expect her to tolerate a Captain who didn't know how to effectively use a byakugan?

The Captain's deep baritone voice echoed through the twisted tree roots. "Walk away but your sister never would."

The palm of her fingers simmered with chakra. She twisted on her heel and craned her neck to look up at the ANBU Captain that towered over her. Her tongue was scathing and did not fear the consequence of its words. "Who do you think you are? You know nothing."

"It is you who know nothing, little girl. You've been spoiled all your life, given everything, and the moment you face something you have to actually work for you give up."

Her byakugan activated on cue with her rising temper and the perceived threat. Instinctively, she gauged the level of her opponent. Crane could feel the stifling pressure from the amount of chakra compressed in his body. Crane could feel the killing intent he kept at bay. He had no scars save one.

"You've got to be kidding me?" Crane scowled. "Hinata put you up to this didn't she? I don't need anyone to babysit me."

"I chose you because you are one of the rare water elementals in ANBU. I chose you because you are skilled and can be an asset to this team. I don't have time to babysit you. I have a war to fight. If you refuse to take this team seriously, then you're of no use to me. Leave and don't come back."

And Crane always hated doing what people told her to do.

Rebellious footsteps stomped back towards the training room. Crane paused, looked back, had to get one thing straight if she was going to accept him as her sensei, "I am not my sister."

Rabbit didn't graduate the Academy with the best grades nor the worst. He wasn't ugly but neither did women form fan clubs to celebrate his stunning good looks. He wasn't from a clan but his parents weren't civilians either. He wasn't rich but he wasn't poor. He didn't have a lot of friends but he had enough. Rabbit always considered himself as average.

So when Rabbit told his brother that he had been invited into ANBU, Rabbit's feelings were not hurt when his brother laughed. His father had never gotten any higher than a genin and made a meager career out of it. His mother on the other hand had been a chuunin before she died in the Third Shinobi War. Rabbit's brother was a medical chuunin with a pay just enough to support him, his wife, and son. Rabbit's sister never became a ninja, forced to drop out of the Academy when their parents died to raise her two younger brothers.

His family had never been anything remarkable.

Rabbit silently wondered if the Hokage was running out of options. Sure, he's survived thus far but he didn't consider himself as one of those ninja whose idea of fun was the middle of a battlefield. His idea of fun was a beer and a game of poker with his brother. He wasn't special enough, or crazy enough, or talented enough to be in ANBU.

It wasn't until Rabbit had spent a few weeks in ANBU himself did he begin to think that everyone didn't always begin crazy. He was beginning to get rather good at pointing out the newcomers to this black business, the ones used to the daily grind of a chuunin: Accept mission, finish mission, do everything you could to forget the mission, and then start the cycle all over again.

But for the veterans - it was as if their mission never finishes. They were constantly looking over
their shoulder, silently sizing up everyone around them, friend or foe. That was the impression Rabbit got of his ANBU Captain.

The practice had ended and Rabbit was gathering his items. Not used to the social isolation that ANBU agents imposed upon themselves, he naturally drifted towards the other ANBU he sensed as a newcomer.

"Want to grab a drink later?" Rabbit suggested.

"Sorry," Hound apologized. "Already have plans for tonight. Next time after practice?"

"Yeah," Rabbit agreed, more hopeful for a next time than he would care to admit. Everyone had a tendency to keep to themselves in ANBU. They did all their socialization in the sparring room and well, Rabbit didn't want to die over a hello. It was hard to find a friendly face… erm mask.

After Rabbit had gathered all of his scattered equipment, he hunched his shoulders as he neared the door. The Captain had privately ambushed everyone into a private discussion before they left and Rabbit could sense his turn was approaching.

The Captain's gaze fell on him. "Good job today."

"Not really," Rabbit denied the compliment but often found his attempts at being realistic mistaken for humility. He was awful at taijutsu, mediocre at ninjutsu, and passable at genjutsu. He should have become a medic like his brother. "Everyone is better than I am."

"You don't have a large array of powerful jutsu but you use what you do have efficiently. Besides, give yourself some credit. You were better than Crane."

That didn't give Rabbit anymore confidence. Fighting against a Hyūga who couldn't use their byakugan was like fighting against a genin.

"People are more effective at different things. That's the point of a team, to cover each other's weaknesses. This is a tough job and you're not a chūnin anymore. If you need anything or if you need someone to talk to let me know. I'm not as scary as I look."

Rabbit disagreed wholeheartedly. He was as scary as he looked. In the end, Rabbit just wanted to do his time and get out of ANBU alive.

Konohamaru reached across the table for the last piece of Barbeque. "Naruto is an ANBU Captain."

Moegi looked up from the alcoholic drink that seemed to have been decorated by a drunken rainbow. The ragged scar that crossed the left side of her face arched along with her eyebrow. Even though there were little customers present at closing time, Moegi reprimanded with a whisper, "Quiet, that's not something to say out loud."

"I'm never going to catch up to him."

"Naruto is what?" Udon questioned. "Almost twenty-one? You've still got three years."

"Yeah, but now he's the second youngest to ever become a Captain next to Itachi, and I've already missed that deadline. Itachi became a Captain at thirteen."

"Itachi also massacred his entire clan," Moegi deadpanned. "To be quite honest I don't think that was one of your Grandfather's better decisions."
"You have to make exceptions during war," Konohamaru defended.

"And sometimes those exceptions come back to bite you in the ass." Moegi played with the small umbrella that came with the drink on her tongue as dexterous as if it was a senbon needle. "Makes you wonder what exceptions we're going to make this time around. Ame, Mountain, Mist, Sand, Leaf. With five countries fighting are we in a Great War?"

"Not until the Hokage declares it, but cards are falling. Now that Suna's attentions are divided, you can bet that Iwa is going to push back with a counter attack. Lightning is Lightning, they are not going to stay out of a fight for very long," Konohamaru answered. "It's only a matter of time. We might as well brace ourselves."

"The Fifth Shinobi War," Moegi tried out the title.

"The way they keep adding numbers make it sound not much of a big deal anymore," Udon noticed. He stared at the nub on his right hand, where he had lost his pinky finger. He hardly looked at it very much.

"How did we get here?" Moegi questioned. "A few years ago we were fighting alongside each other."

"We're ninjas."

The old genin team took their time. Udon was being assigned to the Eastern front against Kiri's forces and Moegi was assigned to the Northern front against Ame. Konohamaru wasn't assigned to a battlefield but his job was just as dangerous. They lingered until the final hours, because you never know.

Hanabi was competitive by nature. It was not acceptable to be dead last at anything.

With a blindfold placed over her eyes, she went through her usual katas across the Hyūga dojo. Her eyes were the cog that made everything else work. Like a stack of cards, once the foundation was taken away all of her abilities and skills came tumbling down.

"Hanabi, it is your turn in the kitchen."

Hanabi audibly yelped at her sister's sudden voice. Hanabi attempted to recover her composure and mask her embarrassment at being caught unawares. She usually didn't get caught by surprise.

"I'm training," Hanabi said obviously.

"You have chores."

Hanabi frowned. She did not like to repeat herself. "I'm training."

Hanabi's legs were suddenly swept from underneath her. Hanabi snatched the blindfold from her eyes. Hinata replied in a matter-of-fact tone, "Your temper is not going to improve your senses, it only blinds them."

Hanabi knew that and was annoyed by the obvious, and further annoyed by Hinata's presence. Hanabi felt overshadowed and she wanted nothing more but to find her own sunlight.

Hanabi reached for a towel to wipe the sweat from her forehead. "Your lover is my ANBU Captain."
"I am married," Hinata answered automatically.

Hanabi honestly couldn't interpret her sister's body language but logically reasoned that if Naruto was her Captain, Hinata knew. "You could have warned me before he kicked my ass."

"Language."

"Yeah whatever, the day I mind my language is the day you tell the truth." Hanabi pulled her training gi over her head. "What the hell am I doing today?"

"Kitchen duty. Language," Hinata replied again.

"I am not the Clan Head. What does anyone care about my language?" Hanabi questioned and then began a song as she walked down the hallway, "Fuck, shit, damn, fuck, fuck, fuck."

x

"I'm starting my first day of work tomorrow. I can't believe it. Thanks to Onee-sama, I have a job..."

"I heard Onee-sama is destroying the branch house and attempting to combine the compound. We all are getting our own rooms!"

"Yesterday Onee-sama helped me with my Jyūken stance."

Hanabi probably stared at the potato and the peeler in her hand for a full thirty minutes. Her lazy attempts resulted in cuts along her hands, a brocade of peelings at her feet, and the twisted potato in her hand that looked as if someone's face had been pummeled in too many times.

Then Hanabi looked at the two full baskets of her cousin's peeled potatoes. Hanabi couldn't understand why peeling a fucking potato was so hard.

"Do you need help Hanabi-sam... Hanabi-san?" Her cousin asked, who had famously belonged to the group of handmaidens that had been nicknamed, "Hanabi's flock of doves."

"No," Hanabi snapped, "I do not need help."

After a few minutes, Hanabi threw the potato down on the ground and gave up.

It had become their corner.

Whenever Old Man Teuchi saw both of them enter the ramen shop he already knew which table to prepare. It was a small table tucked into the corner on the second floor of Ichiraku's expanding restaurant. It was positioned by a corner and shadowed enough to where other customers had to look closely in order to ascertain the patrons' identity.

It was perfect when Naruto wanted to visit Ichiraku and didn't want to be bothered.

"Don't go easy on her just because she's my sister." Hinata pressed the rim of the sake ceramic delicately to her lips.

Naruto slurped the ramen into his mouth. The door to Ichiraku's opened and on instinct both occupants at the table looked up briefly, assessed the amount of danger from the person who came through the door, saw nothing to note, and returned their eyes to their meal.

Naruto reached into his pocket and passed the sealed paper across the table. Hinata didn't take it right
away, took a sip, and then activated her byakugan. She read the copy of the mission Hanabi was soon to receive.

"She is a ninja." Hinata said simply, deactivated her byakugan, and looked away. Of course she was worried about Hanabi being placed on a potentially dangerous mission but, "It's a war. Do what you have to."

Naruto placed the mission assignment back into his pocket which hadn't even been seen by the Hokage yet. "I never thought I'd hate anything more than being a squad leader until I became an ANBU Captain. You constantly hope you train them well enough, that you've chosen right according to their abilities, that you've given them as much information as you can, then you let them go... and wait. I want to do something."

"You're still sending out clones to all the major warfronts, you shouldn't stretch yourself more than that." Her lips glistened from the alcohol still stained on her lips. Her eyelashes arched with a wistful sigh when she placed the empty ochoko back onto the table. Her fingers drummed along the rim, questioning another one.

She always had another one and Naruto always went ahead and ordered for her.

"I have to meet with the elder's today."

"That's what you always say," Naruto replied knowingly, whether she had a meeting with the elders or not. He knew she used the excuse to keep her from drinking too much. She was always careful with her intake, always careful to minimize her mistakes, always careful to maintain a distance.

Ayane replaced the empty tokkuri on the table and Naruto poured the sake.

And yet, she always had another one.

"How have you been progressing with the seal?" Hinata asked and tested her tolerance.

"The prototype is almost finished but I've had to put it on hold to rework another seal for the current mission."

There was an unspoken question in her eyes and Naruto answered it without thought. "I'm reworking the seal used to hide chakra. It's not built to hide vast amounts of chakra like mine. I need to perfect it.

"Any mission that requires you to hide your chakra is dangerous." Naruto grinned cheekily, "Are you worried about me?"

Then Hinata leaned over with a pair of chopsticks that dived for Naruto's ramen bowl.

"Hey," Naruto pouted, "You should have ordered some of your own." Their chopsticks clashed, and then a fierce swordfight ensued until Hinata proved herself with greater dexterity and Naruto's chopsticks twirled out of his fingers.

A smile peeked onto Hinata's lips before she placed the ramen into her mouth.

"Count yourself lucky," Naruto claimed. "I don't share my ramen with just anyone."

Hinata slurped the ramen into her mouth just as he finished his sentence. That small smile that constricted Naruto's throat appeared on her lips.
Naruto leaned forward, suddenly not caring whether or not she was married to Neji or that Neji was his friend. But Hinata cared and leaned backwards, subtly turning her head away. She set the chopsticks along the rim of the bowl and slid the ramen back towards Naruto in apology. 

Naruto thought about it a lot of times, would rather lie in bed and fantasize about Hinata than find someone who could actually pleasure him. Naruto often obsessed about the choices he could have made, what paths he could have taken, if any, that would have led him to Hinata. 

"What's stopping us?" Naruto whispered conspiratorially, his voice burdened with need. 

"No, Naruto." 

"Why do we always have to do the right thing? Why can't for once we be a little selfish?"

This wasn't like Naruto and Hinata knew it. She wondered if it was the job, or the war, or everything finally accumulating and becoming too heavy to carry. 

"I have done a lot of horrible things. I have made some terrible decisions. Still believing in rights and wrongs are the only bit of humanity I have left. I am not going to cheat on my husband."

Naruto reached for her hand and it slipped out of his grip. "I'm not asking you to cheat on him, just… just… why won't you let me hold you?"

Hinata stood up from the table. The sudden movement caused her to tumble back into her chair. She gave the alcohol a regretful stare. It was hurting them both. "I don't think we should have these dinners anymore."

Naruto stood up, red irises flaring. "Wait, Hinata don't leave me."

"You never had me." Those words opened a bleeding wound.

Hinata picked up her cane and snatched her robe from the back of the chair. She wished Naruto had never said the words, had never reached out for her hand. Why couldn't he be satisfied with what this was? – Lunch, two bottles of sake, ramen, and each other's company to make the rest of the day bearable.

"Don't be a hypocrite, Hinata." Naruto's eyes narrowed and his jaw set. He hasn't been wounded like this in so long. The pain ached and he savored the salty taste. His hands quivered, his heart clench, his question a tortured prisoner of their past, "Don't you still think about me?"

Hinata lifted her broken eyes and met his tortured blue ones. They were both helpless to the cruel gravity that kept them revolving around each other, unable to touch. 

"I can't heal you, Naruto. I can't even heal myself."

"I don't want to be healed. I just want to know-fuck Hinata-" Naruto left his sage cloak behind with the alcohol and cold ramen. He raced after her down the stairs and slammed his wallet down before Hinata had a chance to pay Old Man Teuchi for her share. 

"Do you still love me?"

"No."

"Liar."

"Please." Hinata's cold mask broke - perhaps too much sake, too little sleep, or too much Naruto.
"Let me go."

They've been here before.

The Hyūga clan head disappeared out the door. The moment she was gone, he missed her. He knew he had a bad habit of holding on to people.

Naruto Uzumaki didn’t want to move on.

Calligraphy elaborately adorned the stolen scroll of Kirigakure. Crane copied down the seals impressed upon the pliable surface, not allowed to touch it herself. In great detail, the scroll described how to perform Kirigakure's secret water breathing technique.

"How did you possibly acquire this?" Crane couldn't help her curiosity. The scroll itself was stamped with the seal of the second Mizukage.

Captain Fox leaned back in his chair with his feet planted lazily atop the desk. His eyes were closed but Crane knew he wasn’t asleep. If she activated her byakugan she could see the Captain absorbing the natural energy from the environment of his office.

Fox shrugged his shoulders and answered as if pondering the preparations of his next vacation, "I've been to Kirigakure once or twice."

How one of Kirigakure's most prized possessions had gotten to Konoha, Crane would never know but she was certain that there was a lot more behind the story of Kirigakure's coup d'état than anyone would ever know.

There were only a few ANBU gathered within the office. Crane noticed that those present were the only members of the team knowledgeable in the water element. When the ANBU finished copying the jutsu, the Captain rolled the parchment that creaked with age and locked it within a storage scroll weighed heavy by the amount of seals.

"I have chosen you all to infiltrate Kirigakure's ANBU underground and spy on behalf of Konoha. This is a dangerous mission that could potentially last for months. For many of you, this will be your first undercover mission. For an undercover mission there is only one rule: Never break your cover."

"One rule," The Captain spoke the words through his teeth like a distasteful but necessary dose of medicine. "This mission will test your loyalties, your resolve, and your love for this village. It’s not easy to forget who you are and become a blank mask. There will be times when you can't afford to entertain your morals. There will be times when you are called to do what is necessary for the benefit of the entire village, sometimes what is necessary means cutting down your friends," every word was a small cut on the skin, until everyone in the room was bleeding their nervousness. "Never break your cover, and when the mission is finally over, then deal with the consequences of whatever pieces are left of you afterwards."

In a rare moment of brutal honesty that clutched a raw fear into Crane's spine, the Captain said with words full of the emotion his static mask could not afford, "And even years later, whether or not we win or lose this war, whether or not it was worth it, you are still picking up the pieces."

"Who do you think the Captain is going to appoint as squad leader?" Bobcat asked curiously.

"The Captain will probably appoint Cincada," Hound replied. "He has the most experience out of all of us here."
"He's not appointing me," Rabbit replied. He was just an average ninja, with no business being in ANBU in the first place.

Crane secretly hoped it would be her. She wanted to prove herself. She no longer wanted to stand in her sister's ever-growing shadow.

Before Hound placed down a card, Bobcat quickly replied, "Not that one."

"Would you shut-up?" Cincada threatened. "Mind-reading is cheating."

"I don't have to read your mind," Bobcat boasted. "Every time you rub your finger against the left edge of your card there is an eighty percent chance you have a good hand. You'd think ANBU would have a good bluffing face."

Hound picked another card and sat it face-down on the table. He reached for the beer.

"How about this?" Rabbit challenged. "Who will win at a game of cards? A Hyuuga or a Yamanaka?"

"A Hyuuga, they're always playing strip poker," Cincada answered the joke. "That's an old one. How about this: A Hyuuga and a Yamanaka walk into a bar…"

Impatient, Bobcat read his mind and shivered at the answer. "Eww, I'd never screwdrive a Hyuuga…. No offense." Bobcat said quickly.

Crane, who leaned against the table, shrugged her shoulder in disinterest. Some of the team got together to play cards after practice. Most wondered why Crane bothered coming if she simply watched with a bored expression on her henge.

"Alright, Crane your turn," Rabbit challenge.

"I don't do jokes," she pouted.

"What's wrong? Need a byakugan to come up with a joke too?" Cincada sniggered. "What can a Hyuuga do without a byakugan?... Nothing!"

Crane angrily rose to the challenge. "What do two Hyuuga say when they greet each other?... I see you. Get it? Eye see you."

"Sorry, It wasn't that funny," Hound admitted. It was his turn. "Why did the Hokage's boobs get so big?... She needed somewhere to hide her gambling's debts."

"I have one," Bobcat said eagerly. "How do you make a Yamanaka angry?... lose your mind."

"The Hokage and Raikage challenge each other to a game of darts. Who loses?"

"The Raikage? He only has one arm."

"Nope. The Hokage, she has the biggest targets."

"There's pussy flavored ramen-

"Eww, Cincada, why do you always have to go with the dirty jokes?"

"and boob flavored ramen, and dick flavored ramen. Which one would a Uzumaki choose?"
"All three, its ramen."

Suddenly the laughter was doused from the room. ANBU unconsciously placed their heads down when Captain Snake entered the room. She didn't stay long, slinked forward to grab a bottle of alcohol off the table of a group of ANBU as if she was going shopping. Then she left the room with a skip. She bathed in the fear her presence caused.

A collective sigh left the room.

"Sensei Snake is so cool," Bobcat said wistfully, "Only she can sharpen a body into the deadliest tool."

"I hear she's looking for a new play toy," Cincada said. "I wouldn't mind taking her up on her offer."

Rabbit had to agree that the idea of having sex with a Captain was hot, sounded like a scene straight out of Icha Icha.

Hound thought quite the opposite. Snake was so crazy she created her own level of craziness. "I'd rather avoid her attention."

Rabbit knew he didn't have any problems with that. He was average, he wasn't anything special, certainly not special enough to catch an ANBU's Captain's attention.

"I win," Cincada suddenly proclaimed.

Hound and Rabbit looked stunned at the deck of cards. "But, Bobcat, you told me not to play that card."

Bobcat winked and with giddiness said, "Which is why you'd be a horrible squad leader."

Cincada reached over, raked the pile of money towards him, and proceeded to split the winnings fifty/fifty with Bobcat.

Rabbit threw the rest of his hand onto the table. "I think I've lost enough for today," he mumbled bitterly and wondered how Cincada and Bobcat always got the best of their comrades. Bobcat wasn't allowed to play because she was a Yamanaka, and still somehow, in the end, she won.

"See you tomorrow," Rabbit got up from the table. It took a few weeks of collectively getting their asses kicked by the Captain for everyone to warm up to each other's personalities. In the end, you didn't have a choice but to tolerate one another, because in the field, someone was going to have to cover your back.

Rabbit was sweaty and sticky from training but the shower was farther than the bed. He collapsed into the pillow and closed his eyes.

He remembered the click that the door made when it was closed, remembered the sound of hissing that coated his skin in a terrifying fear that would later haunt his nightmares.

The rest was a blur.

"You sent for me?" Hound asked when he entered the Captain's office. It was rather messy with maps of Kirigakure covering every surface of the floor. Hound knew for a fact his grandfather never owned such detailed maps of the fog covered village. They had to be recent additions to Konoha's archives.
"I've chosen you as the squad leader for the upcoming mission," The Captain replied and navigated around the limited space of maps with ease. Usually the promotion was given with a little more enthusiasm but Hound just got the sense of pity and apology mixed within the Captain's words.

"I will do my best," Hound promised.

The Captain opened one of the drawers of the desk and withdrew a small capsule. He raised the mask slightly. It was just enough to expose his lips and swallow the medicine and glass of water afterwards.

"Nii-san, are you sick?" Hound asked without thinking in his sudden concern.

The glass of water tapped the desk. Fox Captain beckoned Hound closer as if about to impart a secret. Hound leaned forward, was grabbed suddenly by the sleeve, and in a blink, felt damp air breathing against his skin.

Hound looked at the rounded rooftops and the drifting constellations in the sky. He realized quickly they weren't in Konoha anymore.

"Kirigakure."

"What?" Hound whispered urgently, suddenly checking his noise level. He turned and found the distant back of the Captain's white cloak. Hound quickly attempted to catch up, careful not to make any unintended noise. Meanwhile, the Captain was walking the rooftops as if calmly strolling through the market rather than navigating a dark night in enemy territory.

The Captain jumped down between the cracks of two roofs and stopped at a windowsill. Hound pasted himself on the side of the house and curiously looked inside. He found an ordinary woman cooking dinner.

"Her name is Hosaka Ayumi. She is twenty-six years old, has given up on love after abused by her fiancée when she was younger but still promises her mother she's going to get married. She likes to read the Icha Icha series in her free time, bites her lip when she is nervous, talks in her sleep, and is the secretary of the Mizukage."

The window creaked open.

Ayumi felt a chill, turned toward the window, and never had the time to scream.

The scene was reminiscent of a prince catching a fainting maiden. She fell into the Captain's arms as if falling into the soft caresses of sleep. Blood rimmed her neck like a ruby necklace. Her corpse was laid to rest gently inside a storage scroll to later mine for memories.

In a blink, a shadow clone of the Captain appeared. The clone transformed into a copy of the woman he had just killed, turned around, and continued cooking dinner. The aroma of grilled fish began to engulf the air, the apartment was absent of any blood, as if nothing was amiss. There was a cruel sort of perfection in a silent kill, like the last note of a sad song.

"Why did you show me this?" Hound questioned.

"It looks easy but... I hate this job." The Captain shrugged his shoulders. "This sort of job is hard for people like us, for people who believe in a wrong and a right, but do the wrong things anyways and hope that sometimes the total will add up to a right... I've never been good at math."
"Here are your mission assignments."

Captain Fox stood with his arms crossed beside the Hokage's desk, almost lost in the lengthening shadows of the sunset behind him.

"You have a week to memorize the maps and details of the mission. Discretion is of the utmost importance," The Hokage stressed. "If you think at any moment your presence will be detected, abort the mission."

"I understand," Hound replied and received the mission folders from the Hokage. Hound distributed the folders and the small ANBU team nodded in understanding.

"You are dismissed."

When they were gone, Fox leaned against the window and watched the descending sun. The light danced with shadows over his stark white mask. "They're not going to come back the same are they?"

"They never do," The Hokage replied. "You made good choices. It's a good team."

"What now?"

It was a waiting game the Hokage had long become proficient in playing. "I usually have a drink and hope they come back alive."

"Isn't that Hiashi's girl?"

Konohamaru looked up from his beer and over across the bar heavy with cigarette smoke. After Konohamaru had been promoted to chūnin, it had become tradition that he and his father would go out for a few beers before each mission.

Konohamaru choked on his drink when it was indeed Hanabi who had walked into the bar with the shortest dress he had ever seen her wear. His gaze followed her sculptured legs.

"I'm glad I never had girls," Sarutobi replied gruffly.

As if she had targeted her destination, she slipped through the crowded bar and pushed to the front. She ordered a beer. When the bartender ignored her, she reached over the bar, caught the bartender by his tie and sent him spinning into her pale eyes with a demand. The bartender gulped and handed her a beer for free.

"I remember when Hiashi, Hizashi, and I were kids," Sarutobi grumbled. Konohamaru knew it was coming. His father only talked of the past when he was drinking. "It wasn't too long ago we were genin. It was the Second… Third Shinobi war? Fuck, I can't remember anymore."

Hanabi took her first sip of the beer. Her disgusted expression said she was not impressed. A man beside her, a ninja - Konohamaru instantly identified from the scars on his hands, attempted to flirt with Hanabi. She ignored him and ordered another beer.

"Those were the old days..." Sarutobi considered the bias of his memories. When reminiscing over someone you tend to focus on their good traits and forget the bad. The truth of it, Hiashi was both a perfectionist but cruel, he was a romantic but an utter liar, proud but always self-conscious of the narrow distinctions between him and his twin.
"I think I've had enough," Sarutobi replied as he placed down the empty beer mug. His knees creaked when he peeled himself from the bar stool. His hand pressed against Konohamaru's shoulder. "I have a council meeting in the morning but make sure Hiashi's girl gets back home."

"Alright dad," Konohamaru replied reluctantly. Hanabi had never been his favorite person but in Konoha there were always complicated relationships that prescribed who to look out for. Konohamaru watched his father leave. His father still had that limp he received as a genin. Sometimes Konohamaru was glad his father wasn't a ninja and other times he was ashamed of it.

With a sigh, Konohamaru peeked at Hanabi through the clear of his empty beer glass. Konohamaru didn't think there was anything wrong with a few drinks before a mission but drinking alone and not knowing your limits was a disaster waiting to happen.

When the ninja Hanabi had blown off previously placed a hand on her butt and she allowed it, Konohamaru knew it was time to step in. Konohamaru moved from his seat and moved towards Hanabi who had already downed three beers and another that had been bought by her new friend.

Konohamaru leaned against the bar and bodily made himself a barrier to the ninja behind him. "Hanabi, I haven't seen you in a while."

Hanabi could never just play along. "What do you want?" she snapped.

"Hey look dude," the ninja behind Konohamaru replied. Konohamaru looked over his shoulder - definitely too well-dressed to be a genin but too much of an idiot to be a Jounin. After all, who in their right mind tried to pick up a Hyūga?

"The name is Sarutobi," Konohamaru shamelessly name-dropped. "You're in my seat."

The ninja stood up, ready for fight. He towered over Konohamaru but Konohamaru's hair gave him more height. The man leaned forward, right into the tip of Konohamaru's unexpected kunai.

Konohamaru could see the ninja weighing his options. Murder was certainly illegal in Konoha but Sarutobi was the sort of name that could kill you and your death will never be observed in police records. There was always a certain amount of danger surrounding a clan name.

The chūnin wisely backed away, judged no bar fight or girl was enough to die over.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Konohamaru asked when he turned back toward Hanabi now that matter was dealt with. He sat down in the vacated seat and ordered another beer.

"I can't have a drink?" Hanabi challenged.

Konohamaru looked around the bar in an attempt to find any other Hyūga that had accompanied her. A Hyūga had the tendency to henge themselves when they were doing things that they considered below them, like going out to a bar. When Konohamaru confirmed that Hanabi had come alone he asked, "You snuck out of the compound?"

"I am seventeen years old and a professional killer, I don't need to sneak out of anything," Hanabi retorted.

"You know what I don't get?" Hanabi asked as she slammed her beer down and it sloshed over to sprinkle her dress and Konohamaru's pants. "He picked you for squad leader. I don't understand. We graduated equally at the Academy, we both led our genin teams, became chūnin at the same time, and now I am supposed to follow you."
It had always been a rather unhealthy and wordless competition between them.

"Perhaps it's about more than just skill? He's a Captain, I'm sure he knows what he's doing."

Hanabi's expression soured. "It's because you're his favorite. You're everyone's favorite, oh the grandchild of the Third Hokage, they give you everything."

"I never asked to be the favorite," Konohamaru replied. Hanabi wasn't the only person Konohamaru competed with. He always felt as if he was competing with his grandfather's shadow. Someone had to make the old man proud, considering both his sons were disappointments. One abandoned Konoha for a time in order to serve as a Guardian and the other gave up as a genin. Sometimes the kids of the famous are forced to carry the weight of their names.

"It hasn't been easy," Konohamaru argued.

After another beer, "I wish sometimes I wasn't a Hyūga, that I didn't have these eyes, and so many expectations."

"Perhaps the reason why we hate each other so much is because we have so much in common."

"I hate you."

"It's certainly mutual."

Hanabi pulled up the covers when the sun crept into her eyes. Her head was ringing, like a bell pounding against the sluggish walls of her brain. Hanabi sluggishly turned over, stared at posters of past Hokages that adorned the walls for several seconds. As she turned, the covers were pulled off the other person in bed.

Then Hanabi screamed like a high-pitched siren.

In Hanabi's shock, she flailed in the covers, untwisted herself, jumped from the bed and slipped on an issue of an old manga. She fell against the trophy case that collapsed behind her. "What did you do to me!" Hanabi demanded in a pathetic attempt to figure out what was going on. Except for a mission, she had never woken up in anywhere else but her bed.

"Stop fucking screaming," Konohamaru groaned and shoved his face into his pillow. "I didn't do anything to you. We still have our clothes on. Besides, I'll never be drunk enough to sleep with you."

Hanabi finally took the time to pause and analyze the situation and realized through the cloud of her headache that he had just insulted her. "You were probably too drunk to even get it up."

"You look like a little boy."

"Oh yeah? Well, well… monkey face!"

"Monkey face?"

"My head hurts," Hanabi said pathetically as she dropped her head in her hands.

Konohamaru groaned when he pulled himself out of his bed. He dragged himself to his closet, grabbed a shirt, and threw it into Hanabi's lap. He had to get this girl out of his house as soon as possible. She was a danger to his sanity.

"So you don't have to walk home in that," Konohamaru acknowledge the dress that barely covered
Hanabi's polka-dotted panties.

"I'll go make tea for the hangover," Konohamaru left to put the kettle on the stove. When he returned to his room Hanabi was gone, his window open with a faint breeze to rustle the mess she had left behind.

Konohamaru groaned, stared at the clock, and then collapsed back onto the bed. He only had four hours before the mission.

Hanabi didn't have to sneak back into the compound. They were waiting. Hanabi cursed and wished Hinata's range of vision wasn't so fucking large. She could always see further than everyone else. It wouldn't have been half as embarrassing if she had listened to Konohamaru's advice and borrowed his shirt. She could feel the crisp morning air riding up her ass.

Both Hinata and Neji were waiting on the steps of the compound.

Hanabi suffered the full force of Neji's fury. "What were you thinking?" He demanded, red in the face as his eyes stumbled over what she was wearing.

Hanabi opened her mouth to defend herself but Neji was not going to let her get in a single word, "Anything could have happened to you. You were irresponsible, negligent, and a fool. What if someone had hurt you or taken advantage of you? This is not the way a Hyūga should act. You are above this debauchery."

Hinata stepped in the middle and placed a soft hand on Neji's chest. "Hanabi Hyūga, put on some clothes."

Hanabi hated Hinata's tone the most. It was as if Hinata refused to talk much less look at her until she was properly dressed. Hanabi lifted her chin, determined to make her see. "You two are not my parents. I am tired of people trying to control my life. Nothing has changed. You're just as worse as the elders!" Hanabi screamed. "I fucking hate you!"

Hanabi charged down the hall and slammed the door to her room. She collapsed on her bed screaming into the pillow.

It isn't fair. She never asked to be born a Hyūga.

Hinata always thought the Hyūga could use a little more color in their lives.

Hinata didn't acknowledge Neji's presence when he suddenly crouched down beside her. He wordlessly grabbed a handful of flower seeds she had set aside and joined her in planting the flowers. The cool soil darkened Neji's hands. Hinata liked to garden. It reminded her that even good things could come from the dirt.

"I've been assigned to command our forces on the Northern front against Ame."

Hinata's hands paused. "Who is your second?"

"Lee," Neji answered without hesitation. He didn't trust anyone else with the job.

Neji didn't know how long he would be gone. He didn't know if he would even make it back. Neji knew Hinata was capable of handling the affairs of the clan by herself but there was something else he was more worried about, "Take care of yourself."
Hinata nodded as the dirt fell between the spaces of her fingers. "You as well. Ame is not a welcoming region."

"Hanabi didn't mean what she said."

"I know."

Neji crept his hand forward but when he thought he had finally grasped her, she slipped from his hand. Neji's jaw hardened. He didn't realize it bothered him until the words escaped through embittered teeth, "Why am I not good enough?"

"You are enough," Hinata whispered and admitted, "Sometimes I look back on those few days in the hospital when I was unsealed. I considered running away and starting anew." Hinata's eyes unfocused on the pale skin of her wrist that she often imagined stained with blood, "or I could have ended it permanently. But I didn't. I chose this path, this clan, and you."

"I'm not the path you wanted."

"When you set yourself upon a path you can't turn back, you cannot regret the roads you did not take for who knows if it would have led to a better end, there is no other choice but forward, no choice but to see how far you can go."

Neji remembered that it had been Hinata's stubborn will that had attracted Neji to her cause and had guided his own hesitant footsteps.

"I know this hard for you and I apologize. I wish I could give you what you want."

"Because of Naruto?" Neji questioned, trying to understand. Hinata gave him a fierce glare, as if reprimanding the smartest person in Konoha for being dumb.

"This isn't about Naruto. It's not a competition between you two. It is never a question of you or him. Naruto has nothing to do with us. I am not ready, Neji."

"Then when will you be ready?" Neji demanded. "I want to sleep in the same bed with you. I want to touch my wife."

"I don't know," Hinata replied with hesitancy.

Neji looked away, out over the Hyūga compound that whispered with the empty air of winter. "Perhaps I'll get back in time to see the flowers bloom."

Neji picked himself up. He had a meeting with the Hokage to attend. He stopped for a moment at the gate and looked one last time at the woman whose clothes were covered in dirt and so stubbornly determined to bring a little color to the Hyūga.

"I have a mission for you, Naruto."

"The alliance with the Land of Demons?"

Tsunade paused, a bit surprised he was already familiar with the secret alliance.

"The representatives of the Land of Demons arrived in Konoha this morning along with their priestess. I want you to pick her up from a medical check-up at Sakura's house. The priestess' family has always had a long history of weak constitutions. I have yet to look over the medical reports myself but from what I understand she's gotten weaker over the years."
Naruto noted, "Rumor also has it that her power of foresight have developed so much she can now predict the future. You plan to use the health of the priestess as a bargaining chip for an alliance?"

The Hokage felt the heaviness of his stare. "War, we all do a lot of things we don't want to do. Sometimes Konoha has to be the big bad bully in order to be the last left standing."

Naruto scoffed, "and you wonder why we have no friends?"

"If you prefer, I could have ordered you to simply steal the priestess and we use her as a hostage for her country's cooperation?" Tsunade suggested. Luckily, she was not her Grandfather. Her Grandfather had a tendency to collect kekkai genkai. The founders of Konoha's clans didn't necessarily stay because of their own volition.

"I'm glad Konoha is above kidnapping," Naruto replied sarcastically. "I know what you're doing. I'll be her bodyguard but I refuse to accept an arranged marriage."

Tsunade stilled the frown on her face and was beginning to accept Naruto knew a lot of information he shouldn't be privy to. In fact, Demon Country wasn't the only one. There was a lot of tempting marriage offers. Tsunade assured him, "I'm not going to sell you to the highest bidder."

"I don't want to get married. I am willing to sacrifice anything for this village but marriage involves two people. It's not fair to the unfortunate woman who has to marry me."

Tsunade bit her lip and knew Naruto was asking her to decline the alliance with Demon Country.

"And what if I ordered you to do it anyways?"

Naruto waved a lazy hand. "You love me too much, old lady."

Tsunade turned to argue but he had already disappeared, leaving her alone in the office. She rested her cheek against her fist with a thoughtful pout. Sometimes she wondered if her emotions got in the way of performing her duties as Hokage.

No one was perfect.

"It's certainly been a while," Sakura replied as she scanned the results of the medical examination. Sakura remembered when she once had to carry this very woman on her back up several mountains. It certainly hadn't been her favorite mission.

"It has been a long time," Shion, the priestess of Demon Country replied. Her soft purple eyes were framed by the blonde hair that twisted around her thinness. "When are you due?"

Sakura caressed her baby bump with a smile. "Not for a few months still but I'm ready for them to come out now. It's a little disorienting not to be able to see your feet, I have pee every thirty minutes, and they are a huge drain on my chakra. Being pregnant is rather tiresome."

Shion hid a laugh behind her sleeve. "Have you decided on names?"

"Not yet," Sakura replied. It was a rather tricky situation. She couldn't give them any names connected to the Inuzuka.

"Aren't you worried about being pregnant during the war?" Shion asked curiously.

"The war hasn't touched Konoha and I have trust in my friends that it won't," Sakura answered. "In the meanwhile I'm still capable of helping out where I'm needed if it doesn't require too much chakra."
There's no point in stopping our lives. If we do that for every war then how are we supposed to have one?"

Sakura knew a lot of ninja that didn't agree with her and admitted the fact she was a medical ninja gave her more options. There were reasons why many of the current clan heads were born in the same generation. It wasn't until the Third Shinobi War's end, did many ninja attempt return to their lives.

"How are things in Demon Country?" Sakura asked and sat down in her favorite spot on the couch.

"Demon Country is far away from the conflict but Konoha is in a complicated situation right now. The Daimyo hopes if we help you out, in return you'll help us out."

"Everyone wants something – politics," Sakura tried to stay far away from the subject.

There was a knock at the door.

"Ah, here is your bodyguard."

"But I brought my own bodyguard," Shion replied.

"You're in Konoha. I don't think you have a choice." Sakura didn't have to get up from the couch. Naruto took the initiative to enter the house and poke his head around the corner into the living room.

"Good morning, Sakura. Geez, you really need to lay off the ice cream."

One of the empty ice cream boxes on the floor hit Naruto squarely in the head. Naruto wiped the melted dessert from his face with a light chuckle.

Shion's gaze fell on him. She had seen him in her visions but the actual reality was far more than she could have expected. He was taller and broader than he was just a few years ago. When Naruto turned his attention to Shion, her mouth hung open like a guppy, stricken by the brilliance of Naruto's smile.

"Do you remember me?" Naruto asked with uncertainty.

"Eh…"

"Well, it was a long time ago," Naruto said embarrassed. He bowed in greeting. "I'm Uzumaki Naruto. I'll be your bodyguard for the remainder of your stay here in Konoha."

Shion nodded her head.

Sakura watched the entire exchange hiding an amused smile. "She just got here Naruto, how about you show her around Konoha?"

"Sounds great," Naruto agreed and held out a hand.

Without question, Shion accepted his hand. The warmth of his touch jolted Shion to her senses and reminded her that she had a mission to complete. Shion swooned. Naruto instinctively reached out to catch her and she fell against him, brushing her hand against his chest and testing the shape of his arms.

"I'm so sorry," Shion gasped, even though she certainly wasn't. She hid the red of her face behind the long sleeve of her kimono. Her blush could have easily been mistaken for embarrassment but it was because of the sheer closeness to the man she hoped would one day become her husband. "I'm
feeling a little weak today."

Sakura almost choked on her ice cream, laughing. Sakura knew a few minutes ago there had been nothing wrong with the Demon priestess.

Naruto certainly wasn't that naïve either but nevertheless acted the gentlemen. "That's no problem, hold on tight so you don't fall."

Sakura watched the two leave. She felt bad for that poor girl.

Naruto escorted Shion through the streets of Konoha. Naruto showed her the market first, knowing that it was a place that tourists loved to visit. The market of Konoha was the largest in the Land of Fire. He obliged Shion to every sparkling item that attracted her.

"These are beautiful," Shion appraised the jeweler's wares. As the priestess of Demon Country she wasn't allowed to own such extravagant items. Shion looked out the corner of her eye toward Naruto. He wasn't paying attention. His thoughts seemed occupied elsewhere. Shion sighed. This was going to be harder than she thought.

As the day dragged on, suddenly the market was crowded with people.

"Naruto," Shion whispered weakly and tugged on his arm. She grew hotter as the streets congested with people. Her hand slipped from the cloth and collapsed.

"Shion?!" Naruto asked in alarm and began to panic when he realized this wasn't another act. Her forehead was burning underneath his hand. The jeweler came forward and pushed the crowd of people away.

"Get her some water," the jeweler advised. "It might be a little too crowded for her."

Naruto scooped Shion in his arms. He stopped at the end of the road along the empty bridge. He trickled water from the river on her lips.

"I'm sorry," Shion whispered when she finally opened her eyes. Naruto sighed in relief.

"No, I'm sorry. It is my fault." Naruto replied. "I should have been paying more attention."

"I don't do that often," Shion promised quickly, afraid if he thought her weak or flawed he wouldn't be interested. Shion turned to the bridge post to lift herself up. Instead, Naruto grabbed her by the waist and helped her to stand in the constricting kimono.

When she stood, Naruto noticed she was taller than most women but reached no taller than the tip of his nose. Her body was that of a willow, as if any gust of wind could sway her.

"Here."

Shion gasped when a shadow clone suddenly appeared and offered two sticks of dango. Shion accepted the dango and the errand shadow clone disappeared as quickly as he came.

"Thank you."

"The dango is hush money. Don't tell the old lady I almost killed you today," Naruto whispered conspiratorially.

"That's not how it works," Shion replied as she bit into her dango. "My cooperation costs more than dango."
Naruto leaned against the edge of the bridge. "Oh?"

Shion looked at him underneath her lashes. The autumn wind rustled the trees and rained golden and bright red leaves around the arcing bridge. The ornaments in her hair played a pretty song in the wind. Shion stepped forward and reached.

"Umm…” Naruto turned his head away from her kiss. Rejected, Shion hung her head and hid her face behind her blond hair. She turned around and stared at the river and its winding flow.

A person had many paths, many futures, and she knew one of them led to Naruto. She just didn't know which one. It was frustrating. She knew endings, but never the journey. "I presume that was too bold of me," Shion whispered.

"I'm sorry," Naruto tucked his hands into his pocket. "I don't think the alliance with Demon Country is going to be successful."

There was a sharp pain in Shion's chest at his words. "But you promised."

"Promised what?"

"You promised to help me pass on my powers. You promised to have a family with me." Shion had clutched onto that promise ever since they parted that day long ago.

"What?" Naruto asked. "I never promised that."

"Yes you did, years ago when we first met."

"You're still holding on to a promise from years ago when we were children? Do you know how stupid I was back then? Shion, there are better men for you. I'm not what you think I am."

"But I don't understand," Shion said through a cloud of tears. For years she held onto the illusion that she was going to marry him. "Why? Why not? I know we don't really know each other but can't you at least give me a chance to prove myself?"

Unwanted images flashed before Naruto's eyes: Mei lying dead in his arms, the smirk of Mei's violet lipstick, the scar that tainted Hinata's thigh, the smile that constricted his heart, and the love she wouldn't admit.

"I can't." Naruto hunched his shoulders. Fuck the mission. He was going to the Hokage right now to demand that she assign someone else to watch the priestess.

"Wait," Shion yelled after him. "Our first child is a boy. He has your blonde hair and blue eyes. You named him Iraiya."

Naruto cringed. "I already have children."

Then the strongest ninja in Konoha ran as far and as fast as he could away from the woman so fragile she could be blown over by the wind.

"I'm Kakashi Hatake. I have no desire to tell you my likes and dislikes… My dreams for the future… Hmm… As for my hobbies… I have lots of hobbies…"

The trio of genin stared at their Jounin Sensei. It was one of those long pauses after trying to interpret the convoluted conversation of someone on drugs.
"That wasn't a very good introduction," Asami Nara replied.

"I believe it is your turn," Kakashi replied as he flipped a page in his porn book.

Asami Nara cleared her throat, stood up as if answering a question in class, and proclaimed, "My name is Asami Nara, my hobbies are photography and one day I'm going to marry Uzumaki Naruto!"

Kakashi slightly lowered his book. "Good luck with that one. Next."

Kusuro dunked his head and grumbled. "My name is Kusuro… Kusuro…" and finally barfed on the last word. "Hatake. My Jounin sensei is fucking my mom and one day I am going to take my country back from Konoha and become Kusakage."

The last member of the new Team Seven stood up, "My name is Okabe Yuuki" He blushed in Asami's direction and in an attempt to impress her proclaimed, "I'm going to become the next Hokage!"

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard," Asami replied with a nasty streak of sarcasm. "How about you live long enough to become a chūnin first?"

"Look who's talking," Kusuro argued. "Perhaps if you were in the same generation as Naruto…"

Asami quickly snapped back, "And perhaps what you weren't suggesting didn't sound a lot like treason…"

Yuuki hunched his shoulders while he found himself between the two verbally sparring team members.

Kakashi calmed them down with the beckoning of his hand. Kakashi often wondered at what time his mid-life crisis occurred when he decided it was a good idea to work with children.

"The lot of you certainly has very lofty dreams," Kakashi noticed, then closed his book with a snap. In Kakashi's experience, dreams were overrated.

"Here is the situation: I have been assigned to command the Eastern front against Kirigakure. As you know, genin are not allowed to fight on the frontline and are only assigned to support roles. If you're lucky, your primary tasks will be sharpening and cleaning my kunai, probably dig a few graves, and the more menial chores around camp. If you're unlucky, you'll find yourself in the middle of a battle. There are no missions, no contracts, and no finding lost cats. We're doing it the old school way - Either you die or learn through experience."

Like Kakashi did.

Hound checked the maps once more time. He looked over the small hidden route through the mountain pass that served as one of the main supply lines of Kirigakure's army. "This is it," Hound determined.

The first objective was to attract a team of Mist ANBU. Endangering a vital supply route will surely bring an ANBU team to investigate.

"Crane and Bobcat, I want you on lookout. Bobcat, the front and Crane, the rear. Cincada, Rabbit, and I will begin setting up the explosives."
Even though it was their first mission together, the team operated with efficiency. Each was focused on their separate task. The level of concentration distinguished an ANBU from any other ninja ranking.

"Hound, there are Mist ninja coming our way. You have fifteen minutes." Crane suddenly replied into the radio in Hound's ear.

Hound cursed. They had not yet finished their preparations. He signaled for a stop, attempted to gather their gear as quickly as possible and cleared the road. The footprints were obvious and signs of tampering were noticeable to any trained tracker. Hound could only hope they were too much in a hurry.

When Hound heard their footsteps approaching and the rate they traveled, he knew they were going to have a problem on their hands. They were running at average speed for a team of ninja pacing themselves but still needing to get somewhere.

The footsteps stopped, right underneath the tree Hound took refuge. He was careful to peak from the cloak of branches. He was barely able to brush his eyes over the top ridge of the Mist ninja's blue spiky hair. The ninja looked around.

"Something isn't-"

Hound gave the signal. No hesitation, simply the principle of attacking first. The Leaf ANBU rained down a coordinated barrage of kunai, followed by a large plume of fire. A boon in wind strengthened the flames, caught on the explosive devices already planted, and created a larger explosion than they had originally planned for.

Hound winced at their screams. When the noise dwindled to nothing but the crackling of flames, Hound gave the signal to Cincada. The black cloud of insects left his cloak and consumed the chakra that fueled the fire and extinguished it in seconds.

When it was finished, Hound jumped down onto the road to inspect the damage. He suspected the display of fire would be sufficient enough to summon the Mist ANBU they were looking for.

Hound hated the smell of burnt flesh but living in Fire Country it was certainly an aroma he was forced to get used to. The Mist ninja's clothes were melted into his skin, sticky like red cobwebs. Hound checked the Mist ninja's friends for any useful information they could possibly salvage. When Hound reached the next corpse, his stomach was unsettled. The hitai-ite was unscathed, still shiny, still new.

Hound barked into his radio. "Crane, why the fuck didn't you tell me it was a genin team?!"

He had just killed three children, three helpless children that he could have easily knocked out instead.

"They are Mist ninja. They are the enemy," Crane answered in return.

Hound's anger broke the radio in his hand and it crumbled onto the road in pieces. When Crane stepped into the area, Hound swiveled on his heels and grabbed her by the shirt.

"They were children, fucking children."

"This is war," Crane told him as if he needed a big sign to read the obvious, "and we don't have the time. Our bait is on the way. A team of ANBU spotted our greeting."
Hound shoved her away from him as quickly as possible before he resorted to hitting a woman. He occupied his mind with organizing the next stage of the plan. They prepared for the arrival of the ANBU squad, which they knew would be more dangerous, more unpredictable than a helpless team of genin and their lone Jounin commander.

The Mist ANBU team was much more cautious. They spread out into the forest along the road which prevented the Leaf ANBU from attacking them all at once.

Each had their targets. Hound had the leader in his sights. Hound clicked his tongue against the back of his throat three times.

"Multiple Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Hound invoked, threw himself bodily toward the ANBU leader with a rasengan in hand. Hound's opponent withdrew his katana, already on guard, and sliced it across Hound chest until he disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

Then Hound un-henged himself from the tree's bark and struck the rasengan into the ninja's spine. Hound withdrew his katana and the moment he severed the head a thick mist began to choke the forest. "Report." Hound demanded into the radio.

"Crane reporting, target eliminated."

"Cincada reporting, fucker disappeared."

"Bobcat reporting, target eliminated."

"Rabbit reporting, target fleeing."

"Crane and Rabbit, go after the fleeing target. Do not let him escape or our mission is compromised. Cincada, clear the mist." A slight sound caught Hound's ear and he twisted, barely evading the katana that thrust out of the mist. Hound's breathing grew heavy. This wasn't training anymore. It was real.

The metal of the two clashing katana played like a song. Hound heard his opponent's foot slide back, shifting his center of gravity. Hound reacted quickly, went underneath the strike, and his katana slid into the mist ninja's chest. Then the mist of chakra thinned and was finally consumed by Cincada's insects.

"Our target has been eliminated," Crane reported.

"Gather the bodies and meet back at our central position," Hound ordered. He grabbed the ninja he had just killed and threw the new corpse over his shoulder. Hound met the team at the center of the road.

"Proceed with the third stage of the mission," Hound commanded.

Crane reached down toward a fallen Mist kunoichi. She tore off the ANBU's uniform, her belt, her shoes, her clothes, her mask, and finally the symbol of a Mist ninja. When Crane placed the Shrimp mask over her face and tied the hitai-ite around her thigh, she suddenly wasn't a Hyūga anymore. She was a Mist ANBU.

Hound nodded, turned to the Mist ninja gruffly. "See you on the other side."

They repaired the road, cleaned the blood, disposed of the bodies, and the Mist and Leaf ANBU parted ways.
It was as if they were never there.

"Mission successful," Hound muttered, unable to raise his head. The Hokage never required for them to raise their heads, simply to say the words.

"Dismissed."

Hound breathed a sigh of relief. He was relieved when he finally peeled the mask from his face and flung it on the other side of the room. He stripped off his clothes and took a shower. When he was finished, he determined that he wanted nothing more than to go home and eat his mom's cooking.

"Fucking genin," Hound grumbled. It was Crane's fault. If she had just told him... if she wasn't such a psychopathic bitch.

The Sarutobi compound greeted him with open arms. There was always a sense of calm when he returned home. He dragged his feet against the floor, could smell his mother's famous takoyaki, walked into the kitchen and was suddenly surprised to find Naruto eating dinner with his mom.

"What do you want?" Konohamaru spat.

"Maru-kun," His mother reprimanded him. The civilian woman who had birthed him was the only person Konohamaru was ever afraid of. "Manners. Uzumaki-sama has come to join us for dinner."

"Please, just Naruto." Naruto leaned down and stuffed both cheeks with two balls of octopus. "Oh wow, these are good."

"They're mine!" Konohamaru leaped across the table and hoarded the entire plate in his arms. Suddenly he felt the weight of his mother's glare. "Sorry," Konohamaru whispered and placed the plate back down. He suddenly wasn't hungry anymore.

"I think I'll skip out on dinner." Konohamaru turned around, for a moment he entertained slamming the door but closed it softly instead to evade his mother's ire.

"The mission must not have gone so well," Mrs. Sarutobi lamented and then whispered conspiratorially, "He only snaps like that when he's stressed or having girl issues. Hopefully his dad will talk to him when he gets home."

"I'll try to talk to him," Naruto offered. Naruto lifted from the table and grabbed a handful of the takoyaki before he left the kitchen. He found Konohamaru on the training ground of the compound. Konohamaru lazily picked up a shuriken and tossed it. It hit the target every time. Konohamaru remembered a time when he actually had to work to hit the center.

Naruto said knowingly, "It's the genin."

"If I had known I would have done something else."

"I'm sure you did best with the information you had."

"And you! You're not one to talk!" Konohamaru said, suddenly projecting his anger onto Naruto. It was easier to get angry at Naruto without the mask. The Captain was distant but Naruto was right here where Konohamaru could put his fist into Naruto's face.

"This is all your fault! If you hadn't started this stupid war, hadn't killed the Mizukage, hadn't voted to go to war with Mountain, none of this would have happened. What happened to the Nii-san that I looked up to? What happened to peace? What happened to you? This is all your fucking fault!"
Konohamaru’s breath left him.

Naruto raised an eyebrow. "Are you finished?"

Konohamaru roared at him and the punch he threw never touched Naruto’s face. Instead Konohamaru rolled in the ground, turned with two rasengans in hand, and charged for another round. There were several failed attempts of trying to attack Naruto’s stupid cheeks stuffed with food.

Unable to move any longer, Konohamaru pressed his face to the grass. "I ordered it," he whispered. "It’s my fault. The mission was a success but... they were just children."

Konohamaru looked up when Naruto crouched in front of him and offered him takoyaki.

"Otou-chan," Naruto said softly and explained what took a lot of lessons to learn. "The numbers never equal."

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This sort of job is hard for people like us, for people who believe in a wrong and a right, but do the wrong things anyways and hope that sometimes the total will add up to a right... I've never been good at math.
Lesson Thirty Two

Shadows in Kirigakure

"I should have just taken my chances," Suigetsu mumbled as he slammed his feet onto the Mizukage's desk and caused the towers of paper to cower before the wrath of his frustration.

Suigetsu didn't want to be Mizukage anymore. It had been fun while he was trying to outsmart Mei, fun to watch old classmates grovel at his feet, and fun to wear the biggest hat in the village but all of his fun had been brutally eroded underneath oceans of paperwork and responsibility he did not know what to do with. All he wanted to do was see Konoha drown, to watch their terror, and watch their world come to an end. Who knew it would be so boring?

"Mizukage-sama, we desperately need to talk about the current war situation," Sandayuu Momochi replied. The old war veteran hadn't knocked. A scar curved around his right eye as if a fish hook had wrangled into it – a sharp wind jutsu from a Sand ninja. A grotesque burn bubbled chunks of his right arm into a mass of dead flesh – Leaf ninja. The multiple bones fractures limped his walk – Earth ninja. The patch of hair that never grew back was courtesy of the Raikage himself. Sandayuu Momochi was Zabuza's younger brother, not as skilled with a sword, but still as dangerous as a sword's edge.

"Situated inland, Konoha does not have a direct avenue to attack us directly. Most likely Konoha will attempt to infiltrate and sabotage us from within," Sandayuu did not flinch when the paper kunai flicked past his ear. Sandayuu continued without interruption, "We need to increase our security."

"Yeah, whatever," Suigetsu replied, distracted by the phallic origami he was attempting to create. He spent more energy trying to remember a pastime from his Academy days than he did governing the country.

"Ame will stage a preemptive strike while our main force will feint to the eastern shore and attempt to catch them by surprise." Suigetsu began to purposefully perspire from his arm. Suigetsu snickered as water dripped toward the paper dick he held upside down and clear liquid dripped from the tip. "Sand is also nearing from the South. They seem intent to cut off our trade. We should be able to sustain our current military output without those trade routes for now but it would be in our best interest to send a team eventually."

"Lightning is hanging back from the war for now. Lightning is always an interesting element – you can never predict where it was going to strike. Lightning's jinchūriki is no longer active in the field, giving Konoha the dominant position on the world stage but Lightning is a country that loves to overshadow other countries, not live in the shadows of others."

"Uh-huh, hear anything from Sound?" Suigetsu asked after the origami went limp from an excess in water.

"A letter did arrive today," Sandayuu acknowledged. "The Otokage wishes to stay neutral and refuses to participate in the conflict."

"Traitor," Suigetsu spat and crushed the next origami he was working on in his fist. Creating inappropriate paper artwork with mission reports was no fun if it did not garner a reaction.

"Sightings have reported the Fox on Konoha's northern front, eastern front, and in Konoha – no doubt shadow clones."
Suigetsu knew that Samehada, always in arm's length, hasn't sensed the Fox's chakra since the coup d'état. "He hasn't been in Kiri."

"Foxes are known for their cunning." An expression finally cut across Sandayuu's face. The bloody smile looked as if it had been cut from someone else's face, as if it was closest smile he could find at the time. "I remember when the name "Yellow Flash" used to make a man shit himself. It's beginning to stink in Kirigakure again." Sandayuu sniffed the air. He was born into this aroma of fear. "It's a good smell."

Suigetsu snatched a piece of paper, the tower wobbling, and hunched over it in sudden excitement. He folded and created a paper fox. "Have we finally gotten anything on his family?"

"The numbers of individuals that live with him vary, but there are three constants. We do not have any detailed information because his place of residence is defended more heavily than the Hokage Tower. He also shadows the residents whenever they leave the compound. Attempting to get any more information has been too risky and threatens to compromise our spies in Konoha."

"Fucking useless idiots. Don't we have anything interesting? Any juicy rumors? Any embarrassing secrets?" Suigetsu asked while he created three little paper foxes and placed them beside the larger one.

Sandayuu paused, "There are plenty of unsubstantiated rumors surrounding him in Konoha but hardly anything reliable. Konoha has a perverse obsession with his love life. Rumors range from a secret engagement with the Demon Priestess, having a secret affair with the married Hyuuga Clan Head, to secret trysts with the Kazekage."

Suigetsu created three more foxes. "I'll just kill them and make sure." Suigetsu decided. One by one, Suigetsu was going to cut anyone in Naruto's life that mattered. How he was going to do that from behind this desk, Suigetsu wasn't exactly sure yet but he didn't mind sacrificing thousands of lives in this war until he figured it out.

Suigetsu overlooked his family of foxes. He hated this desk, this office, and this hat. He didn't know why he ever thought this was a good idea. "Can't we just invade Konoha already and fuck the consequences?"

"If you want to die," Sandayuu's tone suggested he didn't mind that option either. "We only have a chance of succeeding if we push with the full force of Kirigakure behind us but in order to do that, you need the support of all the clans."

It seemed so easy but nothing ever was.

"You have Momochi clan support."

"Until you no longer have need of me," Suigetsu answered knowingly. Sandayuu had been one of Suigetsu first supporters, not because he gave a damn who was wearing the hat but because he was an old warrior and didn't know what to do with peace. Both men loved to work in chaos but it wasn't a passion that forged the strongest of friendships. Suigetsu looked up curiously with a glimmer in his eye. "Why the fuck don't you want this job?"

It was a simple answer. "The guy with the biggest hat creates the biggest target," Sandayuu answered. His shoulders stood straight with discipline even in his old age. Sandayuu dismissed himself with a bow straight enough to cut on its edge. Sandayuu smirked knowingly, mockingly, as if he had always gotten the better of Suigetsu, "In the world of Shinobi, there are only those who use and those who are used."
Suigetsu did not like the implication of the man's words. Suigetsu was not to be used, not by Orochimaru, or Sasuke, or anyone else anymore. Sandayuu was going to get what was coming to him but first, Suigetsu looked down at the family of origami. His teeth gleamed through his smile as water condensed and then began to flood down his arm. He watched the foxes drown. He heard their screams and pleas in his head.

Then briefly, for a moment, he wondered if Karin begged.

Suigetsu seized Samehada's hilt when the office doors suddenly slammed open. Suigetsu's fun was kidnapped by his murderous frown.

Her voice was a chill shock to the bloodstream. Her dripping thin hair framed a disproportionate face. Her nose was too big, her eyes too little, and her smile too crooked. A love for chaos and anarchy was the jewel of her eye.

"What's wrong Sui-kun, not excited to see your big sister?"

"I requested to see the clan head," Suigetsu sharply replied.

"I am the Clan Head," Kyouka Houzuki smiled that cruel smile, seemingly stolen from Suigetsu's lips.

"Bullshit, women can't inherit the clan."

Kyouka sat atop the desk, leaned over and looked at her younger brother with a gleam. "I guess they didn't a choice. Even a woman is more preferable than the Leaf's butt-toy."

"I am the Mizukage," Suigetsu snapped.

"And I've made a bet you won't last more than a month. Did you think things would change once you wore that hat? You belonged to Orochimaru and when you finally escaped you chased after that Leaf renegade like a floundering guppy. You're not a Mist ninja, much less a Houzuki."

"Go the fuck back to your damn island."

Kyouka sneered. "I liked Mangetsu better."

"I was Mangetsu's favorite," Suigetsu replied smugly.

"You were everyone's favorite, everyone had such high hopes for you, 'the next coming of the demon,' they said. Then you failed them. You're only going to fail again, it's only a matter of time."

"I don't give a shit."

"I think you do. I think you want to prove yourself." Kyouka leaned against the table, leaned so close as if there was a secret between them. "Your war will never be successful without the support of the clans. There are two things I want. I want a sword-"

"Fuck you."

"-and I want Uzumaki Naruto."

Suigetsu made a splash when he slammed his hands on the table. "He's my prey."
Kyouka pouted. "I missed him last time he was in Kiri. Mei kept him all to herself. I want to teach him how to make sushi."

"He's mine."

Kyouka raised an eyebrow playfully. "Not yet tired of being underneath Leaf ninja?"

The two siblings stared at each other. There was always one of two ways to settle an argument in the Houzuki clan. Suddenly they wielded their fists into the air.

Scissors.

Both siblings gave each other annoyed stares at the end result of their janken match. "Again," they both declared.

Scissors.

Scissors.

Sameheda.

The large sword glanced of the twin blades Kyouka had unsheathed from her hips. The scales of Samehada barely avoided the skin as Kyouka skipped away. There was always one of two ways to settle an argument in the Houzuki clan.

She cackled madly. "Guess we'll see who catches him first."

Kyouka winked before closing the doors of the office behind her, a smug smile and a final glance at the boiling of Suigetsu's skin.

Suigetsu released his hand from the hilt of Samehada once she left. She was wrong. He didn't care what anyone thought of him. He did whatever the fuck he wanted.

He grumbled to himself as the hat settled like a weight and the paperwork scattered around the desk like chains.

"I'm going to slaughter all of them," Suigetsu promised. Naruto Uzumaki wasn't the only person whom he was harboring vengeance towards. He constantly told himself that he didn't give a shit that his family never came to rescue him or tried or cared.

Suigetsu didn't care about anyone else.

He didn't.

He really didn't.

Karin's broken glasses were hidden underneath a pile of paperwork on the desk, hidden but there.

And when that weird sensation began to storm through his chest which threatened to leak though his eyes and leave shipwrecked debris throughout the depths of his skin, he called in the secretary.

"Mizukage-sama," The secretary politely replied when she entered. At once she recognized the storm that Suigetsu had no name for. It was betrayal, and loneliness, and frustration, and heartbreak. The Mizukage's teeth rattled, choking on a growing addiction. He was looking for an escape. There was a psychotic gleam in his eyes as he stared down at his quivering hands.
The Mizukage reveled in someone's pain in order run away from his. Ever since the first time, since the first graduation, since the first cut, it was his way of coping. The addiction began long ago underneath a shadowed tradition of Kirigakure.

"At once," The secretary bowed, used to the routine.

There were many prisoners, some civilians and some ninjas who had attempted to flee Kirigakure after the change of power, some who had caught the Mizukage's ire, and some with bad luck.

The secretary returned to the office with a prisoner whose bones were to be used at whetstones. After all, every scale on Samehade and every jaded broken piece of Suigetsu had to be sharpened.

The doors of the office closed.

Hosaka Ayumi walked to her desk, kept her head down, and opened Icha Icha Tactics as screams began to pound against the door for escape. Blood leaked from the bottom, spreading into the Mist.

"We investigated the incident but found nothing to report. Any rumors of an explosion along the river seem to have been false," Shrimp reported. In the dampness, her sweat clung to her skin like the sharp tips of a kunai.

Luckily, the Mizukage didn't seem to give a fuck. He couldn't care less about complaints from a bunch of civilians. "Yeah, whatever, dismissed."

Shrimp and the accompanying ANBU left as fast as they could. She wondered if their stomachs were also melting in the heat of the Mizukage's office or if she simple wasn't as hard as she thought she was.

The three ANBU finally released the water-breathing jutsu and emerged within the underground cave networks of Kiri's ANBU. The three ANBU looked at one another. It was only a moment, a small consideration for the time they've shared preparing for this mission. Each knew they wouldn't talk to each other again until the mission was over.

The Leaf ANBU went their separate ways.

Shrimp wandered the narrow hallways in search of her room until an ANBU she passed suddenly stopped and swiveled around in her direction. His arm hit the other side of the wall, barring her path, "Shrimp? Just getting in from a mission?"

Shrimp froze. She could feel the thickness of fear clinging to her tongue.

"Hey, you owe me money. If you just got in, you just got paid. Cough it up." Shrimp's hesitation caused the Mist ANBU to scrutinize her closely and then ask, "Who are you?"

Shrimp finally found her words in the heat of her endangered identity. "Change of mask," Shrimp answered smoothly. "I don't owe you any money."

"Ah, sorry, my mistake," Piranha moved his arm and scratched the blue hair that poked out the back of his mask in embarrassment. "Do you know what happened to the previous wearer?"

"I don't."

"Fuck," Piranha cursed.

Shrimp saw an opportunity to gather information. She crossed her arms and demanded sharply, "I'm
hungry, coming? I expect you to pay for the trouble you've given me."

"Hey, wait a minute," Piranha followed after Shrimp's crisp stride. "I'm not paying for-" Piranha evaded Shrimp's attack with his forearm. To his surprise, his arm went limp.

"Imagine a strike like that to the balls. Hurry up," Shrimp snapped.

Piranha tested his arm curiously and attempted to figure out why he couldn't use chakra. He did not know what techniques he knew in Kirigakure could have accomplished the jutsu she just perform. He was curious, that's why he followed.

"I'm new. Where do you eat around here?" Shrimp questioned.

"This way," Piranha replied.

Shrimp had subtly activated her byakugan. Piranha was physically tall, broad shouldered, and every inch of his skin was blue. The unique characteristic allowed her to immediately identify his clan. A rush of information she had studied passed through her thoughts: Hoshiagaki clan; family jutsu – water dome technique; Family summoning – Great White.

Shrimp sat down in the cafeteria and stared at the large trays of sushi and the variety of fish they offered. Piranha didn't hesitate to delve into his food and ate with a henge that hid his skin color. Shrimp sighed, created a henge, and ate while hiding her disgusted expression. If the hardest thing about this mission was the cuisine Shrimp could count herself lucky.

"Kekkai genkai?" Piranha asked, looking at her over his meal.

"Maybe," Shrimp replied with a smirk. "A clan ninja?"

Piranha froze, suddenly unnerved that she knew more about him than he did of her within just a few seconds of meeting. He gracefully retreated from the topic. "Done anything interesting since you've been in ANBU?"

Shrimp shrugged. "Killed a few Leaf ninja. What about you?"

Piranha thoughtfully ate around the fish eye on his plate. He's had his share of weird, awkward, shit-frightening missions but that was normal in his line of work. "Played goldfish with the Uzumaki Naruto. Cool guy and smooth as hell. Dude was sleeping with the Mizukage weeks before he killed her."

The sushi Shrimp had aimed for her mouth missed. "What? He was sleeping with the Mizukage?"

"Who wouldn't?"

Shrimp leaned forward conspiratorially, curious about the topic herself. Only rumors were in Konoha. "Do you think the Demon Fox really killed her?"

"Who knows? It takes a real heartless bastard to fuck a woman knowing you're going to kill her but... when I met him he didn't seem the sort. Guess you never really know a person. He is the Demon Fox of Konoha after all."

"I don't believe you really met him," Shrimp replied doubtful.

"Blonde hair, blue eyes, those iconic whisker marks that are actually real by the way, can probably kill me with his pinky finger... and sucks at Goldfish." Piranha brooded over the memory. "That
guy... he leaves an impression on you."

Shrimp sat back with a smirk. "I didn't take you for the kind to swing that way."

"Hey," Piranha straightened. "I don't usually... but yeah, I'd do him."

Shrimp broke out in laughter. Piranha's serious tone of voice and the fact she knew Naruto Uzumaki was an ironic combination that broke her composure.

"He's that kind of guy," Piranha defended with a pout.

"Then I guess you're not interested." Shrimp winked as she got up from the table, her lunch half-eaten.

"Wait," Piranha said suddenly. He noticed from the beginning that Shrimp had few curves, she was short, and had a body akin to a young boy but hell, pussy was pussy. "You're interested?"

Shrimp looked over her shoulder. "I might have a soft spot for guys with blue skin."

She watched as Piranha's mouth fell open and had to admit she enjoyed the fish-smacked expression on his face. Piranha watched as she disappeared down the hallway, much more interested and much more intrigued than he ever had been before.

She knew how to leave quite an impression herself.

"Are you sure you can't tell me where Shrimp transferred? Look, she owed me 500 ryo, I'll pay you a cut." Piranha attempted to bribe the ANBU Captain in charge with maintaining the record books. Stacks of books surrounded him like a regimental army around a general.

"I didn't even know Shrimp transferred," The Captain said annoyed. "Do you see all this damn paperwork that the Mizukage expects me to do? I have enough to worry about."

"Uncle," Piranha leaned against the desk, careful not to disrupt the carefully organized stacks. "I don't have enough to pay the rent this month."

"Come back to the compound."

There was an awkward silence between the two relatives.

"I don't belong there."

"You'll come back," The Captain said with a voice full of fact. "You'll realize soon enough that the clan is the only place that will ever truly accept you."

"...I'll just sleep in ANBU." Piranha turned to leave but a thought struck him before he made it to the door. "By the way, do you have a file on the new agent assigned to the Shrimp mask? She has some sort of chakra blocking jutsu."

The Captain slammed the ink brush down in exasperation and the ink splattered a stain on his white cloak. "Fuck, I don't know. The Mizukage keeps killing people off. I don't know who is alive or dead anymore. My advice is to keep your head down and stop asking questions."

Piranha sighed and knew his uncle was right. Anymore questions and he would be the next agent to disappear.
"Can you put her on my team?"

The Captain reached over, snatched Shrimp's name and placed her on Piranha's team. "Now go away."

"I knew I was your favorite."

"Third favorite after you left the compound."

"Don't have to rub it in."

Shrimp read the file with a measure of disbelief and wondered if Kirigakure had a habit of playing jokes on their ANBU. "He wants us to assassinate the Otokage?"

There was very little information, as if success was expected as long as they were pointed in the right direction. "Isn't there anymore information?"

"What more do we need? Let's go kill the guy," Piranha teased, poking his elbow into Shrimp's side to make her jump. It was an unfortunate discovery made during a sparring session.

"Stop doing that," Shrimp complained in exasperation and held her sides protectively with her hands. It was such an embarrassing weakness.

Piranha simply laughed as he passed her by. He disappeared around the corner, on his way to his room to get his gear.

The team had been ordered to meet at the north ANBU exit.

Shrimp sped to the privacy of her room. With the door protectively closed, she opened the mission file and quickly created a copy of the scant mission details. She created a shadow clone henged in a different mask and handed the copy of the mission to the clone. The clone nodded and left the room towards the drop-off point.

No one was watching. The clone made sure of that with her byakugan. Then she reached down and placed the copy of the mission files underneath a rock on one of the smaller islands surrounding the mainland. It was a calm island, with white sandy beaches, bowing palm trees, and dolphins that jumped in the distant water.

She upturned the rock like she was instructed and hoped Konoha received the information in time. She had no idea who was supposed to relay the message but that wasn't her problem. The clone disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

Shrimp flinched when her clone dispersed while traveling alongside the three Mist ANBU. Sometimes she grew paranoid and wondered if they could see through her disguise as easily as a byakugan. But their pace did not slow atop the ocean waves as they ran toward land.

While they traveled the three days toward Sound, Shrimp noticed that her team rarely traveled without a birds-eye view of a source of water and always camped near one.

On the first night they sat around the fire to eat and even if they didn't voice it aloud, Shrimp could feel her team's anxiousness. The assassination of a Kage was a huge undertaking.

"Personally, I'd rather just kill Leaf ninja," Crab complained. "What does the Otokage have to do with this war anyways? We're just caught up in the Mizukage's personal grudge."
"If you have a problem then I suggest you take it up with the Mizukage," Piranha snapped. "If you want to run and take your chances I'm not going to stop you but I hear Kushimaro Kuriarare has been promoted to Captain of the Hunter-nin division and he's been given the Nuibari."

The surname instantly hit a note of recognition in Shrimp's head. Kiriarare was one of the seven clans of Kirigakure and the patriarchs had a long history of being one of the Seven Swordsmen.

"Yeah and I hear the Otokage can turn into a demon. I don't like the way my chances are looking either way."

"Either you die a Mist ninja or you die a coward," Trout shrugged his shoulders.

"Still dead," Crab huffed but he didn't seem inclined to go anywhere.

Shrimp took another bit into her meal of fish. Shrimp liked fish but eventually she was going to get tired of it. She was even beginning to miss the ramen Konoha was becoming famous for.

"You don't seem to be worried," Shrimp replied when Piranha shifted closer towards her. It was apparent to everyone in the group that Piranha had a thing for her.

"In the Bloody Mist, the only option you have is to succeed or die," Piranha answered. "We can't fail."

"Do you have a plan fearless leader?" Shrimp asked mockingly, suspicious.

Shrimp wondered what the vial in his pocket was for. There was certainly more instructions not in the mission file that only Piranha had privy too. She hoped whatever it was, it did not compromise the information she gave to Konoha.

"Fearless leader?" Piranha asked amused. He completely ignored the question and made it obvious no sign of a plan was forthcoming. Piranha leaned closer until their shoulders were touching. Shrimp pulled back reflexively. "Why are you always so distant?"

"Piranha, leave the kunoichi alone before she stabs you," Trout sighed.

"Shrimp and I will take the first watch," Piranha ordered.

"You're not that subtle are you?" Trout asked as he picked himself up and spat out bullets of fish bone from his mouth. To the untrained eye it looked as if Piranha barely evaded the attack but Shrimp knew each movement was measured.

"I'm writing you up for that," Piranha threatened.

"Yeah, as if the Mizukage gives a shit." Trout disappeared inside of his tent.

"Want to go for a swim?" Piranha suggested.

Shrimp tactfully replied, "If we're going to take first watch shouldn't we take different sides of the camp and-" Shrimp stuttered when Piranha threw his shirt at her face.

"Very mature," Shrimp spat as she dropped the sweaty shirt on the ground and Piranha flipped backwards into the stream. "I do not find this amusing at-" Shrimp froze with a shock of cold when she was suddenly drenched in water.

"Come on, Ice princess," Piranha challenged as he floated on his back with nothing but his mask on. Anyone in Mist could tell you skinny-dipping was the best sort of swimming.
Shrimp leaned close to the edge and challenged, "I'll join you if you drop your henge."

Piranha froze and for a moment there was nothing amusing about their game. The water came to his waist as he stood up. "That's against mission protocols."

Shrimp shrugged her shoulders and knew he'd back down. She managed to confiscate some measure of her pride. "I didn't take you for someone who always follows the rules."

"Yeah, it was a stupid idea anyways," Piranha stormed out of the water, grabbed his clothes from the ground, and took watch on the opposite side of the camp.

Shrimp looked toward the river that glistened and winded toward the towering mountains in the distance. Shrimp, on the other hand, wasn't much for rules at all. Her clothes landed like the weight of falling leaves to the ground. With nothing but her mask, she slipped her foot into the river. You only live once.

She loved the adrenaline and excitement that melted the cold exterior expected of a Hyūga. It was the first time in her life she felt free. There was no one looking over her shoulder, peeking through walls, or checking her location at all hours of the day. She loved this job and loved the mission.

Piranha looked up when a kunai landed at his feet.

"Are you going to join me or not?" Shrimp asked from the river bed. He didn't have to be told twice. Piranha jumped from his spot, the water reached up to catch his feet, and he surfed into a cannon ball.

For a brief moment, Shrimp's breath caught when Piranha pulled himself from the water and slicked the henged ebony hair backwards. Sometimes when you're traveling between missions, a ninja's surroundings are nothing but which shadow is the enemy hiding under, what cluster of trees are good for traps, and never travel away from your source of power. There was hardly any time to stop and admire the scenery of a full moon casting shadows, the luscious green of twisting roots and ripe berries, and the magnificent river on which life thrived.

Shrimp smiled. "So fearless leader, what are we supposed to be watching for?"

Piranha's mask tilted slightly. His gaze had rested on her petite breasts growing sensitive to the river's cold. Piranha walked forward, aware of his cock growing just as sensitive. "Well, there are leaf ninja… sand ninja…" Shrimp took a step back and wondered if this is what a piranha's prey felt like, under relentless pursuit. "…perhaps you should watch out for me."

Piranha arched over Shrimp and she lay backwards on the river bank. The chill of the river and the heat of his body was an exciting combination. His hand tested her thigh. When it seemed she wasn't going for a hidden kunai, he grew bolder and began to explore the slick wetness of her body.

Shrimp could hear Neji's reprimands and could see the shake of Hinata's head. Hinata would do the right thing, end whatever this was, no distractions, and complete the mission no matter what.

But Hanabi was not her sister.

She reached out her hands and spread her fingertips along the nakedness of the Mist ninja's body.

"Why now?" Shrimp whispered a cool breeze into his ear. There had been plenty of opportunities after training practice or dinner, but he had never so plainly stated his intentions as he did now. He gave the most honest answer Shrimp had ever heard from a ninja in her life.
"In case we die."

Piranha reached for the mask, gave her several seconds to prepare a henge, and lifted it from her face. Shrimp did the same. The mask fell from her hands like water through fingers.

She didn't hesitate to meet his lips. Underneath the illusion, there was a real softness of flesh. She ran her hands over real scars. At some point, there was a fine line between the illusion and the truth. Her heart was beating faster and her limbs shook in wanting. She widened her legs underneath him. An aching gasp of pain left her lips.

"Whoa, wait-" Piranha lifted suddenly, pulled himself away, and stared down at Shrimp in confused shock. "You're a virgin?"

"...I don't see how that is relevant," Shrimp snapped. "I was hoping in five minutes I wouldn't be."

Piranha winced at the control it took to raise himself up. "Hey, I really don't think your first time should be with me."

"Are you serious?" Shrimp asked incredulously. "You're a ninja who kills people for a living. Why does this matter?"

"It just does," Piranha cleared his throat. Shrimp grew even more furious when he reached for her flak jacket and dropped it into her lap.

"You're a guy," Shrimp complained. "All you're supposed to care about is sex. You're a Mist..."

Shrimp caught herself. He was a Mist ninja, the enemy, cold, heartless, and not supposed to be worried about something stupid like her virginity.

Piranha finished putting on his clothes with great difficulty. He himself didn't know he had a problem with it until now. "I don't know," he was at a loss for words to explain his inability to fuck her. "The whole virginity thing- it should probably be more important than some random night with some random person."

"Who are you to tell me what I think is important?" Shrimp argued. "You're making it a bigger deal than it actually is. We're not in the Academy. We're in ANBU for fuck's sake. Grow the fuck up."

She found herself yelling at shadows. Piranha had hastily disappeared into the forest.

Shrimp was seething when she dropped down among the campsite. Even in ANBU, people were still treating her like a child.

"I'll fuck you," Crab said suddenly from his bedroll.

"Shut up before I gauge out your eyes." Shrimp snapped, crossed her arms and couldn't figure out why she was so fucking pissed.

"Well, that's unfortunate."

Shrimp didn't need the binoculars to see what the rest of the team was waiting anxiously to find out. With her byakugan activated behind her mask, she wasn't surprised to find Naruto Uzumaki eating dinner with the Otokage. From her vantage point on the roof, they were having a friendly discussion over a plate of ramen. Shrimp's mouth-watered at the inopportune time.

"What is it?" Crab asked. Piranha passed the binoculars to the rest of the team. There were audible
curses from both Trout and Crab.

"We're still going through with it, aren't we?" Crab asked.

"We are?" Shrimp asked, surprised. The reasonable thing to do was to turn back, reassess the mission, and call for back-up... or at least that's how things in Konoha were done.

"We don't have a choice." Piranha muttered bitterly and suddenly wished he had taken Shrimp up on her offer the other night. "If we turn back now, we're as good as dead."

"This is suicidal. That's the Demon Fox of Konoha. The logical plan of action is to abort the mission," Shrimp attempted to convince them. Her comrades seemed settled on their grim fate.

"Either you die a Mist ninja or you die a coward," Trout shrugged his shoulders. "At the very least, I'm going to die a ninja."

Piranha took the vial he had carried from Mist out of his pocket. "This is a liquefied form of natural chakra. We are supposed to inject this into the Otokage and watch him go berserk." The four Mist ANBU crowded around each other and listened intently to Piranha's plan, not wanting to miss any small detail that could give any small chance at survival. Piranha handed the delicate vial to Trout.

"The three of us will attempt to distract the Demon Fox while you creep behind and inject that into the Otokage."

"That sounds like a stupid idea."

The Mist ANBU went rigid. Trout and Crab went as still as if someone was holding a katana to their necks. Shrimp stared at an empty chair through the wall of the building several meters away from her position. Piranha jolted at the sound of that voice. With a creeping spread of dread, they turned to discover that Naruto Uzumaki had leaned over and joined their conversation.

On the other side, Shrimp thought his whiskers looked more akin to the scars that marked him as a ninja not to mess with.

Naruto sniffed, when he recognized the scent, he grinned. The grin was a false hope. It was the final act of kindness that compelled the judge to ask for any last words before the noose was placed around the neck.

Uzumaki was so close that the strands of his hair seemed threatening. "Piranha, long time no see. How have things in Kirigakure been since I left?"

Piranha awkwardly mumbled, "Bloody."

Naruto straightened and the sudden room offered the Mist ANBU at least a little space to breathe in their fear. Naruto reached back, the movement caused the Mist ninja to tense, but he only reached to scratch the blonde hair that framed his face. "Look, I'm rather hungry and would like to eat dinner, so how about we settle this over a game of Goldfish? I win, you go back, no one gets hurt, and I eat dinner. I lose, we can settle it your way. I'll even let you get the first hit."

Piranha gulped and looked at his team. He had no illusions that they would not be spared. This was the heartless bastard who was fucking the Mizukage weeks before he killed her.

"Fine," Piranha agreed for no other reason but time. He put a hand in his pocket and pulled out a deck of cards. He knew Naruto wasn't very good at the game. "Surround him while he's playing," Piranha whispered to the team.
"You can surround me if you want," Naruto replied, making it rather obvious he could hear any whispers. "But I already promised you the first hit. I don't go back on my promises."

"Fucking nonchalant bastard, playing with us like his dinner," Crab whispered under his breath, hoping the Fox heard that. Trout nudged Crab in the waist and they took up positions around the roof of the building.

Piranha began shuffling the deck of cards. The cards were shuffled awkwardly underneath Piranha's shaking hands. It was the most frightening game of cards Piranha had ever played, even compared to the time he had gambled away his katana.

Naruto sat down cross-legged on the roof of the building when the cards were dealt to him. He looked at each in concentration. Shrimp activated her byakugan and studied the cards in each player's hands.

"Do you have any threes?" Naruto asked.

Piranha handed over the card, concentrating on his strategy.

"I didn't kill her," Naruto responded suddenly.

Piranha bit his lip. "You've probably killed a lot of people."

"Mei, I didn't kill Mei." Piranha ignored the way the Demon Fox's voice lingered over her name. It almost made him sound human.

"Everyone saw it."

"It was."

"I know. But who cares if I know the truth? What is the truth going to change? It's easier this way. You're the bad guy. I'm the good guy. Simple and easy, you learn to ignore the messiness in between." Piranha threw his cards down with visible relief. "Goldfish."

"Promise is a promise," Naruto agreed. He stood up and opened his arms. "Alright, go for it. Give it your best shot."

Piranha raised his fingers to signal a well-timed coordinated attack. He never agreed on how many got the first shot. Four different water cannons sped towards Naruto, only to collide with a poof of smoke.

"Fucking shadow clone," Piranha cursed and suddenly had to dive out of the way when a giant rasengan rained from the sky. Before Piranha could perform another jutsu, the ground beneath his feet crumbled and the Mist ninja fell into the smoke of the collapsed building.

Piranha knew that a direct fight with the Demon of Konoha was a lost cause. If they couldn't manage to get a surprise attack, then this altercation was pointless. It was either die here or figure out some excuse to save their asses later.

Piranha attempted to signal a retreat but couldn't while the smoke fogged everyone's vision. Piranha whipped his head around when he heard an agonized scream on his right. He could only imagine the fuel for those screams, and it was gruesome, and bloody, and ruthless. Piranha decided to put his team on even ground and performed the hiding in the mist technique. His clan was one of the few who could use the technique with just the water from their own body. The smoke was swallowed by the chakra-tinged mist.
He could finally get a sense of the battlefield and realized with alarm that the mist did not slow the Demon Fox at all. But he was finally able to see. As Crab screams echoed through the crumbling building, Piranha realized he couldn't retreat. Retreat had only been a fancy created out of his fear. He knew what happened to squad leaders who failed their mission. He had no choice but to stand, fight, and die.

Shrimp had seen everything the moment they had fallen into the building. She had watched the rather grumpy Crab fall when a katana sliced through his gut. It was a slow death. It could have easily been a quick one, but the screams were part of the strategy, as much a part of the fear as the cloud of smoke.

Trout's death had been quick. Shrimp had accidentally kicked Trout's head when it rolled on the ground. The mask had fallen and Shrimp stared down at an auburn-haired boy with an expression twisted into one of both regret and anticipation. At least he died a ninja… right?

Everything happened in the blink of an eye, too fast for her byakugan, too fast to see. Shrimp stepped back, more frightened than she had ever been in her entire life. Two ANBU had gone down in seconds. Crab was still screaming. Shrimp pressed her back against the wall, unsure whether or not she was going to be killed too. When the Demon Fox turned his sight on her, instinctively, in her fear, she dropped into the Jyūken stance. At that moment she didn't know Naruto Uzumaki. She didn't even know her own name. All she knew was fight or die.

The Demon Fox sped towards her. His charge was suddenly cut off with a cannon blast of water. The force hit the Demon Fox like a piece of iron and he disappeared inside the rubble on the other side of the building.

"Go," Piranha snatched at Shrimp's arm. "Go back to Mist, become missing, whatever. Just get the fuck out of here."

"Wait," a scream ripped through Hanabi's throat just before a katana plunged straight through Piranha's shoulder. The blow had been aimed for the heart. It didn't miss on accident. Naruto looked at Hanabi, never stopped the eye contact when his foot smacked against Piranha's head and knocked Piranha out.

Hanabi reached down to check Piranha's pulse. It beat against her fingers like fish struggling upstream.

"You resorted to your Jyūken stance," Naruto replied as if they were in his messy office and he was instructing a student. "The moment they see your stance they will know you are not Mist. You need to be more careful."

Hanabi didn't give a shit about her Jyūken stance. She looked up, wide pale eyes glittering with tears. "Can't he live?"

Naruto looked down at the fallen Mist ninja. "What makes him different than those genin?"

Hanabi winced at the question.

"His life depends on your answer," Naruto said quite frankly. "He is the enemy, isn't he?"

"Yes but," Hanabi gave Naruto a hopeless expression. She looked down at the Mist ninja in her arms. His henge had dropped and blue skin peeked out of his uniform. "He isn't any different. None of us are. It's not simple and it's not easy. It's one giant fucked up mess."

Naruto retrieved his katana from the Mist ninja's flesh and slid it in the sheath hidden behind his sage
cloak. "Sorry," Naruto said apologetically, "I have to make this believable."

Hanabi blinked, suddenly a rasengan was in her chest, and she was flying across the sky.

Piranha groaned when the rise of his chest constricted the pain in his shoulder. He opened his eyes weakly to the crackling of the fire and the comforting smell of fish. The tree bark he leaned against cut into his skin and he could feel the humidity of a lake nearby.

"Don't move too much. You've lost a lot of blood," Shrimp whispered. Shrimp had wrapped his wound but that was all she could do. Every Hyūga had the chakra control to learn medical ninjutsu. Shrimp had never learned. She had thought it was a waste of time.

Piranha lifted his hand and showed proficiency for at least a basic medical ninjutsu. The pale mask reflected the green glow. The pain in his shoulder began to subside. "We need to get to Kirigakure quickly. If we don't they're going to assume we're missing."

Shrimp hung her head over the fire thoughtfully. "You're in no condition to move any faster… and what's so wrong about becoming missing?"

"Kirigakure is where I belong," Piranha replied. "It's the only place I know. It is home. You can go if you want. I'll look the other way."

"I don't run away," Or at least that was the excuse she told herself.

Piranha overlooked the fire that accentuated Shrimp's form. "You're different than most ninja," Piranha noticed. "There's more of a fire about you."

Shrimp avoided his eyes and replied with the first lie she could come up with. "I didn't grow up on the mainland."

"I didn't either," Piranha replied and leaned over to grab the cooked fish. "Actually I was born in a small lumber town in Earth Country."

Shrimp gave him a stare of disbelief. "Earth Country?"

"Believe it or not, but my dad is Hoshigaki Kisame. Never met the guy. All I know about him is that he tends to leave things behind in the places he visits, like kids from time to time. The clan doesn't necessarily like our kekkai genkai strewn around the world. My kin found me when I was six, took me away from my mom, and forced me into the clan." Piranha shrugged his shoulders. "It was the first time I felt as if I belonged. They looked like me."

"Bullshit." Shrimp whispered as she stoked the fire. "That's the easy answer. You might look like them, you might share the same kekkai genkai, perhaps share the same last name, but it doesn't mean you belong."

Piranha downed the fish like a starving man. He stared at the bones that were left. "I hate fish. My favorite food is the grape vineyards that grew in the mountains next to my mother's lumber mill. I love the water as much as the fresh mountain air. I don't know who I am. I don't know if I'm a Hoshigaki, a Mist ninja, or that son of a miller's daughter who had been raped by a missing-nin just passing through."

His awkward chuckle was that of a bone stuck in his throat. He's never spoken of his past to anyone else before, but the way he saw it, he was going to die soon. He didn't want to die with his demons too. "Sometimes I entertain the idea of visiting my mom. Then, as if I had forgotten, I remember my
uncle placing my hands around my mother's throat until she drowned."

"I can never go back," Not to a location, but to a place in time and a sense of being.

Shrimp realized they were asking the same questions.

Piranha was surprised when Shrimp cuddled into his side. He wrapped his aching arm around her. The two ninja overlooked the glistening lake that reflected questions off its surface:

Where in this world do I belong?

"The mission was a failure," Piranha told the Mizukage. During the trip back to Kirigakure, Piranha had leaned weakly against Shrimp's shoulder but when he stood in the Kage's office, he shed her as easily as a cane, straightened his posture, and stood on his own two feet.

"We attempted to go through with the mission but the Demon Fox intervened. We were the only ones who managed to survive."

The Mizukage didn't seem to be very sympathetic. "And why are you still alive?"

Piranha was about to answer, and then stopped when the question hit him as hard as a water dragon jutsu. Piranha didn't know why they had survived and hadn't questioned it until now. "I don't know, perhaps as a message to you Mizukage-sama."

The Mizukage's eyes flitted towards the spiral that had torn through Shrimp's clothing, which was enough evidence that they had indeed come into contact with the Nine Tailed Fox. His tongue preyed across his razor-like teeth.

Shrimp could feel the weight of his gaze. It felt as if he was considering which portion of his three-course meal she should be.

"I don't accept failure," The Mizukage finally replied. The guards accosted Piranha by the shoulders. He didn't fight back, simply accepted it, and was dragged backwards through the door.

The Mizukage gave Shrimp a frightening gleam of the eye. "I suggest you don't make the same mistake. You are dismissed."

A Captain's expertise was information. The Captains were always the first to know what was going on in the world and it was their job to relay it to the boss. The Captains of ANBU didn't answer to one another, were considered higher in power than the council and even the clan heads. They didn't answer to anyone but the Hokage.

"I've made sure that spies in Konoha haven't reported anything significant to Mist," Captain Tiger replied. He, of course, could get rid of all the spies but no spies would be too suspicious. It was always better to give them information you wanted to give them. Fox had always wondered the role Tiger played since he could never leave the village. Tiger, apparently knew everything that went on inside of Konoha. He owed allegiance to no clan and spied on them all.

"I'm worried about our reports from Iron Country," Captain Raccoon replied. His area of expertise was Konoha's spy networks across Fire Country. Fox hadn't even known the Captain existed until he became one himself.

"I've heard something about that too," Captain Snake slithered in her seat, balancing her head like a
cobra in thought. "I've heard Iron Country has partnered with that illegal organization, Kuro no Keiyakusha about weapons that will wipe out the use of ninjas and bring the samurai back into power." Snake waved her hand, "but there's no hard evidence. It's all empty talk."

"Nevertheless, I want you to investigate these rumors," The Hokage ordered Snake. "The last thing we need is Iron Country taking advantage of an opportunity."

The two newest Captains sat next to each other. Even though they were new, their voices were no less dimmed. They had earned their place like everyone else around the table.

The new hunter-nin Captain replied, "A lot of the missing ninja who escaped from the Hozukijo prison have made Ame their home. Ame needs to be kept an eye on as closely as Kiri."

Captain Fox reported next, "Suigetsu barely has control of Kirigakure. Until he can get all the clans on his side I doubt we need to worry about Kiri making it all the way inland anytime soon."

"Perhaps we can use the Mizukage's weakening control to our advantage?" Cat suggested. Captain Cat was the Hokage's personal bodyguard and right arm.

"There are three main power struggles in Kiri: The Mizukage, Sandyuu Momochi, and Kokyou Houzuki. The Mizukage is effectively using fear to rule but he does not know how to run a country and this lack of skill is trickling through his administration, which allows me to effectively slip through the cracks. Sandyuu Momochi on the other hand is largely the field general and knows exactly what he's doing. He's shrewd, careful, and does not let anyone close to him. The last is Kokyou Houzuki who is head of the T&I division. These three branches don't necessarily share information with each other," which has certainly made Fox's job extremely difficult.

"Ame is beginning preparations for a preemptive strike while at the same time Kiri is sending a force to our eastern front."

"Sounds too sophisticated for Suigetsu. I'm guessing Sandyuu Momochi?" Cat asked.

"Aye, Momochi is the brains behind Kiri's tactics and strategies. He's one of those types that love war no matter whose war it is. He doesn't seem keen on any idea of peace – probably going to have to kill him."

"Konoha has fought him before," Raccoon said shrewdly. "He's not as skilled as his brother but just as sharp. He's been trying to push Mei toward war for years. I've been keeping an eye on him for some time now. I'm not surprised he supported Suigetsu."

"What do you have on Kokyou Houzuki?" Snake asked curiously as if asking for the pedigree of someone she entertained of dating.

Fox cleared her throat. "Many consider her the Mist incarnation of Konoha's… Anko."

Snake laughed gleefully. "Do tell?"

"She's known to be rather psychotic and seem to have set a personal goal of capturing Konoha's Nine-tails."

"It seems the Houzuki have become rather obsessed with the Nine-tails." The Hunter-nin Captain observed.

Captain Cat shook his head. "That's the Houzuki clan on a whole. They are always looking for an unhealthy dose of excitement. For generations they've thrived in chaos and have plotted against
many a Mizukage just to watch what happens next. Personally, I think we should be careful how far we stretch the Nine-tails. It would not be ideal if he fell into their hands."

"I'll take your suggestions into consideration," The Hokage. Her arms were crossed in thought during the entire meeting. "Fox, how far have you come with a plan on dealing with the Mizukage?"

"I'm currently searching for a way to get around Suigetsu's kekkai genkai. The problem is that Houzuki is practically impossible to kill while they are in Kirigakure, even with a Lightning jutsu. The air is too damp and will help regenerate whatever wound they suffer."

"So we have to draw the Mizukage out of the village?" Tiger concluded.

"Exactly. If our goal is to the kill the Mizukage we have to force him to leave."

"Easier said than done," Cat replied. "A Kage rarely leaves their village and if he's smart, he won't until this war is over."

Fox winced when he suggested, "Which is why I think we should change our focus. If we take out Sandayuu Momochi and Kokyou Houzuki, there isn't any way the Mizukage can stop Kirigakure from falling down around him."

"You can bet those two won't be easy to get to either. What if we play the clans against one another?" Cat suggested. "Suigetsu is never going to gain enough power to attack us directly unless he has the support of the clans. If you can play them against each other just right, Kiri will never attack Konoha."

"And Konoha will never attack Kiri," Tiger said knowingly. A direct attack by Konoha on Kiri's mainland island was a death trap and all of them knew it. And thus the history of war between Konoha and Kiri: always at a standstill because it was practically impossible to directly attack one another."

"Thus this war hinges on Ame and Mountain. We can't let this war go on long enough to let Mountain recover, we also can't give Ame the opportunity to weaken us and provide Kiri an opening."

"We need a decisive move into Ame before they act on their pre-emptive strike."

After taking in all the information the Captains had to offer, the Hokage finally ordered, "Snake, I want you to launch a further investigation into Iron Country. Fox, I have changed your priority target to Sandayuu Momochi. I want Kakashi's forces to meet Kiri on our eastern front with our Sand allies, Chouza will hold Mountain, and send a message to Neji's forces. They are to prepare an attack on Ame immediately."

The Captains stood at once with their orders and bowed deeply to her feet. "At once, Hokage-sama."

"You are dismissed."

Captain Fox gathered his folders with a million things racing through his mind. He had a few clones in Neji's regiment and would probably have to focus his chakra on that location until the attack on Ame was over. He was going to have to figure out how the hell he was going to kill Momochi, a man who only trusted his blade. He was also going to have to figure out how to keep the clans of Kiri at war with each other all the while keeping an eye on-

Captain Fox placed the folders onto his desk when he reached his office and almost tripped over the stacks of books and scrolls. People who visited often commented he needed a secretary but he knew
where everything was in his coordinated mess.

"You are not busy. Why? We are going to get a drink."

Fox turned and found the newest Hunter-nin Captain leaning against his door.

"I have so much to do."

"Was it a question?" Captain Mantis stated.

Fox chuckled. "Well, you've always had a way with words."

Naruto took the mask from his face and hung the white coat on the hook one would normally place their katana. Naruto wore it with him at all times underneath his sage cloak. Shino did the same. They took one of the tunnels Naruto had built into his office that exited near the Uzumaki compound.

Shino and Naruto outings were becoming a tradition.

Naruto and Shino sat in the corner of a jazz bar. Naruto drank water. Shino had tea. For at least an hour, they didn't think about their workload, they didn't entertain their stress, they bathed themselves in the illusion that the war did not exist. For at least an hour, they took a deep breath.

Then together, they'd watch the shadows dance.

Shrimp couldn't find the strength to eat, or train, or do much but lie in her bed and dread when the next mission was given to her. She didn't know whether or not she would ever see Piranha again. He had been taken out of the village and far out of her range of vision. Eventually she allowed her byakugan to expire and stared at nothing but blank walls.

Shrimp shivered when there was a sudden knock on her door. She attempted to ignore it underneath the thin covers.

"Shrimp?"

Shrimp sat up at the voice muffled by the door. Her jaw slackened when she activated her byakugan. She jumped from the bed, threw open the door and jumped into Piranha's arms. They crashed into the floor.

"I thought you were dead," Shrimp whispered through the heaviness of her breath. Shrimp finally pulled back and realized how weak he was.

Piranha looked at her as if he was still hanging from a noose. "I did too," he said with a hoarse smile.

Shrimp quickly invited him into her room. He collapsed on the bed and peeled the sticky cloth of his dirty uniform from his blood covered arm. Shrimp immediately went to her knees and helped. It was the first time Shrimp helped someone without being asked.

Piranha reached up, grabbed his mask, and peeled it from his skin. It suction from his face and separated with a squelch of blood. He let it fall from his grip to the floor.

Shrimp stared at his face. The purple bruises mixed into the blue of his skin. The blue ponytail he usually wore was messy and shaggy around his face. He had brown eyes. Shrimp had seen images and stories of Kisame Hoshigaki. His progeny had yet to develop the sharp shark-like features.
"Not what you imagined?" Piranha asked with a crooked and biting frown.

"A little bloodier," Shrimp replied nonchalantly. "You must stand out wherever you go."

Piranha chuckled bitterly. 'Believe it or not, I actually like this job. Guess that would consider me a little messed up but I enjoy ANBU, despite all the killings and fucked up shit in it, at least behind the mask I can be normal."

"Normal is overrated," Shrimp scoffed and then went to get water from the bathroom. She returned and the air was silent with unspoken words. Her uncaring hands were gentle against his wounds.

Finally, "They let you go?"

Piranha answered with a grunt. "If the Mizukage wasn't trying to get into the Hoshigaki Clan's favor, I'd be dead. I always hated being a part of a clan, grateful for it now."

Tortured, abused, but alive.

"Hope you don't mind that I'm getting your bed bloody," Piranha responded softly. "I could have gone to my room but yours was closer." That was a lie. He had dragged himself to see her every painful inch of the way.

"It's alright." She reached and compared her pale skin to the blue of his cheek. He leaned into her touch.

"You don't look too good yourself. You're thinner."

"Been sick lately," Shrimp explained.

Piranha stared at the gaunt lines of her face and realized with almost painful clarity that this woman cared about him. He couldn't fathom why.

"I've been wondering why he spared us."

Shrimp paused as she circled her fingers around the newly applied gauze. "What do you mean?"

"The Demon Fox. A guy that good doesn't accidently leave people alive. He let us live and I wonder why."

Shrimp repeated the famous Mist mantra, "Asking question will only get you killed."

To distract him, or just for the excuse, Shrimp leaned over him, and tasted the blood on his lips. Their kiss was as tender as their growing emotions. Shrimp wrapped her arms around him and bore the weight of his exhaustion and his wounds upon her chest. With a smile she said the most honest words she would ever say in her life, "We're alive."

In the Bloody Mist, the only option you have is to succeed or die.
Lesson Thirty Three

Pieces of Paper

There was at least one in ANBU every year.

Captain Fox leaned against the doorway of one of his subordinate’s rooms. The layout was an average set-up for an ANBU agent. There were porn books neatly stacked alongside a pillar of scrolls. Empty alcohol bottles created an obsessive collection in the corner. The katana was pinned to the display rack. A uniform that never made it to the laundry littered the couch.

Captain Fox picked up the Rabbit mask that had fallen to the floor. The weight of an ANBU mask had never felt so heavy in his hands, as if it was created out of guilt, shame, frustration, and questions that would never be answered.

The rope held the broken neck to the corpse hanging from the ceiling.

Tomu Uzumaki finished hammering in the last nail. He drew back and looked at his work. For the first time he wasn't very proud of it. Lately his construction company has been hired by the government to provide several items needed for the war. Tomu sat atop the lengthy wooden arm of the large catapult. He wondered how many people it would kill and should he add those numbers to his death count? Was there anyone who lived in a ninja village completely innocent from war?

"Tomu!" The Boss of the company called, "The shift is over."

Tomu watched his co-workers drift away from the construction site towards home. He flipped around the foundation pillar and landed with chakra to cushion his fall.

"Thanks again for the hard work," The Boss replied, "don't know what we'd do without you."

The Boss was the one who gave Tomu a chance. It took a lot longer for Tomu's co-workers to warm up to him but they came to appreciate his usefulness. Because he was smaller than most of the construction workers he was often given the hardest jobs that required smaller hands, fitting into tight spaces, or scaling the projects.

Tomu craned his neck upwards and finally received a good view of the behemoth he had helped to create.

"How is it going to get to the warfront?" Tomu asked.

"We build what we're ordered. The government figures out the rest. Hate to admit, war is bad and all, but good for business."

The Boss packed his tools over his shoulders. Tomu helped to close down the construction area. "See you tomorrow," The Boss replied as always before meandering towards a cup of sake and eventually towards home.

Tomu missed building houses. It was hard work, a painstaking ordeal, sometimes it took months, but eventually you were able to provide a roof over someone's head. A catapult did the exact opposite. They destroyed houses in mere seconds.

Tomu hunched his shoulders, hid his hands in his pockets, ashamed of them.
He wasn't in any particular hurry to get home and wandered aimlessly around Konoha. He rounded the corner and suddenly found himself standing on training ground #10, where he would often meet his girlfriend to go eat dinner. She wasn't here. The training grounds were eerily quiet, akin to that of a graveyard. The abandoned kunai and irreparable marks in the training equipment were relics of those who had long since passed.

Mushi was a genin and a genin was the type of person who would transport a catapult to the battlefield and people would die because he built it and because his girlfriend brought it there. But Tomu knew that wasn't fair. Mushi was just as likely transporting medicine, food… or corpses.

Tomu shivered, dunked his head, and sped off down the road. His thoughts always did a cyclical spiral around Mushi. Was she safe? How was her mission going? Is she caught up in a battle? Is her leg hurting her?

In an attempt to interrupt the cruel cycle of his thoughts, he turned them to more practical matters. Groceries were dwindling in the house. He decided to go shopping before he returned to the compound.

Tomu went to the bank and submitted Naruto's bank numbers to the clerk behind the counter. It was a slow business day today. Usually, it was full of ninjas picking up their paychecks. Civilians worked the counter but it was known that the higher managerial jobs at the bank were exclusive to the Akimichi Clan.

"I'm going to need proof of identity," the clerk responded.

Tomu was rather used to the process. He reached into his pocket and produced a scroll signed with the Uzumaki Clan seal. Withdrawing money from a clan account always required a seal imbued with the chakra of the Clan Head. The clerk checked the seal's authenticity. The clerk sent the spiral seal through security and it returned with approval.

"Now I need you to sign these papers."

Tomu sighed heavily, grabbed the papers, and sat down to complete them. It was always a hassle. The paperwork was extra, just because he wasn't officially an Uzumaki Clan member. After he finished filling out the paperwork, signing the documents with a pinprick of his blood, he finally received the small amount of money he had requested.

Tomu mumbled a tired thank you when he received the receipt. Tomu stared at the receipt as he walked from the bank. Every time he looked, Naruto's revenue was tripling in amount. Whatever Naruto was doing for the Hokage, he was getting paid well for it. In just a couple of years, Naruto had gone from being poor to relatively rich, even compared to ninja standards. Constructions workers weren't the only ones who seemed to profit from war.

Tomu tucked the receipt into his pants pocket and entered the grocery store. He was always careful to grab items strictly on Naruto's diet. Naruto was easily tempted when any food was put in front of his face. As usual, Tomu held out his arm and shoved an entire row of ramen into the basket he carried.

Tomu stopped in the milk aisle. With a large wad of money in his pocket, it still bothered Tomu that the prices of everything had gone up considerably. In the corner of his eye Tomu noticed an old woman considering the price of milk. It was triple the amount it had been just a few months ago. He recognized the old woman from the Uzumaki community service events. She was one of the grass refugees who had made it to Konoha with three grandchildren.
Tomu knew that look on her face all too well.

Tomu quickly passed her by. He grabbed a bill from the wallet for his personal earnings, stuffed a bill into the woman's basket and kept walking. Eventually he reached the check out and just before he managed to walk out of the grocery store...

"Young man!"

Tomu cringed. He swiveled around and was faced with the old woman from the milk aisle. Grey wisps of her framed her head like a pock-marked hat.

"Young man, I think you dropped this," The old woman smiled with pain and she offered the bill back to Tomu.

"No, I don't think so," Tomu said softly. "It's not mine." He could see from the expression on her face that she didn't believe him and was adamant in refusing the money. He changed tactics. "Please, I really don't need it. Just take it as a gift."

"It wouldn't be fair. There are others who are worse off than I. I couldn't possibly take this."

Tomu wished Kusuro was here, because Kusuro was Grass. Many of the refugees more readily accepted help from Kusuro without question. Tomu was an outsider, a stranger.

"This is for all the things I stole," Tomu admitted weakly as he held out the bill that wavered in the space between. "At first it was for my mom and then I kept doing it just because I could."

Tomu wished it was a small kindness but it was for all the old ladies he stole from too. She reminded Tomu of when he first got started as a thief; the helpless old ladies were easy targets. Tomu had to swallow his sympathy if he wanted to keep his mother alive... she died anyways.

Tomu could feel the conflict between her poverty and her stubborn sense of pride as she looked down at the bill. Finally her shoulders sagged. She had three others to feed. "Thank you."

"Do you need help?" Tomu offered. He often took scrolls to go grocery shopping because of the amount of ramen Naruto required. Tomu quickly stored the groceries and took a hold of the woman's bags.

"The Uzumaki are a really kind clan," the woman replied as she added canned food items into the basket on Tomu's arm. "At a time when clans and ninjas should be worried about the war, you're worried about a little old lady like me."

"I don't think many ninja realize just how much a war cost," Tomu whispered. Like most ninja he met, a ninja thought in terms of their duty, of protecting their village, of fighting a battle they have spent their lives training for. They never thought of the little old ladies who couldn't afford to buy milk.

When they were finished, "I don't mind carrying your groceries back home."

The older woman hesitated. "I don't think that would be a good idea. I live on the eleventh street."

"Ah," Tomu understood immediately and released her grocery bags. Eleventh Street was only a block away from where Tomu had learned to navigate Konoha's toughest streets, but that area has changed a lot in the past year. That part of town had been claimed by Grass refugees. In an attempt to protect themselves from the thugs next door they created a cautious and close-knit community. No one who was Grass could enter that area, unless you wanted to get robbed or killed.
Ninjas of course didn't know or didn't care. Ninjas could go anywhere in Konoha that they pleased but in the world of civilians, the world that seemed to exist out of a ninja's notice, there were several layers that were complex but important for a civilian to know how to navigate in order to survive.

Tomu watched the old woman carry the grocery bags with a strength that seemed impossible for quivering arms. They went their separate ways but the incident still weighed heavy upon Tomu's consciousness.

He pondered on the existence of two worlds within Konoha that depended on each other to function and how he often straddled both sides. He had a civilian job but had a ninja girlfriend. He lived in a clan compound but came from the streets. His father was a ninja but he was raised by a civilian. He didn't know where he belonged anymore.

Tomu was suddenly startled when someone shoved into him. "Sticky?" Tomu questioned. He caught the bright red of his friend's hair before a package was shoved into his arms.

"Hold that for me," Sticky yelled while sprinting off down the road and turning a corner.

Tomu stared confused for several seconds before he caught sight of two men jumping the rooftops in the direction Sticky fled. Tomu reacted immediately. He dipped into an alleyway, slid behind a dumpster, and waited until he could no longer hear the receding footsteps of the ninja.

The rats scurried from their hiding spot when Tomu clanged his head backwards against the dumpster. Why did trouble always seem to find him?

Tomu stared at the package in his arms, gulped, and peeled back the edge of the paper to peek at what's inside. His breath caught in his throat. He held pounds of unprocessed opium. Unprocessed – which meant he wasn't dealing with regular thugs or gangs or even the government, this was Akimichi shit.

The gravity of the situation crushed his lungs and he struggled to breath. Eventually he managed one meaningful word. "Fuck."

He needed to get this stuff off his hands immediately. He'll go to Sticky's usual hideout, wait for him there, and give it back. Tomu would brush the drugs off his hands clean. He refused to bother Naruto about it unless Tomu couldn't find Sticky by the end of the night. That's when it was time to panic. The Akimichi always kept track of their stuff.

Tomu quickly stored the package in a scroll so he couldn't be caught with it out in the open. Tomu created a shadow clone, just in case, and sent him in the opposite direction.

Tomu took the long way to Sticky's place. He never stepped onto the main road but kept to the darker roads he hadn't navigated in a long time. Konoha was full of small cracks between houses, cat trails, and hidden spaces that only a trained eye could find. It had gotten very difficult to squeeze into the narrow spaces now that lean muscle had suddenly appeared on his arms and legs.

Tomu wondered if this was how Mushi felt on every mission, with this cloud of death hanging over your head at every moment. It was a cloud Tomu hadn't felt in a rather long time.

It was dark by the time Tomu arrived around his old haunts. He remembered when he used to steal from the drunken patrons from the bars that populated the long street. It was worse than he remembered. There were more drugs floating around, more alcohol, and more ninja.

It was early in the night and drunken ninja were already causing a scene out in the streets. Ninja came home from the war front for a few weeks leave and they terrorized the street of bars that led...
towards the red lights district at its end, the government's attempt to keep prostitution under control. Of course it was hard to keep a woman from selling her wares on any street corner if she really wanted to and enforcement wasn’t necessarily strict.

Tomu slipped into an alleyway and pushed a pair of trashcans aside to reveal a small hole in the wall. Tomu hoped he could still fit. He leaned down and slipped inside until he poked his head into the thatched roof where Sticky lived.

"Hey Sticky what's-" Tomu's voice died when he pulled himself out of the hole and stared at the blood drying along the wooden boards. The small place that Sticky had prized was ruined. Tomu stared at what was left of Sticky's torn and mangled body. The chest was compressed inwards, as if he had been crushed.

Without another word, Tomu turned and slipped back through the hole. His forehead rested against the grimy brick wall, and then suddenly a voice unhinged his spine.

"Do you have something for us?"

Tomu looked up as two large shadows blocked the exit of the alley. A red mane framed their large physique and had the blank eyes of a ninja on a mission.

"I have what you want," Tomu immediately established. Tomu knew any fast movements would not get him out of this alive. "It's in a storage scroll in my right pocket."

"This one is rather smart," The Akimichi with a purple tattoo that smeared his left eye replied. Tomu's heart thundered as the giant approached him. The ninja's large hands were unexpectedly graceful as they searched Tomu's pockets and procured the scroll. The Akimichi cut his finger on fangs that further enhanced his appearance of a lion. The scroll opened.

A large grocery bag of ramen appeared.

"Wait, no, I meant your right, your right."

"You don't get second chances," The Akimichi replied and pulled a kunai from his belt.

Survival instincts kicked in and Tomu ran for the wall. Applying chakra he went straight up, flipped toward the wall behind him and caught the tip of the roof. His fingers slipped when suddenly his ribs were being clenched shut. The Akimichi's arm was extended and had a vice grip around Tomu's chest. Tomu was dragged back down to the ground.

"Rather good use of chakra," The Akimichi observed as if the weather.

Tomu's hand couldn't reach the hiraishin kunai in his belt. The Akimichi's fist tightened further. Tomu jerked in sudden pain when a rib audibly cracked. His chakra flared in response and closed his eyes to hide the burning red of his irises.

He was going to die and he didn't have any ideas how to save himself. Mushi's sudden voice in his head reasoned a solution.

"My name is Uzumaki Tomu!"

He hoped Mushi was right about the power of a clan name.

The grip around his chest suddenly loosened. With some relief from the pain, he finally gained control enough to deactivate his sharingan. Tomu opened his eyes in disbelief as the Akimichi
looked at each other. After a few seconds of silent consideration, they finally let him go. Tomu’s shoulder caught his fall on the pavement. Without word, the Akimichi that had held Tomu grabbed him by the hair and literally dragged him through the streets.

Tomu knew exactly where they were going. After twenty excruciating minutes of being dragged through Konoha with a broken rib, they came upon the Uzumaki compound.

The doors were always open but it didn't mean they were welcoming. Uzumaki Naruto appeared in a spiral of leaves.

"Let him go," his tone was anything but friendly.

"This one is yours then?" Akimichi identified. Tomu found himself lifted to his feet and patted roughly on the back as if from a gruff uncle. Naruto caught Tomu by the forearm and pulled Tomu behind him.

For the few seconds Tomu looked in Naruto's face he found red eyes and pronounced whiskers. "I demand to know why you have attacked my family."

"Mistake," the Akimichi replied. "Perhaps he shouldn't be in certain places."

Tomu reached into his left pocket, withdrew the scroll, unlocked it and retrieved the package. He threw it at their feet. The Akimichi looked inside, with an approving nod they replied, "Sorry to have bothered you. I'm sure both sides will let the incident slide."

"I'm sure," Naruto replied with a sharp tone that implied he didn't forget.

The Akimichi bowed deeply to the Uzumaki clan head and took their leave. In the corner of Tomu's eye he spotted Naruto's hand twitching as of it was overcharged with chakra ready to be released.

"I wasn't running drugs," Tomu mumbled.

"I didn't say that you were," Naruto replied and licked his protruding fangs, almost in disappointment that potential prey had gotten away. "Dinner is in the fridge. Give me a few minutes."

Tomu nodded and left Naruto standing at the gate of the Uzumaki compound. There were moments over the years when Tomu has seen Naruto at the edge, but he was never afraid. Naruto has never hurt him or Ame or Ichigo. Although, Tomu was afraid for the Akimichi.

Tomu walked into the house. Tomu noticed three dirty plates onto the table. He wasn't very hungry. He grabbed the plates, brought them to the sink, and began to wash them. The water caressed his hands.

"Tomu."

Tomu snapped out of his daze when Naruto suddenly called his name. His sharingan had been activated and he had been scrubbing nonstop at the clean plate.

"Tomu, that's enough," Naruto replied gently. "I smell blood on you. What happened?"

"This fucking war happened," Tomu spat.

Tomu's anger was doused by Naruto's expectant expression and knew he hadn't answered correctly. "Think I broke a rib and landed hard on my shoulder. The rest are just scratches. No hospital."

"I don't know how to mend a rib and unless you want to deal with pregnant Sakura at this hour of
the night, you don't have a choice. I'll get your cloak.

"No," Tomu refused as his hands tightened around the rim of the plate. He demanded of the clone, "Where is Naruto?"

Tomu turned his sharingan with scrutiny. The clones were illusions. He didn't want to talk to shadows. There were words he needed to say and he wanted them flung at something solid enough to stick.

"He's sorry for not being here more often." The clone gave a resigned expression before he disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

A few seconds later a breeze flew into the house. The Captain didn't have time to shed his mask and cloak. Only a few moments ago, he had been assigning a solo mission to Hound but that could wait, because to him there were more important things.

He didn't like bringing his work home. Naruto peeled off the mask and sat it uncomfortably onto the kitchen table. "You have a habit of getting in trouble when I'm not around."

Naruto had warned Tomu several days ago he was limiting the number of his clones in Konoha because he needed to concentrate the majority of his chakra on the northern front in the major offensive against Ame.

Tomu dropped the plates in the sink and spat, "Why?"

Naruto patiently replied, "What do you mean?"

"Why are you fighting?" Tomu challenged.

"To protect you and to protect Konoha."

"Bullshit. This war isn't helping Konoha. People are starving because they can't afford food because of this stupid war. There are more drugs, more violence, and more problems. There are more gangs because resources are dwindling, more kids on the streets because their parents are either in the war or dead from it. Konoha isn't safe for its own civilians anymore. You say you're protecting Konoha but it's only getting worse."

Mushi is fighting because she sincerely believes this is what she was born to do. What kind of stupid ideological bullshit is that? What kind of place convinces a child that they are born to kill?" Tomu questioned, his chest on fire, his heart constricted.

"Sticky died today. He wasn't killed by Kiri or Ame, he died trying to edge out a living in a world dominated and controlled by ninja. That's the sort of world you are protecting.

Why do you keep fighting and fighting but nothing ever gets better?"

It's been a long time since anyone has managed to hit Naruto so hard he was forced to stumble backwards, but somehow Tomu managed it with mere words.

Tomu collapsed into the chair after all his strength had left him. He wiped the wetness from his eyes. With a measured breath, "I'm sorry."

"No," Naruto held his hands in the pockets of his ANBU cloak. "You're right."

Rabbit died today. He wasn't killed by Kiri or Ame, he killed himself.
"I haven't taken the time to see the toll these wars have taken on Konoha and I know I haven't been around lately but," Naruto looked down at the mask he had sat upon the kitchen table. It didn't belong in this space, "I haven't stopped fighting for you, this family, and for Konoha. I'm trying."

Tomu looked down at his hands. "No, it's not fair of me to demand so much of you when I don't even know what I'm fighting for. It's wrong of me to expect you to fix everything. That's not fair," Tomu admitted. "I've been running away hoping that this war would miss me but I was wrong, it affects everyone."

Naruto saw the spark erupt in the boy's eyes. It had always been there, tiny, minuscule, but now it had erupted into a visible flame.

"I think I know what I need to do."

The Uzumaki compound was quiet. Ame and Ichigo were in bed. Even the ghosts were asleep. Naruto looked at his younger brother. He wasn't so little anymore.

"I'm not going to stop you."

"Sometimes," Tomu gave Naruto a weak smile, "I'd wish you'd tell me no."  

"We've all got those things we need to do."

Tsunade walked downstairs with a yawn. She wasn't startled by the brooding ninja sitting in her kitchen.

"You know, when we started doing these informal meetings, I didn't mean as a permanent visitor," Tsunade replied. She was pleasantly surprised when she found a pot of tea already prepared on the stove.

"Why is Konoha indebted to the Akimichi Clan?"

"I believe that is beyond your jurisdiction," Tsunade replied in amusement.

"I should have known. It makes so much sense why the government always looks the other way. The corruption goes all the way to the top."

He didn't sound accusing nor did he sound surprised that Konoha was mired in corruption.

Tsunade sat at the table with her cup of tea and explained, "The Akimichi are not the Uchiha or Hyūga who sees power in terms of jutsu, kekkai genkai, or skill. They see power in terms of money. The Akimichi are less likely to overthrow the government but are more likely to control it. When your father came into power after the Third Shinobi War he inherited the task of rebuilding Konoha but by that time the wars had depleted all of the Land of Fire’s wealth. Minato decided to borrow from the Akimichi. He was intelligent enough to keep their power limited but it got worse during Sarutobi's reign. Suddenly there was an Akimichi in every level of government."

"Why hasn't anyone tried to stop them? I've found evidence that the Akimichi are involved in every illegal activity in Konoha, from illegal drug dealings, human trafficking, protection racketeering, to control of the underground gambling ring."

"I've tried to limit their power. When I first entered office I figured it would be best for Konoha to diversify its loans instead of relying solely on the good will of the Akimichi... and then the Akimichi clan bought all of my gambling debts. My hands were tied when even I became indebted to them."
Naruto bitterly, "The corruption goes all the way to the top."

Tsunade nodded. Lines of thought were beginning to leave permanent marks on Naruto's face. Tsunade knew by his expression he was up to something. "Naruto, what are you planning?"

Naruto stood from the chair. "If the government is in the Akimichi's pockets then it's a problem I need to handle on my own."

"I hope you are not planning to challenge the Akimichi Clan by yourself. There are some things you can't win with brute strength. They have the power to take everything that you have worked so hard for. They can buy the Uzumaki compound right from under your feet if they wanted to."

"I'm going to talk to Chouji."

"Chouji can't help you." Tsunade explained, "Out all of the Clan Heads in Konoha he has the least amount of power. The Akimichi clan is less of an autocracy and more of a democracy. His primary function is to protect the clan, not direct it."

Naruto gave a mischievous smirk, much like the one he used to give when he was a child right before he performed one of his elaborate pranks. "Then I'll make them listen. Trust me, Granny I know what I'm doing. I know how this game works."

Naruto dug into his pocket and reached for a scroll. He placed it before her on the table. "I need you to sign this."

Tsunade was about to complain about the presence of paperwork in her kitchen until she briefly caught sight of the adoptions papers. She was startled to remember that she never signed them because of the uncertainty of his job.

"I believe I have proven that I can take care of my children. Surely, you can make an exception to the rule."

Tsunade agreed that Naruto had proven himself as a caretaker and father. Naruto watched her signed the papers. There weren't any feelings of satisfaction or joy. He was rather ambivalent about the entire process. A piece of paper did not make a family.

"That's not going to be easy," Hinata Hyūga replied. She sat down her cup of tea at the same time a note was plucked from the strings of the shamimasen. It was a large spacious room that overlooked one of the many gardens that dotted the Hyūga compound. Beside the shamimasen player, two children were silent while they practiced their calligraphy as the setting sun reached across the warm floorboards. The Hyūga crest encompassed the entire wall and belittled all who entered the room.

"I can't watch it happen and do nothing about it anymore. I've made my decision and this is the path I am taking."

"You can't take on the Akimichi family alone," Hinata said matter-of-factly. "Besides, what do you have to offer them in return? You will lose far more than you will gain."

"Which is why I've come here," Naruto said. The Uzumaki cloak rustled in the cool wind that wafted through the room. He knew in matters regarding politics and business, the easiest way to sway Hinata was to show her due respect. He took his time, played the game as he was expected to do. He knew how to get on her good side when he wanted to. He had gone through all of the proper protocols in order to schedule this meeting.
"You're doing construction?" Naruto asked as he looked out over the garden. It was grand in scope, shifting colors toward the golden hues of fall.

"I'm tearing down the old branch headquarters. It unbecoming of a clan to live so separately," Hinata replied. A single lone flower decorated her hair, done in an elaborate bun of midnight blue.

"It is quite beautiful," Naruto remarked. He wasn't talking about the garden.

"It is but a trifle thing," Hinata replied as she stared out over the Hyūga lands. She wondered how many of her kin would return from the war, return to see the flowers bloom in spring.

Naruto tasted the tea and took a moment to appreciate its taste, like fall shifting on his tongue. After allowing the moment to settle and small talk ease the way to more important matters, he finally replied, "Taking on the Akimichi would be a trifle thing," Naruto purposefully copied her words, "with the backing of the Hyūga clan."

Naruto attempted to gauge her reaction but Hinata was a master at hiding her emotions. She gave him a matter-of-fact reply, "If you can get the backing of the Hyūga clan."

"Of course I will, because the Hyūga need the Uzumaki. Unless of course, there is another fūinjutsu expert you trust with your seal?"

Even though Hinata's face was a mask, her killing intent was permeable through the room. There was a missed chord on the shamimasen. Suddenly Naruto felt those impassive Hyūga eyes on his person, those in the room and outside of it.

Naruto forged ahead, "I think it would be in both our interests to form an alliance between our two houses. Since the secrets of the caged bird seal is known to the Uzumaki clan I would think the Hyūga would like to keep us very close."

Hinata gave a slight nod and the shamimasen continued its song. She lowered the tea cup and the moon of her eyes descended over the rim. She did not believe for a moment Naruto would sell the secrets of the Hyūga seal.

"Your threats are hollow."

Naruto leaned in, for a few short seconds the skin of his arm brushed against hers. She hid her hand in the cloth of her sleeve. Hinata refused to give any ground in her own house and didn't stop Naruto as he inched forward and threatened her space. Her lips moved, so close, her threat was a kiss, "I could kill you."

With a smug mischievous smirk, he said, "Your threats are hollow."

He pulled away like a sudden breeze. "I trust you Hinata," Naruto replied, "probably not everything you say but I'd trust you with my life if it ever came to that. But the future generations of Uzumaki and Hyūga might not have the same relationship we do. Are you willing to take that risk?"

Hinata was grateful to finally have a pause and looked towards the garden in an excuse to look at anything but him. How shameful. Every Hyūga in the compound probably noticed how her heart had raced. It was hard for her to judge the boundaries how Naruto played the game and the boundaries between them.

"Generations ago the Hyūga had an alliance with the Uchiha. It had been established in a mutual interest to protect our doujutsu and the distant lineage related to the Sage of Six Paths. Then they betrayed us, which created the need for the caged bird seal to be created in the first place. The Hyūga
has hated them ever since."

It was a hatred that has lasted for well over a thousand years.

Naruto scoffed as he leaned back on the tatami mat. "Are you sure you didn't betray each other?"

There was an amused almost vindictive smirk on Hinata's lips. "They're not alive to say otherwise."

"Perhaps, but the Uchiha have the uncanny ability of coming back from the dead," Naruto observed, he meant it jokingly but they shared a glance. They couldn't openly talk about the fact Naruto had a sharingan hiding under his roof.

Hinata finished her tea. One of the branch members who stood at the door began to clean away the tea set and brought out a plate of light snacks.

"Thank you," Hinata smiled, the branch member nodded in acknowledgement and rushed from the room with shy embarrassment.

Hinata turned to Naruto. "Do you understand what a clan alliance entails?"

Naruto certainly didn't come to this meeting ignorant of what he was asking for. He knew what it would cost. "I understand."

"You need an heir."

"I have one," Naruto retrieved a scroll from his belt, unlocked the stored items and showed Hinata the official adoption papers.

"The Hokage finally said yes despite your job?"

"There are always exceptions," Naruto replied as he reached for a rice cake. "I've proven I can take care of them. They are officially, on paper, Ame and Ichigo Uzumaki," Naruto continued with a summary of the documents. "In case of my death, all my assets will go towards Tomu until Ame comes of age, my official heir. The Uzumaki clan will continue through her. I plan to teach her the family business and the secret of seals that have been compiled by Jiraiya, Namikaze, and Uzumaki."

After scanning the documents and confirming they were official, she knew Naruto was completely serious about what he was about to do. "Are you truly prepared to give one of your children away in marriage?"

"The moment our alliance is established, if anything happens to me-"

"Their safety is assured," Hinata answered, "by law, by the honor and pride of the Hyūga clan."

Naruto sighed in relief, as if a weight was lifted from his chest. He couldn't predict his own death, but he was a ninja, pretending it might never happen was ignorant and stupid.

"I'll have the papers written up tonight and will have you informed on the date of the ceremony."

"I understand," Naruto replied. He looked into Hinata's eyes. "It's ironic, if my parents had never died, this could have easily been us."

"A possibility." Hinata acknowledged but it wasn't meant to be. Marrying Neji was much more beneficial to the clan in the short run and marrying off the children much more beneficial to both clans in the long run.
"I'm curious," Naruto began carefully, "Have you named an heir?"

The children who were practicing their calligraphy looked up with equally curious expressions.

"I'm still deliberating," Hinata responded. "I have decided that the position of Clan Head is no longer strictly an inherited title. I want to choose someone who I think show leadership qualities."

"So you and Neji aren't planning on..." Naruto raised his eyebrows.

"Eventually," Hinata snapped. "You aren't planning on getting married?"

"Eventually," Naruto repeated with a smirk and amended, "I apologize if I have offended you."

He knew the inquiry would anger her, especially in the formal setting and surrounded by the clan who he suspected didn't realize her lies. Sometimes he really did do things to intentionally provoke her.

Naruto reached for his cloak. "I look forward to working with you more closely in order to maintain the mutual strength of our alliance. Ichiraku's tomorrow for lunch? For important clan things of course." There was a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

"Naruto, I would hope you will not abuse this alliance for your personal amusement."

Naruto grinned. "See you tomorrow."

Before Naruto walked from the room, he paused, "No more games, if something ever happens to me..."

It was a request he couldn't ask from Sakura who was trying to prepare for her own family, he couldn't ask Kakashi who could barely take care of himself, the only person he could go to was Hinata because she had the resources, the wealth, and the prestige.

"I'll protect them," Hinata promised.

There were times when signing a piece of paper wasn't enough. A ninja's life revolved around blood and there was no oath more important or sacred than a blood oath.

The Hokage participated as witness to the ceremony. Tomu Uzumaki sat in attendance as witness for the Uzumaki Clan and the oldest Hyūga alive sat in attendance as witness for the Hyūga Clan.

Naruto and Hinata sat across from each other with both hands on their knees. Their coats were thrown backwards off their shoulders. Naruto was bare-chested and Hinata wore a plain black strip across her breasts, a symbolic gesture to prove there were no hidden weapons on their person. The sudden lightning from outside lit the panels and casted shadows across the floor boards.

"Both parties have agreed to the demands of the alliance, which are to be sealed by the blood of each clan." The Hokage sat the papers before the participants.

They reached for the kunai provided by the Hokage. Naruto sliced down his forearm, but the skin quickly healed. It took Naruto three attempts to fill the sake cup sufficiently with his blood. The metallic smell of blood reached Naruto's nose vividly. He watched as the deep red made a startling contrast with Hinata's pale skin.

Her back creaked with scars that wove together like the branches of a naked cherry blossom tree. The scar clawed down Naruto's chest like dark smears of ash.
With a quick snatch of her hand, Hinata lifted the ink brush and dabbed it in the cup. With envious grace, she wrote her name in succinct strokes down the paper. Her calligraphy was perfection.

Naruto on the other hand felt clumsy as he roughly signed his name to paper. They reached for each other's sake cups, intertwined their arms. Their eyes watched each other as they placed the cups to their lips.

He slid the blood into his mouth and his tongue exploded with the flavor of it. He immediately swallowed and denied the ache that wanted more. His hearing was ultra-sensitive to the heart that pumped blood through her body.

The Hokage ended the ceremony, "May your clans flourish and prosper."

On a storming night in autumn during the Fifth Shinobi War, the Hyūga and the Uzumaki clan formed an alliance.

When meeting with the Head of the wealthiest clan in Konoha, you have to dress like it. The Hyūga were traditional but the Akimichi were anything but. Naruto popped the collar on his cuffs and stepped into the most expensive restaurant in Konoha with the sleek black of a tuxedo draped over his skin.

"Uzumaki-sama, we have been waiting for your arrival. Come right this way." Naruto followed the server up the flight of stairs. The wind touched his face when he reached the balcony that overlooked the market and business district of Konoha.

Chouji Akimichi hadn't waited, even though Naruto had arrived exactly on time. Chouji had already begun eating a four-course meal.

"Naruto!" Chouji beamed as Naruto neared. They greeted one another like old friends. Naruto sat down with a grin.

"How has it been Chouji?" There were rules and it was always rude to begin with business.

"Starving," Chouji answered. "It's hard to find enough food to feed my gut on a battlefield," Chouji laughed lightly, making his own joke about his weight.

"You're assigned to the Eastern front against Kiri?"

"There were a few skirmishes but it's a complete standstill right now. Leaf ninja are watching from the trees and Mist ninja are watching from the sea, with both sides unwilling to give up the advantage of terrain. Things should get interesting once Konoha attacks Ame?"

"If we can catch them by surprise I think we'll take Ame rather easily."

"Really?" Chouji leaned over in curiosity. "Then I assume your side of the war is going well?"

Naruto didn't offer a pause when Chouji revealed he knew about Naruto's profession. He had a good idea he knew the culprits. "I was under the impression that the alliance between Akimichi and Yamanaka were crumbling."

Naruto's watched Chouji's shoulders sag. Chouji placed a chicken leg in his mouth as if for comfort. "I'm afraid our alliance is. Ino refuses to see me, Naruto. She hasn't even talked to Shikamaru. I'm worried about her."
"I'm sure she'll get over it soon."

"You don't know Ino. She will hold a grudge forever," Chouji lamented. After Chouji finished cleaning the meat from the bone, he looked across the table at Naruto who had ordered nothing else but water.

"I'm guessing we're not here just to catch up on old times?"

"No, this is business," Naruto admitted.

An expression set over Chouji's face. It was harder and colder and bitter. "Business."

"From what I understand the Akimichi family supplies Konoha with drugs?"

Chouji didn't mince words as he placed a BBQ wing into his mouth. "Yes, the Akimichi family owns the land where we hire farmers to grow the drugs, we process, manufacture it, and sell it to various places in Fire County, most notably Konoha's government so they can properly manage the drug flow."

"That's not what I'm referring to. I'm talking about the extra profit your family makes on the side selling it illegally to the drug lords, the side that pays off the Konoha police in order to keep all illegal activity quiet, the side the government knows exists but overlooks because even Konoha is indebted to your family."

Chouji gave a pained expression. "If there is a demand, there can always be profit. If you want it to stop, I can't necessarily help you there. That's my aunt's jurisdiction. If you try to stop it by force… that can very well bring on an internal war in Konoha. It seems to me that's the last thing we need right now."

"No, not stop," Naruto answered, "but manage."

Chouji raised an eyebrow. "What are you suggesting?"

"I get it, alcohol, drugs, sex – there is always going to be a demand for that especially here in a ninja village. I'm not trying to get rid of it but I am concerned on how it is affecting the community. I want to put the drug lords out of business."

"I'm listening," Chouji answered once he finished his dessert and lit up a cigar.

"You primarily do your business with the drug lords outside of the village so it cannot be traced to your family. In turn, the lords use children to smuggle your illegal drugs into the village. With the war, there has been a higher demand and things are getting out of hand. The drug lords are fighting with each other over territory and civilians are getting caught in the crossfire. No one touches the drug lords because they are protected by the Akimichi."

"The fact of the matter is, I'm offering the Akimichi clan an ultimatum: either you agree to sell exclusively to me or you won't be selling to anyone." Naruto had enough influence in Konoha and connection in ANBU to convince ninja on watch to look the other way instead of using children to do all of the dirty work. "My goal is to clean up the streets of Konoha and if that means I need to become the biggest illegal drug pusher in Konoha, then so be it."

Chouji wasn't smiling. Chouji wasn't eating.

"That is not acceptable. There are reasons why we invest in all the drug lords and not just one. First, it inspires competition and competition equals more profit. Second, if one does negative there are
others to fall back on. Your solution is too high-risk. The Akimichi clan would never agree."

"This isn't a solution, it's a compromise." Naruto replied with steel to his voice. "I'm allowing the Akimichi the opportunity to keep making money but the drug lords have to go."

Chouji smiled, amused at Naruto's attempts. "Do you even know how to run a business?"

"No," Naruto admitted, "but I have friends who do. I'm not trying to make a profit. Whatever money I make is going back into Konoha. I'm going to use that money to help people, to fund the orphanage, and to do some good."

"Then what next? Are you going to clean up the red lights district too?"

Naruto shrugged his shoulders, "Maybe next year. What do you say?"

"No," Chouji said without hesitation. "The clan will never agree to this."

"That's too bad," Naruto gave a deep sigh. "As of five minutes ago, all the drug lords in Konoha are dead."

Chouji attempted to determine whether or not Naruto was bluffing. Suddenly two ninja appeared on the rooftop, the same two Akimichi that had been at Naruto's door several nights before. Chouji raised his hand to silence them. He already knew what they were going to tell him.

"You do understand you've stepped into our territory and this means war?"

"Perhaps," Naruto acknowledged, "You might not have heard while you've been out of Konoha but the Uzumaki and Hyūga have formed an alliance. You would also be declaring war on the Hyūga clan and you know what they say about a Hyūga, they know everything." Naruto rose from his seat. "I'm willing to give you another chance, either you make money or you don't. It's really as clear cut as that."

In the twinkling of the night, almost an illusion of the light, Naruto's eyes suddenly flickered red, if only to remind them who they were dealing with.

Chouji knew a conflict between the Uzumaki, a small upstart clan, was vastly different from a conflict between both Uzumaki and Hyūga, one of the oldest and second wealthiest clan in Konoha. The Hyūga came from old money and they were literally sitting on mounds of it. Fighting over drug rights in a time of war isn't exactly a move the Yamanaka or Nara would likely support.

"As clear cut as that?" Chouji questioned as he took a puff of his cigar. Chouji looked out over the glittering buildings of Konoha. "We're not genin anymore, are we?"

Naruto tucked his hands in his pocket, tilted his head, and appreciated the same view. It was time he accepted this world as it was, and if he wanted to change it, he had to first play by its rules. "No, we're not genin anymore."

Chouji stepped forward and held out his hand, "The Akimichi clan is looking forward to doing business with you."

Doors were not welcoming objects, they protected the household from all the things that would knock them down. The red momoji leaves that shaded the house formed a pool of blood at Naruto Uzumaki's feet. He stood in front of the door, unwilling to be the one to knock it down.
The wood creaked.

"Yes?" The bright-eyed woman answered. Lines of hard years creased around her eyes. Naruto watched as the lines grew even harder and her breath hitched. Her hand went to her face, as if trying to repel the sudden blow of shock.

"Sis, what is it?" A man came to the door, slowed, and his eyes were pinned to the black envelope in Naruto's hands. Naruto felt it was his responsibility, as the Captain, as the person who should have interfered before it was too late.

"Please come in," The man straightened his shoulder. Naruto didn't want to come in, but didn't have a choice when the man carried the woman over to the couch.

She wasn't a pretty crier and focused all her guts to the task. Snots, and tears, and hiccups escaped her lips. "I told him not to join ANBU, I told him."

"He was a good agent," Naruto replied with the words he had prepared, hoping they were enough to propel him on auto-pilot.

"Thank you," the man replied grimly, knowing not everyone got a personal visit from the Uzumaki Naruto at the eve of their deaths.

"He died protecting the village…" 

"Get out of my house," the woman snapped. She was tired. She had heard the same words before, when the black letter came for her mother and her father. Even her neighbors, and friend, and coworkers have experience a black letter at least once. The names of ninja sealed between the folds of black paper could be stacked into piles of fodder.

"This village doesn't care about us," she had screamed. "We sacrifice the ones we love for what?"

The man opened the door, an obvious hint that Naruto's visit was no longer welcome. The front door waivered open, as if in apology for the grief it had let in.

They were just an average ninja family, constantly torn apart by the black letters that arrived on their doorstep.

Naruto had never delivered a black envelope before. It wouldn't be his last.

x

A piece of paper did not make a family
Shrimp woke with a smile. Her fingers combed through the blue hair of the man placing kisses down her chest. "Morning," Piranha's sharp toothed smile greeted her.

It was a good way to wake up.

Shrimp barely got her bearings before Piranha pressed down on her lips. She knew what this was going to lead to. It was so easy to get lost in someone else's flesh. Suddenly, they found directions when the ANBU tattoo burned on Piranha's arm.

Piranha pulled from her lips, reached down toward the foot of the bed, and grabbed his shirt. Shrimp frowned. "They don't let you rest."

Piranha shrugged as he pulled the shirt on. Ever since the Otokage mission, Piranha has been assigned grunt work and barely got any rest. When he did get an opportunity to sleep he would rather have sex.

Their eyes met before he walked from the room. Shrimp wanted to say, "be careful," and Piranha wanted to say, "I'll be back," but neither wanted to sound too attached. Instead, Shrimp turned over the bed and Piranha walked out the door.

Shrimp dug her face into the covers and could smell him in the empty space. Eventually she managed to pull herself away from the comfort of the bed and toward the shower. At first she mistook her reflection for a stranger and then remembered that the long blonde locks of hair and dark green eyes were her henge. Hanabi looked normal, even attractive she thought. She had always been built more boyish than her sister. She leaned into the mirror to primp the ringlet curls until she realize what she was doing, then stomped into the shower in frustration, unwilling to admit that her sudden obsession with beauty was rooted in the need to look pretty for him.

After the shower, she passed the mirror without a look, put on some clothes, and sat down to quickly right a report for the Captain.

When she spotted Piranha in the hallway with her byakugan, she stashed the writing materials underneath a hidden wooden panel she created inside of the desk. She turned just as Piranha entered the room with an alarmed expression.

"What's wrong?"

"I finally received a real mission but," Piranha collapsed on the side of the bed as if his head was already hanging in the noose. "I was pulled aside and given the mission by Kyouka, then on threat of death promised not to tell the Kage."

"Kyouka?" It was a name Shrimp needed to know. They whispered gruesome stories about the torturer's methods that further motivated Shrimp not to get caught. "What could she possibly want?"

"It's a delivery mission. We have to deliver this scroll to Iron Country."

Shrimp wanted to ask what sort of connections Mist had to Iron Country but you don't ask questions in Kiri. "Sounds easy enough. Why are you still worried?"
"We've been ordered to take the quickest route and that includes going through Sand Country," Piranha replied distastefully. Every Mist ninja was in a bad mood if they had to go through Sand.

"We set out in an hour." Piranha entered the bathroom. Shrimp waited until he got into the shower before she reached for the scroll they were to deliver. It was sealed. She could unlock it but it would take considerable time that she did not have.

Shrimp understood she might have stumbled onto something potentially important. She had no idea what Iron, a land of samurai could want with Kiri but sending Mist ninja through Sand was an obvious attempt to hide from Konoha. No one would think of looking through the desert for Mist ninja and it was so big and sparsely habited it was possible to slip through without even Sand ninja knowing.

The scroll was placed perfectly where Piranha had left it when he exited the shower. Shrimp had donned her uniform and belted her katana, Piranha came behind her still wet and unbuckled what she had just put on. "We still have thirty minutes."

Neji Hyūga walked into Amegakure. Neji walked into the building of four faces. Neji walked into the large office room that overlooked the entirety of the village and found a note on the desk that read: keep my chair warm for me.

Neji picked up a card and on its surface was the exaggerated face of a joker. "Do you know what this means?" Neji asked Naruto who had drifted to look outside the window.

"The last warlord has a moronic sense of humor?" Naruto guessed and then went around the room looking for traps.

"There are none." Neji said offhandedly. The office windows opened to a balcony that ringed around one of the large heads. Neji walked outside. With his byakugan activated, he could see the various chakra signatures crawling within the depths of the metal maze.

"I don't like this." Neji admitted. He had been planning and strategizing days for a fight when there wasn't even a hostile escort to greet him when he walked into the village.

"Ame has been ruled by warlords for a long time," Naruto said thoughtfully. "They know we're only here temporarily. They are going to wait until we leave and come right back in. To the citizens of Ame, we're just another warlord."

"You're missing the point, Naruto," Neji replied passively. "Why did the warlord of Ame enter an alliance with Kiri if they were just going to give up the village? Look around you, our information informed us that Ame was planning an attack which is why we attacked first but there aren't stockpiles of weapons, no reinforcements on the gate, nothing to suggest that Ame had any inkling to attack."

Naruto paused at Neji's astute observation. "Can we talk privately?" Naruto asked, suspicious of the office. Neji motioned outside and the two shinobi walked out into the thundering rain. Under the noise, Naruto whispered, "I was there Neji. I overheard Momochi tell Suigetsu that Ame was going to attack."

The rain thoroughly soaked Neji's hair and clothes. His shirt stuck to his skin and was gradually becoming see-through. Nevertheless, the prodigy paused for a moment of thought. "I don't think Momochi was telling Suigetsu the entire truth and now that we've attacked first he knows there are spies in Kiri. I suspect Ame never had any intention of fighting us head on. This ploy was to split our
forces and keep us preoccupied."

Naruto frowned. "I have men on the southern front watching Momochi."

"He needs to die."

"I'm working on it." Naruto replied.

They re-entered the office and bolted the windows to the loud boom of thunder outside. Neji pulled off the soaking fabric of his shirt and hung it on the backside of the chair. Naruto bore the weight of his dripping cloak. Naruto watched amused as Neji took out a scroll, put on a dry shirt, and reordered every strand of his hair.

"Neji, it's just rain."

"I am the commander of this regiment and I must present myself as so," Neji said when he sat down in the chair and sent for his second-in-command. In seconds, Lee burst through the door with an enthusiastic salute.

"No casualties to report of sir," Lee grinned.

"Lee, spread the men between guarding the ramparts and the main building. Make sure no one is stupid enough to get "lost," anyone who decides to wander the streets go in at least a squad of three. I suspect rain ninja are disguised as citizens, send a warning to be wary of anyone but don't attack unless you're being attacked first."

Naruto watched as Neji gave commands. Sometimes it awed Naruto how well the Hokage placed her units. There were reasons why Shikamaru, arguably the smartest person in Konoha, would never be assigned first-in-command. He was too lazy to be anything but second. Neji had learned underneath Gai and was effective at organizing large groups of men.

"Right away!" Lee exclaimed and raced to fulfill the orders faster than his record time.

A flash of lightning lit the room. It was the brightest light the room could ever offer.

"I'm going to dismiss myself and let the Hokage know what has occurred here. The boss will send another shadow clone in a few days."

"Wait," Neji replied smoothly as he went around the room to light the lanterns. "I have a message I want you to relay to Naruto."

"Yeah, sure."

"Are you aware that there is an alliance between the Hyūga and Uzumaki?"

The shadow clone gave a perplexed expression. He's been observing Neji on orders of the Hokage for several weeks now. "No, I didn't. Isn't that great? Now we're like broth-" one look at Neji's expression and the word withereded on Naruto's tongue.

"I was not consulted on this decision at all," Neji said with a slight frown but Naruto has been around enough Hyūga to know that a slight frown meant Neji was pissed. Neji accepted that Hinata was the Clan Head and she certainly didn't have to inform him on all her decisions but an alliance was a decision that would affect them for generations. "I agree it is a smart move with the Uzumaki's expertise in seals but I can't help but wonder…" Neji looked Naruto in the face. "Are you fucking my wife?"
Naruto instantly grew defensive. He didn't know what the Boss was up to but the clone wouldn't be surprised. "So what if I am? She doesn't love you anyways."

Those words cut a wound across Neji's hard exterior. Neji wasn't one to pay attention to rumors, but the rumors about Naruto and Hinata were harmful to his pride, his reputation, the clan's reputation, and the pain in his chest he refused to admit was his heart. "She is my wife."

Naruto gave a foxy mischievous grin. "She is my first."

The foxy grin didn't go away when Neji shoved Naruto against the wall. Only a few seconds ago, they were getting along and working toward a common goal. It certainly wasn't hard to put them at each other's throat. Naruto said around his smug grin, "And I was her first. She gave me her virginity not too long after she sucked my-

Neji decided it was the perfect time to reveal to Naruto that he didn't need to activate his byakugan to perform a jūken strike, and then proceeded to jūken Naruto right in the throat. Neji admitted there was satisfaction in watching that grin collapse to the floor. Naruto fell to his knees and gripped a hand around his collapsed esophagus. Naruto didn't know if he would suffocate first or if he would heal first. Naruto clutched helplessly at the futile attempts to breathe.

"If you touch my wife, I'm going to kill you."

The shadow clone disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

x

Captain Fox cringed and held his throat, let the fear of suffocation pass, then returned to writing his elaborate plan to kill Sandayū Momochi. His fingers drummed against the desk, then sat his work aside and began a plan to kill Neji Hyūga.

The Captain heard the door open but didn't bother looking up. He was busy. He was beginning to have too much fun imagining ways he could put a rasengan through Neji's chest. "I don't have any appointments today. What do you want?"

"Are you trying to ruin my marriage?"

The Captain's head jerked up. He didn't recognize the mask – Mouse – but he was intimately familiar with the curves of her body.

Lightning escape her fingertips. Captain Fox looked down, rather disappointed by the burning hole in his desk. It was a controlled and concentrated strike that turned his plans for Neji into ash. Instead of worrying about the smoke in his office, the Captain leaned forward with a smirk you could hear, "Do you often masquerade as your cousins in ANBU? I'm fairly sure that's illegal."

"You seem to have a problem understanding that Neji is my husband," Mouse replied as she calmly leaned against the entranceway.

"I have a problem with the fact he hit me in the throat."

"You deserved it."

The Captain conceded. He said a few things he should not have. "Fine, I deserved it. But tell me, if through some unfortunate accident Neji was to die, how upset would you be?" He felt the familiar but always unnerving wave of her killer intent, as if he had suddenly plunged into a lake of glacier ice. "I see."
Her chakra signature was different. The only reason why she would take steps to hide her signature was to hide from him. "Are you spying on me? I didn't know I had a stalker."

Her tone of voice was indignant, as if he was the only person worth spying on, "I spy on everyone."

"How did you learn about Neji so fast?"

Mouse shrugged her shoulders and then left the office without another word as if she had been blown in by the wind. He didn't know she went prowling about in ANBU until now and the reveal was a clear message: she was watching him.

The Captain smirked when she closed the door. Neji did not deserve her.

Hanabi watched as Piranha's skin began to dry, crack, and then peel. Underneath the harsh sun their water supply was draining fast. Over half of Piranha's jutsu were useless, which caused him to be more defensive and paranoid of the mirages he chased. His anger was boiling. The third member of their team, Eel wasn't faring too well either. Eel floated on the sand like a waif.

Hanabi was all too relieved when the sun started to descend.

"Why is it so cold? It's the fucking desert," Piranha spat.

"I heard it can get below freezing at night," Shrimp explained without trying to sound too knowledgeable. She wasn't a stranger to the Desert due to the occasional joint drills between the Leaf and Sand.

All three Mist ANBU were tired. They were hoping to get through the Desert in the span of a day but the dunes stretched endlessly on. Finally, Piranha gave up and decided to set up camp.

They went through the motions in silence, already used to the routine. They ate, they sharpened metal edges, and sat out the sleeping bags.

When Shrimp sat down to eat with Piranha, she kept her byakugan trained on the unknown entity of her third teammate.

"He's a child," Shrimp whispered.

Piranha shrugged. "He's probably one of those kids Mist saved from the base of Ishida Nashi, a former Seven Swordsmen. Mei returned most of them to their homes but those with potential were placed in ANBU. As long as the kid can point a kunai I'm fine with it. Don't tell me you have a thing for kids. I'd never figure you for the type."

Shrimp shoved Piranha in the chest. "I'm not a pedophile. I prefer guys who are much bigger."

Shrimp could imagine the cheeky smile behind his mask. "How big?"

"Oh perhaps," Shrimp leaned forward, crawled her fingers on his leg until she caught a hold of his crotch between his pants, "this big."

The masks got in the way of kissing, but Piranha was all too happy to skip to fondling. Shrimp seethed when his cold hands massaged her breasts. She pulled away before it got too heated. "You need to sleep. I'll take first watch."

"Wait," Piranha complained. "Eel can take first watch."
"He's already asleep." Shrimp turned and walked in a way that jutted out of her curves. This sudden sexual power she had found was so exhilarating at times.

Shrimp traveled up the nearest rise and took advantage of the high ground. The sky was a depthless blanket patterned by stars. Shrimp pulled out the scroll she had pilfered from Piranha's vest only a few seconds ago. Now she had the time. She took out an elaborate seal from one of her storage scrolls. She matched the seal to the seal on the scroll. Then she added chakra and all she had to do now was watch it work.

The master counterseal twisted and conformed to find the right combination to unlock the scroll's contents. The Captain really was ingenious sometimes.

After about an hour of waiting the seal came undone with a glow of red. Shrimp eagerly opened the scroll to peek at its contents. It was only a letter, an encrypted letter. Shrimp attempted to decode the strange script but couldn't. Instead, she copied it with a plan to send it to the decryption team in Konoha.

Right as she finished with the copy, she spied Eel coming up behind her. Shrimp scrambled to put the materials away as Eel came over the crest of the dune. "My turn for watch."

"That's alright," Shrimp said nervously, afraid he might have seen something.

Eel stared at her, or more precisely stared at the area where she had stuffed the scroll down the front of her flak jacket.

"I do not care if you are a spy."

Shrimp tensed. Her hand inched toward her kunai.

"I do not care about Mist. I do not care about this war. I only have one mission in life." The blank mask of the Eel turned toward Shrimp. "To meet Uzumaki Naruto."

"To kill him?"

"To ask him a question. I watched him turn on his own teammates to keep me and the other kids alive. I want to ask why he spared my life. Why didn't he end my miserable existence?"

Shrimp wondered if the man she knew as the Captain today would have made the same decision. "Naruto can't give your life meaning."

"And you know the meaning of yours?"

"I am a kunoichi of the leaf," Shrimp proclaimed before she cut her kunai across his neck. Blood splattered against the startling gold of sand.

Shrimp figured she could find an easy lie to tell Piranha, after all, Mist ninja went missing all the time. It had to be done. Eel knew too much; Even if he was a child.

"You don't at least want to see him?" Sakura asked.

"No."

"You don't even want to give him a name?"

"No," Tenten snapped for the last time from the hospital bed. Her breasts were sore and painful
against the wrap that attempted to contain her breast milk. "Why are you giving me that pitiful look? I told you this is what I wanted. I made my decision. It's behind me now."

Sakura sighed deeply. It hadn't been an easy birth. The meds hadn't kicked in, Tenten's screaming still ringed in her ear, but all that effort, all that struggle amounted to the emptiness of Tenten's stubborn silence.

"Alright, once you're strong enough I'll discharge you from the hospital."

"When can I go back out into the field?" Tenten demanded.

"You've just given birth. Your body needs rest. The last thing you need is a mission."

"I've been resting for nine months. I can't do it any longer. How much longer do I have to put my life on hold for a mistake?" Tenten asked angrily. Everything made sense when she had a weapon in her hand. She was tired of being helpless and scared, she wanted to get back onto the field and prove to herself that what had happened to her had only been an accident, an unlucky incident, and had nothing to do with her skills as a kunoichi.

Tenten wanted to put the reigns of her life in her hands again. She had the child, isn't that more than anyone could really expect of a ninja, a born killer?

"Tenten, I can't out of good conscious allow you to take on a mission."

"We're at war. At this point I doubt they care." Tenten scooted forward and placed her feet on the ground. She felt heavier than when she was pregnant. All she wanted was to free herself from the weight.

"Tenten, stop."

"I'm not you, Sakura. I was never that girl who wanted to settle down. Stop thrusting your judgments on me. This is the life I choose to live."

Tenten shrugged on the clothes she had brought to the hospital. She didn't tell her mom, or her dad, or her brothers. She just left. Tenten walked through the maternity ward of Konoha's hospital. The crying was ear-splitting. She passed the window that displayed the newborns cradled inside.

Tenten did not spare a look. She didn't want any emotional attachments, didn't want to doubt herself, didn't want to regret. She feared if she stopped and looked, spared even that small glance, she would crumble.

Tenten exited the hospital, went to the Hokage tower, and took the first mission available. It was a C-rank, nothing too strenuous, an escort job to get her acclimated back to the lifestyle. Tenten was a ninja but she had to prove that to herself.

Shrimp watched from the wet and snowy branch of a tree for an ambush. Below her, Piranha met the intermediary who would relay the scroll to the client. The intermediary was a young woman, civilian, with the dark skin common to Lightning all the way in the middle of Iron Country. What was going on?

x

Piranha was no fool. Perhaps there were some things he let slide because he was sleeping with her but more and more things weren't adding up. Shrimp was too familiar with the Desert for a Mist
ninja, too many things went missing, too many lies when Piranha could sense the water of Eel's dead body buried underneath the sand.

But he waited to confront her about it, waited until they were out of the Desert, waited until their mission objective had been completed, and waited until he was sure he wanted to break the illusion of what they had.

"Are you alright?" Shrimp was worried. Piranha was a cuddler after sex and he recently stopped the habit. Shrimp turned over in the tiny cot and wrapped her arms around his waist. Their cabin rocked in the small boat meandering across the sea. Piranha certainly wasn't going to back through the desert and had led them the long way around.

Piranha distractedly combed his fingers through her hair. "I'm fine," probably not the best idea to tell her that he was contemplating on how to kill her. He's been stalling. Every time he tried to come close he just ended up having sex with her. He didn't get it. She wasn't the most attractive woman he's ever slept with, not the most skilled, but she charmed him.

Decisively, he rubbed his hands along her arms. He pinned her hands up and kissed her like he's done a hundred times before. Her tongue eagerly darted in and out of his mouth.

Suddenly, Piranha could feel Shrimp struggle underneath him as he drained water from her lips. Her hand waved helplessly in his grip. Before she lost consciousness, he could see the betrayal in her eyes. How ironic. She passed out and the henge dropped. The blonde curly hair turned a straight dark brown.

Piranha should have killed her, knew he was going to regret this moment. Perhaps he was a fool after all.

Hanabi woke up sluggishly. Her shoulders ached with the stiffness of her arms locked around the mast. She looked up as Piranha pulled on the sails and steered the boat along the waves of the ocean. His blue hair flew in the wind as he tied down the sail. He was at home here.

Piranha turned around and was taken aback by the pale white of her eyes.

"Why haven't you killed me?" Hanabi asked softly.

"I'm going to bring you in for interrogation."

"And give me to Kyouka? Wow, I didn't think the sex was that bad."

"I don't have a choice. I'm a Mist ninja."

"Bullshit," Hanabi sneered. "Hioki, you can't kill me can you?"

Piranha's head snapped around. "Do not use my name."

"My name is Hanabi Hyūga."

Piranha knew she wasn't lying. Her eyes were proof enough. He pulled out a storage scroll from his flak jacket. He had already gone through all of her possessions. Piranha bent in front of her. "What's the counter seal?"

"You're not going to find anything useful in there. That scroll isn't for business."

"What is the counter seal?"
Hanabi rolled her eyes and described the counter. Piranha opened the scroll and looked perplexed at what he found. Hanabi turned with a shade of red in her cheeks. "It reminds me who I am."

The scroll contained two pictures and her Leaf hitai-ite. Piranha picked up one of the pictures. It was a sepia tone image of a young woman with a little girl and a babe in her arm. All wore the byakugan. "I'm the baby," Hanabi explained.

Piranha placed his fingers at the top of the photograph and Hanabi jolted forward. "Don't you dare. It is the only picture I have of my mom. It's the only one that exists."

A spy was a good liar but he sensed that the inferno that erupted in her eyes was real. He picked up the other picture, frowned as he looked at a image of a very naked silhouette of him sleeping across his bed at ANBU headquarters, blue skin and all.

That one was much more embarrassing.

"Fuck," Piranha cursed and threw the photo into Hanabi's lap. "Why do you have to be so fucking… endearing."

"I would prefer hot sexy bitch but if endearing gets me out of these bindings, I'm fine with that too."

"I'm not letting you go."

"At least have the balls to kill me yourself then."

Piranha slammed his hand onto the railing. He couldn't give her to Kyouka. He's been through that torture before. He couldn't do that to her. He withdrew his katana. Hanabi watched as Piranha approached her. He brandished the katana and the tip kissed her on the neck.

Hanabi looked at him with wide luminescent eyes. "I love you Hioki."

He hesitated.

Hanabi kicked upwards. Her left foot shoved the blade to the side while she twisted and slammed her right foot with a Jyūken strike against his face. Hanabi had slowly been burning through the ropes, concentrating chakra through the tenketsu points on her wrist with infamous Hyūga chakra control. She jumped atop him and without hesitation slapped her palm straight into his chest.

A gush of blood coughed out of his mouth.

"I'm sorry," Hanabi whispered. "It wasn't a lie."

Hioki reached his blue skin to touch the tears staining her cheeks. Hanabi reached her hands in horror as his eyes began to darken. She attempted a medical jutsu but the green glow kept sputtering. Why didn't she ever learn medical ninjutsu? Why had she been so stupid?

Hioki stilled her hands and pulled her into a weak hug. The breeze haunted the sails. The ocean pulled the boat along dying waves.

"You're beautiful."

Tenten was impatient to get going but when she looked around the gate for her client all she saw was some dark-haired kid. Her stomach lurched when he neared her.

"Umm," The kid scratched his hair awkwardly. "I'm not really sure how this process works."
Tenten could feel the dread in her stomach. "You hired me?"

"Yes."

"How did a kid like you afford a C-rank?"

"I saved money from my job."

Tenten looked down at the file she had received. The client name was listed as anonymous. Babysitting was the last thing she wanted to do but a job was a job. With a heavy sigh, "Alright kid, let's go."

x

Tomu Uzumaki wasn't quite sure about the kunoichi he had hired. She wouldn't stop looking at him. He hoped it was the fact that young clients were unusual. He kept his head down and continued down the road.

"We rest here," Tenten decided as the sky darkened. She was exhausted and gave the kid an envious look. There was no way he was a fucking civilian. He had too much stamina. Tenten was intimately familiar with the sound of metal and knew he was carrying kunai on him. He had to be a spy.

Then Tomu rolled out a large sleeping bag, took an hour unsuccessfully wiping away stray insects, and gave the container of processed travel food a blank stare. This kid confused her.

"It needs water," Tenten said. "Not very used to the road?"

"I've never traveled so far out of Konoha before." Tomu tensed, instantly guarded by her questioning.

"Then why are you attempting to go to the warfront? It's an odd excursion for someone who hasn't been far from Konoha."

"I need to deliver something."

That was such a horrible lie even Tenten could read it.

Tomu didn't see the glint of metal in the night before he could react to them. Three shuriken pinned his clothing to the tree behind him. "What are you doing?" Tomu questioned, afraid that the ninja he had been paired with was psychotic.

Tenten got up and kneeled in front of him. She opened the front of his jacket and revealed the kunai hanging inside. The kunai were Konoha-made. This set were even made by her family's business. "I think you're a spy. I'm going to kill you unless you convince me otherwise."

"Fucking ninja," Tomu cursed. "Is this how you treat all your clients?"

"In a time of war, yes. I don't want to accidently escort my enemy into our camp. Who are you?"

"I am Kusuro… Umino."

Tomu followed the line of a finger Tenten pointed upwards. A crow cawed in the sky. Tenten threw up a kunai and Tomu watched amazed as the crow dropped several seconds later. "If I can reach that from this distance, imagine what I can do to you up-close. I want the truth. Who are you?"

"I am Uzumaki Tomu."
"Uzumaki?" Tenten suddenly remembered where she had seen the kid's face before, it was that time she had visited the Uzumaki compound. "If that's the case why didn't you just ask Naruto to bring you? I hope you aren't trying to sneak away. He is the last person I want to get in trouble with him."

"I can't rely on Naruto all the time. I have to learn how to take care of myself."

"Teenagers." Tenten cursed. "What's the point of filing under anonymous?"

"Naruto has lots of enemies."

Tenten stood up and tried to decide what she was going to do. She should just bring this kid back to Konoha. "I'm going to send a message to the office to make sure you're telling the truth, your Clan Head gave consent, and the money is legit."

"What does it matter? Konoha is at war. It could use the money."

"Every mission a ninja accepts is a risk to their life. You aren't worth my life kid." Tenten began writing the letter.

"Wait, you can't write that letter."

Tenten stopped, looked at her client curiously. "Talk."

Tomu unwillingly admitted, "The Hokage doesn't know I'm out of the village. If Naruto was to take me out of the village it would be treason."

Tenten scoffed in disbelief. "What could possibly be so important about you?"

Tomu knew he was taking a gamble but he had to get to the Eastern front. His eyes flickered red, the bright red of fresh spilled blood.

Tenten's jaw dropped. She was so shocked she had to take a step back. It was like looking into the eyes of a ghost. Fucking Kami. Her C-rank suddenly turned into an S-rank by the level of its secrecy.

"If the Hokage finds out you can't get in trouble because I paid you. It's a mission. I can't afford to pay for Naruto." At this point, only a Daimyo or the Hokage herself could afford to pay for Naruto.

"And you want me to escort you to the Eastern Front?" Tenten attempted to clarify.

"That's all the mission requires."

Tenten could feel the heat of her ambition burning in her chest. Once the Hokage finds out the mission will certainly be listed an S-rank. An escort was probably one of the easiest S-ranks in the world but it was an S-rank to add to her mission history. All she had to do was complete it.

Her response was completely different from what Tomu would have expected.

"Kid, I'll get you to the Eastern Front in no time at all."

Hanabi stumbled back through the gates of Konoha like a ghost. She knew she should check into the Hokage's office, report to the Captain, and deliver the encrypted message but Hanabi didn't care. There was only one place she wanted to be.

It was the first time she was relieve to be seen coming. The doors of the compound were already
open. Hinata was already waiting.

The moment Hanabi saw her big sister, she broke down. She raced forward, clung to Hinata's waist and erupted into tears. Hinata really was the only mother that Hanabi has ever known. Hinata gently rocked her little sister in her arms.

They never came back the same.

Much to Neji's frustration, Leaf ninja disappeared every day, lost to the maze of pipes, confusion, dirt, and rain that was Ame.

"You're still up?" Lee questioned as he bounded into the room Neji had accosted as his study.

"We have five new reports of ninja going missing," Neji sighed, rubbing his temples together. "I don't know how long we can keep this up until it becomes illogical to keep holding this position."

Lee didn't really care much about reports, only action. The entire city was always enveloped in the shadow of giant rain clouds. Lee had tried to be of some use, but felt helpless when his vigilante efforts ended when his opponents slipped into the illogical maze of pipes and steam powered buildings.

"Neji," Lee said in a secretive whisper. "I like war."

Neji paused and looked up at Lee.

"There is always a new opponent to fight, always a chance to prove myself, and people depend on me. In times of peace, well I'm just Lee. I'm not sure I wish for this to be over." It was a conflict of emotions Lee had been battling ever since Gai died. War was bad, it killed the people he loved, but suddenly Lee realized he didn't know what to do without it.

Neji wasn't really sure how to respond. Lately, he's felt more at home on a battlefield than back in Konoha where the only welcome he received was his wife's silent stare.

"I understand," Neji found himself saying.

"Neji, I know this isn't any of my business but..." Lee's head tilted forward until his long black braid dangled in the air. "If you're not happy then what's the point? Gai and I..." It was the first time Lee talked about his relationship with his Sensei since his death. "We were happy."

"Because I love her," Neji said the words in disbelief, "because I believe in her dream, in the future she is trying to make for the Hyūga, and I will support her until the end. It does not matter if I am unhappy."

"Yes it does," Lee insisted and to show Neji he was wrong, Lee threw himself forward and pressed his lips roughly against Neji's face.

The chair fell, the papers were thrown in the air as Neji jumped away as if he had been bitten instead of kissed. "I- Lee- I- I'm not like you," The stuttering Hyūga backed against a wall.

"What do you mean not like me?" Lee questioned. "Gai Sensei told me about you and your grandfather-"

"Shut up," Neji snapped. "That wasn't his business to talk about. Get out, Lee. I have work to do."

"I'm really sorry Neji, I really didn't mean to hurt you." Lee apologized, "I- it's just lonely without
Sensei around. Aren't you lonely too?"

Lee attempted to step forward but Neji had enough invasion of his space for one day. He angrily struck out with his Jyūken palm which Lee deftly evaded. Instinctively they stepped into their old routines and the sparring match was brutal. The desk was split in two, the chairs flung across the table, and a wall smashed in.

Neji struck Lee to the ground angrily. Neji slapped away a kick and fell over at the second kick that swept at his ankles. Lee jumped atop him with a punch, pulled his arm back, Neji cringed when Lee's weight pressed the friction of his clothes against his cock. Lee punched Neji in the face, blinded him only seconds, when Lee flung forward and connected his hot and rough lips.

Neji seethed into Lee's lips as the movement pressed deeper and deeper onto his crotch. He hadn't been able to touch his wife in a long time, wondered if that was why he found himself sensitive to Lee's advances. As in battle, their lips fought for dominance and Lee was always up for the challenge. He was relentless until Neji was forced to pull away. He was blinded by the heaviness of his breath and exhaustion.

Lee gave a victory grin, knowing he had won. Neji found himself blushing as Lee loosened the belt around his waist. Lee's hot hands explored Neji's body and Neji leaned into their heat. Neji was tired of Hinata's coldness. He felt warm against the strength of Lee's body. And then suddenly, the heat of Lee's mouth descended onto Neji's cock.

Neji grunted as he pushed himself further into Lee's throat. Saliva slid down the pulsing veins along the shaft. Lee popped off and pull his lips back onto Neji. Their limbs rammed against one another. The slickness of sweat leaned against their bodies.

Neji neared the entrance. Lee licked his lips expectantly. "What's wrong?" Lee asked worried.

Neji had always been the receiver in this specific sexual act, ever since he was a boy. Neji slid his dick into the tightness of Lee's ass. The tightness stole Neji's breath. Lee leaned back and pushed Neji further inside, as if it was a challenge, as if to see how far he could go. Neji fell so deep, his pubic hair brushed against ass cheeks.

Lee jerked himself off while Neji fucked him in the ass. Neji felt powerful with the strength of Lee at his mercy. Unwillingly, an image of Naruto pounding into his wife came into his head. Neji felt the hotness of his anger as he beat Lee's ass raw. Another Neji would have resigned himself to the fate of things but not this one. Hinata was his wife. It was a matter of pride.

Neji came violently inside of Lee. Lee had already cum into his hand. The two men spent themselves and fell over each other as if just finished a heated sparring match. It felt like a heated sparring match.

"One time Gai and I had challenged each other on how long we could last."

"That's great, Lee." Neji wasn't listening. All he could hear was the content breath of his body.

"I miss Gai."

Hinata caught sight of movement.

Her byakugan noted Hanabi raising herself from the bed in the middle of the night. Hanabi was beginning to put on clothes and it wasn't just her training gi she would usually wear to release some steam in the dojo. Hinata raised herself from the large master-sized bed. Her bare feet touched the floor, grabbed her robe, and went to investigate.
"I'm going out," Hanabi stated clearly when Hinata reached her room. All Hanabi had to do was count down the seconds before Hinata came to stop her.

"Going out where?" Hinata questioned.

"To drink."

"Last time you went out you almost slept with Konohamaru. I really do not think you are mentally and emotionally prepared to protect yourself from your own vices."

"I don't want to protect myself," Hanabi argued. "I'm tired of being watched over like a baby. I'm eighteen years old. I know what I'm doing."

"Hanabi, going out there isn't the best way to release your anger. You are only going to hurt yourself."

"And perhaps I want to hurt myself?!" Hanabi yelled, "Or as Clan Head do you have authority over that as well. How long are you going to keep me locked in the compound? Until the old me comes back? She's never going to make it back. I'm tired of you looking over my shoulder. Just let me make my own mistakes."

"I can't watch you destroy yourself Hanabi. I have decided to place a guard over your room. You are grieving, you are distraught, and it's normal to be angry but I cannot let you leave."

"What?! You can't keep me here."

"I just want the best for you. I just want you to be happy."

"No, you just want me to be you," Hanabi spat. "I am not the object of your wish-fulfillment. I am not everything you didn't, or couldn't, or wouldn't. I will no longer be what you can't have."

"Hanabi-chan," Hinata said patiently. "I know this isn't easy. Let me help you. I understand what you're going through."

"Like hell you do!" Hanabi screamed. "I killed the first man I have ever loved. He loved me for who I was, for me, not for these stupid eyes I have in my head. How can you ever understand my pain? You chose to let your love go, you chose the clan, you chose this life and I've watched you grow bitter and unhappy and lonely as the days pass. I chose him and he was ripped away from me. I chose him, I chose to be happy, I chose not to become like you!"

Hinata was too hard for those words to hurt her. She refused to move. "Hanabi, if you would just listen-"

The slap echoed through the entire Hyūga compound. Hinata lifted her hand to the sharp red of her cheek. Both sisters gave each other stunned looks, each equally surprised. Hinata stepped to the side and opened a path.

"You are henceforth banished from the clan. Do not come back."

x

Hanabi strolled into the bar like she owned the place. She bought the short halter and tight black pants only a few minutes ago. Her boots cost more than a B-rank. She figured she might as well blow all the money she had earned from the mission. She didn't want the fucking money. She didn't want to be compensated for the pain she felt. She just wanted to forget.
The beer bottles collected and towered. The air filled with mist and the sweet scent of poppy.

Every drink, every sniff, every puff was every desperate attempt to get higher and higher until she escaped the heavy emotions weighing her down.

When Haruno Sakura went into labor everyone in Konoha knew about it. The buildings quivered at the viciousness of her screams. The nurses in the maternity ward quivered at the rampaging tyrant that attempted to tell them how to do their job.

Naruto winced. He actually felt bad for Kohei, who Naruto admitted was a braver man than he, who dared brave the depths of the beasts' lair.

Suddenly the screaming ended. Naruto's ears caught the sound of a babies' cry. Without direction from the nurses who were all rushing around the hospital in fear of their jobs, Naruto snuck past them. He was eager to see if everything turned out alright.

Naruto turned the corner. Sakura apparently still had energy enough to bark orders at the nurses trying to clean up the birth. Sakura noticed Naruto at the door and narrowed her eyes in daring.

"Don't laugh," Sakura snapped while the nurses rushed around trying to clean up the birth. Naruto bit into his lip, tried to stop it from coming, but eventually he collapsed on the ground from the pain of his laughter. It was perhaps the hardest he had ever laughed in a long time. Tears were at the corners of his eyes and his sides ached.

Sakura Haruno had just given birth to two pink-haired twin boys.

Kohei sat beside the new mother with a bright smile. He was gleaming in pride, blind to the shading of their hair.

"I think they have your forehead," Naruto teased.

"Hey, it's a very beautiful forehead," Sakura defended. When the children were cleaned and the umbilical cords cut, the babies were finally placed in the mother's arms. Sakura stared at her precious twins. She wiped the joyous tears with her arm. Sakura looked around the room and asked curiously, "Did you see Ino out there?"

Naruto scratched his head awkwardly. "I didn't see her."

"Oh," Sakura's shoulders fell. It had been hard keeping up with her best friend in the midst of being pregnant and married but at the very least, Ino should have come to the birth. "Bitch."

"I'm sure Ino has a good reason." Kohei said if only to calm Sakura's rising anger.

There was a knock on the window pane. Naruto reached over and unlocked the bolt on the window.

"You're always late, Sensei."

"I'm sorry I could only send a shadow clone," Kakashi said as he stepped through the window as natural as entering a door. He froze once he looked at the twins. He was grateful for the mask covering his face.

"Not you too," Sakura moaned.

"Tell them the names we've decided," Kohei suggested.
"I've decided to name them Sai and Sasuke Haruno."

There was a soft reminiscent silence. It was another chance to give those names life. A name for the fallen so that they can rise again.

Hanabi Hyuuga woke up sluggishly with a pounding headache.

Hanabi blinked with pale eyes smudged in a fog of red. Barely did she make out the outlines of the person in front of her. Hanabi curled into herself, clenched the pillows beneath her, and felt like shit. The cool air swept over her naked skin while the blurred figure in the corner of her eyes slowly focused. Hanabi's body began to shake and convulsed tears into the pillow. Hanabi whined, feeling the impact as she wheeled back towards the ground.

"Tsk, tsk, the wayward little bird can't fly."

Hanabi opened her eyes and finally saw Ino Yamanaka. The mind reader stared down at her with hands on her bare hips. It didn't initially alarm Hanabi until she attempted to disengage her byakugan and then realized that no, Ino was walking around naked.

"Good morning, sunshine," Ino said loud enough to nail across Hanabi's brain.

"Why do you have to be so fucking loud?" Hanabi grumbled.

"Because you can't do anything about it," Ino replied. Ino leaned back and finished off a bottle of alcohol, then flung it over her shoulder.

Ino crawled onto the bed. Hanabi tried to escape but her body was too sluggish to respond before Ino thrust her tongue down Hanabi's throat. "Please," Hanabi cried when Ino allowed her breath. "I just want to go home."

Ino scowled, snatched Hanabi's hair by the roots and twisted Hanabi to face her. "You mean the very place you were trying to escape? The very place you were kicked out of? You think you're special? You think you're the only one who's ever had to do something they didn't want to do? Oh boo hoo, let's all cry for the spoiled Hyūga brat."

"Shut up."

"The world is a cruel and fucked up place. It eats little birds like you for breakfast and in order to survive you have no choice but to become a creature that thrives in the dark parts of human beings. I hate people like you who think you have a choice. There is no such thing as fucking happiness. It's an illusion, a lie, implanted by your mind to convince your body to keep living."

Ino slapped her hands against Hanabi's temple with a cruel smile.

Hanabi blinked, she shook as she pulled her face from the lips of Ino's vagina. Hanabi wiped her mouth disgusted.

"You finished?" Ino smirked around the alcohol bottle she had in her mouth.

"Why are you so cruel?" Hanabi flailed her arms against the sheets as if wading through water. She had to escape.

Ino laughter was like walking on pieces of glass. Ino picked herself up and dug her foot into Hanabi's waist. Pathetic. "Because people like you piss me off."
Ino pressed the bottle of alcohol to her lips, tossed her head back, and chugged it. The empty bottle fell from her fingers. Ino slipped backwards, fell, tumbled, and hit her head against the floor.

"I heard Ino was admitted into the hospital. Perhaps we should go see her," Chouji suggested to Shikamaru.

Shikamaru sat in the commander's tent of the Eastern front with his feet atop of the table. He puffed on a cigarette. "That's what she wants Chouji. If you're going to choose a position stick to it."

"But Shikamaru," Chouji lumbered back and forth, "what if it's my fault?"

"This is how Ino operates. She wants you to feel guilty, go running back, and forgive her. She's only doing it for the attention."

"But Shikamaru, what if she really needs our help? Why do you always have to look at a situation so logically? Can't you think with your heart for once?"

"I'm not being paid to sit here and think with my heart. If I could afford to do that then I'd be at home with my kid."

"If you cared so much about Shika-chan then you'd stop smoking," Chouji accused.

"I tried," Shikamaru defended. "You know I've been trying."

"I'm going to see Ino," Chouji decided.

"You need to stop forgiving her whenever she does something stupid. There is nothing we can do to help her unless she decides to help herself. Honestly, I think it would be better for you to really consider quitting Ino. She's not the only woman in the world."

Chouji stepped back offended. "How can you possibly say that?"

"You've fooled yourself into thinking that Ino is the only person who can accept you. You're a good guy Chouji, better than most of us. I think you should really consider trying to marry someone else."

"How could I possibly give up on Ino?"

A trail of black smoke twisted with sarcasm, "like giving up smoking I assume."

"That's an unfair comparison."

"Is it?" Shikamaru question. "Ino has become a poison determine to infect everyone around her. She's only going to bring you down Chouji."

"When did we begin giving up on each other? This isn't what Sensei would have wanted."

"She gave up on us first."

Chouji was tired of Shikamaru's lazy excuses for everything. He was tired of being the only one trying to hold this circle of friendship together. He pulled back his arm and pounded Shikamaru in the face. Shikamaru flipped over the chair at the force of the blow.

"Maybe I'm the one in the clouds but you're the one who sounds defeated. You might be lazy but you cared. I don't know what's going on with you but let me know when Shikamaru comes back. I'm going to see Ino."
Naruto was rather alarmed when he entered the tent and Chouji sped past him. Shikamaru had a black eye and an expression that suggested not to ask. Chouji and Shikamaru never fought.

"Wrong time?" Naruto asked.

Shikamaru straightened himself in the chair. A coughing fit suddenly consumed him as he moved to light another cigarette. The cough shook his hands as the lighter gave birth to a flame.

"Hey Shikamaru, do you mind? My nose is sort of sensitive to that kind of stuff."

Shikamaru sighed and felt uncomfortable when he placed the packet of cigarettes down. "What do you want Naruto?"

Naruto held up a letter. "ANBU recovered this encrypted letter but Konoha's decryption department hasn't been able to crack it. The Hokage wondered if you would give it a chance while you're sitting here."

Shikamaru took the letter and scanned it. From first glance it would take more than a few minutes of scanning. "Yeah, alright. I'll look at it."

"How is everything on this end?"

"Tense. Kiri has camped on the beach and we're here in the forest. Neither side wants to give up the advantage in terrain. Now we have this waiting game and both sides are playing the same game. Ame is a drain on resources for Konoha but Sand has been a drain on Kiri. We've been staring at each other for almost a month now. The game is about who is going to break first. I don't mind doing nothing but I can't say the same for the ranks. The wait stresses the nerves, they begin to think about their families, that their time could be spent doing something more productive. We try to give everyone a rotation on leave but tempers are running high."

"You think Konoha is going to break first?"

"I know it. In a week or two Kakashi and I are going to be forced to meet them on their terms. We can't continue like this much longer. After the Fourth Shinobi War came the Peace Treaty War, then the Mountain, and now Mist. These conflicts have really started taking a toll."

"Shikamaru, how long since you've been on leave?"

Shikamaru rubbed his eyes. He needed a smoke. "A while."

"Do you want me to take you back to Konoha for a day to see your family?"

Shikamaru winced, his shoulders shook as he began to cough again. He wheezed, "I'm fine."

Naruto could see within the cracks of people beginning to crumble apart. "Konoha has been at war for too long."

It was odd. When grown accustomed to avoiding shuriken, evading jutsu, and the stray stabs in the back, it was easy to forget that everyday things were out to kill you as well.

"If this was about getting my attention, you certainly have it." Ino scowled as she turned away from the man who sat by her bedside. "Really Ino, alcohol poisoning?"

"Why do you care?" Ino snapped.
"If this was a test to see if I'd come then it was a stupid one. You know I'm always going to care.

"Shikamaru doesn't."

"He's second in command on the Eastern Front. He was too busy to make it."

"Chouji, I'm a mind reader. You do not need to lie to me."

To be frank, Chouji was too busy but he called in a favor from Naruto for at least a day. Chouji went into his pockets and handed Ino a jewelry box. Ino already knew what was in it. She opened the lid to reveal the largest diamond she had ever seen with smaller glistening flowers blossoming around the wedding ring. It was perhaps the most expensive thing she had ever seen.

Chouji leaned forward seriously. "If you can stay away from the drugs and alcohol for at least a month that ring is yours."

Ino's snapped away from him sharply, as if his words had burned. "You can't tell me what to do."

"I think it will be good for you. I think once you clear your head you'll realize that you're destroying yourself." Chouji pulled the ring away from her. "That's my ultimatum, Ino."

"Get out," Ino snapped. Ino hate that look of disappointment, as if she could do better. Chouji picked himself up and left the hospital room with hunched shoulders.

Ino petulantly crossed her arms. No one told her what to do. Ino looked up when she sensed her father in the hallway. Her Daddy was going to take care of her. Her hopes were dashed when his darkened expression came around the corner and she got a look into his thoughts.

"How could you do this to me?" Inoichi demanded, disappointed. "You know what happened to your mother."

*I'm sorry.* Ino's shoulders shook and collapsed into tears.

*I can't fall for those tears again, Ino. I've decided to pull your position as Clan Head. I don't think you're ready for it.*

The tears ended quickly as Ino ferociously snapped, "It is my birthright!"

"And sometimes you have to earn things. You will always be my little girl but you are not a child anymore. This behavior is unacceptable. I can't keep going through this with you."

"But Daddy-" Ino whined.

"I'm also pulling you from ANBU for a while."

"We're at war."

"And I'm a Yamanaka. I have strings I can pull. Spend time with Sakura, go shopping, and work the flower shop for a while. Clear your head. And for fuck's sake Ino, Chouji is a good man, marry the boy. I would like to see grandkids before I die. Even Shikaku's lazy son could accomplish that."

"I will, I promise. I'll make you proud of me."

Inoichi knew his daughter's promises were hollow. *"We'll see."

Ino blinked in confusion when her Father simply walked away. This had never happened before. He
always forgave her. He always let her cry in his arms. Ino looked down blankly at her hands. Sincere
 tears fell from her eyes. She has never felt so alone before.

"I don't understand how you tricked me into this," Naruto frowned as he looked at himself in the
 mirror.

"You promised me a favor," Sakura exclaimed after she slicked her hand through Naruto's messy
 and untamed hair.

"That was before I knew what the favor was," Naruto complained. "I thought you needed help with
 the babies or something, not taking your friend out on a date."

"She's been trying really hard to get your attention and you've just been oblivious to it. I figured it
 was time for me to step in and do something about it."

"I haven't been oblivious," Naruto admitted. Yes, he might take an unwanted detour if he had the
 inkling she was trying to bump into him, he might choose a different store, he might even walk back
 out of Ichiraku if he saw her there.

"Why are you so afraid of her? She is half your weight and can barely wrestle a caterpillar."

Naruto looked down at his shined and polished shoes. "I don't know."

"There are a rules we need to go over before you go on this date," Sakura held up three fingers.
"Don't talk about the war, don't talk about politics, and please don't talk about Hinata."

"That doesn't sound too hard."

"And ask her questions. Get to know her. That's what you are supposed to do on a date." Sakura
 knew Naruto was hopeless. It was no wonder he was still single. "Enjoy yourself tonight and don't
 be so guarded."

Naruto would prefer marching into a battle-zone than having to endure this date. Naruto mumbled,
 "Yeah, I'll try."

"I already made the reservations. Here is the address," Sakura replied and stuffed a note in the front
 pocket of Naruto's tuxedo. "Now hurry up, never keep a girl waiting."

"Alright, alright," Naruto replied as he was pushed out of Sakura's house. She gave him an
 encouraging wink. Naruto sighed as he stared at the stretch of road before him. It wasn't too late to
 run away but that would mean having to avoid Sakura for the rest of his life who would no doubt
 attempt to poison his ramen.

When Naruto approached the front door, it opened of its own accord to reveal a man who dwarfed
 Naruto in size. From the look of the scars on his hands Naruto could tell he was no stranger to a
 fight.

"I'm Kentaro, elite guard to the Demon Priestess."

"I'm Uzumaki Naruto, the Demon Fox or Fox Sage of Konoha depending on who you ask."

"If you hurt the missus or cause her to shed even a single tear-" Kentaro, the bodyguard was
 interrupted when Shion came to the door.

"Stop it. I'm not a child anymore."
Naruto raised an eyebrow. She certainly dressed to prove she wasn't a child anymore. The slender high heels raised her to his height, she didn't have much cleavage but the neckline added grace to the elegance of her neck bone, and the ruffles of her tasteful fuchsia dress gave way to the shapely tower of her legs.

"What do you think?" Shion playfully turned and the volume of the dress' bottom half spun with her. The turn was permission for Naruto to get a full view of her features.

"I- um," Naruto cleared his throat and wanted to tell her she had the best legs he had ever seen but felt that was too inappropriate. "You look beautiful."

Shion glowed from the compliment. She gave her bodyguard a farewell hug, patted him on the shoulder like a tearful father, and clicked down the street. "Thanks," Shion said breathlessly. "I hardly ever get to wear something like this. Normally all I wear are my priestess robes. The old nuns back home would practically die if they saw me."

"You don't have to dress like that to get my attention," Naruto said uncomfortably.

"Did it?" Shion asked hopefully. Naruto didn't answer, kept his eyes cast on the ground, and nodded mutely. Those legs could catch anyone's attention.

Shion clasped her hands behind her and breathed in the air of Konoha. "The air is so much fuller here and it smells so different than home."

"Konoha has a distinctive smell. It's the trees," Naruto explained. "The smell is more noticeable when you're returning from a mission. It gets stronger and stronger the closer you get to the gates. It calls you home."

Naruto stopped, startled when the back of her hand brushed against his. The sudden shock of her touch caused his body to light on fire. Naruto's breathing came harder. The touch forced him to remember the last time he's had sex. It's been a while. It's been Mei.

Shion's good mood wilted when Naruto suddenly distanced himself two paces away.

There was an awkward silence until they reached the restaurant. Naruto noted immediately that it was large and fancy and didn't look like it served ramen. "Reservations for Uzumaki," Naruto told to the waiter.

"Right this way."

The moment Naruto stepped through the front door, he made a mental note of all the exits. Once he had determined his methods of escape, only afterwards did he observe the décor of the restaurant. There was a live band and a stage at the center where couples were floating to the airy melody of the waltz. Naruto and Shion were led to a private table reserved for the guest of honor. The table sat on the second floor and overlooked the dancing couples beneath them. The centerpiece candle was engraved in gold, the table cloth was lined with gold, and the utensils were gold.

Naruto immediately felt uncomfortable by the uncompromising splendor of the restaurant. In a time of war, people could barely feed themselves but this place was an idyllic fantasy that pretended war didn't even exist.

They were given the drink menu. Even the menu was framed with gold.

Naruto didn't bother opening it and immediately requested, "Water please."
"You're not going to drink anything?" Shion asked. Naruto automatically tensed at the question. He wondered if she was a spy trying to steal the secrets he kept heavily guarded.

"I don't really drink. Do you? As a priestess I didn't expect it," Naruto deflected and kept the conversation away from him.

"I'm not a wine connoisseur but I like it occasionally." For a moment, Naruto imagined the rich color of wine soaking into Mei's lips. He winced.

"Is that okay?" Shion asked at his sudden pained expression. "If you don't want to pay then I can get something else…"

"No," Naruto quickly replied, a little offended Shion assumed he couldn't pay. To prove her wrong and to prove to himself he was perfectly capable of handling this date Naruto pointed to the most expensive wine on the menu. Really, Naruto scoffed, one bottle was the sum of an A-rank mission.

The owner of the restaurant nodded, who was personally serving his high-profile customers, Uzumaki Naruto and Shion the priestess of Demon Country. "Excellent choice."

The wine had a strong scent when it arrived. Naruto scrunched his nose and swirled the ruby red color within the glass. He figured a drink wouldn't hurt for one night.

Shion giggled as Naruto chugged the entire wine glass in one gulp while she delicately tasted. "What do you think?"

"Smells rustic."

Shion's smile was weightless, "I meant the flavor. Sort of sweet, I think."

"Yeah," Naruto agreed and picked up a menu. He frowned when he didn't see any ramen options. He frowned when he noticed the prices. This was going to be the most expensive meal he has ever paid for in his entire life.

"A salad and miso soup please," Shion ordered.

"A salad?" Naruto asked confused. "You don't like anything?"

"I'm a vegetarian," Shion replied apologetically. "It's not your fault. I forgot to tell Sakura."

"We can go somewhere else if you want-" Naruto said rather hoping.

"No, I like it here. It has a nice atmosphere." Shion answered. "It reminds me of my favorite restaurant back home." She was used to high prices and extravagance. Within Demon Country, the Priestess was akin to a very devout princess.

Naruto put in his order, light on the salt. The waiter nodded and scooped up the menus.

"So, what have you been doing lately?" Shion asked curiously.

"Now that Konoha has captured Ame I've been mostly focused on the eastern front with Kirigakure. It's a game of cat and mouse right now with both sides watching each other but hopefully we can trick them to attack on our terms. It's sort of a delicate situation…"

Shion's eyes glazed over and found it difficult to concentrate on the sudden war terminology. Shion's stare wandered off and watched the couple twirl each other on the dance floor. She sighed wistfully and knew with her health she could never do any of that stuff. Thankfully, dinner saved her from the
boring conversation.

Naruto looked down and there was a note sticking out from beneath his steak. Naruto reached for it and read the message written in Sakura's script: "You dumbass, shut it with the war talk."

Naruto realized Sakura was probably right. Talking about the war certainly wasn't a good conversational topic over any dinner. But suddenly Naruto realized he didn't have anything to say at all. What was he supposed to talk about?

"So," Shion said in the silence. "What do you do for fun?"

"I take the kids somewhere and we'll do something but I haven't had time to do that recently because of the war..." Naruto started over. "I like to train, not that I think fighting is fun but I train a lot in my free time..." Naruto was beginning to panic. "Sometimes I'll see what Hinata is doing... fuck," Naruto cursed. He broke all the rules in a matter of seconds.

"What do you do for fun?" Naruto asked weakly.

"I like to read," Shion answered. "Sometimes it's fascinating to read about adventures and romances and mysteries." Her eyes began to light up, "I'm also one of the few people in the world other than the scholars at the Shogun's court that can read ancient Japanese. I love translating the Tale of Genji. It is such an inspiring tale of human passions," Her cheeks went as ruby red as the wine. "Do you read?"

Naruto didn't learn to read until he entered the Academy, his calligraphy was horrid, and felt embarrassed to admit it. "I don't read much other than scrolls and training stuff. The only thing I've read is the Icha Icha... not that I'm a pervert," Naruto said loudly and found his voice echoing throughout the hall. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. This is probably the worst date you've ever had." Naruto felt as if he had ruined everything, he couldn't do normal things anymore and being with Shion made him realize he couldn't be normal anymore either.

"I'm having fun, really. I don't even know what Icha Icha is." Although Shion was going to have to find out when she got home.

"This is why it's not going to work," Naruto said exasperated. "You're too normal. I'm no good for you. There are people trying to kill me, and my family, and I don't want to put anyone else in danger like that."

Shion said rather calmly, "You're the Naruto Uzumaki, of course I know there are people trying to kill you but I'm okay with that because I know you'll always be there to protect me. Perhaps I came at the wrong time, perhaps I should have waited until the war was over, but once I began having the visions I couldn't let someone else get here first and take you instead. I'm not giving up on you, Uzumaki Naruto. Even if you walk away from this table I will be waiting every day until I make you fall in love with me."

"You don't know the things I've done," Naruto whispered.

"And I don't know the things that you're going to do," Shion answered. "Your past is your past. I'm interested in our future. Please," Shion blush was too endearing, "this is the first date I've ever had."

Naruto bowed his head in shame. He didn't run away from Pein, or Madara, but something about this woman scared the shit out of him. "I don't know what's wrong me," Naruto whispered hoarsely. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Shion said as she picked up her chopsticks and continued eating. "Sometimes the
priesthood houses a lot of war veterans. You remind me of them sometimes. It's impossible to put them back together, there are pieces missing and the remainder will never fit right, and it's too much expecting to get the whole of what they used to be. All you can really do is treasure what remains. I'm not asking you to be perfect Naruto. I understand."

Naruto suddenly didn't feel like eating anymore.

"I really like helping people," Shion said as she continued the one-sided conversation. Naruto nodded numbly, just fine with listening to her voice. As long as the conversation wasn't about him hopefully the date couldn't get more disastrous.

Shion recounted a few stories of the nuns, and the servants, and the guards who raised her while training to become the Demon priestess. Naruto attempted to focus more on her, the tempo of her voice, the way she smiled or laughed when she reminisced on the people she had left behind.

"You miss them," Naruto noted.

"Of course I do. They are my family. They are the ones who raised me. My dad died before I was born and my mom died when I was young. " Shion answered. "Being in Konoha is both an adventure and lonely but I know they support me. I understand you're an orphan? It must have been hard without a family."

"I've come through okay." Naruto noticed her ability to weave the excitement and suspense of a story into her conversation. On clouds of Shion's conversation, Naruto somehow managed to get through his meal. He looked up and noticed Shion's eyes drifting toward the dance floor.

"Do you want to dance?"

"Oh no, I can't possibly. I don't know how and I'm not sure about my health," Shion found herself stumbling over her words. "I really can't."

Naruto chuckled at her awkwardness. "Nonsense. Come on."

"I really-" Shion yelped when Naruto bodily lifted her from the chair. He held her hand as he guided her down the spiral staircase. Shion felt very self-conscious, as if everyone was looking at her with each tap of her heels on the wooden floor.

"The dance they are doing now is called the Chacha. The core or basic move is the triple step." Naruto attempted to show the steps in unison without bumping into each other. His right foot forward, her left foot back. Triple step.

Shion's eyes were pinned to the movement of her feet as she asked, "how do you know this stuff?

"It's weird the kind of things you need to learn for a mission," Naruto admitted. Once he saw Shion getting comfortable with the way to move her feet, "Ready?"

"I'm not sure I've got it yet," Shion said frightened.

"You'll be fine." Naruto grasped her hands and took her to the center of the dance floor with a dashing smile that marked his confidence.

"I'm sorry," Shion said breathlessly as she stepped on his foot.

"You're doing great," Naruto encouraged and suddenly spun her as the horns kicked in.
Naruto kept Shion's spirits high as he playfully drew her attention away from her inability to listen to rhythm. It didn't matter she kept getting the steps wrong, Shion couldn't believe she could move so fast. Her laugh was breathless and the music swayed her around.

Naruto was having fun.

"I did it." Shion finally had time to take a breath in the pause between the song's end and the next change of beat. There was a pain in her throat, her chest was aching, but she didn't care. "I was dancing, I was really dancing. No one is going to believe this."

Naruto couldn't help but to smile at the glow he had put in her eyes. "Calm down, I don't want you to pass out on me. Do you need some water?"

"No, I'm fine," Shion wanted nothing more than to do it again. "What's this one?"

"The Tango. It's a bit… closer than the other one. Do you still want to try?"

Shion took a brief look at the other dancers and blushed. Of course she wanted to try, but she didn't want to seem too eager. "What do I have to do?"

"For this one?" Naruto questioned and gave a wolfish grin. "It'll be best if I lead you."

Naruto clasped one hand around her soft fingers and another within the arc of her back. Then he suddenly slid his foot forward and carried her along the beat of the music.

Naruto felt the tenseness growing in her body each inch his lips neared her ear. He whispered, "You have to feel the music. It's like feeling the beats of a match, moving with your partner, creating a rhythm, until the song ends and someone is dead."

A sudden rise and Naruto lifted Shion off her feet, caught her by the waist, and dipped her low. Shion breath caught at Naruto's devilish smirk. Shion assured him that, "No one has to die at the end of this dance."

Naruto's hand snapped her onto her feet. They glided, step by sultry step, across the floor. A sudden passionate note and Shion was thrown into his chest. She gasped when his hand held up her leg, his touch paused at the breath where the dress ended.

The note gave way and she was pulled back across the dance floor.

For Shion, all that existed was the sky blue of Naruto's eyes. She leaned into him and floated aloft the clouds at the tips of their feet. Naruto pushed her away in a tease and it was akin to a sudden free fall. He caught her, with an arm hooked around her knee and lifted her leg around his waist. His lips dragged across her neck tugging at her scent, the final crescendo as the music heightened and finished with Naruto's lips inches from hers.

But the last note was a sad funeral. The lightness died in the end. Naruto jerked away. He couldn't afford to fall.

"Perhaps you should sit down. You don't look too good."

Shion felt faint for many reasons. Naruto helped her to a seat. "Do you need water?"

Shion would highly prefer the lips of the sexiest creature she had ever met but settled for the drink. Naruto brought a cup of water. "I'll be back. I have to go to the restroom."
"I-" Shion didn't get a chance to respond when Naruto disappeared in a blink.

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"Fuck, Fuck, Fuck," Naruto cursed, relieved no one else was in the bathroom and slammed the stall door behind him. He fumbled with the stupid belt on his pants and finally freed the raging boner. He slid the pre-cum over his dick.

Naruto panted, groaned, he had to hold against the stall wall to keep his balance as he remembered the way her body slid against his, the sweat that glistened on her cleavage after they were done, that monstrous need to ravage her right there on the dance floor.

Finally, he came.

"Shit," Naruto moaned as he hit his head against the wall. He had meant to cum into the toilet but he had been so occupied it had gotten everywhere. "This is fucking embarrassing." He couldn't even jerk off correctly tonight.

Naruto attempted to clean up the best he could but felt awkward at the mess he left in the stall.

"That was pretty hot."

Naruto jerked back and fell backwards against the toilet. Naruto looked up at Sakura sitting on the washroom counter in the male's bathroom. He had been too occupied to notice anyone had come in.

"Did you- were you there the entire time?" Naruto whined as he picked himself up.

"You mean while you were jerking off in the stall? Yes," Sakura answered. "I didn't know you could dance."

"The Daimyo mission," Naruto grumbled as he attempted to regain some kind of dignity. He hunched his shoulders as he washed his hand thoroughly. "Shouldn't you be at home with your kids?"

"Kohei can handle the kids better than you can handle a date, obviously. Why the fuck didn't you kiss her?"

"I don't want to get her hopes up."

"You promised me you'd try. What are you doing after this?"

"I was going to bring her back home."

"Wrong," Sakura held up a movie. "You are going to take her back to your place and watch a movie. It'll be romantic."

"No."

"Why not?" Sakura asked.

"I can't," Naruto said as if it was obvious.

"And why can't you?" Sakura dug.

"I just can't."
"Naruto Uzumaki, you give me a straight answer or I swear you'll regret it for the rest of your life."

Naruto searched for the answer he didn't know himself. "It's just- the kids are there."

"They're sleep."

"But it's weird, and awkward, and what if they wake up, it's home and-"

Sakura suddenly realized what was going on. "You've never brought a woman around the compound before?"

"No," Naruto whispered. Mei was in Kirigakure and the rest of his flings usually happened in the ANBU underground. The only woman he had allowed in his compound, his space, his territory was Hinata and they've never actually done anything.

"What if she's a spy?" Naruto whispered. "What if Demon Country and Kiri are working together and I haven't found that out yet? Or she has her own motives? Or she wants to hurt the kids? I can't just let anyone into my life, Sakura."

"Naruto, I know trust is hard for us ninja, but you've got to give a little or you're going to end up lonely forever."

"I just don't know. She's already messing with my head, and she's attractive, and I don't want to be tricked, or fooled, or-"

"Heartbroken."

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"Sorry I left you waiting for so long."

Shion breathed a sigh of relief. For a second she was afraid he had walked out on her. "It's alright, I was just resting."

Naruto held out his arm. Shion smiled as she reached for him. Naruto paid for the food and led Shion outside. He shrugged of his coat and placed it over her shoulders as they entered the night air.

"Do you want to go back to my place and watch a movie or something?" Naruto suggested.

Shion shined. "I'd love to. I don't get to watch very many movies in the monastery."

"What do they let you do at the monastery?"

"Read, and they let me eat chocolate," Shion grinned. "I think my chocolate is your ramen." They stopped before the compound doors with the Uzumaki symbol swirled on the door. "Oh wow it's huge."

"It still needs a lot of work," Naruto admitted as he pushed open the doors. Shion peeked inside at the line of houses. There were small footsteps that littered the dirt roads. Lights were on in the house.

Naruto opened the door and allowed Shion into the main house.

"It's very traditional and really cozy," Shion said as she slipped off her shoes.

A clone was cleaning in the kitchen while Ame sat on the couch watching the black and white images move across the screen. Ame turned her head when the door opened. She stared.
Naruto cursed. He had not wanted to introduce Shion to the kids. He was hoping they would be asleep.

Shion eyes lit up. She had heard about the kids from Sakura. "You must be Ame? You are adorable."

Ame crept from the corner in her pajamas and looked at her dad. She noticed the tuxedo he was wearing. "Were you on a date?"

"Yes," Naruto said defeated.

Ame threw her hands up in exclamation. "Finally!"

"This is Shion. Shion this is my daughter, Ame."

Ame raced on the wooden floors and slid to a stop with a bow. "Nice to meet you. You're really pretty."

Shion bowed in return. "It's very nice to meet you."

"Where's your brother?"

"He fell asleep. He's in his room for now," Ame added.

"Go to bed. I don't know how you keep convincing my clones to let you stay up past your bed time."

Ame gave a wide smile and raced up the stairs.

"She seems energetic," Shion noted.

"She can be a handful but I love her and I will kill anyone who will hurt her," Naruto looked at Shion from the corner of his eye, "violently."

Shion gulped. Satisfied by her terrified expression, Naruto turned to figure out how to work the television. Naruto pouted when the image blinked static and screeched. With a sigh, "Ame, help?"

Ame's head peeked around the corner and giggled. She quickly left her hiding spot to help Naruto put the movie into the TV.

Naruto sat back on the couch and felt awkward with Shion's closeness. It was as if he was obligated to wrap his arm around her and perform other small date responsibilities that gave misleading messages.

"Can I watch?"

"Yes," Naruto said without hesitation and moved farther away from Shion to give Ame room on the couch. Ame jumped into the spot between Naruto and the armrest. She squeezed in, shoved against Naruto until he crashed over into Shion, laid down, and placed her head on his thigh.

Naruto picked himself off of Shion. "Sorry."

When they sat back up, Naruto was right against Shion's side. Naruto gave Ame a narrow glare and she replied back with a mischievous grin. Ame twisted into a comfortable position against the side of his thigh.

A clone came from the kitchen and sat a bowl of popcorn between Naruto's leg. Ame reached over
and crunched popcorn as the movie began. "Oh, its Kazahana Koyuki. I like her, she's my favorite actor."

Naruto focused his eyes on screen, at the blurry image of the main actor. "I've met her before. I have her autograph somewhere."

"You know her?" both Ame and Shion said at the same time.

"I saved her once," Naruto said with a shrug.

"You've saved everyone," Ame giggled as she turned back toward the screen. After five minutes, Naruto jumped at the sudden poke into his rib. Ame shifted her eyes back and forth between Naruto and Shion. With a resigned sigh, Naruto stretched his arm until he eventually had it around Shion's shoulders. Shion subtly cuddled into his side and when he didn't react, smiled as she leaned her head against his chest.

The movie was the most dramatic love triangle Naruto had ever seen. He kept looking over at the girls who seemed to enjoy it. Naruto leaned back into the couch and found himself very comfortable with the warmth of the body heat lying against both sides.

When the movie flickered off, Shion turned and found both Ame and Naruto had fallen asleep. Naruto's head was flung backwards. It was different seeing him at the restaurant compared to how he is at home. He was more relaxed.

Shion touched Naruto's arm. He jerked awake suddenly and tightened his arm around Ame.

"The movie is finished."

Naruto rubbed his face with his hand. "Sorry I fell asleep." He stood up with Ame dangling under his arm. "I'll be back. I have to go tuck her in."

Shion attempted to fix her hair. It had been a good night but she knew that she had not succeeded in convincing Naruto to fall in love with her.

"Ready to go home?" Naruto asked when he returned.

Shion smiled weakly. "Sure." She followed Naruto to the door with the creeping sense of failure. She found the courage to ask. "I had a really good time. Are we going to do this again?"

Naruto stopped right before opening the door, uncomfortably combed his fingers through his hair, "Umm…"

Shion could feel the silence clench around her heart.

Suddenly there was screaming, a terrifying wail of screaming. Naruto disappeared.

Shion stood abandoned at the archway of the front door. The sound of crying increased and a light came on from the kitchen. In curiosity, Shion peeked into the kitchen where Naruto rocked a black-haired child up and down in his arms.

"Hey kiddo, it's going to be okay," Naruto replied to the child sniffling into his shoulder. "It was just another nightmare."

As if it was routine, Naruto held the boy with one arm while he leaned down and rummaged in the refrigerator. He sat Ichigo on the counter and handed him a juice box. Naruto leaned down and
asked, "Are you feeling better?"

Ichigo nodded his head.

"Do you remember what the dream was about?" Ichigo wordlessly pointed to the scars that patterned his arm. Naruto frowned angrily. "I won't let them get you, promise."

"Is he okay?" Shion asked the quivering question as she stepped into the kitchen.

Naruto narrowed his eyes when she entered.

Naruto explained flatly, "He has nightmares."

Shion leaned forward for a good look at the boy. Her stomach began to churn. "He's a Jashin acolyte."

"He is not," Naruto snapped and Shion had to step back at the heat of his anger.

"Our temple and theirs often come into conflict over beliefs and religion," Shion explained. "There was a time we excommunicated all of them from the country. We saved the kids but most of them… they never really make it back. He's lucky to have survived."

"I don't know how long they had him before he was placed in the orphanage. Some scars don't go away."

Shion was careful to creep around Naruto's watching eyes. She felt if she made one false move, he would kill her. Shion reached out a hand and smiled. "Hi, my name is Shion."

Naruto stared in shock when Ichigo handed her his juice box.

"Your daddy tells me you have really bad nightmares," Shion took a thankful drink from the juice box and handed it back. "I still have bad nightmares too but I don't have anyone like your daddy to protect me. You're really lucky to have such a cool daddy like him." Shion testily held out her arms. Then the small five year old leaned forward. Both Shion and Naruto was surprised when Ichigo gave her a hug. "Thank you," Shion answered, "it makes the nightmares better."

Shion hummed a song and rocked Ichigo in her arms until he fell asleep. Naruto watched dumbstruck. First, Ichigo never took to strangers. Second, it took Naruto hours to put Ichigo back to sleep.

Naruto held his arms out automatically when Shion handed Ichigo over.

"How did you do that?" Naruto asked.

"I work with a lot of kids at the temple. We take in a lot of orphans."

"Thanks, I can't usually get him back to sleep. He typically likes to stay up with me all night. I'll be back, I'm going to put him in the bed," Naruto replied and carried Ichigo upstairs.

Shion hoped she hadn't crossed a line she wasn't supposed to. Shion looked around the kitchen. People always said the way to a man's heart is food. Shion thrust opened the cabinets and started the stove.

"What are you doing?" Naruto questioned when he came back downstairs.

"I'm making ramen," Shion said nonchaltly. "It's rather late and I figure you'd be hungry. All the
nuns at the monastery praise my cooking."

Naruto certainly wasn't about to kick her out while she was making ramen. He watched while she moved around the kitchen.

"The seasoning is to your left."

"Do you cook?" Shion asked as she attempted to pour her heart into this meal. She felt as if this was the only chance she was going to get.

"I didn't really care for it when I was growing up alone but I learned for the kids."

Shion blushed as she asked, "And do you want to have more kids?"

"I plan to open an orphanage on the compound." Naruto easily slid into his dream and concept of what he planned for the orphanage to be. "Any child should be able to come here and find a home. That's what I want."

"You sound really passionate about the project. I love kids and I think it's a great idea." Shion smiled. She was completely impressed with how selfless he was. "But my original question, I meant do you want kids of your own blood?"

Naruto rested his head back against one of the cabinets as he watched her cook or watched her legs. "I guess, but I don't really think of it that way. I don't agree with the other clans. I don't think family is just blood. Ame will always be my oldest and heir. The people I consider family, the pervy sage, Iruka, and Granny, they taught me what to believe in. I want to teach my kids never to give up trying to make this world a better place. Anyone who believes that I would be proud to call them an Uzumaki."

"A clan based on trying to make the world a better place? I think the world needs something like that."

"Maybe," Naruto had his doubts. The world was cruel and it demanded sacrifices.

Shion finished the ramen and put a bowl in front of Naruto. She watched him eagerly as he twisted the noodles onto his chopsticks and slurped them into his mouth. His eyes lit up. "Oh wow, this is amazing."

Naruto finished it in seconds and demanded more. Shion was all too happy to oblige. When he finished the third helping, Shion made a move for the bowl as if she was going to wash it but instead leaned forward. She managed a quick peck on the lips. "I want to stay."

She watched his eyes cloud over with a dark hunger that ramen wouldn't be able to satiate. Naruto reached and placed his hand along her delicate jaw. "You don't know what you're asking priestess," he said heavily.

Her lips quivered and mewled, "I want you."

He pulled her forward and their lips met. He didn't feel the heart-writhing explosion that was Hinata who was like a fire, warm but always painful to touch. Shion was a sun, warm to the skin, full of an innocence he valued. Naruto hands went to those legs he had wanted to scale all night. He pulled her forward onto his lap and rolled her hips into his erection.

"Is that what you want?" Naruto demanded.
"I'll take anything you give me," Shion said desperately. What woman could say no to him? Shion was the demon priestess, she wasn't allowed to have sex before marriage but if Naruto was the one, and she knew he was the one, it was okay right?

The lock clicked on Naruto's bedroom door.

Naruto sat on the edge of the bed, still unsure if she wanted this. "Strip for me, priestess," he asked in order for her to prove her resolve.

Shion stood before him with a blush. Her heart was beating like the bristling petals of sunflowers. She began unzipping her dress and felt it loosen around her. Naruto was supposed to be her husband. It was natural for him to see her nakedness. This was okay, right?

Shion's hand shook as she pulled down the shoulder strap, and then the other, and then the dress fell at her feet. With a gasp she pressed her hands over her pink frilled bra. Her entire face was red.

"You have nothing to be ashamed of," Naruto assured her. "You're beautiful."

"You truly think so?"

With a wicked grin, Naruto teased as he began to undo the buttons on his tuxedo, then pulled off the tie and white undershirt. Shion's eyes bulged at the glory carved into his skin. "Oh kami-sama..." she whispered. Naruto left her panting as he began to undo the buttons on his tuxedo. Shion watched him mesmerized as he undressed and then stared at the scar that ran from his face all the way to the inside of his thigh. Sakura had warned her not to ask about the scar.

Naruto got up from the bed, with his eyes appreciating the leanness of her body. He stalked around her, then came up behind her. The snap of her bra and Naruto slid the fabric from underneath her insecure hands. Shion squirmed when he took the small perkiness of her breasts in between his fingers. She was so focused on what he was doing to her breasts she didn't notice his other hand circling her waist until it dived into the front of her pink panties. His fingers combed through her blonde bush before his forefinger massaged her clit. Shion jumped at the sensation but Naruto held her in place and forced her to endure.

Then Naruto thrust his finger into her tight pussy. Her tightness confirmed her virginity. "Are you sure you want this?"

Shion's hearing was clouded by the way Naruto curled his fingers inside of her. She never thought she could experience anything like this. "Take me, take all of me," Shion begged.

Naruto worked his fingers inside of her in an eager attempt to prepare her. When she had soaked her panties, he pushed his leg against the back of her knee and directed her onto the bed. He pulled off her underwear and admired the smooth skin of her ass in the air.

Shion couldn't see what was going on but she heard the buckle of Naruto's pants come undone. She was horny and wet and wondered what she was doing. She was a priestess. She didn't believe in sex before marriage. His hands widened her legs. But she wanted him. She wanted Naruto to love her so badly she was willing to sacrifice everything she believed in.

Shion gasped in pain when Naruto began to push his dick into her virginal canal. The pain was so intense she could hardly hold herself up due to her shaking arms.

Naruto could feel her shaking but the moment his dick came into contact with her warm slick tightness, he couldn't pull himself away. He held her up when she could no longer do it herself as he finished sliding into her undiscovered pussy. When he was sheathed, he licked the salty sweat from
his lips and let her go to get a solid grip on her hips. He had starved his body for too long.

Shion fell face forward into the pillow. Her hands clutched through the sheets. She kept silent, determined to give him everything. There was no going back now. The line had been crossed. Her tears fell as he rammed his dick back and forth inside of her and slapped his hips against her ass. She closed her eyes to his satisfied grunts and counted the time when it would be over.

Naruto knew she was more delicate than what he was used to, but lost control as he got closer and closer, going faster and faster to reach it until he finally came.

Naruto collapsed on the bed beside her. He closed his eyes and drowned in the tension that left his body. Shion shyly shifted and attempted to put an arm around him. It was instinctual. Naruto reacted when he felt something trying to take advantage of his current state. His hand snapped around her wrist as his eyes flared open.

"I'm sorry," Shion whispered in fright. He saw the fear in her eyes. She saw the fear in his eyes.

Without words Naruto moved from the bed and slammed the bathroom door behind him. Shion could hear the running water of the shower.

Shion attempted to find some strength to move her legs. She promised herself that next time it would be better, that it wouldn't hurt so much. But when Naruto exited the shower, he reached for his clothes and said, "I think it's best if I take you home now."

"I thought I was staying overnight," Shion said softly.

"I never said that." Now that the lust was not clouding his head Naruto could think rationally. The idea of her nearness, her intimacy, with her body resting so close to him made him uncomfortable. This was the best way.

Perhaps it was for the best. Shion didn't want her bodyguard to guess what had happened. She put on her dress and fixed her hair the best she could.

The walk back to her house was a cold one.

Shion bit her lip. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No," Naruto said. "It's me that is wrong." They stopped in front of the door. Naruto looked away at the ground. "We can't do this again."

Shion's jaw went slack. "But I thought we had fun together and, and, you can't. I gave you my virginity."

Naruto winced. "I wasn't thinking straight."

"But you were supposed to fall in love with me!"

Naruto blinked blankly and almost hated to crush her naivety. "I am not going to fall in love with you just because we had sex. If I knew your virginity meant that much to you I would not have taken it so carelessly but you didn't exactly say no."

Shion sniffed. "I just wanted you to love me."

Naruto looked away and bit down on his lip. "I'm sorry, but I'm not ever going to love you. We're
too different. You're too... innocent. You don't need someone like me ruining that."

"Wait," Shion cried and hung onto the ends of his robes. She would not have done it if she wasn't extremely desperate. Without her virginity, she could not go back home without a marriage. "Please, don't abandon me like this. I'll give you my heart and my body, whatever you want."

"Go back home, priestess. There is nothing for you in Konoha but shadows."

Shion fell onto her bed, heartbroken.

Shion lost all her strength as she descended into a blanket of tears. She cried at the unfairness of it all. Where was the happy future she had envisioned? She felt like a fool and a whore. She couldn't return to home. Once they found out she was no longer a virgin they were going to take her birthright away from her. The stupid advisors had already taken away her country and used her like a puppet.

She was tired of being a puppet. She was tired of feeling as if her dreams and her life were crumbling down around her.

He was never going to love her.

The priestess gasped as she began to shake. Her pupils dilated and turned white as a vision overcame her. When she recovered from her vision she sat up with a shocked expression.

She saw her path to Naruto. It wasn't a straight one.

"Are you testing me Kami-sama?" Shion asked softly.

She couldn't go back to Demon Country. She only had one option. A mad laugh began to escape her lips. The shadows in the night shaded her crooked smile. Nothing was going to stand in her way from owning Naruto's heart.

"What took so long?" Naruto demanded of his clone once he arrived.

"I didn't know what to get," the clone argued petulantly. "There were so many boxes and they all looked the same."

"Shut up, I'm trying to read," the clone who sat cross-legged on the couch had his nose deep in a biology book.

Naruto snatched the bag from the clone and rushed into the bathroom where Ame sat in tears on the toilet. Underneath her feet were panties she had stained with blood. Naruto had noticed it first, the distinct smell of blood on his little girl. Then she noticed it second, when it began to spot her pants.

Naruto opened the bags and stared blankly at the two different kinds. He was trying not to panic so she wouldn't panic. He really needed Sakura right now but she was still was busy with newborns and Kurenai was on a mission. "Maybe I should get Hinata..."

"No," Ame said petulantly and tightened her knees together. "I don't like her and this is embarrassing."

"Ame, I'm a guy. I don't know anything about this."

But there was only one person Ame was always able to rely on when she was helpless and scared.
She whispered softly, "And you're my dad."

Naruto held the bridge of his nose, trying to focus on what he needed to do, trying to push back the thought that Ame just started her first period which meant she was old enough to get pregnant. Naruto had a mini heart attack. He ran to the sink and attempted to wash the horrified expression from his face.

"Dad? Are you okay?"

"Yeah," the fearsome ANBU Captain squeaked. Ichigo peeked inside of the bathroom curious.

"Get out Ichigo!" Ame yelled. Ichigo scurried underneath the couch and observed with bright eyes.

"Don't yell at your brother," Naruto automatically replied, but closed the bathroom door to give himself and Ame some privacy. He dismissed the clone who had been reading the biology book. Medical terms he did not know the definition of, body parts he didn't know existed, and words he didn't know how to pronounce, rushed into head. He didn't know where to begin. He wasn't sure he understood himself.

"Alright, at a certain age all children will begin to have changes in their body. It's a little different for boys and girls. For girls one of the things that start to happen is your menstrual cycle," Naruto wasn't sure he said that word right, "It's when girls start to bleed every month."

Ame's eyes bulged. "This is going to happen every month?"

"Yeah that's how it is supposed to work."

"That's not fair," Ame pouted. "How come guys don't have to?"

Naruto attempted to find a better way to word his answer but surrendered to, "because girls have babies."

"But I don't want a baby."

"Good. It should stay that way," Naruto replied sternly.

"What else is going to happen to me?" Ame asked concerned, a little afraid to grow up.

Naruto blushed. "Um, well..." he waved his arms in front of his chest.

"I'm going to grow boobs? Awesome," Ame exclaimed then her eyes widened. "What if they get as big as Granny's?"

"You still have a few years to worry about that," Naruto said quickly, more than a little disturbed by the unwanted image of Tsunade's boobs plastered on his nine-year old child.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is that you don't have to be afraid of what you're going through. It is normal and it is as natural as taking a shit."

Ame erupted in bubbly giggles. "Eww."

He reached and pressed his thumb to wipe the dampness from her cheeks. "You're growing into a young woman much too soon for me kid."

"You'll still be my dad even when I grow up," Ame said stubbornly.
"I know," Naruto said with a sincere smile. "When Sakura has time, I'll have her talk with you about it. She can explain this much better than I can." He knew Sakura was going to give Ame a more medical answer that made a lot more sense. "Besides, if you're going to be a ninja you're going to have to get used to blood."

Ame nodded in determination. She picked up one of the boxes from the floor. "How do these things work?"

"I have no idea." Naruto said and he reached for the tampon box, opened it, and paled at the directions. He tried another box and his shoulders sagged in relief. The pads seemed a lot more reasonable.

"Have you ever seen anyone use one?" Ame asked.

"No, girls don't talk about this kind of stuff to guys." Naruto rarely noticed it and whenever he did, it was only around civilians.

Then Naruto's eyes lit up. He grinned and then threw the bothersome boxes in the trash.

"What are you doing?"

Naruto disappeared and returned in a flash with a new pair of clean panties. "We're going to do this Uzumaki style."

Ame cleaned herself for the time being and followed her father into his workshop. She climbed onto a chair and watched as he dug into the floorboards and released a seal locked by the spread of his blood. Naruto grabbed a scroll and studied the schematics.

"What is it?"

"When every kunoichi graduates the Academy they get sealed to prevent them from getting pregnant. It also controls their period. Here, we'll put this one on for now. Its only temporary until I create one specifically for you. I want to make sure it doesn't affect your growth and maybe add a hiraishin seal into it in case you are ever in trouble."

Ame peeked over the table and watched as Naruto prepared the ink. Once he finished, he instructed her to pull down her pants. Ame giggled at the sudden chill of ink on her skin. Naruto finished painting the seal and then applied his chakra. It glowed red until it settled black onto her hip.

"It's like I have a tattoo," Ame admired before she fixed her pants. Her dad was the most awesome dad in whole wide world. Now she didn't have to deal with those silly boxes. Ame scooted back and sat down in one of the wooden chairs. Her dad's workshop was becoming one of her favorite places on the compound. It always smelled like ink and sometimes he would let her watch him work. Ame gave a nervous smile, "Dad, while we're talking about this stuff... how do girls have babies?"

Naruto collapsed backwards in his chair. He grumbled, "Sex."

Ame blinked. It was a word she had heard before but did not necessarily know what it meant. "What is that?"

"Something you are never going to do."

"Dad!"

"Alright Ame," Naruto brushed back his hair. He knew if she was serious about this ninja thing he
needed to talk to her about sex and he guessed nine was as good an age as any. At that moment a shadow clone entered the workshop and placed two steaming cups of hot chocolate onto the table.

"You know that boys and girls have different… body parts?"

Ame nodded and said rather bluntly. "Ichigo has a penis."

"Sex is when a boy and a girl's body parts come together," Naruto attempted to explain.

"Huh?"

Naruto winced. "It's when a boy sticks his penis into a girl's vagina."

Ame stared blankly for a moment. "eeewww. That's disgusting. Why would I ever let them do that?"

"Teenage hormones," Naruto grumbled. "Anyway, during that process, if you don't have the seal to protect you, you can become pregnant."

Ame looked absolutely horrified. "I always thought you had to be married or something to have a baby."

"I certainly prefer that you be married before you decide to have sex and make a baby but," It pained Naruto to say this. "Ninja's rarely follow that rule."

"Why?"

"Civilians are a lot more conservative about it. Their lives are more stable and are more likely to wait until marriage but a ninja on the other hand, we live in chaos. Our lives are short. We want to find happiness any form we can."

Ame sipped on her hot chocolate and asked, "Do you have sex?"

"Yes."

"Why do you have sex?"

Naruto paused. It was such a loaded question. "Um, it's a case by case basis."

"Who was the last one?"

"Ame…" Naruto groaned. He was talking about sex with his nine-year old daughter but he wanted her to be open about it with him when the time came. He hadn't even had such a conversation with Tomu. "Shion, the woman I brought to the compound."

"But I thought you didn't like her. You never brought her back."

Naruto winced. "It didn't work out."

"Why did you have sex with her?"

Naruto scrunched his face. Shion had been a moment of weakness. He admitted he was attracted to her, it's been a long time since Mei, but the point he crumbled was when he watched Shion with Ichigo. Suddenly he wanted to be touched by the softness of her hands and delve into the warmth of her innocence. He had ruined her instead.

Ame looked at her father expectantly.
"It wasn't for good reasons," Naruto whispered and said very seriously, "If you ever decide to have sex I want it to be for a good reason. There are a lot of bad reasons but I trust you enough to be smart enough to figure out what those are. Don't ever let anyone pressure you and if you tell them no and they're not getting the message you kick their ass. Let me know when you start liking boys because believe me they're not always thinking with the right head and if... if I don't live long enough to see the beautiful woman I know you will become, don't fall in love with someone as horrible and insensitive and flawed as me."

"You have to hit with the intention to kill. The Jyūken stance is created to fully maximize the first seconds of a fight. Your first hit should be your last."

There was something mesmerizing about watching the graceful cold of Hinata's jyūken, like watching sunlight reflect off ice. Naruto leaned against the doorway of the Hyūga dojo while Hinata demonstrated a move set for the class of children.

Suddenly the children who were not yet old enough to have been socialized with a Hyūga's prideful sense of decorum began to giggle. "Onee-sama, Uzumaki-sama wants to have sex with you."

It really wasn't a secret in the Hyūga compound that Naruto often developed boners in Hinata's company. The adults were either too respectful, too used to it, or didn't care enough to say anything about it. The children used every opportunity to point it out. For them, it was still an interesting topic as they began to master their erratic byakugan.

"Naruto, we have our lunch meeting tomorrow," Hinata said as she turned around. Today, Naruto was dressed in a button-down collared shirt. He even attempted to tame the shoulder length locks of his hair. He held a large bouquet of flowers. They were vibrant with a lone lavender at the center

"What are the flowers for?"

"They are for you."

"Why?"

"Because today is my birthday."

"I know and I think you're confused with how presents are supposed to work."

Naruto smiled smugly. "I wanted to treat myself to your smile all day. Come to lunch with me?"

"I'm not finish teaching my class."

"I'll finish it," Tashiko Hyūga slid into the dojo with a smile as if she had been watching from behind the wall. "Go get ready, nee-sama."

Resigned, Hinata took the large bouquet of flowers and went toward the back of the compound to get ready.

"Thanks."

"No problem. She needs to get out. She's hides it well, but she's been rather depressed after her fight with Hanabi."

"She had a fight with Hanabi?" Naruto always found out from Hinata's kin if something was going on with her. He wished for once Hinata would trust enough to confide in him but he didn't blame
"I would not have gotten dressed up for a picnic," Hinata noted when Naruto finally led her to the area they were going to dine. He already had everything set up thanks to a shadow clone. A blanket was spread across the head of the Fourth Hokage. The fall leaves of the mountain framed the village in a flourish of warm colors.

"I wanted you to dress up for my birthday," Naruto grinned cheekily, knowing he had intentionally misled her by wearing something more formal. Hinata had chosen a pattern draped with silk honeysuckles that matched the highlights in Naruto's shirt. Ruby and emerald kanzashi pins held an elaborate bun twist.

"You normally don't do anything for your birthday," Hinata said as she held out her hand and Naruto was there to receive it. He carefully helped her down onto the ground.

"I don't. Usually Old man Teuchi closes the shop early and treat the kids and I to a private all-you-can-eat dinner but this year Ame is planning a surprise party."

"What is this then?" Hinata asked of the impromptu lunch.

"I enjoy your company," Naruto said sincerely. He began to distribute the food. He noticed Hinata didn't eat as carefully as she would have if she was in public. She didn't bother cutting the food and simply shoved the pieces into her cheeks. Naruto scarfed down his portion. "I heard you and Hanabi got into an argument?"

The slight scrunch of the brow and Naruto knew this wasn't a topic Hinata wanted to talk about. They didn't delve. It was an unspoken rule, like asking about the scar. "Never mind."

"Have you ever come close to hurting Ame or Ichigo?"

Naruto was unsettled by her random change in questioning. "No."

Hinata gazed over the sprawling buildings of Konoha and the fire of trees that surrounded it. The wind chimed through her hair ornament and crept along the nape of her neck. She was usually solid but had to release the heat against her chest.

"I snapped."

Naruto recognized he was stepping into uncharted territory.

"I came very close to killing my little sister. I was so afraid of what I would do to her I had to immediately banish her from the clan. For a moment I was there again. I kept hoping, kept deluding myself into thinking that perhaps... I can't escape ANBU."

Never before have they spoken about their time in ANBU together.

"Are you alright, Hinata? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

Naruto was worried. It was like cutting a piece of himself to admit, "I understand. Sometimes it's the wrong scent, or wrong sound, or someone says something wrong, and I snap. It's as if I'm on a mission, or on the battlefield, and I blink and I realize I've just hurt someone. I don't know if it ever
goes away but I just try really really hard to avoid those triggers."

"Hanabi hit me."

Naruto snapped into a sitting position with red eyes hungering for justice. "Well, fuck Hinata, I'd have tried to kill her too."

"She's my sister," Hinata replied sharply. Naruto could feel the wall of ice she suddenly slammed between them. He knew he had said the wrong thing without thinking. Naruto refused to have Hinata angry at him on his birthday. He leaned over and purposely laid his head onto her lap.

"Get off of me Naruto."

"One of my triggers is the smell of blood mixed with an opium extract that Jashin priests use to acclimate their acolytes. When I smell it I break down crying every time."

He had never told anyone that before. He was afraid to reveal to the Hokage that something in his head other than the Fox wasn't right.

Hinata softened. "I'm surprise you still cry."

"I usually don't but sometimes I can't control it," Naruto smiled weakly. "I'm one of the strongest people in the world but I can't control my own tears. It humbles you in a way." He felt a bit embarrassed. It wasn't a manly thing to talk about tears especially when he's never seen Hinata cry before.

Her hands reached into the golden strands of his hands. He didn't realize how much tension he had been carrying before her hands made him melt. A content purr left his chest. "I have another present for you. It's at the compound so I'll give it to you after dinner."

"This isn't a scheme to make sure I go home with you?" Hinata asked with a rare hint of playfulness.

"Very much so," Naruto said honestly. "Then the next step involves your clothes and the last is my bed." Hinata gave him a baleful stare. Naruto laughed as he said, "What? You thought I was a good guy or something? Of course, all these steps can't happen unless I get you drunk at dinner tonight."

"Plans never work out the way you want them to."

Naruto gave her the cutest pout he could manage, "But I think you're cute when you're vomiting into my toilet."

"That incident," Hinata said dryly, "should never be spoken of again or I will tear your tongue out through your throat."

Naruto grinned mischievously. "Kinky."

"You're impossible," Hinata admonished. "I'm serious. Do not mention that again."

"You don't even remember that night." Naruto chuckled.

"I think you find it a goal in life to embarrass me."

"I find it a goal in life to embarrass every Hyūga, but yes, I admit you're special. I'm wondering how red your cheeks need to be before you faint."

Hinata raised her hands to hide the ruby dusting of her cheeks.
"And I really enjoy drunk Hinata. You're a giggling, clumsy, and horny mess."

"You lie." Hinata said aghast.

"I still remember the lacy black thong you wanted me to ravage but alas I couldn't bring myself to take advantage of your primal situation no matter how many times you begged me to suck on your tits."

Naruto caught Hinata before she hit the ground. With a smug smile, he leaned backwards against her thigh. "Oh yeah, I've still got it."

x

"Happy Birthday!"

Ame was the loudest. She jumped into Naruto's arms when he came through the door. This year Ichiraku's Ramen was decorated with balloons and streamers. Granny Tsunade, Sakura and her family, Shizune, Iruka, and Shino had joined him for dinner. Naruto didn't like parties because they tend to remind him who were missing, but he certainly appreciated Ame's efforts.

"Wow," Naruto enthused as Ame smugly led him to the seat of honor. "I'm impressed."

"Alright you know the drill, your favorite flavor determines what is on the menu this year," Ayane declared. Old Man Teuchi was getting old and Ayane had largely taken over the cooking responsibilities.

"This is my favorite part of the year," Naruto grinned cheekily as bowls began to rush out of the kitchen. This was the only day he didn't care about diet restrictions.

It was still possible to hear the festivities going on outside where children ran around with Fox masks and the fox themed festival food hawked from the vendors. None of the celebrations could touch the peace within Ichiraku's Ramen.

"I can't believe he ate all that," Kohei was still carrying around his slack-jawed expression. Sakura chuckled while she burped Sai against her shoulder.

"The potential medical discoveries after further analyzing the new hybrid hive is exponential," Shizune discussed with Shino.

"Another!" Tsunade cheekily raised her glass for a refill while berating Iruka that it was time for him to find a wife.

"Why do you look so angry?" Naruto cheekily asked as he plopped beside Hinata. She gave him a side glare before turning away. "Don't be like that. You used to faint all the time when we were kids."

"We're not kids anymore."

Naruto stared at the shape of her lips. He was still hungry. "We all have our weaknesses."

"Sing karaoke with me," Ame demanded as she pulled on Naruto's hand. Naruto reached across the table and grabbed Iruka to join him. Naruto demonstrated his lack of singing ability in a trio with a drunken Iruka and an off-key Ame.

Hinata took a sip of her sake when Sakura sat down next to her. Sakura lifted Sasuke against her
shoulder who was amused by the impromptu concert. "Thank you for the flowers when I was in the hospital."

"My pleasure," Hinata said smoothly. She turned when chubby fingers attempted to grab the jeweled ornaments in her hair. "Your children are very handsome. What will you do when the Inzuka comes for them?"

Sakura was startled by the exposed secret. "Did Naruto tell you?! I swear I'm going to pummel his face in so hard he'll be breathing out of his ass!"

"Sakura," Hinata said in a calm tone. "Besides the hair they look like Kiba."

Sakura calmed down only slightly. She grew defensive whenever her children were concerned. "I'll figure something out when the time comes. I'm not giving up my children to the clan. I'm not giving up their freedom to choose."

It was a freedom Hinata couldn't comprehend. Hinata belonged to her clan since the day she was born.

"Do you want to hold him?" Sakura suggested.

"I don't think that's a good idea. I haven't held many infants."

"Here," Sakura shoved Sasuke into Hinata's arms.

Hinata stared at the mischievous smile that reminded her of Kiba. Sasuke's chubby hands stretched for the dangled ornaments in her hair. His hands were pale and tiny and never before had she held something so fragile. Her arms felt awkward and when she attempted to readjust them, Sasuke blinked. His eyes opened to reveal the hard cruelty of a byakugan.

Hinata's shrill scream shattered the fun within the restaurant.

Sakura snatched her child away. Hinata collapsed in a sudden wave of tears.

"I can't stop bleeding," Hinata cried as she attempted to wipe the blood spreading along her kimono, but it wouldn't go away, it infected her hands and everything she touched. She wailed at the futility of it, tightening her arms around her stomach.

"Hinata, you're not bleeding," Naruto told her softly, calm, solid. He picked her up from the floor and when he realized she couldn't stand on her own, swept her up into his arms. "I'm going to take her outside," Naruto declared as he made a clone and then carried Hinata out of the restaurant.

If Naruto wasn't holding her up, she would have fallen. The sound of bursting fireworks exploded in the sky and reflected red and green off their skin. Naruto had forgotten how small she was compared to him. He could engulf her in his arms and feel every part of her trembling. Black eyeliner was smudged underneath her eyes when she finally stopped.

Naruto knew Hinata would be too ashamed to return to the restaurant and wouldn't be too keen to return to worried kin. "I'm taking you to my place."

The stickiness of her cheek made it difficult for her to nod her head.

Naruto ported to his bedroom and gently placed Hinata down onto the covers. She turned over and curled into Naruto's pillow. She didn't resist when Naruto began to take off her shoes and undid the tightness of her obi. Then he lifted the covers back and placed it over her shoulders.
"You were right. Things never go to plan."

The party was over. The kids were asleep. Naruto was making a midnight snack of the ramen Ayane sent home with him. Naruto said suddenly, "I hope you're not leaving without your present."

Hinata stopped in the hallway. Naruto noticed a slight color had returned to her cheeks but looked as fragile as she was a few hours ago. She hadn't refixed her hair so it fell straight around her shoulders. It was difficult to put a kimono on by yourself and Hinata hadn't even tried. She stole a pair of Naruto's clothes. They were baggy and seemed to engulf her.

"I'm sorry I ruined your birthday."

"It can't be worse than the one where my parents died and a demon was sealed into me." There was an awkward silence. He knew better than to ask what had happened at Ichiraku's. "You're going to like the present, I promise."

"Alright," Hinata gave in.

Naruto grinned. He grabbed her hand and knew she was still recovering when she didn't resist it but he took advantage of it anyways and led her outside to his workshop. Naruto eagerly went through the many practice seals onto the table.

Hinata picked up a practice sketch. "I hope you really haven't incorporated a heart into my seal."

A cheeky grin crossed Naruto's face. "I decided not to go with the heart. It doesn't really suit you."

Naruto finished unlocking a scroll and produced the latest version of the new Hyuuga clan seal. It was simple and yet elegant like the way Hinata wore her signature bun. Gone was the overbearing 'X' that marked the forehead like a warning.

"I like it," Hinata said finally.

"I want you to try it on," Naruto encouraged.

Hinata nodded. Naruto pressed the wet ink of the brush atop her head and freed her from the old seal. The old seal had seared an angry scar along her forehead but Naruto had accounted for that and gently brushed over the old lines. He turned the 'x' into a circle more aligned with the Hyuuga clan crest. It glowed a soft blue before it shifted to a midnight shade of purple.

"The chakra absorption feels manageable," Hinata noted.

"That's not the best part." Naruto placed his hands on her shoulders and whisked them into the bathroom back in the house. Hinata was startled by her sudden reflection in the mirror.

"I look like shit."

Naruto laughed at her frankness. "Personally I think you look hot in my clothes."

Hinata breath hitched when Naruto gripped her hips and pressed behind her. His breath was hot against her ear. "When you apply chakra," Naruto touched the center of her forehead with chakra. The seal inspired by the color of her eyes began to melt into her skin and eventually disappeared. Hinata's eyes widened as she leaned forward into the mirror.

"And if you apply even more…"

Suddenly the shade of purple that consumed her eyes condensed and coalesced into bright amethyst
Hinata stared speechless at a reflection with normal eyes. "I know you're too proud to ever use it but it could be useful when you're out in the field. If you add even more chakra it blows up, because it wouldn't be a Hyuuga seal if it couldn't do that."

He placed his hands on her temple and showed her how to reverse the effects. "I want you to wear it for a while, let me know how it performs, but I think this one is it."

Naruto watched as the smile crossed her lips. There was something about that smile that washed floods of satisfaction and pride through Naruto's body. He grinned smugly when Hinata turned to him with glistening eyes. "It's perfect."

"Only because you're wearing it," Naruto assured her.

He suddenly found himself wanting to kiss the smile on her lips. Naruto's chest was heavy with maybe. He leaned forward and met surprise when she moved in unison. His grip tightened around her hips and pushed her further in to the hunger of his lips.

The soft sensual caress of lips became a lustful battle of tongue. They had gone too long, far too long. One kiss ignited the passions of years. The kunai and scroll shaped toothbrushes fell from the sink. The too large pants slipped off easily. Naruto was afire as his claws shredded the sheets.

"Hn?"

Hinata and Naruto froze. Naruto looked up with embarrassment as Ichigo sat up in the bed staring confused at the panting half-naked woman. Naruto normally didn't mind Ichigo sleeping with him but there were exceptions.

"Be right back." Naruto grabbed Ichigo, whisked him to his room, plopped him in the bed, and ordered, "Stay."

Ichigo looked confused. He had never been made to stay in his bed before. He attempted to climb back out.

"Look kid, your dad is about to get lucky. You have got to stay," Naruto ordered. He tucked Ichigo in and chained him to the bed with the sheets. Naruto raced to get back but slowed when he opened the door. Hinata had sat up on the edge of the bed with his shirt so large on her it easily fell at her knees.

It only took seconds for them to come to their senses.

"Hinata," Naruto sighed deeply. "I don't want to take advantage of your weird emotional state. I don't want you to do something you'll regret."

Hinata stared at her hands. "I'm afraid that if we... I want to enjoy it and I'm afraid that I won't."

Naruto remembered the last time they had come close and her inability to go through with it. He kneeled in front of her and knew she wasn't exactly stable right now. "It can't hurt to try. I'll stop whenever you give the word."

Naruto crawled forward and pressed Hinata backwards onto the bed. Her breasts bounced beneath the cloth of his shirt. He watched his nail slide the shirt upwards and trail along the body he hadn't explored in years. She arched underneath him when he teased his nail into the concave of her nipple.
Then he sucked the peak of her other breast that ignited a fire that burned through her skin. Hinata didn't know when she had lost her lust but found it in the corners of his lips.

"No, stop."

Naruto did so immediately. He grew worried to watch Hinata clutch at her chest. In tears she said, "I don't want to be her anymore."

"Who?"

"Fox."

Naruto thought he finally understood the problem. "Hinata, Fox isn't someone else. She's a part of you and unless you fully accept that darkness we're never going to get very far. I understand if you don't want to, if you want to keep struggling against the weapons they've crafted us into but the truth of the matter is, we will never escape ANBU. We have to either embrace it or let it tear us apart from the inside."

Hinata scowled at him. "I am more than just a weapon."

"It doesn't define who we are but it's a part of ourselves we can't escape."

"No," Hinata pushed against Naruto's chest. "Even just a part that is not the person I want to be. I've fought all my life to prove that I am worth something. It is my past. I am not that person anymore because I don't need to be. It is you who is wrong. I will prove to you that there is an escape."

Hinata moved to gather her clothes. Naruto reached to stop her. "You don't have to leave. Sex is great and I admit that I want it on the verge of painfully but I want more than that. I want all of you. I want your smile, your laughter, your stubbornness, your pride, and all the things about you that make me get out of bed," Naruto smirked, "or in bed."

"Stay with me tonight?"

It was more than just a question. It was a desperation in his eyes that could break him depending on her answer. She didn't have the heart to leave him.

Naruto grin glowed like a child. "Give me ten minutes in the bathroom."

Naruto raced to the bathroom. He was in pain. A few minutes, a little lube, and the image of Hinata half-naked on his bed healed him well-enough but it was an unsatisfying medicine. He got ready for bed and slipped under the covers in a pair of boxer-briefs that hugged his waist.

Hinata had already claimed the right side of the bed. She had been too tired to bother getting the pants that had been left in the downstairs bathroom. She was resigned to sleeping in Naruto's shirt and her underwear.

When Naruto lifted the covers he had noticed she was wearing a red thong, a detail he missed when he was blinded by lust. Naruto curiously lifted the shirt and blatantly stared at the back of her ass. Right above the area where the string began disappear into the crack, was a flower composed of rubies to hold the strings together. Naruto didn't usually notice a woman's underwear because he had usually taken it off but, "Your thong matches your hair ornaments?"

"In the Hyūga compound an outfit is more than just outerwear. Are you done?" Hinata asked with a hint of a yawn and a tease.
Naruto was too curious. Hinata's eyes snapped open when she was jerked from her position and flipped onto her back. The front of the thong was a see-through reveal of neat and shaven pubic hair. But Naruto didn't notice. He leaned forward and kissed the burnt scar on her left forearm.

"It's just a scar," Hinata whispered.

"I did that to you," Naruto said darkly. Even years later it was still there. "You know the worst of me."

"And I know the best of you," Hinata said softly as she brushed her fingers against the scar of his cheek.

"You're the only person who's never asked about the scar."

"I don't need to."

Naruto didn't need to ask Hinata what had happened at his party.

Naruto wrapped his arm around her waist and buried his head into her shoulder. "This probably isn't going to help the rumors about us."

"You mean the rumors you started?"

Naruto smirked into her neck. "Hey, I did not start that one about a threesome with Gaara," after a moment of thought, "Actually, I might be able to make that happen if you're interested."

"You already have a problem sharing me," Hinata replied tersely. "As if you didn't intentionally start those rumors to see how Neji would react."

Naruto kissed her neck with his laughter. Hinata always had a tendency to see through his schemes. Naruto breathed in her nearness and said all too honestly, "I will kill your husband to have you."

"And I will stop you."

"Can you? Could you kill me if you needed to?"

She said without thought, "Of course I can."

Naruto contently dug his face into her shoulder as sunlight began to rise through windows. The shadows dwindled to the far corners.

"Don't hesitate when you do."

x

If I don't live long enough to see the beautiful woman I know you will become, don't fall in love with someone as horrible and insensitive and flawed as me.
Lesson Thirty Five

Bonds of Blood

Udon and his team were counting the numbers of enemy ninja. From the protective bough branches of the great maple trees, he could see the jeweled blue of the ocean beyond. The leaves were a bright autumn red which alighted the entire country in a blaze of fire. Udon kept watch over his genin team members underneath the shadows of red leaves.

Hohei's eyes were tired. He counted every day and every day he felt overwhelmed by the sea of people on the other side. But Hohei would rather overexert his byakugan than get caught up in another battle. The black and grey of Hohei's vision suddenly began to blur. The branches began to creak underneath his wavering feet. Mushi placed a hand on Hohei's shoulder to steady him.

"You should rest. You've been doing this for three weeks straight."

Hohei pushed her hand away. Some people's job was to fight and die. His job was to count.

"Udon, Hohei needs to rest."

"Can't. The higher-ups are breathing down my neck to submit these numbers faster." Udon reached into his pocket and tossed over a chakra pill. Without looking behind him, Hohei snatched it out of the air. Hohei swallowed it without hesitation.

"Genin aren't supposed to use chakra pills because our chakra capacity isn't large enough. It is one of the first lessons you learn in the Academy," Mushi said with disapproval.

Udon looked at the four fingers on his hand. "We're not in the academy anymore."

Hohei finished the last tick on his scroll and reported the final count.

"That's a bit more than yesterday," Udon observed. Udon doubted they would see action anytime soon. War isn't exciting. It was actually quite boring – filled with a lot of scouting, and waiting, and brief moments of terrifying blood curdling action in between.

Hohei narrowed his eyes and focused his byakugan to the edge. The edge hurt so much that few Hyūga dared to test its limit but the Clan Head had proved the limit could be stretched. Hohei fought through the pain and the chakra pill added just enough focus to obtain the miles he needed.

"Udon, there are four Mist ninja traveling south along the coast. They're leaving my range of vision quickly."

It was suspicious activity and Udon knew he should investigate. Sometimes there was no time to call for back-up. "Mushi, send word to let the camp know what we're doing," Udon commanded. A kikaichuu beetle left Mushi's sleeve. "We're only going to follow at a distance and observe. We will not under any circumstances engage the enemy. Hohei, take point."

The Hyūga nodded. He pushed off the branches and attempted to keep the Mist ninja in his range. Mushi and Udon followed his flanks.

"What do you think they're doing?" Hohei asked. He had no idea what Mist ninja were doing so far out of the combat zone.
"Probably scouting or looking for any holes in our defenses or a way into the country. Sometimes it's not that complicated. They're guys like we are, just on a different side, doing the same thing."

Hohei, Udon, and Mushi followed the Mist ninja along the coast for the better part of an hour. Udon raised a hand for them to halt. Hohei didn't question it and slipped backwards against the tree. His hands were shaking and could feel the crash of the pill.

"We're crossing the border into the Land of Hot Water," Udon reported.

"Should we continue to follow?" Mushi asked.

Udon rubbed the nub of his finger in thought. "No, the ninja of Hot Water have been pretty skittish since Sound was in the country and haven't been too kind to other ninja. We'll pull out."

"The Mist ninja have also stopped. They're meeting with someone wearing a Leaf hitai-ite," Hohei suddenly reported.

"Sounds like a spy. Can you get a look at his face?"

"Hold on," Hohei attempted to zoom in. The Mist ninja had spread out around the meeting area as sentries. He zoomed in further.

Then his cranium felt as if it was lit on fire. Hohei blinked from the sudden black out. He was caught by a blanket of insects and pulled back onto the branch. When his vision focused, he found Udon kneeling in front of him with another pill.

Mushi's insects suddenly swarmed around Udon's head like frenetic bees. "He cannot take another one of those. It is against regulation for a chūnin to take two consecutively. It requires a twenty-four hour time period in between doses and that information is on the bottle."

"We need to identify that spy. It could mean the war."

"And it could mean his life."

Udon sighed and rubbed his eyes. It took patience to deal with genin. "It's called a double-hit. A second pill will cause dizziness, vomiting, dehydration, and chakra exhaustion but the point is to kill your opponent before the side-effects kick in. A third one will kill you. He just needs to get a look at the spy so a Yamanaka can identify him later. We'll turn right back around once that's done."

Hohei took the pill without question and swallowed it. Hohei activated his byakugan.

"Fuck!" Hohei pushed off with chakra on both his hand and knees and rushed back through the trees. Udon and Mushi reacted on instinct, turned, and followed.

Udon pulled forward and demanded, "What happened?"

"I got the visual on the spy's face but they have a sensor. They broke off the meeting when they realized they've been compromised. They're coming after us."

Udon's team raced upward through the maple trees and every well-placed footing never disturbed a leaf. Udon looked downhill behind him and could see portions of the forest shaking, displaced by the intruders among their branches. Udon did the math. "They're moving faster than us. Contact in three minutes and thirty-five seconds."

Udon accepted in that moment they weren't going to escape. Even though they had sent a message
back to camp, Udon knew how the chain of command worked. The message would be delivered to his squad leader, if deemed urgent, then reported to one of the Jounin who would later report to one of the commanders. Who knew if the message would get that far and prompt a second team to go out and investigate. By the time anyone realized they were missing it would be too late. In other words, no reinforcements were coming.

"I'm going to stay behind and engage the enemy in order to buy you enough time to get back to camp with the identity of the spy. Hohei isn't going to make it on a double-hit running at full speed. Mushi, your job is to make sure he gets back to camp." Udon went into his pocket and took out another chakra pill. Hohei gulped dryly as he accepted the pill. "If push comes to shove, a Yamanaka doesn't need you alive to get in your head."

The genin were conflicted. Sometimes there was nothing you could do but throw all your morality onto the order you were given.

"You are going to die." Leave it to an Aburame to say the facts straight.

"I am the leader of this team. I made a bad call. I shouldn't have followed four high level Mist ninja with two genin even we had a byakugan," Udon lifted the four fingers on his hand. "Can't get lucky twice."

"What the fuck is this?"

The Mist Jounin raised his hand and his team halted behind him. The Mist ninja stared at the path before them. The entire area was coated in what look like slick spider webs. The entire team turned to the sensor. The sensor reached out and gingerly reached for the substance. His expression was disgusted once he realized what it was. "It some sort of chakra enhanced mucus."

Then the sensor attempted to wipe his hands on his pants. The skin of his fingers stuck to the fabric. "Fuck, it acts as some sort of-"

The forest behind them erupted into flames. An instinctive reaction to avoid the heat of the flames forced them back. Feet and hands stuck to the mucus webs. The Jounin commander was the only one to hold his ground. The fire came closer and closer, reaching out with the claws of a red dragon.

"Water Release: Water Dragon."

The moisture in the air and the water in the gourd he carried coalesced in the Jounin's hands and blasted forward, meeting the fire head on in an equal battle of power.

A chūnin with his foot stuck to one of the branches while mucus dribbled on his clothes, watched the breathtaking conflict between fire and water. Water proved the stronger element and doused the burning trees.

The chūnin tensed at the sudden presence behind him. He attempted to break away from the mucus binding him to the bark. A kunai was thrust into his neck and the mist ninja's blood spilled to water the roots of the maple trees.

The sensor turned with a one-handed jutsu.

Udon braced himself against the sudden jet of water. He was thrust backwards and crashed through the trees to the ground. The team of Mist ninja added their stores of water to the jutsu. The torrent took Udon downhill in a sudden man-made river. Scratches formed along his arms in Udon's an attempt to catch a root or branch to leverage himself out the power of the river.
Udon coughed when he washed up in a field of grass on the border of Hot Water. Udon jumped backwards when the ground erupted underneath his feet and hot geysers shot up in the air. His surroundings became engulfed in mist. Udon picked himself up, so drenched his clothing stuck to the crevices in his skin. He attempted to sense the enemies' chakra through the mist but felt nothing but the hard hit of his heart against his chest.

The ground ruptured underneath Udon's feet. Udon fell to the ground, hobbling, as he dragged his foot out of the burning geyser. Udon stared at the shriveled remains of his foot. The skin was deformed in a twisted visage of pain.

Udon deflected the katana that descended behind him. The kunai was wrenched from his hand at the force of the blow. The mist thinned. Udon didn't dare move to risk the ire of the katana at his neck.

"Not too bad, Leaf ninja. You managed to kill one of us all by yourself."

Udon was surrounded by the remaining three Mist ninja. He counted himself lucky that he managed to lessen one of their numbers. He gave Hohei and Mushi distance and time. He gave them a chance.

The Jounin motioned to the sensor. "Is it too late to catch the others?"

"We could catch them at full speed," the sensor calculated.

"Take care of this one," The Jounin ordered his chūnin companion who nodded eagerly. "This hunt isn't finished yet."

"I can't."

Hohei had to stop. They were only halfway to camp but running had become akin to dragging stones. Hohei calculated how much chakra he had expended while running through the forest at a dead sprint and how much chakra he had remaining. He was forced to deactivate his byakugan to end the constant drain of chakra they cost him.

"Hohei, we can't stop. We have to keep going."

Hohei shook his head and the world began to spin. Mushi grabbed his arm and pulled his weight over her shoulders. Hohei groaned after a few minutes of rest and re-activated his byakugan. He replied grimly, "They're coming after us: the sensor and the Jounin."

"How unreasonable and illogical. It doesn't take a Jounin to kill us," Mushi stated.

Hohei knew he was a burden. He had to think of something. "I'll kill myself. You can store my corpse in a scroll and use your hive to deliver me to camp. That's the only way we're going to complete our mission."

"I'm not going to kill you, Hohei. I can get you to camp. Get on my back," Mushi insisted.

"Carrying me will slow you down." Hohei scrambled in his pocket for a kunai. He held it aloft and stared at the point.

"A kunai? You can't use something less… bloody?"

"Like what? Do you want me to activate my seal and blow up?" Hohei snapped. "A Yamanaka can't get into my memories if my brain is in pieces."

Hohei noticed the point of his kunai was rather sharp. He wondered how much force he needed to
use or how deep it should go. The point kept wavering in his shaky hands.

Mushi reached out to stop him. "No, I can't watch the death of another teammate."

"Do you know how many teammates I've seen die?!" Hohei screamed, offended by her emotional problems while he was trying to kill himself. "On a mission with my first genin team we ran into Lightning ninja who decided genin were easy pickings and that they wanted to capture me. I never really liked my team but they died for my kekkai genkai. These eyes were more valuable than the lives of my three teammates. Then the Hokage and Grandfather concealed their deaths because they did not want to break the peace with Lightning. Apparently, as long as the byakugan was safe the incident was forgotten, but I haven't forgotten the faces of my teammates. I haven't forgotten them!"

The Mist ninja were coming. They needed a plan. They were going to die. Mushi watched helpless as her teammate buckled under the pressure. Mushi gripped her teammate by the shoulders. "Hohei, don't break on me yet. I need you. I don't want to be the one that survives."

Hohei needed to say their names. "Yamanaka Keiko, Noriko Keigo, Yamato Tozai. I haven't forgotten."


"Well, look what I've found."

Mushi and Hohei turned to face the Mist ninja.

"Kid, this is not the way to the camp."

"No, it has to be," Tomu said with doubt in his voice. He crouched down, combed his fingers through his hair, and when he opened his hand, revealed a black kikaichuu beetle in his palm. The wings buzzed and danced in Tomu's palm with directions. "We need to go this way."

"I know what I'm talking about," Tenten argued.

"But she's this way!" Tomu pointed fiercely into the foliage of trees.

Tenten narrowed her eyes. "Wait, are you fucking serious? Was this entire mission for some girl?"

Tomu crossed his arms with a pout. "She's a very important girl."

"Teenagers," Tenten cursed. "Why do guys have to feel so compelled that we helpless kunoichi need saving? Want my advice? You're not a killer and you're not a ninja. Your girlfriend can handle herself."

"I know that. It's just, there is something very important I need to tell her."

"What could be so important that you risk treason, going out onto a battlefront, and potentially getting yourself killed?"

Tomu blushed and stared down at the grass beneath his feet. Then he bounded off into the trees.

Tenten knew the mission wouldn't be complete until she delivered Tomu to the Eastern front, even if she had drag him there. Tenten raced after him. Her frustration increased when she found him unnaturally fleet of foot as he easily used chakra to hop from branch to branch.

"Fuck this," Tenten grabbed a kunai and aimed for his leg.
Tomu grabbed a branch above his head, pulled himself up, missed the kunai, and kept going without missing a beat.

He activated his sharingan. He became sensitive to details: the weak spot in the branch, the slickness of moss he avoided, and the strength of the trees that afforded momentum. A rain of projectiles came towards him. Tomu jumped five feet toward the ground, cushioned his fall with chakra, stopped when sharp weapons fell in front of him, turned, jumped over a tree that fell in his path and-

Tomu jumped back when a shadow appeared from the foliage. The figure lumbered over until Tomu looked up in disbelief at a large panda standing on its hind legs, a scar down the center of its fur, and two scythes at both hips.

The panda summon gave Tenten enough time to catch up. "Damn kid, you'd be a great hunter-nin. Look, I am taking you to camp and-" Tenten stopped when a sudden blast of fire erupted far down the hill of trees. The trees began to topple, falling over each other like dominos. Then a sudden river left an angry scar straight through the forest.

Tenten hadn't heard the sweet sound of a battle in a long time.

"If you only wanted to play with them, you certainly didn't need me," The sensor noted. "They're just runts."

Mushi was nursing a broken arm. Parts of her hive were scattered throughout the forest, forever lost. Hohei held the chakra pill tight in his hands as he laid on the ground. If it would have made a difference, he would have eaten it.

The Jounin grinned. "I've been waiting around for weeks to kill Leaf ninja. Maybe they're just runts but I need something to quench my thirst."

In a last ditch effort, Mushi thrust out her hands and the rest of her hive attacked. The Jounin laughed as water sprouted from around his skin and drenched the incoming insects. The beetles were weighed down by the water and collapsed into puddles.

"No!" Mushi screamed as the Jounin reached and squashed the beetles floundering in the water underneath his feet. Mushi closed her eyes and tears leaked from the corner of them. Jumper. Flicker. Magine. Twitch. Mushi silently listed off the names of beetles that died for her. Then he kicked Mushi in the chin like swatting away a fly.

"Genin, they fly so easily." The Jounin stepped aside and avoided the Jyūken strike. Hohei fell past but was prevented from falling when the Jounin caught a hold of his hair. Hohei bit his lip as he was pulled backwards into the Jounin's arm. Jounin took a hold of Hohei's chin roughly. "Damn, those eyes are beautiful, worth more than diamonds."

Hohei hoped the Jounin was stupid enough to try and take them.

"Don't try it," The sensor warned. "They blow up."

"And he's such a pretty little thing," Hohei began to struggle when the Jounin ran a hand over Hohei's slender frame. The Jounin leaned over and whispered into Hohei's ear. "I bet that ass is nice and tight isn't?"

The sensor watched as his commanding officer began to enjoy the spoils of their catch. He didn't utter a word of disapproval, knowing he could be killed if he did. He watched as the leaf's ninja face was shoved into the ground.
"Kill me," Hohei begged, shivered, and then vomited.

"Something is wrong with his chakra," the sensor noticed. "He's on the verge of chakra exhaustion." It was roundabout way of asking if it was really necessary to traumatize their enemies before their deaths.

"By the time I'm done, he's going to be so tired of being fucked, he's going to ask me to kill him. After all, it was Uzumaki who fucked the Kage and then killed her first."

'So the rumors say,' the sensor said to himself. He stared at the ground and found a five pointed maple leaf fallen onto his boot. The metal of an unbuckling belt clinked together. The leaf was a vibrant red. A whine of pain and a satisfied groan. The leaf was as red as the coolest part of a fire. The violent slap of skin on skin. The leaf was as red as the closest hues of a sunrise.

"Fuck."

The sensor raised his eyes as his commanding officer lifted up with a drunken swagger and a terrifying grin. The leaf ninja had only been a toy to him, something he stumbled over to entertain his rather boring day.

The Jounin gave the sensor a cruel stare. "Your turn."

The sensor couldn't help but look at the boy. Hohei's face had been pushed into his own vomit, his jaw was clenched so hard in refusal of any cries of pain, his eyes had grown hard and cold and angry.

The sensor knew he couldn't refuse an order, knew it meant death. The mist ninja approached the genin. He admitted the genin was a pretty little boy. The sensor crouched down under the Jounin's watchful eyes. He finally found the right color. The maple leaf was as red as a Leaf ninja's blood.

Mushi shivered as she stumbled through the forest. She hoped she could make it to camp, find someone to help, and come back to save both Hohei and Udon. But those were hollow hopes. Udon was dead and after the Mist ninja tired of playing with Hohei, he would be dead too.

Mushi stopped when one of her beetles landed on her hand. "Tickler?" Mushi questioned. This was the beetle she put on-

"Mushi!" Mushi looked up with wide eyes as Tomu dropped down from the branches and caught her in his arms. He put her down when he noticed the blood on her arm.

"What's going on?"

Mushi stared. There was no logic to explain this.

"Is that her?" A leaf kunoichi dropped down from the branches. The kunoichi noticed the fresh blood. "Has there been a battle?"

Mushi pointed weakly. She didn't have time to question. "Hohei, he's, please save him."

Tomu crouched, pulled Mushi onto his back, and followed Tenten in the direction Mushi had pointed. Their feet were nothing but wind on fallen leaves as they crept through the forest floor. They peeked through the natural spaces between the maze of leaves. Tomu went slack-jawed and averted his eyes.
It was the Jounin's turn again.

"They have a sensor. We need to strike before he notices," Mushi said urgently. The sensor was leaning against a tree and stared mesmerized by the shape of a maple leaf.

Tenten waited for the perfect moment and found it when the Jounin popped his flaccid dick out Hohei's ass. When a kunai left Tenten's fingers it always hit its target. The Jounin toppled over and screamed in fury as he unplugged the kunai out of his dick. Then the Jounin looked up and barely evaded the spike weight that tore through the cloth of his shirt.

"Who the fuck are you?!" The Jounin demanded. He hadn't expected reinforcements, hadn't expected the kunai that clenched his body in pain.

"The name is Tenten." She smirked at the blood that spread along his crotch. It was Tenten's opinion that such perfect aim should always be appreciated.

Tomu ignored the tears hidden in his shoulder. "He's shaking," Tomu whispered in concern for the quarry he carried on his back.

"He had two chakra pills before we engaged the enemy."

"What?!" Tomu question. "I've known guys who have died on that shit." Tomu immediately stopped and sat Hohei on the ground.

"Why are you stopping? We don't have time for this."

"A chakra pill increases your chakra but afterwards it falls twice as hard. If your chakra capacity isn't enough to handle that type of fall you're dead. Plants contains the most natural chakra, it should minimize the fall at least a little." If anything, Tomu knew his drugs.

Hohei's blank eyes winced when Tomu sat him down on his behind. It was a fire of pain that traveled up the Hyūga's spine. Hohei ate the leaves mechanically. The shaking calmed at the very least. He dared to activate his byakugan. "The sensor is coming after us."

"He's only a chūnin. I think we can take him," Mushi reasoned.

"What? We should run." Tomu argued.

"We can't run from everything."

"I'm not running," Hohei said, gripping the last pill in his hand so hard his nails were digging into his skin. His pride as a Hyūga would not stand for what they did to him. "Go back to camp. I'll stay here and do what I can."

"This is ridiculous. I'm not leaving you Hohei," Tomu said solidly.

Hohei replied bitterly, "A sensor will be able to sense all of Mushi's insects and see her attacks coming, all you're good for is running away, and I'm useless. We don't have the sufficient skillset to defeat this guy. Maybe I can distract him enough for you to get away."

Tomu was not leaving Hohei. He slammed his hands onto Hohei's shoulders and asked, "Can we defeat him with this?"

Hohei had been through a lot today and the sight of Tomu's sharingan was too much. It sent him over the edge into a panic attack. "You're a Uchiha."
"Hohei, focus. We need you."

"You're a Uchiha."

"Come on. Pull it together."

"He's coming," Mushi said insistently. Mushi prepared the hive that has had enough time to breed the numbers. Tomu entered a stance beside Mushi, sharingan activated.

The last thing the Mist ninja anticipated when he cleared the bushes was to be greeted by the most valuable eyes in the world. "An Uchiha."

"It was one guy that fucked my grandmother!" Tomu snapped in frustration.

The Mist ninja placed a hand to his ear and activated his radio. He had to report this immediately. "Yeah, boss, copy, I think I just-"

The mist ninja ripped his fingers way from his ear in order to defend against the sudden flurry of Jyūken strikes. Hohei dug his fingers into his opponent's shoulder. Hohei reached, chakra crackled from the edge of his fingertips right past the ear. The radio exploded, knocking both Hohei and the Mist ninja backwards.

"Hohei, did you take another chakra pill?" Mushi asked fearfully when she caught him with a blanket full of kikaichuu beetles.

"The enemy cannot know about the sharingan. Countries will go to war for those eyes. I had to do something." Hohei leaned against Mushi arms and whispered as the Mist ninja stood up, "There is a chakra stabilizing pill in his pocket."

Tomu looked back and forth between Hohei and the Mist ninja. Tomu grounded his feet and charged forward. Without thought he leaped over a shot of water and landed with his kunai glancing off the Mist ninja's katana. Tomu could see every attack coming at him in a sluggish trick of the perception and could predict every move.

The Mist ninja stepped back for distance to perform a jutsu. Mushi attacked from behind, dipped underneath the katana while Tomu stabbed a kunai into the thick flesh of the Mist ninja's thigh. During the double-team, Mushi's beetles raided the Mist ninja's pockets and procured the pill.

"Here," Mushi practically shoved the pill into Hohei's mouth. "It's not going to save you."

Hohei jabbed his fingers into his own chakra nodes. It decreased the amount of chakra he was going to lose once the side-effects kicked in. "Mushi, spread out your hive all around us and keep them moving. It will throw off his senses. It will give you enough cover when Tomu creates an opening. Tell Tomu he might be able to copy his enemies attack but if he isn't naturally water affinity or hasn't mastered it, he isn't going to be able to perform it. Focus on his shoulder and thigh."

Hohei's instructions whispered through a kikaichuu beetle at the base of Tomu's ear.

Tomu was scared out of his mind as he fought for his life. The sharingan kept his awareness focused on the Mist ninja's wounds. Tomu heavily exploited the side of the wounded shoulder and thigh.

Tomu flipped backwards to evade a stroke of the katana. He didn't even know he could do that. Tomu's taijutsu moves were wild and erratic, stolen by watching Naruto spar with his shadow clones back at the compound. He rolled through the grass, grabbing a shuriken in the movement, and threw it without aiming. The Mist ninja stumbled backwards as the shuriken stuck in his eye. It was perfect.
aim, a perfect aim stolen from watching Tenten practice while they were on the road.

Mushi came from behind and thrust a kunai into the base of the Mist ninja's neck. Tomu punched his opponent straight in the face who fell backwards from the blow. Mushi's beetles swarmed for his chakra and then swept out the way when an inferno of fire blasted and cooked the corpse.

Tomu fell to his knees in exhaustion. Mushi's hood had fallen backwards. Dirt and sweat stuck to her tired smile. They embraced.

Hohei never thought he'd see anything more beautiful than a Mist ninja in flames. Unable to hold on any longer, his vision darkened and blacked out. When Hohei re-opened his eyes, he was on Tomu's back, racing through the maze of forest leaves. "Thanks," Hohei mumbled.

"Don't push yourself. We'll get you to a medic," Tomu promised. "You'll be okay."

Hohei nodded into Tomu's shoulder. Hohei didn't think he would ever be okay after this. "You're a Uchiha," Hohei repeated, surprised, unsure how he felt about Tomu's secret.

"I am not. These eyes don't change who I am."

"No, it's not the eyes," Mushi said as she reached out and grabbed Tomu's hand. "It's this life."

Tenten admitted her opponent was skilled with a katana. The Jounin admitted his opponent was skilled with any matter of metal that appeared in her hand. A silent respect formed on both sides.

The Jounin was careful to circle the mine-field of shuriken. "You're good but not good enough to kill me."

Tenten smirked, "Do you want to place a bet on that?"

For all of Tenten's taunting, she knew he was right. She was tiring quicker. Her usual stamina had been crippled by months of not being out on the field. She needed help. The scroll snapped in the wind before Tenten slammed it onto the ground. The Jounin didn't make a move to stop her. He was too curious to find out what weapon she was going to pull out next.

The ground creaked underneath the weight of the summon that stepped out of the smoke. The large black and white panda spun a naginata in his palm before thrusting it to the ground. The earth gave way and cracked underneath the hilt. The summon wore a martial arts gi with the mon of 'kin' printed onto its chest.

Tenten claimed an Omi Yari across her back with the end spear pointed towards the Mist ninja. The summon and summoner moved in tandem as if they were controlled by the same puppet strings. The Jounin cursed his curiosity. He reached for the scroll to his own summon to even the playing field, but didn't have the time once the weapon's duo was upon him.

Sparks as the katana clashed with the Omi Yari. Metal grazed through Tenten's shin. She jumped back, unhooked the wind and fire wheels from her waist and threw them like a boomerang. Blood dripped from a cut in her cheek. The rattle of chain links snaked through the air and curved around the Mist ninja's feet.

Tenten ran up the back full of black and white fur, jumped into the air, and summoned the Jidanda monstrosity beneath her feet. The large spiked metal ball landed, crushing the earth and the body of the Mist ninja. Tenten cursed when a cloud of mist escaped from underneath. She activated the explosive tags, which jumped her backwards into the air.
The enemy ninja reformed from the mist. Tenten was breathing heavily. She could feel the adrenaline rushing through her body. It was the only time Tenten truly felt alive.

She motioned to her summon and activated the spike ball beneath her feet. The panda curled, the two spikes ends of the spear protruding from both sides of the black and white furry ball. Tenten jumped down just as the two large spinning balls gained momentum and shot forward. They rolled like an avalanche of boulders towards the Mist ninja.

The Mist Jounin leaped, barely evading the clash of metal spikes. The Jounin's limbs tightened together as the kusarigama spun around his body and the sickle caught into his flesh. The summon lifted the spinning Jidanda and placed it harmlessly to the ground.

Tenten smirked. She pulled on the chain and tightened the sickle's grip into the Jounin's waist. Then she jerked it forward, springing the Mist ninja towards her. His adam's apple landed straight through her kunai. His weight slid forward until his neck was caught on the hilt. Sometimes a simple kunai was all that was needed.

Tenten collapsed backwards on the ground. Her body was burning so hot from the heat of battle. She had lost a clip that held one of her buns together. Her shirt was in tatters. She survived by the skin of her teeth. Any longer, her exhaustion would have been the weapon to slay her.

It began in her toes. Then it traveled up her legs, around the heavy pounding of her chest, consumed her lungs, and finally Tenten released a mad laughter. It echoed through the forest of red maple leaves.

She wasn't out of the game yet.

Since the medical tents were not yet full, Hohei was given a more spacious corner. Tomu rolled the ache in his shoulders and carried the weight of his head in his hands. He sat on the adjacent cot and watch Hohei in his sleep. Tomu and Hohei had never been friends.

Mushi entered the tent with two bowls of soup. She sat down and handed over the bowl of tasteless camp food. They sat in silence, while their bowls turned cold, watching the oscillating motions of Hohei's chest. One breath at a time.

"This is what it's like to be a ninja?"

Mushi nodded.

She leaned to the side and was caught by Tomu's shoulder. Tomu adjusted his arm and wrapped it around her. "I love you. I needed you to know in case this war… and we…" Tomu shrugged his shoulders, "Die."

The two teenagers held onto each other, a silent promise that this war wouldn't tear them apart. They were too tired to be embarrassed by their closeness when they received a visitor in the tent. Mushi tightened her grip through Tomu's fingers. Naruto looked down at the tired couple, but everyone was tired. It didn't blunt the edge of his disapproval, "I let you come out here on your own terms because you promised me one thing. What was that?"

Tomu hunched his shoulders, embarrassed to be scolded in front of his girl. "I promised not to activate my sharingan unless it was a life or death situation."
"It was a life or death situation, Uzumaki-san," Mushi spoke up quickly.

Tomu placed a hand on Mushi's knee, a polite attempt to say he could handle it. "Tenten would have written to the Hokage. I didn't have a choice."

"That is not acceptable. We're not in Konoha anymore. One mistake, the wrong person knows, and you are marked for dead. You are not strong enough to protect yourself if your kekkai genkai goes public. It should be the last resort in a battle. Life or death, that was our agreement."

"I understand."

Naruto softened. He rubbed his eyes and opened them to the prone figure of Hohei in bed. He couldn't believe he let this happen to one of Hinata's on his watch. He had read the reports. He knew every detail of what had happened.

"Did you catch the spy?" Tomu asked hopefully.

"We haven't been able to identify him."

Tomu frowned. "So this," he shrugged in Hohei's direction. "So all of this was for nothing?"

"Most of the time it is for nothing. But the risk is still taken, just in case it is that one rare moment that it could be for everything." Naruto could feel the heaviness in his eyes. "I want you to return to Konoha. It's too dangerous."

"But if I had never come Mushi and Hohei would be dead," Tomu argued. "You can't just ship me back."

"You've accomplished what you came here to accomplish haven't you? You told her?"

Mushi rubbed her thumb over Tomu's hand. "I love you too."

Tomu couldn't leave her in this chaos. He couldn't live with himself if he wasn't there if something happened to her. He hadn't been there when his mother died alone in her hospital room. He hadn't been there. "I can't leave her."

Mushi wanted to argue with him but she couldn't force herself to do it. She knew Tomu was safe in Konoha but there was a selfish part of her that didn't want to be alone anymore. Love. Some would say it was a ninja's bane.

Naruto was not moved by Tomu's argument. "I'm taking you home. It's too dangerous. You're not even a ninja."

"Then get me a damn hitai-ite!" Tomu snapped. "You're scared, Naruto. I'm scared but this is what I choose. Let me make my own mistakes."

It was like watching Sasuke leave at the valley of the end. No matter how hard Naruto tried to stop him, Sasuke made his choice. Naruto hid shaking hands inside of his cloak. Then he snatched the hitai-ite off his forehead and threw it in Tomu's lap.

Tomu touched his fingers along the metal edge of the leaf symbol. It was scuffed along the edges. There were slight dents where it had deflected enemy kunai. The cloth was frayed at the ends. Mushi's breath hitched. That was the Uzumaki Naruto's hitai-ite.

"Thank you."
"Yeah, whatever, just stay out of trouble. It has a bad habit of finding you," Naruto reprimanded sternly. Then Naruto went in his pockets and remembered the items the medics had given him. Both Mushi and Tomu blushed when Naruto dumped a handful of condoms into Tomu's lap. "Disease is getting worse in camp. It's all this waiting around."

"We will," Mushi promised and straightened her shoulders. She proudly owned that Tomu was her boyfriend. A monogamous relationship was a lot more than most ninja could claim.

Naruto stopped before he walked out of the tent. "Be safe." He meant that in more ways than one. His departure left Tomu and Mushi staring at the hitai-ite.

"Once you put it on, you can't go back," Mushi warned.

The weight of the metal was heavier than Tomu thought it would be. He wrapped it around his forehead and tied together the cloth. It felt as if he was selling his soul. Hopefully, it was worth enough to buy their peace.

Tomu and Mushi leaned against each other and closed tired eyes. They sat in silence, while their bowls turned cold, watching the oscillating motions of Hohei's chest. One breath at a time.

The bandages moved. Hohei strained to open his eyes. He almost had a panic attack when he stared at the Hyūga waiting for him to wake up. He was a Hyūga. It was normal to have family wherever you went looking out for you, but this visitor was unexpected.

"Calm," Hinata reached and placed a hand on his chest. It was unheard of for the Clan Head to leave Konoha unless for official business. Hinata sat on the edge of his bed, poised, and patient. "How are you feeling?"

Hinata retracted her hand and allowed Hohei to push himself into a sitting position. Even though Hohei felt as if his insides were burning, he was determined to pick himself up.

"I have been asked to deliver this to you."

Hohei blinked when she placed a flak jacket into his lap. "After going over the reports, they decided you showed sufficient qualities to earn a field promotion to chūnin."

Hohei didn't show any signs of excitement. A flak jacket gave him greater respect and a higher pay grade but the problem was, during war, a Jounin were typically too tough to die easy and the genin weren't put out on the front lines. It was always the chūnin that died first.

But in the Clan Head's presence, he reached for it. He knew he didn't have a choice. His eyes were defective. Now that the playing field had been leveled between branch and main, skill and the potency of your byakugan was the only measure of respect. Secrets didn't stay long in the Hyūga clan and once his eyes had been revealed, even his cousins didn't want to hang around him as if his defect was contagious. When he used to be a main member, no one looked down on him but now, a promotion was his only chance at respect.

"I accept." Hohei took hold of the flak jacket after he came to terms with his conflicted emotions.

"Hohei," Hinata whispered gently. "You don't have to."

"Yes I do," Hohei said bitterly, "or I will be looked down on all my life."

Hinata answered, "I was looked down on all my life and I understand why you need to accept it,"
Hinata leaned forward with a whisper, "but that doesn't mean you can't be angry about it. Not even a Hyūga can be hard and cold and resigned to his fate all the time."

Hohei could feel the anger and the frustration and the pressure like an infected wound that would not heal. His shoulders shook.

"It's okay to cry."

Hinata finally offered comfort when he reached for it. Hinata held the tears of the young teenager into her bosom. The fresh scent of her clothes reminded Hohei of home. Hohei had never cried like this before, not even as a child. He wiped his cheeks and felt embarrassed that he had cried all over the Clan Head but he didn't have the strength to pick his head out of her lap.

"Does my mom know?"

"Not the details," Hinata said as she stroked her fingers through his hair.

"Why are you here?"

"Perks that comes with having an alliance with the Uzumaki Clan. The world is a cruel place and it is my belief that as a clan we should do more to support each other. We're a family and I still have a long way to go to teach a Hyūga what that means."

"Do you know what it means?" Hohei asked softly. He hadn't meant to sound difficult.

Hinata appreciated the challenge. She didn't want the Hyūga clan to blindly accept the world for what is was like sheep anymore. "I'm still learning myself." After all, Hanabi was a work in progress.

Within the softness of her fingers, underneath her fingernails was an anger carefully hidden. Hinata knew a lot of her clan was going to die because of this war. Dying on a battlefield was understandable but terrorizing and raping a genin three times over was not. Hinata whispered as Hohei drifted off to sleep.

"I will spill lakes of blood, rip out hearts, and become the shadows people fear before I ever allow such a travesty to happen again."

Hound was on scouting duty. He sat among the reeds while watching the shadows in the trees rooted onto the distant hills. Suddenly the chūnin beside him jumped.

"Just a bird."

"Are you sure? It could have been a Leaf ninja."

"It was a bird," Hound yawned. He wished he was on the other side. When the sun dipped down, he lifted himself up at the end of his watch. The sand molded to the print of his ninja boots. Insects scattered from adrift sea kelp. His toes were suddenly run over by water when the sea reached out in an unexpected surge. The rolling waves were constant.

Hound's partner suddenly reached down and collected a seashell from the sand. The mist ninja rubbed the smooth ridges with his thumb and then pocketed it in the front of his flak jacket. Hound didn't ask. He tried not to get too attached.

The Mist ninja camp spread for miles along the shore. Tents were erected on unstable foundations of sand but never bowed to even the strongest of waves. Hound and his partner went their separate
ways after they reported to their commanding officer. Hound passed by card games of goldfish, fishing contests, and bored expressions.

Sand collected between his toes.

Hound turned suddenly when whispers rolled through the camp like waves. Mist ninja abandoned their games for something interesting to mark their day. Hound followed the school of ninja. Through the throng of heads, Hound spotted Sandayuu Momochi. Momochi was as paranoid of spies as spies were paranoid of getting caught.

Water splashed as Momochi pushed a man with a bag over his head onto his knees. The tide dampened the prisoner's pants. "Some of you have forgotten why we are out here. Some of you have started to think this is just a vacation." Momochi reached for the coarse brown bag and pulled it off. As if on cue, the crowd cheered at the appearance of metal engraved with a leaf. It was out of place among the shore, as if the leaf had blown in by an ill wind.

It was a sting that paralyzed every part of Hound's body.

"We are here to kill leaf ninja," Momochi reminded as he roughly grabbed the hair of the captured ninja bound by his wrists. Momochi snatched the hitai-ite from around the prisoner's neck and raised the leaf into the air. "We will attack soon," Momochi didn't smile but he cut into one, "and when we do, whoever collects the most leaf hitai-ite will be awarded with a sword and the title of Seven Swordsmen of the Mist."

There were shouts and hollers. The sounds rolled past Hound as he stared blankly at the Leaf prisoner: Udon.

Hound blinked when he was shoved to the side as the crowd erupted in celebration at the news. What they didn't know, and what Hound did, was that Sandayuu Momochi wasn't planning on attacking anytime soon. This was all just a show to keep his men from getting bored and returning home. With a sword on the line, no one was going anywhere. It was also a tactic to root out spies. Hound knew that, was all too aware of Momochi's cunning intelligence after spying on him for weeks, but Hound was still conflicted.

It wasn't just any Leaf ninja. It was Udon. Konohamaru's best friend. They had saved each other's lives since they were genin.

Right before Momochi forced Udon to his feet. For a second, Udon glanced up. Their eyes met. Just as quickly as a leaf snapping off a limb, they both looked away. Udon was telling Konohamaru to let him go, to let him fall.

Sandayuu staked Udon at the center of camp, daring, challenging anyone to come save him. Hound stuffed fists into his pockets, turned and stomped away while the water resisted his need to get very far.

Hound watched as silver fish nibbled on his toes. The night descended and the moon reflected off the formless waves. Hound knew he was an important piece to the Captain's plan. But whatever happened to 'those who don't go back for their friends are worse than scum'?

Clouds drifted in front of the moon which trapped a sharp darkness in the camp. Hound's footsteps were louder than he anticipated as he attempted to stealthily creep along the water. Eventually he pulled himself up and managed to silence his footsteps by gliding atop the water on chakra.

Hound stopped when he could see the silhouette of Udon tethered to the embedded fishing pole. He
created a henged shadow clone and sent him forward, easing through the shadows, and stretching along the waves beneath the guard's awareness. The clone reached the pole without incident and slit the rope that held Udon with a kunai.

Udon suddenly disappeared in a splash of water. Hound took a step backwards as lights from the guards began to come on. The shadow clone disappeared. Hound backed up until the lights were distant on the water.

"Did you really think you got away?"

Hound went rigid. The waves soaked his pants and added unwanted weight. He turned with a heavy breath to the cold night air. Sandayuu Momochi stood behind him. The burned that scarred Momochi twitched.

The surrounding ocean suddenly lit up in a brilliant shade of red.

Momochi borrowed the waves and shielded himself from the large fireball attack. The large light show was nothing more than an attraction. The greater the light, the larger the shadow. Hound used the cover of darkness to cloak his escape. He raced across the water, past Mist ninja who did not yet know what was going on, too focused on the direction of the still fading fire.

Hound reached into the water to pull away whatever had gotten entangled in his feet. He withdrew his hand at the feel of something slimy and wet. Then his hand was stuck. Without his hand he realized in alarm he couldn't complete hand signals. He quickly withdrew a kunai and attempted to cut his fingers loose but the ink spread to the metal and eventually to his other hand. His feet were stuck, gathering a patch of seaweed he stumbled over, and fell sideways with a splash.

Like floundering fish caught in a net, Hound continued to struggle when Sandayuu Momochi calmly walked through a camp thrown into a chaos and confusion Hound had caused. Momochi stood over Hound, reached down into Hound's flak jacket until he found the hidden Leaf hitai-ite.

Hound stopped struggling and collapsed backwards into the sand as the waves receded around his hair. The stars were millions of fireflies engulfed by darkness threatening to swallow them. The sand of Fire Country stuck to the Mist uniform he wore.

Momochi admired how the metal reflected off the moonlight. "For my growing collection," Momochi explained as he pocketed the leaf symbol. "Leaf ninja, so bloody sentimental."

"Good job, Konohamaru," Udon said when Konohamaru finally opened his eyes.

The two leaf ninja sat tied to chairs with chakra draining cuffs around their wrists and placed on opposite ends of the tent. Both knew what was about to happen to them.

Konohamaru tested the cuffs. With a weak smile, "I didn't get an invitation to the party."

Udon sighed and leaned back with a sniff. Stress worsened his allergies. "So what have you been up to?"

"Killing Mist ninja. You?"

"The same," Udon answered. "How is Moegi doing?"

"Don't know. Haven't seen her since she's been assigned to Ame and many letters haven't been getting through. Last I've been in Konoha, your folks were doing well."
"Yours?"

"Same."

"If we make it out of this I want some of your mom's takoyaki."

"Deal."

Their casual chatting stopped when the flap of the tent pulled back to allow the woman with acidic green eyes to enter. Konohamaru knew exactly who she was and gave up any thoughts entertaining they might get out of this alive.

"They're cute," Kyouya Houzuki grinned as she studied her two victims. "We're going to have lots of fun." The twin swords at her side reflected for a moment the sliver of moonlight that crept into the tent. Kyouya dragged the chairs until they were facing each other.

Konohamaru's face was stone as she slid her fingernail down his chin. "Alright, Mr. ANBU this is how the game goes, you answer my question and your boyfriend gets to keep his fingers. Looks like he's not starting off with an ideal number."

"Do you remember how I lost my finger?" Udon asked nonchalantly as if there wasn't a psychopath encircling them.

Annoyed that she was being ignored, Houzuki skipped the question. Udon's index finger went flying. Blood dripped down onto Konohamaru's toes. Udon grimaced, "It's just a finger."

Kyouya stuffed a rag into Udon's mouth which finally allowed her to operate in peace. Kyouya reached down and picked up the fallen finger from the floor. She admired the clean cut. "What is your mission?" Kyouya asked.

Konohamaru replied to the memory, "You were saving my life. You should not have come back for me."

Cincada did not want to be the one to deliver the bad news but the information had come through his channels. He raised his hand to knock on the door.

"Captain," suddenly came from the other side in a heated mix between a squeal and a moan. Cincada curiously leaned his ear to the door. The springs of the office couch squeaked in rhythm, occasionally broken by a woman's heavy moan. Cincada wondered if the Captain would kill him for interrupting. His hive whispered conflicting opinions of what he should do.

Cincada considered the importance of his information and raised his hand to once again knock on the door. He knocked on air. The door suddenly opened.

"You have business with the Captain?" Bobcat greeted with a chirp. Her flak jacket barely covered her bare breasts and black underwear. Cincada wasn't surprised by those who decided to fuck their way to a promotion.

"I have important information to deliver to the Captain."

Bobcat stepped to the side to reveal a second woman lying on the Captain's couch completely in the nude except for the Wolf mask she wore. If this was the type of benefits to being a Captain, Cincada would accept the position in a heartbeat.
"What have you come to tell me?" Captain Fox asked as he sat down at his desk with nothing on but his cloak, boxers, and mask. Sweat and the distinctive smell of sex clung to his skin.

"I've gotten news from our people within the Mist camp on the Eastern Front. Hound has been captured by Momochi."

"Is he dead?"

"We don't know."

Cincada imagined that the Captain's expression was as hard as his mask. "Leave." Cincada did so at once. "All of you."

"But Captain," Wolf growled while her fingers teased her begging vagina.

"I said out."

The women cringed as if painfully lashed by the burst of red chakra that spread throughout the room. Wolf jumped from the couch and grabbed her clothes from the floor. The Captain leaned backwards in his chair and stared at the ceiling as the girls left his office.

Hound had been an instrumental piece in his plan to take down Sandayū Momochi. He had been working on that plan for weeks. Now he had to start all over, from scratch. The lines of ink blurred in the Captain's vision as he stared at the paperwork on his desk.

There had to be something he could salvage from this disaster.

"One of my top agents has been compromised," Fox Captain reported to the Hokage. "His capture has set my plans back for Momochi exponentially."

"Why did you give such an important mission to someone who had the potential to get caught so foolishly?" The Hokage reprimanded.

"Around the same time of my agent's disappearance, Udon went missing after a run-in with a few Mist ninja. It is of my opinion that my agent was facing conflicting loyalties. He isn't usually so… stupid."

"Konohamaru should have known better." The Hokage reprimanded but sometimes her anger tired her, "Even if it was Udon." It was potentially worse than the Hatake incident - when Konoha's White Fang decided to abandon his mission in order to save his teammates. That mission cost Konoha another year in the Third Shinobi war.

"We might be able to turn this to our advantage," Fox suggested.

"I'm listening," the Hokage said curiously.

"One of Udon's teammate was an Aburame and she had a bug on him. Mantis has helped me to trace Udon's location to a small island in the middle of the sea. It is my opinion that this island is the hidden headquarters of Kiri's T&I division." Because the location was such a well-kept secret within Kiri and Kyouka largely kept her affairs separate from her brother, even the Captain hadn't known its exact location.

"I want to save our ninja and completely obliterate this island. It also might give us an opening at Kyouya."
The Hokage considered the request. "Destroying their T&I division would certainly put them into a frenzy. It will be a much needed blow to Kiri. I want to see a plan of how--"

Captain Fox slapped the folder of paperwork onto her desk. Tsunade reached for it and skimmed through a detailed plan of the operation. "Alright then, I'll leave this matter in your hands. Do what you do best."

Hanabi leaned over the table and sniffed the white powder up her nose. She laid back and watched the overhead light flicker like the sparks of two kunai clashing against one another. There was a sudden commotion. All of the drug pushers in the small bar quickly stood to attention.

Hanabi didn't care to look. She didn't care, and that was the point.

"Hanabi."

Hanabi grunted when she let the weight of her head drop and Uzumaki Naruto sat down in front of her.

"Boss," One of the drug pushers bowed and respectfully placed a cup of water in front of him. Hanabi raised an eyebrow.

"I'm not here on business," Naruto raised a hand. The bar eased and the pushers turned back to peddling their wares to the patrons.

"What?" Hanabi asked carelessly.

"I have a mission for you."

"I thought I was suspended from the team," Hanabi snorted. Her undercover mission was a success since she had prevented assassination of the Otokage and uncovered the decrypted letter with ties to Iron Country. It was the practices she missed afterwards and finally showing up drunk that finally got her kicked out of ANBU. She had certainly been trying.

"You can sit around here feeling sorry for yourself or you can get back out on the field and prove to me why I picked you in the first place."

Hanabi leaned forward and rested a finger onto his chest, "You picked me because you couldn't fuck my sister and I'm the next best thing,"

Naruto caught her wrist. Hanabi winced when he unceremoniously twisted it and Hanabi's head was forced to the table. She looked up at him with her byakugan activated in her fury. Hanabi could see the vibrations in his throat as a low growl escaped his lips.

"Don't drag your sister into your self-hate. It's easy to give up but it's not going to make you feel any better about yourself. We all make mistakes, we all make decisions, and we all have to fucking live with them." Naruto enunciated every word and every syllable revealed the sharpness of his incisors.

"I'm spoiled, everything in life always came easy, and I give up. You were right about me."

Naruto released her. Hanabi picked her face from the table with the white powder stuck to strands of her hair. Naruto stood up and dropped a folder onto the table.

Hanabi couldn't break eye contact, as if the magnetism of his terrifying killer intent held her enthralled. Naruto stopped, looked behind him with eyes the color of fresh blood, "On a personal
note, if you ever strike your sister again, I'll eat you."

Hanabi believed him. She watched as the crowd parted for him. It wasn't until he left the building, could she breathe from the killing intent that was choking her. Her hands couldn't stop shaking. Then she realized that the intensity of Naruto's hatred for her didn't skim the amount of hatred she had for herself.

Hanabi grasped her head and found herself looking down at the folder. It stared at her in challenge. Annoyed by its presence, her byakugan activated and Hanabi found herself staring at Hound's profile. There was one word at its end: missing.

It was a small island in the middle of the sea.

The vibration of wings sent the clouds hugging past the masks as the Leaf ANBU navigated the dark sky. Crane sat at the end of the iconic rhinoceros beetle, a summon shared throughout the Aburame Clan. Crane focused on the small island glittering like ebony against the dark waves. Her byakugan observed violent waves knocking against the craggy shoreline and the guards. Crane lifted her hand and signaled when they were above the target area to land.

The summon was dismissed into smoke and formed a passing cloud. Shadows plummeted toward the ground like black rain. Chakra padded their fall and landed on silent feet. The Captain's cloak billowed behind him. There were two guards at the hidden entrance. Crane's breath hitched at the speed of the Captain's disappearance, then the guards fell. Her byakugan didn't catch how they died.

It was the first time she had been on a mission with the Captain.

The team caught up with the Captain at the entrance. Bobcat activated her jutsu, reached down and placed her hands on the forehead of the fallen guards. The corpses lifted themselves up like mindless zombies and straightened back into their posts.

"The Leaf ninja are kept in the west wing. Kyouya is there now," Bobcat reported the information she found in the guard's heads.

"Crane and I to the west, east, and south. Bobcat and Cincada to the north. Maintain two-man teams at all times. Clear out your sections and be careful. They know we're here."

No one questioned their orders and they parted within the crossroads of the hallway. Bobcat and Cincada to the north. Clones to the east and south. Fox motioned with his fingers and Crane quickly followed to the west. Crane followed the Captain through the dark and choking hallways. It was the humidity that gave away their position.

"What do you see?"

Crane activated her byakugan. The images she saw made her stumble over her feet. Her nails bled over the walls in an attempt to balance. She surrendered her head and vomited to the ground. Crane couldn't bear the scenes she saw and immediately deactivated her byakugan.

Captain Fox put a hand on her shoulder, "Keep moving." It wasn't an order but more akin to a piece of advice.

"They're gathering past this room to welcome you."

The doors swept open as Captain Fox walked into the next room. A team of ten Mist ninja waited to greet him. Crane cringed at the sudden wave of chakra hot against her skin. The intensity of chakra
literally blinded her byakugan. When the light faded from her eyes, she stepped forward into the wet puddle of blood. She stared slack jawed at the bloodshed equaled to a battlefield or a torture chamber. The Captain looked back and his hard mask seemed to ask, 'Are you afraid of me?'

Crane realized it had been a show for her.

They walked into one of the cells. The man was barely alive. He hung from a cage at the top of the ceiling. There were large open gashes in the skin where a hot iron poker was stabbed between the cracks of the cage. Leaf ninja. Seeing the scene in color than through the greys of her byakugan was even more shocking.

Captain strode toward the caged man and slit his throat with a kunai. He passed Fox without another word and went to the next cell. He walked as if there was a part of him that was at home here.

"Three in the next room," Crane reported but he already knew. He could sense them, smell them, feel them, and taste the sweat that dripped from their scared skin.

A blast of wind rushed past her, harming nothing but her balance. Sudden screams when bodies were torn in half and heads decapitated from the body. A lucky one who must have been natural to air felt the attack coming, managed to save his life, but not much else on his body.

The Mist torturer screamed. It smelled like the sharp scent of piss. Fox reached out his hand, claws extended and ripped his throat out with no more effort than someone turning down the volume.

The four walls, the chains, the metal, and the flesh was Kyouya's dominion. No one dared to disturb her in the spaces she reigned.

"You are fun," Kyouya claimed as she circled the mass of meat hanging from the ceiling like a butcher evaluating what piece she should cut next.

Konohamaru stared blankly at the abused and burnt husk of his best friend.

"Give me an answer and I'll let him die."

Konohamaru's lips were dry and his throat cracked. His vision blurred, unable to look upon Udon trying so desperately to find death but she always held it at arm's length, cackling in amusement at his attempts to catch it.

"What is your mission?"

"Who is your Captain?"

"Fox."

Kyouya was a little taken back by the sudden answer. It was not his time to break yet. "Fox? Does he organize Konoha's effort in Kiri?"

"Or you can just ask me."

Kyouya seethed and instinctively evaporated in the air and appeared again onto the ceiling. Crane entered the cell just in time to watch Fox tear through the roof with a rasengan and chase after Kyouya like cat after mice.

Crane released Udon and Konohamaru. Konohamaru caught his balance against the same table that held the tools which pierced his skin.
Udon couldn't stand and Konohamaru was forced to bear his weight. The tendons in Udon's wrists and ankles were severed. Even if he was to recover, if ever, he'll never be whole again. Udon would never be able to walk again on his own. Konohamaru gently laid Udon on the ground. Konohamaru was looking for a sign, some sort of approval or confirmation, but he didn't get any. Udon's eyes were glazed over, empty, lost.

"Crane, can I borrow your sword?" Konohamaru asked. Crane unsheathed the sword and handed it to Konohamaru.

The katana did not go easy into Udon's chest.

Crane watched and knew. Udon was finally released from his pain but who would release Konohamaru from his?

The rasengan crashed into empty air. The Captain turned when Houzuki appeared behind him, roundhouse kick, and she walked around his attack. The Captain studied Kyouya's movements. There was no way she was this fast.

Captain growled as he put his hands together and used the Fox's chakra to disrupt the genjutsu. He looked around in alarm at the inscriptions surrounding his standing position. He flipped out of the way just as the script glowed with chakra and exploded where his feet had been seconds before.

The Captain turned once he sensed Kyouya presence materialize out of the air. He snatched the paper seals from his belt. It landed between her eyes. The seal activated on touch and sprouted electrocuting ropes around her body.

Kyouya smiled at the pain, almost as if it turned her on, "Ravage me Captain."

The Captain didn't entertain her eccentrics. He approached her and withdrew his katana.

Kyouya squirmed on the ground, looked up at the Captain upside down. Her smile was acidic as her eyes. "One day I'm going to get my hands all over you."

Suddenly, a bright light blinded the Captain. Kyouya lit up like an electric eel and short-circuited the ropes that bound her. The Captain opened his eyes and she was gone, faded away into the moisture in the air and waves of the sea.

"Fuck," The Captain cursed. He was going to have to further tweak his lightning seal.

The Captain re-entered the cell. He didn't ask any questions when he found Konohamaru crying over Udon's corpse. Konohamaru grabbed Udon's body, determined to bury him in Konoha. A shadow clone used the hiraishin technique to teleport the rescued to safety.

Once the rest of the facility was cleared out, the team regrouped outside. The Captain teleported the entire team to safety in order to complete the finale. He jumped into the air with two large Oodama rasengan in each hand. The two orbs shone like brilliant suns and were blasted downwards towards the small island.

The ocean caused the waves to swell backwards and then swallow the remains of the island in its jaw like that of a cruel monster. Then the ocean returned to peace.

Hinata Hyūga didn't flinch, hesitate, or find anything out of the ordinary when she stepped into her bedroom and found a body lying across her bed. The petals of blood soaked into the sheets were a
A gentle stream of moonlight brushed through the window. Hinata leaned over the prone body, was cautious with her fingers as she settled them on the edge of the mask, as if there was a certain way it should be handled less it crumbles. The Fox mask peeled away.

"Mission successful?"

"Successful," Naruto answered after a moment.

"Konohamaru?"

"Alive."

"Udon?"

"Dead." Naruto turned and stuffed his head into the pillow.

The white cloak dripped with fresh blood. Hinata calculated it couldn't have been less than an hour before he finished the mission. She reached forward and pulled the cloak off his arms. His arms flopped back onto the bed with weight and exhaustion. She reached around his chest and unbuckled the straps of the flak jacket. She stripped him until she peeled back the sweat soaked undershirt from his bare skin.

"I knew them before they ever graduated from the Academy, fuck, I knew them when they were nothing but kids."

Hinata scanned her byakugan over his body, checking the pulse of his heart, looking for signs of any new knitted flesh. His muscles were tense and knotted. She pressed two fingers into his back and concentrated her chakra to massage throughout the knots.

His shoulders relaxed, the knots came undone, and Naruto breathed easier underneath Hinata's hand. She reached for the covers and without direction Naruto pulled himself up until they both were underneath. His hand smeared blood along the white slip of her dress as he wrapped his arms around her. The covers stained the blood along her thigh. Naruto nuzzled into her neck and breathe in her scent. She smelled of blood.

Hinata woke as the sun drifted into her eyes. She snapped awake at the sound of running water. The tension left her body when she realized it was only the unwelcome sound of the shower handle screeching off. Hinata stared blankly as Naruto entered through the double-doors of her bedroom with a towel around his waist.

"You took a shower in my bathroom?" Hinata asked incredulously. His side of the bed was still warm with blood. She wondered if allowing another man to sleep in her bed and bathe in her bathroom was considered cheating? She didn't know the boundaries anymore.

Naruto peeked out from under the strands of his blonde hair with a foxish smile. "I was dirty."

"You can't be here." Hinata said and pulled the covers above her chest.

There was a sudden knock on the door. Naruto reached and opened the door to five blushing and giggling girls. "We brought umm…" the Hyūga stuttered, blinded by Naruto's bare chiseled chest.
"We brought Onee-sama's morning tea."

Naruto flashed a bright smile, "Thank you, ladies." Naruto turned from the door with a tea set for two.

"What did you do?"

"Nothing, I just took a shower," Naruto snickered. Hinata was well aware of Naruto's showers when he knew he had an audience. Naruto sat down on the edge of the bed and poured Hinata's tea.

"Would you put on some pants?"

"My pants from last night are bloody and dirty and Neji is rather narrow around the waist. Perhaps I should start leaving clothes here."

Hinata almost choked on her tea. "You will do no such thing."

There was another knock on the door. "It's for you," Hinata said with a subtle smile.

Naruto gave her a curious look and went to answer the door. "Uzumaki," Auntie was the only Hyūga who didn't bother with the formalities of honorifics. She shoved a tray into his face. Naruto soured when he looked at the offering of cleaned pants freshly bought from the store. Not only that, but there was underwear, a shirt, and clean boots. "You didn't have to," Naruto grumbled.

Auntie gave a terse smirk, "Hyūga hospitality."

"Then I guess I can't refuse." Naruto dropped his towel. Auntie didn't entertain his mischievous, shoved the tray into his chest, and slammed the door into his face. Naruto chuckled and pulled on the pants, leaving the rest on the dresser.

"If I knew this was going to be an extended stay I would have never let you sleep overnight. Why do you always have to test your boundaries?" Hinata questioned. She resigned herself to Naruto's lingering presence and got out of bed to begin her day. She reached for her large walk-in closet.

Naruto came up behind her and claimed her curves with his hands. He whispered in her ear, "Because every time I do, I get a little further."

He quickly took advantage of the fact she wore no underwear, slid his hands underneath the silk until he cradled her breasts. "Naruto," Hinata said patiently as he pressed her against the wall and embedded his erection between her butt cheeks. Naruto teased her often, never took it all the way, but always crossed the border of inappropriate. "You have plenty of women in Konoha who can satisfy your libido."

It was the way Hinata said the words which caught Naruto off-guard. "Are you jealous?"

Hinata peeled his hands off her breasts. "No. I'm only noting your sudden increase in promiscuity."

Naruto leaned backwards to give Hinata enough room to face him. Naruto searched her eyes for any sign of emotion but she was hiding it well. His more active sex life had nothing to do with Hinata. He could keep himself controlled around her when he wanted to, just often chose not to. "It helps with the stress."

Naruto pulled away and reached for the crisp clothes. "It's about time I got to the hospital."

He didn't say it aloud, but Hinata knew his decision to linger around the compound was an excuse to
delay the hospital visit. "The injuries are severe?"

"Severe enough. I'll probably be there all day with the family."

Hinata placed a hand on his arm before he could disappear. "I'll wash your uniform. You can pick it up later tonight."

Naruto's smiled with rays of sun in the corners of his lips. "Tonight it is."

Konohamaru had already woken up when Naruto arrived at the hospital. Naruto peeked into the room where Konohamaru's mother was fussing over him. Akai, Konohamaru's cousin and Kurenai's daughter, stood on her tiptoes chatting nonstop.

"It was a close one," Sarutobi said when he noticed Naruto had entered the doorway.

Naruto nodded. "Do you mind if I have a private word with him? Message from the Hokage. It won't be long."

"Alright," Sarutobi entered the hospital room and managed to convince his wife and niece that Konohamaru was well enough to leave by himself for a while.

Konohamaru looked up as Naruto entered the room. The bandages prevented Konohamaru from flexing his arms, one of his legs had been broken and stilted, but he was well enough to sit up. Konohamaru could tell from Naruto's expression that Naruto had a few choice words.

"I fucked up," Konohamaru said knowingly.

"You. Fucked. Up." Naruto agreed. "You completely abandoned your mission and it cost Konoha Momochi. You've been demoted and have lost your status as a squad leader. You'd be on probation if it wasn't for this war."

Naruto dropped a stack of paperwork into Konohamaru's lap. "That is all the paperwork I have to fill out to cover your ass. While you're stuck in a hospital bed consider this as another part of your punishment."

Konohamaru stared at the pile of folders. "I'm sorry."

"No you're not," Naruto sighed as he collapsed in the adjacent chair. "For what it's worth, I would have done the same."

Hohei walked around camp after the nurses discharged him. The flak jacket was a bit big on his leaner frame. He activated his byakugan to see if Tomu or Mushi were free for some sparring. A hand slid over a burnt scar. The Aburame hood had been tossed into the dirt. The sinew of muscles clenched with a thrust between legs. Hohei just as quickly deactivated his byakugan.

The accidental peek happened far too often for Hohei to be fazed or embarrassed by it, but instead found himself angered. His speed quickened, then cringed when he could feel the hot breath of the Mist Jounin appreciating how pretty he was.

"Is that a brooding Hyūga I spy?"

Hohei looked up at a woman with two buns on either side of her head. He recognized her as the kunoichi who had come to his rescue. There were two piles of metal objects at her side. One was
sharp and the other was blunt. Tenten picked up another shuriken and began sharpening the edges. "Aren't you one of Tomu's friends?"

Hohei nodded.

"Where is that stupid kid at?"

"With, umm, his girlfriend."

"Hope she's worth it," Tenten mumbled. Tenten picked up a kunai and began sharpening it. She was supposed to return to Konoha but she was waiting around hoping a battle would break out soon. "You've got a promotion," Tenten observed. She remembered when there had been proper steps: the test, the tournament, the forest of death… Tenten chuckled. They were in a forest of death.

The jacket was an uncomfortable fit. "Yeah, I am a chūnin now."

Tenten chuckled. She could see straight through the act. She put down the kunai and appraised what he had to offer. "How old are you?"

Hohei gave her a perplexed stare but answered, "Fourteen."

It was old enough for hair on his balls. "Tell you what, I'm looking to pass the time. Want to help?"

Hohei looked at the pile of weapons she still had to sharpen. He wondered how she possibly carried all of them on her.

Tenten could see he was still new to the code. She beckoned him forward with her hand. She hooked her fingers into the buckle of his flak jacket and pulled him closer. His belt was eye-level and easy reach.

"I-wait," Hohei said in a sudden panic when she swatted away his hands and began undoing his belt. He was skittish and didn't want anyone touching him. His protestations stopped when she leaned forward and slid her mouth onto his cock.

"Hold on, don't get too excited," Tenten said when she pulled away, amused it had only taken him seconds to stand at full attention.

"People can see us," Hohei whispered when Tenten directed him to the ground and she crouched on top of him. Ninja walked by them without even a glance.

"Sort of reminds me of my first time," Tenten said as she lifted and pulled down her pants and underwear. "It was with a Hyūga, Fourth Shinobi War."

Tenten could feel Hohei shaking underneath her. He remembered the pain and the violence and—Hohei groaned at the surprising warmth. Beside a large crate of kunai, ashes of an abandoned campfire, the drunken laughter of chūnin in the air, the sound of feet walking by, two ninjas were just passing the time.

Hohei watched as the woman he found an enigma returned to sharpening metal. He admitted to being a little in awe of her. "I want to cut my hair."

Tenten looked down at the young Hyūga. She always imagined cutting Neji's hair. "I can do that."

Snippets of hair fell to the ground as Tenten leaned over Hohei's head with a kunai. It kept getting shorter and shorter until you couldn't even put it into a ponytail anymore. When she was done, she
turned Hohei around to admire her work. "You're pretty hot."

Hohei blushed, and then blushed even further when he felt her breasts against his back. She reached forward and lifted her kunai before him. He looked at his reflection in the polished metal. He reached into his pocket and stared at the glasses he would often fiddle with in his hands.

His hair was too short, his eyes too wrong, and the flak jacket too big.

Hohei whispered, "Why did you pick me?"

"Because you were scared," Tenten said knowingly. "We're all afraid but we can't run away from it. You have to face it. Fear is an enemy and we can't let it stop us from having the courage to keep trying. I've been gone on a long hiatus from the field. Honestly, I have never been so afraid in my life, not even on my first genin mission, not even when I was captured by the enemy than when I stepped out the gates of Konoha for this mission."

Tenten reached down and placed the glasses on the bridge of his nose. She smiled.

"I'm not afraid anymore."

A neat stack of papers were tucked onto the table. Konohamaru stuffed his head into the pillow. He wanted nothing more than to go home but he was stuck in the hospital overnight. The curtains were drawn back and the room was dark.

"Are you going to just lie there or join me for a beer?" Sarutobi asked his son.

Konohamaru didn't think going for a beer was in good taste after he had witnessed his best friend tortured and killed. "I'm not approved to leave until tomorrow morning."

"Get up," Sarutobi ordered. Konohamaru picked himself up because even though he was in ANBU, Konohamaru didn't dare disobey his father. Old habits die hard.

They went to their usual spot and hunched over their beers. They spent a better part of the hour in silence.

Konohamaru didn't understand why he was the one to survive. It should have been Udon. Konohamaru didn't know the point of this war anymore. He was beginning to think that it was simply because fighting was the only thing a ninja knew how to do. His grandfather had attempted to change that but only proved that ninjas were not so excellent peacemakers.

Sarutobi threw back a beer. "Quite a bad day."

"Bad day." Konohamaru nodded. He didn't know when 'fucked up nightmarish mission' had been euphemized into just a bad day, but in a ninja's vocabulary everyone knew what it meant.

"Isn't that Hiashi's girl?"

Konohamaru looked up over the rim over of his beer glass when Hanabi Hyūga walked into the bar. It felt like deja vu, but this time was different. She wasn't dressed in scantily clad clothing but a large shirt and pants that gave an air that she didn't give a fuck. She walked to the third chair as if her name was scrawled underneath it. The bartender knew her and gave her usual drink without a word. She leaned forward, lit up a cigarette, and teased it between her lips.

"Hey dad," Konohamaru began.
"See you in the morning," Sarutobi said in understanding. "Your mother is making your favorite."

"I wouldn't miss it," Konohamaru said earnestly. He watched his old man leave. Internally there was always a part of him that despised his father, that didn't understand why anyone would not want to become a ninja to protect Konoha. Konohamaru began to feel something akin to pride and respect. It must have been imaginably difficult to stand up to his grandfather with the words, "I don't want to be a ninja anymore." Konohamaru didn't think he could do it, wish he had the balls for it though.

Konohamaru picked himself up and took the vacant seat beside Hanabi at the bar. Konohamaru's attention was drawn toward the tattoo that began to peak out of her collar. The tattoo was a depiction of a small bird in flight.

Hanabi noticed his stare. "Got it done the night I left the compound to piss off my sister. I hate it, it's ugly, and Hinata doesn't get angry. She just looks at you with those stupid eyes, expecting more, expecting better."

"They always expect more than what you think you're actually capable of," Konohamaru answered as he downed his beer. "Thanks for getting me out of there."

Hanabi leaned her cheek on her hand. "I'm sorry about Udon. Does Moegi know?"

"Not yet," Konohamaru said hoarsely. "I never should have made it out of there. Udon was a better man than I. It's fucked up. I don't know where the rights and wrongs are."

"They seem to get twisted in a sadistic sort of way," Hanabi answered. She finished a beer. Then she reached into her pocket and paid for her tab. Konohamaru did the same.

"I'll walk you home."

Hanabi gave him a look. "I can certainly get there by myself."

"And my dad would kill me if I didn't," Konohamaru said as he opened the door of the bar for her.

They walked through the streets of Konoha. "You don't live in the compound anymore?"

"It's complicated," Hanabi replied simply.

"I get it. After I graduated the Academy things between my Dad and I were tense. We were too close. I needed my own space," Konohamaru chuckled to himself, "even though I didn't go any further than the house on the other side of the compound. Can't get too far from the home-cooked meals."

"You and your Dad seem close."

"Aye, I don't think I'd be the person I am today without him," Konohamaru said honestly as they walked the bustling streets of Konoha even at night. Not many ninja grew up with their fathers.

"I never had anything like that with my dad. It was always a competition with him, always pitting me against my sister."

Konohamaru gave Hanabi a look. "You've changed."

"I've decided I'm done competing with her. I don't have to be better at everything." Hanabi narrowed her eyes as if trying to see something off into the distance. "People die. There isn't much time to argue the should-I, could-I, and maybe. I guess I've learned to appreciate people better."
They reached the loft Hanabi rented from her mission funds. She opened the door with a key. Konohamaru honestly wasn't very surprised at its state. There were clothes, food, and trash everywhere.

"Didn't anyone ever teach you how to clean?" Konohamaru asked instinctively.

Hanabi bobbed her head in thought. "No." Hanabi collapsed backwards onto the couch. Hanabi kicked her shoes off in the air, vagrantly throwing them on the floor. She gave Konohamaru a thoughtful look. "Do you want to stay? I have drugs."

"I don't do drugs," Konohamaru said in apology. "I'm going to head home. I just want to sleep in my bed tonight."

"The bed with the monkey blankets?" Hanabi said softly as she sat up, surrounded by the filth that she had gathered the past few weeks.

"Hey, those were limited edition and very cool when I was five years old," Konohamaru argued.

Hanabi smiled. She reached her hand underneath the pillow of the couch and retrieved a bottle of sake. She lifted it in the air. "One drink."

Konohamaru gave in and joined her on the couch. One drink couldn't hurt.

"You're the first visitor I've had over," Hanabi replied as she poured the cups.

"I can see why," Konohamaru mumbled. He wouldn't be surprised if there were a few dead rats hidden underneath the mounds of garbage. Both chugged down the sake in seconds. Konohamaru was surprised when Hanabi leaned her head against his shoulder.

"I'm lonely," she whispered.

"Hanabi, do you want to come over for breakfast tomorrow?" By all the wrappers on the ground he could tell she hadn't had a home-cooked meal in a while.

"Yeah, breakfast would be nice."

They used to be old rivals, but the hatred was pointless and it took up too much energy now. They were just two people, stumbling along, trying to figure everything out.

"Dude, she's ten years older than you," Tomu pointed out as he sat on a branch, his leg hanging limply off it.

"Eight," Hohei corrected, annoyed as he lay flat against a tree branch and wrote down ticks on a blank scroll. He pushed the glasses further up his nose. His short hair was swept to one side.

"Some parties in arranged marriages can be thirty years apart," Mushi reasoned and kept watch with her hive surrounding the area.

"It's not anything serious. She's just bored," Hohei said of the kunoichi who had a soft spot for Hyūgas. He wasn't stupid. He knew after the war she would forget all about him, but she had helped him through the nightmares and panic attacks.

"I'm just worried about you. I think you're falling in too deep." Tomu said honestly.

"I never asked you to worry about me," Hohei snapped. "We're not friends."
"After everything we've been through why do you still have to be a dick?" Tomu spat.

"It isn't difficult to get along," Mushi pointed out.

"I'm doing you a favor. The less friends you have the better," Hohei said.

"Hohei, he doesn't know about that yet."

"Know about what?" Tomu questioned his girlfriend.

Hohei explained, "A sharigan evolves after witnessing the death of someone close to you and Uchihas go fucking insane the more power they gain. You know, control the world with the moon, try to inflict pain on everyone, massacre their entire clan, destroy Konoha type of fucking insane."

Tomu gave them blank stares. "Wait, you're serious?"

"The Uchiha Clan has had a long history of mismanaging grief," Mushi said after a pause.

"Stop looking at me like that. I'm not going to go crazy. I'm not a ticking time bomb."

"You're a liability."

"Why don't you just pull that stick out of your ass." Both Mushi and Hohei looked at him. Tomu raised his hands and conceded, "Too soon."

"Idiot."

At least when they were arguing, Mushi knew things were normal.

Hohei and his team finished counting the numbers of enemy ninja. From the protective bough branches of the great maple trees, they could see the jeweled blue of the ocean beyond. The leaves were a bright autumn red which alighted the entire country in a blaze of fire.

x

*The maple leaf was as red as a Leaf ninja’s blood*
Lesson Thirty Six

The Perfect Storm

"Are you going to go back to your girlfriend after the war?"

Konohamaru peeked out from under the covers at the pearlescent alarm clock ticking on the dresser. The time ticked onto four stars. The sun wasn't even up yet. In an annoyed grumble, Konohamaru said from underneath the monkey printed covers, "I didn't think you thought of this as more than a fling."

"I don't," Hanabi corrected. She lay on the other side of the bed and stared at the vibrant posters plastered onto the ceiling. Even though there was a chill in the room, she didn't expend the energy to wrestle the covers wrapped around Konohamaru. Her bra was somewhere on the floor and the chill seeped into her skin to the rim of her boy-short underwear.

"For people like my father, the war never left him. Is it possible to really go on with our lives as if the war never happened?"

"We have to win the war first," Konohamaru replied a tad sarcastic, but felt he was entitled to it for being disturbed early in the morning.

"Doesn't peace ever scare you? Peace means we have to face the horrifying truth that we can't put things back together the way they were before."

"It only matters if we live long enough." Ever since Udon's death, for Konohamaru, it has been one breath at a time. He tucked the covers over his head, determined to go back to sleep and ignore the emotionally disturbed woman he decided to bring to his bed. He was typically better at picking women.

"Go to sleep."

"I can't."

Konohamaru grumbled as he reached his hand from the covers and fished around atop the bookcase nailed above their heads that held an impressive manga collection. He threw a book into her lap, hoping it would keep her quiet enough for him to sleep.

"What is this?" Hanabi asked as she inspected the item Konohamaru gave to her.

"The first volume of my favorite manga series. The main character transforms into a giant monkey at a full moon."

"Is it some sort of jutsu?"

"No, he's an alien," Konohamaru said obviously.

Hanabi flipped through the pages. A Hyūga didn't read manga. It wasn't informative or instructive at all. It was childish and Hanabi had spent all her life proving she wasn't. She turned to the first page and tried to figure out the point of the black and white images. "This looks stupid."

Konohamaru felt the futon shift when Hanabi left the bed. Her bare feet thudded against the wood. He heard her shuffling through the bags she had placed on the worn monkey-shaped beanie bag he
refused to throw out.

He knew what she was looking for. With a concerted effort, Konohamaru emerged from the covers into a sitting position. The curved line of her back straightened. She stared at the pipe she finally procured in her hand.

"Hanabi, you've been clean for two weeks."

His words grazed deeper into Hanabi's skin than the chill. It sunk into her pours like a judgment and she wanted to scratch it out. She turned with nails in her voice. "Why are you so fucking together?! Isn't it tearing you up inside? Isn't the pain so unbearable that you would do anything to escape it? Why doesn't it hurt you?"

"Because I know that drugs, sex, alcohol, or my guilt can't bring Udon back to life. I was taught to carry my choices like I carry my hitai-ite."

Hanabi sharply turned and the two shinobi dwelled in the silence of the early morning. Finally Hanabi returned to bed. She didn't hate Konohamaru, merely frustrated by her own limitations. "If you can do it why can't it?"

Hanabi lit a match underneath the pipe. There were times when the withdrawal hit harder than the pain. Hanabi acknowledged the truth as she brought the pipe to her lips, "I can do better."

"You have a mission in a few hours," Konohamaru stated.

"It's just a stupid escort mission. I don't-" Hanabi attention was distracted when Konohamaru pushed his hand up her thigh. "Are we really doing this again?"

"You woke me up," Konohamaru said flatly. He snatched the pipe from her lips and flicked it to the ground. Her shorts soon shared the same fate. Hanabi turned and stared at the path of her pipe with a forlorn expression. It was like an itch that needed to be scratched.

Konohamaru hiked up her hips. Hanabi grunted when he thrust inside of her. There was no kissing or cuddling. That would make this more than what they wanted. Denied of her drugs, she clashed against his hipbones in frustration. Konohamaru didn't hesitate to match her pace and fervor.

The hands of the clock ticked by.

Konohamaru came into her heat and melted on top as a weightless wave of contentment. After a few seconds of rapid heartbeats and faded adrenaline, Konohamaru opened his eyes to the shape of her lips.

Hanabi's thoughts snapped to the present when she felt the curiosity of his lips. The touch sent a jolt to her chest. Hanabi grasped the long locks of his un-gelled hair and replied with a curious exploration of her own. It was the only part of each other's body they hadn't explored yet.

Hanabi licked her lips when Konohamaru pulled away. Their eyes met. "You can do better," Konohamaru whispered. Then he turned over and pulled the covers over his head.

"I haven't told Moegi about Udon. I've tried, but I can't. I'm afraid of looking her in the eye and not knowing what I'm going to find.

I don't think I'm going back to Moegi after the war."
The road back to Demon Country was a long one.

Junna has served Shion since they were children and knew the prolonged silence within the palanquin was not normal. Shion kept a forlorn expression pinned to the window as the village receded behind the leaves. Shion’s thoughts were in another time, another place.

"He was a jerk anyways," Junna attempted. "I've been thinking," Junna leaned forward and whispered, never too careful in the company of ninjas, "we should tell the ministers what he did to you."

Behind a blink, Shion's emerald eyes snapped back to the present. "He didn't rape me."

"Yes, he did." Junna insisted. "He took advantage of you. You are a priestess. You were innocent. You didn't know what you were doing. We will tell the ministers what he did to you and we will seek revenge against Konoha."

"No. What would a priestess do with revenge? I simply wanted to be loved and I take full responsibility for my naivety."

"But what are you going to do?" Junna insisted. "You can't continue your duties now that you've been… tainted."

"Kami-sama has already decided my fate," Shion said resigned and turned back toward the window to stare at the shadows.

The palanquin was handled delicately as the party wound down the road. Junna could begin to feel the cramps in her leg as the midday sun grew bloated in the sky. She rocked to the jostling of every bump and pothole. There was a persistent chill in the air that threatened to invade the fur protecting their shoulders. Like a hound trained to notice any signs of distress, Junna immediately noticed when Shion pressed the back of her hand to her forehead.

"Mistress, are you alright?"

Shion smiled weakly, "I think it might be a little motion sickness."

Junna stuck her head out of the palanquin and yelled for the entire train to stop. Everyone bowled over each other as they planted their feet to the ground. Shion's bodyguard, Kentaro rushed over and thrust the palanquin doors open in concern. "Priestess, are you alright?"

"We just need to stop a little while. The motion is making her sick," Junna reported. Shion felt embarrassed that everyone had to stop at one small sign of weakness but she was relieved to stretch out her legs. When she stepped out of the palanquin, the warmer temperature of Konoha had disappeared down the road behind them. The chill had become a gripping cold. Shion shivered once and the servants were falling over themselves to make her a fire.

One of her servants bent to his knee and offered freshly collected water. The cool water soothed her throat. The water almost spilled down her neck when an ANBU suddenly appeared.

Kentaro stepped in front and asked annoyed, "What do you want?"

Shion had to admit the masks unsettled her. She wondered if the things they did were so horrible that the shame required them to hide their faces. Their presence was supposed to protect her but unnerved Shion more than anything else.

"How long will we be stopped?" The blank Crane mask asked.
"Our priestess is in weak health and we will be stopped as long as she needs to be," Kentaro said grumpily.

Shion placed a hand on her bodyguard's arm and addressed the ANBU with all the strength she could muster, which amounted to nothing but a trembling voice. "Allow me to eat and I will be well enough to travel again. I apologize if this has caused you any inconvenience."

The blank Crane mask disappeared.

Rumors said that ANBU were cold blooded killers, murderers, and their souls irredeemable. And yet, the grace of a crane haunted her visions. Her thoughts were occupied with the growing guilt as Shion sat down to enjoy the fresh air filling into her lungs. Suddenly the clouds in the sky began to darken. Shion's eyes lit in recognition and said ominously, "It's going to rain."

Junna was well-acquainted with that tone in her voice. "A vision?"

The dice were cast, and now that they were rolling, she was powerless to what numbers would land. Shion couldn't stop it anymore.

"TRAP!" Crane yelled at the sight of chakra heavy in the clouds. She instantly radioed her team who she had spread around their escort. "Falcon, send a message to the Hokage requesting reinforcements. The rest will engage the enemy while I get the priestess to safety. Remember, her safety is our number one priority."

Crane's byakugan spotted the four ninja that descended like heavy raindrops to the ground. Her team raced to engage the enemy falling down upon them. Crane didn't waste any time reaching the priestess. "Priestess, I must get you to safety."

"They're not here for me," Shion whispered. Shion turned to her best friend. "Get to safety. Run."

"But what about you?" Junna asked.

Crane didn't have time for all this sentimentally. She roughly snatched the priestess from the ground and threw the woman over her shoulder.

"The message has been sent to Konoha," One of Crane's team reported into her ear.

Over her shoulder Crane carried the priestess from branch to branch back towards Konoha. With her byakugan activated she saw her team engaged in a fight with the enemy ninja. Crane personally wanted to stay behind and fight, but she was the squad leader and it was her responsibility to assure the success of the mission and that success depended on the security of the priestess.

"Have you ever killed anyone?"

"What?" Crane replied to the idiotic question of the priestess. The rain cloud from earlier was following them and Crane couldn't outrun it. It began to drizzle, then rain, and then downpour.

"Is there anything you would like to confess?"

"Would you shut up?" Crane snapped as she raced through the shower of rain. A flash of lightning blinded their vision. Shion screamed and clung more tightly around Crane's neck while Crane somersaulted to the next branch, barely avoiding the smoky ruin of the branch they had left.

Crane realized she couldn't outrun it and finally sat the priestess down. The priestess looked up at the
kunoichi that protected her. Shion had to at least try to redeem her soul. "Is there anything you want to ask kami-sama to forgive?"

Crane answered while performing a flurry of hand seals, "Shut up."

A jet of water exploded from Crane's hands. It grew larger and larger as it collected raindrops toward the looming cloud. The cloud dispersed before Crane's jutsu could reach it, but revealed the manipulator of the storm. A ninja dropped from the sky and caught himself on a branch. Three lines were etched into a white mask.

Crane didn't care if they were allies. Cloud had initiated the attack. She would ask questions after she kicked his ass.

Crane's series of hand-seals were interrupted when the rain that drenched her clothing came alive like tiny insects biting tiny jolts of lightning into her flesh. The lightning bore into her skin, burrowed into her bones, and crawled toward her organs. Crane's muscles twitched before the paralysis deadened her legs. She fell and hit her head on the tree branch.

She was caught by the collar of her flak jacket. It was a jutsu created to kill but it let up at the last minute before the shock attacked her heart. The weight of her unconsciousness was light, easy enough for the Cloud ninja to pull her up.

Shion gasped. "You weren't supposed to hurt her."

The ANBU ignored the priestess' idiotic words. It was impossible to capture a ninja without hurting them. The ANBU pulled the mask from Crane's face. He smirked at the unmistakable Hyūga features and the prize she held in her irises. He heaved Hanabi over his shoulder.

"I don't know how Demon Country benefits from this, but the Raikage sends his regards. Thanks for the tip."

Kami-sama required a sacrifice.

"I completely understand why you hate paperwork so much," Naruto mumbled as he stamped Tsunade's name onto the report. "It's both necessary and pointless."

Tsunade finally had time to enjoy a cup of sake with the help of five Naruto clones all set to complete the paperwork that had piled around the office.

Naruto didn't mind helping to take a load of stress from her shoulders nor did he mind digging through the information that funneled through the Hokage's paperwork. A shadow clone asked from the corner of the room who noticed a reroute of supplies toward the Eastern front. "How are we going to approach Kiri?"

"I want to take advantage of the opportunity that has opened while their spy networks are in scrambles since we destroyed their entire intelligence division. I've sent word to Kakashi and Shikamaru to prepare for battle. If the weather is right, we should be engaging on the battlefield with Kiri by the end of the week."

Tsunade poured herself another shot.

"You should lessen your alcohol intake," Naruto said casually, as if he was commenting on the weather outside.
Tsunade scoffed. She figured Naruto would get into her medical records soon enough. "I'm alive."

"You're old," Naruto said without meaning disrespect. 

Tsunade leaned back into her chair and blatantly consumed the bitter shot in one gulp. It eased the headaches the stress of the job frequently caused. "I'll listen to your concern when I finally have a successor."

"Konohamaru is growing up nicely," Naruto pointed out. "Or even Sakura, if she's up to it."

Tsunade's eyes caught the path of a bird approaching the Hokage tower. It slowly came into focus against a cloudy sky.

"That's a summoning bird." Naruto noticed as the bird increasingly came into view. "It's a summon from the ANBU sent on the Demon Country escort."

A shadow clone stood up.

"Sit down," Tsunade ordered and reprimanded, "Don't waste the seconds."

Tsunade leaned in her chair and took in the wonderful sound of an office devoid of paperwork and commotion. The sake stung her throat and flowed through her veins as the summon disappeared into the rookery. She let her limbs feel nothing but gravity weighing on them.

A knock came at the door.

Tsunade removed her feet from the table, reached behind her, slipped her arms within the Kage's cloak, and placed the hat atop her head. She placed the sake into her drawer for another time.

"Now you can get the door."

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Naruto landed at the scene of the ambush with a grim expression. He had sent members of his own team on this mission.

He couldn't walk a few feet without stepping into a puddle or over a corpse. The scent of blood clogged his nostrils. The palanquin was overturned and had crushed several servants underneath it. Shion's bodyguard was dead. Shion's best friend was dead. Three of his ANBU were dead.

Naruto swiveled around and focused on a body that wasn't Leaf. He overturned the carcass with his foot and revealed the hitai-ite of three Lightning strikes. A menacing hiss left Naruto's lips. Naruto was going to have answers for his dead even if he had to demand them from the Raikage himself.

Naruto entered sage mode and scanned the area for any survivors. He could feel the chakra signatures of a few servants who had escaped and were lost throughout the forest. Shion wasn't in the vicinity. He walked over to the palanquin and took a slow smell of the scent inside.

Naruto knew he had to find the priestess or face the real possibility with an added war against Demon Country. He followed Shion's distinct scent into the forest until it was covered by the overwhelming smell of rain. He spotted a scuffed branch, no doubt made by a ninja's boot, and followed the trail through the forest.

Naruto heard her tears long before he found her huddled against a tree trunk within the cold and damp furs of her coat. Naruto landed gently so as not to startle her. Shion looked up with blue congested in her nose and cheeks. The sight of her tears caused an uncomfortable sense of failure.
Naruto crouched and pressed the warmth of his hand against her chilled cheek. He spoke to her gently, as if speaking to a helpless babe. "Are you okay? Are you wounded?"

Shion didn't know if her soul counted. Shion numbly lifted herself into the arms of the man that would protect her forever. "We must hurry and save my servants."

"Shion," Naruto said as he scooped her into his arms. It was like carrying snow. "You need to get to a hospital."

"No, my servants have served me since I was a child. I can't leave them, they're family."

He couldn't tell her that they were dead. Naruto feared the truth would literally break her. Despite her protests, Naruto tucked her into his chest and used a hiraishin kunai connected to Konoha's hospital. Naruto immediately called for a nurse and stretcher.

Naruto slipped her onto the stretcher but her hand was frozen to his shirt.

"They took her," Shion whispered with tears glistening down her cheeks.

Naruto frowned in confusion. "They weren't after you?"

Naruto watched her figure fade down the hall as the nurses rushed her to a room. If Shion hadn't been the primary target what was?

The answer immediately hit him. There was one body he didn't find. His anger physically manifested in boiling red chakra that seeped from his pores.

Konoha could not afford a fucking war with Lightning.

"Its bad news," The Hokage resigned herself when Naruto re-entered her office. "Did we lose the priestess?"

"Worse. I've delivered Shion to the hospital but she wasn't the target of the ambush. Lightning was after the byakugan." Naruto cursed. "I don't know how they knew she was on that mission." Where there spies in his ANBU unit? How could covert communication with Lightning have passed underneath his radar?

Tsunade could follow where his mind was going. "We will deal with spies later. Right now we have more pressing matters to attend to." Tsunade pressed a button on her desk and Captain Cat entered the office.

Naruto watched as the Hokage wrote a letter and handed it to the Captain. Captain Cat nodded slightly and then disappeared as fast as he came.

"What do you not want me to know?" Naruto asked suspiciously.

Tsunade sighed at Naruto's astuteness. He knew she could have simply told Captain Cat what she wanted. "We don't have a choice but to wait until Lightning sends their demands. We can't afford a war."

Naruto's eyes narrowed. "You're planning on letting them have Hanabi."

"What other choice do I have?" Tsunade questioned.

"Let me put a team together, go into Lightning, and get Hanabi out."
"That route takes time to gather information and to plan properly. We only have a small window of opportunity and right now I need you focused on the eastern front against Kiri."

"I know kumogakure well enough. I can do this. Let me try."

"Then I suggest defeating Kiri first and then we'll talk about Hanabi." Naruto knew a command from the Hokage when he heard one. He had no choice but to try a different angle.

"The Hyūgas are never going to agree to this."

The Hokage said rather confidently, "which is why the Hyūgas will never find out."

That statement almost made Naruto laugh. "You cannot comprehend how many eyes the Hyūga clan has on this office and in ANBU. It's only a matter of time before," Naruto stopped. "What did you tell Cat?"

Tsunade looked Naruto in the eye and dared him to challenge her. "Naruto, you understand that we do not have the means to fight both Kiri and Lightning, much less try to hold Mountain and Ame in check? You and I both know that the Hyūga will not, under any circumstances, allow Lightning to acquire the Byakugan. Until the matter is solved, Hinata will be placed under supervision."

"You're locking her up," Naruto said flatly.

"Essentially," The Hokage admitted.

"Let me do it." Naruto understood the consequences and understood how dangerous Hinata could be when she perceived her family was in danger.

"You're too close to her. I fear your emotions will cloud your judgment."

Naruto crossed his arms. "I'm ANBU. I can separate my emotions from a mission."

"Captain Cat will handle it."

Naruto leaned forward onto the Hokage's desk in order to emphasize, "Hinata is with me right now. Cat is going the wrong direction. If you want to make sure she doesn't escape, give me the order."

Tsunade narrowed her eyes to the points of kunai. "Do not, under any circumstances, let her get away. Be careful, she is one of the best manipulators in Konoha."

The shadow clone scoffed before he disappeared, "I know."

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Hinata instructed the Hyūga children in their calligraphy lessons. All children sat under one roof and threw themselves into their studies, eagerly trying to be perfect, eagerly trying to earn her attention and earn her smile.

"Excuse me," Hinata said gently and bid the children to continue their lessons. The moment she stepped out of the classroom, the children activated their byakugan in unabashed curiosity. Hinata stepped into the hallway where the white ANBU mask of Sloth waited for her. He was still banished from the clan. He wouldn't show in the compound unless he had something Hinata wanted.

"What happened?" Hinata questioned.

Sloth stepped forward and invaded too close Hinata's personal space. There was a sleazy smirk behind his voice. "Nothing is for free princess."
Hinata stepped back and slipped out of the corner Sloth attempted to create. She casually avoided the hand that had reached out to grope her breast. She fixed Sloth a cold expression and the killer intent forced him to step away. "I did not give you permission to touch me."

Sloth was stung by the reminder in status. "You never repaid me for the lightning I taught you. I want everything you promised me, whore."

Sloth collapsed to his knees when the seal atop his forehead glowed with fire. He writhed on the ground in agony. Sloth focused on Hinata's feet when she finally relieved him of his pain. "Of course nothing is for free. I am willing to exchange your life for whatever information you have."

Sloth's shoulders bowed and kept his forehead to the ground in deep apology. "I beg your forgiveness Onee-sama. Lightning has captured Hanabi on her last mission."

Footsteps scurried through the hall. Hinata turned her attention when a niece stopped and bowed. "Captain Cat is at the gate. The Hokage requests to see you immediately."

Hinata gave a soft smile, "Tell the Captain I cannot currently attend him at the moment as I am in the bath but I promise to receive him soon."

The messenger bowed and rushed to relay the words.

Hinata reached into the front of her yukata and pulled a scroll from the center of her breasts. She wiped her blood along the paper. Within a cloud of smoke, a large snake appeared in the hallway.

"Please tell Neji what is happening," Hinata said gently.

"What do I get in return?" Sloth demanded.

Hinata's gentleness disappeared. "That wasn't a request."

The snake sprung forward, swallowed Sloth into its jaw, and disappeared deep into the ground. "And if you don't finish your calligraphy a giant snake will come to swallow you too."

The children all rushed back to their lessons.

The room smelled of the fresh flowers that decorated the room.

Captain Cat stared at the untouched tea that sat atop the table in front of him. He contemplated what course of action he should take. He wanted to go digging into the heads of the Hyūga Clan to see if the Clan Head suspected anything, but he was probably being watched and a perceptive Byakugan would catch the shift in his chakra if he went mind-jumping.

The Captain looked up when Hinata entered the room. She was fresh-face and smelled as if she had just left a bath. "I apologize for the delay," Hinata bowed deeply. "I understand the Hokage wishes to meet with me?"

"She does," Cat responded, "but it is a private matter and she does not wish to discuss it at the Tower. I am to escort you to the meeting place."

"Then let us not delay. Let us leave at once."

Cat took a chance and subtly began to probe around in her head. When he entered the contours of her mind, he found a wall of ice blocking his passage to the brain. He swore they trained their ANBU agents too well. It would take several minutes to get around the block unawares.
Captain Cat remained cordial and stood from the floor.  
"You did not touch your tea," Hinata noticed when she looked over at the table.  

"I apologize for refusing your hospitality. Bad stomach today," Cat replied.  

"I was afraid the tea wasn't to your liking." Cat passed in front of her as he exited the room. "Or you assume that I would poison a guest in my own house?"

Cat turned immediately. Before he could blast his will into her consciousness with a force that turned most people into zombies, he swayed past her, lost the concentration he needed for his jutsu, and fell to the floor.

"I didn't touch or drink anything," Captain Cat heaved. He had been careful.

"The flowers do hide the smell wonderfully don't they?" Hinata asked. She kicked the tenketsu point in the back of the neck and knocked him out. Then she stepped out of the room. "Make sure no one goes in that room for the next twenty-four hours."

Auntie nodded. "What about the Captain?"

Hinata handed Auntie a vial that contained the antidote. "Have someone dump him in front of the Hokage's office. Also send the Hokage a bottle of the Hyūga's best sake as an apology for disabling one of her ANBU."

"And Hanabi?"

"I'll handle it. Manage the clan until I return."

Hinata's shadow clone disappeared in a puff of smoke.

The sun filtered through the canopy of leaves and spotted Naruto's skin. He purred as Hinata combed her fingers through his hair while he rested his head in her lap and overlooked the luscious pond of koi fish and water lilies. It was a calm they both desperately needed.

Naruto smiled up at her. "You're humming."

"I've forgotten the words." Hinata wished she remembered the words her mother used to sing but they were lost to her now.

Naruto reached. She didn't pull away anymore. The corners of her lips hid a cool shade. They breathed into each other's mouths, embracing each other's heat for several held moments. He could feel her body tremble in want as his finger trailed over the cloth of her kimono. It had taken time for Naruto to earn the trust of her body. Hinata did not move to stop him when he undid her obi.

They always stopped before it got too far. Although, neither could define the border between too far and enough.

Naruto twisted over, crouched on all fours, and brushed his nose along the edge of her bra. The kisses began down the line of her cleavage, trailed around her belly button, and arrived at the center of her thighs. Naruto thrust his nose into the dampness of her underwater.

Hinata's breath hitched when Naruto licked the lace of her underwear and tasted her want. Naruto purposefully pulled back to look at her. Her thighs quivered in protest of his absence. He casually teased a nail around the lining of her underwear as he said, "I've gotten a lot better since the first
time."

Hinata's thoughts flashed back to the first time, in that cave during an ANBU mission. It was such a long time ago.

Hinata lifted her hips. Naruto smirked and slid her underwear down her legs. Naruto kissed her sweet folds and then plunged his tongue into her depths.

"Naruto," she whispered his name but that wasn't good enough for Naruto. He wanted her screaming it. His tongue flicked and twisted and tasted. His mouth sucked and enveloped and breathed himself into her.

Naruto embraced the growing power he held over her as she slipped out of control. Her gasps raced into heavy panting. His hands gripped her bucking hips and tamed them under his strength. She was desperate to reach the finish under his guiding tongue, until he stopped.

"Naruto!" Hinata screamed at him. She needed this release, needed the denied orgasm she hadn't had in years. Naruto gave a mischievous smirk before he dived forward and once again swam in her depths.

Hinata suddenly grabbed the belt along his waist and began to undo it. His tongue was no longer enough, her body needed more. She got far enough to place her hand on his cock before Naruto grabbed her wrist and pinned it above her head. Naruto was surprised to have finally found Hinata's threshold, finally found the line when passion overcame all logic, and reason, and the wedding ring on her finger.

"I need you Naruto," Hinata begged. Her hands cut against the bark and fell past the tree when he applied his fingers and sucked on the sensitive bud of her clitoris. Hinata lurched at the powerful moment of her release, crashing through her like waves shaking her core.

Naruto rose to watch the content expression that came over her eyes and couldn't help but to place a hand on his cock while he did so. He masturbated to the sweat that glistened off her breasts, and the scent of her pussy still on his lips, and the beautiful and raw expression she made when passion overwhelmed her body.

It's been a long time for Hinata. She had forgotten that lustful sensation only born in the depths of her being. She reached down between her legs, smeared her hands with her wetness, and then wrapped her graceful fingers around Naruto's shaft.

He groaned and closed his eyes to the feeling of Hinata jerking him off. There was an intensity her fingers could accomplish that he couldn't do with his own. It felt amazing.

Then unwelcome thoughts exploded through his head.

Naruto eyes snapped open. There was a shift in Hinata's eyes. They both knew, and the knowledge stared at each other. Naruto realized suddenly he could not have found himself in a more vulnerable position. The most vulnerable part of his body had literally been handed to her.

"Hinata, don't you dare," Naruto seethed. Her eyes didn't reveal anything but knew she was considering it. "I won't ever forgive you."

"Yes you will," Hinata said knowingly.

Then she began to pump her hands back up and down his shaft. A groan intruded on the thoughts attempting to calculate an escape. Naruto found himself unable to concentrate. It wasn't the tightness
or the warmth she imitated with her hands, but the sadism that caused a hitch in his breath. He was turned on by how close he brushed against the lightning she could summon in her palms. The combination of unpredictability, of pleasure, and even a tint of fear turned him hard as a solid rod.

"What does the Hokage plan to do?" Hinata asked before she ringed the wet warmth of her tongue around his head.

"She," Naruto placed his hands out to support himself. He fell further into her trap as his hips adjusted atop her to give her mouth better access to his dick. Her teeth skimmed the underside of his shaft. "Let Hanabi have Lightning. Prison Put."

"That didn't make sense Naruto, but I get the idea." Hinata taunted as she trailed a forefinger up his thigh. Naruto twitched when it crackle with lightning and trailed a burn toward his hip bone.

His diminishing care for self-destruction became more obvious every time Hinata threatened to but his cock between her teeth. The act was a taunt, but at this point Naruto admitted he was completely at her mercy. Her hands pumped up and down while her tongue curled like that of a snake.

All of his senses narrowed to the furtive touch of her tongue on his tip, the taste of her passion still in his mouth, and the slick of her hands while they pumped up and down. A battle could have been going on in the forest and he would not have known.

Naruto chirped when a kiss of chakra crackled along his dick. The orgasm was so unexpected and powerful, that semen exploded from his body.

Hinata had angled his dick, and the semen shot straight into Naruto's eyes.

He snapped up with a growl. Naruto blinked at the sudden burning and frantically searched the ground. Finally he came across his shirt and furiously wiped at his face. When Naruto opened his eyes, Hinata had searched through his bags, grabbed one of his hiraishin kunai, and disappeared. Naruto was too angry to chase after her in that moment and finished wiping his mess from his face.

"Fucking kunoichi." He knew this was going on the list as one of the most embarrassing experiences of his life.

Naruto collapsed backwards and took a moment wrapped in the quiet of the forest to enjoy the wash of gravity leaving his skin. Anyone with any less chakra control would have easily burned his dick off, but Hinata had forced him into the strongest ejaculation he had ever had in his life. It was blasphemy not to enjoy it while he could.

"Fucking kunoichi," Naruto repeated. Finally he turned over and dumped his bag full of kunai to the ground. He spread them out to determine which one was missing.

If Hinata could play dirty, so could he.

Naruto appeared atop the Shodaime's head at the Valley of the End. He stood still and felt around for Hinata's chakra. He sensed her a few miles off toward the direction of Lightning.

The Kyūbi's chakra erupted around him. His speed caught up with her easily, charged forward into a tackle but she twisted and Naruto was forced to catch himself on all fours. He wasn't surprised. She had from the edge of her byakugan range to prepare for his attack.

Naruto looked up at her and stifled a laugh.
"This isn't a joking matter," Hinata snapped.

Considering Hinata never left the compound with a hair out of place, it was rather hilarious to find her with only her under robe and nothing else to tie around her. Naruto smirked in vindictiveness. "You have a little jizz on your shoulder."

Hinata refused to break eye contact in case he tried to do something. Naruto held out his hands with an offering. It was her underwear and fresh clothing. She stomped forward indignantly and snatched the articles of clothing from his hand. Without ever breaking eye contact, she properly dressed. It was much colder up north and Naruto watched as she covered the cold on her skin.

"If it was Ame or Ichigo what would you do?" She whispered softly.

Naruto knew he would probably bomb Lightning until it didn't exist as a country but that didn't mean that it was the right thing to do, sometimes emotions overwhelmed logic. "I'm hoping you'd be the one in my position, trying to stop me. Charging into Lightning half-dressed isn't going to save Hanabi."

"You approve of letting Lightning rape my sister?"

Naruto gritted his teeth. "She's a kunoichi. She knows the risks of this job. If we go to war with Lightning, you'll lose a lot more than Hanabi. We'll lose Konoha, and your clan," Naruto shrugged his shoulders, "and perhaps each other."

"She's my little sister," Hinata said as tears began to stick to her cheeks. "Do you know how much I have sacrificed for her? Do you know how many people I have killed, fucked, and lied to in order to ensure her happiness? She is everything of me."

"Hinata," Naruto said insistently as he raised his hand to wipe her cheeks. She collapsed and cried into his arms. "I bled for your clan. We have an alliance. I will do everything in my power to get-" A powder suddenly exploded in his face.

Naruto stumbled back as Hinata pulled a kunai from his belt. Real or fake, the tears stopped. Hinata cut through her palm and summoned a snake that towered over Naruto's height. It coiled back, flicked its tail, and Hinata was thrown like a projectile into the air.

Naruto fell over backwards as he clawed at his nose. His senses were all mixed up and nothing would heal the fire in his nostrils. He rolled through the ground in helplessness until he finally disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Hinata landed behind the border of Lightning. She raced forward with calculations in her head until she determined she was close enough to Kumogakure in order to use the hiraishin kunai. She pumped her chakra into the hiraishin seal.

Hinata gasped when the sudden dip in her chakra bordered on chakra exhaustion. She was too weak to even sit up. She looked around her wildly and found herself confined to an inn room. Hinata winced at the smug smile of Naruto sitting in a chair at the bedside, waiting.

"Sometimes you can be really predictable," Naruto chuckled. He had mislabeled the kunai linked to Kumogakure and changed it with another one that was just enough in her chakra range not to kill her but render her helpless with chakra exhaustion.

"You tricked me," Hinata said in surprise.
"Don't be a hypocrite," Naruto chided as he reached down and began to tie her hands and feet. "And what the fuck was that powder shit? Were you trying to kill me?"

"Be glad I didn't use the one laced with my pheromones."

"Why in the world would you make something like that?" Naruto questioned. Naruto began to lift her up when Hinata suddenly snapped her fingers and the room exploded in purple powder.

"Fuck," Naruto spat and his entire body lit on fire. The edges of his vision went red as claws extended from his fingers. He snapped off the ropes he had just put on from her feet and shoved open her legs. Two chakra tails twitched manically. The smell had gripped his nose, clogged his eyes, and raced like crack through his body.

Hinata slipped her hands from the bindings around her wrists, but needed time to regain some of her chakra. She pulled Naruto's head growling into her breasts and was willing to do anything she had to do in order to pass the time. Before Naruto could thrust into her welcoming legs, he disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Hinata pulled herself up, growing dizzy as the chakra exhaustion began to take a toll on her body. She coughed up blood and realized this was more than just chakra exhaustion. She had been poisoned.

She didn't know when or how, but she had to keep going. She stepped forward off the bed and entrusted her weight to shaky feet. She slipped and fell onto the floor. A cough racked her body. Blood dripped from the shade in the corner of her lips.

A wind suddenly blew through the room and washed the smell into the breeze. A shadow clone stepped into the room through the window, walked around the bed, and found Hinata unconscious on the floor.

There was one poison no one was immune to.

Naruto reached down and placed his hand on her chest. In concentration, he sucked out the Kyūbi's chakra that had accidentally leaked into her chakra networks only seconds ago. This is what happens when he was not in control of himself.

When he was certain that he had cleared Hinata of the poison, he scooped her in his arms and carried her back to Konoha.

One down, one more to go.

In Amegakure, you either had to learn to like the rain, or be driven insane by it. Neji stood by the side of the window, protected by a thin plate of glass from the storm that hammered against it. There was so much paperwork, so many men to order around, and so much rain.

Neji looked up when the door to his office opened. He frowned at the sight of Sloth, the Hyūga banished from the clan after he had massacred an entire family of main members years ago. If it was up to Neji, Sloth would be dead already. By the looks of the slime that coated Sloth's clothes, Hinata had sent him.

"What's going on?" Neji demanded.

"Why do you both automatically assume something is wrong? Can't I ever stop by for a friendly chat?"
"I will kill you." Neji never considered this one family.

"I would think you need all the allies you can get right now considering the Hokage is attempting to lock up your wife."

Neji went cold as the rain beating against the window pane. "What did she do?"

"What doesn't she do?" Sloth scoffed. "She spies on the Hokage, she's cheating on you, Hanabi was captured by Lightning, and the Hokage is planning on letting them have her."

Neji rested his head on the coolness of the window pane. Sometimes his life felt like the storm threatening to grab him.

"I don't mean to interrupt." Sloth slinked away from the second voice that had entered the office. Naruto dripped rain onto the carpet of the office floor, "but Neji, I need to take you into custody and I'm hoping you won't come quietly."

The glass shattered and Neji was thrown out into the storm. Neji landed on his feet in his Jyūken stance. Neji looked through the curtain of his hair with rain in his eyes.

Naruto crouched on all fours atop one of the statue heads. "I just finished eating out your wife."

"My wife," Neji stressed.

Then rasengan rained from the sky.

Hanabi yawned right before her captors pulled her into the Raikage's office. The Raikage didn't look up when she entered. He seemed rather focused on the ink brush that shook in his hands. When the brush snapped, he grumbled annoyed and then signed the document with an imprint of his fist.

"Sir, I'm not sure that counts as a signature," Mabui, his assistant complained.

"Shut up, woman. You're not my wife." The Raikage spat. He looked up grumpily at the ninja who entered his office. "Speak, what the fuck do you want?"

"Oh sorry, sir," The ninja apologized, who had been unsure if they should wait until he had finished with the document. "We've brought you the byakugan."

The Raikage said gruffly as he wiped the ink from his fist with the cloth of his Kage's robe. "Name?"

"Hanabi Hyūga," Mabui answered.

"I don't mean to interrupt," Hanabi interjected, "But does anyone have a smoke?"

The Raikage lifted his chin. Mabui stepped forward and handed Hanabi a cigarette. The tobacco helps Hanabi to manage the opium. She breathed in relief when they lit the cigarette.

"Who has the strongest byakugan in the Hyūga Clan?"

Hanabi released a dark cloud of smoke from her lips. "My sister, the Clan Head."

Mabui didn't have to even look up the folder. "Hinata Hyūga, Clan Head of the Hyūga Clan. Twenty-one years old. Birthday is December 27. Blood Type A. Her height and weight is-"

"Do you know her cup size too?" Hanabi sarcastically asked.
"D cup. Classification: tracker, saboteur, and espionage. Byakugan range is unknown. Magnification power unknown." The Raikage raised his hand to pause Mabui's listing.

"What is her byakugan range and magnification?" The Raikage questioned.

Hanabi blinked blankly. Every time she was about to answer she could think of another instance when Hinata knew something that challenged Hanabi's initial guess. "I don't know. The only way for me to know is if she told me and she's never going to tell me the truth if I ask." The Raikage obviously didn't like her answer. Hanabi added, "She can see in both x-ray and infrared," Hanabi added. She looked around and sat down in a chair.

"You don't seem very resistant about giving up this information." The Raikage noted, and especially noted the way she didn't seem to fear him.

Smoke wafted through her lips. Hanabi shrugged her shoulders. "There is a very good chance that in a few hours my sister is going to kill me or kill you."

The Raikage was intrigued by her confidence. "That would mean war for Konoha."

Hanabi scoffed. "Konoha is already at war."

"There is something else in the file you might be interested in," Mabui noted.

"Get it out then," The Raikage said impatiently.

Mabui sighed and rolled her eyes with patience. "She is married to Neji Hyūga but there are rumors she is romantically involved with Uzumaki. Also, the Uzumaki Clan and the Hyūga Clan recently brokered an alliance."

"Are these rumors true?" The Raikage asked.

Hanabi shifted uncomfortably. Something as personal as her sister's love life was not her area of expertise. Either it said something about the Hyūga clan or the state of their sibling relationship. "To be honest, I don't know. If she does, she certainly keeps her activities outside the range of the Hyūga compound. Personally," Hanabi shrugged, "she deserves to be a little selfish. But Naruto certainly has a thing for her. Why is this at all relevant?"

The Raikage smirked from underneath the shadow of his wide-rimmed hat. "You can tell a lot about a man by the women they favor. I enjoy getting into the head of my opponent."

It was the deranged excitement in the Raikage's eyes that did scare Hanabi.

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A meteor sized rasengan plummeted to the ground. It shadows could engulf cities and promise to catch Neji wherever he ran. Debris shot upwards when the explosion hit the ground and sent an earthquake through the creaking pipes of Amegakure.

Naruto cursed when he sense around with sage mode and realized Neji had drilled underground to avoid the attack. Naruto cursed when he missed again. It was like trying to catch a fly. It was smaller than you, but fucking annoying.

Naruto's big movements clashed with Neji's smaller movements that evaded with foresight and the smallest amount of effort. Naruto landed on all fours in front of Neji and charged in with an attack.

"Eight Trigrams Palms Revolving Heaven."
The cloth of Naruto's shirt burned away as he pushed his shoulder against Neji's ultimate defense in an attempt to break it. He sprouted four chakra tails and sent each tail like chains covered Neji's dome in a flare of red chakra. Naruto flipped backwards when the chakra defense burst outwards.

Like a comet, Naruto moved backwards until he was safely out of Neji's range of vision. Naruto could sense Neji's movements and mirrored them and always kept just out of his range. It took a few shadows clones to determine how far Neji couldn't see.

Naruto circled around until he calculated the Hyūga's blind spot. A chirping rasenshuriken exploded into Naruto palm. He cocked his arm back and then sent the destructo disk wheeling towards the back of Neji's head with as much force as he could muster. The sonic boom was so loud it broke the speed of light.

Naruto released a stream of curses when Neji effortlessly sat down and the jutsu passed over his head without so much as singing his head.

Neji stood up when Naruto landed in from of him. "I call foul," Naruto spat, "There is no fucking way you could have seen that coming."

Neji had a smug expression, that smug smile only a prodigy could be born with, "I have complete 360 degrees of vision."

Naruto knew even Hinata hadn't been able to minimize her blind spot.

The wind gust through the field. Neji exerted chakra from his tenketsu points right before the wind blew past and cancelled the chakra in the sudden wind attack. The jutsu blew harmlessly past like a breeze.

Naruto evaded the incoming Jyūken strike with the speed of his chakra cloak. Neji's ability to read Naruto's muscle movements matched Naruto's speed. Neji was prepared for every strike before it came. Naruto held his breath when Neji's fingers lightly glanced off his chest.

Then Neji fell backwards, completely swept off his feet and head hitting the ground when Naruto had wrapped a chakra tail around Neji's ankle and tripped him.

Naruto threw his entire weight into Neji's chest. Neji managed to expel enough chakra from his tenketsu point to soften the blow but they went backwards rolling on the destroyed ground. Naruto pulled back and cocked a fist into Neji's face.

Naruto stopped when his ears caught the sound of destruction. Naruto's eyes widened at the realization that his own attack had come whirling all the way around the world.

Naruto rolled and threw Neji off him, right into the incoming path of the rasenshuriken. Neji had seen it coming with his byakugan, exerted chakra from the tenketsu point in his chest to give him enough force to propel him downward. His shoulder caught on the jutsu, a tail wrapped around his ankle, and he was pulled away from the force of the explosion at impact.

Naruto had carried them both away from the epicenter of the explosion. He looked down and Neji's shoulder was entirely shattered. Blood and flesh hung limply as Neji clung to the wound. Neji didn't have any chakra left. He couldn't even pick himself up. Naruto loomed above him.

Kill him.

Naruto threw a punch right into Neji's face. The crunch of bone felt good underneath Naruto's hand. His lungs wheezed as the chakra cloak powered down around him. Naruto collapsed beside Neji in
"Done?" Neji coughed around the blood streaming from his nose.

Naruto picked Neji up by the collar of his shirt. "If there is anything between Hinata and I, you look the other way. Or else I will kill you."

Neji scowled, "When did Naruto Uzumaki resort to threatening people to get what he wants? Are you just going to kill every obstacle that gets in your way and doesn't give you what you want? How many people are going to have to die for your selfishness?"

"You don't understand," Naruto spat frantically. "I need her. Do you know how much Konoha asks of me?! Do you know how much I sacrifice for this village?! Why can't I be selfish for once?"

Naruto held his breath when Neji suddenly shot his hand up. Neji's palm rested right above Naruto's heart.

"Let's try this again," Neji said coldly. "This war is hard on all of us but that doesn't change the fact Hinata is my wife. Realize right now that the only reason I choose not to kill you is because we need to get through this war. But the moment it is finished, whether Konoha wins or not, you better hope you kill me first."

The facility that held Hinata was far enough out of the Hyūga's range of vision and secure enough to imprison Konoha's Class A criminals. Some would consider it a little overboard, Naruto didn't think so.

Naruto studied the slab of metal with a small peep hole to look inside. "Are you sure this can hold her?" Naruto questioned the guard.

"There have not been any escapes since I've begun working at this prison," The guard said confidently.

"I'm going to talk to her."

The guard shifted uncomfortably. "The Hokage ordered no one to see her, especially you."

Naruto gave the guard a look, challenging the guard to physically stop him. "And what are you going to do if I see her anyways?"

"Report to the Hokage."

"And when you report to the Hokage you are also going to tell her that I stole the keys off of you," Naruto said as he held out his hand. The guard blankly looked at his palm.

"Of course Uzumaki-sama." The guard handed over the keys.

Naruto put the keys into the door and unlocked it. The door screeched open to a poorly lit overhead lamp. Naruto made sure to close the door securely behind him. He surveyed the room. They provided her a desk, a bed, and her own privy.

"Looks as comfortable as home," Naruto mocked.

Hinata cut him with her eyes.

"I hope you're not looking forward to reinforcements. I already took care of Neji." Hinata swiveled
around with a horrified expression. "I didn't kill him," Naruto said before she jumped to the wrong conclusion. "Although, he does look a little worse for wear."

"Where is he?" Hinata demanded.

"The Hokage ordered for you two to be placed on opposite sides of the prison."

Hinata sat on the bed and straightened her stare on the same boring plate of the wall. There were no windows. There wasn't much room to breathe. The chakra cuffs were clenched tight onto her wrists. "I can't see anything."

Naruto could imagine Hinata wouldn't take too kindly to the fact she could no longer see what was going on around her. "The Hokage talked with Auntie and for now the clan thinks you're on a mission for the Hokage, no one knows Neji is no longer in Ame, and the Raikage has yet to send his demands."

"I want to see my husband."

"I'm not that stupid Hinata," Naruto said as he crossed his arms. "There is no way I'm letting you out of this cell, not after you made me go through hell to get you in it."

"Lightning has the byakugan, the clan is without me, I can't see what is going on, and I might have to kill my sister! I WANT TO SEE MY HUSBAND!" Hinata screamed.

Naruto raised his hands against the sudden heat of her anger. "Hinata," he said gently. He could hear the cracks along the frozen ice and knew one wrong step would break it all. "I have been trying to do everything I can for Hanabi but the Hokage refuses to budge until the matter with Kiri is settled. You might have to wait but I will get Hanabi back. I need you to trust me and not give the Hokage any reason to detain you further."

"Hinata, this is exactly where you need to be right now. Think about it, why is Lightning taking so fucking long to send the demands? They want someone to try and rescue Hanabi. It's a trap. Think."

He finally saw a dip in her shoulders. It was a good sign. Logic was beginning to slowly reign in her emotions. He knew she had been in fight or flight mode ever since she heard the news about her sister. Naruto stepped forward, crouched down and wiped the frustration from her eyes. She loosened her hands and released the kunai she had hidden in her palms. It clattered to the floor at Naruto's feet.

"Where do you even hide that?" Naruto questioned.

"I coughed it up earlier," Hinata admitted.

"I want to take your handcuffs off but I need you to promise me you'll stay here." He knew Hinata would eventually figure out a way to escape if she wanted to. The easiest way to keep her from escaping was to convince her she should be here. Pushing her into a corner was only going to force her to do something crazy and Naruto can't predict Hinata crazy.

"I'll stay," Hinata promised.

Naruto slid the keys into the cuff and they fell from her wrists. Within seconds she activated her byakugan.

"What do you see?"

"You almost killed him," Hinata accused.
"He's breathing," Naruto scoffed. "I was really close but I didn't think you could handle that right now."

Hinata hung her head. "It's a lot to handle. How am I supposed to figure this out?"

"Sometimes you've got to trust people," Naruto said. "Let's wait until we receive the demands and we'll both figure out a plan."

Hinata nodded slightly.

"Come on, let's go see Neji." Naruto said as he offered his hand. He helped her from the bed and escorted her out of the cell.

The guard watched in disbelief. "Um, um, Uzumaki-sama!"

"I'll make sure she gets back." Naruto promised.

The guard did nothing to stop them. He would rather lose his job than lose his life.

Naruto followed Hinata through the prison maze and neither of the guards impeded their passage to the other side of the prison. Naruto "asked" the cell guard for the keys and opened the door.

The cell was very similar to the one Hinata occupied. Naruto closed the door behind her to give them privacy. He trusted her, enough.

Hinata walked along the edge of the bed and witnessed the evidence of the beating Neji had received. At the moment, Neji was sleep. Hinat sat on the cot and reached out to the severe wound on his shoulder. It looked like the medic had healed it enough to ensure he wasn't going to die but kept him weak.

The soft and cooling glow of green called Neji out of his slumber. Neji opened his eyes, spotted Hinata, and then turned his head in an effort to ignore her. Once Hinata had eased him of the pain, she leaned forward and placed a tender kiss on his cheek. Her lips trailed down his chin like the relief of band-aids. Her hands massaged his back, caressed the length of his body, and journeyed toward his groin.

"Get off."

Hinata scowled as she snapped her hand away. "So you can fuck Lee but I can't fool around with Naruto?"

"Those two does not equate," Neji argued. "You were fooling around with him before Lee."

"No I wasn't," Hinata insisted.

"Not just sex." Neji accused.

"I'm sorry that marriage doesn't have the power to erase my feelings as if they never existed. You knew what our marriage was. It wasn't for love, it was to keep our clan together. Someone needed to show Konoha and to show the clan that we were still whole."

"I wish you could have told me that, instead of leaving me to look the fool."

"Get over yourself," Hinata snapped. "You can fuck however many men or women that you want to. I don't care. What I do care about is the current crisis we have on our hands. I need your help. I need my husband to help me figure out how we're going to solve the mess we're in. We're both in
jail, if you hadn't notice."

"Return to your paramour and leave me be," Neji spat.

Hinata leaned forward and whispered, "We can fix our marriage."

Neji refused to look at her anymore. "It was broken from the beginning."

Hinata stood, insulted, frustrated and hurt. "I do care about you, Neji Hyuuga." Then she stormed out of the cell.

"The Raikage is rather greedy." Hinata noted.

Naruto looked up from the cup of noodles while lounging on the wooden stool. "What is it?"

Hinata had put her chopsticks down and focused her byakugan. "I'm reading the letter on the messenger bird. It hasn't reached Konoha yet." Naruto watched the concentration on her face for thirty minutes. "The bird has reached the tower." A pause. "The Hokage broke her desk. She's coming here."

At word that the Hokage was coming to the prison, Naruto debated whether or not he should leave and then decided he didn't care. Perhaps cups of ramen wasn't any better, but he couldn't leave Hinata to eat prison food. "Hinata, your byakugan range is much farther than when we were in ANBU isn't it?"

"Neji decided to close his blind-spot. I decided to test mine in a different way."

"How far can you see?" Naruto asked seriously.

"...far."

Naruto slurped the ramen into his mouth while they waited. He watched Hinata take up her chopsticks. Captivity aged many, but Hinata didn't seem bothered by it. As long as she could see, she was content and kept her promise.

The metal door slid open. Naruto sat up when the Hokage appeared at the entrance. She motioned for him to near. Naruto knew what was coming. Naruto approached and the slap sent him flying to the opposite wall of the cell.

"Naruto, we are at war, I cannot have you undermining my authority whenever you feel the need to see your lover."

"I assure you, Hokage-sama, we are merely good friends," Hinata corrected. "I apologize, I would have prepared some tea to receive you but I do not have any."

"Save me the snark," Tsunade snarled. When Naruto attempted to sneak out, Tsunade said, "You might as well stay. This involves you too." Naruto ears perked up and leaned against the stone laden wall in curiosity.

"I've received the demands from the Raikage."

"I'm aware," Hinata said politely.

"I'm not," Naruto said flatly. "Anyone wants to clue me in?"
"The Raikage has decided that Hanabi is not good enough for them. They want to trade Hanabi for Hinata. If we don't agree with their demands they will declare war." The Hokage said.

Naruto's jaw loosened in disbelief. "What? We can't do that. We can't just cover up the fact that the Clan Head of the Hyūga clan has been traded to Lightning. Hanabi maybe, but the Hyūga Clan and the Council will never agree to this. Handing over a Clan Head is like Konoha cutting off its arm."

"We don't have a choice," The Hokage replied bitterly.

"This is idiotic. It's becoming more obvious that Lightning doesn't want the byakugan, they want this war. This is the Raikage, why would he go through all the trouble making demands when he can just invade Konoha and take whatever they want? He's pushing us into a corner to enter into a war on their terms."

"I agree with Naruto's assessment," Hinata responded.

"That doesn't change the fact that Konoha cannot get involved fighting both Lightning and Kiri at the same time. It's only temporary but we need to appease Lightning for as long as we can."

"Until what?" Hinata said as if breaking ice between her words. "Until they ask for the children in gift boxes? Until the Hyūga hear their brethren have been sold off like breeding cattle and you have a civil war on your hands? Where is the line drawn?"

Tsunade closed her eyes. "I'm coming to you as someone who carries the weight of the thousands of lives that live in Konoha. I know your responsibility is to protect your clan but sometimes the few have to be sacrificed for the whole."

"So the Hyūga clan must sacrifice ourselves? We have fought and bled for this village for hundreds of years, we shared in your grandfather's dreams, and we call Konoha our home." Hinata layered her will in cold armor. "You are here for my cooperation. I will sacrifice myself but I refuse to sacrifice my clan. I'll go to Lightning but if Konoha agrees to any more demands that endangers my family, then I won't rest until I pull the Raikage's heart out of his chest."

It wasn't the answer the Hokage wanted but she respected it nevertheless. She remembered a day when Hinata had been just a trembling scared little girl. "I understand."

"Hinata, your preference for self-sacrifice is admirable but this is bullshit," Naruto interrupted.

"Naruto," Tsunade said patiently. "I need your cooperation too. The Raikage is planning to make the trade in person and as custom either a Kage or someone of equal status needs to meet with him. I can't leave the village because of the war. I need you to oversee the trade."

Naruto shook his head. "And if I refuse?"

"This is an order Uzumaki Naruto," The Hokage said with steel.

"What about Neji?" Hinata asked.

"I need you to talk with him and explain that this is the best course of action. I need you to make him understand because I need him back in Ame." The Hokage stood. "As shinobi of this village, I expect you to do what you have been ordered."

"No," Neji said flatly after Hinata attempted to explain the situation. "You are the Clan Head of the Hyūga clan, not a stock animal."
"What else is there to do Neji?" Hinata questioned. "It's best that it's me."

"No its not. Anyone in the clan would sacrifice themselves to go in your place. We all understand how important you are in keeping our family together. It doesn't have to be you," Neji argued. "The Hyūga know what it costs to sacrifice for family."

"How can I possibly allow anyone to go in my place? The Raikage asked for me by name. Anyone from the Fourth Shinobi war can identify me."

"No."

"Neji, I'll stall as long as I can from getting pregnant to hopefully give Konoha enough time to end the war with Kiri. If not... I won't let Lightning have the byakugan."

Neji's face was horrified when she dropped the word 'pregnant', vividly bringing what they wanted to do with her. "You are my wife and I don't deserve to live if I allow this to happen to you. I will fall on my sword before I let Lightning have you."

"Neji, Konoha needs you."

"I am married to you, not to Konoha." Neji said flatly. He reached forward and held her hands in his. "What would Grandfather say of me if I cannot protect you? What Hyūga would I be? The entire clan will fall on its sword if Lightning claims the byakugan, for how can we live in such dishonor and disgrace?"

"Sacrificing for the village is not disgraceful. It's nothing but another mission." Hinata said simply. Neji drew forward, his cheeks blushed in shyness, before he kissed his wife gently on the lips.

It was as if they were staring down a knot they were too tired at the moment to try and fix. Hinata held his apprehensive hands and they sat together in silence.

Naruto entered the unlocked apartment. There were dead flowers everywhere. Someone had neglected to water them. The rotted flower petals crunched underneath his feet as Naruto made his way to the bedroom. There were drugs and alcohol spilled onto the floor. Naruto reached down and checked for a pulse in the woman's neck. He was relieved after he found one.

Then he sat down in a chair by the window. Dead and crumbled lilies broke away onto the windowsill while he waited for Ino Yamanaka to wake up.

x

Ino jerked away when she re-entered her own body. She had stolen the the body of one of her subordinates in ANBU in order to get around her father's restrictions that kept her from coming to work. Sometimes a good torture session was an easy de-stress. Ino yawned as she sat up and didn't acknowledge Naruto waiting in the chair. She reached down and fished for a bottle of alcohol. She grumbled when all she found were empty ones.

"Go get me some alcohol."

"Didn't you just get out of the hospital for alcohol poisoning?"

"So."

"Then perhaps you don't need anymore."
"I didn't ask for your opinion."

"You never ask for my opinion whenever you decide to go delving into my issues. You started getting worse around the time Sakura got married."

Ino scoffed as she stretched out her arms. "Why are you here?"

"I brought you flowers," Naruto proclaimed and handed her a vase of peonies, "since your other ones are dead and all."

"Do I look like a peony type of person?"

"There just flowers," Naruto said exasperated.

"They are never just flowers," Ino said lifted herself from the bed and grabbed the flowers from Naruto's hands. He watched as she laid her nose into their petals and a light returned to her eyes. She placed them onto the dresser. "What do you want?"

"I need a favor."

Ino laid backwards on her bed and gave Naruto a full view of her cleavage as she asked, "Aren't you already in my debt enough?"

"You could do it out of the kindness of your heart," Naruto suggested.

"What kindness in my heart?" Ino scoffed. "I'm guessing this has something to do with Hinata? I do have to applaud the Hokage. She has managed to keep it all hushed up pretty well. Amazing in a ninja village."

"I need you to get into someone's head for me."

"Don't you have one of my cousins on your ANBU team? Why would you need me?"

"Because I need the best," Naruto said quite frankly. "I need to get into the head of one of the most powerful man in the world without anyone ever knowing about it. Can you do that?" Naruto asked.

Ino sat up intrigued. "How much time will I have?"

"Not long. Maybe ten minutes."

"I'll do it," Ino agreed. "But first you have to do something for me in return."

Ino pulled herself from the bed. She prowled over to Naruto in her underwear. Then she began pulling the cloak from Naruto's shoulders.

"You want me to fuck you?"

Ino chuckled. "You should know by now it's never that easy," Her lips touched his ear. "I want you to make love to me." Ino brushed her fingertips around his head. "Don't resist."

Naruto growled and shoved her away backwards against the bed. "I don't want you messing with my head again."

Ino leaned upwards with a smirk. "You want to save your lover don't you? I'll fix whatever I undo after we're done."
"Sometimes I hate you," Naruto admitted.

Ino smirked as she pushed herself off the bed and focused her hands on his head. She dug into the mechanics of his brain. Some people say that love was simply a chemical in the brain trying to keep the human race alive. Ino transferred what thoughts of Hinata invoked to thoughts of herself.

Ino pulled down and sucked onto his lips. Naruto pulled away. "I can't do this. You don't smell like her."

Ino sighed in exasperation as she twisted his olfactory senses. There was an immediate response as Naruto growled into her neck and tightened his claws around her hips. His hands were softer and gentler than most men she had been with. They were careful and reverent. Ino bathed in the worship. She felt like a goddess in Naruto's hands. Their clothes were shed as if he was trying to close the physical gap between them.

"Hinata," Naruto breathed as he offered his body in sacrifice. Ino didn't care. She wanted the emotions. He parted her legs as if his fingers had been granted the miracle of parting rivers. He filled her as if he was unworthy of being a part of her. Naruto's love was a powerful one and gave everything he had to her.

Naruto sat up in Ino's bed and stared at his hands. He didn't know his own hands were capable of such softness. Whatever softness they might have held, he figured it had fled when he first held a kunai. He felt violated in some deep hard way to comprehend.

Ino watched the lines in Naruto's expression grow. "You did great."

"You stole something that wasn't yours." Naruto reached to the floor and put on his pants.

"I could have asked for anything. All I wanted was love."

"You have Chouji." Naruto said angrily.

Ino avoided his eyes and whispered, "I don't feel those emotions for him. I suppose I'm not in love with him. I realize that now." Ino tucked her head against her knees. "The man I love is already married."

Naruto winced. He knew what that felt like.

"It's not easy watching someone have the life you wanted, and now he doesn't even care about me anymore. Then Sakura gets married as if rubbing it in my face. She has the husband and the kids and she's happy." Ino held her tears and looked at Naruto, looking for something to make herself feel better. "Do you think we could have ever been together, you and I?"

"No," Naruto said immediately. "I don't like people in my head. I have enough things going on in there already."

"Other than the mindreading thing?"

"Hinata is willing to sacrifice herself for her entire clan and you refuse to do a favor without asking for something in return. No, Ino, I could never love a woman like you." Naruto got dressed. The only time Hinata ever indulged in her selfishness was the first time they slept together. Naruto stopped before the doorframe, "and tell Chouji the truth. Don't keep hurting him like this."

Ino watched as Naruto left. A taste of her own medicine was bitter in her mouth.
Naruto waited while the guards escorted Hinata out of the prison. A few of his ANBU and several chūnin that he trusted were behind him as witnesses to the exchange.

Hinata approached in the fresh clothing she had requested delivered to her. She had refused to wear the restricting movement of a kimono or don fanciful ornaments as if a gift-wrapped present. A mesh shirt was tucked underneath a comfortable gi and the cloak of the Hyūga clan was donned over her shoulders. If Hinata was going to agree to this transaction, she was going to do it with her pride.

But there was still one piece out of place.

Hinata neared and her prison guards released her into Naruto's custody with a bow. Naruto reached to take off the seal from her forehead. He made grand gestures with his brush to fool the eyes who watched the process. Naruto applied chakra to her temples and the seal disappeared. It was their secret even the Hokage didn't know about yet. Naruto knew that sometimes plans didn't work out. If everything fell through, he leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead, "In case you need a way out."

"Thank you," Hinata whispered.

Naruto held out his hand. Her palm slipped into his. Then his team teleported to the meeting place with the hiraishin technique. They were in the Land of Hot Water, at the crossroads between Fire and Lightning.

"I see them," Hinata replied with her byakugan activated. "They have Hanabi."

"Is Bee with them?"

"No."

Bee's absence was telling. He should have been at A's side in such an important meeting. While Naruto attempted to interpret the snippet of information, the Raikage and his team came into view.

The Raikage landed in the frosted field several paces away. The distance between a cloud and a leaf was great.

"Don't move until I give the signal," Naruto ordered and then stepped forward. When the Raikage saw Naruto's lone figure approaching, he stepped forward as well. They met in the between.

"I'm surprised. This isn't your style." Naruto said.

Their cloaks flapped in the sudden breeze. Their posture, from the tension in their arms to the strength of their feet firmly rooted to the ground, were telling signs that this was anything but a friendly meeting. Both men were on guard.

The Raikage shrugged with his one arm. "Might as well if Konoha is willing to give me what I want."

"When did you become a man willing to accept things given to you? You used to be a man of respect. Where did all that honor of yours go to?"

The smirk on the Raikage's expression was amused. "Honor doesn't keep you young."

Two of the most powerful men in the world stood facing each other, feinting left and right with the power of their words.
"We could make a deal. We could fight Kiri together."

"Kiri doesn't have anything we want. Konoha does. Are you going to conduct this trade or not?" The Raikage asked impatiently as if he had better things to do elsewhere.

Naruto raised his hand and motioned behind him. The Raikage did the same.

A Cloud ANBU led Hanabi forward. A Leaf ANBU was led by Hinata. They stopped beside their respective leaders.

The Raikage assessed Hinata with an unimpressed expression. "They say you were born with a byakugan that can see farther than anyone else."

"It is true," Hinata acknowledged.

"If there's anything I've learned it's not to trust a Hyūga." The Raikage motioned to the Cloud ANBU. "Strip her, make sure she isn't carrying any weapons."

"Is this necessary?" Naruto demanded. He kept his voice even for the mission but there was a smoldering in his chest.

"Everything is necessary with a kunoichi." The Raikage said, with an eye closely scrutinizing Naruto's expression.

The Cloud ANBU approached Hinata and reached for her. She slapped away his hand with a sound like breaking ice.

The Raikage frowned.

Hinata pulled off her cloak and threw it at the Raikage's feet. Then her gi, the mesh shirt, and her pants followed. The relentless chill of the north began to show on her bare skin. When Hinata reached for her bra, and no one seemed inclined to stop her, Naruto interrupted, "She is a Clan Head of Konoha and is worth more than this disrespect."

"Evidently not if Konoha is willing to give her away like cattle. Continue," The Raikage ordered.

Naruto watched Hinata's shivering fingers reach behind her to release the clasp of her bra with no more emotional investment than watching a boring play. He had noticed the Raikage was much more interested in his reaction than in Hinata. Hinata popped off her bra and the bright red material fell into the snow like a puddle of blood. Then she pulled off her underwear until she was standing at the center of the two parties in the nude.

The Cloud ANBU stepped forward. Hinata's palm shot forward and broke the man's nose before he could touch her. "The Raikage can't do his own dirty work?" Hinata challenged.

Finally, the Raikage's attention shifted from Naruto to Hinata. The Raikage stepped forward and his shadow stretched twice the size of her. The Raikage reached forward and roughly grabbed her face. Hinata opened her mouth and the Raikage checked to make sure nothing was hidden underneath her cavities. She choked around his finger as he checked for weapons in her throat.

The shift in attention allowed Naruto to send a message to one of the ANBU behind him.

*Hold on, I need at least five more minutes.* Ino's voice echoed in Naruto's head with strained attention.
Naruto occupied his time with ticking off the seconds. The Raikage shove his fingers up Hinata's vagina, searching for something he didn't find. The search ended with two fingers up her ass. When the Raikage finished, he reached for the Hyūga cloak and cleaned his hand on the full moon of the Hyuuga seal.

Emotions of worry and concern creeped through when Naruto snapped his eyes to Hinata. She could bear the abuse of her body but not the abuse of her seal. Naruto was relieved to find her mask better than his, a frozen block of ice that emotions had no chance of seeping through.

"She's clean," The Raikage said with surprise and confusion in his voice. Naruto noticed the disappointment, as if the Raikage had been disappointed it had all gone too easily.

"Are you satisfied or do you need to try her out to make sure she fits up to Lightning's standards?" Naruto asked.

At the suggestion, the Raikage gave Hinata a mechanical stare. He didn't see her breasts or the curves of her hips, all he saw was the byakugan that shimmered like diamonds in her head. "I am curious about the marks on her back."

Hinata answered, "You cannot become Clan Head of the Hyūga without a few scars."

The Raikage smiled at her answer. "She will do."

He motioned behind him to Hanabi. Hanabi was finally able to step forward and join Naruto's side. The Cloud ANBU with the broken nose unlocked the cuffs on Hanabi's hands. Then the Cloud ANBU moved to transfer the cuffs onto Hinata, gave it a second thought when he met her eyes for the third time, and determined she didn't really need them.

Hinata stepped forward of her own accord and stood beside the Raikage. The Raikage scratched his chin in thought. "I'm thinking we also need a male specimen in order to produce the purest byakugan."

You were right, Naruto.

The Raikage blasted like a comet across the snowy terrain courtesy to a rasengan to the face. The large man rolled to a stop at the center of his entourage that held both surprised and silent stares.

In a swift stroke, Naruto decapitated the Cloud ANBU with the katana he kept at his waist. He walked through the snow and gathered the articles of clothing that had been discarded in the snow. Then he boldly turned his back on the crowd of Lightning ninja. He went to one knee.

Hinata balanced her hands on Naruto shoulders as he held out her underwear and she slipped her feet inside the holes. The seconds were tense as Naruto slowly pulled the soft lace up her thighs.

The Raikage held up a hand and prevented his ninja from attacking. He didn't attack an opponent in the back for it only reflected weakness onto himself.

Naruto covered Hinata's breasts back in her bra. He dressed her in her pants, covered her scars with her shirt, and then burned the Hyūga cloak that the Raikage had defiled. Naruto took off his own cloak and placed it around Hinata's shoulders, showing the Raikage the amount of respect that she deserved.

Finally, Naruto turned and spat, "You have your war."

The Raikage gave a mad grin. "I'm looking forward to meeting you on the battlefield Uzumaki
Naruto stood in front of the double doors of the Hokage's Office. He knew now it was time to deal with the consequences. He opened the door and blinked when he was two feet embedded in the cement outside of the Hokage's tower. He could look up and see the hole in the building where he had flown through. He picked himself up and tried again.

He entered into the office a little more slowly this time. He found Tsunade with her back facing him. She was staring out of the window.

"Hokage-sama, I know I disobeyed you but I had a very good reason. The Raikage wasn't going to stop making demands of us. He wanted to keep pushing us until we had no choice but to declare war on them. Lightning wants this war so they can take whatever they want. If you want confirmation, I had Ino in his head. I know it was a risky move but she can confirm everything I told you is true. This war was inevitable so I approached the trade as an opportunity to get our kunoichi back. I'll pay the consequences of my disobedience any way you see fit, but I believe I did the right thing. Lightning doesn't respect weakness. We couldn't afford to show it."

Naruto waited in silence. Then Tsunade turned around and her tear smeared cheeks obscured the view of Konoha. "Naruto, we've lost."

"No," Naruto refused to believe that. "We've still got a chance."

"It's not enough." She pointed to the stacks on her desk. "I've already gone over the numbers. Soon we're going to run out of money, out of food, out of new supplies, and out of men." Tsunade's shoulders heaved, "Oh Kami, I've lost my grandfather's village."

"Granny," Naruto whispered as he approached. He had never seen her look so defeated before. He walked around the desk and crouched before her. He took her hands in his, gingerly, like a son would an ailing mother. "We'll figure something out. Konoha will not fall because we won't give up. We can't."

Naruto took one of the most important women in his life into his arms. "Here, I'm going to take you home. We can't have anyone seeing you like this, right?"

Tsunade shook her head into his shoulder. "No, there is so much work I have to do."

"A few hours of sleep can't possibly worsen the mess we're in. Rest while you can, we've got long days ahead of us." Naruto picked up Tsunade in his arms. He was surprised by how light she was. She always appeared heavier to him.

Naruto whisked her away to the silent Senju compound. He carried her up the stairs and placed her in the bed. He took off her coat, slipped off her shoes, and placed the hat on the floor beside the futon. Naruto sat on his knees and watched as she slowly closed her eyes. Naruto stood up to leave.

"Jiraiya," Tsunade whispered, "don't leave me to do this by myself."

"He left both of us didn't he?" Naruto whispered. He leaned down and kissed her forehead as she drifted to sleep. "At least he left us with each other."

Naruto returned to the Hokage's office and began turning off the lights. If the end days were coming, he planned to spend as much time as he could with the kids. With the lights off, the office seemed menacing in its darkness. The shadows reached with the cold hands of ghosts over the furniture. The
Hokage's chair was framed by the skyline of Konoha.

Naruto reached for the door and paused when he touched the handle. It was as if a spark had erupted through his thoughts, like the kindling to his unpredictability.

Naruto turned towards the desk. He leaned over the wood and touched the button underneath the panel of the first drawer. He leaned against the desk when Shizune entered the office.

She took an unexpected step back when she found Naruto's silhouette outlined by the ghosts in the room.

"Where is Tsunade?"

"She's okay," Naruto said quickly not to raise concern, "but she's tired, so I took her home."

Naruto straightened his shoulders. "There is something I need you to do. I need you to send out messages to Shikamaru, Gaara, the Tsuchikage, and," Naruto winced, "Demon country."

Shizune smiled and nodded her head. "Right away."

"Tsuchikage," Naruto greeted, flashing a smile that could cost a war, "It's been a long time." Naruto bowed, low enough in the presence of a Kage but high enough as a person of importance. Every measured gesture was a careful weight on the scale of politics.

The Tsuchikage, Kitsuchi, didn't look impressed by the greeting. "Where is the Hokage? I thought she was supposed to mediate the summit."

"The Hokage is currently at war," Naruto said regretfully, "I know that I am unequal to the power of a Kage but I assure you that Konoha has given me all of the Hokage's authority in dealing with this matter."

The Tsuchikage walked past Naruto into the meeting room. Naruto noticed the drawn lines in the man's face. The mantle of Kage has aged him.

"You're really kissing ass," Kurotsuchi noticed as she followed behind her father.

Naruto bowed before her, but notably much higher. Naruto straightened and having noticed the humor in her voice, responded, "Must I kiss yours too?"

"Spare me," Kurotsuchi replied.

Naruto grinned and escorted Kurotsuchi into the meeting room where she joined her father. One long table was the centerpiece of the room. At one end, the Tsuchikage sat with his entourage standing behind him. At the other end, sat the Kazekage with Temari and Kankurou. Naruto sat in the middle. Naruto knew this wasn't going to be easy. There had been a lot of bad blood spilled between Suna and Iwa.

He kept a straight face when his eyes met Gaara. Naruto didn't want to be accused of playing favorites. A Leaf ANBU appeared at his side. Cincada whispered, "The area is secure."

Naruto nodded and the ANBU melted back into the shadows. "This summit will now convene to discuss an alliance between Suna, Iwa, and Konoha."

The Tsuchikage crossed his arms. "I will not agree to an alliance until Suna gives up the land they stole from us."
"I did not steal it," Gaara said in his gravelly voice. "It was won."

"Taken while the entire country was mourning the death of my Father. It was outright thievery," The Kitsuchi argued.

"I am not giving up that land," Gaara replied.

"Then this summit is pointless." The Ichikage stood up. "Why have you requested my presence if you were just going to waste my time? We do not need to get involved in Konoha's mistakes out of the goodness of our hearts. It was Konoha who killed the Mizukage and it was Konoha who declared war on Lightning. You brought this on yourself."

"Of course I don't expect you to help us for nothing," Naruto interjected. "If you would sit back down I would gladly offer you a much greater prize." Naruto and the Tsuchikage locked eyes.

"Surely you will not be at a loss if you grant me just a moment of your time to present Konoha's proposal?"

The Tsuchikage looked back at his daughter and she shrugged her shoulders. "We came all this way."

The Tsuchikage sat back down. "I am listening. What can Konoha possibly offer me?"

"If you fairly concede the land to Suna and join our alliance against Kiri and Lightning, then after the war we will give you something much larger. We will help you regain Mountain."

The area of Mountain was four times larger than the small strip of land that Sunagakure had taken. "What is one strip of land compared to half your country that Mountain took?"

The Tsuchikage's expression was stone and Naruto found it hard to read his reaction. "We are fully capable of getting Mountain back ourselves."

"Then why haven't you? Konoha has the intelligence on their hidden village and resources. Help us beat back Kiri and Lightning, and I personally will help you get your country back with my bare hands." Naruto couldn't crack the Tsuchikage's game face and boldly continued, "Besides, if either Kiri or Lightning takes Konoha, does anyone in this room want to deal with a Bloody Mist or the Raikage's ego three times as strong? For your own self-preservation, all three of us need this alliance."

Naruto could feel the heat underneath the sage cloak he wore as he waited for the Ichikage's response. "How do we know Konoha really has such intelligence?"

Naruto motioned to the ANBU and they escorted a kunoichi inside of the room. Kurotsuchi's jaw slackened when the woman in civilian clothing entered. "I thought you were dead."

The woman instantly bowed her head to the ground before the Tsuchikage. "I was assigned to spy on the rebels when they declared independence on Iwa. I was discovered and locked away within their hidden village. I was saved by Konoha during one of their missions. I can testify that Konoha has been inside Mountain before."

"Why didn't you come home?" Kurotsuchi asked.

"During my time imprisoned my chakra networks were damaged irreparably. I could no longer return to my country as a kunoichi and thus I stayed in Konoha as a civilian to live out the rest of my days in shame."
Kurotsuchi came over and pulled the woman to her feet, and then into a hug. "I really thought you were dead."

"I wanted to be dead," the woman whispered. "Konoha has vital intelligence on Mountain that would allow us to punish the rebels."

"You help us and I promise Mountain is yours. I don't make promises lightly." Naruto addressed the Tsuchikage. Naruto was well aware Iwa had been Konoha's primary enemy in both the First and Second Shinobi War. "We've had our differences but enemies today are friends tomorrow."

"I accept your proposal," The Tsuchikage answered.

Naruto knew the matter wasn't truly settled. He knew Tsuchikage would help Suna and Konoha now, get their help with Mountain, and years down the line when Iwagakure had gathered its strength back to Great country status, they'll settle their debts.

A rock never forgets.

Every side knew that alliances in the end, were just a sheet of paper.

"You did well mediating the alliance with Suna and Iwa," Tsunade said as she studied the signed documents. Tsunade and Naruto were in the war room, staring at the maps spread atop the table. "For the time being, Iwa will occupy Mountain. This will free both Chouza and Tsume's unit."

Tsunade tapped her fingers. "I'm going to bring Tsume's unit to Konoha, just in case we need an extra line of defense close to home. Chouza will join the eastern front with Kakashi."

"We should reconsider our hold on Ame. It's taking too many resources to hold them."

"But we can't afford to have them at our backs," Tsunade argued.

"Ame is ruled by a bunch of warlords. They won't give us a problem if we pay them more than what Kiri is paying them." All of her usual advisors, Kakashi and Shikaku were out of the village but she respected Naruto's opinion just the same.

"We don't have the money."

"We already do. I've been in touch with Demon Country. Their religious order owns the country's gold mines."

"That money doesn't come without a price. What did you promise them?" Tsunade asked, alarmed by his initiative.

"An heir within the year." Naruto cleared his throat. "With the ruling warlord in our pocket, this frees up Neji's unit."

Tsunade placed her hand on Naruto's shoulder. "You don't have to do this."

"We could potentially send Neji against Lightning's forces," Naruto said as he brushed off her hand and walked around the table.

Tsunade sighed. "No, I need someone who knows how the Raikage operates. I need you."

Naruto's head snapped up. "I can't lead an army."
"You fought beside the Raikage during the Peace Treaty War. You understand him. I need you leading the forces against Lightning."

"What about everything I've done with Kiri? We still haven't figured out why they've been in communication with the Land of Iron."

"Iron Country has been known to grant asylum to fugitives and international criminals and recently, the terrorist organization Kuro No Keiyakusha. Anko has sent in reports that confirms Kiri has been communicating with this terrorist group and not Iron Country's government. I'm calling Anko and her team back home. We have larger enemies than a few angry civilians."

"But what about all the spies I have in Kiri? It is Suigetsu that wants to massacre my entire family, not the Raikage. Suigetsu is my biggest threat."

"First lesson of being a shogun, place your units where they are most effective. Lightning still has Bee, the eight-tailed jinchūriki and you're the only person in the world faster than the Raikage."

Naruto held in his anger because the logic of her argument made sense. "Then what do I do?"

"I want you to hand over the operation in Kiri to someone you trust and can potentially run things in case something happens to you. You're still the Captain and overseeing the division, but someone else will be Shouldering most of the responsibilities."

Naruto winced. "All I've got for you is Konohamaru. He know the ins and outs of how I run things but he's currently on detention right now."

"Not anymore." Tsunade reached for a block piece and placed it on the border of Fire Country that faced Lightning.

"This still doesn't change the fact I don't know how to lead an army."

"Each one of your shadows clones have been watching Neji and Kakashi. You know more than you think. You need a second. I recommend Neji or Shikamaru."

"Neji and I aren't a good mix. The Eastern Front is a joint venture between Suna and Konoha. You need Shikamaru there to mediate between the two." Naruto tapped his fingers along the wood and attempted to think of someone reliable who wasn't currently involved in the conflict.

"I'll give you some time to think about it. We have a few days at least before Lightning is at our border."

"Once Lightning attacks, Kiri certainly will. We need to attack before they do," Naruto said.

"Already sent in the orders."

The tense waiting game was finally about to break. These last few days were the calm before the storm.

Shion felt too weak to even get out of bed. For once, it wasn't her weak constitution hampering her recovery but the grief that infected her like a disease. When her nurses told her that none of her servants had made it out of the ambush alive it felt as final as a death sentence. All Shion could think about were the last time she saw the faces of the people that had meant the most of her in the entire world.
There were tubes in her wrist that fed her. The nurses had to change her clothes. But she deserved it.

She heard the door of the hospital room open.

"Shion?"

Shion turned towards the unmistakable smoothness of Naruto's voice. She didn't know how she could ever possibly face him, but when she finally gathered the courage to beg him to go away, the curtains that surrounded her hospital bed were drawn back.

Shion looked up into Naruto's worried eyes at the state of her. Shion knew she didn't deserve his worry. Naruto pulled up at chair. "I'm sorry about your family."

The mention of them caused tears to gather again in Shion eyes. Naruto was growing worried that her grief was going to kill her and that would not be beneficial to Konoha. Naruto forced himself to reach out and place a hand around her small and fragile fingers.

"It's going to be alright," Naruto said gently. "At least you were saved."

"Did- did you find her?" Shion asked hopefully.

"I did. The kunoichi is back in Konoha."

Shion breathed in relief. The guilt hadn't made her grief any easier.

"But Konoha is now embroiled in a war with Lightning," Naruto began, hoping to gradually build up to their impending marriage.

Shion crumpled into a harder bout of tears. "War? I never meant for this for to happen. It's my fault, all my fault."

Naruto moved his hand from her hand with a sickening feeling. "What's your fault?"

Shion looked into the darkening of the clear blue sky in Naruto's eyes. She couldn't keep secrets. Even if he would hate her, she couldn't live a life buried under her guilt. "I saw it in a vision and Kami-sama showed me what I was supposed to do. I didn't know those visions were going to lead to this. I didn't know."

"What are you talking about?" Naruto demanded.

"I asked Kami-sama to show me how to get to you and he showed me a vision of myself writing a letter to Lightning," Shion whispered, "and I wrote it. I can't go back. If I had known, if I had only known..."

Naruto stood as he paced around the room and demonic chakra whipped from the pores of his skin. "You started a fucking war with Lightning," Naruto snapped in anger, "for what? For your own fucking selfishness!"

"It was for us," Shion sobbed.

"And you lost everyone close to you," Naruto spat. He turned and punched through the hospital wall. He pressed his head against the plaster and attempted to get his spiraling anger in control.

Naruto turned around when suddenly the medical equipment beat frantically. Naruto shouted for a nurse and raced for Shion's bed. Naruto pulled her into his arms as the high-stress situation was seriously beginning to threaten her life.
"Shion," Naruto said gently as he pressed her against his chest and her sobs shook her body like a seizure. A team of nurses rushed in. One began to stabilize her with medical ninjutsu and the other injected a serum into the IV. After several moments, the episode had passed. It left Shion barely breathing.

"Uzumaki-sama, we are going to ask you to leave if you continue to traumatize the patient."

Naruto had been watching from the far wall. He nodded his head. The nurses left the room. Naruto bit his lip after watching Shion's brush with death. He had come close to losing her. Naruto peeled himself from the wall, readjusted the chair, and sat over her bed.

Shion was embarrassed and ashamed by her condition as much as she was guilty over her actions. Naruto lifted her hand. "Shion, will you marry me?"

She answered with tears.

Naruto sat hunched atop the head of the Fourth Hokage and watched the lights of Konoha glitter in the night like dying stars.

He didn't react when presence approached from behind him. The scent loosened the tension in his shoulders.

"You seem unsettled," Hinata noted and sat beside him.

"I just got finished telling the kids about the marriage," Naruto hadn't formally discussed his looming marriage with Hinata, but knew she was already aware of the arrangement with Demon Country.

Hinata could tell by his demeanor that it hadn't gone so well. She placed her hand on top of his and sat under the heavy cover of darkness until he was ready to speak.

"It didn't bother Ichigo. I don't think he really understood but Ame was upset. She didn't seem to mind that there wasn't going to be a wedding or that the marriage is supposed to be a secret. Then Ame asked if I loved her."

Naruto shrugged his shoulders hopelessly. "I've never lied to her. I told her no." He turned to Hinata. "It was like training for years through the academy with a dream to become the greatest ninja and protect everyone, and then you kill someone for the first time, and you realize you can never go back to those dreams. That was the sort of realization that came over her face when I told her the truth." A tear slid down Naruto's cheek but it was too dark to see it. "I broke my daughter's heart today."

Hinata leaned into Naruto's shoulder and he instinctively turned his forehead to rest on top of her hair.

"I refuse to let it all fall to pieces, I refuse to give up without a fight, but I'm not just marrying Shion for the money. It's an out. If things worsen, I'm shipping the kids to Demon Country. My fight is not their fight and I realize by the time this is over, I might have to break her heart even more."

"She's a tough girl, she can handle it. I think she gets it from her Dad," Hinata responded and rested against his full biceps. "I think we need distance. I don't want to impose on you and Shion. She deserves a chance."

"Distance," Naruto chuckled at the irony of the word and their physical orientation. Something had fundamentally changed between them in the past few months. He told her things that he didn't tell anyone else. She had become a part of him, inching into an emotional space no one had ever been
"Shion tipped off Lightning."

"I know," Hinata answered. "I put the pieces together. She is the only one who could have known with a low enough profile to slip under Konoha's surveillance."

"Don't kill her."

"She is nothing but a babe playing in a tank full of sharks. She is no use to us or Konoha dead."

Both of their shoulders rose with a sigh.

"I noticed you've submitted your name to the Kage's office for field deployment."

Hinata avoided his eyes and confirmed Naruto's suspicions that she wasn't planning on telling him until it was too late to stop her. "It's impossible for me not to get involved, not with Lightning on our doorstep."

Naruto lifted her shin to face him, and tender as lifting a butterfly. "What ever happened to proving me wrong? You were supposed to escape."

"We can never escape ANBU."

There were full moons in Hinata's eyes. Their lips were only a firefly's breath apart as she said, "I'm nothing more than a snake shedding old skin."

"You go back out there and it's no turning back."

"There was no turning back the moment Lightning captured my sister."

They stared each other down like two stubborn rocks, with wills that refused to move.

"I need a Second."

Hinata smiled with murder between her lips. "I accept."

Naruto darted forward, unable to hold back, and released all his stress and frustrations onto her lips. Soft peppered kisses turned into tongue, saliva, and not enough. Naruto's skin was afire and his hands frantic as he pulled off her clothes. They rolled along the stonework until Hinata's heaving chest was underneath him. Her breath trembled as Naruto trailed his lips up her neck.

Their eyes were locked on one another and there was only one key. "I want you," Hinata whispered.

"That's not good enough. No more lies, Hinata."

Sometimes the truth hurt too much. Hinata held her head into his chest to hide the tears that escaped from the emotional armor that could no longer defend her. Embracing who she was meant embracing all the demons she had refused to confront.

Hinata looked at Naruto with eyes that could pull tides, then admitted, "I love you." Naruto kissed her tears. "I love you so much that I can't breathe unless I have you in my sight. I love you so much that it hurts, it hurts so much." Naruto's held her so softly, like catching a firefly in your hands.

"It was ANBU when I began falling in love with you. I liked the way you fit so well beside me. I was falling for you before I ever knew who was behind the mask," Naruto laid on their sides and
pressed their naked bodies against each other. He pulled her leg up over his waist. "I loved you every time you broke my heart and every time you put it back together."

They clung to each other. Naruto placed himself inside her body until no more distance separated them. The moon was full in the sky and watched as the two lovers cut themselves open.

Sometimes distance was an elliptical orbit.

x

Don't waste the seconds
Lesson Thirty Seven

Till Death Do Us Part

Naruto Uzumaki signed in big messy strokes, barely eligible, by a hand much more used to holding a hilt than a brush. In comparison, Shion followed with a fancied script so miniature as if to embroider the document. The two discordant signatures began to dry into the parchment.

Shion hadn't looked up from the floor since it had begun. Naruto's face was a mask while he watched the signatures dry, as if waiting for something. Ame wasn't fooled by the mask. It was the same expression he wears when he tells her 'everything is going to be okay', before strapping on a katana, buckling his flak jacket, and jumping out the window.

The Hokage came forward and examined the signatures. Finally she signed her name at the bottom like a chain forging a link between the names above.

"It's done."

Naruto had always imagined a big wedding. All of his friends would be in attendance, regardless of the symbol on their hitai-ite, with enough room for both the living and the dead.

"Sorry it couldn't be a big ceremony," Naruto said, not knowing whether he was apologizing to Shion, the kids, or himself.

"I don't need a big one," Shion whispered as she followed behind him with her head still lowered to the ground. Naruto realized how fast he had been walking when he heard her voice far behind him. He slowed down to allow her time to catch up, but she slowed down too.

Both Ame and Ichigo watched the sudden battle of paces in confusion. Finally, Naruto gave up and turned around, "What's going on?"

Shion blushed in embarrassment and wondered what she had done wrong. "A proper wife walks behind her husband," she squeaked.

"Not in a ninja village," Naruto said immediately. A ninja never wants their spouse to walk behind them; they'll be the first one to stab you in the back.

Naruto reached out his hand and pulled Shion to his side, then reached over and lifted her chin. "Keep your head up. Always be aware of your surroundings no matter who you're with."

The correction embarrassed Shion further. She silently reprimanded herself that she should have spent more time studying the customs and habits of Konoha. She felt entirely inadequate as Naruto's wife.

Naruto was keenly aware how this felt similar to the night he brought Ame and Ichigo home from the orphanage. It had been a mixture of excitement, happiness, and nervousness of not knowing how to put a family together.

Naruto felt a tug on his pants leg. Without thought, he reached down and scooped Ichigo in his arm just like that first night. Ichigo twisted and hugged Naruto's neck. He has gotten older and bigger, but no less spoiled.
They arrived at the open gates of the compound where the Uzumaki crest swirled on its doors. For the first time since the compound was bought, Naruto turned and closed the doors tightly behind him.

Ame noticed the change. "Why are we closing the doors?"

"It's gotten too dangerous," Naruto replied. He was always willing to accept anything or anyone who wandered in. But times have changed.

"We're home," Naruto introduced as he opened the door to the main house. Shion crossed the threshold into what was now her home and remembered the first time she had come here, desperately hoping she could make Naruto fall in love with her.

For a moment, there was a silent interlude that questioned what now? Naruto had brought Ichigo and Ame to the small apartment he used to own to the same silence. He solved it the same way he solved it then – with ramen.

"How about Ichigo and I begin dinner while Ame can help Shion unpack her things?" Naruto suggested.

"But I'm supposed to cook dinner," Shion argued. For the first time that night her voice was louder than a whisper.

"Not tonight," Naruto smirked. "Tonight is ramen night."

Both Ame and Ichigo's eyes lit up. Traditionally, ramen night was scheduled for the last week of the month but tonight was special and it came early. Shion could see the kids' excitement and did not offer any further protests.

Naruto carried Ichigo into the kitchen and set him on the counter. Ichigo was given the important job of taste-testing.

"Alright," Naruto said as he rolled up his sleeves. He had come a long way from instant ramen.

Bags of Shion's belongings that had been salvaged from the ambush crowded the upstairs. Ame stuffed Shion's clothes into the closet and secretly admired the soft fabric that slid through her hands. "You sure have a lot of clothes."

"I haven't actually worn most of them," Shion admitted as she spread the fine silk of spring and winter. "When I went on tours I had a tendency to splurge but life was humble in the monastery and I was never allowed to wear them."

"It feels like we've adopted you," Ame giggled. "I've never had a mother before."

"I never been a mother before." Shion found it easier to talk to Ame. There was too much guilt weighing down any conversation she had with Naruto. "Do you have any tips for me?"

"Ichigo doesn't talk much so if he doesn't say anything to you don't take it personal. Dad is on a strict diet so we have to make sure he doesn't eat anything he shouldn't."

"A diet?" Shion questioned. "But he's rather fit."

"Dad has a bad heart," Ame said as if stating a fact about the weather.

"I didn't know," Shion said.
Ame turned and emphasized, "You're weren't supposed to know. It's a big secret that Granny wants only in the family. *Never* tell that to anyone who isn't family."

Shion could only imagine what would happen if the international community got a hold of such information. Through Ame's words, Shion got the sense that Ame meant more than just Ichigo and Naruto. "Who is family?"

"Granny, Tomu, Kusuro, Uncle Iruka, Uncle Teuchi and Aunt Ayane, Grandad but he's dead, Uncle Kakashi but he doesn't like to be called Uncle, Big sister Sakura because she thinks 'aunt' makes her sound old, and Honorable Sister Hinata because," Ame was so used to hearing the title from her Hyūga friends that it had caught on but the long address gave Ame time to catch herself before she spilled the fact her dad was in love with someone else. She turned with a smile, "because Hinata knows everything."

Shion hadn't notice the break in Ame's reply because she was brooding on the fact that she hadn't met most of these people. They were just names to Shion but evidently big influences in her family's life.

"You haven't met Tomu. He's the most important person you need to meet," Ame said, "but he ran away to the war." Then after further contemplation Ame said, "They're all in the war."

Ame wiped a tear from her cheek, and then another, until her vision blurred. Shion was immediately attentive and crouched down with a gentle touch through Ame's hair. "It's going to get better."

"That's what Dad always says but it's only gotten worse." Ame couldn't even go to the Academy this semester because the classes had been suspended.

"History has shown that war is economically unsustainable. By its very nature it can't last forever. Peace will come." Shion promised.

It was the first time anyone had given Ame a logical explanation for what seemed like false hope. "I'm scared," Ame whispered and looked at Shion. "I know that's why Dad married you, because he's scared too."

The guilt began to wrack Shion's core. She felt as if Ame's fear was her fault. She wondered how many children she hurt or even orphaned for her selfishness. For a woman who could see the future, she had taken foresight for granted.

Ame wiped her face. She felt silly. "I know Dad is doing all of this to protect us but I don't want to be an orphan again."

"Do you remember all of those people you just listed off as family?" Shion asked. "No matter what, you will never be an orphan again."

Ame smiled and gave Shion a quick furtive hug. Ame reached into the luggage and asked, "You're not a kunoichi? You don't fight? You're never going to leave?"

"No, I'm not going anywhere," Shion said determine. "I'm a priestess."

"What does a priestess do?"

"A priestess interprets the will of Kami. Sometimes I fail to interpret his will as well as I should. A priestess if offered special permission similar to that of a sage that grant us the ability to move through the world irregardless of politics or borders to help those who are suffering. Although," Shion said softly as she carefully handled the priestess robes she pulled from the suitcase. "I'm
slightly different than an ordinary priestess. My position is both limited and empowered by my visions. Because of the power Kami has granted me, I am under constant protection. My role is much more politicized. I don't always have the freedom to help like I want to."

"Daddy likes to help people too."

Shion green eyes were as bright as a glade of sunlit grass. "That's what I like about him."

"Are you two done gossiping about me?" Naruto teased from the doorway of the bedroom. Shion turned with a blush, not knowing Naruto's keen hearing had overheard the entire conversation from the kitchen.

Ame smacked her lips and asked, "Is dinner ready?"

"Yep," Naruto proclaimed, "and wash your hands." Naruto created shadow clones to finish unpacking the items while Shion and Ame went to the bathroom.

Everyone converged on the dining table where a great pot of ramen rested in the middle. Naruto raised a hand before the proceedings could begin. "Since it's her first ramen night, we will allow Shion to have the first bowl."

Once Shion had been served, Naruto gave the most foxish grin she had ever seen. "No cheating," Naruto stressed like an exam proctor at the chūnin exams. "Ready, set, go!"

Noodles began to fly. Shion watched speechless as Naruto, Ame, and Ichigo fought for first turn at the spoon, poured their bowls, and participated in what appeared to be a ramen-eating contest. Shion hadn't even eaten a mouth-full when two bowls clattered onto the table signaling Ame's and Naruto's first emptied bowl.

Shion blinked when broth flew on her cheek. The bowls began to stack up. When Ame couldn't eat anymore, both Ame and Ichigo conspired together to prevent Naruto from collecting anymore bowls to his number.

Ichigo jumped on Naruto's face. Ame snatched the spoon from the broth and threw it with the alarming accuracy of a kunai across the room and out the half-opened window. Naruto peeled Ichigo from his face only to have Ame bodily slam into him. One inch of the chair and Naruto lost his balance, falling backwards onto the floor.

"Dad." Naruto looked up at the sudden call of Ichigo's voice and saw the metal bottom of the pot slide off the table. Naruto reacted instinctively, pulling Ame into his arms and bodily protecting her from the metal pot that fell onto his shoulder. He couldn't protect her from the broth that drenched their clothes and noodles that covered them like jungle moss.

A hand coated in the blood of ramen emerged over the edge of the table. Ame and Naruto pulled themselves up like wounded soldiers.

"Count!" Ame declared, eager to claim victory.

Ichigo leaned over and pooled his and Ame's bowls together. Two from Ichigo and four from Ame. "Six."

"Six," Naruto said as he finished counting. His total would have been a lot more if he hadn't been interrupted. "You cheated," Naruto complained as he licked the ramen-taste from his lips.

Ame had a twinkle in her eye. "We're ninja."
"It's not over yet!" Naruto proclaimed.

Shion's eyes widened when Naruto, Ichigo, and Ame turned toward the half-eaten bowl of ramen in front of her. Shion shoved her bowl forward and held her hands up in surrender.

Immediately after dinner it was bath time. Shion found that most of the duties she expected herself to perform, like cleaning the kitchen, were easily completed by shadow clones within seconds. Ame and Ichigo had gotten adjusted to taking their own baths and getting ready for bed by themselves and did not need any assistance from her.

Shion placed aside her ruined kimono on the bathroom counter. She didn't feel as if she had much to contribute to the family and was still very much trying to find a place to occupy. Shion reached over and tested the warmth of the shower. Naruto had insisted that he would use the bathroom in one of the many houses of the compound while she was granted the luxury of the primary bathroom.

Shion entered the foreign shower. She was much more used to the traditional public baths in Demon Country. The shower was a ninja invention. Sometimes a ninja didn't have the time to soak.

The water massaged away the sticky sensation of the ramen broth.

The steam had condensed on the mirror. After Shion dressed in her pajamas, she began her habitual nightly routine. Shion was comforted by the presence of her personal items stocked within the cabinets beside Naruto's. Shion went through the cabinets in an attempt to familiarize herself with the bathroom. Shion's hand paused when her fingers landed on a prescription bottle. It was right next to her allergy medicine, body supplements, and the fertility pills Sakura had ordered her to consume for the past week in precursor to the marriage. Shion reached for the prescription bottle and studied its contents.

She jumped when a knock came at the door. The medicine fell and knocked against the counter. The door eased open to announce Naruto was coming in. He peeked inside, "Are you doing alright? Just checking to make sure you didn't fall in the toilet or anything."

Naruto's gaze turned toward the fallen bottle of medicine.

"Ame told me about your heart," Shion whispered.

"The kids and I are waiting for you to finish. They want to read a bedtime story," Naruto said as he walked into the bathroom, shoved the pills back into the cabinet, and closed it so hard the mirror cracked. Shion watched as Naruto left the bathroom with an innate sense that she had crossed a boundary and it was a place she didn't belong,

Shion finished getting ready for the night and left the bathroom. Immediately, she noticed that the brief hardness on his face softened at the side of the children, as quick as a coin flip. Ame and Ichigo were waiting for her, tucked under the blankets.

"Bedtime story," Ame declared. "You're not a Uzumaki until you know this story."

Shion's smiled stretched into an horizon and her lips touched the sunrise that lit her eyes. When she climbed into bed, she noticed how the children seemed to both distance and bridge her to Naruto on the other side. Ame's warmth leaned against Shion with the book in her lap. "It's the story of the Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Ninja."

Shion noticed the faded and well-cared for pages. Ame didn't have to look at the words and began the tale by heart.
Shion turned the last page as Ame's head fell against her shoulder. Ichigo had fallen asleep with his mouth open and his foot constantly kicking in Naruto's rib, of which, Naruto kept unconsciously swatting away.

"I liked it. Was the character named after you?"

Naruto chuckled. "I was named after the character. It was written by my Grandfather and my parents liked the name."

"Your Grandfather must have been a great man."

Naruto scoffed, "He was a perverted old man that did nothing but write smutty books."

Figuring she had made a misstep Shion corrected, "I only assumed because parents tend to name their children after people they admire, most often after their own father."

Naruto shrugged his shoulders. "Didn't really know my father," he said without the fondness he had used when referring to Jiraiya.

Naruto collected the children into his arms in order to deliver them to their beds.

"Naruto," Shion said before Naruto left the room. "I'm sort of hungry. I'm going to be in the kitchen."

Naruto flinched and remembered that Shion didn't have much to eat at dinner. "Alright, I'll meet you downstairs." Naruto said as he hefted Ame over his shoulder and the movement jostled her awake. "No, daddy I want to stay up all night with you."

"I'll be here in the morning," Naruto said. He wasn't going to miss the last chance to hold her in a while. The memories of clones were never enough. Touch, smell, taste, sight and sound were only phantoms. They were just illusions, just shadows casted by his chakra.

"Promise?" Ame asked as her voice was carried down the hallway. "Don't ninja out the window."

Shion admired their close relationship. It was the sort of relationship she wished she had with her father, who had died before she was born. Shion went downstairs to prepare something to eat.

"Smells delicious," Naruto commented when he arrived downstairs. Naruto watched the display as Shion effortlessly tossed a pan of frying meat into the air. Without the children, a gaping hole of silence settle in the kitchen. Naruto cleared his throat and said, "I hope you weren't too traumatized by ramen night."

"I enjoyed it," Shion said. She doubted many people got the chance to see Naruto smile like that. "How did the tradition start?"

"We were at the old apartment. Sometimes I'd make a huge pot of ramen for dinner but there was this one time I had burnt it… pretty badly. Couldn't let it go to waste and suddenly it erupted into a large food fight. From that moment on, it was called ramen night on the last week of every month. Sometimes on those nights we would invite unsuspecting guests who didn't know what the night was." Naruto winked. "Never eat ramen with an Uzumaki."

Shion giggled, "You are horribly mischievous." Conversation was easy when he tried. Naruto was warmed by how her laughter lit her face. Shion turned and lifted a sample of stir fry in the air. "Do you want to taste?"
Naruto walked over and lessened the distance between them. Naruto opened his mouth and Shion placed a piece of meat on his tongue. Naruto caught her wrist and began to greedily suck on her fingers. Shion yelped at the sudden kidnapping of her limb. She was helpless until Naruto finally released her, smacking his lips. "Very good."

Shion gleamed at the compliment. She turned back toward the food with a keen sense that Naruto was watching her. Naruto noticed how easy was Shion's smile. It was very different from Hinata. Hinata's smile was earned.

Finally Naruto said, "There are a few things we need to talk about before I leave."

It was a brutal reminder that this day was quickly coming to an end. Shion finished the stir fry, made two bowls, and sat down at the table. After a solemn "itadakimasu," Shion began to eat.

"It is extremely important that this marriage remains a secret because my family has been targeted by the Mizukage. Because of the danger, you cannot leave the compound until the war is over. Ame and Ichigo cannot freely roam Konoha without a shadow clone or a Hyūga present. Since I need to concentrate all of my chakra against Lightning, I am leaving three shadow clones in Konoha. One will be at the front gate, the back gate, and at the Hokage's Tower. If you need anything just let one of them know."

"I understand," Shion acknowledged. She knew marriage to Naruto came with certain dangers.

"If my shadow clones happen to disappear, do not go anywhere. Stay put and someone from the Hyūga Clan will come and get you. You and the kids will remain with the Hyūga until a shadow clone reappears."

"I understand."

Naruto combed his fingers through his hair. "Shion," Naruto pronounced her name with all the seriousness he could muster in order to emphasize how important his next statement was. "You are always in danger."

Shion looked up with a confident ray of hope. "I'm not scared. I know you'll protect me."

"No, you do not understand," Naruto got up and walked around the table. Shion gasped when he suddenly grabbed her by the chin, like he had done earlier that night, but this time it was much rougher. Naruto could hear her heart beating faster at the deepening of the whiskers on his cheeks. The lengthening of his nails caused a sheen of sweat on her forehead. She held her breath at the slow horrifying transformation of sky blue irises to an unmistakable blood red.

"You are always in danger."

Naruto let go of her. An echoed silence overwhelmed the room. Shion wiped tears from the corner of her eyes. Naruto looked away and tried to figure out the emotions that were running through him. He was both angry at himself for making her cry and oddly pleased at shattering the heroic image she had of him.

"Have you ever hurt Ame and Ichigo?" Shion whispered. When emotion overwhelmed her, she cloaked herself in logic.

Naruto looked behind him. "No."

"Then don't you think that your insistence to make me see you as a monster without any basis in fact only reveals your own self-loathing?" Shion said and then her eyes widened at the boldness of her
"You have no idea of the things I have done."

"No, but I know of the things I have seen. If you are such the monster you think you are, you would have never married me. I don't deserve the kindness you've shown me tonight."

"That's different. You're my wife," Naruto argued.

Shion stared at Naruto's hardened jaw and knew this was a man whose will she would have to whittle down little by little until she could convince him to no longer hate himself.

"We haven't talked about the details of the alliance," Shion said softly.

Naruto was well aware about the details of the alliance. Naruto and Shion were required to produce a child within the year and at least an heir to the priesthood, a daughter, within four years.

"Shouldn't we start tonight?" Shion asked, determined to earn her place in the family. She was well aware that getting Naruto's child inside of her as soon as possible would make this marriage much easier.

Naruto combed his hand through his hair. It was action he had done so much within this short time span that Shion was beginning to realize it was an indicator of his nervousness. Shion deflated at his silence and sniffled as she wiped at her tears. "I know I'm not very pretty and I wasn't good enough for you the first time but... but..."

Naruto stared at her. He honestly didn't know whether or not she was manipulating him or seriously believed what she was saying. Then after ten minutes, she was still crying and Naruto was honestly surprised by her sincerity.

"Shion," Naruto finally said. He leaned over and caught Shion's tears on her lips. When Naruto pulled away, it was as if he had zapped her. Shion looked at him shocked. Naruto kneeled with a sense of appreciation for her sincerity and honesty. He remembered how Shion had openly told Naruto about her betrayal when any other kunoichi would have kept it a secret. The least he could do was try.

"Do you prefer the bed?"

Shion looked at him nervously. "Where else would we do it?"

"Right," Naruto said with the sudden realization that he had taken this woman's virginity and the only sexual experience she knew was what he showed her. His mind hadn't been in the right places that night.

Naruto scooped her up in his arms and carried her up the stairs. Shion didn't care what Naruto told her, she felt safe in the large biceps of his arms. They entered the darkness of the bedroom. Naruto laid Shion gently in the bed.

"You are very beautiful," Naruto said and tested his touch along her skin. Shion's eyes followed the trail his hand blazed up her leg, her waist, and cupped around her breast. Shion blushed at the compliment even though she knew her curves were straight and narrow and anything but impressive.

"A little adventurous for a priestess," Naruto noticed when he lifted Shion's nightgown past her chest. Shion blushed at the yellow push-up bra and skimpy underwear.
"Sakura bought it for me. She said you'd like it."

Naruto had to admit he did like the way it seemed to elongate her legs. Naruto pulled the night gown further over her head. He kissed his lips along her neck while his hands teased up her back to the hook of her bra. Shion stared into the darkness and couldn't help but to remember her first time. It hadn't been a pleasant experience. It had been downright painful and as cold as the walk home afterwards.

Her heartbeat sped. She was shaking like a leaf in a storm.

"Shion," Naruto paused at the sharp smell of fear. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Shion whispered. "Please continue."

"But you're shaking."

"I'm just cold," Shion said weakly and Naruto realized she was perhaps the worst liar in the world. When nothing happened for several minutes Shion opened her eyes to Naruto's worried blue ones. She felt guilty about his worry.

"We tried." Naruto said simply, shrugged his shoulders, and then moved to retrieve her nightgown he had thrown on the floor.

Shion flung herself onto his arm. "No, please. I'll do better than the first time, I promise. I'll be the perfect wife. I'll do anything you want. We can't be husband and wife until we consummate our marriage."

Her trembling fingers pulled the loosened bra from her shoulders.

"Shion, we don't have to have sex now. We have the rest of our marriage."

Shion's eyes were delicate glass as she argued through tears, "If you die without putting a baby in me what will happen to the alliance? Demon country will revoke their support. I can't go back and serve in the temple. They will arrange for me to marry some other country and anyone will take me because of my visions. This marriage is a secret and without a child, Konoha will not protect me. You are my best option even if I'm not yours. I know you can have any woman in the world but I will do anything to redeem my mistakes. I have no one else because I've inadvertently killed everyone that had genuinely cared about my well-being."

Naruto had grown too hard for tears or words. His reservations were rooted in emotions he was too busy to work through. He hadn't forgiven her, not entirely, for putting his family in danger and worsening the war. Naruto remembered a time when he was younger he could forgive anyone anything. Nowadays, forgiveness was much harder to come by.

**What a pathetic sniveling creature.**

Naruto turned and pushed Shion back into the bed. Her tears stilled for a moment. He rolled her face down until her derriere was facing him. The cold hit her behind when Naruto snatched her underwear off her legs. Shion knew what to do from here. Shion took the position of her first time and propped herself on her hands and knees. Her back arced and opened her legs. Then she waited.

Naruto reached down to stimulate an erection as he eyed the smoothness of her behind. Her skin was soft, unscarred or untouched by a weapon, smooth and pliable to any touch. Keeping her face away made it easier to pretend she was just another woman to fuck and not the woman whom he couldn't forgive.
Shion’s breath hitched in pain when Naruto penetrated her tense body. Naruto focused on the mechanical movements of his thrusts, like the turning gears in a clock. Shion closed her eyes and willed her body to endure.

Shion counted the lines of the headboard. Sweat dripped from the tips of her breasts. The pain traveled through the long length of her body. Shion hung her head in relief when Naruto climaxed inside of her. He unplugged himself from her vagina after giving her what she wanted.

Shion collapsed onto the pillow, unable to hold herself up any longer. The sounds of the room was Shion's heavy breathing. When her breathing finally evened, Shion looked up at Naruto with an expression wondering if he had broken her. He raised an eyebrow as if asking, 'satisfied?'

"Again," Shion whispered.

Naruto rolled back over. He was more earnestly turned on by the sudden strength of character. Naruto grabbed her by the hips. Shion slid along the bed until she slid onto his cock. She was pressed into the mattress as Naruto dug his cock between her legs.

Tears streamed down her cheeks and every penetration had become unbearable by the time semen burst into her body a second time.

"Again."

"No." Naruto rolled over onto the other side of the bed and threw the covers over his head. He was done hurting her and he was emotionally exhausted.

Shion curled under the covers as semen dripped down her leg. She stared off into the darkness and decided a moment of pain was little in her journey to pay for her mistakes.

"Goodnight," Shion whispered.

"Goodnight," Naruto returned.

The newly-weds fell asleep on opposite sides of the bed between a distance hard to cross.

Kohei didn't say a word. Sasuke was collapsed against his chest, drooling into the cloth of Kohei's shirt.

"If you need anything my parents won't hesitate to help. They've agreed to babysit while you're at work. It shouldn't be for too long," Sakura attempted to explain. "The war has escalated so much that I'm not longer as effective from the hospital. They need me on the field. I signed up with Naruto's unit because he's going to need me the most considering his unit is greatly outnumbered by Lightning."

Kohei reached forward to hold her hand. "I understand. You don't need to make your excuses. You're a kunoichi. It's your job. I knew that when I married you."

Sakura looked down at Sai who had fallen asleep while breastfeeding. She brushed his pink hair away from his peaceful face. A heavy pain entered her heart. Kohei leaned over the table and wiped a tear that trailed down Sakura's cheek.

"I'll always be here when you come home."
"After the war is over I'm going to move to Konoha." Temari stared into the darkness of the tent while she laid in Shikamaru's arms. Her blonde hair was undone in a matted mess around her head. It was early morning when they tried to get some sleep, but Temari was too restless. "I've been thinking about it for a while. I'm tired of being apart from my family."

Shikamaru couldn't go to sleep either. His relaxed posture tensed at the prospect of anything threatening his carefully laid plans. "You should take Shika-chan with you to Suna."

Temari's head swiveled in a manner that always indicated Shikamaru was not about to get sex tonight. "Do you not want me in Konoha?"

Temari could see the calculated thinking behind Shikamaru's expression as he looked for the right strategic words that could placate her. Before Shikamaru could give her a calculate answer, Temari pushed out of his arms.

"Where are you going?"

"Back to Suna's side of the camp. There's too much bullshit over here." Temari snatched her hair-bows from the ground and split the strands in four. "And you can forget about sex until you tell me what you're hiding from me."

Temari stopped just before the tent door hoping the threat would pull an answer out of him.

Shikamaru hung his head. "Suna is strategically safer and-

Temari walked away.

Neji snapped awake at the sound of thunder. He pulled the pillow over his head to drown out the persistent rain that drummed against the window. He moved too quickly and the sharp movement sent a pain through his wounded shoulder. Unable to get back to sleep, Neji activated his byakugan.

He paused when the black and white vision revealed a clear night sky. Neji jumped from the bed and stormed to the window. There was no storm, no clouds, or even puddles. Neji winced as he brushed his hair back behind his ears.

Neji grabbed a robe and walked through the compound towards the dojo to exhaust himself back to sleep. He stopped and looked down the path where Hinata rested in the moonlight atop the porch. Hinata struck a whetstone against her katana like a note on a shamimasen.

Neji came to a stop beside her and Hinata deactivated her byakugan when he came near. They existed within a silent understanding that both were headed off to war in the morning and yet the usual co-existence was more strained that it had been before.

"I'm sorry," Hinata whispered. She didn't need vocal confirmation. Hinata knew from the heat of his silence. "Don't be angry at Naruto. I made the decision out of my failings."

"It is my own failings that anger me," Neji replied. "I am ashamed of my own powerlessness to help the clan and to help my wife when I was needed most. Like salt on a wound, it was Naruto who swept in with all the answers. He could have killed me but instead spared me to die a slow death under my humiliation. Now you confront Lightning, under Naruto." Neji said, unabashedly referring to both meanings of the word. "It seems both of us have failed."

Hinata looked up with moonlit eyes. "Is it possible to make this work?"
The silence was filled with a search for the solution that would benefit them both within the confines of their strained marriage.

"I want a son after the war is over," Neji said.

Hinata looked out over the pond that reflected the stars. "It is not an unreasonable request."

Neji looked away and through a twist of words said, "Keep your affairs a secret. I will not stand for rumors."

Hinata was keen enough to understand what Neji was conceding to. Neji's threat against Naruto had been from the heat of his anger. Now that Neji has had time to logically think things through, brood over it, away from the chaos and stress of a battlefield, he knew that killing Naruto would not make his marriage any easier to bear. In fact, he suspected the possibility of waking up with a kunai in his throat.

It was the only logical solution.

Marriage should be, after all, a compromise.

Hinata leaned against Naruto's ANBU desk as they studied the reports on Lightning's forces. Naruto stared at the numbers, at exactly how outnumbered they were. The numbers slipped from his hand as Hinata plucked it away from his fingers. Naruto's worried expression suddenly shifted focus when she leaned forward, he could peek at how her cleavage met full and crescent shaped breasts. The lines of her back kissed the flawless curve of her buttocks. The stars that shimmered in her lips upturned into a knowing smile.

Hinata's breasts bounced as if in a wild evocative dance. Sweat glistened down her neck, her back curved in a half-moon, her hips rocked forward, meeting Naruto's thrusts like the crash of two waves. There was an undeniable rhythm they had formed, that caused their bodies to dance, and pull a tide so great it weathered the rocky obstacles that kept them apart. She moaned every time he left her body, like a siren's song calling him to return.

Naruto snapped his eyes opened at the force of his orgasm.

Kill her, dump her in the river, Demon Country won't know until it's too late.

"I'm not going to kill her."

Look at how small her neck is. Naruto turned and noticed how narrow and fragile it was. It wouldn't take much to snap it.
Naruto wouldn't be responsible for her anymore. **She brought Lightning into this war. She endangered your family, she's dangerous, a threat, and threats need to be dealt with.**

Naruto reached over and the point of his nail slid down her skin. "She's a threat."

A soft breeze swept through the window. Naruto's growled at the sensitive touch of metal at the back of his neck. "Don't move," Hinata's voice kissed his ear with a whisper. Her hand tread the length of his arm until she pulled his claws away from Shion's neck.

"She is a threat to my family," Naruto growled.

"She is your family," Hinata insisted. "She's pregnant."

Naruto froze, snapped away, and realized the real threat was in his head. The Kyūbi laughed maniacally as if it was the best amusement he's had in months. **So close.** The Kyūbi lamented like a joke that never got to the end of its punch line.

Hinata pulled him away and shoved Naruto into the bathroom. Naruto collapsed backwards against the wall in disbelief. "I don't know what happened."

Hinata ran the faucet and dampened a towel. She crouched and wiped his face, then ran the heat of it down his neck. "I thought you stopped hearing the Fox. Perhaps it's the escalation of the war and the increased stress," Hinata attempted to analyze.

It was never really a matter of "stopped hearing". The Fox was always talking. It had just gotten easier to ignore him.

"I don't know, but I don't think it's the stress of this war or the job, its Shion. She's the problem. It's as if my entire life has been disrupted. Home, this compound, it's where I recover, it's my safe place but now I'm out of my comfort zone even while I'm at home and I feel off-balance, as if my equilibrium shifted. I've been able to mentally prepare for this war, even if it worsened. I never saw Shion coming."

"Are you alright to march out today? I could go ahead and lead it."

"No. I should lead. Under my command they are leaving Konoha and under my command they will either return, or die." Naruto picked himself up. "I can't let him get to me. That's how he wins."

Hinata reached out and brushed her hand over his scar. She nodded softly at the determination in his eyes that no one had the strength to move. Hinata's smile was the tender glimpse of a star in a cloudy night. "Alright, I'll see you in a few hours."

"Wait," Naruto grabbed her by her wrist and trapped her against the counter sink. He grinned with a mischievousness between his lips. "I had a dream about you."

"Is that what all that moaning and grunting was for?" Hinata turned her head when Naruto dived for a kiss. "She's in the other room."

Naruto's jaw hardened. "She's sleep."

"I wouldn't allow Neji to sleep with someone else inside the compound. It's too disrespectful and I wouldn't do the same. I don't belong in this home, Naruto." Hinata slid off the counter with ease and proved she had never been trapped. "Give her a chance. She'll be good for you."

"I already know who's good for me."
Ame peeked into her Father's bedroom. When she saw his space in the bed empty and saw the light on in the bedroom, she felt relieved he hadn't left yet. Ame got the bright idea that they should make breakfast. Ame tiptoed around the bed, trying not to disturb Shion, but stopped when she heard unmistakable voices from the bathroom. Two whispered voices were arguing with each other from the door.

Ame knew her Dad had the tendency of talking to himself but that was an old habit she was used to. Ame neared the door curiously.

"You know what your fucking problem is Hinata? Stop trying to assume I want to fix everything."

"You can have a good life with her if you tried. She's largely untouched by the life we lead. You need something good like that in your life. She's easy. We're just too complicated."

"Have you ever realized that the only one making this relationship complicated is you? What are you afraid of?"

Hinata's voice lowered to an inaudible whisper that Ame couldn't hear.

"What do you mean Ame?"

"Right now?"

"Fuck."

After several moments, Ame heard Naruto's voice pressed against the wood of the door. "Ame?"

"I want to make breakfast," Ame said as she leaned adjacent to the door. The door cracked open and Naruto peeked out his head to check if Shion was still asleep. Ame crossed her arms and reprimanded her dad with a disapproving look. "There's not a window in the bathroom huh?" Ame asked.

Finally Hinata slipped out of the bathroom behind Naruto, painfully aware of how this must look. Hinata nodded in acknowledgement before she crossed the room and leapt out the window.

"Let's go make breakfast," Naruto said quickly and rushed Ame downstairs.

Naruto peeked beside him when Ame ruined her fifth egg. She reached for a sixth. The shells collapsed in the batter and the yoke coated her hands.

"We didn't do anything."

Ame looked up at her father. "Ichigo or I have to marry a Hyuuga?"

Naruto nodded his head slowly. "Yes."

"What if Ichigo and I love someone else?" Ame challenged. "What if we don't want to marry a Hyūga?"

Naruto stared down at the boiling pot. Hot water popped onto his skin without a flinch. "Being a ninja is more than fighting for the village and it's more than dying for it. Sometimes the hardest tasks we are called to do, is to live for it. I didn't choose to marry Shion but I'm trying to make the best of it and my best isn't always perfect." Naruto turned and looked at Ame who had finally successfully cracked open an egg. "But if you and Ichigo don't want to go through with the contract, then I'm sure
I can come to some sort of agreement with Hinata. She's flexible." An embarrassed red captured Naruto's cheeks when he realized the words out of his mouth.

"Pervert," Ame muttered under her breath. Ame concentrated her attentions on whisking the batter. She looked up and was afraid that her father would be disappointed. "I don't know if I want to be a ninja anymore."

Naruto tossed the noodles with the ease of someone who, in another life, could have been a master ramen chef. "There's nothing wrong with that."

Shion shifted, opened her eyes, closed them, then snapped awake and turned to check the time. She gasped at the hour. At the monastery she was used to waking up at dawn. She had plans to cook a huge breakfast for Naruto. When Shion attempted to push herself up, the pain sent her tumbling down into the pillows. It was more than just sore legs and genitals like the first time. This time her entire body seemed leaden by exhaustion. Tears began to gather in her eyes as she cursed the confines of the body she was trapped in. Shion crawled to the edge of the bed and stared at the floor. She was determined to make breakfast for her husband.

The door slammed open and the noise startled her over the edge. Shion looked up shaking at Naruto's vibrant blue eyes. He had caught her in his arms before she could hit the floor.

"What are you doing?" Naruto asked, alarmed when a shadow clone reported she was trying to get out of the bed.

"Trying to make breakfast."

Naruto lifted her and placed her back under the covers. "You should rest," Naruto insisted. "Ame and I are almost finished with breakfast."

"Oh," Shion looked up when Naruto slid his hand up her nightgown. Her heart thudded in fright, not knowing whether or not she could handle sex so soon. Then her eyes widened as she watched his eyes turn as gold as the sun. A pallor of orange rings formed around his eyes.

A grin widened across Naruto's face as he cupped his hand around her abdomen. He could sense the natural energy of the newly fertilized egg nestled in her body.

"Am I?"

Naruto left a gentle kiss on her lips. "Get some rest."

A gleeful smile with the sort of power to lift sunlight into the sky radiated between her cheeks. Naruto found himself bombarded with her uncontained excitement as she threw her arms around him. "We're going to have a baby."

Those words finally physically hit Naruto. They weren't portents, or illusions, or false hopes anymore. As Naruto held Shion in his arms he realized suddenly that she had fought for and carved out a space in his life that no one else occupied: as his wife and the mother of his biological child. He found his arms tightening around her in a shared excitement.

Suddenly she began to shake, as if an earthquake erupted in the depths of her chest. Her eyes jolted to the back of her head. An immense well of power wracked against a body too weak to contain it.

"Shion," Naruto said. A tremble of fear formed at the pit of his stomach and weighed down his whispered concern. He understood what was happening but found himself completely helpless to
stop what some considered a kekkai genkai and others considered an act of God. He didn't know he could feel such fear for a tiny egg not even fully formed.

Shion slumped backwards into Naruto's arm. She snapped up and flailed her arms against Naruto's chest before she threw her head forward and vomited on the ground. Naruto winced at the vomit that stained his ninja boots and pants but he didn't abandon her when she rested her head against the crook of his arm. Her body felt as if it were made of liquid.

"Are you alright?"

She nodded.

"Is it always like that?"

She nodded.

"What… was it?"

Shion's emerald eyes lifted, a line of tears trailed across her cheeks. "Kiri is going to invade Konoha."

"This is pointless," Kusuro grumbled as he finished sharpening yet another shuriken. He had sharpened so many shuriken within the past few days his fingers were covered in bandages. The only tasks genin were given in camp was the grunt work. Grunt work was not going improve Kusuro's ninja skills.

"I'm tired of all you're complaining," Asami Nara snapped. "These shuriken are important to the ninja fighting in the war."

"This isn't my war. We're not even fighting Mountain anymore." Kusuro said bitterly which predictably further angered Asami.

"It's called the Fifth Shinobi War which means it includes everyone."

"You don't understand. Perhaps when Konoha burns to the ground you finally will. You don't know what it's like not having a home anymore."

"It's your home now. Your mom married Kakashi-sensei. He's your-"

"He is not my dad!" Kusuro snapped. "I never had one."

Kakashi didn't flinch as he turned another well-worn page of Icha Icha tactics. With his feet resting on the makeshift table, he was casually "watching" over his genin team.

"He's just some stupid pervert who reads stupid books," Kusuro said loudly, not afraid of being overheard.

"Kakashi-sensei is the infamous copycat ninja. He taught Uzumaki Naruto and Haruno Sakura."

"What happened to the third one?" Kusuro challenged.

"What do you mean?"

"There's always three people on a genin team."
"Oh," Asami stared at her image reflected in the kunai she held. "We don't talk about him."

"His name was Uchiha Sasuke," Kakashi casually commented. "He became an international criminal."

"Why?" Kusuro asked, genuinely curious.

It was a word you never used with experienced ninja. They didn't know why they did things anymore.

"Hn," Kakashi answered. Kakashi flipped another page and found himself getting bored with his favorite book. Yet, he still read it time and again, despite not knowing or caring about the why.

A messenger ninja entered the tent. "Sir, a war meeting had been convened.

"I know." Kakashi said like the sharp sound of a flipped page.

The messenger shifted around uncomfortably much to the genin's amusement. "Sir?"

"Are we being attacked?"

"No."

Kakashi turned to the last page, dramatically closed the cover, and then started right back at the beginning.

"But it is an important meeting!"

Kakashi picked himself up and stuffed the book like a relic into his pocket. Asami and Kusuro glanced at one another. The messenger followed Kakashi outside of the tent, where Kakashi stopped, whipped out his cock and took a piss.

"Who was stupid enough to force that guy in charge of three genin?" Kusuro's voice could still be heard from inside the tent as urine watered the grass.

"At least Naruto came out okay."

When Kakashi was finished, he turned and patted the errand boy on the shoulder. "Tell them I got lost on the road to life."

Then Kakashi walked through the camp in the opposite direction of the meeting. The messenger stared helpless, unable to force the copy-cat ninja to do anything. No one could force the copy-cat ninja to do anything.

Kakashi meandered through the camp with his hands sleeping in his pockets. The camp was humming with nervous energy. It was the same nervous energy you could find in any war before any battle. That could have been Kakashi once - before Gai, before Minato, before Rin, before Obito, or before his father committed suicide.

The camp had swelled with the added unit of the persons that had been stationed against Mountain, all but one.

It was another battle, in a long history of battles. There would be deaths, in a long history of deaths. Nothing changed but time.
The grass withered underneath the discarded cigarette bud. Kagome sat atop the hill and watched the sea of grass sway in the wind. She had grown up riding horses on these fields. When the sun began to descend, she could stay no longer. She rose and was disoriented by the dizziness that washed over her.

They said a pregnant kunoichi was a dead kunoichi. Kagome never understood why she didn't abort the first pregnancy. She had every reason to. It's not as if the ninja – whose name she had forgotten – had a kekkai genkai or was somebody famous, just a chūnin on a random night she never saw again. She stopped asking herself silly questions like why.

Her contact was too late for her to stay.

She backed up and the familiar dew that clung to blades of grass washed against her legs. She rounded the hill back towards the southern front before her absence was noted. Kagome stopped. The sway of grass caressed her legs like a lover's touch.

Kakashi sat leaning against the other side of the hill, reading his book, while his feet were propped on the dead body of her contact. He must have went through the trouble of intercepting her contact ahead of time. How sweet.

"You're going to kill me while I'm pregnant with your child?"

Kakashi turned a page, "Yes."

Kakashi's mission had always been twofold: to first marry Kagome in order to secure the Grass kekkai genkai and second, to spy on all her activities.

"If you begin an uprising in Grass, Konoha will not forgive this."

"There's nothing they can do to stop me," Kagome challenged, knowing full well with Lightning and Kiri on Konoha's plate, they hardly had an appetite to stomach Grass' attempt at independence. Kagome never cared about the treaty she signed. It was simply a tool to bide her time and gather the necessary resources.

"Grass could fight for Konoha and in the event of victory, independence will be considered," Kakashi went through the correct protocols, saying what he was supposed to say for the higher-ups, but he didn't believe his words any more than Kagome did.

"I will not be imprisoned by Mountain or Konoha anymore. Unseen chains are still chains." Kagome combed her fingers through her hair and the strands sharpened to needles between her fingers.

"If you continue to resist it is your son that will suffer your consequences."

"It's a cruel world. Best thing I could ever teach him."

Kakashi blinked when the words on the page were suddenly punctuated with needles protruding through the cover. "It's personally signed by the author," Kakashi lamented.

He flipped backwards to avoid the roundhouse kick. His hands landed on blades that penetrated through his hands, then his feet when he landed in a field of grass sharpened into the tips of metal. Kakashi was already performing a series of seals. A ring of fire blew from his mouth and burned the field of grass away.

Kakashi lowered his mask over his eye and activated his sharingan. He leapt in the air just as Kagome slammed her hands into the ashes and a field of grass grew taller and sharper than before.
Kakashi landed in a ball of fire. He quickly attempted to activate his mangekyo but Kagome had been around him long enough to recognize when he was about to use the fatal teleportation technique.

The series of seals broke off to evade a hit to his head. Kicks and punches threatened bone in a fierce match of taijutsu while the ground beneath them cycled between life and death. The song of blocked shuriken chirped like birds in the air. Kagome's foot smacked across Kakashi's face. His uppercut slammed into her abdomen and forced her to stumble backwards.

Kagome's attention was suddenly distracted when what felt like contractions shook her body. Her eyes drifted to the blood that dripped puddles between her legs.

It was a moment of distraction, and any experience ninja was trained to take advantage of that distraction. On nothing but pure instinct a raikiri shot straight through her chest. A pregnant kunoichi was a dead kunoichi.

Kagome looked up into the fading sharingan in Kakashi's eye. Her nails hooked into Kakashi's arm that was still embedded in her body. "I'm taking you with me."

Suddenly the hair on her body, on her arms, and her legs, and every place hair on a human body could be, shot out in all directions like small knives.

The wind bent the grass. Kakashi's body tipped over, the weight taking Kagome down with him, until they had fallen like the abandoned orange book that mirrored the fiery hue of the setting sun across the endless plains of grass.

"I wanted to name him Minato."

"Your dad?"

"Hn."

Kagome coughed blood that rained down her chin. With bloody fingers, Kakashi pulled the mask off his face as if it could help him breathe better. Kagome lifted her hand and brushed her fingers against his lips. Kagome's arm fell back into the bed of grass. Kakashi rested his head against her still chest.

They were out of time.

x

A ninja never wants their spouse to walk behind them; they'll be the first one to stab you in the back.
"Have you considered what you would do if you ever managed to get out?" Naruto asked as he sat atop the cage and swung his legs through the bars.

Red smoke wafted from the Kyūbi's mouth as he stared at the swaying leg like the annoyance of a persistent fly.

"Sure, you would go on a killing spree in celebration, specifically partying all over Konoha but after you take over the world what are you going to do?"

"I am destruction and hatred and vengeance."

"Do you know what I think?" Naruto asked.

"I don't want your opinion."

"I think you're going to get bored. You won't have anyone to challenge you anymore."

"Malevolent beings do not get bored. Demonic beings are eternal. Our sense of time is not finite. And when I finally pass into the void and I begin my next cycle of reincarnation it would only seem a moment, but I will reappear into a different world than the one I wish to destroy."

"A different world?" Naruto asked.

"It could be a world without ninja, a world full of machines and people who have forgotten that chakra exist, a world where all of your efforts now will be but a raindrop in the river of time."

"If that's the case, if time means nothing to you, why not wait until I die of old age instead of always trying to escape?" Naruto teased.

"IN THIS CYCLE I HAVE BEEN IMPRISONED BY MERE INSECTS THAT HAVE THE ARROGANCE TO BELIEVE THEY CAN CONTAIN MY POWER! I AM THE DEMON OF NINE TAILS, SON OF THE SIX PATHS, I AM NO ONE'S PET. I BELONG ON A THRONE. NOT IN A CAGE."

"I get it," Naruto said sincerely. "No one likes to be caged but I can't let you out either."

The Kyūbi did not want Naruto's sympathy. He would prefer to see him suffer. "Quit wasting my time and ask what you have come here to ask."

Naruto raised an eyebrow. "What would that be?"

"For my help," The Kyūbi said obviously.

Naruto laughed at the idiotic notion. "I didn't come here to ask for your help. I just wanted to annoy you."

The Kyuubi thrashed nine-tails against the bars but it did not knock Naruto off his perch. "You can't defeat them without me."
Naruto looked into the bloodthirsty eyes of the Nine-tailed fox. "Yes I can."

It was the early hours of the morning, only a day away from the moment Lightning would march across Fire Country borders with all its resources and all its men. Hinata rested a hand on Naruto's shoulder. "There's nothing else to be done."

Naruto eyes hurt from reading the dark ink under the lowlight. "It's not enough," Naruto said insistently. "Do you comprehend how much we are outnumbered? All of Lightning's manpower and resources have been mobilized against us."

Hinata leaned against the table where the maps she had created herself were spread to the far reaches of the forest. She looked down at the five small cloud icons facing a lone leaf. "I comprehend better than anyone else. I can see them."

"I have to make sure everything has been thought of, that there are no holes." Naruto said bitterly as he stared at the map. "I'm no Shikamaru."

Hinata gently turned Naruto to face her with the sharp touch of her fingers. "If the Hokage wanted Shikamaru she would have assigned him to command but she didn't. She gave you this job. You are the person she believes has the best shot of fending off Lightning," Hinata tilted her head with a twist. "You used to be known as Konoha's number one knuckle-headed unpredictable ninja."

"Now they call me The Demon Fox." Naruto said sourly. "But that's the problem, I'm not what I was during the Fourth Shinobi War. I can't maintain Fox cloak indefinitely and I can't fully transform into biju mode without the Kyūbi's cooperation."

She carried darkness on her lashes. Hinata whispered, for some thoughts were not meant to be said too loud. "What is the nine-tails price?"

"He wants me to kill you and the kids."

Hinata's eyes narrowed. She tilted her head as her fingers tapped along the table.

"What a dick."

Naruto's tired eyes scrunched in amusement. He reached and interlocked his hands with hers. "There is no other option." He scanned his fingers through his hair. "Growing up I was always the underdog. I forgot how awfully scary it is to face something bigger."

Hinata leaned into Naruto's chest. She picked up the lone Leaf piece on the board. "You don't have to do everything alone. Konoha has many leaves on its tree."

The Land of Hot Water is known for its Hot Springs. It was a famous center of tourism and leisure, before the Fourth Shinobi War scarred the land. The Daimyo residence had been one of the most envious palaces in the known world, embellished with gold and gems, before Sound invaded and tore the palace down.

The Daimyo of Hot Water was a hard-bitten man and was not impressed by the stature of Naruto Uzumaki. Years ago, the Daimyo sat on a throne of gold, today he sat on a slab of stone. A scar ran across his eyebrow.

"I'm not a ninja," the Daimyo said as he sharpened a katana. "When Sound invaded my country, I led the resistance. All of my men have seen non-stop battle for years. They kill like men with no
souls. They are the hardest men I know and yet they readily admit a fear of you."

Naruto's face was impassive but he hid an impressed smile. Never had he met a civilian, without any chakra to protect him, who has led ninja into battle.

"But I'm not a ninja." The Daimyo sat atop the ruins of his palace. Ninja stood at his side and gave him the earned respect of a Kage. The Daimyo looked into Naruto's eyes. "No. I will continue to do business with Lightning. They pay good gold and keep my smiths employed."

"Your allegiance used to be to Konoha."

"And Konoha did nothing when Sound invaded. From what I understand, we weren't important enough to get involved," The Daimyo spat. "The great countries have trampled their feet carelessly over my land. Why must the people suffer when the gods go to war? I do not want Leaf ninja in my country. Let the fighting remain on your borders. Lightning is your enemy, not mine."

"I understand," Naruto replied. Influence in the land of Hot Water was crucial to the conflict. If Naruto could gain access he could essentially stop the flow of supplies to Lightning's main army. "Perhaps after the war is over, Konoha and Hot Water will re-establish business relations. I'm sure we will see each other again."

"I hope not," The Daimyo said blackly.

The wind swept through Naruto's hair as he looked behind him. The war-hardened expression never softened. Then Naruto Uzumaki disappeared.

The Daimyo's head of security immediately leaned down and said, "We're doubling the guards."

"I am going to retire for the evening." The Daimyo of Hot Water stood and limped towards the small cottage surrounded by five guards. His son and wife had died in the invasion. He hardly had enough family to fill a cottage, much less a palace. The candle burned dimly.

The Daimyo sat down and penned his day down in his journal. The day I met Uzumaki Naruto was on opposite sides of the war… The shadows moved. The Daimyo placed down his quill. The woman drowned in shadows stepped forward. Ino tossed her golden hair with a smile.

"The answer is still no. Your threats will not move me."

"I'm not here to change your mind," Ino scoffed. "I'm here to take it."

Ino's body fell limply and the Daimyo of Hot Water caught her. He placed Ino's body in his bed and she rested like that of a newly chosen mistress. The Daimyo carefully echoed the limp and walked back outside.

"Contact Uzumaki Naruto. I've been convinced that his is the winning side of the war."

The Raikage crossed the border into the territory of Fire Country. Trees taller than lightning rods towered over his head. The thick forest hid a darkness between their boughs. The Raikage immediately thought, 'If there was a place Konoha would begin their attack, it would be here. That's what he would do.'

The Raikage noticed an odd expression coming over C's face. "What is it?" The Raikage demanded.

The chakra sensor, C shook his head in confusion. "They're out there but I can't get a clear read on
anything. It's as if the enemy is everywhere, thousands of them."

Bee could sense Naruto's chakra all throughout the forest. "It's shadow clones. Naruto is using clones to hide the position of his army. One thing for sure, I wouldn't go into those trees alone."

"Sir, the sun is setting. It's not wise to wander through this forest at dark. We should make camp and dig in defensively," C suggested.

The Raikage considered the advice. But before he could make a decision, the darkening shadows were chased away by the bright meteor shower of rasengan quickening towards the march of Cloud ninja.

The Raikage was unfazed by the show of power. The Raikage raised a fist and pinned the Cloud ninja to their feet with three words, "Hold your formation!"

At the speed of which the rasengan bore down on them, Bee had only eight tails and immediately swatted away the rasengan directly above the Raikage's head. But it was only eight rasengan out of hundreds.

Panic swept through the entire line. Staying still meant dying.

The Raikage looked back with a crack of the neck as men began to scatter into the forest or were lost in the explosive impacts that decimated everything to dust.

Bee stood ready for any more attacks but after several tense minutes of waiting, the Raikage signaled Bee to lower his defenses. Eight chakra tails dissipated into the air.

"Set up camp and raise defensive positions." The Raikage demanded.

"What about those who fled into the forest?" C asked in concern. Even though they had lost men in the attack, more had attempted to evade the danger.

The Raikage shrugged. "They should not have broken formation."

The Cloud ninja stumbled out of his sprint at the force of the impact behind him. Then he turned around and found himself surrounded by the thickness of trees. The tangled canopy prevented any sunlight from reaching the forest floor.

He listened for the sound of the Raikage's voice but the only sound that echoed from the forest was the caw of crows. The Cloud ninja quickly decided he did not want to be stuck in the forest at night by himself. Chakra stuck his feet to the trunk of a tree in an attempt to locate his unit. He ran up the tall tree, reaching for the peak of white clouds through the leaves.

And never made it.

Hinata Hyūga used the cloud to break her fall. She lifted her hand from the conclave of his chest. The darkness of the forest did not hinder her sight and watched as her unit dispatched the lost Cloud ninja with ease.

She pressed her hand to the radio. "All targets eliminated. Returning to base."

The ground shook each time a tree was felled. Gradually a circle of the forest was cleared out so Cloud ninja could properly make camp. The Raikage sucked in a breath and blew it out like a bull.
C reported the number of those who had been lost in the chaos of the surprise attack. There had been more lost to the forest than the rain-shower of rasengan. It was such a devastating attack that Lightning was forced to reconsolidate their units.

"Sentries have been posted around the camp and our engineering unit is beginning to break the frequency of their radios."

The Raikage really thought this was going to be easy, thought that Fire country was war-weary and on the brink of crumbling.

With an excited smirk, the Raikage declared, "From this point forward, we will burn down this damn forest until their village is no longer hidden in leaves."

Kurotsuchi had been assigned to command the Iwa units that were aligned with Konoha. She found herself increasingly delighted to watch the twisting gears in the head of Uzumaki Naruto.

The command center was expertly hidden beneath ground to prevent any expected damage from lightning strikes. A large detailed map of the forest was spread onto a long table, a map so detailed it showed the topography, elevation and points of interest. Underground tunnels crafted by sprawling roots branched off to the carefully protected area for medical operations. Above ground the camp stretched upwards to the branches of the trees where Leaf ninja were used to making their beds.

Kurotsuchi watched as ninja clung to Naruto like leaves clinging to the support of a tree. He was surrounded by voices and assistants while Naruto stayed rooted to a calm that exerted itself over the room.

"We suffered no casualties in the surprise attack but we can't lose the momentum. We will follow-up with a counterattack. Shino, your unit will provide the distraction to allow Kurotsuchi and her men to strike. I'll take care of Bee and the Raikage." Naruto described as he circled an area on the map.

Kurotsuchi drew closer to the table and closer to the hooded man that preferred the darkest corners of a room.

"Kurotsuchi, I want you to direct your attack against their food supplies, equipment, and their engineering squad before they have a chance to scramble our radios."

Kurotsuchi narrowed her eyes on the radio in Naruto's ear where a voice was continually giving him a steady stream of information until Naruto had outlined the entirety and specifics of Lightning's camp.

"Have you planted spies in Lightning's camp?" Kurotsuchi asked. "How are you getting this information?"

"I can assure you this information is accurate if that is what you are worried about," Naruto answered, standing straight in a reminder of how much he towered over her.

Kurotsuchi said slyly. "It's dangerous to have an active signal in Lightning's camp. They invented the radio after all."

"I appreciate your concern," Naruto said with ambiguous sincerity. "Have you memorized the coordinates of your targets?"
Coordinates were important to Stone ninja. It allowed them to see underground. After a moment of silence Kurotsuchi answered, "I have."

"The Raikage is beginning to organize his ninja to burn down the forest," Hinata's voice reported in Naruto's ear. Hinata crouched in the trees with her attention divided between Cloud and Leaf's camps. The Hachibi and his ability to sense Naruto's chakra prevented Naruto from getting too close for espionage. From the comfort of a distant tree branch, Hinata reported on anything that moved in the forest.

Kurotsuchi watched as Naruto suddenly smirked, a horrifying mixture of mischief, ingenuity, and the definite knowing that someone was about to die. "Never mind Shino, the Raikage has provided the distraction." Naruto turned to the bored kunoichi always at his beck and call. "Go gather all the wind users that we have."

"Yes sir," Hanabi acknowledged and bowed. She quickly set herself to the task without question.

"Let's welcome Lightning to Fire Country."

Night descended and the Raikage sensed Konoha was going to launch an attack. Even though a ninja's battle was by night, the Raikage knew that sending his army into the dark depths of the forest would swallow them whole. He had to level the terrain advantage.

Karui was in command of the Cloud ninja that formed a long line before the Raikage. He watched as Karui gave the signal. The Raikage didn't flinch at the sudden cascade of light. Lightning crackled from the fingertips of the Cloud ninja and attacked the closest defense of trees until they toppled over. The lightning caught fire and contagiously spread into the forest.

Then the direction of wind began to change. The smoke obscured everyone's vision. The heat of fire warmed the Raikage's face.

The line of lightning users turned nervously back towards the Raikage. The Raikage demanded the line to hold but the wind maintained its direction and the fire never stopped coming.

"Break," Karui ordered. Karui reformed the line to defend the camp from the coming fire.

While Cloud ninja were running past him and efforts were organized to stem the flames from reaching camp, the Raikage threw off his burning robe and walked into the fire.

"Uzumaki Naruto!" The Raikage called out from the ground of burnt ashes.

Naruto lounged against the branch of an untouched tree. Naruto motioned his hand like that of a beckoning cat.

The Raikage charged forward, creating a line of destruction through the forest as lightning charged chakra incinerated everything it touched.

"Yo, it's just a shadow clone," Bee sighed deeply when the Raikage charged recklessly through the forest. The wind was beginning to die down and the fire was getting easier to manage. Bee turned when he noticed another portion of Naruto's chakra had appeared rather close to camp.

"Let's not wait. Let's go investigate."
The Raikage grumbled as he stomped back into camp, disappointed that the expected sound of bones breaking underneath his fist had been nothing but a puff of shadow from a clone. He walked back into camp and found the fire had been extinguished but had left angry lines of ash throughout the camp.

C had been waiting for the Raikage's arrival.

"What's the damage?"

"We suffered little damage from the fire but our enemy used it as a cover to hide a surprise attack from Iwa ninja. We were hit pretty hard with significant losses to our supplies and our engineering unit."

"Order more supplies to replace what we lost." The Raikage ordered.

C reported nervously. "We've also received a letter from the Daimyo of Hot Water. He's cancelling all business transactions with us."

"Then send a squad of ninja to threaten him until he changes his mind," The Raikage said as if the solution should have been inherently obvious.

The Raikage finished surveying the camp. The faces of several Cloud ninja were beginning to realize that penetrating into Fire Country wasn't going to be easy. The Raikage found someone missing. "Where the fuck is Bee?"

"I'm married." Naruto announced.

"Congratulations, yo," Bee punched Naruto in the shoulder. "It's about time you tied the knot. Is she hot?"

Naruto chuckled as he sat against the trunk of the tree. Naruto's blue eyes reached up to Bee. "Yeah, she's hot. But, its, you know, politics. How have you been feeling?"

Bee rolled his shoulders. "The Cloud medics have been trying to ease the pain, but every transformation is still a drain."

"I don't want to fight you, Bee."

"I can't guarantee anything because the reality is that now we're enemies. There was always the possibility you would have to fight me."

None of the two men carried any animosity.

"I know but I can't see us as foes no matter what happens tomorrow. I'm thinking of a master plan, but there's nothing but sweat in my hand. It's A I don't understand."

Bee sighed. "It's gotten worse since his birthday. He's sixty this year and he fears dying in bed when death comes near. He isn't the person to be defeated by old age. He's seeking a more glorious stage."

"We don't need to get killed for his mid-life crisis. What are we fighting each other for?"

"Some of us learn to love war."

The sound of broken bone folded underneath the roundhouse kick. The punch cocked back like a
springboard and the limp body went flying into the sky.

"Dare to challenge my fist of youth!" Lee roared. The bowl cut swayed as he cocked his leg backwards into a ninja coming from behind.

"Lee."

A punch struck Lee's chest and it bounced back with a ring, as if hitting steel. Lee's long braid whipped around as he spiraled and crushed the ninja underneath his fist.

"Lee!"

"Oh Neji!" Lee said emphatically as he pressed a hand to the radio and pressed another hand into the gut of a Mist ninja.

"You were supposed to be on the other side of the bluffs by now for the next maneuver."

"Right!" Lee exclaimed. He released the weight from his feet. Ninja in the nearest mile radius fell over like bowling pins. "Count!"

Neji audibly sighed over the radio. "I'm not playing this game with you."

"Oh come on." Lee stopped his speed just before he fell over the cliffside. Down on the beach the front ranks of leaf ninja were suffering against the ocean assisted Mist ninja. Lee bounced up and down enthusiastically on his feet for the signal.

Far into the sky, a butterfly's wings reflected the sun.

A tiny ninja rode a butterfly high into the sky. Chouji Akimichi peered downwards. He had come so high that the dark armies of ninja were meaningless to the expanse of the massive ocean blue.

Then Chouji jumped.

From the size of a larvae, Chouji began to grow and grow, casting an engulfing shadow over the water until a mountain-sized cannon ball plummeted into the ocean. The water swelled and exploded upwards at the force.

Mist ninja rained down. Lee leaped into the air and batted Mist ninja across the sky.

"Sir, the Leaf ninja have advanced past our first line of defenses."

Kyouya cackled gleefully within the underwater grotto where Mist held its command center. Kyouya never thought things would get so interesting so quickly.

"Shut up that idiotic cackling or I'm going to kill you myself," Sandayū Momochi said. Sandayū was of the opinion that the entire Houzuki clan should be drowned in the deepest depths of the sea. Sandayū reached across the map and ordered his men to specific points along the coast.

Kyouya leaned forward. "We should hit them where it hurts. We should attack their camp and take out their genin and wounded."

Sandayū said rigidly, "If I destroy the genin, who will rise to challenge me after I kill their parents?" Sandayū questioned. "I have had years of war experience. Get out of my camp."

Kyouya pouted and dispersed into an angry puddle.
"Sir, our left flank is crumbling."

Sandayuu Momochi hefted the razor's edge of kubikiribochi over his shoulder. He strolled atop the water. It was rumored that Sandayū never smiled, but a twist lifted his lips as he walked into the fray of battle.

Half the torso stood upright, as if wondering which direction it wanted to go before crumbling to its feet. The upper half had been severed with the ease of a katana.

**Left.**

Naruto turned to his left and deflected a Lightning a jutsu.

**Right.**

Naruto plunged two rasengan into the chest of two Mist ninja.

**Behind.**

Naruto twisted on his heel. The tip of his katana froze an inch away from the Leaf hitai-te. Naruto grabbed the leaf ninja by the shirt, shoved him to the ground, and a dome of wind released in all directions to protect the leaf ninja from the cloud that converged on their position.

Naruto's ear buzzed with the sound of Lightning. He spun out of the way, sticking his feet to a nearby tree and riding it down as it crashed to the ground.

The Raikage pulled his hand out of the earth. He knew immediately when Naruto took the extra effort to evade, that he had finally shifted through the various shadow clones in the field.

The Raikage chased after Naruto through the trees. From the sky, a bolt of lightning and a streak of fiery chakra carved a maze as trees fell around them. Naruto skidded to a stop, barely evading a bijū bomb that bowled through the forest like an angry scar. Naruto turned and caught the Raikage's fist in the face, flew backwards, and then was slammed to the ground by the force of the Hachibi's suckered tail.

Naruto blasted himself up with the force of a rasengan. Multiple shadow clones began to disappear the moment they were created as the Raikage systematically eliminated them. Naruto landed with a bloodied palm on the ground.

The moment Gamabunta saw the full formed Hachibi, he asked, "You're kidding?"

"Long story," Naruto sighed. The Raikage landed behind the Hachibi's horns and Naruto faced the world's number one tag-team. The Hachibi roared. Naruto ran across Gamabunta's back. Chakra claws grew out of his cloak to grab the bull by the horns. Naruto and the Raikage collided. The explosion leveled the field.

The earth shook.

Hinata lost her footing when the ground moved beneath her feet. She looked up at the approaching tip of a katana. It felt right past her ear when the katana loosened from its owner's grip. A Jyūken crushed his throat.

Hanabi reached out and pulled her sister from the ground. A looked exchanged between them. With their backs pressed together, they protected each other's blind spot. Their Jyūken was a perfection of
movement, precision, and death.

Lightning bolts rained down from the sky. Hanabi rolled forward and sprung back to the ground when a katana nicked her arm. Hanabi evaded the charged katana and the confident grin of its pink-haired wielder.

Hanabi prepared hand signals but before she could attack, Karui turned and thrust her sword through the chest of a Cloud ninja.

Suddenly entire crowds of Cloud ninja were turning against each other until only those who were mentally fortified enough to break the genjutsu retreated backwards.

"Unit 4 retreating," Hanabi reported and bowed her head to the genjutsu user before she went in search of another fight.

Kurenai tripped an incoming ninja with the bandages unwound from her arms. Her red eyes were the color of blood as she sliced her kunai through his throat. Then she signaled to her genjutsu unit to regroup for their next target.

The battlefield was a pockmarked forest. Entire regions were burnt and cleared out. An area of trees shook leaves to the ground and Cloud ninja ran for their lives.

Omoi turned with a curse when another team member fell to the ground as a pile of bones. He ran as fast as he could through the forest, stopped when the route for retreat was cut off by a wall of fire. Omoi made a right as another Cloud ninja screamed. The buzzing came louder and louder.

Omoi jumped from the tree and dived into the water of the river.

A shadow emerged from the forest. Shino crossed his arms with a pronounced grudge. "Missed one."

Naruto fell like a comet at Shino's feet.

Shino's beetles picked Naruto off his feet before the Raikage came through. Naruto and the Raikage tumbled over the waterfall with punches at each other's faces. Naruto hiraishined away just before A crashed into the lake below.

Naruto reappeared atop Gamabunta's head, seeking to capitalize on the time while the tag team was separated.

"We need to manage those tails," Gamabunta determined.

"They grow back if we cut them. The goal isn't to defeat him. We need to pressure Bee enough until he transforms back."

"You've got a plan?"

"A long-term one. Distract him. I'm going to give it all I got before A comes back."

Gamabunta moved his pipe to the other side of his mouth. The sporadic flames had trapped the battlefield in a heat wave. Gamabunata removed his happi coat to reveal an intricate tattoo of peonies and waves that covered his entire back.

Naruto created eight shadow clones and targeted each tail with a rasenshuriken. Gamabunta slashed through the tough shell-skin of the Hachibi.
The Eight-tails found itself overwhelmed. **Bee, you need to make a decision. Naruto is giving it all he's got. We've got to do the same.**

Naruto made a clean cut through the tails. Immediately they began to regenerate. Naruto gathered all the chakra he could afford in Fox mode. Bee twisted around. A bijuu bomb charged in Hachibi's maw.

If Naruto's attack missed, Naruto would be left in a vulnerable position. Gamabunta leaped forward. The bijuu bomb veered sideways. Like that of a small star, the large rasengan was brought to bear directly against Hachibi's chest.

The battlefield was blinded by a flash.

Naruto stumbled forward. He lifted his eyes in a cloud of blue. The Hachibi condensed and a tentacle plucked out of Gamabunta's chest.

Gamabunta's dosu blade fell to the ground. "Bunta," Naruto placed his hand on the chill creeping through Gamabunta's chest.

"Good run," blood cough from the Great Toad's mouth, "kid…"

Bee shook as he crawled to his knees in unbearable pain. His body refused to heal from the trauma of the transformation. Bee's face fell at the sight of Gamabunta's prone body. "Naruto, watch out!"

Having powered down, Naruto was unprepared when the Raikage blindsided him. The punch struck Naruto in the chest. Naruto flipped backwards and landed on his face. A puddle of blood smattered the ground at a sharp eruption of pain. Naruto kneeled over, looked up in agony as the Raikage neared him.

The ground beneath the Raikage's feet ruptured and a giant snake swallowed the Raikage in its maw.

"Be still," Hinata insisted as she pressed her hand against Naruto's chest and studied him with her byakugan. "This is beyond my expertise." Her words echoed in the radio in Naruto's ear. "Sakura, we have an emergency. Naruto needs you now."

In seconds, Sakura appeared, connected to the hiraishin kunai that Naruto held. Sakura immediately checked his vitals.

"There is pressure building in his arteries. He's going to need surgery." Hinata reported.

"How hard is it not to get hit?" Sakura asked him. She had blood on her hands from a previous operation that she smeared on her forehead. She didn't hesitate as she injected Naruto with the serum. Sakura brandished a shrapnel and cut into Naruto's chest.

"Naruto, I need you to relax. Keep your heart rate down," Sakura ordered.

Hinata bound her fingers through his. She knelt forward until her face obscured the destroyed terrain. Naruto whispered, "Bunta's dead. I can't believe… the old toad is dead. I thought he'd outlive all of us. It didn't seem so long ago when I first summoned him..."

Naruto paused when Hinata's attention broke. She turned at the flailing of her own summon. Smoke wafted after a bolt of lightning struck from the sky. Hinata winced. The Raikage dug himself out of the nest of scales. Guts coated his clothes when he emerged out the belly of the beast.

"How much time do you need?" Hinata asked.
"As long as you can give me," Sakura answered. Sweat gathered along Sakura's forehead but her hands were sure and steady.

Hinata stood and walked forward, barring the Raikage's path.

"I guess the Nine-tails isn't so invincible after all."

"All of us are mortal," Hinata said succinctly as she entered her Jyūken stance. Hinata had already run this scenario several times through her head. The Raikage was faster and stronger than she was. His elemental affinities were at an advantage. Even though all organs, no matter how strong their constitution, was vulnerable to a Jyūken strike, she would never have a chance to hit him. Her only option was defense.

Her byakugan watched the twitch of his muscles. She began to dodge the moment he decided to attack. The punch swept past her face.

The Raikage narrowed his eyes and began to analyze how he had missed someone slower than him. He threw several more testing punches which were all successfully evaded. Then he smirked.

Chakra cackled around his one arm.

The sudden intensity of chakra turned Hinata's grey vision into a sudden shock of white.

Hinata wheezed when the fist plummeted into her stomach. She didn't even see the attack. It was only one hit, but it was enough to send Hinata to her knees.

The Raikage challenged, "Is this all the Hyūga are capable of?"

Hinata fisted ashes and dirt in her hand as she attempted to get up. Her mind knew exactly what she wanted to do: throw the ground in his eyes as a distraction and go for the throat but her body was not physically capable of picking itself back up no matter how much she willed it.

The Raikage slammed down his foot. Dirt welled in her mouth when Hinata's face hit the ground. The corner of her left eye caught on a rock. Hinata remained silent as he kicked into her side and ribs cracked.

But Naruto heard the bones breaking.

"Sakura, what the fuck is going on?"

"Shut up. It isn't easy to perform heart surgery on the field."

Sakura punctured a hole and added a stint to relieve the blockage. Naruto could feel the pressure of pain ease. Sakura applied the antidote and watched as Naruto's skin knit together without the need for stitches.

Sakura kept her hand held down against Naruto's chest. "Call in a retreat. You're out of immediate danger but you need to rest."

Naruto set his jaw. But he had come to know his limits and he accomplished today what he set out to do. Naruto activated his radio. "Call a retreat."

Naruto motioned to Sakura and ordered her to circle around.

The Raikage watched Hinata's attempt to push herself up before he forced her back down. The Raikage could have killed Hinata by now but he was stalling for time, waiting for Naruto to get back
up and start the real fight again.

"That's enough," Naruto's voice carried a strength that he no longer physically possessed.

The Raikage immediately recognized Naruto was done fighting for today. He reached down and picked Hinata off her feet. Her hair had come undone, and was matted and stuck to the blood and dirt on her face.

Naruto walked forward without any hint of fear or any reserves of chakra left in his body. "Enough people have died today."

Behind the Raikage, a unit of Cloud ninja were gathering Bee from the ground to deliver him immediately to a medic's tent. But the Cloud ninja dropped with a senbon needle sticking out of his neck, and another was killed by sheer force before he ever hit the ground.

Sakura held a kunai over Bee's throat.

The Raikage looked over his shoulder. "Agreed. Enough people have died today." The Raikage placed Hinata in Naruto's arms. Sakura lifted her kunai and backed away.

The distance between a cloud and a leaf wasn't so far.

On both sides, it was agreed the Leaf ninja had won the day. Lightning had gained no ground and lost too many men. But there wasn't time for celebration.

Immediately in camp, Naruto's attentions were directed towards tomorrow. "The initiative today was successful but we have to maintain the ground," Naruto told those in the room and outlined all the preparations he wanted done before Lightning recovered from their losses.

"Report."

"I'm still gathering the count but this is what I have so far," Hanabi answered. Few dead, some injured. Naruto knew that no matter what, people were going to die under his command. Naruto dismissed his lieutenants to carry out his orders.

"While they are weak and least expecting us, we should do another raid." Kurotsuchi suggested as everyone began to file out.

"No."

Kurotsuchi narrowed her eyes. "If this was Mountain we'd crush them, every single one into dust."

"We don't need to kill them to defeat them." Naruto argued. "I know it's not the typical strategy of Iwa ninja. No, because a stone never wavers – victory or defeat. But even stones can be weathered." Naruto walked around the table, as if prowling towards Kurotsuchi. "As a reminder, if Iwa breaks the peace treaty and attacks either Suna or Konoha, we will not help you recapture Mountain."

"I'm well aware of that," Kurotsuchi crossed her arms.

"I will always honor my promises but if you cross me, if you betray my trust, I won't hesitate to kill you."

By her values, Kurotsuchi stood her ground as Naruto came closer. She refused to back down even as Naruto reached behind her, bodily pressing her against him, then snatched a piece of paper from her back pocket.
It was sealed and ready to be sent.

"What a crude seal," Naruto said. He unlocked it in seconds and read the contents.

"It doesn't mean anything," Kurotsuchi said simply. "I was simply compiling information… just in case."

Naruto tore the letter detailing the abilities and names of Konoha's top ninja. "That was a warning. I only give one."

Hinata blinked as her eyes attempted to adjust after hours of her grey byakugan vision. She winced as Sakura prepared to dose her with heavy pain medication.

"No, I don't want it."

"Hinata, a fractured rib like this takes at least six weeks to heal. You might as well take the medicine, there is no way you are going back out into the field." Hinata breath hitched when Sakura pressed a bag of ice on the injured area and tightly wrapped her ribcage.

"If I was to guess, the Raikage didn't want to kill you but he completely succeeded in disabling you." Sakura explained what Hinata already knew. It was obvious to them both that the Raikage still held hopes for Hinata's eyes.

"I don't want the medicine," Hinata repeated. "I can't afford not to have a clear head."

Sakura cleaned Hinata's bruised and bloodied eye, and then applied gauze. The last time Sakura had seen Hinata beaten this badly was the chūnin exams against Neji.

Sakura turned to wash her equipment. The silence was tense. But someone had to address the evident issue in the room. "Hinata, there are high levels of mifepristone and prostaglandin in your system. You've been trying to induce an abortion."

"It doesn't matter anymore," Hinata said and pulled off her blood splattered pants. Then she took off her bloody underwear. Sakura handed Hinata a clean pair of clothes that Hanabi had delivered earlier. The Raikage had unknowingly taken care of her problem.

"Why didn't you get an appointment before you left Konoha? It's much safer that way."

Hinata struggled with the clothes. Sakura reached and helped place Hinata feet into her underwear. "I was hoping the drugs would work faster." Hinata looked at Sakura pointedly. "I didn't want anyone else to know."

Sakura understood the meaning behind her words immediately. Only one person in Konoha's hospital was allowed to operate on a Clan Head. "There's patient confidentiality. I would not have told Neji."

Hinata gave a blank blink. "Neji is a Hyūga. He knows."

"But who..." Sakura's jaw dropped at the realization.

Hinata stared at the soiled clothes on the floor. She reached out for the crutches and balanced her weight against them. Her hair covered the coldness in her voice, "It doesn't matter anymore."

A medic nin's most prized attribute was that of silence. Sometimes the silence was harder than even the most traumatic of missions. The silence built up in your chest like heartburn.
Hinata limped into the command center at the sound of torn paper. "Am I interrupting?" Hinata asked to break the tense stand-off between Naruto and Kurotsuchi. Hinata could see the twitching of Naruto's hand, as if he hadn't decided to lunge for a kunai.

Kurotsuchi turned on her heels. She stomped toward the exit and passed Hinata who held a clinging hand on the wall. It was silent as both Naruto and Hinata waited until Kurotsuchi's footsteps had faded into the distance.

Then Naruto was atop Hinata angrily. "I told you I'd pick you up," Naruto reprimanded. Then he reached under Hinata's legs, carried her in one arm and picked up the crutches in the other.

"I'm the Second. I can't be carried through camp," Hinata argued. "No one would respect me."

Naruto sighed, even though he was beginning to understand how important appearances were to the people you led. Never show fear, or doubt, or regret, or any weaknesses that could reveal you were mortal and just like them.

"What were the doctor's orders?"

Hinata answered, "Sakura said you should get some rest and lay down. Avoid anything extraneous for the next 24-hours. Which includes carrying me."

"You weigh nothing and that's not what I meant."

Hinata knew that's not what he meant. "She gave me a week. After that, I should be well enough to go out into the field." Hinata reported. They reached the small hole in the wall with enough room for a low-lit table and a bed on the side. Naruto gingerly placed Hinata on the pile of covers. They stared at each other with a knowing that things today could have gone horribly wrong.

"If A knew exactly how far you could see into their camp, he would not have hesitated to kill you," Naruto whispered. It was scary how much information was the line between life and death. "I'm pulling you from the front lines indefinitely, regardless of how much you're lying to me."

"I'll be fine in a week," Hinata insisted. "People go into battle wounded all the time. If I hadn't been on the front lines today you'd be dead."

"And I appreciate it," Naruto said sincerely and placed a kiss against her resistant lips. "But the truth of the matter is, your eyes are more important to the overall war effort than just on the frontlines. Stay in HQ and feed me information on what is going on. I can't lose you. A lot of my plans hinges on what you can see."

It was worse that Naruto didn't appeal to her emotionally but logically because Hinata didn't have a good counter-argument.

"But-"

"That was a fucking command Hinata. Understand?"

Hinata looked up at him with soft eyes. "I want to die by your side."

"I'm not dying," Naruto told her confidently. "Do you understand, Hinata?"

"Yes sir," Hinata whispered.

Naruto straightened and pulled his shirt over his shoulders. "Everything went according to plan."
Things will be different tomorrow. I should only have A to worry about.” Naruto looked at Hinata questioningly.

She activated her byakugan and reported, "Killer Bee won't be fighting for the rest of this campaign."

"How long do you think it will take them to figure out why he's not healing?"

"It took Sakura an hour when it happened to you. I give them all night. Even so, they won't be able to treat the poison I created. It's specifically designed for a Jinchūriki."

"And you're sure it won't kill him?"

"The poison doesn't actually inflict any harm. It's simply a placebo that diverts the attention of a jinchūriki's healing abilities and renders him unable to recover from his transformation.” Hinata reached up and touched the new scar above Naruto's heart. "Sakura had to use it on you to make the surgery possible. It's useful when you have the antidote."

Naruto looked down and traced his fingers on the upraised skin. It's been a long time since he's gotten a scar. "We both knew today was going to be hard. But now that Bee is out, I can handle the Raikage."

Naruto turned over and wrapped his arms around Hinata. His hand lightly touched the bandages, an awful reminder that other people didn't heal as fast as he could. He pressed Hinata against his ailing heart.

"What's wrong Hinata?” Naruto asked. Before she could lie, "Hinata, I know you. Something is wrong."

The fact she was a trained kunoichi in the art of hiding her emotions unsettled her to Naruto's sense of knowing when something was wrong with her. "After the war," Hinata whispered.

Naruto thoughtfully traced a finger down the ridges of her bandages. "It doesn't compromise the war campaign?"

"No."

"After the war," Naruto agreed as he bowed his head against her shoulder. He felt a shiver run through Hinata's body. Tears dropped on Naruto's arm. Sometimes even he didn't want the war to end.

He was dead on arrival. The medic ninja shook their heads at the bloating corpse but he was too important to roll out into a ditch like all the others. This was the sort of body with enough gold and status that even in death it was certain he would be cremated at home, so important that one dead corpse took up space in the medical tents that could have been reserved for the living.

Chouji rushed toward the medic tents the moment Shikamaru told him over the radio. Chouji stared at the pale corpse of his father.

One of his cousins and Chouza's lieutenant bowed at Chouji's appearance.

"I should have been there,” Chouji said as the guilt ran through him.

"If you would have been there, you would have been defying orders,” The lieutenant replied.
"What happened?" Tears began to spiral down the tattoos on Chouji's cheeks.

"Momochi had us pinned down. Your dad was wounded from an earlier involvement. We tried to convince him to go back and get medical attention but... you know your dad, he wouldn't budge." Chouji's hand bled with the blood of his Father's wound. "We will get him back home soon, I promise."

"No," Chouji said. "There's no room to store him here." Chouji's hands increased in size and easily hefted his father's weight in his arms. Chouji carried him outside into the night. He took refuge under the arching trees and placed his father under a branch of leaves.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Technique."
Chouji watched his father burn and the fire reflected in his eyes. Shikamaru placed a supporting hand on Chouji's shoulder. Chouji looked up at Shikamaru and said, "I need a sandwich."
Shikamaru turned and scanned his eyes through the camp for someone he could use. "Asami, I need a sandwich."

Asami, Kusuro and their third team member, Yuuki looked at each other as they hauled a crate across camp. Ame nodded without question. "Yes sir!"
They dropped the crate of building supplies and rushed to the mess area. No one was manning the station and they were forced to make the sandwich themselves.

"Do you think he likes cheese?" Asami asked.

"What about lettuce?" Yuuki asked.

Kusuro threw his hands in the air in frustration. "What are we doing?!"

"Making a sandwich," Asami said obviously.

"People are dying, our sensei isn't even fucking here, and we're making a sandwich," Kusuro spat.
An explosion went off in the distant forest and Yuuki cringed at the sound. He closed his eyes as the sound of battle drew closer. "I can't... I can't..."
Kusuro leaned down. "Hey, it's going to be okay. They aren't going to let anyone come into camp."
Suddenly thunder shook the sky as if threatening to burst it apart. Asami looked up, fearless because even though a storm was brewing the shadows were growing. A Nara was strongest at night.
One drop of rain splattered on Yuuki's skin in a cold shock. Startled, he ran off into the forest.
"We have to follow," Kusuro insisted. "We can't leave a friend behind."
Asami raised an eyebrow. "He's the one that ran."
Kusuro ran off without her. With a sigh, Asami conceded it was safer in numbers. She activated her kakkai genkai and handed the sandwich to a tendril of shadow that lifted from the ground. "Make sure this gets to uncle," She lectured the shadow before it darted across the ground.
Asami followed Kusuro tracks and found where he had stopped. Kusuro stood and stared at the
body of Yuuki pinned underneath the branch of a fallen tree that had struck him in the head.

"Huh, what an odd thing to die from," Asami noted.

Kusuro looked over at Asami. "What is wrong with you?"

"Ah well," Asami leaned down and went through Yuuki's pockets for his shuriken. "He's not using them." Asami collected the weapons, then her head swiveled around. She was alone. "Kusuro?" Asami called out. "This isn't funny."

When there was no answer but the rain that fell around her feet, she began to get worried. Asami placed her hands to the ground. The shadows were pliable under her skin. "Find Kusuro for me," Asami asked. The shadows did nothing. Asami pouted. "Please."

They moved. Asami waited and listened until they whispered back to her. She smirked. "Got you." Asami raced off into the forest and peered up into a branch where a ninja was caught intertwined in her shadows. He held an unconscious Kusuro in his arms.

Asami brandished her kunai. "Let him go." Asami demanded from the ninja, "or I kill you."

The ninja turned. Asami froze when the rain fell on the stark white mask and the leaf symbol etched on its forehead. Then the ANBU escaped from the shadows that had captured his legs.

"No!" Asami cried out as she chased after the ANBU. "Why are you taking him? He's not the enemy."

The ANBU easily evaded the vine of shadows that attempted to deter his escape. Finally, the ANBU turned. A glint of kunai pinned Asami's pants and then shirt to the tree. Asami brought her hands together for a jutsu. She cried out when the next kunai stabbed through the middle of her palm and stuck it back into the bark.

She looked up just as the ANBU loomed before him. "LET ME GO!" She screamed. "YOU'RE GOING TO REGRET THIS. I'M GOING TO FUCKING KILL YOU!" Her screams ended with a knock to the back of the head. She limped against the tree.

The ANBU crouched and wove an intricate genjutsu to cover her body and protect her from the sight of her enemies. The ANBU looked down at the tears fallen on the young Nara's face.

"You'll get over it," Boar said confidently. Then he gathered Kusuro under his arm and disappeared in the night. He had a mission to complete.

The continued rain was beginning to turn the ground to mud. The foundation of the camp was quickly becoming unstable.

Tomu wiped the mud from his eyes and then hefted a box of medical supplies in his arms. On the side of the box was a logo Tomu knew well. It was the logo of the construction company he worked for. Mushi and Hohei followed behind and picked up crates with the same logo that reminded Tomu that this was more than a war just on the front lines.

"Hurry up," Temari commanded as she rushed around camp and organized the relocation. "We need to move to drier ground now."

Medical ninjas rushed passed carrying cots of the maimed. The dying, those that couldn't be saved without extensive medical care, were left behind. Mushi step forward and her foot stuck in the mud.
Hohei and Tomu paused to pluck her foot out of the sinkhole.

A line was formed as the medical unit trekked through the forest in search of dry ground.

"Fuck," Tomu spat and stopped at the burn in his thighs. He wasn't used to such physical demand. "I can't," Tomu said hoarsely. His legs were shaking underneath the weight of the crate.

"We can't fall behind," Hohei said insistently but no amount of coaxing returned the strength to Tomu's legs. "Mushi, grab the crate," Hohei ordered.

Tomu felt helpless as his girlfriend carried his load. Then Hohei crouched in front of him and lifted Tomu onto his back. Then they resumed their march uphill.

"I'm sorry," Tomu whispered through the curtain of rain. He conceded that he didn't have their physical training nor was he used to the physical rigors a mission often demanded.

Hohei put one foot in front of the other. "It's my turn to carry you."

Temari watched as the camp gradually emptied to seek refuge somewhere else, except there was one tent left standing. Temari rushed into the central command tent. There were three others left in camp: Shikamaru, Chouji, and Naruto.

"We've got to move. This entire hill is about to collapse," Temari said insistently.

"Not yet. If we move the radio equipment, the entire army will be blind," Shikamaru warned. Eating a soggy sandwich in one hand, Chouji was gathering up all the important maps in the other. Naruto watched the situation unfold impatiently, knowing that it was more complicated than simply grabbing the equipment and moving it somewhere else. The antennas had to be set up and the correct frequency needed to be established. It took time to set it back up - time that Shikamaru had determined was needed more now.

"We've broken through the second line of defenses. I'm about to engage Momochi," Neji reported.

"No, do not engage Momochi," Shikamaru said insistently. "We're about to lose radio contact. When that happens, I'm transferring all command to you. You have the best visibility in the field," Even though Shikamaru was the strategist, he agreed that Neji was better at command. Shikamaru could formulate intricate perfect plans that needed time to form within the synapses of his mind. Neji was a prodigy in a different sort. Neji could react to situations quickly with an immediate plan under the circumstances, even if it wasn't the perfect one.

Shikamaru turned to Chouji. "I need you to gather your father's men and back up Neji immediately."

Chouji scarfed down the rest of his sandwich. "Right away." Chouji dumped the rolls of maps in Naruto's arms and then went outside.

"Human Bullet Tank Jutsu."

Chouji rolled downhill.

Shikamaru continued to shout orders. "Kankurou, maintain your position. Chouji I want you to…" Shikamaru realized he was talking to himself. He turned around when Temari had dismantled the connection. Before she could place the lumbering radio equipment in a storage scroll, the ground beneath their feet gave way.
Naruto clung to the maps as the mud knocked his legs over. Naruto reached and shoved them in Shikamaru's arms. It wasn't a shadow clone made to be durable but to simply observe. The shadow clone collided between two rolling trees in a cloud of smoke.

Shikamaru winced as the table flipped over his head, hit his elbow on a tree root, but maintained a grip around the maps as he was dragged down hill. Shikamaru could have stopped his quick descent with a jutsu but he was unwilling to let go of the maps that were as important as a shogi board to the pieces that played on top of it.

Temari's fan caught Shikamaru's fall. "You should have went after the radio," Shikamaru argued in his current frustration, unable to understand why she didn't choose the most logical and advantageous course of action. Shikamaru spotted the radio equipment only seconds before it sunk deep into the mud.

Temari gave him a blank look. "You're my husband."

Sometimes Shikamaru's plans were often ruined because people didn't take the most logical course of action. Shikamaru collapsed backwards against the ridges of the fan. He let the maps fall from his hand. They fluttered in the air against the rain.

It was still raining, but only a drizzle and the ground was solid. Hohei was drenched in sweat when Tomu moved off his back. Immediately the medics, genin, and support staff began to rebuild a base. Hohei, Tomu, and Mushi were quickly enlisted to help. Even though everyone was exhausted no one complained as the wounded were tended to and protected.

Suddenly Hohei snatched at Tomu's collar and whispered, "We're surrounded."

Seconds later the entire camp was enveloped in a thick fog of mist.

"Where did this river come from?" Temari questioned. A dread filled Shikamaru's stomach as they neared closer and closer to the area where the camp was supposed to be relocated. There was no camp.

Shikamaru landed in the forest clearing. A river of bodies floated past his feet. The rain had stopped but water continued to drip from the leaves.

They lost the entire medical team except for those retrieving bodies out on the field. They lost their supplies. They lost the genin.

The genin were younger brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, daughters and sons. A whole generation swept out to sea.

"Shikamaru, I want the head of whoever did this. Was it Momochi?"

Shikamaru studied the ambush, logically shifted through the logistics and planning. "No, this isn't Momochi's work. We have a rogue element on the field I didn't account for." Shikamaru was about to place his hand to his ear and remembered the radios weren't working anymore.

Water splashed as he collapsed backwards and stared up at the clouds. "Every time I work through the scenarios, we lose, no matter what. Not just the battle, but the war."

"So you've given up?" Temari asked. "Is that what your problem has been lately? You're defeated?"
"Don't you see Temari? We've already lost. We've lost our King." Temari walked over and kicked Shikamaru in the leg.

"Ow, Temari, stop."

"Get up, you lazy ninja. Get. Up." Temari said as she continued to kick Shikamaru off the ground. Temari yanked Shikamaru forward by the shirt. "I was serious about what I said. After this war is over, I am going to live in Konoha with my husband and my daughter. Now, we've got only thirty minutes before your initial plan comes together."

"You promise?" Shikamaru asked.

Temari knew she had a track record of broken promises. Temari turned with her arms crossed. "I'm not planning on becoming a housewife and cooking all your meals if that's what you're asking."

Shikamaru grumbled, "If you did, I would accidently kill you wondering what ninja was masquerading as my wife."

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Naruto jolted awake when his shadow clone dismissed from the Eastern front. He reached over Hinata's huddle body and grabbed his utility belt. Naruto pulled his shirt over his head. When he reached down to grab his boots, he stumbled into Hinata's eyes. She gave him one look.

"They might need me," Naruto told her. "It's not looking good on the Eastern front."

Hinata narrowed her eyes and then turned on her side.

"Fuck Hinata, what am I supposed to do? Lie here while people are dying?" Naruto asked. "I know I've only rested an hour. I know I haven't recovered enough chakra to hiraishin there and get back. I know that this is where the Hokage ordered me to be."

Naruto paused and questioned himself. "What if there is a surprise attack and I'm not here?" His Second was obviously not in any shape to command.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." Naruto said as he collapsed back down in bed and Shion's vision plagued his thoughts. "What's the point?" Naruto asked Hinata softly. "Shion foresaw that Kiri is going to invade Konoha. What if everything I've done so far doesn't mean a thing?"

Blood was beginning to stain Hinata's bandages. Every time she breathed pained her. "Why do we keep fighting?"

Naruto searched his soul for an answer, "Because we don't know how to do anything else."

---

Mushi caught Tomu in her arms as he grew faint from the sharp drop in his chakra levels. Mushi didn't hesitate to force a chakra pill down Tomu's throat.

Naruto had given Tomu a set of hiraishin kunai. Tomu had one in his pocket, which he had just used to clear his teammates to safety before the Mist ninja attacked, and the other was at the initial campsite just in case he ever got separated. But the camp had rode a mudslide downhill.

Hohei flipped over Mushi and, "Eight Trigrams Palm Revolving Heaven", deflected the water cannon that shot directly towards them. They found themselves on the shores of the beaches where the worst of the fighting was located.
The tide surged forward and washed red water around their feet. Hohei brought his hands up to defend against the charging Mist ninja but slipped when he stepped on a shuriken fallen in the sand.

A metal tipped crossbow bolt shot into the Mist ninja's throat.

"Forward!"

Mushi helped Tomu to his feet as a line of Leaf ninja overtook them. The Leaf ninja dropped to their stomach and loaded crossbow bolts.

"Where did you three come from?" Tenten asked as she reached down and dragged Hohei to his feet. Then she whipped around with a fuma shuriken that cut through three mist ninja. "Hold," Tenten ordered the line until enough targets were in position. "Fire," Tenten commanded the ranged-unit.

Guided by chakra, the accuracy and precision of the bolts reached their targets regardless of how much the Mist ninja were moving in battle, always avoiding the Leaf and Sand ninja just inches apart.

Mushi watched as one her aunt's beetles landed on Tenten's shoulder and whispered in her ear. She recognized it was a method of communication Konoha used to employ before the invention of radios. "We're losing men to the sea. We need to hurry and back up the commander's forces. We've only got twenty minutes before the grand finale."

But everyone knew twenty minutes was a long time on the battlefield.

Tenten patted a hand on Hohei's shoulder. "I love how a Hyūga always shows up when I need them," Tenten smirked. "The radios are dead and I need eyes on the field. Guide my men through the holes on the battlefield, understand?"

Hohei stared out toward the beaches of mass massacre. "I understand."

Tenten turned and motioned to Mushi and Tomu. "Get in formation," Tenten signaled to the ninja behind her to move. "Stray from the formation and your dead."

Tenten lifted a bow the length of her body and released the arrow.

Moegi turned with a fire jutsu as the Mist ninja behind her caught an arrow to the eye. Water splashed on the scar that marked her face. Moegi increased the intensity of her flames and directed it downwards. The water boiled and burned the feet of the three Mist ninja surrounding her.

One hopped backward in the air and was caught by the snapping fangs of a nin-ken. Sharp claws tore through his skin. Hana whistled. Three large nin-ken surged forward. Hana slid off her mount and gathered a floundering raccoon summon in her arms. Its summoner was dead. Hana strapped the raccoon onto the back of her nin-ken and raced down the coastline. She dunked down when two clattering puppets floated across her head.

The two puppets snapped around two Mist ninja and exploded, sending the ocean surging backwards. Kankurou played the strings along his fingers like keyboards and the puppets reassembled like puzzle pieces. The sand shifted in the bag Kankurou carried at his waist to form a set of numbers ticking down the time: ten minutes.

The time was erased when a splash dampened the sand. Kankurou looked up annoyed when Lee landed in front of him, crashing the head of an enemy ninja into the ground. The head splattered apart like the seven points of a starfish.
Lee looked up and flashed Kankurou a thumbs up before creating a stream of water behind his feet, completely soaking Kankurou and washing the white and purple make-up from his face to reveal a distinct frown.

Waves were formed under the speed of Lee's feet. Lee rounded when he saw Chouji bowling towards him, Chouji rolled along the arch Lee created and was redirected towards a crowd of ninja trying to reform to maintain a mist.

Chouji crashed right into them, splattering the ninja in the air. Then Chouji increased in size to swat at the Mist ninja floating on the water.

Momochi darted between Chouji's feet. Neji ran across the ocean as waves followed behind him, but he couldn't run as fast as Momochi swam. Neji was pulled underwater. He spiraled around, excreting chakra from every chakra point and forced Momochi backwards.

Neji pulled himself out of the water. Watching Momochi's movements underneath him, he avoided every attack. Then the water lifted up and formed a bubble that picked Neji's feet off the surface of water. Neji spun around and his Jyūken attacks bounced off the interior.

Momochi emerged out of the water with eyes hungry for the hunt. He lifted the sword, Kubikiribocho.

A crossbow bolt shot straight through the hole of the massive butcher's knife and embedded itself in Momochi's arm. He looked around for the attacker but she was leagues away. Tenten smiled smugly.

The distraction was enough. Neji's byakugan had searched for weaknesses in the bubble that held him, zoomed in on the water, zoomed in on the two molecules of hydrogen and oxygen bound tightly together by chakra. With a controlled concentrated strike of chakra, the atoms burst apart.

Momochi broke the bolt out of his arm.

A single leaf floated on the wind, swaying and tumbled until it fell between the tense stares of Neji and Momochi.

Momochi's sword was atoms away from Neji's chest. Neji's hand was atoms away from Momochi's cold heart.

A shadow loomed overhead, but Momochi refused to break the impasse. "Times up," Neji told him. "We've won." Mist ninja began to rush past them, fleeing back into the sea.

Then mountains of sand exploded out of the air.

Neji wiped sand from his hair as he straightened. The border between the ocean that had stretched for miles on one side and hills of forest on the other, had been engulfed in a desert of sand. Mist ninja were retreating backwards towards the oceans humidity but the sand had a mind of its own. One by one Mist ninja disappeared underneath the depths of sand, never to be seen again.

Gaara collapsed backwards. He fell into Temari's arms. It had taken Gaara at least an hour to move an entire section of the desert from Suna to the other end of Fire Country. Gaara had used all his chakra to complete the stunt.

Temari watched in triumph as Sand ninja capitalized on the opportunity and destroyed the Mist ninja not quick enough to get away.
A dark cloud dispersed out of the sky.

Kyouya dropped to the ground and landed with a splash. "Wrong move, Sand ninja," Kyouya said with a chakram at the back of Temari's neck. The sharp metal cut hairs. Gaara yawned and fell asleep in Temari's arms despite the danger.

When Kyouya attempted to strike, she found herself stuck to her own shadow.

"Now it's my move," Shikamaru said as he walked forward with his hands in his pockets. He knew a person like Kyouya couldn't pass up on the ripe opportunity at the Kazekage. He knew that a type of person like Kyouya had to feel her own hand cut through the Kazekage's throat. It wasn't a job she'd leave to a water clone.

Kyouya screamed as she attempted to disperse back into the air but she had been trapped within her own trap. She struggled as the leeches of shadow crawled up her legs.

Temari hefted her fan, and then the blade edge cut across Kyouya's shoulders. Kyouya's head rolled across the ground.

Shikamaru stopped and stared at the twisted scream on Kyouya's expression. The torturer had never known fear until she truly felt what it meant to be trapped and unable to escape. Shikamaru picked up her head and tossed it to Temari. "Happy anniversary."

Temari said in a tease, "Aww, you remembered."

Shikamaru and Temari shared a smile.

There were only a few hours left until sunset. Naruto studied the terrain for any advantages he could use against the Raikage. Naruto swore that for a one-armed ninja, the Raikage was sure damned hard to kill. "I'd never thought I'd say this, but thank Sasuke for taking this guy's other arm," Naruto said as he sat back and went through schemes in his head.

One thing about being Commander was that he couldn't focus solely on his battle anymore, he had to figure out a way to lose the least amount of men while Lightning lost the most. Naruto raised his head when Shino entered central command.

"What's going on?" Naruto asked.

Shino reached for a map and pointed toward the coastline. "What is going on? My scouts have located a second force coming by ship from Lightning. They just landed on the coast."

Naruto combed his fingers through his hair. "Alright, hold on." The shadow clone disappeared.

Naruto hadn't gotten very much sleep. He pinned close to Hinata, cherishing her heat while the air temperature began to quickly descend, but she was the problem. Typically the steady rhythm of her breathing lulled him to sleep but the lullaby was off-note in her struggling and inconsistent breaths. He constantly woke up to check if she was alright, until he finally decided to watch her sleep.

Naruto once again ran his fingers down the ridges of her bandages while the thoughts of the shadow clone settled in his head. He knew the moment he moved away, she would wake up. So he laid still for several moments more.

He reached over for a shirt. Naruto placed a hand on Hinata's chest just as she jerked awake to prevent her from sitting up and worsening her wound. Hinata's heartbeat raced under his hand.
Hinata turned towards him. "What's going on?"

"Shino caught sight of a second force landing on our coast."

"What time is it?" Hinata whispered.

"Almost sunset."

Hinata reached over for her bra. Naruto knew he couldn't possibly keep her stubbornness in bed.

"Do you need help?"

"I think I've got it. Get back to Shino before he thinks you've forgotten about him," Hinata said as she lifted herself up and the pain seized her body. Naruto saw the change that came over her expression. He came up behind her and helped slip the straps over her arms. It was a simple black sports bra that kept her breasts anchored in place.

"I'm usually taking these things off," Naruto teased.

"You did take it off."

"To help you stay comfortable," Naruto grinned. Then he helped her put on the rest of her clothes.

"Here, I thought you might need this so I got it for you."

"You went all the way back to Konoha?" Hinata asked as she took her grandfather's cane from Naruto. "You're impossible."

Naruto left a kiss on her lips, before scooping her in his arms to speed up her walk through the tunnels. Shino waited patiently in a corner until Naruto reappeared, unsurprised that Hinata was behind him.

"Shino says there is a second force that landed on our coast. Can you see them Hinata?"

Hinata activated her byakugan. "Darui is leading the force. It'll take several hours before they make any inroads into the forest. Judging by the time, they are attempting a coordinated strike with Lightning's main force later this evening. It's almost exactly the same maneuver Lightning did during the Sound war."

Naruto brushed back the hair that was a constant in his eyes. "We don't have enough men to take on both forces."

"Is it not possible to prepare a trap?" Shino asked.

"It has to be a trap intricate enough to capture all of them, keep them from attacking our flank, at the same time, its needs to be by a small force we can afford to lose." Hinata added.

Naruto tapped his fingers as the pressure to find a solution began to weigh on him. "Shino, go and grab Kurenai. I have an idea."

Darui landed on the northernmost tip of Fire Country's eastern coast. Darui led his army toward the suspected position of the Leaf ninja's camp.

Darui leapt to the trees and rushed to make the deadline to time his attack with that of Lightning's larger force.

"Sir," Darui's lieutenant said as the sun began to sink. "We're about to miss our deadline."
"The camp has to be around here somewhere," Darui insisted. All around him were an endless maze of trees that seemed to stretch on forever.

"Not too tough without your tag partner?" Naruto asked smugly after the satisfying hit to the Raikage's face.

The Raikage smeared blood along his jaw as he returned to his feet with a mad smile. The adrenaline pumped like fire in the Raikage's veins. A flurry of snow whipped around their heads and covered the dead.

The Raikage's fist equipped gloves of lightning. Naruto unsheathed his katana coated in a turbulence of wind, a glistening of bubbling red chakra, and blood.

The two combatants disappeared to the naked eye but every blow bellowed like thunder.

The Raikage plummeted to the ground like a lightning bolt, sundering the ground with the skull of his head. Naruto floated to the ground on all fours with the soft touch of fresh snow. The Raikage lifted from the crater, his head ringing in agony but he was enjoying every minute of the battle.

"Flee or die," Naruto demanded, with his katana pointed towards the Raikage.

The Raikage gave a red grin and challenged, "Are you worthy enough to be the one that kills me?"

Suddenly the cloud ninja across the battlefield began to retreat. Naruto raised an eyebrow and sheathed his blade. "Looks like your army chose for you."

The Raikage swiveled around at the crumbling of formations. "What is going on?" The Raikage demanded.

Karui appeared and bowed before the Raikage. "I called for a retreat. We cannot hold our position any longer."

"No," the Raikage demanded. "We must hold until Darui arrives."

"He is late. We cannot wait any longer."

Naruto interrupted the private conversation as he rocked back on his feet. "I might know what happened to your lost unit."

The Raikage spat, "Retreat."

When the Raikage arrived in camp he heard a host of complaints. They didn't stop complaining when he went to take a shit. They didn't stop complaining when he threatened to rip their tongues out. Finally, the Raikage convened a meeting.

"Sir, winter is getting harsher and we have no supplies. Hot Country betrayed us. Not only have they refused to sell to us but they've begun disrupting our supplies out of Lightning."

"Darui is either lost, dead, or captured," Karui added. "Another push forward would be suicide."

"Killer Bee is helpless until he heals from his transformation and it's going to take as long as the rate of a normal person. He could be out of commission for months. He could catch a disease. He could die," Omoi emphasized.
"So what? You punks want to run the fuck away?" The Raikage demanded.

"There are rumors that Konoha defeated Kiri. They have nothing else to distract them. We need to regroup at the very least," C suggested. "I doubt they'll dare to follow us into Lightning."

The Raikage opened his eyes and asked, "You accept defeat at the hands of a smaller and inferior army?"

Sometimes numbers doesn't win a war. The Cloud ninja looked at each other. "We'll be back. We won't accept defeat."

"Withdraw back into Lightning." A finally ordered.

The Raikage always came back to war, if only to test the limits of his mortality.

"Sir, something's not right."

Darui agreed. They've been running for hours and only found exhaustion settling into their bones. Darui motioned to make camp and collapsed backwards against the rough bark of the tree. The grass was slightly damp under his hands. The wind touched his face. The birds chirped in the branches but he had never actually seen any birds.

Darui sat up and stared at his surroundings into the dark shadows of the trees.

"Hmm," Darui said as he placed his hands in his pockets.

"It's a genjutsu trap," Darui told his lieutenant. They were in a very elaborate genjutsu trap, so detailed, he would not have realized anything was wrong but for the fact they weren't going anywhere.

The cloud ninja looked at his commander confused. "What does that mean?"

"It means they knew we were coming hours before we got here. They've probably got genjutsu users surrounding us maintaining the jutsu. It also means we don't have enough genjutsu users to counteract what they've created, which would have to be twice as many."

Darui scuffed his feet on the ground. "It cancels out when they run out of chakra but if they're smart they're probably keeping a rotation. Therefore, they can keep us here for as long as they want, until our supplies run out, until our food runs out, until we starve to death."

Darui walked forward and held up his hands. "I surrender."

Darui didn't receive an answer until two days later. He had been going through the numbers for how much they would have to ration their supplies when an imperceptible change occurred in his environment.

"I accept your surrender."

Everyone in the make-shift camp jumped for their weapons at the sudden appearance of Uzumaki Naruto in the center of their camp. "Move and you will be burned alive."

Darui gave the command to his army to stop and lay down their weapons.

"You might not have heard but The Raikage has retreated back to Lightning. You and your army
have no business here," Naruto said in a crisp and clear tone.

"How do I know you're not lying?" Darui asked.

"Believe what you want, but either you command your army to turn around or die." Naruto gave his ultimatum and meant every word.

With the genjutsu finally broken, Darui could see eyes in the shadows of the trees. Darui backed up a step and then commanded his army to turn around. Naruto followed, walking beside Darui as if they were comrades. Their feet left prints in the snow. The leaves moved with them.

"A lot has happened while you've been in the dark for two days." Naruto chatted amiably. "Konoha has successfully pushed backed Kiri's forces to the outer islands of Water Country."

"Congratulations," Darui was careful with his words.

Naruto stuffed his hands in his pockets and looked at the Cloud ninja with steel eyes. "Perhaps Lightning entered the wrong side of the war."

"Perhaps," Darui shrugged. "But there isn't a wrong side. In war, no one wins."

"If that's the case, why do we still go to war?" Naruto questioned.

Darui said thoughtfully, "We might talk of things we will do "when the war is over," but it's just a way to the pass the time. No one truly means it. Peace is the real hell. There is something so frightening about peace that keeps us coming back to war."

They arrived at the coast where the great ships of Lightning's armada had landed. The coast was sparsely populated by trees and the majority of Naruto's forces stayed back into the forest. The ocean brought an even colder breeze.

Darui was calm but casually took in the fact he and his forces were no longer surrounded. The reports claimed he had the numbers. Darui reached for his sword.

"I give one warning," Naruto said and watched the sun glisten of the surface of the ocean.

Darui unsheathed his sword. The army had been watching their commander for a sign. They immediately turned and charged back toward the forest.

Naruto exerted just enough effort to minimally evade the blade. Darui kneeled over to the sudden knee to his gut. Naruto pinned Darui to the ground with his foot, reached down, and snapped back his arm. The bone stuck out like a dead tree branch.

The earth shifted and swallowed the entire army of Cloud ninja in a maw of stone. Without hesitation, Naruto gave Kurotsuchi the signal. The earth collapsed inwards.

"You could have saved their lives. Always remember what price you pay for stepping into Fire Country uninvited." Naruto placed chakra draining cuffs around Darui's wrists. The earth molded back into the ground.

For years to come, the entirety of Fire Country's eastern coast would be known for its red sand.

Tsunade hadn't had a cup of sake for the past two nights. She watched over Konoha through her view out the window, always distant from what she protected. Being a Kage was a lonely job.
Tsunade swiveled around when Captain Cat appeared within the office. Behind the mask, Tsunade couldn't tell if it was good or bad news. "Report."

"We've sustained heavy losses against Kiri but Kyouya Houzuki has been killed and Kiri's force has fled back to its outlying islands. We have not been able to confirm the death of Sandayuu Momochi."

"And Naruto?"

"He has kept Lightning out of Fire country," there was a hint of emotion in the ANBU's voice, "and remarkably pushed Cloud all the way back to Lightning Country despite a great disadvantage in numbers. He has effectively taken the Hachibi out of the war and captured Darui, next-in-line to the seat of Raikage."

A smile cracked along Tsunade's face. These were the sort of battles that will remain in the collective memory of Konoha's history. Perhaps Konoha was going to lose this war, perhaps many more will die before it was finished, but for today Tsunade will have a cup of sake.

x

_Konoha has many leaves on its tree_
"Did you kill Hatake Kakashi?"

Kusuro's right eye was so swollen he couldn't see out of it. Four fingernails were ripped off his left hand and two on the other. "Yes, I killed Hatake Kakashi," Kusuro said through burning lungs. Ibiki twisted him by the hair until Kusuro looked up and faced Ibiki's scar.

"Do you love your mother?" Ibiki asked, unsympathetic to the age of his captive.

Tears streamed down Kusuro's cheeks. "Yes."

"And like a good boy you did everything your mother told you to do." Ibiki procured a letter. "This is a letter your mother sent you after the war was declared on Lightning."

"What? She doesn't send letters. She doesn't…" Kusuro's words were garbled by the blood in his mouth.

"She told you to poison Hatake Kakashi's book, a long term poison that would weaken him. Therefore, you collaborated in the plan to kill him."

"I didn't do it," Kusuro argued. Kusuro's head snapped backward from the punch that broke his nose. He sobbed, "I didn't. I didn't do it."

"Tell the truth and the pain will end," Ibiki demanded. "Did you kill Hatake Kakashi?"

Kusuro looked at the sharp of knuckles of Ibiki's fist. Kusuro cowered when Ibiki flexed his hand. "Yes," Kusuro cried. "I killed Kakashi."

Ibiki straightened and knew the ANBU on the other side of the one-sided glass had recorded the admission. With the confession, Konoha now had a legitimate reason to lawfully hold the boy and discourage any further uprisings from Grass refugees in Konoha. Ibiki re-pocketed the false letter as evidence to Kusuro's guilt.

The truth was relative.

The war wasn't over.

But an uncertain end did not prevent ninja from celebrating. Corks popped from bottles. Beer and stories were passed round the fireside. Someone had gotten ahold of the war drums and a drunken reverie of voices collapsed over the beat.

"He sprouted nine-tails just like the Kyūbi, had fangs sharper than a Cloud's katana, whiskers deeper and thicker than a Inuzuka, and eyes as red as fresh blood. I saw with my own two eyes on the battlefield."

"Liar. All I saw was a red flash."

"I heard he beat the eight-tails so badly the Hachibi was scared to fight the next day."
"I heard he *killed* the Eight-tails."

"I heard he cut off one of the eight tails and cooked it in a soup."

With each swing of sake, the outrageous claims escalated. This was how legends were made: not through the exploits on a battlefield but the drunken rumors around a fireside.

Bellows and laughter ceased when eyes were drawn toward the woman crossing camp. Apprehension seized the ninja and followed a trail of hushed whispers as if they could avoid Hinata Hyūga's eye. Everyone knew when Hinata came through orders were coming down. A collective sigh of relief expelled when Hinata's target was the group of medics that enshrined Sakura Haruno like a goddess.

A ninja leaned in and the fire danced around the leaf on his hitai-ite. "They say she sees and *hears* everything."

The Iwa ninja asked, "Who is she?"

"Hinata Hyūga led a coup d'etat of the Hyūga Clan. She stabbed the old Clan Head in the back with his walking cane."

"She gives you an order and you don't question it. When she looks at you, it's as if she can see everything you ever did and everything you are going to do. They call her Snake Eyes."

A leaf ninja leaned forward, looked around as if sensing the all-knowing eyes of Hinata Hyūga over his shoulder. "I heard the Commander was fucking her."

"I'd fuck her," the ninja claimed and cupped his hands before his chest. A drunken laughter burned in the fire. Cups were tapped together in agreement.

A kunoichi scoffed. "I heard the Commander's dick is twice as long as any of yours. I heard he's called him the Demon Fox because he has a cock like one." The kunoichi sniggered.

"Do you want to see how big my Demon Fox is?" A ninja grabbed his groin, "Maybe I don't have nine tails but I've got one."

"Bet I know why Snake Eyes is really limping…" A ninja raised his eyes suggestively.

Eyes went wide as if some great revelation had fallen from the sky.

"How else did Hinata receive the wound? It was from the Raikage."

Ninja jumped up frightened and were utterly taken by surprise. Kunai were thrown and fell around its target in a drunken arc. They stumbled over themselves and scattered. Shino sat alone by the fireside and thought they had known he was there the entire time.

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Naruto could clearly hear the celebrations taking place above ground. Under the lowlight, Naruto read reports collected by his protégé, Konohamaru, about updates in Kiri in an attempt to determine whether or not a permanent move into Hot Spring Country would be wise.

"How come you're not out celebrating?" Kurotsuchi asked as she turned around the corner into the room. She displayed a bottle of sake between her fingertips.

Naruto didn't lift his eyes from his work. "I'm not a big alcohol drinker," Naruto said. Besides, he had already made plans to celebrate.
Kurotsuchi leaned against the table, irked that she was being more or less ignored. She definitely got the sense that Naruto was a busy man but being busy was for another time. "Let's cut the bullshit," Kurotsuchi placed the bottle of alcohol onto the table. "I like you. You're not like other ninja. You have charm, you have ambition, and you have power. I want that."

Naruto was taken aback a moment by her bluntness. Naruto replied, "You mistake me. I am no different than any other ninja."

Kurotsuchi narrowed her eyes. "All ninja are weapons. Like kunai, we are crafted and shaped until all our flaws, and emotions, and ambitions are hammered out of us. Our dreams and wants dull our effectiveness, so inch by inch everything we are is whittled away until we are sharpened into emotionless tools. A kunai exist only for the purpose of the wielder as much as a ninja exists only for the purpose of the village.

But you aren't a kunai Uzumaki Naruto." Kurotsuchi leaned forward, truly baffled and intrigued, "What are you?"

Naruto acknowledged that Kurotsuchi posed an intriguing question. "I don't know," Naruto replied mechanically.

Kurotsuchi pushed off the table laden with maps and markers and walked to the low table where Naruto made his study. A light lit the tunnels of Kurotsuchi's eyes. "Do you know what I want? I want people to revere my name generations from now. I want to be great." Kurotsuchi laughed, plopped down on top the table and in a secret whisper said, "I don't want to be just another death. I want to be remembered after I die." Kurotsuchi's sharp nail lined Naruto's jaw. "What do you want to be remembered for Uzumaki Naruto?"

A glow peeked through the clouds of Naruto's eyes, and for a slight moment, he allowed the Iwa ninja close to his thoughts. "I'm going to change the world."

The words were said with such conviction it was impossible to laugh at them. Kurotsuchi was drawn towards his ambition. Her hand slid up Naruto's inner thigh.

The touch closed a gap between them physically but Naruto shut off from her emotionally. Kurotsuchi felt the error when he turned his head and her lips brushed past his cheek. "Kurotsuchi, I'm sorry, I have work to do."

Annoyed she was being denied, Kurotsuchi pushed harder and gripped her hand around his groin. Naruto patience at an end, he shoved Kurotsuchi until she tumbled backwards over the table.

Kurotsuchi snapped up. "I don't get the problem, are you married or something?"

"Am I interrupting?"

Kurotsuchi's fist punched into the stone and rocks crumbled. Kurotsuchi turned to Hinata in anger. "Yes bitch, you're interrupting."

Naruto released a killer intent that revealed he did not appreciate the name calling. Kurotsuchi's eyes widened. She looked from Hinata to Naruto's scowl. It had never crossed Kurotsuchi's mind that something might be going on between them. In public, they retained a distance and because of the clones, it was hard to tell when they were together. Kurotsuchi saw now that the distance was all just an act. "Don't make me look like a fool again," Kurotsuchi snapped before getting up and storming toward the exit.

Hinata barred her path.
"Get out of my way," Kurotsuchi demanded. "Or I'm going to... oh."

Naruto's jaw dropped as he watched as Hinata's tongue curled inside Kurotsuchi's surprised gasp. Hinata fit the softness of her curves into the spaces of Kurotsuchi's want. Hinata's fingers played the sensitive areas like an instrument. With a snap, Hinata removed Kurotsuchi's bra and pulled it from underneath her.

Hinata's eyes looked at Naruto over Kurotsuchi's shoulder, raised the bra in the air like a trophy, teasing, showing how easy she could beat Naruto's record in bra removal. The coy twist of her lips asked, 'What the fuck are you still standing there for?'

Kurotsuchi moaned when Naruto moved behind her and flushed his hard chest against his back. Moving closer, Naruto could see the detail of her tongue sensually enjoying the other woman's mouth. Naruto licked his lips and the size of an increasing erection began to push into Kurotsuchi's behind. Naruto wrapped an arm around Kurotsuchi's waist and then the shadow clone disappeared with the Iwa nin to a more secluded location.

"What was that?!!" Naruto asked immediately.

"What were you thinking telling her no?" Hinata questioned as she pulled back a stray strand of hair only for it to bounce back out of place. "The seat of the Tsuchikage leans towards a family lineage and she's next in line. You cannot afford to anger Kurotsuchi."

"I was thinking we had already made plans," Naruto argued. "This war has been over my head non-stop. Now that I have room to breathe, all I want to do is fuck you, cuddle, and then sleep for more than a few hours."

"Cuddle?"

"Yes, I want to fucking cuddle," Naruto's ego easily admitted. "I'm too tired to deal with someone else right now. I just want to be alone... with you."

Hinata gently trailed her fingers down Naruto's arms. "I asked Sakura," It was probably one of the most embarrassing question Hinata had ever had to ask, "but she wouldn't advise having sex right now with my injury. We can't."

Naruto dropped his head into Hinata's shoulder. "We'll skip the fucking part then."

They pressed into the familiar comfort of each other's arms, as familiar as the comfort of their own beds. "Naruto," Hinata said softly. "You never had a problem sleeping with other women before."

Naruto mumbled, embarrassed, "Things are different. That was before we started having sex."

"You don't have any commitment to me," Hinata pressed, "You need to maintain your bachelor image to protect the truth about your wife."

"And I'm tired of fucking politics in my sex life." Naruto looked into her pale knowing eyes. "I love you, that is my commitment."

"And we can't allow our emotions to hinder our responsibilities." Hinata said softly. "You need to pacify Kurotsuchi and I can't properly satisfy you with my wound. This way, everyone wins tonight."

Naruto knew Hinata was right. Konoha couldn't afford another enemy and if he was going to have to fuck her to keep her happy, then so be it.
"Watching you kiss her was pretty hot," Naruto said, attempting to trick himself that he was in the mood. Hinata helped as she walked her fingers towards his groin.

"I'm going to make sure you enjoy it," Hinata teased. "Unlike you, I can share."

Naruto narrowed his eyes into a smoldering fire. Then he sucked in her coy lips between his teeth. "Let's celebrate our small victories."

Sometimes, small victories were all you had.

Steam rose from Suigetsu's arms as he listened to a report on the disastrous retreat that happened on the Eastern Front. The messenger was justifiably afraid for his life. Suigetsu gnashed, "No, you tell Momochi to turn back around and try again."

"But sir, the momentum is lost. Momochi has requested the time to regroup," the messenger reworded Momochi's words more politely. "And the men are losing interest. Fishing season is coming up and men want to return home for the catch."

Suigetsu cut the messenger in half. Samehada thudded on the ground and Suigetsu sat back in his chair. There was another knock at the door. A small angled genin entered the room, glanced over at the halved Mist ninja and turned back to the Mizukage.

Suigetsu recognized the "claimed" prodigy of the Houzuki clan, who had come all the way from the clan's distant island.

"The clan is not pleased that Konoha has killed the Clan Head, we express wishes to continue the war," the young girl named Mizuka reported.

Suigetsu leaned forward, affronted that the clan had sent this little girl, his niece, and Kyouya's daughter to make their demands. Suigetsu hated the little girl on sight. The position of Clan Head was supposed to be his by birthright. He was the only living son and he would not be ordered around by women. "You tell the clan to go fuck themselves before I butt fuck you with my sword. And I got a big fucking sword."

The small genin named Mizuka wasn't cowed by the eccentrics of her family member.

Mizuka placed a folder onto the desk, "That is a back-up plan the Clan Head had prepared in case of her death. The Clan hopes you will take the reasonable course and seek revenge for the death of a Mist ninja and not for some woman known to be a Uzumaki."

Mizuka's feet dangled in the air. Suigetsu's snarl landed hot in Mizuka's face as his hands gripped around her throat. "You think the clan is going to give a shit if I kill you right now? Do you think that they are going to come and rescue you?! NO! NO ONE IS COMING TO FUCKING SAVE YOU! NO ONE FUCKING CARES ABOUT YOU!"

Suigetsu screamed in rage when he squeezed harder and the genin splashed to the floor as a water clone. Suigetsu fell back against the desk and his hands boiled into the wood like acid. The shadow of a shark floated around the window of the Mizukage's office.

"I don't need them. I can do this by myself. I never needed them," Suigetsu repeated under his breath. Then Suigetsu collapsed into the chair and realized he had no more options. When the heat of his anger left him and his body started dripping tears, Suigetsu reached out feebly and opened the folder.
A mad laughter crawled through his teeth.

"What fucking back-up plan?" Captain Fox demanded of Butterfly as she passed along the message.

"We were unable to obtain the details," Butterfly reported. The Captain dismissed her.

Captain Fox bowed his head once Butterfly had left the office. Then Konohamaru took off the stifling mask that fit oddly to his face. Konohamaru resigned himself to the fact that he could never be Uzumaki Naruto. The mask was too big to fill.

Konohamaru paced around the room and the imminent threat of Naruto's disappointment placed him back in his chair. Konohamaru took a deep breath, and looked at the hundreds of reports on the table. Somewhere hidden in the classified files had to be the answer. There was no way this back-up plan could have gone completely unnoticed.

Konohamaru put back on the Fox mask. He sent a shadow clone for Cincada. After several ticking minutes, the branch Aburame entered the office. "Captain?"

Fact: Kyouya and Suigetsu largely acted independently of one another.

"We've just received news that the Mizukage might implement a back-up plan formed by Kyouya. I need you to pull out every file with her name in it."

Cincada wrote Kyouya's name on a blank sheet of paper, then after a moment of silent confirmation, an army of beetles stormed out of his sleeves. They began buzzing through the entire office looking through files for that name.

Captain Fox watched as the room shuffled and organized until a pile of folders were created with every document that had Kyouya's name in it.

"Sir, what are we looking for?"

Captain Fox opened the first folder. "I'm not entirely sure."

Naruto lifted the undershirt over Kurotsuchi's arms and exposed the buds of her breasts. He ran his hands down her muscle-toned body, massaging his thumb over her skin. Over Kurotsuchi's shoulder, Hinata was pressed back into the mound of covers, fingering herself as she watched Naruto strip the Iwa heiress. Always one for a show, Naruto crouched and curled his tongue around the perkiness of Kurotsuchi's nipple. Naruto leaned down further, hooked his incisor through the string of Kurotsuchi thong and pulled it down her leg. He was bombarded with the strong scent of arousal from both kunoichi in the room.

After visually confirming the pregnancy seal on Kurotsuchi's hip, Naruto raised up, caught her legs on his shoulders and carried her forward into the arms of Hinata.

"Be careful with her," Naruto whispered as he landed kisses on Kurotsuchi's neck. Kurotsuchi pushed Hinata's shirt gently over the bandages. Naruto slid off Hinata's underwear and slid the soaking thong underneath his pillow.

Kurotsuchi reached for the clasp of Hinata's bra. She stopped and stared at the tangle of scars on Hinata's back. Ninjas didn't ask questions. Kurotsuchi popped off Hinata's bra and watched as Hinata's breasts burst from the restraints.
Naruto turned Kurotsuchi towards him and earnestly kissed her lips. He brushed his hand down a pattern of old scars down Kurotsuchi's arms that looked as if she had cut them into her skin.

Kurotsuchi's hands climbed the golden tone of Naruto's abs and continued to scale the discoloration along his skin. Kurotsuchi's breath hitched when fingers gently trailed chakra up her spine, her breast popped out of Naruto's mouth until she was pushed onto her hands and she was face level with Naruto's erect cock. Kurotsuchi didn't hesitate to engulf the pulsing member into her mouth.

Hinata positioned herself underneath Kurotsuchi's legs. Naruto's breath hitched when Kurotsuchi's moan reverberated around his cock. Kurotsuchi was forced to pop Naruto's cock out of her mouth, almost about to bite him as she clenched her jaw at the tease of Hinata tongue dancing in her pussy. "Oh Kami," Kurotsuchi moaned, "She's trained…” Kurotsuchi tightened her legs. Suddenly Kurotsuchi was more focused on humping Hinata's face than attending to Naruto's cock.

Not wanting to be left out, Naruto shifted around until his balls were sliding against Hinata's breasts. Naruto reached behind him and cupped his hand into Hinata's pussy and used her natural moisture to lube between Kurotsuchi's butt cheeks. Kurotsuchi shivered as Naruto partially slid his cock into her ass. The tightness of the canal sent a pleasurable ache through Naruto's body.

Naruto thrust forward, further pushing Kurotsuchi into Hinata's mouth. The drunken laughter of celebration drifted through the roots of the earth. Kurotsuchi's scream was hidden under the loud sound of fireworks. Her orgasm excreted cum that dripped down Hinata's chin and pooled on her neck. The strength left Kurotsuchi's arms. She collapsed but Naruto upturned her hips firmly to receive his every thrust.

Hinata scooted backwards and lifted up to catch Naruto's swinging balls. She suctioned them hard into her mouth. Naruto bucked at the sensation and came inside of Kurotsuchi's ass.

Naruto laid his forehead against the Iwa kunoichi's back to catch his breath. As he looked down he received Hinata's coy smile before she opened her mouth and caught the cum dripping between the crack of Kurotsuchi's ass. Hinata's tongue lapped it up and swallowed.

Kurotsuchi turned to relax on her back with a content smile and combed her fingers through the silk strands of Hinata's blue hair. Naruto had a towel prepared and gently wiped the aftermath off Hinata's face and neck.

Naruto and Hinata exchanged a look. He was asking how Hinata was feeling and if in the second round he could put his dick inside of her. Hinata shook her head.

Kurotsuchi noticed the silent conversation and asked, "How long have you two been together?" Naruto looked up. "Oh, no, you have the wrong idea. She's um…”

"I'm married." Hinata said. Hinata made one motion with her hand and without thought Naruto reached down and picked her up with the care of handling glass.

Kurotsuchi raised an eyebrow and laughed. "Naruto Uzumaki, what a demon you are. Do you get off fucking another man's wife?"

"I think he does," Hinata teased. Naruto pouted and traced his finger along Hinata's jaw but he didn't dispute it.

In a teasing manner, Kurotsuchi crawled forward and plunged her tongue into Hinata's mouth. She brought up her hands and tested the weight of Hinata's breasts.

Hinata immediately went to work. Her body easily plied underneath the wants of her target, easily
snaked her hands and legs around in such an unsuspecting manner, and before you knew it, Kurotsuchi was the one in the compromising position. Hinata could kill without even a blink and knew Naruto was a tad masochistic, knew he was following the death in her fingers with a sweat just as much as the tip of her tongue.

Naruto scooted forward and gently pushed Hinata onto Kurotsuchi's stomach, and then lifted Kurotsuchi's legs around his hips. Naruto kissed up the back of Hinata's spine, gripped his hands along Kurotsuchi's hips, and thrust into the Iwa kunoichi's vagina.

Kurotsuchi sucked on Hinata's breasts and massaged them with her moans. As Naruto slammed forward into the warmth of Kurotsuchi's pussy, he reached his hands around to finger Hinata's clit. Both women flailed underneath him. Their battling scents of arousal clouded his head. Two of the strongest kunoichi in the world were moaning his name together between their lips.

"Shit," Naruto cursed when he came too soon.

Naruto pulled out his spent dick. Hinata looked back and gave Naruto a sympathetic expression, as if telling him he did a good job, and then activated her byakugan. Hinata slipped two fingers into Kurotsuchi's pussy, knew exactly where the g-spot was, and expertly concentrated chakra into that area.

The orgasm ripped through Kurotsuchi's body. The pleasure seized her innards and submitted the kunoichi to exhaustion. Kurotsuchi collapsed onto the cover and didn't get up again. Beneath her, the covers were soaked in Kurotsuchi's ejaculation.

"What did you do?" Naruto asked when he realized Kurotsuchi was out for the rest of the night.

"A Hyūga trick." Hinata said with a coy smirk, amused by his confusion.

"How come you've never done it to me?" Naruto pouted.

"You don't have a vagina," Hinata laughed as she laid in a position that got Naruto's attention. "And the male equivalent is prostate stimulation. You weren't too receptive the last time I tried to put my fingers up your ass."

"Fair. I suffered a traumatic experience at the capital once." He prowled over her and gave Kurotsuchi one last look. "Although, I'm beginning to reconsider."

"We'll work on it," Hinata promised and playfully tapped Naruto's butt cheek. Naruto responded by applying a long lick to Hinata's face.

"Eep," Hinata attempted to push Naruto's face away as he licked her clean. It always amused Naruto how she'll swallow his jizz like water but she squirmed at things he considered insignificant. "That's disgusting Naruto," Hinata pouted as his tongue wiped across her cheek.

Naruto chuckled. Naruto pinned up Hinata's legs and cordially opened them. "You don't mind when I lick you here." Hinata's head rolled back. "Don't move too much or you're going to hurt yourself," Naruto reprimanded, then returned to the task of granting Hinata a release.

The sheets gathered underneath Hinata's fingertips. Her byakugan watched every insertion of Naruto's tongue. She watched it originate in his lungs and build in his chest, until Naruto released a growl that vibrated between her legs.

Naruto snapped his hands to her waist in order to pin her down as the orgasm continued a vibration of pleasure through her body. Naruto watched her face as the flush painted her cheeks and for a short
vulnerable moment, Hinata Hyūga couldn't see.

Naruto pressed a hand along her side, followed the rise and fall of her breath as she recovered. "How is the pain?"

"It feels like there's a constant knife stabbing into my side," Hinata said honestly. "But I've been through much worse." Naruto kissed up her neck in apology and the prickly blonde hairs along his jaw irritated Hinata's skin. "You haven't shaved."

"I hadn't the time." Naruto laid down in the bed beside her. "What do you think about growing it out and seeing how long it can get?"

Hinata scrunched her face. "That would be weird."

"Weird? How?"

"It's just… its hair on your face. I can't even imagine a blonde beard."

"You can just use your byakugan and see past it," Naruto joked.

"And it'll probably scare Shion."

Naruto laughed. "Probably." He rubbed his prickly jaw and realized how uneven the hair was coming in.

Naruto instinctively turned inwardly as Hinata cuddled against him. Her hair blanketed his arm. Naruto was getting accustomed to the fact that the only time he saw her hair out of its bun was in bed, as if it was a detail only shared between them.

Naruto closed his eyes against Hinata's shoulder. Naruto completed his list of things to do for the day: fuck, cuddle, sleep.

Captain Fox rubbed his tired eyes. He had been up all night trying to decode a potential threat through the endless stacks of papers and lines of calligraphy. Butterfly entered the office and reported, "There is confirmation that Sandayuu Momochi has entered Kirigakure. Also," Butterfly shuffled nervously. "We've lost track of the Mizukage. He's evaporated into the air and he hasn't reappeared in Kirigakure since."

"Shit," Captain Fox felt as if there was a clock ticking above his head. He was close to giving in and informing Naruto that he had failed at the task Naruto appointed him to do.

Fox's gaze landed on the folder in front of him. It was the mission that had brought Hanabi home. Finding it odd that Kyouya's name cross referenced with one of Hanabi's missions, he opened Crane's mission folder and read the details.

"There is something weird here," Captain Fox said aloud. "Why would Kyouya secretly order an ANBU squad to deliver a scroll? Shikamaru had decoded the message. It's just a grocery list of war material. You don't need ANBU to deliver that sort of scroll."

"What if it's going the other way?" Butterfly said slowly. "What if Kyouya was secretly selling Kiri's war material? Technically that's treason, especially during time of war."

"What would a group like Kuro no Keiyakusha need all that material for?"

"Their terrorists," Cincada said obviously.
"Butterfly, I want you to confirm if Kiri's supplies have been decreasing." The Captain realized how stupid the order was after he said it.

Butter shook her head. "That's almost impossible to confirm. Their supplies were obviously decreasing because of the war and if a few crates went missing, who would notice or if someone did, assume Konoha took them?" Butterfly asked. "It's completely possible Kyouya could ship out materials under everyone's noses."

"Cincada, I want every folder on this terrorist organization." Cincada's beetles immediately went to work and systematically rooted through the folders. The Captain flipped through the paperwork, searching for something but not knowing what.

"Sir, I've got something." Cincada handed the Captain a folder. "It's the information that was sent over from Iwa after the alliance was formed. They had some information that we didn't have."

Captain Fox was surprised by the fact Iwa was keeping a close track of a terrorist organization run by civilians. Then Fox realized why.

Deidara, a missing nin of Iwagakure had joined Kuro no Keiyakusha a little before joining Akatsuki. There was evidence that this terrorist organization were the ones distributing Deidara's bomb formula after his death, a bomb formula that did not require the use of chakra but instead complex chemical components.

"Get me a list of the materials found at the site where the Daimyo's palace was bombed." Captain Fox ordered. "Konoha suspected that the former Daimyo Tahiko hired Kuro no Keiyakusha to bomb the capital."

"It's possible that a bomb would get any Houzuki's attention." Butterfly concluded. "Kyouya could have approached them afterwards."

Cincada found the material analysis of the remains of the bomb. He handed the document to the Captain. Fox cross-referenced the document with the grocery list from Hanabi's ANBU mission. All the materials found in the bombing were contained in the other list on every third line, a hidden code in a hidden code.

"Shit."

The Hokage had her heels on the desk and the Kage hat over her face. It was a slow day and she figured she could afford a nap. Her snore was caught off mid-sentence when the doors of the Kage's office slammed open.

"Hokaga-sama, we need to erect sentries and defenses all around Konoha immediately. I have on good evidence that Konoha is about to be bombed."

The Hokage didn't take threats like that lightly. Without delay, the Hokage called Shizune into the office immediately. The Naruto shadow clone perched on the windowsill was in listening range and appeared inside the office.

"Naruto, I want you to close the gates and get sentries on the wall. Shizune, I want all the individuals who have entered Konoha within the last twenty four hours detained, civilian and ninja alike." The Hokage ordered. "Alright Captain, what type of bomb are we looking for?" The Hokage asked.

"Kiri has been supplying Kuro no Keiyakusha with massive amounts of materials. We're talking about a bomb much bigger than what happened at the Daimyo's palace. Possibly the size of a bijū
Everyone in the room froze, shocked that an organization of civilians could gain control of so much power.

Naruto had disappeared to close the gate. Shizune reached for the door knob. The Hokage reached for her pen.

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**A LOUD BANG SHOOK THE WORLD.**

Kurotsuchi woke up and stretched the soreness out of her body. She sat up and found Naruto curled around Hinata. Three's a crowd.

Kurotsuchi began to get dressed. She looked down at Naruto's bags tucked into the corner. She stared at them for several seconds and wondered what secrets could be found in them.

Kurotsuchi leaned forward, her hand paused, and thought immediately this was too easy. A ninja like Naruto wouldn't leave such personal items out in the open unless they were traps. Kurotsuchi pulled back her hand. She felt eyes watching her but when she turned around, both Naruto and Hinata were sleep. Kurotsuchi put on her clothes and slipped out.

She enjoyed the sweet smell of the earth around her in the morning but enjoyed the sun much less as she emerged above ground in search of coffee. She could smell it in the air.

"Looks like you had a late night," Sakura said when she finished making her coffee at the station with coffee beans graciously provided by Iwa. Coffee was an Iwa specialty compared to the preferred tea in Konoha.

"Not bad," Kurotsuchi cordially greeted the Leaf kunoichi. Sakura gave space to allow Kurotsuchi the room to brew herself a cup of coffee. "What did you do last night?"

"I was watching over the patients wounded in battle."

"That sounds boring," Kurotsuchi said as black as her coffee.

Sakura invited Kurotsuchi to a campfire where she had begun to cook breakfast. In the early morning, both kunoichi shared a quiet appreciation for their coffee. Sakura explained, "I'm married so I stay away from the alcohol. I don't want to do something I'd regret."

Kurotsuchi stretched out and scratched the bottom of her feet on the edge of a log. "I don't understand why anyone would want to tie themselves down like that."

"It's a base." Sakura said as she tucked her ankles underneath her legs. "In a world full of betrayals and lies it's nice to have that one person you can come home to."

"Your spouse will just as quickly stab you in the back just as fast as anyone else."

"I'm married to a civilian. He hardly knows how to hold a cooking knife," Sakura answered with a smile. "If I'm not mistaken, your mother is also a civilian?"

"Perhaps if she knew how to hold a kunai she'd be better off," Kurotsuchi grumbled and realized she was falling into clan business. Kurotsuchi grew quiet as the coffee heat created a tinge of pink in her cheeks, then she quickly shifted the conversation. "So I guess you and that missing nin didn't work..."
"Uchiha Sasuke?" Sakura laughed. "I moved on."

"What if he shows back up in Konoha? You wouldn't drop your husband to see what could have been?"

"If Sasuke ever shows his face back in Konoha I'm going to be the one to kill him," Sakura said without hesitation. "I'll do what Naruto couldn't finish back during the Fourth Shinobi War."

"I hope you do," Kurotsuchi replied. "He killed an old friend of mine."

"I hope you're not holding a grudge against Konoha for the actions of a missing-nin," Sakura said carefully and gauged the Iwa ninja's thoughts. Even though they were fighting side by side, there was still a lot of bad blood bubbling between Leaf and Stone.

"No," Kurotsuchi shrugged, "If Sasuke hadn't killed Deidara first, Iwa probably would have done it sooner or later." The bitter coffee warmed Kurotsuchi's bones. "Deidara was my Sasuke. He and I were on the same genin team before he left Iwa. His parents were civilians and he was constantly struggling between his identity of a civilian and that of a ninja. He was a rebel, he fought for the rights of civilians, and he was always against the very establishment I was born from.

When we were kids I remember how he'd speak of his plans. He wanted to change the world and believed if he could just make people understand the beauty of his art, to make them fully appreciate the beauty of impermanence, to make them truly understand how life is lived in brief brilliant moments, then he could change them."

Sakura could hear it in Kurotsuchi's voice. "You loved him?"

Kurotsuchi downed the bitter coffee. "Fucking idiot, he never did achieve his dream."

A brief brilliant moment of fire exploded into the sky.

Tomu leaned back against the tree bark and watched the brooding expression on his girlfriend's face. His leg swung off the branch. Further below he could see the morning campfires. Further down was Konoha's new landmark, what many were beginning to affectionately, and in Tomu's opinion morbidly, call the Misted Desert.

"Fifteen students graduated in my class from the Academy," Mushi said as she huddled inside of her robes. "Now there are only me, Hohei, and the three that were assigned to Naruto's camp. Everyone else is dead."

Mushi grew quiet as her beetles returned to her sleeves after the search. "Still no sign of Kusuro."

Even though Kusuro had been declared dead, Tomu hadn't given up hope. "Maybe if we can get Asami to remember something..." Asami had lost an entire block of her memory during the battle and assumed something had hit her on the head.

Tomu was already tired. He leaned against the bark and suggested, "After the war we can stop being ninja."

The darkness in Mushi's hood turned toward him. "Once you take off that hitai-ite, you are considered missing. There is no going back."
"Mushi! Tomu!" Hohei called up to them. "The Ups wants to see us."

Mushi and Tomu dropped down from the tree and joined Hohei on the forest floor. Tomu asked, "What is going on?"

Both Mushi and Hohei already knew. "We're going home."

"What were you up to?" Tomu asked as they walked through camp with a skip in his step. He was excited to return to Konoha. Tomu playfully elbowed Hohei in the arm. "Were you with your lady friend?"

A dark cloud hung over Hohei's head. "She's moved on," Hohei said bitterly. He had been too disgusted to even activate his byakugan for most of the evening.

Mushi whispered in Tomu's ear, "She's sleeping with the Commander now."

Tomu's wisely avoided Hohei's bad mood. There was a line coming out of the Central Command tent where ninja were exiting with their leave papers.

"How do they determine who stays?" Tomu asked.

"Typically they'll assign the genin and those who have been out on the field the longest back home while retaining a certain number of men to hold this position," Hohei explained.

After waiting in line, it was finally Tomu, Hohei, and Mushi's turn to enter the command tent. Both Hohei and Mushi were relieved to see it was the Akimichi instead of the Nara giving out the letters. "What's wrong?" Mushi noticed Tomu's baleful glare. "He's the nicest one."

"Bad run in with an Akimichi once," Tomu grumbled.

Chouji looked over the table at the three ninja still battling through puberty. Chouji lifted a file, "Aburame Mushi." Mushi stepped forward while he read off her credentials. "Congratulations, you have received a field promotion to chuunin," Chouji said and handed the Aburame a flak jacket. "And here is your letter for leave."

Mushi prized the letter more than the flak jacket and carefully tucked it underneath her robes. The process for Hohei was largely the same. Then Chouji shuffled around in his folders confused. "Oh you're that one," Chouji finally realized. He had to go through three seals to reach Tomu's file and read off, "Uzumaki Tomu." Chip crumbs wasted on the document and on it, Chouji added the length of service Tomu served on the Eastern front.

Tomu received his leave of absence. "Good travel home," Chouji wished them well with a smile that almost convinced Tomu that perhaps all Akimichi weren't bad.

They exited the tent with their papers in hand.

Tomu fell over Hohei, the shuriken Hohei instinctively reached for spiraled out of his hand and cut through the cloth of Mushi's hood. All three felt wounded underneath the powerful noise that had suddenly erupted through camp.

They lifted their eyes to the fire in the sky.

Resigned, Mushi tore up her leave paper.

"The Hokage wants us to confirm the position of Momochi's army," Shikamaru replied.
"I'll do it," Neji Hyūga said without a word of complaint, even though he was tired from the last battle, even though out on the large expanse of the ocean it was an order as dangerous as an A-class mission.

"It'll be best to take a small unit with you." Shikamaru pushed forward a map of the ocean. "Here are the islands I have circled where Momochi is most likely hiding. Confirm his location and turn back. Be careful not to get too close."

"I know," Neji grabbed the map to study more closely in his private quarters. Before Neji reached the exit, Shikamaru cleared his throat.

"You didn't sign up for leave."

Neji stared into the deep night sky. "I'm not going home."

Shikamaru lazily placed his hands in his pockets and wondered why it was so hard to ask. "I have a kid and…"

"Take my leave, Shikamaru. I'll take care of things here once I finish this mission." Neji shrugged his shoulders, it wasn't a big thing. Neji left and entered the tent he had pitched against a tree. Neji entered the tent, stepped over Tenten, and began studying the map.

Neji took an hour to memorize the map's contents before rolling it up and reaching over to wake Tenten.

Tenten peeked open her eyes. "What's up?"

"We have a mission," Neji told her. "We need to scout Momochi's position."

Tenten groaned. "The Hokage is trying to work us half to death." She sat up and began checking the sharpness of her weapons. She did not accept any signs of dullness. "At least you get a break. Technically I just got on the field. There are a lot more people with longer campaigns than I've had."

"I'm staying here," Neji replied nonchalantly.

"Lee is staying too. What is wrong with our team? Why do we always have to do five times more than everyone else?" Tenten joked and then said seriously, "You should go home Neji, I've haven't seen you this worn down in a while."

Neji turned to Tenten with an embittered stare. "My wife is fucking Naruto."

"I'd fuck Naruto," Tenten quickly countered but it worsened Neji's mood. "Neji, she cheated on you… first. Stop brooding so much. Just get a damn divorce."

Neji gave Tenten a look as if she had just stabbed him in the back. "A Hyūga does not get a divorce."

Tenten mimicked him word for word with a roll of her eyes. "And next you're going to tell me I wouldn't understand?"

Tenten took the words right out Neji's mouth. Marriages in the HyVga clan have always been arranged, often at the expense of the participants' happiness. To Neji, marriages were a tool to keep the clan alive.

"Look Neji, I've known you almost all my life and you're always brooding over something. This isn't
about the clan, this is even about Hinata, this is about your damn pride. Your pride is wounded and you don't want to go home and face it."

Neji finished gathering his supplies. Dawn began to peek through the tent. He did not entertain Tenten with a response. Instead, he stood up.

Then he fell backwards against Tenten as the ground shook under their feet. Tenten pulled herself from underneath Neji's leg and un-plucked the shuriken that had become embedded in her hand. Both walked outside to watch the dust of the explosion disperse in the air.

"Let's have a baby."

Shikamaru raised an eyebrow. "Now?"

"I went to the medical tents and got the seal taken off," Temari explained and reached down to untie the belt on Shikamaru's pants. Temari was eager for a second chance. She had missed the teething stage, had missed the first step, and the first garbled words of her daughter's life. She wanted to do better this time, she wanted to prove to herself that she could choose family over work.

Shikamaru stilled Temari hips. In Shikamaru's opinion, this was a serious issue that needed more discussion than mere whim. "Temari, a baby requires extreme planning. A kunoichi is at their most vulnerable when their pregnant. Not only does your body provide nourishment to the fetus but also a portion of your chakra. That's dangerous, especially during wartime. I know we won the battle but the war isn't over. Anything can happen; Lightning or Kiri could decide to attack again. Producing a baby needs a sufficient prolonged safe environment."

Temari sighed and knew Shikamaru would be resistant. "The first one was unplanned."

"And we were in a time where Suna and Konoha didn't have so many threats. I do want to have another baby," Shikamaru told her sincerely, "But we need to do it right this time and having a baby isn't strategic right now."

"What if something happens to you and we don't get a chance?" Temari asked.

"The likelihood of my death is statistically lower compared to the higher increased statistically likelihood of your death during a pregnancy. The numbers don't lie."

"Fuck the numbers."

Temari fell back as Shikamaru sat up. "Why are all the Clan heads born in the same generation? Why am I, Ino, Chouji, Hinata, and Shino all born in the exact same year and graduated the academy the exact same class? Why is my graduating year marked by its size and its talent to include the likes of Naruto and Sasuke?" Shikamaru questioned. "It's because we were conceived right after the Third Shinobi War was over. That wasn't on accident. Our parents faced this same issue and they waited."

Shikamaru continued to make his point, "That same year, at a time when Suna didn't believe in reproductive planning, how many graduated from your class?"

"Three," Temari whispered. "Most of our kunoichi died in the war."

A hand lifted from the shadows and Shikamaru grabbed the condom he had sent it to retrieve. He held it before Temari. "Fuck the numbers," Shikamaru agreed. "I love you and I'm not going to put you in any unnecessary danger."
Temari’s eyes softened and she placed her arms around Shikamaru. "We'll wait," Temari reached forward with a kiss. "I love you too Shikamaru. Who knew it would work out so well between us?"

Shikamaru raised an eyebrow. "I'm still not convinced the first time wasn't planned. It was too convenient."

Temari conveniently didn't answer as she ripped the condom open with her teeth. Shikamaru didn't press her, too busy taking off her clothes. Temari dropped the condom when the ground began shaking underneath them. The sudden sound jolted her out of Shikamaru’s lap and towards her fan lying to the side.

Shikamaru groaned as he laid backwards and placed the covers over his head.

Temari would be expecting too much if she thought Shikamaru was actually going to get out of bed despite the earth shattering noise. Temari hefted the fan over her shoulder and left the privacy of their tent to find out what was going on.

Scales of alabaster gold ringed around Hinata’s arm and continued to slither down her leg. Naruto twitched when the cold of the eight foot Taipan began to slither along his waist.

"That thing bites me and I'm killing it."

Hinata finally turned over, kissed Naruto, before reaching her hand under the covers to receive the summon that watched over her sleep. Naruto reared back as the chill of the scales glided along his groin. Hinata smiled as she lifted the heavy snake in her arms.

"She won't hurt you. She's actually rather shy and doesn't like to talk."

Hinata stepped over Naruto and released the snake to the ground. She began getting dressed. Naruto could feel the slitted eyes on him coiled in the corner. Naruto growled and the snake hissed in return but remained where it sat.

"Where are you going?" Naruto asked as he reached for his boxers.

Hinata kicked the boxers behind her feet into Naruto's hand. "I have a meeting with a contact."

"Which one?"

Hinata didn't answer but the Taipan gave a disapproving hiss. Naruto snarled as he hit his head back into the pillow. "I fucking hate him. Why do you continue to do business with him?"

"Because he knows how to get classified information and if he's willing to come all the way out here he has something I want."

"I'm going to send a clone with you."

"He's not going to tell me anything if he feels threatened. Besides, don't you have a meeting with Ino in Hot Water?"

"Right," Naruto said as he combed his hand through his hair.

Hinata paused and looked at Naruto over her shoulder. "You have decided what you are going to do with Hot Water?"

"I'm going to recall their ninja back home. I don't want to raise any unnecessary suspicions that they
are not actually running their own country."

"Instead, Ino is running their country."

Naruto laughed, "I agree. It's not the most reassuring thought but she knows how important it is to keep Hot Water appeased. We need to get through the country to get to Lightning."

"So you are planning on attacking Lightning?"

"It depends if we can get a significant hit on Kiri before Lightning recovers. I don't plan on pursuing Lightning unless we managed to join our forces with Shikamaru. We're going to need all our strength if we want to overcome their mountainous terrain advantage."

Hinata finished after pinning her hair upwards into a bun.

Naruto grinned. "Threesome with Sakura tonight?"

A laugh escaped Hinata's lips and answered, "I'll invite Kurenai and we'll make it an orgy."

"You're laughing but I'm serious."

Hinata winked before she left.

Hinata tightened the coat around her when the cold met her above ground. She trudged through the snow. In camp, ninja were sluggishly waking up from a night of regrets and lost memories. They hunched their shoulders as if they could avoid Hinata's gaze. She saw Kurotsuchi and Sakura drinking coffee at a fireside.

Hinata continued a few leagues into the forest.

"Took you long enough," Sloth attempted to keep the derision from his voice but Hinata could see it in his vocal chords.

"You have information for me?"

Sloth crossed his arms. "Kakashi is dead."

Hinata was concerned by the unexpected information. She knew immediately something more was going on if rumors of Kakashi's death wasn't circulating through camp, especially if Naruto didn't know by now. "Why is the Hokage trying to keep Kakashi's death a secret?"

"I'll tell you the other half once you give me what you promised."

Hinata and Sloth stared at one another, stared at all the innards and the organs that kept a body going.

"Fine," Hinata broke ice with the word. She stepped forward.

Sloth bowed down and took off his mask. His long black hair covered his shoulders. The burn on Sloth's forehead that marked his banishment from the clan was forever etched onto his face.

Hinata dipped a brush in ink before pressing it to Sloth's forehead. The lines drew on the caged bird seal. Hinata applied her chakra until the seal glowed red and burned an angry scar into Sloth's forehead.

Sloth jerked forward without hesitation and struck Hinata straight into her wound. Hinata keeled over and scrambled through the burning pain to pick herself up. Then her arms went numb. Her
body collapsed on the ground, powerless to move.

"I'm finally going to take everything you owe me." Sloth stood over her with fixed eyes. "We both wanted the same thing: to free the Hyūga clan. We simply chose different paths. I wanted to kill all of the main family."

"Death only begets more death. I refused to build the clan on blood." Hinata set her jaw as Sloth crouched down and ripped open her shirt. "Raping me isn't going to solve your hate," Hinata said unflinchingly, "You're free. You no longer have to be defined by the chains of the branch family."

Sloth's hand seized, his body seized, then he collapsed over shaking.

Hinata stewed in her anger until the paralysis gradually wore off, then she pulled a kunai from her holster and stabbed Sloth again and again into his throat. Blood splattered against her cheeks and replaced the lipstick on her seething lips.

But he was already dead from the poison she had applied to the ink brush. She was never planning on letting him leave alive, unsealed. Hinata's words had been nothing more than making time.

Hinata breathed and closed her eyes to regain her composure.

"You can come out Hanabi."

Hanabi dropped into the glade. "Sorry, I got here towards the end. The Captain ordered me to follow you before he left camp."

Hanabi reached down and held out her hand. Hinata accepted the help and was assisted to her feet. Hinata was naturally shivering in the cold. Hinata shook off the snow from her fur coat before replacing it over her shoulders.

Hinata stared at the disturbing smile on Sloth's face. Blood leaked from the cracks of his glee. Perhaps he didn't live the way he wanted but he died unsealed.

Hanabi scratched the drug patch on her arm. The intimate moment between the two sisters was interrupted at the sound of a distant explosion. The two Hyūga sisters activated their byakugan.

"What happened? What's going on?" Hanabi asked, unable to see far enough.

Hinata was at a loss for words as she watched thousands of people lose their lives in seconds. There were some things no one should be able to see.

"Ame, none of these are right," Shion said as she checked over the math problems. Shion brushed her blonde hair behind her ear with a sigh. This was the third time.

"My head hurts," Ame whispered. She stared out the window as if she was waiting. "The Hyūga said that Dad beat Lightning. Why hasn't he come home yet?"

"He defeated them in a battle," Shion emphasized. "A war is comprised of a series of battles."

Ichigo looked up after repeating the kanji "fire" through the first page of a kanji lesson book. Shion leaned over and applauded Ichigo with a smile. "Good job. You can go play." Shion encouraged.

Ichigo kicked his legs at the table, and after a moment, clambered down from the chair. He ran outside toward the pond where his pet frog lived.
"Can I go over to the Hyūga compound?" Ame asked.

"From what I understand the Hyūga children can do calculus by the time they enter the academy."

"Because they need math for their Jyūken. What do I need math for?" Ame challenged.

"Well," Shion said patiently. "A basic grasp of math is essential to anything you might want to do. Perhaps you want to apply for the civil service and work for the Daimyo? Serving the government is a very respectable job," and then asked after some thought. "Have you ever been to the capital?"

"No."

Shion's eyes lit up excitedly. "Fire Country's capital is a wonderful place. It is the center of Fire Country's art and culture. It is where you can find the largest and most renowned kabuki, noh and bunraku theatres. There are Taiko performances and brilliant artisans and craftsmen."

"Of course, even the capital has its problems too. There was a huge wealth disparity and security concerns ever since the bombing of the Daimyo's palace. But I think we should go someday. You should experience more than just the militant village of Konoha. Becoming a ninja isn't your only option."

"I have red eyes," Ame said flatly. "There are no other options." Then Ame slid from the chair. "I'm going to the Hyūga compound."

"No, you haven't finished these math problems correctly," Shion told her.

Ame looked back with an expression that asked, 'what are you going to do about it?' before she left out the door.

Shion knew she had to set boundaries, according to the advice from the self-help books on how to raise ninja children, but she didn't want Ame to hate her either. Shion collapsed in the chair with tears trailing down her face. If she couldn't parent Ame, how was she supposed to parent her own baby when it finally came?

Shion jolted out of the chair when the door of the house slammed open and she fell into Naruto's arms. She didn't have time to question what was going on before she blinked and tasted sand in her mouth.

Gaara lifted up a tray of pastries with dancing cactus oven mitts. Another Naruto appeared in Gaara's kitchen with Ame and Ichigo under his arms.

"Bomb threat in Konoha," Naruto explained as he placed his family down in the kitchen. "Bijū size."

Gaara put the warm chocolate covered pastries on the counter, took off his oven mitts, and walked outside. Gaara knelt and placed his hand on the ground. The desert shifted and a dome of sand erected over Sunagakure.

"Do you think that could stop it?" Naruto asked as he followed Gaara outside.

"No, but it will mitigate the damage and forewarn me that something is coming. It is not completely safe here either."

"I know but this is a temporary solution until the Boss arrives with the summoning contract. I'm going to reverse summon them to Mount Myoboku to be entirely safe," Naruto explained. The clone tapped his feet impatiently and wondered what was taking the Boss so long to get here even though
the clone himself had found out about the bomb threat literally a minute ago.

"Nice pastries."

"I promised Temari I would find a hobby," Gaara said. "She's worried that without her around I won't leave the office."

Both jinchūriki clutched their ears at the deafening sound of an explosion that blinded their senses. The two men looked up at a plume of smoke erected far into the distance, both seen and heard all the way from Sunagakure.

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**A LOUD BANG SHOOK THE WORLD.**

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Naruto caught Tsunade in his arms before she fell to the floor. The sake glass shattered against the hard wood. Shizune held on to the doorknob before she slipped in her heels.

Tsunade picked herself up by Naruto's shoulder and stared out the window to the peaceful visage of Konoha.

"That explosion was in the direction of the capital," Tsunade said softly and felt as if she had entered a recurring nightmare.

The burnt ground was still hissing with heat. There was an eerie quiet following the screams and cries that howled together like the moans of a ghost.

Naruto watched as a woman stumbled past, her hair had been singed off and the skin was melting off her bones. The day the bomb had gone off in the Daimyo's palace was nothing compared to the wide swathe of destruction that encompassed the largest city in Fire country.

At the epicenter, there were no buildings, no people, or no rubble.

There was nothing.

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Hinata Hyūga stormed into camp and all eyes were on her, waiting, listening for someone to tell them what to do next. Naruto was gone and in the crucial seconds, Hinata was left to lead. She answered the question burning on everyone's tongue.

"Konoha is still standing but the Capital has been attacked and need immediate assistance. I want all Aburama and Hyuuga, I want all genin, I want every squad leader to choose one person, and I want all medical units to gather their equipment and prepare to leave for the Capital. I want the rest posted as sentinels in the forest in case Lightning attempts to attack. NOW."

The camp came to life like a disturbed hive of ants.

Blood began to matt the side of Hinata's fur coat. She walked through camp to encourage efficiency and speed until she had entire units mobilized in minutes. Time was of the utmost importance. She could count down the seconds in her head – and then Naruto stood before her.

"Sir, in your absence I have begun gathering what we can spare. These men are prepared to assist in the rescue operations at the Capital."

Minutes were the difference between the confused camp on the Eastern front and the readiness of the
Northern camp. Naruto created thousands of shadow clones and transported the units to the Capital. Minutes could be the difference between a life saved.

No amount of experience or talent could have prepared Sakura for what she saw at the Capital. Naruto placed her on ashen ground. The Hokage already had her summon, Katsuyu, dispersed throughout the field.

"Sakura," Tsunade's steel voice caught Sakura's attention. "Set up your equipment. We have lives to save. Naruto," Naruto approached Tsunade who had a map of the Capital spread out. "I've marked the Capital into quadrants based on the average range of a byakugan. I want a byakugan and Aburame in every one of these quadrants leading a squad of at least three. We will do this quickly and efficiently and save everyone we possibly can."

"Understood," Naruto sent a clone to implement her orders and several more to retrieve more men from the Eastern Front.

"Naruto, Konoha might be hit next. I have to return to the village," Tsunade said bitterly and as a healer it was hard to say. "Do you have someone covering you in the North?"

"Yeah, Hinata's in charge."

"For right now I'm putting you in charge of Emergency Rescue Operations here. With your shadow clones you can move people around quickly. Once you've finished scouring the Capital for survivors meet me back in Konoha and place Sakura in charge of the rest."

Tsunade placed a hand on Naruto's arm and took a deep breath before she had to face the elders, the council, and the people of Konoha.

"Alright, take me back."

"The Capital was bombed," Naruto reported.

"I'm going to organize a shipment of supplies. You can find me in the office. Take care of your family," Gaara suggested and disappeared in a whirl of sand.

Naruto combed back his hair and met Shion's eyes who stood precariously in the doorway. Naruto entered the adobe house and closed the door behind him. Naruto rubbed his eyes when the Boss appeared in the kitchen with the scroll.

"I'm taking you to Mount Myoboku for a few weeks."

"But if the capital was bombed then I have to be there," Shion whispered. Naruto frowned. He had not planned to mention the bomb in front of the kids.

"No," and far as Naruto was concerned that was the end of that discussion as he prepared the seal.

"But Naruto, I'm the priestess of Demon Country and everyone is aware of the alliance even if they're not aware of the details. They are going to think it's odd and suspicious if I'm not at the Capital. As a priestess I can't run away."

"It won't be safe and you're pregnant."

"Three weeks pregnant. I haven't even missed my period yet," Shion argued. "What safer place is
there but the capital? It's already been bombed."

Naruto snapped up. "People are dead and dying Shion, what can you possibly do to save them? What difference can you possibly make?"

Shion cowered under the voice of her husband and the most powerful man in the world. She wiped tears down her cheeks. She felt responsible and a sense of duty straightened her back. Then faced Naruto with the most strength she could muster. "It doesn't take a ninja to hold someone's hand."

"I want to go," Ame mumbled. "That's what a Uzumaki does right? We help people? Or was that a lie too?"

Naruto set his jaw and felt the pressure building. All he wanted to do was get his family to safety and it wasn't fair that Ame fought back with the very ideals he had taught her. Naruto combed back his hair. "Alright," Naruto finally made up his mind. He was tired of breaking his little girl's heart.

"Shion, once we are in the capital you are not my wife. We have to keep this marriage a secret at all cost."

"I understand." Shion smiled and raced into Naruto's arms with a hug. Naruto winced when Shion kissed his cheek and whispered, "Thank you."

"It's not going to be easy," he told her.

"I know."

Naruto left a shadow clone to babysit Ichigo, who was too young and too afraid of people to be of any help in the Capital.

Naruto grabbed Ame and Shion. They blinked their eyes and found themselves in the dusty and dirty wreckage of the Capital, a far contrast from the bright gold of Suna.

Shion's jaw dropped and shook her head. "I didn't see this," she said in an agonized whisper. "I didn't see this."

"Shion, Sakura could use some extra hands in the medical tents. Ame," Before Naruto could give Ame orders, she went racing around piles of rock and rubble.

"Tomu!" She yelled and flung herself into Tomu's arms.

"Ame?" Tomu questioned just as Ame erupted into tears.

"You're alive… I was so so worried… and," Ame huffed and flung her arms around Mushi, "I'm so glad you're okay… and," Hohei froze when Ame jumped on him, "I'm just… I'm just…" her tears obscured her words. Ame never worried about her Dad, whom many considered the strongest ninja in the world, but she worried about Tomu and Hohei and Mushi and Kusuro constantly.

"Where is Kusuro?" Ame asked.

Naruto placed a hand on Ame's shoulder. After Darui's capture, Naruto had gone to the Eastern front to assess the damage himself. Even he never found Kusuro's body.

This was a conversation Naruto wished he could have had later when there was a little more sense of hope. But the conversation came when Ame looked into his eyes. The reluctant blue told her the truth. Ame fell into his arms with tears. Naruto held her close to him and felt so helpless. He was the
most powerful ninja in the world but he couldn't save her from her grief.

"Kusuro might be dead but there are people who still need our help," Naruto told her softly. "We need to be strong for them."

Ame nodded and wiped her eyes.

"Why don't you go with Tomu and help them out?" Naruto suggested. Ame nodded. Mushi took Ame's hand like a big sister.

"We'll take care of her," Mushi promised. Naruto watched as Hohei began to lead them through the wreckage. Naruto hadn't even given himself time to deal with Kusuro's death. He was constantly in motion, he felt as if he never had time to stop.

Naruto hardly had time to take a breath when a shadow clone dispersed. "Fuck."

Naruto immediately teleported to the Northern front straight into central command where Karui was on her knees with her hands tied behind her back.

"The Raikage wants what?" Naruto asked.

Karui did not like repeating herself but seeing as she was in a camp full of paranoid and on edge ninja she said, "The Raikage requests a meeting."

"I guess he could have demanded one instead," Naruto muttered.

"I checked her. She's clean," Hinata reported.

Karui smirked. "He said you can bring your girlfriend if you're afraid it's a trap."

Naruto licked the edge of his incisors. He motioned to his advisors and they met in the back of the room. Shino and Hinata leaned into the circle. At once, Hinata activated her byakugan. "I don't see anyone setting up in advance for a trap."

"How do we look if the Raikage decides to attack?"

"I sent about a third of our manpower and two thirds of our medical team to the capital," Hinata replied. "If we are attacked our best option is to pull back."

Naruto stewed in his thoughts. "I'll meet with the Raikage alone but I'll use a shadow clone. Hinata I want you in the forest with a team scouting for any movement. Shino, stay in camp and have the men prepared to move quickly if we need to."

"Yes, sir."

Naruto rubbed his tired eyes and felt as if he had experienced so much in the span of just an hour. "Hanabi," Naruto called, "I want you to escort Karui out of camp and make sure she's headed back to Lightning. If she turns around, kill her." Hanabi nodded and dragged Karui out. Shino followed.

Naruto held out his hand and prevented Hinata from going any further. "Be careful. You're not in top shape and the Raikage knows that."

"Kakashi is dead."

Naruto swiveled around, aware that time was ticking down and that he had to prepare to meet with the Raikage in thirty minutes. "Kakashi can't be..." It wasn't odd to not see Kakashi for a few days.
Sometimes Kakashi didn't want to be found. "What the fuck is going on?" Naruto cursed. "Why is the Hokage keeping this from me?"

"It's obvious," Hinata answered. "She knows you won't like the answer." Hinata placed her hands along Naruto's jaw. "We will do what we have to do and deal with the rest later."

The Raikage and Naruto stood facing each other. Both came alone, or at least, as far as one could see. "The area is clear," Hinata whispered into the radio in Naruto's ear. The cloaks flapped in the wind and whipped around in the light snow fall.

"I heard what happened." The Raikage cracked his neck.

"We're still finding bodies but for the most part the Capital is completely destroyed," Naruto answered truthfully, knowing that spies had probably already reported the same to the Raikage.

"Thirty days."

"What?" Naruto asked, confused.

"Thirty-day-ceasefire to salvage your dead. You do not need to worry about an attack from my side. Lightning is no friend of Kiri's and attacking civilians is going too far. Civilians do not wear the hitai-ite."

"A ceasefire?" Naruto stumbled over the word. Naruto blatantly pressed his hand to his radio and revealed he had not truly come alone. "Hinata?"

"He's telling the truth."

Naruto had honestly truly believed that this was going to be a trap and he didn't quite know how to handle a small act of kindness. Naruto continued to speak into his radio "Tell Kurotsuchi the plan is a no-go. I repeat, do not commence with the plan."

The Raikage knew Naruto wouldn't believe him nor did he blame Naruto for not initially doing so. It was a ninja's job to doubt.

The Raikage cleared his throat. "Is Darui alive?"

"He's alive and he's in my custody," Naruto answered.

The Raikage nodded and said, "I respect you as both my enemy and my friend, Uzumaki Naruto."

The Raikage held out his fist. Naruto's chest tightened at the gesture.

Naruto bumped fists with the Raikage. There was hardly any distance at all.

"Why the Capital?" The representative from Kuro no Keiyakusha asked the Mizukage. "Why not just bomb Konoha?"

"What do you care?" The Mizukage asked. His chair creaked as he laid back.

The representative admitted that no matter what city the Mizukage wanted to bomb the organization got their message across: that ninjas can no longer protect you and that civilians have created the power to defend themselves.
"I personally wanted the ninja to get what's coming to them," the representative admitted. "So they can truly feel that even people born without chakra aren't so powerless anymore."

The Mizukage chuckled at the woman's passion for revenge. "I chose the Capital because Naruto might have been in Konoha. I don't want to kill him. I want to torture him. I want to cut away all his allies until he has no one else left."

The Mizukage sat up with glee and overlooked the map on his desk as if it was a childhood gameboard. He heard the reports coming in about Konoha and the chaos he had caused. He twisted his kunai over the edge, shadowing the tip over Kumogakure and then over Iwagakure. "How long until the next bombs are ready?"

"It'll take a few weeks," the representative replied, "but we'll need more supplies."

"Done," The Mizukage snickered as he pinned the kunai in the middle of the desert and decided on his next target.

The Mizukage looked up and the representative swiveled in fright when Momochi walked into the office. "The very person I wanted to see," Suigetsu smirked. "Gather the forces and begin another assault on Fire Country."

The old war veteran hadn't knocked. A scar curved around his right eye as if a fish hook had wrangled into it – a sharp wind jutsu from a Sand ninja. A grotesque burn bubbled chunks of his right arm into a mass of dead flesh – Leaf ninja. The multiple bones fractures limped his walk – Earth ninja. The patch of hair that never grew back was courtesy of the Raikage himself. Sandayuu Momochi was Zabuza's younger brother, not as skilled with a sword, but still as dangerous as a sword's edge.

The old war veteran reached up, grabbed his hitai-ite, and dropped it on the Mizukage's desk. Sandayu Momochi left Kirigakure a missing nin.
Shion's robes as if that small part of her could heal wounds that the medics could not.

Naruto admitted to himself that he was wrong about Shion. She did far more for these people to comfort their last dying breaths than the ninja who had pulled them from the wreckage to live one more torturous day.

Shion crouched down with a smile. "How are you doing today?" Shion asked a little girl blankly playing with a doll. The little girl's hair had fallen out. She couldn't see out of her blinded left eye. Naruto recognized the doll.

"Another girl gave me her doll," the little girl said with a buck-toothed smile. "Her eyes were messed up too, both red, but she said she didn't need it anymore." The little girl smiled as she smoothed the doll's hair down with her burnt hand.

"When I come back we're going to have to change these bandages," Shion told her. "It's going to hurt."

The little girl nodded and Shion kissed the grotesque skin on her cheek.

Naruto turned round and stared at the doll as he followed Shion on her rounds. Shion wiped her forehead at the heat of so many packed bodies stored close together. "We're going to need more water. The lake isn't any good."

"I'll get you water."

"And I've noticed that Sakura has begun sectioning people off. The ones with the worst wounds are here and the ones more likely to survive are in the next building. They aren't sending food or painkillers anymore," Shion said softly.

Naruto bit down. "It's not easy to convince ninja to give up supplies like painkillers and food for the dying. There is still a war going on."

"You agree with this?" Shion whispered harshly.

"I'm saying from a ninja's perspective these people are going to die anyways and there is no point wasting valuable supplies."

"Do you truly believe that?" Shion asked. "Can't you appeal to their compassion? If these people were there family members they would care. They would do everything in their power to ease their suffering."

"Shion, if that little girl was Ame and I knew she was going to undergo unbelievable pain for two weeks until she died, I'd put her out of her misery. Taking care of those who might live is as far as a ninja's compassion is going to go. The dead is dead."

"You don't mean that."

"Shion, I'm in charge here and I made the decision to cut off food and medicine to this building." Naruto said. "It's fucking cruel but your compassion will get more people killed."

Shion bowed her head. Naruto turned away when her tears began to drop on the floor. "You're doing a good thing for these people," Naruto admitted. "I know these people didn't ask for this and I know that this isn't their fault but these are the realities."

Shion shook her head. "I have dedicated my life to helping and serving people. I have assisted in the
aftermath of many natural disasters but I've never seen anything like this. I've never had so many people lose their lives in my arms. Naruto, this cannot happen again."

"It won't happen again. I promise."

Tsunade played with the rim of the glass cup and swirled the sake inside. Her headache was pounding. Her eyes were tired and she felt her age. Naruto appeared in her office.

"Report."

Naruto reported the estimated deaths since the bomb was dropped. Tsunade's heart creaked and died at the number. "Persons of significance that are still unaccounted for is ANBU Captain Cat, Shikaku, and the Daimyo."

"When Lightning entered the war, Shikaku had the Daimyo moved with his guardians to vacation in one of our coastal villages. Shikaku was practically running the capital by himself." Tsunade rubbed her forehead. Tax collection was coming soon and they had no Capital to collect the money that they desperately needed. "Assume the rest are dead."

Naruto nodded in understanding. Naruto was waiting for dismissal but when nothing came but Tsunade's silence, he cleared his throat and asked, "I heard Suigetsu is targeting Suna next. Have you decided what we're going to do about it?"

Tsunade folded her hands under her chin. "That's what I want to talk to you about."

Naruto stood at attention, anxious for whatever she ordered him to do.

"The elders and a few of the council members have been breathing down my back to retaliate but the dilemma is the fact that no one attacks the island of Kiri directly and lives. There is no guarantee we can actually kill Suigetsu as long as he remains in a damp environment. They have too much of a terrain advantage and we are too much at an elemental disadvantage. What would you do Naruto?"

Naruto had given the problem some thought over the past few days. "I don't know," He shook his head, "but we need to get to those bombs and destroy them. I just don't know if we can figure out where they're hoarding the bombs before they attack Suna," Naruto admitted. "The organization is smart and they're not sharing the location with the Mizukage and as far as I know we don't have anyone with significant access inside the organization."

The Hokage nodded. "I've been trying to get a hold of their members to convince one of them to tell us the location of the bombs through more… forceful means but they've all gone into hiding. It's been rather difficult finding civilians hiding among civilians and their representative stays close to Suigetsu. I've been trying."

"It's not all hopeless. The Raikage called for a thirty day ceasefire and we still have a few weeks before another bomb is ready. We can figure something out."

"I've made my decision."

Naruto squared his shoulders and awaited her orders. The Hokage could feel the weight of the decision that was about to define her career.

"Uzumaki Naruto, I order you to bijū bomb Kirigakure."
Naruto stood in the silence as the stifling tension of the order pressed down on him on all sides. He didn't bow under the pressure and responded mechanically, "A bomb may not ensure Suigetsu's death. Furthermore, without the Kyūbi's cooperation I cannot enter Bijū mode."

I'm in.

The Hokage frowned. "If you can't produce a bijuu bomb, then bomb them with a hundred fucking rasengan. I don't give a shit. Enough people have died and this was has gone on long enough. Konoha has the only viable jinchūriki and it is about time we used it. Kiri crossed the moral boundaries first and we are justified to return the favor. This is my decision. All of the blame, the responsibility, and the consequences rests on my shoulders. You are simply following orders, nothing more."

Suigetsu might die but thousands more civilians will join him.

Naruto gave a sharp bow. "As you command, Hokage-sama."

Naruto turned on his feet and the doors of the Hokage's office closed behind him. His measured steps walked down the hallway until they broke down into hundreds of loose parts. Naruto caught his weight against the wall as the panic attack began to grip him.

With an angry frustrated yell, Naruto turned and the wall crumbled down under the power of Naruto's fists. The scrape bloodied his knuckles but he didn't feel the pain and it healed soon afterwards. All the events of the past few days came crashing against him.

We will do what we have to do and deal with the rest later.

Eventually the rest catches up to you.

Naruto breathed like a drowning man for air. He knelt his forehead screeching against the hallway wall. Various tower assistants passed by and none said a word nor dared to approach the quivering of his shoulders.

It won't happen again. I promise.

Tears fell at his knees. The deaths of so many hung over his shoulders.

That's what a Uzumaki does right? We help people?

Naruto wiped his face with his cloak and found strength in his legs to pick himself up.

Naruto combed back the shoulder-length blonde hair that had begun to stick to his face. It was the long hair that led people to constantly give the comparison to Minato. Discolored skin scarred one side of Naruto's face and upper torso, the side where a child had turned himself into a bomb. There was a scar over his heart that was never going to fade away.

Naruto turned on his heels.
The doors of the Hokage's office exploded open as if a bomb had shook them off their hinges. The Hokage looked up from another glass of sake and had been going through an entire bottle since Naruto had left. She was sluggish as she stood on her feet and asked, "What are you-

The Hokage kneeled over when a fist thrust into stomach. Naruto caught her before she fell but the Kage's hat rolled to the floor. Naruto supported her weight in one arm with ease, leaned over and pressed the buzzer on the desk.

Shizune walked into the office with her eyes on the broken door and then on the unconscious Hokage. "What's going on?"

"She passed out. I found her surrounded by all these alcohol bottles," Naruto said and carefully passed Tsunade into Shizune's arms.

Shizune drew back at the sharp smell of alcohol on Tsunade's breath. "If the elders find out she was drunk at a time like this they won't stop at nothing to evict her from her office."

Naruto tightened his jaw and looked out the window over Konoha. "Perhaps it's time. The war has been placing a heavy toll on her and I've grown concern that maybe she can't handle it anymore. It is a lot for one person to shoulder."

Naruto picked up the wide-brimmed hat that had fallen to the ground. He shook off the dirt and the dust. Then he placed the hat atop his head. "Tell the elders and the council that I will be stepping in as an interim Kage until Tsunade had regained her health to lead again."

"As you command, Hokage-sama."

x

*But you aren't a kunai Uzumaki Naruto… What are you?*
Lesson Forty

Interim

Blank masks bowed their heads to the floor as the Hokage walked through the ANBU underground. All business stopped. Captains placed their fists to the floor and acknowledged the highest position of their order. They noted the familiarity of the Kage's steps within the shadowed domain. Bowed heads did not prevent the Hokage from entering the underground entrance to Konoha's T&I division, of which its existence was known only to ANBU.

Ibiki pulled off a pair of gloves and threw them on top the tray of bloody tools.

"Hokage-sama, the Boss should be getting out of a session at this time." Ibiki heard down the hallway. Ibiki closed and locked the cell behind him. His knees creaked when he knelt and placed his scarred fist to the ground.

"Hokage-sama."

"Rise," the Hokage commanded.

Ibiki's knees creaked just as much on his way up. Ibiki straightened back his shoulders and folded his hands behind his back. "What do I owe this visit?"

"I'm looking for prisoner #48915."

Ibiki turned on his heels and briskly led the Hokage though the oft confusing maze of cells. "If I may speak freely sir?"

"You may."

"I wouldn't recommend freeing the prisoner. We risk a Grass uprising and it is in Konoha's best interest to retain a hold over the kekkai genkai."

Deep beneath the Torture and Interrogation building, the air was hard to breathe for those unaccustomed to its thinness. Grime seemed to become trapped on the skin. The hallowed hall echoed footsteps until they reached the cell door.

"Open it," The Hokage commanded.

"Sir, as head of the T&I division I don't recommend-" The sound of bent metal grated on Ibiki's bald head. Without hardly any effort, the Hokage twisted the locked handle and forced the cell door open.

The hanging light of the hallway peeked inside the cell and shed light on the huddled figure in the corner. The Hokage broke the chains and the metal clasps were bent back from the bloody ankle.

Kusuro crawled open his eyes and all he could recognize was the shape of the wide hat outlined by the swinging light outside. His arm swung limply as his body was cradled in the Hokage's arms. Kusuro's head rolled back and looked into the color of a clear blue sky.

"Naruto?" He coughed through cracked lips.

Naruto carried Kusuro out the cell. The hat on Naruto's head tipped when he paused at the door. "Ibiki, you're fired."
The white cloak swept behind Naruto's heels as he walked through the shadows.

"What is this?" The elders asked when they barged into the Hokage's office without a knock. 

Naruto patiently looked up from his desk. "Do you need something?"

"What is this order?" The Koharu asked. "Why have you recalled all the ninja from the front? Are you preparing for some sort of offensive?"

"I highly advise against this," the Homura elder said.

Naruto folded his hands on the desk. "If I was seeking advice then I would ask, but I didn't."

"We are not going to let you run this village into the ground with your arrogance and inexperience," the Homura replied.

"Tsunade trusted me enough and when the war is over, if you hate me that much I'm sure you can pool the votes together to permanently vote in another Hokage. That is your prerogative but for the time being Konoha is under a bomb threat and I have a lot of work to do. Would you be so kind as to leave my office?"

The elders were taken aback by Naruto's outright bluntness. "It won't be your office for very long," Homura replied. "Try not to get Konoha destroyed in the meantime."

The doors closed.

"I should have thought out this Hokage thing a little better," Naruto complained as he placed the hat over his eyes. There was at least one perk to the job, Naruto thought as he laid back and swirled around in the large comfortable rolling chair.

Naruto spun back around and caught himself on the edge of the desk when there was another knock on the doors.

Shizune announced, "Yamanaka Ino."

Ino strolled into the office with the sort of smile that wanted something. Ino bowed with a flourish and sunk sideways into the chair. "Can't say I'm surprised to find you here," Ino smirked. "It was only a matter of time."

"Get to the point Ino. I have a long list of people I'm scheduled to meet. You have five minutes until my next appointment."

Ino pursed her lips and leaned forward with a knowing smile. "How many people know what you have planned?"

"Reading my thoughts is considered treason," Naruto said and felt as if Ino was a fly that constantly hovered over his head.

"I heard you fired Ibiki."

In fact, it had only been an hour since Naruto fired Ibiki. Without hesitation Naruto answered, "No. You're good at mining information but you're unreliable, do not work well with people to qualify as a leader, and," Naruto leaned forward on his hands and bumped the ridge of his hat into Ino's forehead, "you're psychotic."
Ino rebounded back with an argument, "What other options do you have?"

"Your father might be interested and there is an ANBU codenamed Boar I am also considering for the position."

Ino sucked in a breath and honestly hadn't expected the resistance. She crossed her right leg over her lap, which raising her purple skirt for a peek of skin. "I thought we were friends, Naruto."

"I am the Hokage," Naruto reminded Ino as if the hat and cloak wasn't obvious. "I can't afford to do favors for my friends. I am looking for someone to match Ibiki's caliber."

Ino placed her foot to the ground and took a more offensive pose, "You owe me a favor."

Naruto shrugged off the words like he would a punch from a genin. "Unlock the memory and then we'll be even. I don't need the block anymore. I am a stronger person than before."

Ino scowled and could see no amount of needling could get under his skin. Her efforts were getting her nowhere. Ino stood from the chair and stormed toward the door.

"Yamanaka, I didn't dismiss you."

The heels of Ino's shoes clicked on the floor at the force she turned around. She couldn't help but speak her mind. "I was there for you Naruto when we were genin, I was there when you were fresh in ANBU, and I was there when Sai died. I helped you with the Raikage and I helped you maintain control over Hot Country. You wouldn't be in that chair without me."

"There are a lot of people I owe this chair to," Naruto said. "I am not your Dad. I am not going to spoil you for your temper tantrums." Naruto picked up a sealed folder with mission details. "You want Ibiki's job? Then earn it like everyone else."

Ino fixed her furious expression. She stepped forward and reached out for the folder but Naruto pulled it away at the last minute. He tapped his finger on the rim of his hat, reminding her that as long as he wore it, they were not friends and this was not a favor.

Ino respectfully bowed after she read his thoughts, "I understand, Hokage-sama."

Naruto gave her the mission.

"I thought it would be cruel of me to put you in a cell while you're a guest here in Konoha." Naruto hooked his hands in his pockets.

"I didn't know you had a sense of humor," Darui replied as the doors of the compound began to open.

"Meals, hot baths, and clean clothes will be provided for you daily. You are free to walk around as much as you want but will need an escort if you wish to walk outside of the compound doors. Please refrain from acquiring anything on your person sharper than a butter knife. If I were you though, I'd be extremely careful and have someone else spread my butter."

The wide heavy doors swung open. Pale eyes turned to stare at Darui with a chill that could freeze lightning.

"As you know the Hyūga Clan do not have a good relationship with Cloud ninja. You should probably avoid doing anything perceived as a threat. They are looking for any reason to kill you."
Darui was beginning to prefer the dullness of his previous cell. "This feels like cruel and unusual punishment."

"They will watch you while you sleep, they will watch you while you bathe, they will watch you while you take a shit."

Naruto leaned his head toward Hanabi who greeted them at the door. Hanabi nodded and confirmed, "I'm watching you while you shit."

"Neji."

"Hokage."

Naruto motioned to the chair in front of his desk. Neji sat down. Naruto folded his hands.

"I know things haven't been the best between us lately." Neji sucked in his teeth at those words. Naruto could feel the office lose a few degrees in temperature. "Shikaku is dead and Konoha needs a new Jounin Commander. I am hoping we can put our differences aside for the benefit of Konoha."

Naruto countered Neji's glower with his own stiff-jawed expression. A part of Naruto wanted to mend their relationship but a part of him knew that as long as Hinata remained between them it would never be the same. All friendships weren't meant to last.

"I am giving you some time to consider my offer but I would appreciate a reply as soon as possible."

Neji stood briskly to his feet. "Perhaps we can start putting our differences aside when you refrain from impregnating my wife."

Naruto's face fell. "What?"

Neji gave a smug smile at the confusion, "I accept the position."

Naruto left the hat and cloak behind on his desk. Naruto sat back in the shadowed corner and closed his eyes to catch a nap for a few seconds. Naruto had substituted a shadow clone in a meeting with the Akimichi in order to be here.

It was as if the removal of the hat lifted a psychological weight. The situation was too personal to approach it from the perspective of a Kage.

"Here's your ramen," Ayame winked, "Exactly how you like it."

"You have no idea how much I appreciate this," Naruto said as he sat up and hoarded the bowl filled with noodled golden treasure. It felt like a lifetime since he had Ichiraku. Naruto shoved the ramen into his mouth and without taking the time to chew asked, "Where is the Old man?"

Ayame smiled weakly. "He's sick with a bad case of pneumonia. I'm taking care of the restaurant in the meantime."

"I'll come by and visit," Naruto said immediately.

"He knows you're busy as the new Kage," Ayame said. "He understands."

Naruto gulped down his ramen and dropped the chopsticks in the empty bowl. "I'm never too busy for a friend. Of course I'll visit."
Ayame smiled. "In that case you better bring an appetite. Dinner will be on me." Ayame grabbed Naruto's empty bowl to bring him another batch. Then she turned at the chime of the door opening. "She's here. Try not to run her out of the restaurant this time?"

It was a promise Naruto couldn't make. Ayame stepped down the stairs with an armful of dirty dishes and bowed her head when Hinata passed. Hinata sat down in the seat, at their table, in their private corner of Ichiraku's Ramen.

There was a way that the light could hit her face and reveal an expression as soft as a wounded bird. Sometimes it seemed like a trick of the eye when the shadows outlined the sharp angles in her cold expression. "I was going to tell you."

"You should have told me about the baby before the abortion." Naruto's anger was in the cut of his words.

That small furrow in Hinata's brow appeared. "I am not obligated to tell you anything."

Naruto had never been more annoyed by Hinata's collected poise. Hinata didn't flinch when the table shook underneath Naruto's frustrated fist. "It was my baby, Hinata! Our baby. I had every right to know about it."

Hinata stared coldly, unaffected by the heat of Naruto's anger. "And I had every right to know when you took the seal off your dick."

Naruto blinked. He set his jaw as he searched his memory. He had taken off his seal after he decided to marry Shion. Hinata reapplied hers sometime before they left for Lightning. Naruto realized there was a gap, a crucial gap where they had become too complacent with each other.

"It wasn't my choice," Hinata said, "I am married. You are married. If I had said anything you would have dismissed me as your Second."

"You're damn right I would have dismissed you as my Second. We could have made this work but you didn't even give our kid a chance. Our baby… my baby, and you killed it. I can't forgive you for this."

"I never asked for your forgiveness," Hinata said as she stood up and walked out of Ichiraku. This time Naruto didn't bother going after her.

Shion gently pressed the bowl of water to dying lips. The water dribbled down and gathered atop the struggling chest that breathed in hiccups. Shion held the dying little girl in her arms who had succumbed to a sudden fit vomit.

Shion dabbed a cool cloth and cleaned off the little girl's chin. "Tell me another story," the child whispered and held the lifeless doll in her arms as if it was the one that needed comfort.

Shion wiped a tear from her cheek. "There was once a woman named Shion who could see the future. One day she fell in love with a man that did not love her in return and so she set out to make him love her. But everything she tried to do in order earn this man's love ended in failure. Shion did not understand until it was too late that even though she was granted the gift to see the future, she could not shape it. She did not understand until people got hurt and by then it was too late."

"Does it have a happy ending?"

"Of course it does," Shion smiled, holding the child's hand. "Shion learned her lesson and promised
herself she would never abandon a person in need. It became her selflessness and her compassion that Naruto finally fell in love with. They got married and lived happily ever after."

A tear dropped on the child's bald head. The little girl's breathing stumbled and her grip loosened until the doll fell to the ground. Shion reached and moistened the child's lips with water.

"Be at peace."

"We've got a problem." The Hokage looked up from the paperwork on his desk when Captain Fox appeared in the office. "There are rumors circulating in the Capital that Shion, the Demon Priestess, is your wife. It's becoming too dangerous for her to be there. I would like to send a team to extract her but if she suddenly disappears it could potentially confirm the rumors."

Naruto never consciously noticed how much he swept the strands of his hair out of his face until there was a large hat that impeded the habit. Naruto stood on his feet. "I am going to go and extract her myself."

Captain Fox paused, "Wait, is she your wife?"

Naruto took of the hat and hung the cloak on the back of the chair before he disappeared from the office. There was a hiraishin kunai he had planted in the Capital to increase the ease of moving back and forth. He doubted his shadows clones in the area had yet to realize the sudden danger of the situation.

Naruto ignored people who greeted him or sought to ask for his help and he rushed through the cleared debris towards Shion's bright chakra signature. She didn't use her chakra but she had lots of it to feed her visions. Shion burned incense around the two crippled buildings.

Without a word, Naruto caught her by the arm. The sudden touch caused Shion to drop the incense on the ground. In a breath she was back home. Shion turned and found herself back in the cage that was the Uzumaki compound.

"What's going on?" Shion questioned fearfully.

"Someone leaked that you were my wife. It is no longer safe for you to be in the capital."

Shion pulled back from the hold he had on her arm. "I need to go back. Those people need me. I promised to perform their burial rites."

"I can't take that chance, Shion."

Shion took a step backwards and hyperventilated at the futility of even entertaining the idea of stepping out of the compound. She shook her head wildly. "I promise I'd help them. I promised."

"Some promises can't be kept," Naruto reached out his hand. "Come on, you could use some rest."

Shion pressed her hands to her eyes as her shoulders began to heave. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know this would happen. I promise I won't say anything again."

Naruto snapped back his hand. "You're the fucking leak?!"

Shion cringed under his anger. "It was just one person."

"One person is too many! There are people listening Shion. There are always people listening." Naruto stepped back before he accidently did something he would regret. This complicated
everything. Naruto reprimanded Shion as if she was a child, "Do you realize how much you've put yourself and my baby in danger?"

Shion sniffed, the pressure built, and she answered his question with a fountain of tears. Naruto was so fucking tired of her tears. "And stop crying! This is the life you fucking asked for!"

Naruto's yells did nothing but make her cry even harder. Naruto turned on his heels and his knee-jerk reaction was to go find Hinata but then he remembered he was even angrier at her. Instead, Naruto teleported to his office and hid underneath the piles of paperwork.

Naruto rubbed his eyes and knew that his anger was not going to change the reality that he needed to revise his plan. It was just so frustrating when it was his family putting his family in danger.

Kusuro blinked as he laid his head into the comforting pillow. He felt as if he had been sleeping a nightmare for a long time. Kusuro found Tomu's feet propped up on the edge of the bed while he balanced on the back legs of a chair. Tomu was cleaning a hitai-ite with his sharingan activated to catch every speck of dust.

"I'm thirsty," Kusuro said dryly.

Tomu sat up from the chair and turned to Kusuro with a smile, "Hey. You've been sleep for about three days you know."

Tomu stood up, stuck his head out the door and yelled, "KUSURO IS AWAKE! BRING WATER!"

After a moment, the room was crowded. Kusuro was greeted with a tearful hug from Ame. Ichigo handed Kusuro a crayon colored picture that read 'Get well' on the bottom.

"He wrote that all by himself." Ame said proudly as she tacked Ichigo's picture on the wall. Shion entered with a cup of water and sensed that now wasn't the best time for introductions. She gave the kids their spaces and quickly walked back out of the room.

"Who is she?" Kusuro asked as Tomu grabbed the glass of water and brought it to Kusuro's cracked lips. Kusuro felt as if he could breathe again after the cold liquid soothed his throat.

"Evidently she's Naruto's wife. I don't even know the details of that one yet," Tomu answered truthfully. After the glass of water Kusuro felt strong enough to sit up. He didn't find Ame as annoying when she kept hugging on him.

Tomu pushed back the door. "Hey, you can come in."

The door opened and Asami tiptoed inside as if she could come in unnoticed but the room wasn't that big. "Hey Asami," Kusuro said but felt something wrong when tears appeared in her eyes. It was the first time he had ever seen her cry.

"I'm so so sorry," Asami huffed and cried. "I can't remember. I don't understand why they would take you. You didn't do anything wrong."

"Sometimes you don't have to do anything wrong," Tomu said darkly. "Sometimes you simply have to be the wrong person in the wrong place at the wrong time. Life isn't fair. Konoha isn't either."

Kusuro hung his head and a deep bitterness began to root through his heart. Kusuro turned when Asami suddenly grabbed his hand. The bitterness turned into an unexpected flutter in his chest.
Asami gave a broken smile, "I'm glad you're alive."

Naruto came through the door. He had rushed over the moment he heard the news. Kusuro looked up at Naruto's attire and felt a pang of betrayal in his chest. "You're the Hokage?"

"As of a few days ago." Naruto wanted to approach but he could see the uneasiness in Kusuro's expression. Naruto took off the hat and cloak and folded it to the side. Naruto crouched down to Kusuro's eye level.

"I'm sorry. I promised I would protect you and I failed."

Kusuro gave Naruto a hardened stare. He had called Naruto's name many times in the darkness of the cell. He had been all alone, like he had been all alone after the massacre of his village before Naruto picked him up in his arms.

Kusuro cracked. His mother was dead and he had no one else to reach out to. Naruto picked Kusuro up in his arms and Kusuro cried out his grief, pain, and anger.

Sakura laughed as she kissed Kohei and curled into the soft words he lingered on her neck. She pouted into the corners of his lips. Sakura saddled her husband's lap as their slow make-out session began to steam up.

There was a knock at the door.

"Fuck," Sakura cursed. She pulled back and placed her wine glass onto the table. She jumped off Kohei's lap and hurried to answer the door before the knocking woke up the twins, and if the twins woke up, she was going to kill someone.

Sakura snatched open the door and was surprised to find Ino on the other side.

"Let's party," Ino exclaimed and attempted to drag Sakura out the house.

"Wait," Sakura said as she dug in her heels. "We're not even friends anymore Ino. How are you going to show up uninvited?"

Ino ignored the backlash in Sakura's thoughts. "Come on, it'll be like old times."

"Ino, I'm married with two kids," Sakura explained patiently. Her feet hurt from a day of getting reoriented back at her hospital, she needed to wash her hair, and she hadn't had sex in weeks. "I want to stay in tonight."

"Please," Ino begged. "Look, I'm sorry for being a bitch lately. I'll make it up to you.

"I can't," Sakura said and she turned her head into the apartment. Kohei motioned with his hand to go have some fun and promised he'll be up waiting for her.

"You're the only friend I have left, Sakura."

Sakura knew that Ino knew exactly what to say to hit Sakura's soft spot but there was an honesty in Ino's voice that won Sakura over. Sakura sighed deeply. "Just tonight."

Konohamaru always took a break from his stressful job for dinner. Nothing short but a bomb on the capital kept him from his mother's cooking. Konohamaru opened the door, walked toward the kitchen table, and then quickly walked back out.
"Konohamaru!"

Konohamaru cringed when his mother spotted him before he could get away in time. Konohamaru turned back around toward the dining room table and fixed a smile on his face. "Mom," he said as he kissed his mother's cheek. "Auntie, it's good to see you again," Konohamaru said as he hugged Kurenai and then shuffled his niece's hair. Konohamaru sat down in his usual chair and sunk into the seat. "Hey Moegi."

"You're not very excited to see me," Moegi noted and she swirled her fork like that of a kunai.

Mrs. Sarutobi smiled. "I'm glad you two are back home safely. I was so fearful that one of those black letters would land at my doorstep but this family is so lucky that we still have each other."

Kurenai smiled as she bounced her daughter in her lap. "It is good to be home," Kurenai admitted.

"Look at that, I'm just so full I can't eat anymore." Mrs. Sarutobi grabbed her plate to clean it up. "Kurenai are you done eating?"

Kurenai looked at her full plate and after a few winks and nods, "Oh yes, I am done." Kurenai grabbed her daughter and followed her sister-in-law into the kitchen. Konohamaru and Moegi were left alone.

"Your mother would have been a horrible ninja."

Konohamaru stared down at his dinner plate. He had lost his appetite.

"Your mother is listening through the door isn't she?"

"Yep." Konohamaru left his plate of food. "We can talk in my room."

Konohamaru threw himself backwards atop his bed. Moegi smiled at the familiar setting and threw herself back into the bean bag. Even though Konohamaru had officially moved into the house across the street, his mother hadn't touched the posters and toys and bookshelves filled with manga. Moegi had spent many days in this room with Konohamaru and Udon. "I heard about Udon."

"The details?"

Moegi shook her head.

Konohamaru didn't know how to start and perhaps it wasn't Moegi he was afraid of, it was the fact that she deserves to know what happened. He would have to speak about it aloud for the first time. Konohamaru reached and stuffed the winding green dragon pillow over his face. He told the story to the pillow.

The soft comfort of the pillow pulled away from Konohamaru hands, revealing the tears he was hiding underneath. Konohamaru looked up into Moegi's eyes as she crawled onto the bed on top him.

"I killed him."

"Are you looking for my forgiveness or your own?" Moegi questioned and then hugged her forehead to his chest. Konohamaru shifted his arms around Moegi's waist and replaced her as his pillow. He missed her. They closed tired eyes, grateful for the chance to hold one another one more time.
"Moegi," Konohamaru asked, "Will you marry me?"

"How dull."

Darui was earnestly about to lose his mind. He had his own room but it was only an illusion of privacy. The Hyūga were always at the door with items before he himself knew he needed them, as if just to remind him they were always watching.

Darui lifted his head when a wave of killing intent leaked into his room. He hoped he wasn't about to die.

Darui picked himself up from his boredom and wandered over to the door. He opened it and found the young woman commonly assigned to guard him staring so far out into the distance, that she didn't notice the tears coming down her cheeks.

All Hanabi needed to see was Konohamaru and Moegi cuddling in bed to realize the two had made-up. She was labelling herself an idiot: It's not as if she and Konohamaru had been officially together. Still, some part of her felt betrayed every time she repeated, 'it was just sex,' to herself.

Darui's head popped back when he was suddenly Jyūkened in the nose. Hanabi had suddenly become aware to a hovering presence and instinctively struck out. Even though Darui was the person who had been hit, he was the one apologizing as he wiped his bloody nose on his sleeve.

"What were you doing? Were you trying to leave?" Hanabi asked suspiciously.

"Sorry... want to go for a drink? Looks like you could use one."

Hanabi released her defensive poise and felt grateful to finally deactivate her byakugan so she didn't have to see the clothes falling beside Konohamaru's bed.

"Fuck it, let's go."

Darui had been to Konoha before on diplomatic missions but he had never actually been to Konoha. He hardly knew his way around the village or his way around the infamous nightlife. Lightning was typically renowned for its geisha houses. It was often an international joke that since Tsunade drank so much, of course Konoha was famous for its bars and gambling houses.

Hanabi's small frame easily pushed through the large crowd with a pair of drinks in hand. She made it to the table without managing to spill any of the contents.

"Is it always this busy?" Darui asked and flipped open his beer cap bare-handed.

"Not like this. A lot of the ninja have been recalled from the war front. Looks like people are celebrating," Hanabi yelled over the noise as she scooted into the booth.

Hanabi lifted her cup of vodka to toast to the most popular toast of the night, "To the long life of the Hokage."

"To the long life of the Hokage," Darui repeated and knocked his glass with hers. "He's begun recalling ninja from the front?"

"He recalled everyone," Hanabi corrected.

"Why?" Darui questioned. Darui knew about the bomb. He knew about the ceasefire and could
imagine the Raikage was regretting it. But Darui knew the Raikage wasn't going to go back on his word.

"Who cares," Hanabi said as she put back a drink. They were forced to scoot closer in order to hear each other. Sometime they were forced so close her lips touched his ear, "I've always been curious. Why does the Raikage want the byakugan so much?"

Darui sucked in his teeth. "It's dull. Konoha isn't like Kumo. In Konoha individual clans live in close proximity to one another. In Kumo, the clans don't like each other very much so they live on different mountain ranges. The byakugan can be useful tool to keep the clans under control and under the eye of the Kage. To be honest, I have no idea how Konoha manages to pacify all of these clan without everyone killing each other."

"We've tried," Hanabi promised. "But most grudges are worked out on the council."

"Lightning doesn't have a council," Darui said thoughtfully. "Personally, I always considered a byakugan as a level playing field. Your skilled users can tell if someone is telling the truth. Imagine what would happen if every side had a byakugan? There'd be no more lies."

"I never thought about it like that," Hanabi said thoughtfully.

"If someone offered me to choice between a sharingan versus a byakugan, I'd choose the byakugan. A sharingan is brute strength and a physical asset but a byakugan is more logistical."

"Let me give you some helpful advice," Hanabi smirked. "The best way to get on the good side of a Hyūga is to tell them the byakugan is better than the sharingan. You'd have their panties off."

Darui chuckled awkwardly, unsure if it was the alcohol or her personality but she seemed warmer than most of the Hyūga he had met.

"Little Hinata."

Hanabi glowered at the voice. Ino slid into the booth on the other side of Darui. Ino lifted her arm and waved to someone in the crowd. Sakura shoved through while protecting an arm full of alcohol.

"They saved us a seat," Ino said and pulled Sakura into the booth beside her.

Ino smiled brilliantly as she turned to Darui. Both Sakura and Hanabi rolled their eyes as Ino found her target for the night. "I'm Yamanaka Ino."

"Village slut," Hanabi grumbled under her breath.

Ino ignored Hanabi and raised her Bloody Mary in the air and toasted, "To the long life of the Hokage." Sakura threw out the cherry and one-shot the margarita before placing the glass back onto the table.

Sakura reached across the table to shake Darui's hand. "We've crossed paths a few times but I'm not sure we've officially met. Haruno Sakura." Once the introductions were over Sakura asked in an attempt to make light conversation, "Tell us about yourself. It's not every day I have the time to sit and drink with a Cloud ninja."

Ino smirked as she leaned forward against and swirled her hair in her fingers. "He graduated from Kumo's Academy at the age of nine. He has a younger sister who died when she was a genin. He had a wife and a kid but she left him. He hasn't seen his son in five years."
Darui's hand stiffened around his bottle of beer. The usually relaxed ninja tensed.

"Ino," Sakura said, "that is not how to make conversation with someone. You promised me you were trying to change. That was a bitch move."

"Come on Sakura, lighten up and have fun."

Sakura stood up from the booth and swung her purse over her shoulder. "I have children now and if you persist to be this way I can't bring them around you. Sometimes you have to cut people out of your life and I don't want your negativity in mine."

"What the fuck Sakura? It was just a joke."

"I'm tired of jokes. I'm tired of your habit of making yourself feel better at the expense of other people. I'm going home."

"No one gives a shit about you anyways!" Ino yelled into the crowd and sat back down in anger. She looked around and found herself alone in the booth. She stared at the empty cup that reflected the emptiness in her life.

"Sorry about that. You really have to prepare people before they meet Ino. She's a bitch." Hanabi apologized as she led Darui by the hand out the club. Darui was glad to clear his head in the fresh air. The crackling of lighting calmed in his chakra networks. His son was a personal and private matter that he didn't share with just anyone.

"Where are we going?" Darui asked as he followed Hanabi's steps.

"My apartment."

"You don't live in the compound?"

"I visit. I don't live there." They scaled the stairs toward Hanabi's loft. Hanabi cracked open the door. "Wait, hold on."

Hanabi quickly rushed inside. She ran around scooping up trash and kicked all of her dirty clothes into the closet. There was still a smell coming from somewhere but she quickly covered it up with scented spray.

Hanabi opened the door to allow him inside the slightly less messy apartment. Darui reached and pulled some lint from Hanabi's hair before walking inside. Hanabi locked the door behind them as Darui took off his shoes. "Feel free to make yourself comfortable as if you were at the compound."

"Thanks," Darui said. There was little comfort at the compound but found himself at ease when he rested against the sofa. "Sorry, you didn't have to do all this."

"Lightning didn't exactly throw me into a cell when I was captured," Hanabi shrugged, "just returning the favor."

Hanabi pulled out bottles of alcohol from the cupboard. When she couldn't find any clean cups, which were piled up dirty in the sink, she took two whole bottles, one for each of them. Hanabi sat down and upturned the bottle in her mouth.

"Do you smoke?" Hanabi asked and grabbed a pack of cigarettes off the coffee table. "You know, guys are dicks." Hanabi said as she upturned the cigarette in her mouth towards the fire of the lighter.
Darui refrained from commenting on the anatomical correctness of that statement. Instead, he took the offered cigarette.

"Fucker," Hanabi breathed out a cloud of smoke. "Now that the war is almost over, now he wants to get back with his girlfriend when he was feeling so guilty about it before. You know, I thought it could work out," Hanabi said softly. If anything, Konohamaru had been stability.

"I see a lot of guys do it back home," Darui offered, "Its dull but once the war is over they go back home to their wives and girlfriends seeking a sense of normalcy."

"I should have known better. I think perhaps I was looking for something safe after my disastrous first relationship. I'm more horrible at relationships than my sister and that's saying something."

Darui shrugged his shoulders. "I married my wife after I knocked her up at fifteen. It didn't work out. Sometimes it just doesn't work out. You think you can't take all the drama, and the arguing, and the crying anymore." Darui flicked the end of the cigarette into the ashtray. "But life sure is dull without it."

Halfway finished with her cigarette, Hanabi threw it behind her on the ground. "Do you want to fuck?"

It wasn't the sort of question Darui typically said no too. Hanabi and Darui turned into the heat of each other's eyes. Not wanting to be in the middle of a political disaster, he immediately asked, "You're on the pill?"

"We wear the seal in Konoha," Hanabi showed him as she kicked off her pants. Darui threw off his shirt and arched over Hanabi's smaller frame. Smoke crawled between the spaces where their lips touched.

They made it to the bed eventually.

Hanabi groaned as she reached out and hid the sunlight behind the curtains. She dropped her head back against the hard pillow that was the chocolate skin of Darui’s chest. The air was hot and sticky after the round of morning sex.

Darui relaxed backwards with on hand behind his head. He pressed his other hand into the small of Hanabi's back. The white hair of a Cloud ninja blended seamlessly into the pale skin of a Hyūga. The layer of sweat was beginning to stick to Hanabi's skin and the semen dripping from her vagina began to stain a spot in the sheets. Finally, Hanabi rolled over.

Darui watched her from the corner of his eye, following her small tight body as she walked nude out the bedroom.

Hanabi trudged her feet toward the bathroom.

"Did you really think that was a good idea?"

Hanabi jolted awake, startled, and found Hinata sitting on her couch.

"I can fuck whoever I want," Hanabi pouted before she slammed the door closed to the bathroom. Hanabi groaned as she stepped over the mountain of bathroom items to get to her shower. As she passed the sponge over her legs, Hanabi activated her byakugan and studied Darui in her bed. She teased over her clit as she roamed her eyes over his toned definition and exotic features.
Hanabi pressed her forehead as steam clung to the walls when her body released tension. Hanabi didn't dare masturbate in the compound but she did whatever she liked in her own apartment. She exited the shower and didn't bother to use a towel. She found some dirty pajamas on the ground. The cloth clung to her wet skin. Hanabi exited the bathroom with her hair still dripping water onto the floor.

Hinata did not comment on Hanabi's extracurricular activities in the shower. "Darui is our prisoner and he is Lightning."

"You could have waited until I got back to the compound to reprimand me."

"It is a conflict of interest in our responsibility to hold him in our custody. It is not acceptable of you to have fornicated with him. Did you not think before you act?"

"I don't care what the clan thinks," Hanabi said and began to search through her cabinets.

"The cereal is on the left."

Hanabi took out the cereal boxes. "It's not as if he was trying to take my byakugan or anything. He's smart enough to know the Hokage won't let him leave alive."

"The problem I have is your history of forming emotions for the enemy."

Hanabi slammed the tub of milk onto the table where a few drops spilled over. "It's called rebound sex. Nothing more."

These conversations were always awkward with her big sister, but in reality, there were only a limited number of people Hanabi could talk to. "And did something happen between you and Naruto? Personally I thought you two would be breaking in the Kage's desk by now."

Hanabi finished pouring the cereal and was surprised to find Hinata headed toward the door. "I have a council meeting to attend. Make sure Darui sleeps in the compound tonight."

Hanabi tapped her fingers against the milk jug when the door closed and wondered what was up with Hinata's stiffness. "She's needs to get laid," Hanabi grumbled and lifted two bowls of cereal. She closed the bedroom door with her foot.

Hanabi sat crossed legged in bed with her cereal bowl in her lap. "Sorry for the trouble," Darui apologized and sat up to eat breakfast. Even though in the Hyūga compound he was fed the most expensive and exquisite food, he preferred the simple bowl of cereal. In the compound, he also wasn't privy to the distraction of Hanabi's nipples creating wet dewdrops in her shirt.

"I heard talking."

"My sister," Hanabi explained. "She's a perv. She was watching us have sex."

At that moment Darui decided that when he became Raikage, he was going to leave the byakugan in Konoha. It simply wasn't very practical to live with.

"Where is Sasuke?"

The bindings on the stroller had broken. Sakura looked around the crowded market place as a grip of fear held her. It couldn't be hard to find a pink-haired little boy.

"I'm going to find him," Sakura said as she placed Sai into Kohei's arms who was already loaded
with groceries. Kohei tipped back into the melon cart at the sudden weight. Sakura ran into the crowd and shoved people over as she called Sasuke's name.

Sakura came to a stop with wide eyes. Sasuke's laugh was cradled in Tsume's arms. Tsume teased her finger out of Sasuke's grip and picked through the strands of his pink hair. "Huh, I didn't think this color was natural."

"Tsume," Sakura said while she slipped a senbon needle on the edge of her tongue. "Give me back my child."

Tsume rolled back her head and her fierce mane wavered in the wind. "If I am not mistaken, I believe he is my grandchild. Or did you think I would not recognize my own blood?"

"Babe, did you find him?" Kohei said with the bag of groceries rolling in the stroller. Tsume lifted the bushy eyebrows over her eyes when she saw the second child in Kohei's arms. Kohei stumbled back at the killing intent that was forming between the two kunoichi. The crowd began to thin around the conflict, unsure if a fight was about to break out.

"They are going to need their tattoos before they enter the academy." Sasuke laughed when he reached up and placed his chubby fingers through Tsume's hair.

"I am not entering them into the academy," Sakura said spitefully.

Tsume narrowed her eyes even as her head tilted to the side when Sasuke yanked down her hair. She snarled, "They are Inuzuka. They are male. There are rites they must perform. They should be blooded by now."

Tsume brandished the claw on her finger.

Sakura spat the senbon needles from her mouth. They were barely visible in the air but Tsume dodged them with ease.

Sakura charged forward, ripping the pavement under her feet with her fist cocked. She was forced to change momentum when Tsume threw up her hands and dropped Sasuke. Sakura slid and caught him in her arms. Sasuke screamed into her ear and a line of blood dropped from under his right eye.

Kohei fell to the ground with a twisted ankle. Sakura turned and couldn't get up in time before Tsume's claw drew a line under Sai's left eye.

"Now they are blooded." Tsume threw the infant at Sakura to slow her down. Sakura held both wailing twins to her chest.

And the two kunoichi stared each other down.

"Hey babe, perhaps you shouldn't-" Kohei's sentence was interrupted by the force in which Sakura shoved the twins into his chest. Sakura kicked off her heels and they clattered across the cobblestone.

Tsume grinned with fangs and crouched on all fours.

The crowd surged forward in an attempt to flee the scene. Then a whirl of wind stopped everyone in their tracks.

The Hokage caught Sakura's fist in the center of his palm and pinned Tsume on the ground beneath his foot.
"You two in my office now," Naruto demanded.

Tsume and Sakura sat adjacent from one another. They spilled out their seats in opposite directions in an attempt to create as much distance from each other as possible.

"I am not going to tolerate fights in the marketplace where innocent bystanders can get hurt. If you want to beat the shit out of each other do it on the training grounds," Naruto said.

"She wouldn't last a second," Tsume scoffed

"I'll beat you into an early menopause," Sakura shot right back.

Naruto cleared his throat. "Now that Tsume is back in Konoha, it is an opportune time to deal with the unique situation of Sasuke and Sai Haruno."

"There isn't a situation," Sakura argued. "Those are my kids."

"And they are Inuzuka and need an Inuzuka to train them," Tsume argued.

Naruto rubbed his temples and knew he couldn't approach this from the perspective of Sakura's friend. He had to be fair. He had to be the Hokage. "I'm granting custody rights to Sakura until the twins reach Academy age."

"Until the Academy?!” Sakura asked.

"This is bullshit," Tsume snapped.

"As the grandmother and matron of the Inuzuka clan, Tsume will have visitation rights and have the right to bring the twins to the Inuzuka compound at least once a year. When they reach Academy age the children will decide what they want to do, whether they want to attend the academy or not, and both of you will respect their decision." The Hokage slid forward the contractual document. "I need both of your signatures. Do you understand?"

Tsume and Sakura refused to look at each other. The Hokage suffocated them with his killing intent.

"Yes, Hokage-sama."

"The shadows told me you were leaving," Asami said as she sat on the last street bench found before the gates of Konoha. At night a Nara knew all things.

Kusuro adjusted his bags on his shoulder. "Are you going to stop me?"

Asami scoffed, "I’d go with you if I could but the village wouldn't take too kindly to a missing Nara. Some of us are born trapped here. Get out while you can."

Asami jumped from the bench and walked with Kusuro until they reached the gate. Kusuro shuffled his bags on his shoulder. "Good luck with everything, although you might be too late with the whole marrying Naruto thing."

"That blonde bitch isn't going to last forever. Konoha is going to eat her alive. I'm just waiting for my moment," Asami proclaimed.

Kusuro wished he had a good response but he always found himself unprepared for everything that came out of Asami's mouth. They stood underneath the gate as if playing an odd game of tug-of-war
Finally Asami yanked at Kusuro's shirt and pulled him into her lips. Kusuro blinked at a sudden flash. They pushed away from their first kiss. Asami pulled the photograph out of her camera and shoved it into Kusuro's chest. "We never had time for our team picture."

Then Asami turned on her heels and ran away. Kusuro looked down as the picture slowly came into focus. He blushed at the way his eyes squinted close and the way he had pushed his lips equally into hers. Kusuro mumbled, "All she had to do was say goodbye."

Stars lit Kusuro's path as he put a determined foot in front of another. He looked back one last time at Konoha before it disappeared over the top of the trees. Kusuro walked the trail until it widened and he found himself in a large valley. A waterfall flowed between two behemoth statues.

"You don't have to leave."

Kusuro wondered how many more people he was going to have to get through in order to rid himself of Konoha. "How did you know I'd come this way?"

Tomu tucked his hands into his pockets. "Naruto had told me to keep an eye on you. I saw that your bags were packed and I knew you'd have to come through this valley to get to Grass Country. You made Naruto a promise."

"If Naruto cares so much about his promise then why isn't he here?" Kusuro challenged.

"He said you weren't ready," Tomu said. "Come back with me. Konoha isn't perfect but it's the closest thing to home you've got."

"Why should I ever go back?" Kusuro said angrily, "And now Naruto is part of the very system that had me tortured. No, if I ever come back I'm going to destroy Konoha."

"You're going to destroy everyone just for the failings of the system?" Tomu asked. "I've seen friends die in the shadows of Konoha but I can't blame everyone for their deaths. Konoha is a ninja village and it runs on cold logic to survive. It's not an easy place to live but destroying it isn't going to make it better. Don't you believe there are people in this village worth fighting for?" Tomu asked.

Kusuro had pocketed the photograph safely in his flak jacket. The folded picture that Ichigo had drawn was in his pocket. Kusuro crunched leaves under his feet when he turned around and felt his resolve weaken. "When we meet again we'll be enemies."

"When we meet again we'll still be family."

Kusuro bowed his head and knew if he didn't leave now he would never get the chance. "Tell Naruto I'm sorry."

Kusuro Hatake ran as far and fast as he could from Konoha's large and reaching shadow.

Naruto was beginning to entertain the idea of placing a bolt on the door when Homura stormed in his office once again. "Have you not heard that the Grass boy has escape?"

"I've heard."

Naruto's blatant lack of interest offended the elder. "Why have you not taken the proper course of
action? He is the heir to Grass. He could try and incite a rebellion."

"He is but a child."

"A child today is an enemy tomorrow. We should sent the hunter-nin after him."

"Send the hunter-nin after just one child when we are currently under a bomb threat from the Mizukage?" Naruto dismissed the elder. "There are more important tasks I need the hunter-nin for."

Shizune entered the office and Naruto was inwardly relieved when she saved him. "Sir, you're 4:00 appointment is here."

Naruto looked up at the elder. "We will continued this discussion at a later date but I have an important meeting to attend to."

The elder stormed from the office furiously. Shizune smiled inwardly at his outraged expression. "You should be careful Naruto, the elders could pull the votes against you among the jounin when it is time to officially decide on Hokage."

"Shizune, those are the least of my worries. Please tell Hinata I'm ready to see her." Naruto knew well that Hinata did not like to wait.

Naruto glanced at the paperwork spread across the table. He lifted his head when Hinata entered the office. Naruto motioned to the seat in front of his desk. Hinata briskly strolled forward and sat down.

"Do you know what I'm planning to do?" Naruto asked.

"Yes."

"Rumors about Shion have spread to the Mizukage," Naruto said bitterly. He looked into her pale and emotionless eyes. Naruto said finally, "I need your help, Hinata."

"Write out the mission," Hinata said simply.

"This is too personal to be an order. I'm asking for your help."

Hinata tightened her lips as she looked away toward the window. Naruto couldn't tell what sort of thoughts were going on in her head. Her face was an expressionless mask. "I'm listening."

"I need arrangements to be made to get my family out of the country but it is imperative that I do not know about them. I was originally planning to send them to Demon Country but it's not safe anymore. I have created these seals to be applied to doppelgangers in case you need a diversion. Here is an envelope of all the money you will need to get it done. It is enough to live comfortably off for years. I'm asking your help in keeping my family safe."

Naruto wished he had other options but there was no one he trusted more to get things done. "Will you do this for me?"

Hinata grabbed the money and the seals from the table, stood up, and left the office.

"The end," Naruto said as he closed the last page of the book. Ame curled into his side while Ichigo was flung over his leg. Naruto watched as their chests bobbed up and down, completely unaware of how he was about to disrupt their world.

Naruto carefully twisted out of the bed, slowly shifting around not to wake them. Naruto placed a
kiss on their foreheads and turned on the night light of a glowing red toad. Naruto cracked open the bedroom door behind him.

When Naruto heard a noise in the kitchen, he walked downstairs and found Tomu making a sandwich. "I'm surprised you're not out with Mushi," Naruto said as he leaned against the counter.

"She's spending time with her parents and I still don't think her dad likes me," Tomu said as he casually bit down on the sandwich. "I'm still trying to adjust to the fact that I came home and you're married."

"Sorry I couldn't tell you," Naruto said and used the ingredients left out to make himself a sandwich. They sat in the comfortable quiet of the kitchen.

"I wish you would reconsider. All of Konoha is going to go nuts when they find out."

Naruto chuckled. "Yeah, I might have the shortest reign for a Kage but I'll do what I have to in order to keep everyone safe."

Tomu went to the kitchen sink and wiped the crumbs off his finger. "Will you be here in the morning?"

"I'll already be gone. I need to leave before anyone can stop me."

"I'd try to stop you if I could," Tomu mumbled bitterly. He looked up at Naruto. "You don't have to save the world by yourself."

"I'm not alone," Naruto smiled as he ruffled Tomu's hair and went upstairs.

Naruto opened the door to his bedroom and found Shion still awake. She was sitting up in bed reading a pregnancy book.

"Do you need anything?" Naruto asked as he went to the dresser to grab some pajamas.

"No." Shion watched as Naruto got dressed and then moved into the other side of the bed. "Naruto," Shion said softly, "I'm sorry. I put myself and our baby in danger. I'm so sorry."

"It's alright," Naruto said tired. "People make mistakes."

Naruto reached over and turned off his lamp. His forgiveness only made Shion feel worse. Shion bookmarked her page, turned off the light and laid into her pillow covered in tears. Opposite sides of the bed marked the distance maintained between them.

Naruto's eyes remained open while he listened to Tomu's footsteps enter Tomu's bedroom. Naruto could hear the light breathing of Ame and Ichigo in the other room. Naruto listened until Shion fell asleep.

Naruto turned in the bed, restless, unable to relax. He had a big day tomorrow but there was something that pressed so much weight on his conscious that he couldn't get to sleep. There was still one more knot he had to tie.

Naruto lifted his arm and stared at the lines of black ink embedded into his skin. Then he applied chakra to the hiraishin seal attached to his body.

Naruto stepped back when the palm of Hinata's hand stopped inches from his throat. Moonlight were captured by the windows and created the illusion that there was always a full moon over the Hyūga
compound.

Hinata slid her foot across the sparring room floor. Naruto deflected the attack with his forearm. He crouched underneath her kick, used the ground to ram forward. Hinata flipped over his back and landed in her Jyūken stance.

Naruto pulled off his shirt and threw it to the ground. He rolled the cramps in his shoulders that tightened from sitting in a chair all day. Naruto took an offensive stance.

Naruto didn't use his chakra cloak. Hinata didn't activate her byakugan. The spar was fist, and skin, and sweat. Hinata's feet floated on the ground as if she was born to dance. Naruto prowled after her like a fox trying to catch a firefly.

Naruto caught her arm after a missed attack and twisted up her elbow. Hinata lost her footing as Naruto threw her down, stuck his knee into her back, and laid her against the floor. Hinata breathed heavily underneath him. For a brief second Naruto glanced at the wound she suffered against the Raikage. The violent purple of the bruise had healed into a slight blue.

Hinata twisted around her legs. Naruto fell backwards and hit the back of his head against the floor.

Naruto looked up into the turbulent depth of her eyes. He reached his fingers into her hair and pulled her into his lips. Their tongue sparred in the space of their mouths until they fell into one another. Naruto tasted the saltiness of a tear between his lips. They let each other go only to breathe.

Naruto wiped the trail of tears off Hinata's cheeks with the palm of his hand. Hinata's whisper was as soft as moonlight stretching across the floorboards, "I love you."

Naruto was jolted for a moment that Hinata had actually said the words. She had always held them close to her, as if afraid when she finally said them, they would be taken away. Naruto sat up and held Hinata's legs around his waist.

"I'm sorry," Naruto apologized. "I had my seal on for so long that I didn't think… it never crossed my mind when we were together. I put you in a bad position."

Hinata eyes softened and the hard encasement of ice had melted. She leaned her head into Naruto's chest and sought his comfort. In the privacy of Naruto's arms, Hinata admitted, "I was scared."

Naruto held her, and attempted to imagine if Hinata told him she was pregnant right here and right now. "I'd be scared too."

Sometimes, as a ninja, time was too short not to forgive.

The sun had yet to rise and the village was still drowned in shadows. Naruto caressed his hand up Hinata's thigh. The bedroom windows were fogged from their heat. Naruto pressed his lips against Hinata's forehead and turned his head into her pillowed scent.

"It's time."

Neither occupant in the bed moved, as if their skin was stuck permanently together and it took too much effort to part them. Finally Hinata attempted peeled herself off but offered little resistance when Naruto tugged her by the waist back against him. Naruto sucked on the soft skin of Hinata's neck until a purple bruise blossomed on her pale skin.

Naruto reached his hand up her thigh and clawed into the plump softness of her butt. The shift
reminded Hinata of the sweet soreness Naruto had worked into her body. They hadn't gotten much sleep.

"I'm going to miss you," Naruto whispered and sought to memorize every detail of Hinata's body with his hands. He planted a memory in her lips. Naruto lifted the scarred skin of her back upwards and caught her tit in his mouth.

"I don't want to leave you," Hinata wept around the taste of his lips. Naruto slipped against her as she propped her legs up tighter around his waist. Her tongue twisted around their reluctance to let go. Naruto pressed his weight and stilled into the doubt of what he planned to do.

The heat fogged the windows and clouded their thoughts. Hinata pressed the back of her hand against Naruto's cheek. "Stay strong."

"Stay safe." Naruto lingered one last moment in Hinata's lips.

Ame blinked open her eyes when she found herself being carried in Naruto's arms. She still had on her pajamas and a messy case of bed hair. "Where are we going?" Ame mumbled as she rocked in the movement of Naruto's arms. Suddenly, the night air touched her skin.

"Dad?" Ame jolted awake when her surroundings suddenly change and the familiar house changed to the large overbearing gates of Konoha. A shadow clone appeared, following, carrying traveling bags. Another shadow clone appeared carrying Shion who looked just as confused as Ame felt.

Before Ame could react, she was transferred into another pair of arms. She attempted to fight back but her arms and legs went numb.

"No!" Ame screamed.

Her scream woke Ichigo and he instantly latched onto Naruto's chest. Naruto attempted to gently unlatched the frighten child. "No, no, no, no..." Ichigo repeated the most words he had ever spoken in one sentence.

Coming to an understanding what was going on and realizing that this was partially her fault, Shion stepped forward and coaxed Ichigo out of Naruto's grip.

"No, you can't do this. I want to stay here with you!" Ame screamed but there was nothing she could do as she was pulled away and out of the gates of Konoha.

"I'm sorry," Naruto said as he placed a kiss on Ame and Ichigo's forehead. The tears and sob cut a knife straight into Naruto's heart but he knew this was the only way to keep them safe. Naruto had to let his family go.

Naruto walked up the stairs with a tray full of breakfast. He knocked on the bedroom door. "How are you feeling?" Naruto asked as he entered the room.

"Like I got punched in the fucking gut," Tsunade said as she sat up in bed.

Naruto chuckled nervously as he crouched and he set up the tray in her lap. Naruto kneeled beside her futon. "Sorry about the punching part. You were the one who said, 'the day I make demands and threats at you is the day I become Hokage.'"

"About damn time," Tsunade said as she began to taste the food. "This is pretty good. You make it?"
"Don't worry. I didn't burn down your kitchen," Naruto chuckled. It was odd for Naruto to see her in her pajamas. He immediately noticed that the bags under her eyes weren't as deep as before. "Why didn't you tell me about Kusuro and Kakashi?"

"I was trying to prevent an uprising from Grass and the boy from escaping," Tsunade said pointedly as she looked at Naruto.

"Kusuro might have left the village but he didn't escape me. I have ANBU watching out for him. It has been my experience that the more you force them to stay, the more bitter they become."

Tsunade admitted she would not have committed one of her ANBU as a babysitter but perhaps Naruto's solution would be best in the long run. Time will tell. "I did what I had to do. It's not my favorite part of the job."

"I understand, but I certainly don't approve. We'll call us even for what I'm about to do."

Tsunade turned to him in alarm. Her hair was swept away from her shoulder. "What are you about to do?"

Naruto chuckled uneasily. "I'm not bombing anyone."

"You're going to send the army to attack?"

"No."

"You found the bombs?"

"No."

"What other options are there?"

Naruto stood up and surprised Tsunade when he wrapped her in a hug. At one point he didn't know if he was trying to give her strength or get strength from her. Naruto placed a kiss on her forehead. "I love you, old lady."

"I hate you," Ame said with her arms folded. Ame's red eyes never left the woman sitting across from her, staring straight while bouncing out of her seat at every bump in the road.

Hinata gave Ame little attention. Instead, Hinata focused on watching the roads with her byakugan.

Shion cradled Ichigo in her arms as the wagon traveled along the long winding road out of Konoha. "That's not a nice thing to say," Shion told Ame in attempt to calm her.

"I hate you too," Ame snapped so hard it hurt Shion's feelings.

Shion bowed her head and stared at her hands. Shion was too confused and upset to argue the point with Ame any further. Shion didn't know where she was going and she was scared. When they had left Konoha, Hinata had taken them to a glade where three other carts had been waiting. Each cart had a team that looked exactly like Shion, Ame, and Ichigo before they were sent off in opposite directions.

"Don't you dare touch that handle," Hinata said suddenly.

Ame sucked in her cheek. Her fingers only twitched but she had been entertaining the idea of jumping out and making a run back towards Konoha. Ame looked up at Hinata who stared distantly
out the window. Then Ame reached for the handle.

Hinata's hand slapped across Ame's face hard and fast, forcing Ame to spin backwards into the cushion. Ame blinked. She slowly slid her hand up to the numb sensation in her mouth. Ame opened her mouth to argue and scream-

Another pop sounded in the carriage.

Ame sat back in the chair with both sides of her faces numb and pulsing in pain. Her cheeks had swollen so much she couldn't formulate even a word. Ame crossed her arms and curled up in the seat angrily. Tears began to fall down her face.

Shion had jolted back and jumped at every slap. Shion pressed herself into the corner. Shion whispered softly, "Violence isn't a positive reinforcement in disciplining children."

Hinata raised an eyebrow. Shion sat back and kept quiet. Shion stared in silence when Hinata's sleeve had slipped and Hinata pulled her collar forward to cover the hickies down her neck.

Hinata turned back to focus on her byakugan and confirmed there were no ninja in the surrounding area. She calculated they should reach their destination unimpeded. Hinata admitted that this time Naruto had gotten the upper-hand. The only way Hinata could ensure his family's protection was to stay with them and staying with them meant Naruto was sending her out of the village as well. It dawned on Hinata as Naruto told her goodbye that he was protecting her as much as he was protecting them.

And she fell for it.

The extended mission didn't have a finite expiration date and because of it, just in case, she had declared Neji the temporary Clan Head of the Hyūga.

Hinata's attention refocused when she heard a groan. Shion's hand knocked on the door of the carriage. "I need… need some air."

Hinata immediately demanded for the carriage to stop. Ame jolted forward when the carriage came to an abrupt halt. Hinata opened the door just as Shion lurched and a vision burst through Shion's body. Hinata threw her body weight against Shion to pin Shion down and prevent Shion from hurting herself. Ame watched, unable to speak over Hinata's shoulder. Ichigo had tumbled awake and crawled into Ame's arms.

The strength of the vision violently escaped Shion's body. Shion collapsed limply against Hinata and then vomited into Hinata's lap. Murky vomit slid down Hinata's leg as she carried Shion out of the carriage. Hinata propped Shion against a tree and touched the rising temperature of Shion's forehead.

"Shion," Hinata said steady and attempted to maintain Shion's faltering attention. "How do you feel?"

Shion groaned and tears began to fall from her eyes, and then Shions began crying so much she couldn't give words a chance.

Hinata could see Shion was no longer fit for travel. She was too weak for the road and needed a hospital. Hinata searched the area with her byakugan and found that Konoha was closer than the next village with a medical facility.

But it was too late. They couldn't turn back.
Hinata broke when blood began to spread across Shion's lap. The bottom of Shion's kimono became spotted with blood. Hinata's byakugan watched as the fetus reacted to the demanding drain of the vision. "It's going to be okay. I'm not losing another baby."

Hinata created a shadow clone that grabbed Ame and Ichigo onto its back. Hinata picked up Shion. Even with the weight, she could move faster than the carriage. Hinata race through the trees back to Konoha.

Suigetsu picked his teeth with a kunai and used all the paperwork that had piled up as a pillow. It had gotten so bad, you could literally swim in the paperwork. There was a knock on the office door. Suigetsu looked down when Sameheda suddenly jolted awake as if at the smell of dinner.

An office assistant walked into the office. Sweat slid down his face and dampened his hitai-ite. Suigetsu sat back smugly and thought everyone should treat him with the such amount of fear.

"Yeah what?" Suigetsu asked as he flung a piece of crab meat stuck between his teeth at the messenger's forehead.

The assistant glanced back at the door. His mouth dried and grew hoarser with every word, "Uh, Uzumaki Naruto the Rokudaime Hokage is here to see you Mizukage-sama."

Suigetsu sat up in his chair and removed his feet from the desk. "What?"

The door opened and Uzumaki Naruto strolled into the paper crowded office. The luminescent blue of the ocean reflected of the Hokage's hat. Suigetsu reached for the hilt of Sameheda and Naruto sat down. Suigetsu's hand sweated around the hilt.

"I surrender."

Suigetsu's face dripped with confusion. Since it didn't seem as if the words had registered in Suigetsu's head, Naruto repeated, "With the authority of the Hokage, representing the people of Konohagakure, I surrender."

Some of us are born trapped here. Get out while you can.
"With the authority of the Hokage, representing the people of Konohagakure, I surrender."

Naruto Uzumaki was bombarded with shocked silence from the council. Before the shock wore off into gradual outrage, Naruto continued. "I agree to surrender the village of Konoha, the land of Fire country, and all its resources. In exchange, the Mizukage agrees to never again target the Land of Fire with weapons of mass destruction. If the agreement is violated, Konoha will no longer be obligated to surrender peacefully but will instead resist until the Land of Fire and the Land of Water no longer exists."

"What?" Suigetsu questioned as if someone had just told him there was a sandstorm brewing over Kiri. Then Suigetsu laughed at what he thought was a poorly executed joke. The laughter died when Naruto unfurled the scrolled that contained the details of the surrender.

"This is not a joke." All signs of humor or mischief were absent in Naruto's hard expression.

Suigetsu looked down at the paperwork and dripped disbelief all over the document. Suigetsu's teeth ground together at his frown. "No. We are not done playing my game."

"We are done," Naruto stressed. "You won, Suigetsu."

Suigetsu's eye twitched. The quest for vengeance that fueled his excitement, adrenaline, and thrill had finally come to an end. Suigetsu turned to Naruto and almost asked, 'what am I supposed to do now?'

Naruto gave him his answer. "The moment you sign this document, I am your prisoner. I am yours to do what you will."

Suigetsu licked his lips and began salivating at the thought of Naruto at his mercy. He had won the game and now it was time to claim the prize.

Besides, bombs weren't really Suigetsu's style anyways. He liked to cut things.

"And if we refuse to abide by the terms of the surrender?" Koharu had to stand to get above the enraged outbursts of the other council members.

The objections attempting to argue with Naruto's decision refused to pause. Instead, Naruto projected a thick killing intent throughout the room that was so sinister, it massacred people's voices. "As it seems you have forgotten, in a time of war, the Hokage's decision is the final decision. If any of you refuse to abide by the terms of the surrender then you risk disobeying an order from the Hokage and I'll have no choice to charge you with treason."

"So we're expected to just sit back and watch Kiri's forces march into Konoha?" Tsume snarled.

"Yes," Naruto answered. "A Kage cannot stand alone. This surrender does not have any meaning by my will alone. Therefore, as a part of the treaty all Clan Heads are to be imprisoned to prove Konoha's compliance. I will allow all of you an hour to relay the news of Konoha's surrender to your clans and to promote their cooperation. Afterwards, I expect you to turn yourselves in."

"And if we don't?" Tsume challenged.
"Your entire clan will be imprisoned," Naruto answered and already had ANBU surrounding the entire Inuzuka compound.

"How do we even know the Mizukage will agree to the terms?" Inoichi asked.

Naruto told the most influential people in Konoha, "The Mizukage signed our terms of surrender as of five minutes ago."

**Mist over Konoha**

The Raikage counted to a thousand after he completed another set of push-ups. He grabbed a bottle of water and splashed it over his head. The water dampened his cornrolls and dripped down the tight tendons in his neck. He grabbed a towel from the bench and wiped his face as he walked through the hallway toward the shower. Expensive hangings framed him on both sides of the wall. While recuperating from their loss, the Raikage had commandeered a merchant's estate close to the border of Hot Water.

The Raikage's quiet time of mediation was suddenly interrupted when one of his messenger ninja found him. "Sir, Darui has returned."

"You check him?"

"Not a henge or a spy. He answered with the correct code words. It is Darui." The messenger shifted through his papers. "There is also a message from your wife."

"What does that woman want now?" The Raikage asked.

"She asks that when you finally reach Konoha she wants you to send her a sample of the famous Ichiraku's Ramen everyone is talking about, if she's not dead by then." The messenger added the last part uncertainly, knowing the First Lady was criticizing how long this campaign was going to take.

"Tell her to get it her damn self." The Raikage entered the bathroom and slammed the door close in the messenger's face.

The Raikage had been married to his wife for thirty years now. It had been an arranged marriage to pacify the tension growing among the clans. In his opinion, he could have been worse.

After the Raikage finished with his shower he went in search of dinner. When he entered the dining room both his meal and his prodigal heir was waiting for him. The "host" rubbed his hands nervously together when the Raikage motioned he could approach.

The merchant lifted a silk blanket and displayed the glass embellished diamond necklace. The merchant provided the diamond but the silica glass could only be produced under perfect conditions when lightning strikes sand. The Raikage was pleased with the finished product. "Send it to my wife with a message that reads, 'Happy Birthday.'"

"Sir, you know that's not what she wants," Darui spoke up. The Raikage gave him an annoyed look and Darui quickly apologized.

Nevertheless the Raikage added, "Tell her I'll be home for our anniversary."

With that business taken care of the Raikage addressed Darui. "I doubt Naruto let you go as a measure of good will. He's not that stupid. What the fuck is going on?"

Darui watched as the Raikage began to eat and the building frustration on the Raikage's face as the
Raikage attempted to pick up his dumplings but the chopsticks refused to remain steady. The arthritis was getting worse. Darui would offer to help but knew that wouldn't work out too well for him.

"Naruto has surrendered Konoha to Kiri."

The Raikage stabbed the dumpling with the chopsticks as if stabbing someone in the eye. "You're telling me that Naruto gave Konoha to that crazed psychotic punk they call a Mizukage? Why the fuck didn't you tell me this sooner?"

"Sorry."

The Raikage stood up and left the chopsticks standing upright. "Tell everyone to get off their lazy asses and prepare to march out. We're taking Konoha."

Naruto watched blood drip onto the cobblestone. He winced as another knife slid in between the cracks of his ribs. Eleven knives stuck out between twelve ribs bones as if Suigetsu had placed them there for safekeeping.

"I wonder what will happen if I keep them in?" Suigetsu asked experimentally. "Will your body heal around it?"

The hard stone scraped against Naruto's knees. A pain settled into Naruto's shoulders as his arms were pulled taunt by the shackles made from Sameheda's scales. The chakra drain slowed the healing process. Despite that, Suigetsu let go of the hilt and never grew tired of the fascinating way in which Naruto's skin curved around the blade.

Naruto focused on the blood pooling around the cobblestone instead of the constant embedded pain in his body.

"I'm not going to kill you yet," Suigetsu said as he reached for another tool, "perhaps in a few years when you've grown tired of this. Killing someone isn't fun unless their begging for it."

Suigetsu picked up a hooked scalpel and debated whether or not it was the time to claw out Naruto's eyes. There was a knock on the door.

"What did I say about interrupting me?" Suigetsu yelled at the messenger.

Just in case, the messenger remained at the entrance, far away from the Mizukage's reach. "Mizukage-sama, we've received reports that Lightning has suddenly started moving south. In response, Iwa is doing the same. Sir, Lighting and Iwa are racing each other towards Konoha."

"Konoha is mine," Suigetsu said like a child about to get his toy taken away from him. Suigetsu turned back toward Naruto whose head was bowed in blood. Suigetsu slammed down the scalpel with a ring that echoed of the dungeon's stone. He decided he would wait before he took away Naruto's sight.

"I want you to see the heads of your family when I bring them to your feet."

The dungeon door slammed closed and suffocated Naruto in darkness.

Suigetsu raced to his office. The woman who was the representative for Kuro no Keiyakusha stood when Suigetsu entered. She rarely left the protection of the Mizukage's tower.
"You, woman, I've changed my mind. I want to bomb Kumogakure and Iwagakure."

Confusion set over Nanami's expression. "We have already set the plan for Suna in motion. It will take us weeks more to prepare the bombs for Iwa and Kumo."

"No, you will bomb them now," Suigetsu demanded as the shadow of a shark wrapped around the office.

"But it is not possible."

Used to threats making people go faster, Suigetsu lunged for her. Nanami stepped back and displayed a trigger button in her shaky hands.

"Don't touch me," Nanami warned. "I am wired with explosives and if I detonate you will lose your access to the bombs and the organization will no longer work for you." Nanami shivered as she faced the Mizukage, like a clown fish against a shark, but she was determined not to be gotten the better of by a ninja.

Suigetsu snarled as he retraced his hands. He wasn't afraid of the bomb doing him any harm but knew this woman would go so far as to blow herself up. "How long will it take?"

"It will take at least a month to prepare for both Kumo and Iwa." Nanami said, with her thumb still hovering over the trigger.

"You're coming with me to Konoha," Suigetsu demanded. He didn't trust anyone and wanted to keep her under his supervision.

"Konoha?"

"Are you scared?" Suigetsu asked the uncertain expression.

Nanami tightened her grip on the trigger. As Suigetsu's representative and the one assigned to ensure that the Mizukage held up his agreement to continue delivering materials, she had no choice but to follow. "I am not afraid of Konoha. I don't need a ninja to protect me."

The day that Suigetsu marched into Konoha with his team of Mist ninja the streets were empty, the marketplace was barren, and there was only one assistant on duty in the Hokage's Tower.

"My name is Haruno Sakura and I have been assigned to assist you as you acclimate to Konoha."

"I know who you are," Suigetsu spat.

"I will show you to your new office," Sakura turned on her comfortable flats and walked through the still hallways of the tower. The Hokage's tower had always been full of activity since Konoha was first founded. The emptiness was strange.

"Where is everyone?"

"Naruto fired them. He figured that you would want fill the tower with your own men." Sakura said, referring to the uncomfortable lake of Mist ninja on the streets.

Suigetsu wasn't impressed by the Kage's office. It was the exact same boring office as in Kiri but with less paperwork. But a childlike glee of joy left Suigetsu's mouth when he spun around in the rolling chair. He was the first Kage to have control over two ninja villages.
"The first Mizuhokage… the first Homizukage…” Suigetsu tried out the titles. He leaned back in the chair, put his feet on the desk, and made himself at home. "I'm hungry. Get me the best food there is in Konoha and a jug of water."

"Right away and… Mizuhokage-sama," Sakura couldn't help to say with some sarcasm. "You may not be aware of this but Lightning and Iwa have entered Fire Country. Currently, Iwa is in the ruins of the Capital and Cloud is in the Valley of the End. It seems Cloud will get to us first."

Suigetsu waved away the comment. "They will surrender to me after I bomb them to smithereens. Now, get me my food."

Sakura bowed and did so right away.

Nanami accosted Sakura's attention after Sakura made several steps out of the office. "I wanted to inquire where Konoha keeps its equipment for their radio? And I was also wondering if you could grab me some food."

"Get it yourself, bitch." Sakura Haruno said without even a look.

Nanami huffed as she watched Sakura recede down the steps of the Tower. Nanami cursed ninja as she searched through every room of the Tower until she found what she was looking for.

Nanami began rewiring and fashioning a satellite. She sincerely believed that civilians would eventually surpass ninja. Even though ninja could do amazing things with chakra, it also crippled their perspective on the possibilities that science and technology could offer.

Nanami tapped her finger on the metal and transmitted a coded message to her comrades.

Suigetsu bumped his elbow against Sameheda's hilt as he scarfed down the flavorful Ichiraku's Ramen. He only paused to take a sip of water. When he was finished, he shoved the trash off his desk and left it on the floor. Drops of broth stained into the carpet.

"Woman," Suigetsu called.

Sakura entered the office and gave the fallen trash an annoyed look.

Finally Suigetsu was ready to get to business. "Where is Naruto's family?"

"I cannot answer that question. My memory was erased to protect sensitive information but from what I understand they have not been seen in Konoha since the hand-over."

"Both his wife and kids are gone?" Suigetsu frowned.

Sakura gave Suigetsu a perplexed expression. "Naruto is married? I don't know if your information is accurate but as far as I can judge, no one knows of any wife."

"What about this woman Hinata who is rumored to be his lover?"

"It is also rumored that Naruto has had sexual relations with Gaara, Neji, Tsunade, me, and every else in Konoha. Once again, my memories have been erased. I cannot confirm the validity of these rumors."

Suigetsu cut his lips on his teeth. "Is there a way to fucking un-erase them?"

Sakura said as if schooling an academy class, "The definition of erase is completely destroyed.
Therefore, the memories can never be regained."

"We'll see about that."

Sakura folded her hands in her lap as she sat in the chair. Suigetsu watched the procedure prepared by one of his Mist ninja who specialized in psychological jutsu. The Mist ninja performed a series of hand seals. Sakura swept back the strands of her pink hair just in case he missed her big forehead.

The Mist ninja dived into Sakura's mind, then his expression scrunched in frustration, and soon after he jolted his hands away.

"Sir, someone has placed intricate guards in her head that are too sophisticated for me to break."

"You are the best in Mist," Suigetsu said angrily. "I command you to break them."

The Mist ninja gulped. He attempted to refocus his concentration and navigate past the traps and guards.

An explosion of brains rained down onto the carpet. Sakura wiped the remains of the Mist ninja off her shoe and asked, "Is there anything else you need?"

Many of the Mist ninja had begun to permanently reside in the newly named Mizuhokage Tower. Nanami had brought a cot into one of the small offices and claimed it as her bedroom. In an attempt to get away from the congregation of Mist ninja, Nanami left the tower but found Mist ninja on every corner of the street.

After a few days, several people had ventured out of their homes due to necessity. For the most part, the Mist ninja didn't pay much attention to the civilians.

Nanami watched as a Mist ninja followed a child heavily robed in green buying fruit throughout the market. The child constantly looked behind her but reacted with nothing but an annoyed expression. They didn't follow her past the border of the Aburame's domain. In order to avoid conflict, most Mist ninja refrained from entering a clan's territory.

The bell chimed when Nanami walked into Ichiraku's Ramen. Everyone eventually walked into Ichiraku's Ramen.

The smell immediately greeted her at the door. Nanami's mouth watered in anticipation for the infamous ramen even Mist ninja were fondly talking about. Nanami had arrived a few hours before lunch and was relieved to see it was not yet crowded. During lunch hour, there was a line that stretched down the street.

Nanami sat at the relatively empty bar. "I'll have whatever your special is for today."

"Right away," Ayame said and yelled the order to the cooks. Ayame leaned over and efficiently plated a meal from a previous order. Nanami watched the chef's skilled hands as she topped the broth with naruto swirls and added a side of miso with a splash of art.

When she finished, Ayame called the order. The waiter retrieved the dish to deliver it to the patrons on the upper floor. For a second, Nanami and the waiter shared a glance. The waiter was short, leaned toward androgyny, and did not stand out to a passing glance but for the waiter's neon orange hair.

Nanami returned her attentions to the steaming bowl of ramen placed in front of her. She swept her
blonde hair behind her ear and leaned forward into the heat. Nanami slurped the explosion of flavor into her mouth.

"I haven't seen you around here before," Ayame asked as she took the pause between orders to recuperate.

"It's actually my first time in Konoha," Nanami answered. "I'm originally from Lightning."

Ayame could have guess Nanami's roots based on the cocoa skin tone that stood out in Konoha, but Ayame has seen many people walk through the doors of Ichiraku and knew not to judge on appearances. "You do know that Cloud and Konoha were at war? I'd be careful around here if I were you."

"My skin color do not determine my beliefs. I am no ally of Cloud," Nanami answered but it was an assumption she often encountered while traveling. It was as if no one comprehended that Lightning Country was bigger than its ninja village. Nanami said confidently, "Besides, I can protect myself."

"So you're a ninja?" Ayame asked, confused.

"No. I was the daughter of a very wealthy merchant but my father was murdered for holding different political beliefs from the dictatorial authority of Kumo. I'm no different than you. I hold no more power than you do."

Nanami said into the bowl of remaining broth, "Ninjas killed my family and worst yet, they took away my memory of it but the organization helped me to get my memory back. The organization helped to empower me. The organization gave me truth."

"The truth?" Ayame asked.

Nanami leaned forward conspiratorially. "A ninja village operates on one simple premise: on the civilians' belief that we need their protection. But it's all an illusion. It's all a lie. The truth of the matter is we don't need ninja. Ninja needs us: the regular people to cook their food, to make their clothes, and to smith the weapons they use to kill. Sister, there will come a day when we will rise."

Nanami's head collapsed onto the table.

Ayame reached over and shook Nanami's shoulder. Nanami woke from her sleep with a start and looked around her sluggishly.

"Are you alright?" Ayame asked. "I apologize, I might have overly seasoned with spices. I hear they will make you faint if you're not accustomed to them."

Nanami looked around Ichiraku's Ramen and wondered how long she had slept. "I'm sorry," Nanami said embarrassed and paid her bill. Before she left, Nanami reached into her back pocket and handed Ayame a blank black card. "We are all a part of the movement."

"Mizuhokage," the Mist ninja said patiently. "We have checked the Uzumaki compound twice already. It is completely empty."

"Then begin a search of the other compounds," Suigetsu ordered.

The Mist ninja shifted his feet nervously. "I wouldn't advise that. The clans could see a breach into their territory as a threat. We don't have enough Mist ninja in Konoha to quell a rebellion if the clans decide to rise."
With excellent timing, Sakura barged through the office doors without bothering to knock. "Mizuhokage-sama, Lightning has begun to advance rather close. They are only a few days out from moving their entire army at our gates."

Suigetsu grated his teeth together and finally decided, "Send Lightning and Iwa a message: if they don't turn back now I will bomb them to pieces."

"Iwa has stopped their advance but we have received word back from Lightning," Sakura looked down at the message, "It reads, 'Fuck you.'"

Suigetsu was not amused in the slightest. "CLOUD BITCH!"

Nanami entered the office when she heard the Kage calling for her. "For the last time I am not associated with Cloud," Nanami seethed and knew Suigetsu did it just to annoy her.

"Are my bombs prepared yet?" Suigetsu demanded.

"I am afraid not," Nanami answered.

Suigetsu could feel his slip on Konoha. He stared at the twitch in his hands. The last person he wanted to lose to was some one-armed ninja, not only that but Suigetsu was no closer to what he was looking for.

Suigetsu decided it was time to bring the Bloody Mist to Konoha.

Suigetsu watched the crowd gather around the Hokage's tower like frenetic ants. The crowd watched in a colony of confusion as Tsunade was marched out onto the roof in chains. The chains cackled against the rooftop as Tsunade was ushered to the center. Suigetsu reveled in the crowd's expression of horror and disgust.

Tsunade has carried heavier things than these chains and hardly felt their weight. She looked out over the crowd, over the Konoha that her grandfather had built. She had ran away from it once and promised herself she'd never do it again.

"To your knees," Suigetsu demanded.

"Mizuhokage," Sakura said as her heart began to race and looked into the ageless face of her teacher. "Once you do this, you violate the treaty. Konoha will riot against you."

"It is alright Sakura," Tsunade said gently with a smile and held out her hand. "Help an old woman to her knees would you?"

Suigetsu rolled his eyes at the melodramatic scene as Sakura helped her teacher kneel. The rough ground grazed Tsunade's knees. Tsunade stared at the sunrise setting over Konoha. The faces of five Kages looked down behind her.

"You will not win," Tsunade promised.

"If I can't win, then no one will."

Sameheda was a sword sharp by its scales. It was never crafted to make a clean cut. Sameheda bashed forward and Konoha was tilted on its side, hanging by a string of butchered skin. The second time and Tsunade's head tumbled down the Hokage's tower and landed in a splatter.
The top-heavy corpse fell forward.

Suigetsu addressed the stunned crowd. "Next I will kill your Clan Heads until any information about the Uzumaki clan is given to me."

A mist began to thicken over the crowd. Suigetsu laughed as the ants at his feet scrambled over one another to escape the trap gathering over their heads. The mist intensified and at any moment, a rain of shuriken and arrows would crush the witnesses below.

"Stop!"

Suigetsu watched as a blonde figure remained at the foot of the tower while all others ran to get away. "Don't hurt anymore people! I am Uzumaki Shion and I am giving myself up!"

Suigetsu grinned and the mist dissipated. It was like finding breakfast caught in the morning fishing net.

Suigetsu watched Shion's nervous gestures as she looked around the office. As a test, Suigetsu thudded Sameheda against the floor and laughed when Shion jolted at the sound. "I figured Naruto's wife would be hotter," Suigetsu said in disappointment.

Shion lowered her head and subconsciously wrapped her arms around her chest in a feeble attempt to protect herself from Suigetsu's leering eyes.

"Are you afraid of me?" Suigetsu asked.

Shion attempted to shake her head with a quiver but screamed when Suigetsu squeezed his hand around her throat.

"Are you scared of me now?" Suigetsu asked as a river of tears fell down Shion's cheeks and were absorbed into his arm. Suigetsu pressed the pinpoint of a kunai to her cheek. He licked his lips hungrily as he watched the skin part and the blood ran like tears down the metal blade.

"I'm going to bring your head to Naruto."

Suigetsu dropped Shion and she broke her fall with her forehead. Blood ran into Shion's eyes as her shoulders quivered. She watched as Suigetsu walked around the desk and grabbed his sword. Shion held her mouth when she saw pieces of skin still stuck between Sameheda's scales.

Suigetsu feasted at the thought of Naruto's expression. He couldn't wait.

"Wait!" Shion screamed when Suigetsu was upon her. She cowered against the floor and peeked through her hair at Suigetsu's pause. "You can't kill me," Shion whispered. "If you kill me you'll never find out where the children are."

Suigetsu grinned as he crouched on the ground and ran a sharp finger down Shion's neck. Suigetsu could feel her shiver as he ran his nail down and parted the cloth of her dress. Shion stared, her heart racing as the sharp nail of his finger drew past her belly button.

A gleam in Suigetsu's eyes.

Shion screamed as she jerked back against the floor.

The pain blinded her as she cradled her hand to her chest. Between the strands of her hair she could see where her pinky finger had been left on the floor. Suigetsu stood up and flipped the butcher's
knife in his hand. "You have nine more fingers and ten more toes. I can do this all day or you can tell me where the children are."

Red blossomed into Shion's dressed as she scrambled back against the Hokage's desk. Shion shivered as tears left her eyes.

"No!" Shion screamed when Suigetsu yanked her by the arm and jerked her across the floor. Suigetsu tightened his grip around the squirming fish caught in his grasp. Shion cried as her hand slammed back on display. Suigetsu raised the butcher knife triumphantly, licked his lips, and watched her squirm when the blade entered her skin.

The butcher's knife cut into her finger and resisted against the bone.

"No, no… I'll tell you," Shion surrendered. "They're hidden at the Hyūga compound."

Shion's confession did not quench the blood thirst triggered in Suigetsu's eyes. Shion screams echoed through the Mizuhokage's tower.

"Sir," The Mist ninja reported back nervously. "We've searched through the entire Hyuuga compound and… it's empty."

Suigetsu frowned, "So the Uzumaki weren't there? Did you torture a few of the Hyūga?"

"That's just it sir. The entire compound is empty. The Hyūga are nowhere to be found."

"What the fuck? How do we lose an entire clan of white-eyed freaks?!" Suigetsu demanded as he boiled in anger. "Bring that quivering bitch to me."

Suigetsu watched as Shion was dragged into the office. Blood and tears were her only articles of clothing. The sunlight in her hair had been cast in darkness. Skin hugged around her rib bones.

Suigetsu said darkly. "You lied to me."

"No, no," Shion whimpered, "The Hyūga were entrusted to watch the children. I swear they were."

"Now they are gone."

Shion gasped as cold water began to form around her feet and slowly crawl up her body. The water began to cover Shion's head. She flailed uselessly as the water filled her nostrils and mouth. Despair choked her throat.

Suigetsu watched her face turn pale and only when he was satisfied, did he let her go. Shion fell to the ground gasping for air. She coughed out water. "I didn't know they were going to leave. I didn't know."

"You have one more chance." Shion huddled on the floor when Suigetsu picked himself up from the Kage's chair. He kicked her like a homeless dog. Shion yelped when Suigetsu grabbed her by the hair and stabbed a kunai in her stomach and twisted it to make his point that he would not stand for anymore lies. "Where are the Uzumaki children?"

Shion stared at the bleeding stomach around the gaunt bones of her ribs. Shion's hand clasped weakly over the hilt of the kunai. "I-I overheard the Hyūga talking about Whirlpool. It's Naruto's ancestral home. Please, don't hurt me anymore."
Suigetsu shot paper cranes into a trash bin while he waited word from his ninja. He swore if that Uzumaki bitch was lying to him again, he would make her regret it.

"But she's no fun anymore," Suigetsu pouted. It was no fun cutting someone up if they had no more fight in them. He might as well chop her up and feed her to Naruto in a bowl.

"Sir," A mist ninja bowed. "It would seem that we have found signs indicating movement and people who have spotted the red-eyed girl and the scarred Uzumaki boy down the road towards Uzu. It should only be a matter of time before we find them."

Suigetsu grinned gleefully as he crushed the next paper crane in his fist.

It was only a matter of time.

The underground cells below the Hokage Tower were aged and only used to contain a prisoner on the day of his execution. The door of the containment cell screeched open.

Nanami mechanically began to empty the chamber pot and kept her eyes focused on the dust between the stones. "I am a representative of Kuro no Keiyakusha. It is not by my choice this happened to you but these are the unfortunate circumstances when you are married to a ninja." Nanami had no fault with the priestess who has acted on behalf of civilians in the past. "Soon civilians will overthrow the ninja. Soon we will take power for ourselves."

Eyes caked close with dried blood struggled to open. Shion's whisper was as soft as crooked fingers numbly brushing over stone. "Like what happened at the capital?"

"It was necessary. It made people notice, didn't it?" Nanami argued as she continued to stare at the stone because she couldn't turn around and stomach the sight of blood.

"You killed thousands of civilians to further your cause, the very people you swear to protect."

Nanami's hands turned to fists. "We are only doing what the ninja have forced us to do. It is unfair that ninja are born with this unnatural power and leave the rest of us defenseless. Ninja are monsters. In order to slay monsters, we must become monsters ourselves."

"I know my sins." Finally Nanami turned to face the priestess. "Soon nothing will ever be the same. Civilians will take back what is our right: our freedom," Nanami proclaimed and could feel the bomb that weighed on her body. "Sometimes people have to die in order to break the status quo."

"The bombs are ready." Nanami's words to Suigetsu had always been a lie. Nanami displayed the homing beacon that traveled in her pocket. "When I activate this beacon, it will send a signal to headquarters to deploy the bombs. We will crush Konoha into dust the fateful moment when the Raikage and the Ichikage and the Mizukage will clash against one another. Konoha will be the graveyard for the end of the ninja age."

"You'll die too."

Nanami took a hold of her resolve and held her head high, "And I'll die knowing that I will be reincarnated into a world made better by my hands."

Nanami dropped the bowl of food and water and then closed the cell door behind her. Her determined footsteps faded into the distance.

Crooked fingers numbly brushed over stone and formed kanji in their strokes. A message scrawled
along the dungeon floor.

Shion activated her byakugan.

"Mizuhokage," Sakura said with a bored expression. "Lightning has arrived at our gates."

Suigetsu stopped gorging himself with ramen noodles. "And where are the men I sent out to find the Uzumaki children?"

"According to the messages, the Uzumaki children have not been found yet," Sakura reported.

"Bring that cloud bitch in here," Suigetsu said.

"Right away." Sakura exited the office and gave time for Suigetsu to consider his options. He knew there were not enough Mist ninja to defend against Cloud. He could escape and leave the rest of his men to fend for themselves. To hell with Konoha. He had Naruto in Kiri.

Sakura returned with Nanami in tow.

"Where are the bombs I wanted?!" Suigetsu demanded.

"They are still being prepared," Nanami promised. She watched as Suigetsu grabbed the handle of his sword. It cut through the carpet as he dragged it along the floor.

"If you can't provide the bombs I want then there is no longer any use for you."

Nanami stepped back and realized her lies were no longer enough to stay his hand. She brandished the homing beacon. "Those bombs are pointed at us right now. If you come any closer I'm going to bomb you and everyone in Konoha."

"Lying bitch!"

Suigetsu lunged forward.

Nanami activated the beacon.

The explosion reached high into the sky and stretched a shadow in all directions over the land.

Like a lone flag violently shaking in the wind, a blonde ponytail shook from the force of the blast. The shadow drowned the lone figure who was lounging off the cliffside of a small island located in the middle of an archipelago. The heat kissed the smug smirk. Manicured nails pressed into the radio.

"Ino reporting. Phase 1: destroy the bombs complete. Begin phase 2."

Phase 1

Captain Fox stood beside the Hokage and watched as cuffs were locked around Shikamaru's wrists. The Clan Heads slowly filed into Konoha's police department. Everyone had turned themselves in, except Tsume, but that was hardly unexpected.

"Have the other Captains closed down operations?" Naruto asked.
Captain Fox nodded. "There is a lot of disapproval in ANBU. The whole situation is beginning to challenge their loyalty to the Hokage but for now their following your orders. It might not be so easy once you're gone."

"Once the Mizukage has established power over the village, you have my permission to disband ANBU."

"I understand."

"Have you taken care of the ANBU files?"

"Yes, I have."

"Have you reassigned Shizune? I want her watching Tsunade."

"Already done."

In accordance with the treaty, Naruto had to completely surrender, which meant he had to dispel all of his shadow clones. Naruto asked one final time, "What is your mission?"

The Captain immediately replied, "Minimize the damage without exposing the true objective."

Both Naruto and Captain Fox took one last moment to appreciate the view. Then Naruto finally formed the hand seal and expelled the thousands of shadow clones he had populated throughout the world.

Konohamaru said to the smoke, "You can trust me Naruto. I won't let anything happen to Konoha."

"Is this treason?" Darui asked when Hanabi took the seal off his eyes and removed the Mouse ANBU mask from his face. Exits were closing and the only one left was the secret entrance in the ANBU underground.

Hanabi shrugged her shoulders. "It matters very little now."

"What's going on?" Darui had to ask.

Hanabi tilted her head and said, "Naruto has surrendered Konoha to Mist."

Darui's jaw slackened at the news. It seemed as if his time in Konoha had been anything but dull. "I never took Naruto for a guy who gives up."

Hanabui frowned. "Should we continue fighting until all Fire Country has been destroyed?"

"It's certainly what Lightning would have done."

"Why?"

"Because," Darui didn't question it, "It's what we do."

"That's stupid," Hanabi said flatly.

After a moment of thought, Darui agreed. He turned as wind combed through his hair. "Are you going to be alright in there? You could come to Lightning with me. Cloud could offer you protection."
It wasn't until after he said it, did Darui realize the irony of his words. A Hyga running to Cloud for protection was unthinkable.

Hanabi smirked and tapped the center of her forehead. "I'm a Hyūga, don't you forget it."

Kohei peeked out the window. All the way from his house, he could see the tail-end of a line increasing through the streets, composed of both ninja and civilians that began all the way in front of Konoha's closed gates.

Kohei looked up when Sakura entered the house. "What's going on?"

"Naruto has surrendered Konoha to Kiri," Sakura said as she placed a pile of paperwork onto the kitchen table. The wood groaned underneath the weight.

"Should we be leaving too?"

"I doubt anyone is going to get out of those gates," Sakura said as Sai chased after her heels as if a game. If she had a choice Sakura would certainly attempt to get Kohei and the kids out of the village, but she knew she wasn't going anywhere. "Where's Sasuke?"

Kohei pointed to the closet.

Sakura crept toward the closet, swung open the doors, and declared, "Found you!" Sasuke squealed and attempted to hide his face in the cup of her bra before Sakura reached into the hamper and pulled out the hiding child.

"The Hokage gave me a mission to create fake profiles for all of the S-class medical records," Sakurs slapped her hand on the stack of folders on the kitchen table. "These are the real ones. I need to hide them."

"Wouldn't it be safer if we destroyed them?" Kohei asked.

"These are the only medical files in existence for the Hokage, the ANBU Captains, and the Clan Heads. From their medical history to the dosage of their medicine, everything is contained in these files. Irregardless, this is years of my life's work. No, I'm not destroying them."

Sakura grabbed a blank scroll from the bookcase and stored the paperwork into a more compact and manageable space. Sakura attempted to think of an unsuspecting hiding spot. Then she placed the scroll into the diaper bag.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"What Mist ninja is going to change my kid's diaper?"

"What if I change their diaper and forget it's in there?" Kohei was more worried that he might accidently rub shit all over the most important documents in Konoha.

Sakura rolled her eyes, grabbed the scroll, and went into their bedroom to hide it somewhere else.

Kohei looked out the window when a fight suddenly broke out among the pushing and the quarrelling. A pair of ANBU was quick to break up the fight and attempted to disperse the line congested in the street.

"Babe," Kohei called when Sakura came back into the living room. "What about you? Are you safe?"
Right as Sakura was about to reply there was a knock on the door. She already knew who it was and didn't have to bother with the peephole. It was the second time in a week Ino was at her door. Sakura predicted a Yamanaka might come for her.

"The Hokage has ordered me to lock your memories," Ino said. Sakura stepped aside and allowed Ino into her house.

Sakura automatically picked up Sai who had begun clinging onto her leg. She stopped when Sasuke went missing again.

"I wonder where Sasuke went?" Sakura chimed teasingly and then whispered to Ino. "You have to go find him."

"What?" Ino asked.

"If you don't find him he throws a temper tantrum," Sakura said as she closed the front door.

There were still a lot of people Ino had to get to and thought this was a waste time, but Sakura looked at her expectantly. A little part of Ino wanted to amend for the night in the bar.

Ino focused her senses and searched the house for a child's simple thoughts. When she located them, Ino received a jolting shock. The unblemished thoughts were a sharp contrast to a woman who was used to delving into the darkest crevices of a person's mind.

Ino walked forward and looked under the couch. "Hey kiddo, found you."

Sasuke clapped his hands and laughed as Ino pulled him out. Ino listened to the easy melody that was the sweet song of his thoughts. Sasuke wiggled in her arms and reached out his chubby fingers to yank at her ponytail.

Ino smiled.

"Are you okay, Ino?" Sakura said uncomfortably and grabbed Sasuke before he fell out of Ino's inexperienced arms. Sakura hefted Sasuke onto her hip. "I'm ready for you to lock my memories."

"Right," Ino reminded herself and placed the music into the background. Sakura sat down on the couch with Sasuke in her lap. Kohei held Sai. "I'm going to lock away your memories of the past five years."

Sakura looked at Kohei to make sure he understood what that meant. Kohei asked, "You won't remember me or the kids?"

"It'll be best if Kohei takes himself and the kids into the other room. I need time to explain what has happened so she is not psychologically overwhelmed."

Kohei walked over and picked up Sasuke in his other arm. "This will be sort of hard to explain. Five years ago I was just an acquaintance hoping for a chance to ask you out on a date."

Sakura lifted her chin for a kiss. Ino rolled her eyes. Sai was looking for breast milk. Sasuke was looking for another place to hide. The door slammed open.

Hinata thrust out her hand to cover the seal activated by the force-entry. She overloaded the trap with chakra before it could engulf the doorframe, the ward she carried, and the two children that peeked out behind her legs in an explosion.
"Don't lock her memories just yet."

"There's not much else we can do. Shion is going to have to fight through it alone." Sakura pulled off her gloves and dropped them into the trash. "One of these weak spells is not rare for her but she had been exerting a lot of energy at the Capital and the pregnancy has complicated her condition. She needs constant monitoring."

Hinata stared as she tapped her fingers on the pristine counters. The dirt under her fingernails irritated her attention. "This happened after a vision. What if she has another vision while she's like this?" Hinata questioned and tumbled the problem through her mind. "We need to seal her chakra to stop the visions but will it affect her recovery?"

"I'm not sure how her visions work," Sakura said honestly as she grabbed the clipboard and prepared the paperwork under a pseudo-name. "We are operating on assumption. What if her visions are independent of her chakra? What if when the visions are deprived of chakra they feed on her natural energy instead? She will die."

They did not have enough information to make an educated decision.

"I'll have to stay here," Hinata decided. "If she starts having a vision and it becomes too much, I can stop it by closing her chakra nodes."

The sheets of the bed were stark white and pale as Shion's pallor. Sakura had donned her hospital robe that imitated the lack of color in the room except for the black of Hinata's attire. Unconsciously, Hinata rubbed at the coat of dirt on her arms.

Hinata wished she had made it back to Konoha before Naruto left but at least she made it before Shion's doctor had her memories locked.

Captain Fox appeared in the hospital room. Hinata had sent a shadow clone to explain the situation. As the Captain looked around the disinfected hospital room, he could feel a dread in his stomach. "Where are the kids?"

"The safest place I could find in Konoha," Hinata answered, cautious of straying ears walking the hallways.

"My sources say we have a week at the most until the Mizukage is in Konoha. Do you think Shion will be well by then?"

"It's hard to tell. Looking over her medical history it could last from days to months," Sakura answered, "and I wouldn't attempt to move her until she's strong enough to sit up."

Captain Fox knew his mission had just gotten a lot more complicated. "Plans also need to be made for your safety, Hinata. It is not confirmed whether or not the Mizukage knows about your relationship with Naruto. I don't think he does but we should be safe."

"I used a henge when I came into Konoha. As far as anyone knows I'm still out of the village. Since I need to stay in the hospital to watch Shion, I'll impersonate one of the nurses."

Sakura disagreed. "My staff is close knit and Hinata doesn't know them well enough to impersonate a nurse before they start getting suspicious. With the atmosphere as it is, they'll think she's a Mist ninja spy and I won't have my memories to protect her. But it could work if I hire her as a new staff. I can have hiring papers prepared in only a few minutes to strengthen the story," Sakura offered.
The Captain locked his jaw in thought. "Alright, but you have to make sure there are no holes in either Hinata's or Shion's profile. It has to be flawless. I don't want the Mizukage to get an inkling of suspicion."

"I'll go get the papers," Sakura said as she walked out the hospital room toward her office to grab the paperwork.

The Captain turned to Hinata. "How did you get into Konoha? I had all the exits guarded."

"I went through the Forest of Death." Hinata replied. It wasn't an easy task with an ailing pregnant woman and two children.

"But there's a secret seal combination to open those gates," the Captain argued. The forest was always closed off to let the biosphere grow and mutate in isolation. "That information isn't privy to even a Clan Head."

"I see all things," Hinata said. "Do not worry. I doubt anyone else can get through using that route."

Just in case, the Captain decided he would place a guard over the forest. There were so many things he had to worry about. "We'll talk later," The Captain told her and whisked away.

Hinata looked over her shoulder at the emptiness of the hospital room, all but her and Shion's shallow breaths. Hinata collapsed in a chair as her adrenaline was gradually overcome by exhaustion. In the empty white, Hinata stared at the resting fetus cocooned in Shion's womb.

"What is your name?"

"Haruno Sakura."

"What is my name?"

"Yamanaka Ino."

"Good," Ino said after locking Sakura's memories in the blank hospital room. "Quite a few things have changed in the last five years."

Sakura got up and walked around the empty hospital room. "I'm in charge of Konoha's hospital," Sakura said as she stared at the way items were organized into the cabinets. It was the way she promised herself she would re-organize everything. "My memory had to be erased because I know sensitive information."

"Yes," Ino said as she watched Sakura peer into the mirror and frowned at the crow's feet beginning to grow in definition around her eyes.

"I look horrible," Sakura said as she began checking her entire body.

"Naruto is Hokage and he has surrendered Konoha to the Mizukage."

"I always told Tsunade Naruto wasn't ready yet. I always knew his idealism would be our undoing. You can't fix the world with a hammer and a nail," Sakura said as she lifted her shirt to examine how fat she had gotten. Her probing paused on the stretch marks along her skin. Sakura turned around swiftly. "Did I… Do I have a child?"

"Twins in fact," Ino informed her.
Sakura's eyes widened. She knew how this procedure was supposed to go and knew how important it was to feed information to her slowly. "Twins," Sakura's jaw dropped as she murmured to herself. "How old?"

"Still under a year," Ino vaguely replied, now wanting to admit that Sakura's supposed best friend could not recall when her children were born.

"Am I not breastfeeding?" Sakura asked as she examined her breasts. She was rather pleased that her body had grown a cup size after the pregnancy.

"I believe you dried up during the battle against Lightning."

"I thought Lightning were our allies?"

Ino sighed. The hours ticked away as Ino slowly informed Sakura about all of the important things that had happened over the past five years. Ino paused when she considered whether or not she should tell Sakura they weren't friends anymore. But it was hard, when this Sakura was warmer towards her and all the tension didn't exist between them anymore. Ino decided to keep that information to herself.

Sakura asked, "And I'll never be able to get these memories back?"

"I'm sorry. They're gone," Ino lied but it was safer if Sakura believed she couldn't get them back. "Don't worry Sakura, I'll be here if you need me."

Everyone eventually walked into Ichiraku Ramen.

Nanami's head collapsed onto the table.

Ayame walked around the counter and turned the 'open' sign on the front door of Ichiraku's Ramen to 'closed.' Ayame turned around and reported, "I put the exact amount of dosage you told me to put in her bowl."

Ino walked out of the shadows. The genjutsu images of patrons at the table kept eating without pause.

"Good job, Ayame," Ino winked and vaulted over the counter. Ino didn't waste any time preparing the hand seals and took a dive into Nanami's head.

Ayame returned behind the counter and began cleaning the dishes.

It only took Ino seconds to pass through the second-rate guards someone had placed in Nanami's head and retrieve the information she was looking for. Ino said into the radio as she released her hand from Nanami's forehead, "I've got the location. It'll take three days to get there."

The waiter stepped forward.

"I thought the whole point of dying your hair was to blend in?" Ino criticized the neon orange.

Hanabi blinked. "I like it."

The new seal Naruto had created was activated and turned Hanabi's pale pupils into a dull brown. Hanabi crouched and moved to her phase of the mission. Hanabi peeled back Nanami's jacket and lifted her shirt until Hanabi stared at a complicated mass of wires that were tangled around Nanami's
Ino would have been surprised by the fact civilians were capable of such technology but she was occupied by an errant thought. Ino stared at Nanami's face until a Yamanaka's perfect memory confirmed that Ino had met this woman somewhere before.

"Karma's a bitch," Ino cursed.

"You know her?" Ayame asked.

"Yeah, it was an ANBU mission a few years ago. Should have killed her when I had the chance," Ino spat.

"Why didn't you?" Hanabi asked coolly.

"Naruto."

Hanabi was studying the bomb with her byakugan. There was a red wire. There was a black wire. Hanabi ignored the complex wiring and identified the weakest link. With precise chakra control, Hanabi used chakra to short-circuit the trigger. It was a technique Hyūga used to commonly short-circuit an opponent's radio.

"That worked?" Ino asked when Hanabi lifted to her feet.

"I'm not a bomb specialist," Hanabi deadpanned. "The bomb still works but the trigger doesn't."

"You certainly have more attitude than your sister," Ino observed.

Hanabi whipped out a hiraishin kunai and disappeared. Ino left a wink for Ayame before she disappeared out the backdoor of the kitchen.

Ayame reached over and shook Nanami's shoulder. Nanami woke up from her sleep with a start and looked around sluggishly.

"Are you alright?" Ayame asked. "I apologize, I might have overly seasoned with spices. I hear they will make you faint if you're not accustomed to them."

Nanami looked around Ichiraku's Ramen and wondered how long she had slept. "I'm sorry," Nanami said embarrassed and paid her bill. Before she left, Nanami reached into her back pocket and handed Ayame a blank black card. "We are all a part of the movement.

Ayame watched until Nanami left through the door, then she tossed the blank card in the trash. "We are all a part of Konoha."

"He's planning a trap," Hinata reported to the grouping of people gathered in Naruto's old apartment.

"Can't we just kill him already?" Tenten asked in frustration.

Tomu and Mushi looked at each other in mild agreement. Hohei sat against the wall with his hair dyed a muted purple but it was nothing compared to the bright neon orange of Hanabi's boyish haircut who crouched in the corner bored.

"No," Konohamaru stressed. Since ANBU were supposedly disbanded, Konohamaru abandoned the white cloak but he certainly felt as if its absence caused people to question him more. "Remember, the Mizukage is not our primary target. We cannot afford to show our hand just yet. Ino is on her
way to destroy the bombs right now which means we only need to keep Suigetsu from doing something stupid for two days. We can do that," Konohamaru said confidently even though he knew the Mizukage's patience was running thin. Konohamaru looked at the faces of the people in the room, all hand-picked by Naruto, of different experiences and generations, to keep Konoha safe. And Konohamaru was the one who was chosen to lead them.

"Do you have any more details of the plan?" Konohamaru asked Hinata, who received information much faster than the spies he had planted in the Tower.

"He plans to behead Tsunade, and then he's going to use the commotion as a trap. He's sending Mist ninja toward the Hokage's house right now."

"Do we have a hiraishin kunai on Tsunade?" Konohamaru asked.

"No," Hinata answered.

"We can get to Granny before the Mist ninja if we take the sewers," Tomu offered. "It's underneath the radar of the Mist ninja patrolling the roofs and the streets."

"Alright. I want Tomu, Hohei, and Mushi to find and explain the situation to Tsunade. Have her replaced with a double. She should know the technique." The moment Konohamaru finished his sentence the young teenagers were on their feet and out the door.

"Now we need a plan to stop this trap while also not drawing attention to us."

"He's going to place Mist ninja on the roofs," Hinata reported.

"It wouldn't take much for me to snipe all of them," Tenten offered. "I don't miss."

"Worst case scenario?" Konohamaru asked.

"Suigetsu gets really angry his trap fails and starts slaughtering everyone," Hanabi pitched in. "We will have no choice but to kill him when other pieces on the board are not yet in place, our primary target gets scared, sends a message to her organization and blows Konoha up before Ino can get to the bombs."

"Any other ideas?"

Konohamaru attempted to force his brain to come up with a brilliant insane plan, but no matter how hard he tried, he wasn't Naruto.

"We give him what we wants," Hinata said suddenly, "We give him Shion."

Everyone in the room waited for Hinata to further explain as the idea expanded and set in Hinata's thoughts. "I still have the seals Naruto gave me to create a doppelganger of Shion. It's not a henge so even a sensor wouldn't be able to detect the wearer's chakra. Naruto crafted these seals specifically so no one would be able to tell the difference.

We give the Mizukage what he wants. It should tide him over for a few days, at least enough time to get what we need done."

"It's a good plan," Konohamaru admitted. "But it does pose a lot of risk for the person impersonating Shion. It's hard to tell what the Mizukage might do."

Hinata knew it was the best plan they had. She grabbed her bags and headed toward the door.
"Hinata, where are you going?" Konohamaru asked confused.

"I'm going to prepare," Hinata said obviously.

"Stop," Konohamaru said and literally had to stand in front of the door. "Who said you were going to be the one to do this?"

"It's my plan."

"Yes, but it's hard to tell what the Mizukage might do. He might torture you, he might rape you, and he might kill you. It's a lot of risk for one person."

"I understand the risk."

"Hinata," Konohamaru said firmly and decided it was best to be outright. "You are not going. You're not even supposed to be here. Naruto sent you away Hinata, on purpose. If anything happens to you I couldn't face him."

"I'm doing the mission that Naruto gave me," Hinata argued. "I'm protecting his family."

"And his family is going to need protecting even after we deal with the bombs." Konohamaru argued. "You are not the person for this job."

"I'll do it," Hanabi volunteered. "I need you to give me the seals, Hinata."

"No," Hinata commanded with the authority of a Clan Head.

"No," Konohamaru commanded with the authority of the one Naruto put in charge. "I am ordering you to stand down Hinata." Konohamaru motioned to Tenten. Tenten lifted a crossbow and aimed it at Hinata's leg.

Hanabi walked forward and stood in front of Konohamaru.

"It's my turn to protect you." Hanabi took the seal out from Hinata's pockets with more care than rewiring a bomb.

Hanabi retrieved the seals unscathed and stepped away from the minefield. All Hinata did was frown, but everyone could feel her fury as if a blizzard has suddenly erupted in the room. Hinata left the apartment with a streak of gale behind her.

Konohamaru finally released the breath he had unknowingly held. It reminded him of the time when he was a child and he had followed his grandfather to a meeting in the Hyūga compound. He had accidently broken an heirloom. With only a look, Hiashi had made him cry and that same fear resurfaced in greater intensity when he had faced Hinata.

"It never occurred to me until now but she's a lot like Hiashi," Konohamaru said as he trembled from the cold.

"You should have been more careful," Hanabi warned. "She was going to kill you."

Konohamaru didn't doubt it. He quickly composed himself and returned to the task at hand. "Tenten, I appreciated the back-up. I need you to get a message to Sakura and let her know what's going on. Tell her to put on a good show."

Tenten nodded and went out through the window.
A silence fell over the old apartment. Hanabi traced the seal with her finger. It was the first time she and Konohamaru had been alone together since the hand-over. "You and Moegi made up."

Konohamaru nodded his head. "We're getting married."

Hanabi stared at the seal blankly. It's not as if she wanted to marry Konohamaru - that was never going to happen, but… "It was a good thing."

"Yeah," Konohamaru agreed. Hanabi tapped her fingers on the seal.

"Thanks," Hanabi said as she pushed herself off the table. She paused in the doorway and leaned her cheek onto the frame. "For being a friend."

They tumbled across the board. The seconds were counted as the dice rolled, then stopped on two red dots. Breasts buoyed in victory as Tsunade reached forward to gather her chips. "Alright boys, Granny is on a roll tonight," Tsunade hooted.

Shizune knew this was bad. It's been years since Tsunade had entered a gambling hall, the infamous sucker, the woman who had swindled Naruto into paying her gambling debts, placed down another bet.

There was nothing more fun than making money off of Mist ninja. Tsunade swiveled around to another card table where she was playing a card game at the same time. "Giving up already?" Tsunade challenged as she doubled her bet. "Everyone knows a Mist ninja always folds because they can't afford to lose too much money," Tsunade heckled the Mist ninja that swelled the room. "How much do the Mizukage pay you?"

The Mist ninja sweated, then folded

"That's right, nothing," Tsunade laughed with a tinge of pink to her cheeks. She won the bluff.

Tsunade turned her head as the dice rolled across the green. She slammed an empty glass cup down. Sweaty bodies pushed against each other and watched the roll. The air was thick with tobacco and cigar smoke.

For Tsunade, it was like coming home.

"Sometimes I wonder how did she become the Hokage?" Tomu questioned when he stumbled into the gambling hall. Mushi came behind him and Hohei deactivated his byakugan. None of them felt very comfortable in the room of Mist ninja.

"What's going on?" Shizune asked as she peeled herself from the wall.

With all the noise, Tomu was forced to whisper in her ear. "The Mizukage is coming for Granny. We need to get her out of here."

Shizune sighed. There was only one way to pull Tsunade from a gambling table. Shizune stepped forward with a cup of sake. Tsunade didn't look twice when the alcohol was offered. She grabbed it, chugged it, and was brought more.

"Yeah, keep em' coming Shizune," Tsunade jumped out of her seat as her streak multiplied. "I can feel it Shizu-chan, tonight the only thing I'm losing is that horrible nickname!" Tsunade blew on a pair of dice three times and rubbed them between her breasts.
Shizune handed Tsunade an entire bottle of liquor.

Tsunade put all her money in. The dice rolled. Everyone counted the seconds as tall as the stack of chips in front of them. The dice fell as sudden and as hard as Tsunade fell to the floor. All the chips she had won were taken away at her loss.

"Why is she so heavy?" Tomu complained as he helped Shizune carry the former Kage drunk out onto the streets of Konoha in the middle of the day.

"Okay, we can drop her here," Shizune said.

They dropped Tsunade. She didn't stir an inch. Shizune wiped the heat from her forehead. "Alright, what's going on?"

"The Mizukage is planning to execute Tsunade. Konohamaru wants us to plant a double."

"We need a corpse in order to do that," Shizune replied thoughtfully.

"You are not allowed to be here! Former ninja of leaf are not allowed to loiter!" A patrolling Mist ninja demanded as he spotted them, neared them, reared back and collapsed on the ground with a senbon needle sticking out of his head.

"It seems the plan has worked to keep the Mizukage's attention," Konohamaru said solemnly to the assembly in the apartment. Every few seconds, he constantly stole glances at Hinata who stood in the corner. He didn't know if he was more worried about her silence or the sickly pallor coming over her skin.

Hohei looked at the Clan Head as well. He couldn't activate his byakugan. He couldn't bear to watch the suffering Hanabi endured for the sake of the mission. He did consider himself a coward, just reasonable enough to know he didn't have to be a witness to everything.

"The Mizukage is sending a regiment toward Uzu looking for the children," Hinata suddenly replied. She hadn't deactivated her byakugan in two days. The strain was showing in the throbbing veins around her eyes.

"Tenten, head out of the village and plant a false trail. Lead them in circles," Konohamaru answered. He had to constantly evolve and adjust to the sudden lies that Hanabi were telling the Mizukage.

"My pleasure," Tenten smirked.

"When we enter Phase B, kill them."

Tenten knew she was going to enjoy the hunt. Before she left, she sent Hinata a worried looked. Even though Tenten had slept with the Hinata's husband on several occasions, not that Hinata evidently cared much, Tenten was still concerned for the woman she considered a friend.

Tenten left out the window.

"Five seconds," Hohei reported to Konohamaru.

Five. Four. Three. Two. Hohei stood up. One. And caught the Clan Head in his arms as she collapsed from chakra exhaustion.

Konohamaru finally took the opportunity to take advantage of her unconscious state. Konohamaru
slapped a seal on Hinata's forehead and locked her ability to use chakra or use her byakugan. Konohamaru didn't like standing around while Hanabi was being tortured but that didn't mean Hinata had to watch. He swore that the only one who rivaled her stubbornness was Naruto.

"If her chakra is exhausted then her shadow clones watching the kids and Shion have disappeared. I want Mushi and Tomu to go watch Shion. Let me know immediately if she wakes up."

"Hohei, place Hinata with the kids." Konohamaru allowed Hohei to handle the Hyūga Clan Head out of simple respect. The teenage Hyuuga had grown taller over the past few months and easily carried Hinata in his arms. Hohei wrapped a henge around them and carefully leapt from the window.

The apartment was empty but for one.

Konohamaru had gotten in trouble trying to save Udon. He had put his own mission at risk in an attempt to save his friend. What was right and what was wrong?

Should Konohamaru risk an attempt to extract Hanabi if the ordeal the Mizukage was putting her through became life-threatening? Failure and the risk of exposure could put everything Naruto planned into ruin.

Konohamaru breathed slowly, in and out, in the darkness. He had to wait for Ino. He had to put his trust in her as Naruto put his trust in Konohamaru. Konohamaru counted the seconds and all he could do was hope he wasn’t going to lose another friend. Sometimes the mission was far more important than one person’s life.

Sometimes you had to leave a friend behind.

Hinata woke to the sensation of feather light legs brushing across her skin. She stirred and the beetles dispersed up the walls and clung to the ceiling. Hinata held her aching head as she pulled herself to sit on the bed and found Ame staring cross-legged at her.

"My mission is to watch you," Ame announced and crossed her arms, enjoying the sudden twist of events after weeks of being babysat by Hinata. Now it was her turn to babysit. Small feet padded against the soft clay floor. Behind Ame, Ichigo's red hair streaked across the room in an attempt to catch one of the elusive beetles that scattered whenever he came near.

Hinata immediately attempted to activate her byakugan. Nothing happened. She looked up and stared at the mirror inset within an armoire. Hinata traced her fingers along the seal around her head. She attempted to release herself but did not have the knowledge how. She considered leaving the hive to find Konohamaru and demand that he take it off, but that meant she had to leave without creating a henge and that meant risking the children's discovery if she was caught.

Hinata had to admit Konohamaru learned well from Naruto. She was trapped in the very place she relied on for protection. No one that was not a friend of the Aburame ever made it past the first level of the hive. They were currently residing in the mid-level catacombs as the lower level hives were too dangerous for anyone other than the Aburame Clan Head to enter.

Hinata attempted to gauge her abilities to fight without chakra in case someone attacked. It was possible for her Jyūken to be used as a purely martial arts style but she hadn't used it in that way in so long.
"I can take off the seal," Ame smiled cheekily. She managed to negotiate with Konohamaru to formally be granted this task as her first D-rank mission, "but only if we're being attacked."

Hinata looked at Ame blankly. Great, she was at the mercy of a child.

Hinata moved from the bed. "I'm going to the bathroom," Hinata replied after Ame shot her a suspicious look. Hinata closed the bathroom door behind her and the beetles scurried away at the sound to cling to the darkness in the corners. Hinata stared into the blank air and her thoughts were consumed by Hanabi.

Was she okay? Had the Mizukage decided to torture her again? Was she dead?

"Ichigo, if you move they are going to run away," Ame instructed when Ichigo bounced his head off the wall. Beetles crawled through Ame's hair and clothes. "You have to be still."

Ichigo sat up from the ground and went still as if playing a game. The beetles began to approach him. "I miss daddy," Ichigo whispered.

Ame kicked her legs against the bed. Neither Konohamaru nor Hinata would tell them why her dad was no longer in Konoha. She knew it had to be bad. "Me too," Ame said after a moment of thought. "It's your bedtime Ichigo. Put on your pajamas."

Ichigo pouted. "No."

Ame placed her hands on her hips. "Daddy will be sad if he hears you're not being a good boy when he gets back."

"Me is good boy," Ichigo complained and raced over to their bags of clothing as if it was a normal night and he was afraid Naruto would be home at any minute when he had told them to be ready for bed.

Ame watched Ichigo, then she sat up when she heard noise from the bathroom. Afraid Hinata was trying to escape on her watch Ame raced and leaned her ear to the door. She went still at the soft sound of tears.

Ame stared at the door. Hinata and Ame did not have the best relationship but Ame knew how much her Dad cared about Hinata so Ame tolerated her. But Ame had never thought she would ever hear the "Honorable High Sister" Hinata cry. Besides Hinata was a grown-up and they weren't supposed to cry.

Ame pushed against the door and it swung open. When Ame entered the bathroom, Hinata looked up from the floor in shock. She had forgotten to lock the door. Hinata quickly attempted to wipe her eyes, ashamed, embarrassed, and felt as if Ame had just walked in on her naked.

Before Hinata could pick herself up from the ground, Ame gave her a hug. Hinata stared startled at the weight of the little girl on her chest. Slowly Hinata returned the hug. She tightened her grip and the feeling of Ame's small frame reminded Hinata of the times she used to hold Hanabi in their youth. She had held Hanabi when Hanabi had a nightmare. She had held Hanabi when Hanabi had a nightmare. She had held Hanabi when Hanabi was scolded by their father. She had held Hanabi until clan politics tore their relationship apart.

Not wanting to miss out on the fun, Ichigo pushed room for him on Hinata's lap and cuddled into her arms. Hinata held the children tight against her as another bout of uncontrollable tears left her chest.

"Don't cry," Ame whispered into Hinata's soft bosom and said without a doubt, "Daddy's coming home soon."
The cell door opened and light dawned on the hunched figure. The high-heels of Kirigakure's secretary echoed off the stone. The chained figure lifted his head at the sound.

Uzumaki Naruto opened his eyes out of meditation. Naruto smirked around the blood caked in his blonde beard. "Nice skirt."

For a moment, just a small one, Boar considered leaving Naruto in the dungeon. He released his henge to reveal the passive ANBU mask. "Phase B has been initiated."

After days of meditating and gathering natural chakra, Naruto overloaded the shackles made from Sameheda's scales. Naruto broke out as if the chains were specks of dust around his wrists. Naruto Uzumaki was never held a captive. He always had the decision to leave.

"I trust Konoha is still standing?" Naruto asked as he began to pull out the kunai Suigetsu had left for him. Naruto proceeded to drop each on the ground like metallic drops of rain.

"It was still there last time I checked," Boar shrugged and watched Naruto as he rolled the soreness from his shoulders. Boar had been placed in Kiri in case Nanami chose not to go to Konoha. "But there was a slight deviation from the plan."

Naruto frowned. "Konohamaru handled it?"

"Your wife fell ill and Hinata was forced to return to Konoha." Boar saw the spark of fear that erupted in Naruto's eyes. Boar quickly responded. "They are unharmed."

Naruto released the rasengan that was forming in his hands. If anything had happened to them all of this would have been for nothing. "Good," Naruto said with an ache of dryness in his voice.

"You put your faith in us Hokage-sama. We are your ANBU. We will not fail you."

Naruto gave Boar a rough smile. "I know. I would not have sat here getting the shit beat out of me if I didn't have faith in you."

The sarcastic smirk couldn't be seen from behind the mask but Naruto knew it was there. "It is my opinion that every Kage should get the shit beat out of them every once in a while, to keep them humble."

"I will fire you," Naruto warned, half-teasing, half-not.

"It's about time I retired." Boar lifted his hands and displayed all of Naruto's items that had been confiscated.

Naruto put on the robe of the Toad Sage. The cloak covered the ANBU mark on his shoulder that did not fade away even in retirement. He strapped on the katana he had grown fond of. He retrieved his hiraishin kunai.

Naruto stepped forward atop the head of the Fourth Hokage and looked out over the Village Hidden in Leaves. The Mist ninja scurried in the streets. A mass of Cloud ninja ringed around the gate. The sun was setting and shadows were beginning to stretch over Konoha.

The shade touched Naruto's expression as he stood on the heads of the Kages that came before.
A Kage cannot stand alone.
Chapter Forty Two

Phase Two

The village of Konohagakure stood. Not a leaf was out of place.

Suigetsu reared his head back and laughed until his sides ached, "I guess your bomb thing doesn't work."

Nanami's hands shivered as she stared at the beacon she held. She pressed the button again, and again, and again, but every push of the button was a fast plummet of her dreams.

Her desperation fueled Suigetsu's cackle that hitched a maniacal glint in his smile. "Konoha belongs to me. It will be destroyed when I say it is destroyed."

"Funny, I don't see your face on the village rocks."

Suigetsu's grin dropped. Nanami peeled her eyes from the failed beacon and found Uzumaki Naruto lounging in the Kage's chair, comfortable, relaxed, as if he had been there for a while. "I see you've kept my seat warm for me but I'd like my hat back now," Naruto said as if he had come into work on any normal day.

"Uzumaki Naruto," Nanami seethed his name. She discarded the beacon painfully as her hand had held onto it so tight the joints of her fingers popped. Nanami reached in her belt and lifted the trigger in her sweaty palm. "If I can't destroy Konoha, then I will destroy you with me."

Naruto gave Nanami his disappointment. "There is always a choice."

Nanami has waited years for this moment, to finally come face to face with the man that took her family away. "Did you have a choice when your Hokage ordered you to kill my family? Did you choose to spare my life because of your pity and insufferable mercy? Did you make the right choice, Uzumaki?!"

"The world is more complicated than right and wrong," Naruto responded. "I simply made my choice. It's time for you to make yours."

"I've already made it." Nanami couldn't back down even if she wanted to, she had come too far. She pressed the trigger connected to the bomb around her chest. She pressed it again, then wailed in frustration at the failure of her last gambit.

Naruto's eyes narrowed as he leaned forward against his desk with as much command of the room as a judge in session of a court. "You've chosen to become my enemy."

His words felt like the rope of a noose scraping around her neck. The trigger slapped against Nanami's thigh as she turned and ran. She slammed into a wall as she turned a corner and rushed down the stairs toward the room with the impromptu radio.

If only she could get a message to the organization and figure out what was going on then there was still hope. She could-

Hyūga Hinata plucked her hand out of the severed spinal cord and stepped over Nanami's dead corpse.
Hinata picked up the set of keys that had stepped down the stairs, fallen out of Nanami's pocket when her body hit the cold hard floor. Hinata's footsteps were soundless as she descended into the Tower's basement.

The keys clicked into the lock of the jail cell.

Naruto flipped over the chair and blocked Sameheda with his bare palm. The blade cut into the lines of Naruto's hand, but Naruto swept the sword aside and came with a right hook into Suigetsu's gut. There was a more solid resistance when typically Naruto's hand would have come out the other side.

Naruto dipped underneath the counter attack and stepped back with a smirk. "Not as slippery today?"

"I'm hydrated enough," Suigetsu replied as his body mutated in and out of his liquid form. He lifted Sameheda in a wide swing, stepped forward, and then evaporated into the air.

"Predictable," Naruto scoffed at Suigetsu's bluff. Naruto reached down and picked up the hat fallen on the ground. He casually brushed off the dust and replaced the Kage's hat atop his head. Naruto leaned against the desk and inspected the state of the office. "I'm going to have to replace the carpet."

Then Naruto casually sat back and closed his eyes. He activated sage mode and focused. He could sense Suigetsu's chakra scattered throughout the air but the moisture in Konoha could only take him so far. Suigetsu's chakra solidified outside the Kage's Tower.

Naruto opened his eyes and walked to the panoramic window. He watched Suigetsu run gleefully through the streets of Konoha, as if he had gotten away. Naruto swirled a hiraishin kunai in his hand. Suigetsu did not run toward the gate, instead he ran towards the river that flowed through Konoha. Suigetsu reached toward the river, almost touched the glistening running water, when Naruto activated the hiraishin kunai. The seal on the kunai glowed as bright as the seal Naruto had placed on the bottom of Sameheda only moments before.

Suigetsu found himself in the middle of the dry and arid Suna Desert. Suigetsu flitted his eyes over the restless fire-burnt dunes. Wind swept through the cracking strands of Suigetsu's hair. His skin began to shrivel like a land-locked fish drying in the sun. There was no more running away.

Suigetsu fell to his knees. One grip remained on Sameheda's hilt, not because of some twisted sense of false hope, but the sword was the only thing he had.

"You never really wanted to be a Swordsman," Mangetsu said softly.

"It was just a game," Suigetsu told himself, and empty laughter escaped from him. He laughed until he choked on it and a sharp pain cut through his throat.

"You never played that game before graduation," Mangetsu noted. "It's alright to be angry about it."

Naruto stepped forward and stood beside the kneeling Suigetsu. For a brief moment, it seemed as if they were two bystanders to the great expanse of barren desert.

The direction of the wind changed.

The wind surged forward and cut through Suigetsu in all directions, gaining friction through flesh solid and permanent. It rained blood in the desert and like tears, hissed in heat on the sand.
"You should have never left Kiri."

"And how do we know this plan is going to work?" Tsume questioned after Shikamaru revealed the gambit behind Naruto's surrender.

"He's the Hokage. We have to trust him," Sarutobi reasoned. Inoichi and Sarutobi shared a cell with Tsume who in her boredom managed to scratch the back of her neck with the end of her sharp toenails.

"I don't remember voting him in," Tsume snarled even though she knew how the political process worked. According to law, if the current Kage stepped down or was killed in time of war, the named heir would take the place of Kage until a formal vote could be made. It kept the village out of political deadlock during a time of war.

"I'm getting awfully thin," Chouji complained. Shikamaru didn't see a difference considering the Mizukage had never bothered to replace the jailers with his men. The Konoha police fed them rather well.

"I trust the Hokage," Kurenai said faithfully while sharing a cell with Shino and Neji, neither were very talkative cellmates. Neji was more or less annoyed by the chakra draining cuffs that kept him from activating his byakugan. Dark insects climbed out of Shino's ear and back down his arm.

For the first time since their imprisonment, Shino spoke and startled everyone who had forgotten he was even there. "Phase Two is in effect."

"Phase Two? What's phase Two?" Tsume asked.

Everyone turned to Shikamaru whom everyone had thought was the only person with knowledge of the plan before Shino spoke aloud. Shikamaru smirked, impressed that they had managed to enter Phase Two. Shikamaru had helped Naruto iron out the details but had to admit Naruto was the only person crazy enough to put this plan in action.

Shikamaru revealed what Naruto named the second phase: "Phase Two: Kick Some Ass."

"Now that's what I'm talking about." Tsume grinned as she walked forward on her haunches.

"Everyone pay close attention," Shikamaru said as he drew a rough map of Konoha through the dirt on the cell floor. "There are mist ninja in the streets and cloud ninja at the gates." Shikamaru divided the map into several quadrants. "Each of us will take a section of Konoha and clear them out. Once we have cleaned up, return to your clans and prepare them for battle against Cloud." He assigned each Clan Head, except Sarutobi, a quadrant. "If we coordinate our efforts and use surprise to our advantage we should have Mist ninja cleared out of Konoha within minutes."

Suddenly the cell doors screeched open. "I see you're already up to speed," Konohamaru said as he released the Clan Heads from their imposed captivity.

Tsume had gnawed through her cuffs and broke them off her wrists easily. She was the first one out the door and onto the streets. Konohamaru released the cuffs from the rest.

"You alright, son?" Sarutobi asked as Konohamaru helped his father onto his feet.

"Nothing much, saving the village like gramps," Konohamaru smiled. "You should be safe at the compound. Stay there until the storm blows over."
Sarutobi tightened his grip on his son's shoulder. "Dinner at the house tonight. I'll make sure your mom cooks you're favorite."

"Wouldn't miss it," Konohamaru promised. Konohamaru watched as his father followed the strongest individuals in Konoha out of jail. Sometimes strength wasn't physical.

Konohamaru quickly stopped Neji before he got too far. "Neji, Lee will cover your quadrant. You want to be at the hospital."

Neji finally activated his byakugan and nodded without question. Neji headed towards Konoha's hospital.

Perhaps she wasn't born with the byakugan but Tenten had sharp eyes on her. She drew back the long bow and targeted the group of Mist ninja camped in the valley below. They slept on the border where the mighty country of Uzu once stood, unknowing that the only light Tenten needed was the light of the stars.

With an arrow she had forged herself, Tenten released the deadly missile and struck the scout tight in the vocal chords before he failed to call for help. One by one, Tenten picked them off until their snores were assassinated into deadly silence.

Only one more left.

Sometimes picking off prey at a range wasn't very challenging. For several minutes, Tenten debated which weapon she wanted to use. Then she released a storage scroll.

Tenten entered the camp of corpses. Tents were ripped with holes where her arrows had to cut through fabric.

The rings on each of Tenten's fingers connected to a pair of metal rods with sharpened ends. The Emeici released the sharp sound of a windmill before they cut into the sleeping ninja's neck.

Never heard or seen, Tenten activated her radio, "Mist ninja outside of Konoha eliminated."

Shikamaru stared at the cloudless night sky. The darkness was fathomless before a new moon.

Waves of shadow nipped at Shikamaru's heels as he walked through Konoha. His hands never left his pockets, not even to form seals. Claws of shadow lifted from the ground and snatched Mist ninja off rooftops and corners to devour them in darkness.

Shikamaru finally lifted his hands from his pocket to activate the radio, "All clear."

Chouji's quadrant encompassed the late night food stalls. He appreciated that Shikamaru had thoughtfully assigned him to this sector and immediately ordered a few kebabs, onigiri, and chips to settle his stomach.

Stop eating food and clear your section.

Chouji dropped a few chips on his shirt and stained it with BBQ. "Ino?" Chouji asked. "Where are you?"

I'm not in Konoha at the moment. I'm trying to get back as fast as I can.
Chouji hadn't heard Ino's voice in months, not since he had proposed to her and received nothing in reply. He didn't necessarily want to have the conversation about the proposal while she was in his head. But there was one thing he had to know, "We miss you. Shikamaru does too, he's just too lazy to say it. Ino, you alright?"

A momentary pause.

"I'm better."

Chouji smiled before he finished the rest of his chips. Mist ninja had gathered around him, alarmed that a leaf ninja was out past curfew. Whether or not Ino rejected him, Chouji could accept her decision as long as he knew she was okay. Chouji licked his fingers and opened the packet of onigiri as the Mist ninja charged towards him.

Chouji blinked when a green flash sped past and the Mist ninja all dropped dead onto the pavement.

"Lee!" Chouji complained.

Lee flashed Chouji a thumbs up, "I finished my area and decided to help my fellow comrades."

Before Chouji could eat another chip, Lee was gone as soon as he came.

Stark white bones rained to the ground as Shino walked the streets and caught every living creature in his dark cloud.

A runaway dog barked at Shino's coming. Shino gave the dog a passing glance as he continued down the street.

The dog cowered and whimpered as the dark cloud engulfed him. The dark cloud of insects passed, leaving the tiny pet intact. The dog barked happily at the gift of bones at his feet and chewed carelessly on what remained of any Mist ninja in the surrounding area.

The scalpel was as sharp as a kunai. Sakura secured the surgery mask over her face as tight as the hitai-ite on her forehead. Sakura commanded her team of medic ninja with the deft efficiency of an ANBU Captain.

The heart beat monitor was a constant reminder she was still in this battle.

Hinata watched. She sat outside the emergency room with her Byakugan activated. Her stillness left many to wonder if she still breathed.

Hinata moved, a light hitch of the shoulders, when she felt a warmth wrap around her hand. Shocked gasps erupted through the hospital as Naruto Uzumaki made his first public appearance since his return to Konoha.

"You should be taking care of the Mist ninja," Hinata whispered.

Naruto shrugged. "I'm sure the Clan Heads can handle it. Besides, Lee has probably taken care of half of them by now." Naruto tightened his hand around hers. "She's going to make it."

"It should have been me."

Naruto placed a finger under her chin and forced Hinata to look at him. "I hate to say it but I'm glad
it wasn't. If I knew that was you in that emergency room I would have let Suigetsu escape, because
sometimes my heart puts a wrench into all of my carefully laid plans. If you're going to be angry at
anyone be angry at me. I put Hanabi on the mission. I put her life on the line."

Sometimes, words didn't help. Hinata snatched away and continued to stare forward. Naruto sat back
and lounged in the chair. He was focused on the red light of the emergency sign and how tight
Hinata held onto his hand.

Naruto looked up when he sensed Neji walk into the waiting room. Neji stopped right beside them,
his own byakugan focused on the activity inside the emergency room. For a brief moment, Naruto
and Neji made eye contact and the message was relayed clearly: Jealousies aside, Hanabi was in
surgery and that was all that mattered.

They waited.

A shadow clone dispersed and informed Naruto that Konoha was completely cleared of Mist ninja. It
was time.

Naruto stood to his feet. "I need to welcome our guests."

Hinata nodded in understanding and then after a moment, wondered why Naruto hadn't left yet.
Naruto motioned down to his tightly gripped hand. Hinata let go.

Naruto began to form the familiar hand seal to create a shadow clone. "Do not waste your chakra,"
Hinata told him.

Naruto leaned forward and said, "I'm the Hokage. You can't tell me what to do." Naruto created the
shadow clone and only seconds later, Hinata struck out her hand and the shadow clone disappeared
in a cloud of smoke.

"Do not waste your chakra," Hinata repeated sternly. "Despite the odds, if anything were to happen
to you, could you leave me believing that it was my fault? I will be comforted in knowing that you
face the Raikage with all of your chakra. I will be watching."

The Hokage surrendered to her reasoning with a drop of his shoulders. Naruto leaned forward and
gave a quick peck on the cheek, careful not to disrupt her view of the emergency room. "I'll be back
in ten minutes," Naruto promised.

The Raikage surveyed the formidable gates of Konoha. He could feel his prize close at hand. They
were only minutes away from their assault. Kumo had arrived in good time to beat Iwa but the
Raikage wanted a solid foothold into the village before Iwa arrived at the doorstep of what would be
one of the biggest battles in history.

"When Karui and Omoi's regiment arrive at the south gate we will launch a coordinated assault."
The Raikage ordered Darui who stood beside him.

Darui never thought he would see the gates of Konoha so soon after having been released as a
prisoner just a few weeks ago.

"You think that little punk is quivering in fear?" The Raikage asked smugly. The Cloud army was at
his back. Anyone would be quivering in fear.

"Welcome to Konoha. Sorry I'm late."
The Raikage craned his neck upwards. Darui, along with the rest of the Cloud army dropped their jaws in disbelief to find Naruto lounging atop the gates. Naruto tipped his hat in greeting.

Several thoughts ran through the Raikage's head all at once. He had it on good account, not only from Darui, but from his spies inside Konoha that Naruto had legitimately surrendered. "I thought you were rotting in a cell in Kiri."

Naruto grinned mischievously. "I like to vacation there."

"So what? This all was some giant bluff?" The Raikage asked in an attempt to figure out Naruto's endgame.

"Essentially," Naruto admitted. "This was all some elaborate scheme to kill Suigetsu, but he was only a secondary target. I always had an even bigger target in mind."

C rushed through the crowd with the report, "Raikage-sama, Iwa has begun attacking our flank."

The pieces clicked together. The Raikage understood clearly what was happening. Iwa had been intentionally hanging back, waiting. And now, the gates of Konoha were at his front and Iwa at his back. The Raikage had walked right into a trap.

The Raikage lifted his hand and hit Darui in the back of the head. Darui cringed, while at the same time realizing his role in this elaborate plan.

With nowhere else to turn to and the excitement of battle beginning to churn in his stomach, the Raikage threw down his cloak. "Let's settle this once and for all Demon Fox."

The hands that had bumped fists in a moment of solidarity only a few weeks ago collided in a force of power that shook the world.

"Long time no see," Karui said with a hand on her hip.

"Long time no see," Shikamaru agreed as he stood facing Karin. It was the Jounin exams all over again. It had always been a weight on Karui's conscious that Shikamaru had spared her life back during the exams. "How's the kid?"

"Daddy's little girl," Shikamaru answered. "Yours?"

Karu smirked. "Mom's little terror. You know, I would love to share baby pictures but I need to get through that gate."

The southern gate of Konoha arched above Shikamaru's head. "Not today."

Shikamaru formed hand seals. Karui did the same. It was a battle of speed as both shinobi attempted to complete their jutsu first. Shikamaru spread blood across a summoning scroll.

Karu's hands were pressed tightly to her chest and was unable to complete the last hand seal for her jutsu as a large fist erupted from the ground and continued to grow until a large armored samurai shadow giant held her aloft in the air.

The circumstances were different the last time they fought each other. This time they were enemies. The shadow samurai tightened his fist around Karui.

Karu gritted her teeth and even though her bones were crushing together, she managed to wiggle enough space to complete her jutsu. A storm was brewing when a bright eruption of lightning lit the
sky. The sudden flash of light dispersed the large shadow monstrosity, which allowed Karui to drop to the ground.

"I'm not that easy to defeat," Karui claimed. It was that same grit and determination that threw off Shikamaru's plans before.

Shikamaru smirked. "I don't need to defeat you."

Even though many of the bystanders couldn't see the fight between the two hi-speed ninja, they all could feel it. The shockwaves that bounced from attacks blew many off their feet. The Raikage jolted back from a fist to the face and crashed into the unyielding stone of Konoha's gate. The Raikage peeled himself out the gate and wiped blood from his lips.

The Raikage chuckled. He noted the fact that Naruto didn't bother with any other jutsu than his Fox Cloak. The fight largely remained one of fists, sweat, and muscles creaking at every blow. Naruto scratched the ground with his hind leg and the heat of chakra burned around his skin.

The Raikage blocked with his forearm Naruto's next attack, missed with a front kick and Naruto side-stepped toward the side of the Raikage's missing arm. Naruto countered with a punch that hit the Raikage so hard in his temple, the Raikage stumbled sideways in a sudden fit of dizziness.

The tendons in A's back breathed and his heart thudded from rapid excitement in his chest. Even though the Raikage was being defeated, he never felt more alive in his entire life.

"It's time to end this," Naruto said with finality. He had no plans to stall the fight any longer than it needed to be.

Both Kage-level shinobi charged towards each other at the speed of lightning. The wind swept past and gently rocked the Raikage off-course, straight toward a punch that came under the Raikage's chin. The Raikage doubled back and landed heavily on the ground. The trees shook at the impact and leaves floated before his vision.

"I lost," The Raikage said as the battle stilled. Blood brushed the teeth of the Raikage's broken smile. "You are a worthy opponent."

A pain welled in Naruto's chest as the Raikage conceded defeat. The Raikage's shaky arm lifted and his hand formed a fist. Naruto connected their fists together with one hand, leaned closer, and with the other hand plunged a kunai into the Raikage's throat.

"Good bye, old friend."

For a few minutes Darui couldn't breathe. Before he understood what he was doing he withdrew his katana and neared Naruto's turned back.

Naruto simply stood up, very much aware of Darui behind him. Naruto looked over his shoulder with narrow eyes and the corpse of the Raikage between them.

"Here we are again, Darui," Naruto said. "Your move."

The last time Darui had faced Naruto was still clear in his mind. His decision had caused hundreds of lives. With Iwa at their back and the Demon Fox no longer focused on the Raikage, Darui knew they were going to get massacred. Was standing their ground in a losing battle truly worth it?
Darui looked down at his blade. His katana fell from his grip and in a hoarse voice, "Lightning surrenders."

"I'm not that easy to defeat," Karui claimed. It was that same grit and determination that threw off Shikamaru's plans before.

Shikamaru smirked. "I don't need to defeat you."

Shikamaru straightened from his crouch and pointed up a finger.

"What?" Karui trailed her eyes upwards to the sudden blue lightning bolt that was sent careening into the sky and exploded outwards like fireworks. Karui dropped her arms in disbelief. All around, Cloud ninja held their swords with indecision, unable to comprehend the meaning of surrender. They were Kumo - the country who valued physical strength and frowned upon weakness.

The surrounding ninja watched as their commanding officer slowly bent her knee and bowed her head. Karui placed her katana on the ground and it was the hardest thing she had ever done. With a strength in her voice, Karui said, "Konoha has proven be a worthy opponent. Kumo concedes defeat."

"How is she holding up?"

Naruto lounged back and replaced his hand around Hinata's slim fingers. The chair was still warm.

Hinata leaned her head against Naruto's shoulder and smiled. "Hanabi is going to live."

"I have decided to hold your top ninja as prisoners until all Cloud ninja are gone from Fire Country and all war reparations are made," Naruto said to the one-sided negotiations in the Hokage's office.

"War reparations?" Darui asked uncertainly as he sat in the opposite chair strategically harder and shorter than Naruto's own. Naruto handed Darui the bill. When Darui looked at the number he could have fainted.

"I have collected a rough estimate of Lightning's taxes and income. Based on this estimate, the price I am requesting is doable. To be honest, the price tag would not have been so much if we didn't need the money to support the rebuilding of the capital. With a five-year plan, the money isn't too extraneous."

Darui blanched. "But that would suggest you are going to hold all of our top ninja for five years until the debt is paid?"

"Yes," Naruto said blatantly. Naruto watched the regret of Darui's decision wash over Darui's face. "It is doable," Naruto assured.

Darui nodded his head numbly, still trying to get accustomed to the itch of defeat. Naruto handed Darui the list of ninja that were to be held in Konoha. The list included the names of Omoi, Karui, C, and Killer Bee.

"I'll retrieve Killer Bee myself for the sake of speed and his health," Naruto informed Darui. "I
believe he is still recovering from the last battle but I am certain our medics can help him recover."

"I'm sure they can," Darui said. He was more than aware that their own medics had not cracked whatever Killer Bee had been poisoned with.

"Along with your top ninja, I will allow close family members to join them if requested. I assure you that the prisoners will be treated with the utmost respect and the best of Konoha's hospitality, as you have already experienced yourself." Then Naruto leaned forward with steel in his voice, "As to be expected, if any payments are late or anyone attempts to escape, I will kill the hostages."

"I understand."

Naruto placed forward the contractual agreement that waited for the Raikage's signature.

For Darui, to pick up the ink brush was harder than picking up a sword.

"I'm fine," Hanabi complained even though for once she didn't mind the smothering.

Hinata had impressed herself onto the medical team once Hanabi was cleared from the emergency room. Hinata ignored Hanabi's complaints while slapping away the hand of a nurse who had reached over her. Hinata turned sharp eyes to the nurse and the nurse backed away while Hinata cleaned the wounds with a cotton of alcohol.

Sakura entered the medical room after receiving a host of complaints from her nurses. "Hinata, they are only trying to do their job."

"I'll take care of her," Hinata said simply.

Sakura motioned her nurses to back off, only willing to concede due to the fact Hinata was a certified medic ninja.

"The bandages need to be changed every few hours and I want to get her started on physical therapy as soon as possible." Sakura began to give a laundry list of things that needed to be done but was interrupted when blonde hair peeked into the room.

"Yes, Hokage-sama?" Sakura asked in a patient voice that reminded Naruto if he wasn't the Hokage, he would have been kicked out.

Naruto grinned as he entered the hospital room. The more he walked forward the more Hanabi's bandages came view, the more came into view what was missing.

"Awesome haircut," Naruto said as he playfully teased her bright neon orange hair.

"Naruto, she's injured," Hinata argued.

"I'm fine." Hanabi shrugged and said as if it was nothing, "Its only two broken legs and a missing arm."

Naruto smiled at Hanabi's nonchalant attitude. "There's a line of people outside for you, Neji, Konohamaru..." Naruto listed. "But there is one visitor who wants to see you and needs to go really soon."

"No," Hinata said immediately. "She's only cleared for family visitors."

"I'm sorry, I didn't want to intrude." Hinata watched as Hanabi's eyes lit up. Hinata turned to find
Darui standing at the doorway. "Heard what happened. Just wanted to drop by before I'm kicked out of Fire Country."

"How about we give them some privacy," Naruto suggested but Hinata didn't seem inclined to move. She was determined to stay and chaperone the conversation. Without warning, Hinata went careening into the air and was thrown over Naruto's shoulder. Hinata would have fought back but didn't want to undermine Naruto's authority in front of the Raikage. A soft laugh spotted Hanabi's lips. Naruto dropped Hinata to her feet in the hallway.

"You've only given them the illusion of privacy," Hinata crossed her arms and activated her byakugan.

"She's still watching isn't she?" Darui asked after the comical exit.

"I'm afraid so. I doubt she's going to let me out of her sight anytime soon," Hanabi sighed deeply and then looked up with a smug smirk. The sound of fireworks and cheers of celebration could be heard from the window. "Going back to Fire Country? Guess you got your ass kicked."

"Essentially," Darui admitted.

"Which would mean… oh," Red embarrassed Hanabi's cheeks once she realized that the Raikage was visiting her in the hospital. "You certainly didn't have to visit me."

"Your hair is orange," Darui observed.

"Got a problem with it?" "It's certainly not… dull," Darui chuckled. "How are you holding up?"

It was a question Hanabi hadn't given her time to fully absorb yet. The medics said with successful physical therapy she should be able to walk again, but there was nothing they could do for her arm. She attempted to move her phantom limb.

"I guess," Hanabi found her throat choking with tears. Without two arms, she no longer had the ability to make hand signs. "I guess I'm not a ninja anymore."

"Bullshit," Darui said. "I worked years with a man who cut his own arm off and was never lesser because of it. You're a strong woman and you have people around you who love you and support you. I know you'll be fine."

Hanabi smiled. "Thanks."

Darui straightened and didn't want to take up too much time. "Sorry, there are other people who want to see you and I don't have much time. I should get going." Darui held out a fist. Hanabi found a giggle and shifted her only arm to bump fist with him. "You're welcome in Kumogakure if you're brave enough."

Hanabi sneered. She twisted her wrist and caught him by the arm, then tugged him forward. Her hand caught in his hair and their lips came together. Hanabi said with a teasing smirk on his lips, "I'm a Hyūga. I'm not afraid of any Cloud ninja."

"I don't like this," Hinata said as she tapped her fingers along her crossed arms.

Naruto chuckled as he watched Hinata retain her disapproving frown. "I'm willing to see where it goes. At the very least, it's past time for the Hyūga and Cloud to settle their debts."
"What do you mean, 'willing to see where it goes'?'" Hinata questioned.

Naruto realized he had bit his tongue too early. "Hanabi is still a ninja. She's going to get tired of lying around Konoha. I was thinking that when this war is completely past us of assigning her as foreign liaison to Cloud. As she is a Hyūga it'll be a sign of our good faith and she has a personal relationship with the Raikage. It seems reasonable."

"No."

It wasn't as if Naruto was expecting anything different from Hinata. He knew she still needed time to sort through her emotions, the logic, and the fresh imagery of her sister in the emergency room with two broken legs, a missing arm, and too much blood loss still raw and hurting.

"Of course, my final decision is still months away. We can discuss it in more detail later," Naruto said tactfully, expertly dancing around the minefield that was an emotional Hinata.

"Later," Hinata repeated. Naruto knew the subject was far from dropped but Hinata did him the favor of changing the subject, "Any plans for tonight?"

Naruto tucked his hands into his pockets. "Sakura hasn't cleared Shion's release from the hospital so it'll just be me and the kids. I plan on celebrating with an early ramen night and reading a bedtime story or two." Naruto chuckled. "Nothing exciting for this old man."

Hinata smiled softly. Naruto had become such a Dad, but her plans were just as equally boring compared to the drunken ninja dancing in the streets. Hinata plans were to stay at the hospital with Hanabi.

"Perhaps after I tuck the kids in I'll stop back by. I could bring you some ramen leftovers."

"Will there be some left?" Hinata lightly tease.

"For you, I can make miracles happen," Naruto said in a husky voice.

Hinata's attention shifted for the first time in agonizing hours from Hanabi to Naruto's darkening eyes. Her body shivered in longing for the comfort of his touch and was addicted to the soft moments they shared when all their problems and worries fell away to a world that only existed for two.

"Am I interrupting?" Darui said as he closed the door to Hanabi's room and could feel the sexual tension.

"Yeah, no shit," Naruto grumbled at the jolting break of eye contact.

"See you tonight," Hinata said gracefully and exited the conversation by slipping back into the medic room.

"Eh, come on. Let me escort you to the gate," Naruto motioned Darui to follow him. After Naruto was sure he was out of Hinata's earshot and even so, waited another few minutes while Hinata shifted her full attention back to Hanabi, he told Darui, "In a few months, I'm going to assign a new foreign liaison to Cloud."

That was one Kage down, one more to get out ofKonoha.

The Tsuchikage, Kitsuchi opted to stand as he met in the Hokage's office. "We helped you with your war. Now you fulfill your promise and help us take Mountain."
"Of course," Naruto said smoothly. Naruto reached into a drawer of his desk and offered a scroll. Kurotsuchi stepped forward to retrieve it.

"In that scroll is all the information Konoha has gathered on Mountain which includes the details of an operation that managed to infiltrate the inside of their Hidden Village. I predict that your affinity with the earth elemental will prove more effective than our tactics," Naruto admitted. "Konoha will have a unit prepared to assist you but I don't know long it will take for us to organize as Kiri has wreaked havoc on our organizational structure. Although, once we have it up and running we can-

"No," Kitsuchi said. He had opened the storage scroll and was examining the detailed maps contained in the scroll.

Kurotsuchi leaned over her father's shoulder and pointed. "If we dig ninja here, here, and here, underneath points of their structural weaknesses we can bring their mountain down on top of them."

The scroll snapped close.

"No, we do not require Konoha's help. This is enough."

Naruto had on his game face. He didn't want to involve Konoha in another fight but he also needed to save face. He was betting on Iwa's pride to want to tackle the situation alone once they had acquired all of the data. "But please, if you need our help with anything let us know. Just as Iwa have proven a faithful ally, Konoha wishes to do so as well."

"We can fight our own battles." The Tsuchikage tipped his hat. Naruto did the same. "It was a pleasure working with you. I do admit, when you first informed me of this plan to take down both the Mizukage and the Raikage at the same time I was skeptical. I see now Tsunade has prepared her successor well."

Kitsuchi gave a troubled stared towards Kurotsuchi. Kurotsuchi rolled her eyes. "Let's not get in this argument again, Dad."

Naruto stepped in. "I would also like to remind you of the Kage summit I am planning for next week. We must decide what to do with Kiri."

"I will be there," the Tsuchikage replied. Of course, Naruto thought. Iwa wouldn't want to miss out on sharing the spoils.

"Have a good night, Uzumaki," Kitsuchi turned for the door and said, "Come Kurotsuchi."

Kurotsuchi casually scratched her toes along her leg. "I think I'm going to hang around for a while."

Kurotsuchi shared a tense look with her father and Naruto swore they were about to erupt in an argument but both Iwa ninja were aware they were in the presence of the Hokage and their family drama could wait.

Kitsuchi left the office with a frown and returned to his ninja camped outside of Konoha. A great number of Iwa ninja were in Konoha celebrating.

"So," Kurotsuchi said as she sat atop the Kage's desk. "What sort of thing does a Uzumaki do to celebrate?"

"Ramen night and a bedtime story."

"The most dangerous ninja in the world wants to read a bedtime story?" Kurotsuchi leaned over in
disbelief.

Naruto smiled at her expression and reminded her, "I have kids and I haven't spent time with them for a long time but I can certainly point you in the direction of the bars."

"That's alright," Kurotsuchi jumped from the desk. She was certain she can find the bars if she followed the increasing density of drunken behavior. "Good night, Uzumaki. You deserve one."

"Hello Ino," Chouji said without pause as he walked out the shower with a towel wrapped around his waist. It wasn't new to find Ino suddenly in his bedroom as she had the tendency to test people when they were the most uncomfortable.

"What are you up to?" Ino asked as Chouji put on his underwear.

"Getting ready for tonight. You know what the Akimichi like to do to celebrate." Chouji's mouth watered in anticipation of tables laden with home-cooked food. It was going to be the best dinner party in town. Chouji moved into the walk-in closet that rivaled Ino's own.

"Wear the one your mom bought last week," Ino suggested.

Chouji grabbed the suit that had yet to be worn. It was a tad fancy for a party but he was the Clan Head of the Akimichi and he was always expected to wear more. Ino watched with her knees tucked under her as Chouji got dressed.

"Here," Ino said as she stood up and adjusted Chouji's tie. Ino could hear Chouji thoughts wondering what she wanted. She might as well spare him the wait. "I want a baby."

A sudden intake of breath and Chouji choked as if a chip had gotten caught in his throat. "What?"

"I want a baby," Ino repeated.

"No offense Ino," Chouji said carefully, "I'm not exactly sure if… um, have you even held a baby?"

"Not for very long," Ino admitted. She handed Chouji the small black box she found in Chouji's sock drawer, the place he uses to hide everything. It was the small black box that held her wedding ring inside of it. "Let's do this."

Ino could hear all of his doubts questioning if she was ready for such a commitment. The fact he didn't believe in her annoyed Ino and to show him differently Ino stepped forward. Once Chouji realized what she was trying to do, his thoughts shifted and Ino's mind was assaulted with emotions of overwhelming dedication, caring, and love. Ino was attacked so hard by Chouji's emotions that they were a barrier of resistance between their lips.

Ino had probably slept with both men and women aplenty but had never found anything that made her as nervous as this one kiss. Ino sat back on her heels with a pain in her voice. "Perhaps I'm not ready yet."

"Then you're not ready yet," Chouji said as he peeled the wedding box from Ino's hand and safely replaced it with his socks for safekeeping. "Come have dinner with me, the family misses you."

When Chouji turned around he was assaulted by Ino who drew into his arms and tucked her head into his chest. "Thanks for never giving up on me."
"Those two are too cute," Yoshino whispered as she passed Shikamaru asleep on the couch with Shikako resting peacefully on his chest. Shikamaru's pineapple hair was mirrored by the spiky ponytail atop his daughter's head. "She truly is daddy's little girl."

"Lazy, the both of them," Temari grumbled as she helped the elder woman with the basket of freshly cleaned clothes. The clothes had been outside drying all day in the sun and brought a warm spring smell to the Nara household.

"How was the Akimichi's dinner party?" Yoshino asked as she daintily folded a pair of Shikamaru's underwear. Shadows twisted around the objects in the home like comforting friends.

"They're still eating," Temari said in disbelief. "But Shikako and Shikamaru were getting grumpy so we decided to leave early. I believe most of the Yamanaka are still there. It truly surprises me how close the Ina-Shika-Cho Clans are. It's more than an alliance. It's a family."

Yoshino smiled. "I remember when I first married into this family. To a civilian it all seemed so overwhelming but they welcomed me with open arms. Even now, with Shikaku's death," there was a slight trembled in her voice, "they've all been so supporting."

Temari often watched Yoshino out of the corner of her eyes. Sometimes Yoshino would slow, wistfully past objects in the house that turned her typically cheerful expression melancholy. "I miss him," Yoshino responded to her daughter-in-law's worried expression, "but the moment Shikaku and I said our vows I knew to treasure every moment. I have no regrets. He's resting in peace."

Then Yoshino slyly looked over at Temari, "but this old heart of mine would be even lighter with more grandchildren running around."

Temari laughed at the woman who had become akin to a surrogate mother to her. "You don't have to worry about that."

The bar was throbbing with the heated bodies of the living. Alcohol celebrated with civilians, Leaf ninja, and Stone ninja alike. The chūnin leaned over the bar with a hand to her cheek, protecting her bottle of beer from the crowd.

"What does it take to get a drink around here?"

Tenten turned to the frustrated question from the dark-haired Stone ninja. Tenten reached out her hand and snatched one of the frantic and overworked bartenders. "This woman wants a drink," Tenten pointed, knowing that the bartenders had a preference of serving the Leaf customers first.

"Right away," the bartender nodded.

"Thanks," Kurotsuchi said. Tenten observed the Stone heiress, impressed. Even among the throng of pushing bodies, Kurotsuchi never moved an inch, as if she was an unyielding stone in the midst of a river. Kurotsuchi reached out when her glass of rum was finally placed before her, then tapped her foot to the ground. The earth lifted and parted a path for the heiress. The shorter woman turned around to Tenten and waited.

Tenten pulled herself from the loneliness of the bar and followed after the expectant heiress. Tenten asked, "First time in Konoha?"

"Yep," Kurotsuchi said as she decided the path even though she didn't have any idea where she was going. "I like it. It's less straight-laced than Iwa. In Iwa there is a ban on alcohol and practically any
debauery that can distract a ninja from discipline. Of course, you can get your bottle of moonshine if you know where to find it but," Kurotsuchi raised her glass of rum and shot it back in one gulp, "Damn, that's good."

A stone ninja who obviously couldn't hold his liquor stumbled in front of them and passed out in the middle of the street. Kurotsuchi stepped on his back and kept going. Tenten went around.

"I don't think I could live in a place where alcohol was illegal," Tenten said and was sincerely frightened by the idea. "Not to say that Konoha doesn't have its own problems. The clans have a superiority complex and the police force is as corrupt as shit but I wouldn't want to live anywhere else."

After Tenten finished her beer, they hopped into another bar and grabbed another drink. Between Kurotsuchi's ability to make a quick exit and Tenten's ability to stop a bartender, they were quickly approaching tipsy.

"Any plans once the war is over?" Kurotsuchi asked as she was content to walk around and enjoy the sights.

"I want to become Jounin," Tenten said sincerely. "When I was little, it seemed as if the only avenues for a kunoichi was to become a medic or an ero-nin. I wanted to change that. Even now, there are very few woman who become Jounin or hold positions of power. And I recognize that it's difficult for a kunoichi to get as far in their careers as a shinobi because of the pressures we carry," Tenten pointed to a group of chūnin women enjoying their night out, "The war is over, we've lost many, and now young kunoichi are expected to bear the next generation. There are some that think the Kage runs a ninja village, or that the clans reflect the village's power, or that the civilians are the fundamental foundation, but the truth is, women carry these villages on our vaginas."

"Doesn't sound too different from Iwa," Kurotsuchi said. "A shinobi can have both but more often than not a kunoichi is forced to sacrifice either her career or her family."

For a brief moment Tenten thought of those nine months. She chose her career.

Kurotsuchi and Tenten rounded the street where the Academy stood. Its doors have remained closed for a long time. "My dad expects me to get married and pop out a son to become the next Tsuchikage. Why can't the next Tsuchikage have boobs?" Kurotsuchi asked. "Tsunade did it. Mei did it. I can do it too."

Kurotsuchi leaned forward on the bench and looked up at the rock drawn faces of the previous Hokages. "I sense you and I are similar in that way. We can't stand when someone tells us we can't do something."

"We have to prove them wrong," Tenten agreed.

Kurotsuchi chuckled inwardly. "I remember the day I told my father that I prefer women. He almost died."

Tenten choked on her drink and Kurotsuchi gave Tenten an amused smirk. Tenten asked uncomprehending, "You don't like guys at all?"

"I had that finding myself phase." Kurotsuchi laughed and continued down the street. "Still, I'd sleep with a guy every now and then for a mission but it's not my preference. Here's a story for you. By Dad had it in his mind to broker a marriage alliance between me and Uzumaki when the war was over, that was of course before we knew he was already married. During the war, I was supposed to
seduce Uzumaki on my father's orders but," Kurotsuchi couldn't stop laughing whenever she thought about it, "I still ended up sleeping with another girl by the end of the night."

"You had a lot going against you if you were trying to sleep with Naruto," Tenten looked around, even though it wasn't exactly a secret anymore, it was still juicy gossip. "His dick at least is married to the Hyūga Queen."

"I'm well aware," Kurotsuchi said amused and rounded the corner back toward the bars. "What about you? Kunai or shuriken?"

Tenten blushed. She knew Ino equipped both but Tenten herself had never ventured farther than a kiss or two. Nevertheless, Tenten found herself enamored with the Iwa heiress. Perhaps it was time for her to try something a little different than the coldness of a Hyūga. "I am known as Konoha's resident weapon's master."

Kurotsuchi laughed and detoured toward one of Konoha's cheap hotels. "Alright Weapon Master, I look forward to trying your equipment."

Only the foundation had been built but Lee could see the walls, paneling, the matted floor, and the full potential of what would soon be the largest dojo in Konoha. Lee walked forward and placed a framed photo of Maito Gai against a beam post where Gai's flashing smile was determined to become the dojo's centerpiece.

"I will make you proud of me."

Lee's sweat seeped into the foundations of the dojo and lifted himself bodily in the air by his index finger and began, "One."

"Uzumaki Naruto!"

Naruto had barely taken a few steps in the hospital when Sakura had tracked him down. Naruto pouted as Sakura pointed inside an empty hospital room. Without complaint, Naruto dragged himself inside and sat atop the bed.

"Got your memories back?" Naruto asked.

"Ino unlocked them a few hours ago."

"Why aren't you at home with your family?" Naruto questioned.

"A nurse is the one profession in a ninja village whose shift doesn't end at the conclusion of a battle," Sakura shrugged, "Or I'm a workaholic as Ino claims. I was actually on my way out before I spotted you. I know how hard it is to get you in a hospital when Hinata isn't in it," Sakura said knowingly and glanced at the bag of ramen in Naruto's hand. "We might as well do a check-up now."

Naruto took off his shirt at Sakura's silent instruction and felt the cold metal of the stethoscope on his chest. Sakura listened to the beating of Naruto's heart. "I want to do an x-ray," she said after a moment.

Naruto laid down expectantly as Sakura began the equipment. Most of the nurses had been relieved from their shifts and the loudest sound in the hospital was the beeping on the chakra machine. "You did good, Naruto," Sakura said sincerely. "There were very few casualties. Everyone thought we would lose so much more before this war was over with. I knew a lot of people who thought they
wouldn't survive to see its end."

A part of Naruto, that part that loved every punch and struggle of a battle, wanted to prolong the fight with the Raikage forever but his ultimate goal was to lessen the loss of lives. Naruto scratched the unwieldy uneven stubble that had grown in his captivity.

"It was a gamble," Naruto admitted. "It could have easily gone terribly wrong. It was only due to my relationships with the Raikage and Mizukage that I could predict how they would react and I gambled on those predictions."

"You've always been unnaturally perceptive of other people," Sakura said. She had always thought it was a weakness, having empathy for the enemy, but Naruto had turned it into a strength.

Sakura watched as the machine sent pulses of chakra through Naruto's body and grainy images began to appear on screen. Sakura frowned. "Naruto, there are scars from a recent heart attack."

"It shows that sort of stuff?" Naruto asked impressed. Sakura gave him a sturdy expression and Naruto pulled his hand over his face. "It happened during the fight with the Raikage. It was just a bit of discomfort in my chest but I ended things before it got too bad."

"Even though the attack was mild it is still worrisome. I don't think it is safe for you to keep up long periods of physical exertion anymore." Sakura turned off the machine and told Naruto seriously, "If you don't want to shorten your lifespan any longer it is time you stayed behind a desk."

"I can do that," Naruto answered. He was comforted by the fact that his captivity in Kiri proved he could keep Konoha safe even if he wasn't on the battlefield.

"I brought ramen." Naruto said as he turned the corner into Hanabi's hospital room. Hinata raised an eyebrow at the label of Ichiraku's Ramen on the bag.

"Whatever happened to miracles?" Hinata asked.

"I can't perform a miracle every time," Naruto teased apologetically. Most of the home-cooked ramen from dinner had gone onto the ceiling, on clothes, or in hair. Naruto had been forced to buy some on the way to the hospital.

"How do you feel about the results?"

Naruto handed Hinata the bag and she distributed the food while he discussed the results of his check-up. "Pretty much what I was expecting," Naruto admitted as he brushed his hair back, dragged a chair forward, and propped his feet on the side of Hanabi's bed. Hanabi didn't care but Hinata shoved Naruto feet's off. Instead Naruto propped his feet onto Hinata's lap, which was his original goal, Hanabi's bedside had been just a feint.

Hinata sighed and then balanced her box of ramen between Naruto's ankles. She leaned sideways and assisted Hanabi to function around her missing arm.

Naruto scratched again at his uneven stubble, unused to the feel on his face. "I get tired sooner. Even sitting in the Kage's chair for too long puts a strain on my back. I feel old, but I'm alive, can't ask for much more than that."

"Do you still have a lot of work to do tonight?"

"I need to record the exact number of casualties that has collected over the war. Tomorrow, Konoha
will enter a period of mourning to bury the dead and grieve for those the war has not allowed us to
grieve for. In the morning we will burn the corpses and shed our farewells over their graves. We will
remember all those who died wearing the hitai-ite and engrave the memorial stone with their names."

A list of names exchanged between Hinata and Naruto's eyes. A melancholy silence fell as Naruto
hung his head over the chair and watched the ghosts moving in the shadows.

After Hinata finished her box of ramen, Naruto removed his feet and sat up, "Hanabi, do you mind if
I take Hinata off your hands for a moment?"

"Please do," Hanabi said flatly. Hinata dropped her box of ramen in the trash and followed Naruto
out of the room to a more empty and private one.

Immediately, Hinata was flushed against the counter and equipment that Sakura will yell about later
clattered to the ground. Their breaths stuttered in the dark room as Naruto flushed her warmth into
his arms and buried a content sigh into her neck. Hinata dragged her heavy arms around his width
and pressed her exhaustion into his embrace.

The held hug gave way to a breath of tender kisses. Then they held each other's eyes, both with the
acute awareness that ever since they had begun this affair this was the longest they've gone without
intimate contact.

Much less sex.

"We'll get to that in a minute," Naruto chuckled as Hinata proved to be the more impatient of the pair
and reached to do away with Naruto's shirt. Naruto pulled away and Hinata watched him. She came
to the realization that Naruto actually wanted to talk. His thumb rubbed the inside of Hinata's knee as
Naruto cleared his throat.

"I had a lot of time to meditate about things, about my life, while I was stuck in Kiri," Naruto's
crystalline blue eyes held Hinata's pale orbs. "Marry me."

"What?" Hinata asked in a startled whisper. "Shion, your wife is lying three months pregnant with
your child in the other room, you have a marriage alliance with Demon Country, we still need the
money to rebuild the Capital, and there's Neji."

"It doesn't matter," Naruto said as if all the facts she had listed was an observation about the weather.
"Maybe it'll take us years to sort this out, and I would definitely want to wait until after the baby is
born, but we can make it work. All I need is a yes."

Hinata slid Naruto's hand off her knee and peeled away from the counter. "I can't. I made a promise
to Neji."

"What promise?"

Hinata didn't back down as she faced Naruto with the truth. "I promised Neji to give him a son after
the war was over."

Naruto's face fell, as if one sentence had unraveled all the carefully laid plans he had formed while
bored in Kiri. "Excuse me?"

"He's my husband. It's a reasonable request."

"You kill my kid but agree to have Neji's?" Naruto seethed in disbelief as the feeling of betrayal and
hurt began to temper his voice. "What the fuck did Neji promise in return?"
"He had promised to look the other way between you and I."

Hinata watched as Naruto's growing temper took his feet stalking across the room. Naruto had a way when he was angry to encircle his prey, to make the room seem smaller, as if you were trapped. Hinata didn't flinch as Naruto pressed his hands to the wall and took a deep breath. "So this is my fault?"

"Everything is not about you Naruto. I have a responsibility to my husband and the clan to produce some sort of progeny."

"Fuck it Hinata.Fuck your husband and fuck your clan. What do you want? If we really want to, we can make us work, but it's as if you're the only person ever standing in our way." Naruto said frustrated. "Why is this so hard Hinata? Why are you so fucking determined or unable to comprehend that we deserve a little happiness too?"

Hinata turned her head. "That's not for us Naruto."

Naruto stepped forward and pressed his hands into her shoulders. "You once told me that there was an escape, that there was an out, this is it."

"I can't," Hinata argued. The tears she refused to shed could be heard in her voice. "I'm- I'm- broken. I'm not Shion. At least Shion still has a little innocence left, still has a little light left. I've slept with more men than I can count, I've killed our baby, and I've done things that no person should be redeemed for. You don't need someone like me. You deserve more than me. I am nothing."

"You are far more than you give yourself credit for," Naruto said darkly. "You are the strongest woman I have ever met. You are what stands between me and the Kyūbi, an emotional stability and peace of mind that I can't find anywhere else. I'm not going anywhere. My love for you isn’t going anywhere. You are the only person standing between us. Hinata, tell me yes. Tell me this is what you want and I'll fucking make the world spin to make us happen. What. Do. You. Want?"

Hinata shook her head with a pain deep within her features. "You're wrong Naruto. It could never work between us. I have a duty to the clan-" the door of the medic room slammed shut, wavered and eventually fell off its hinges, leaving Hinata to stand by herself.

"What were you fighting about this time?" Hanabi asked when Hinata entered the room with an expression that said she did not want to talk about it. Hinata opened a hatch on the wall. She pulled out the second bed that could quickly turn the medical room into a double when the hospital was overrun with patients.

Hanabi winced and moved to rub her crippled leg. Hinata turned immediately, "Does it hurt?"

"Naruto seemed pretty upset," Hanabi said now that she had regained Hinata's attention. "Look at me, Hinata," Hanabi motioned to her immobile legs. "I have nothing to do but talk."

Hinata narrowed her eyes and sat at the bedside chair. Hinata sent chakra controlled fingers to massage Hanabi's legs. Hanabi sighed in relief as the pain lessened.

"Naruto is having one of his moments," Hinata said, like a guy dismissing his girlfriend when she was on her period. "He still thinks that somehow we can be together when the world doesn't work that way."

Hanabi stared at Hinata. "You really don't see it, do you?"
"See what?" Hinata asked, annoyed by what Hanabi implied should be obvious. Hinata activated her byakugan to find what was missing.

"That when you liberated the clan you set free everyone but yourself," Hanabi said. "Your world doesn't work that way."

"I do not understand."

"You liberated the clan to give us freedom of choice, to bring us together and heal the rifts that centuries of tradition have created between us. But you married Neji."

"I married Neji for the clan." Hinata said seething, not appreciating that she was being pyscho-analyzed by her little sister. "It was my duty and responsibility."

"You chose Neji because in your eyes Naruto could never be an option. You chose the only path you thought you had. How is that a choice Hinata when there is no room to choose otherwise?" Hanabi asked. "You've been trying to heal the scars in the clan when you haven't healed the scars the clan has inflicted on you. How is anyone in the clan supposed to choose anything other than their duty when you are prescribed to it the most?"

"I am the Clan Head," Hinata explained simply, "My responsibilities differ from the rest of the family. I have dedicated my life in service to the clan. I have long ago accepted the fact that Naruto and I were never meant to be together and I constantly regret this affair in which we have found ourselves. It is not fair to our spouses nor is it fair to our hearts. This affair only proves my weak resolve and reinforces how I could never be deserving of him."

Hanabi had to admit that sometimes arguing with Hinata felt as stupid as arguing with a sign post, it never yielded, only had room to say one thing, and made you question your own sanity. "You're not useless. You're not weak. You're not a bad person. You're the only one saying things like that anymore. Hinata, father is dead."

"What do you think of Kazemizukage?" Kankurou joked as he walked into the office.

Gaara's skin clotted and dripped mud to the ground. The shadow of a shark surrounded him as he sat in the Mizukage's office. Gaara frowned, "I'd rather not be here any longer than necessary."

While they were all scrambling over Konoha, Suna walked straight into Kiri. Kankurou kicked the piles of paper on the floor as he maneuvered inside. "The village of Kirigakure has been locked down and the clans have been detained."

Gaara nodded. "Have you found all Seven Swords?"

The paint on Kankurou skin began to blend in color, softened by the moisture in the air. "We are still in the process of obtaining the swords that Suigetsu did not take with him. What's the news from Konoha?"

"Naruto did it," Gaara reported the recent news. "He defeated both the Mizukage and Raikage in one fell stroke."

Kankurou lifted his shirt and wiped the melting paint from his face. "Naruto has always been strong but the way he executed this plan was impressive. I would have never guessed that little runt we were up against during the genin exams had all of this in him."

Gaara smiled inwardly to himself. "I did."
"Have you ever considered how you want to die?"

Gantetsu asked with a grim smile, like a man who knew the only time he had left was that long walk to the gallows. "I know we never get a choice but," his shoulders shrugged. "Fire."

Tenten shifted in her chains in an attempt to relieve the pain and soreness. "Fire is the worst. It's a slow death."

"Exactly. I want to live as long as possible, be the last moments pain or pleasure."

"Seppuku. I'd rather feel the cold kiss of a blade through my skin, and I would want to do it, to make sure the cut is clean."

Gantetsu stepped backed in confused horror as black began to paint the walls. He attempted to strike with his blade but the darkness danced around it.

"Fuck," Gantetsu cursed and threw himself on top of Tenten to shield her from the attack.

Tenten watched in terror as the insects clung to Gantetsu, until his skin, muscles, organs had all been eaten away. His skull fell on Tenten's chest, bounced off, and rolled away.

A ninja rarely chooses the way they want to die.

Asami followed Kusuro tracks and found where he had stopped. Kusuro stood and stared at the body of Yuuki pinned underneath the branch of a fallen tree that had struck him in the head.

"Huh, what an odd thing to die from," Asami noted.

Ao attempted to struggle and loosen the tangled belt that held him and his hands captive. All his tools were abandoned with his clothes on the floor. In all his years, all the shit he had lived through, this was the last way he thought he would die. How had he gotten so old and complacent?

Ao was head of the Sensor Division in Kirigakure and this woman had deceived him at every turn. She had exploited the weaknesses of the byakugan, tempted him, and like a snake, deceived him and waited for him to lower his defenses to strike.

Before she killed him, Hinata Hyūga whipped her hand forward and tore the byakugan out of his skull.

"Tomu, what are you doing?"

Tomu had grabbed a kunai from Kusuro's pouch and held it aloft before his eyes. "If I take them out it'll all be over right?"

"People with a kekkai genkai are born to become ninja, whether we want to or not."

"I have a choice!" Tomu screamed angrily as he stared at the dagger point of the kunai.
"You're being stupid. It's not in your eyes. It's in your blood." Kusuro replied. "Your children and your children's children will have it. It is a legacy we are given to carry. I am all that is left of my village, all that is left of the Grass kekkai genkai bloodline. I am all that is left of my mother, and my grandfather, and all those that have come before me. Cursing what they gave me is dishonoring their memory." Kusuro slid down into the murky sewers. "We are the children of ninja," he said softly and briefly considered what he would have lost if his hands had been taken away from him, "and ours is a legacy of blood."

And the sizzling flesh was amputated away.

Sakura filed down the sharp and rough edges of the bone and transposed the remaining skin and muscles flaps over the stump, just like she has done a hundred times before.

When it was all over, her hands finally shook, her lips quivered, and her heart trembled. And Akamaru howled a haunting hymn.

"I'm so so sorry." Sakura held Kiba in her lap and cried guilty tears against his skin.

"Come on Kiba," Sakura begged when Kiba's breath stalled in intervals.

Kiba patted along the table until he reached Sakura's hand and pressed it to his nose. "I've always liked how you smelled of cherry blossoms."

"Shut up," Sakura yelled at him and pumped more of her chakra into his body. "Shut up you fucking idiot."

Naruto squeezed his hands over his ears and attempted to dull Sakura's wrenching cries that ripped from her throat. Naruto closed his eyes as he sat on the couch and refused to see the limp arm hanging off the table, and the guilt.

"I'm sorry. His name cannot go on the memorial stone since he died a missing-nin."

"He died an Inuzuka."

And Captain Wolf placed his hands in his coat with resolved calm. He was tired. Ever since Shiyo's death it's as if he's been living with a missing leg, living life at the pace of a limp and a broken heart. Even Captains burn out eventually.

And the large White three-headed beast leaned down and swallowed the ANBU Captain whole.

"I tried to save the village! If Konoha had just given into their demands the Third Shinobi War would not have lasted two more years."

"You stole S-class technology and tried to give it to our enemies."

"To end the war! What are some concessions to the lives we could have prevented?" Shiyo grimaced bitterly and struggled with the wire placed on his wrist. When Shiyo realized it was futile, his back hunched in defeat. "I lost my son in that war."

"I know Shiyo,"

"He was only thirteen years old and he died because the Sandaime refused to surrender. You have no idea what it's like to lose a son. What I did, I did for Konoha."

"You still betrayed the village. You still stole top-secret information. You still escaped from
Konoha's prison. Shiyo, you have to return and take responsibility for your crimes."

Wolf withdrew his katana.

"What are you doing?" Crow asked, alarmed.

"Mercy," Wolf whispered as he stood over Shiyo. "We can't do this anymore. I'm tired of chasing you."

"I'm tired of running," Shiyo admitted. "But what other choice do I have?"

The choice was given to him as Wolf plunged his katana, slicing through cloth and skin with ease. Wolf's shoulders quivered as he kneeled and held his best friend in his arms. "I'm sorry."

"No," Shiyo whispered. "Thank you. I never had the guts to do it myself. Surviving for this long seems… kind of meaningless."

Wolf stood up with the blood of his best friend soaked into his captain's cloak. The Captain of Konoha's Hunter-nin was a lonely and bitter old man. With the hunt complete, Wolf walked like a ghost through the snow-covered forest of Fire Country.

Udon couldn't stand and Konohamaru was forced to bear his weight. The tendons in Udon's wrists and ankles were severed. Even if he was to recover, if ever, he'll never be whole again. Udon would never be able to walk again. Konohamaru gently laid Udon on the ground. Konohamaru was looking for a sign, some sort of approval or confirmation, but he didn't get any. Udon's eyes were glazed over, empty, lost.

"Crane, can I borrow your sword?" Konohamaru asked. Crane unsheathed the sword and handed it to Konohamaru.

The katana did not go easy into Udon's chest.

"No, I can't watch the death of another teammate."

"Do you know how many teammates I've seen die?!" Hohei yelled, offended by her emotional problems while he was trying to kill himself. "Apparently, as long as the byakugan was safe the incident was forgotten, but I haven't forgotten the faces of my teammates. I haven't forgotten them!"

"Hohei, don't break on me. I need you. I don't want to be the one that survives."

Hohei needed to say their names. "Yamanaka Keiko, Noriko Keigo, Yamato Tozai. I haven't forgotten."


The black bowl cut swiveled as Gai turned his head with a flashing smile and raised his thumb. "Go now, you've still got all of your youths ahead of you."

And Maito Gai, barely on his feet, and excited for a challenge of overwhelming odds began fending off the Mountain ninja.

A blazing fire smeared the field as Kakashi jumped into the fray. And Gai leaned against Kakashi's back as if it was a pillar.

"Hey Kakashi, my dear eternal rival" Gai coughed blood which ran down his shirt. There was a pain in his chest every time he breathed… oh, there was a shard of shrapnel poking out of the mushy
wound, puncturing a lung he needed to breathe. How unlucky.

"I challenge you to one last test of skill, will, and heart!"

"I lost," The Raikage said as the battle stilled. Blood brushed the teeth of the Raikage's broken smile. "You are a worthy opponent."

A pain welled in Naruto's chest as the Raikage conceded defeat. The Raikage's shaky arm lifted and his hand formed a fist. Naruto connected their fists together with one hand, leaned closer, and with the other hand, plunged a kunai into the Raikage's throat.

"Good bye, old friend."

"I don't want to hear your fucking apologies," Grandfather snapped as his body grew numb without pain. It was a rather sweet sort of poison, as sweet and deadly as its maker.

Neji sat down in the seiza position and respectfully joined his Grandfather's dying moments. Neji attempted not to crack but tears ran away from his eyes.

"Stop crying, that's disgusting," Grandfather snapped as the chill blanketed his body. "You better take good care of this clan."

Then the sweet poison sang him a lullaby into a painless sleep.

"What are you talking about? That's not a fatal wound. You're going to be fine." Naruto already knew. He could smell it. Poison was the great equalizer and could bring even the strongest to their knees.

Mei full lips grew pale, as if smeared with blue lipstick. The strength to reach her tower was fleeting and she surrendered to the pain in Naruto's arms. Mei could smell the fragrance of the ocean and the mist was a lover's touch.

Naruto realized Mei was right, eventually you grow numb. You lose too many people in this profession, you watch too many die, and the worst part of it was, you begin to grow accustomed to it.

There was at least one in ANBU every year.

Captain Fox picked up the Rabbit mask that had fallen to the floor. The weight of an ANBU mask had never felt so heavy in his hands, as if it was created out of guilt, shame, frustration, and questions that would never be answered.

The rope held the broken neck of the corpse hanging from the ceiling.

"Sticky died today. He wasn't killed by Kiri or Ame, he died trying to edge out a living in a world dominated and controlled by ninja. That's the sort of world you are protecting."

"Believe me, you can't let your life be determined by the acknowledgement of others." Naruto broke rule number one in the ANBU handbook: he took his mask off. "You first have believe in yourself, you first have to acknowledge yourself."

Mantis tilted his head. "You are the nine-tailed Fox."

"No," Naruto shook his head. "I am Naruto Uzumaki. Do you know who you are?"

"I am Danzou-sama's weapon," Mantis insisted.
"We are more than weapons," Naruto argued.

The young boy with grey hair that fell past his shoulders, green haunted eyes, and scars that lined his face no child should ever have, stepped forward. Naruto wrapped his arms around the child and the little boy collapsed into tears against Naruto's shirt.

"All I ever wanted is for him to be proud of me."

The explosive tag that had been embedded deep within the boy's body since he was a baby activated like yearning flint against steel.

The surrounding vases of gunpowder and explosive chemicals lit the entire base like a star, like a falling star.

That had been Naruto's breaking point.

The kunai reflected the moonlight. Naruto's chest heaved and released a ragged breath. Naruto memorized the expression of pain and the fear of a child lost in a darkness he couldn't escape. The tip of the kunai pressed against a small neck coated in sweat. The blade parted the skin like clouds and blood poured like water.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," Naruto cried as the kunai fell from his hands and the body went still. Naruto cried as he clutched the boy and hugged him to his face. Naruto's apologies fell on a dead corpse. There was no one to forgive him.

The winds of winters weren't as painful as the mournful sobs that beat against Naruto's chest. The blood of a child, an innocent child, soaked into Naruto's skin like a bitter fragrance. There were scars on his heart more painful than the ones on his skin.

Naruto still had one hundred and nine more children left to go.

"I guess I should probably question you or something but I don't do torture and interrogation. That's not who I am." Snow landed atop the metal of Naruto's katana as he unsheathed it.

Now that the mask had been lifted, the young spy had shed all pretense of childlike innocence. His face was empty of expression and his eyes were like a void. He had no family, no dreams, no hopes, and no name.

The whistle of the katana through the air was like a song, akin to the pitch of a bell. The body slumped. The head rolled and stopped as it bumped into the insignia of a dead leaf ninja. Blood spread upon the white snow.

Naruto sheathed his blade. He reached down and picked up the Sound hitai-ite.

"I know who you are Naruto Uzumaki, your heart is much too soft." Karin jumped from her chair with kunai in hand.

Karin fell to her knees, tumbled against the chair, and collapsed on the ground. Her palms cut through when she tried to grab the sword as Naruto pulled it out. Her eyes stared blankly up at Naruto.

"If you ever see the Uchiha, tell him- tell him- it should have been his child."

Even to Karin's dying breath she believed that Sasuke had loved her. Sometimes a lie was much more bearable than the truth.
"I'm sorry," Hanabi whispered as tears stained her cheeks. "It wasn't a lie."

Hioki reached his blue skin to touch the tears staining her cheeks. Hanabi reached her hands in horror as his eyes began to darken. She attempted a medical jutsu but the green glow kept sputtering. Why didn't she ever learn medical ninjutsu? Why had she been so stupid?

Hioki stilled her hands and pulled her into a weak hug. The breeze haunted the sails. The ocean pulled the boat along dying waves.

"No," Suigetsu argued. "I'm going to take his sword and I'm going to kill him, then I'm going to take my place as one of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist."

"You never really wanted to be a Swordsman," Mangetsu said softly.

"Of course I did."

"You only wanted it because of me."

"Fuck you."

Mangetsu smiled and his body began to dissolve in Suigetsu's arms. Mangetsu slipped from Suigetsu fingers. His body and tears dripped into the ocean.

"You should have never left Kiri."

The direction of the wind changed. The wind surged forward and cut though Suigetsu in all directions, gaining friction through flesh solid and permanent. It rained blood in the desert and like tears, hissed in heat on the sand.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Technique."

Chouji watched his father burn and the fire reflected in his eyes.

Gamabunta's dosu blade fell to the ground. "Bunta," Naruto placed his hand on the chill creeping through Gamabunta's chest. "Good run," blood cough from the Great Toad's mouth, "kid…"

"The hardest part of this job is watching the ones who fall. It's as natural as rain, but the raindrops fall cold and bitter on your skin."

Squid collapsed against a tree as his intestine spilled from his body. He pulled the mask from his sweaty face and it fell in a patch of untouched grass.

Sai wanted to feel the sun's warmth. It danced on his skin like the touch of a smile. It was the sound of peace that thrummed through a heart. It was the warmth next to a fireside with teammates that cared. It was the first time Sai had felt alive.

You could never capture that in a painting.

Naruto hadn't known how he could possibly live with himself until he walked into Sai's room and was surrounding by sketches. All the emotions that Sai had struggled to show on his face were in his paintings.

It was a group image of Sai, Sakura, Kakashi, Naruto, and Yamamato together. Naruto had framed it. He placed the sketch carefully before Sai's gravestone.

You never realize what you have, never see the ones that are there, until it's too late.
Team Seven was always complete.

Kakashi’s body tipped over, the weight taking Kagome down with him, until they had fallen like the abandoned orange book that mirrored the fiery hue of the setting sun across the endless plains of grass.

"I wanted to name him Minato."

"Your dad?"

"Hn."

Kagome coughed blood that rained down her chin. With bloody fingers, Kakashi pulled the mask off his face as if it could help him breathe better. Kagome lifted her hand and brushed her fingers against his lips. Kagome’s arm fell back into the bed of grass. Kakashi rested his head against her still chest.

They were out of time.

The burnt ground was still hissing with heat. There was an eerie quiet following the screams and cries that howled together like the moans of a ghost.

At the epicenter, there were no buildings, no people, no rubble.

There was nothing.
"How about the pink one?" "How about the orange one?"

Naruto and Shion ran over each other's words as they shopped through the store for a crib. "Orange? But we're having a girl," Shion whispered uncertainly.

Naruto scoffed. "Who says a girl comes out liking pink? They're babies. They don't know what color they like yet."

Shion gave a side-longed glance at the pink one. "I guess we can get the orange one."

Naruto winced at the look of disappointment and the tears that were about to fall at any moment. Naruto said quickly, "We can get the pink one."

Immediately, Shion's face lit up. "Pink is also the color scheme for the baby shower. I couldn't stop Sakura when she demanded that she plan it."

Now that Shion was no longer a secret this was the first time she was able to go baby shopping. After picking up a few more items that were an overwhelming pink, they went to the cash register. "Please, let this be on the store for everything you've done for Konoha, Hokage-sama," the cashier said once he saw Naruto with his pregnant wife.

"Not yet," Naruto chuckled. Naruto has had plenty of time to do things such as shop for baby objects as the government was currently at a standstill while the mourning period continued, the Elders petitioned, and the Jounin voted. "I insist that I pay. It'll be good for business. Feel free to let people know we shop here."

"Thank you so much, Hokage-sama."

Naruto lifted the crib over his shoulder, picked up the other purchases in his other arm, and led Shion out of the store. Shion blushed at the display of strength and continued beside him down the road. The couple merged into the sea of black clothing.

"How do you think the voting is going?" Shion asked. "It's taking quite a while."

"It's procedure to take this long. They're going through all my credentials, mission reports, and everything I've ever done in my career that isn't classified to make sure I'm the best candidate," Naruto didn't want to brag but, "It's going to be a unanimous vote."

The doors of the Hyūga compound swung open to the greetings of "welcome home" from the Hyūgas lined at the gate.

"Glad to be back," Hanabi said, sincerely happy she was finally out of the hospital. Hinata rolled her into the compound and Hanabi noticed Hinata had the entire compound redesigned to accommodate the wheelchair.

It certainly wasn't Hanabi's intentions to be in the wheelchair for very long. "I want to walk."
"Are you sure?" Hinata asked when they stopped at the far end of the hallway that led to Hanabi's room. Relying on the strength of her arms, Hanabi picked herself up. Hinata quickly got an arm underneath Hanabi's shoulders.

"Don't push yourself too far," Hinata said concerned. She could feel Hanabi's shaky arms as Hanabi placed one slow step in front of the other. Hanabi had responded well to the physical therapy while at the hospital but Hinata was concerned Hanabi might push her body too far than what it was ready for.

"I've got it," Hanabi insisted and pushed Hinata away as she leaned against the wall and traveled what seemed like an impossible distance down the hallway. If there was no other better motivation to walk, a smothering Hinata who looked at you with guilty eyes, was certainly it. Covered in sweat and deep breaths, Hanabi collapsed in the bed.

"Do you want me to start a bath? Are you hungry?"

"Hinata, I'm fine," Hanabi said even while Hinata reached to fluff up her pillows. "Stop smothering me. Now that we're back at the compound you don't have to fret over me twenty-four seven. I'll ask Auntie if I need anything."

Hinata pointed to the stacks of manga beside Hanabi's bedside. "I noticed you've picked up a new hobby. I asked Konohamaru for suggestions but if there are none to your liking I could certainly get you more."


The porcelain squeaked clean as Tomu washed the dishes. Naruto picked up the dripping plate and dried it with a towel. From downstairs in the kitchen, Naruto could hear the soft turn of the page as Shion read a book in bed and the soft sleeping breaths of Ame and Ichigo nestled under their blankets. Naruto heard the front door open, following the sound of tired feet dragging across the matted floors.

The kinkaichu beetles crawled in and out of Tomu's hair like lice. Tomu turned around and asked, "How was training?"

Mushi mumbled with her hood drawn over her exhausted face before she disappeared inside of Tomu's room.

"Is she alright?"

"She started a new training regimen with her clan," Tomu replied.

Naruto could have sped around the kitchen and put up the dishes with ease, but he took his time, and waited on Tomu who refused to give up a plate until it was entirely clean. They worked with each other with a sense of familiarity and comfort.

"How is the business?" Naruto asked softly, conscious that if Shion ever found out she would have a heart attack.

"We did well this month with all the celebrations. I doubt its anything the Akimichi can complain about," Tomu said. Tomu had become Naruto's partner in crime in regards to the Uzumaki drug trade. "But some of our guys are getting excited now that you are becoming Hokage. They think they can do whatever they want now."
"Get me names and I'll handle it," Naruto said without a beat.

Tomu nodded.

The dishes were cleared and the light in the kitchen was turned off. Tomu walked into his room and found Mushi face first in the pillow. Tomu leaned over her and pulled off her hood but at that moment, Mushi dropped off the bed and crawled to the trashcan where she began to vomit.

"How dangerous is this training regimen?" Tomu asked with a frown.

Mushi sat back against the wall. "I'm acclimating to a new hive. It's going to take a toll on my body."

"Could you die?"

"Forty percent," Mushi said as she lifted her hand and Tomu helped her back into the bed.

"How could you do this?" Tomu asked. "Why would you choose to hurt yourself like this?"

Mushi turned into Tomu's chest and whispered, "Because I don't want you to have to come save me again. I want you to know that I'm strong enough to take care of myself."

"No, I'm going to go on every mission with you."

Mushi gave him a pained smile. "That's not how it works. Couples aren't assigned on the same team. It's too risky. There's too many emotional attachments that can divert from the objective. Naruto might be the Hokage but he's not going to give us an inch and you know that." Mushi lifted her arms around Tomu. "Stay in Konoha. You have a chance to get out. Hardly anyone ever gets such opportunity without repercussions."

Tomu frowned as he laid back in his bed. "What if something happens to you?"

"Tomu, you have the sharingan. You are still in much greater danger than I would ever be in the field," Mushi hugged Tomu. "It would be safer for you to retire the hitai-ite."

"Yeah," Tomu said hoarsely and then watched in horror as Mushi jumped towards the trashcan and for a moment, her cloak revealed clothes that hung off her withered body.

Hinata sat in her small office and spent the rest of her day going through the large piles of paperwork on her desk. She reached beside her and took another sip of tea, then turned her attention to sorting out the details of the new kitchen renovation.

"The voting is finally over?" Hinata asked without lifting her eyes. Neji leaned against the entranceway of the office.

"It's over." The meeting had ended late but he wasn't surprised to find Hinata still awake. Neji observed the lines of exhaustion around Hinata's eyes. Instead of commenting on her lack of sleep Neji asked, "How is Hanabi?"

"She says I'm smothering her," Hinata said disapprovingly.

"You are," Neji agreed. "You haven't been home since Hanabi was hospitalized. I think it would be a good idea to give her some space." And work on us, but those words weren't said.

Hinata didn't look up from the paperwork and without a change of expression or tone she said, "Give me thirty minutes and I will meet you in your bedroom."
Neji weighed his gaze on his wife. After a few seconds of reasoning that she was willing, Neji conceded and nodded in understanding. Neji left the office.

Hinata placed down the document after she could no longer see the moving words. She stared with very little compassion at her shaking hands and forced them to stop. They stopped.

Hinata picked herself up and blew out the small fire of the candles. When she arrived in her wing of the compound she found Auntie had already prepared her bath.

"It's about time you two focused more on your duties," Auntie said as she filled the void of silence in the bathroom. She applied a combination of soap and oil until Hinata's skin was soft and pliable for Neji's hands. Water dripped down and collected at Hinata's feet when she stepped out of the large bath.

"It is the woman's duty to produce more strong children for the clan. Your actions tonight will prove to be a brilliant role model and a reminder to our women what their duties are," Auntie said approvingly as she readied Hinata for the bed of her husband.

"You're still reproductively young and those hips of yours should be able to push out at least ten." Auntie brushed Hinata's hair until they were soft strands of silk. "You should seriously begin to consider allowing Neji to stay Clan Head." Auntie coated a deep rouge on Hinata's lips that brought a color of lust to her pale skin. "You were our first female Clan Head and that was an accomplishment in and of itself but that's not what the clan needs anymore." Auntie approved the underwear Hinata should wear for the occasion. The lace blue accentuated the curves, not too risque but remained aesthetically pleasing. In all matters, the matriarch had to prove the example of appropriate attire. "The clan needs more babies. I think the best thing you can do for the clan now is to step down and focus on getting pregnant. You must be very fertile. You got pregnant by the Uzumaki easily enough. Too bad you didn't keep the kid. Now that Uzumaki is Hokage, an illegitimate child could have been great political leverage for the Hyūga Clan."

"As you are not ovulating tonight you could use some assistance," Auntie said as she placed a fertility pill in Hinata's hand to end the final detail of her grooming. Auntie stopped for a moment when Hinata slid the robe onto her shoulders to cover the walk to Neji's room and wondered if Hinata had heard any of her helpful advice.

Without looking down at the small item, Hinata lifted the pill into her mouth and forced herself to swallow.

Then Hinata traveled the long hallway towards Neji's bedroom. The door was open in expectation. She slipped into the room as dead as a ghost and startled Neji even though he had been anticipating her arrival. The door clicked close behind her.

Naruto stopped by the unfinished baby room decorated in a fanciful pink. All the items he and Shion had bought today had thoughtfully been placed in the room, until Shion changed her mind and had Naruto move everything around again. Naruto couldn't care less what the color of the crib was. It was just a crib. His thoughts lingered around the fact that soon there would be a baby occupying this room – his baby little girl.

With a soft smile, he turned off the lights in the nursery. He entered the bedroom where Shion laid in bed reading a book. But this time, instead of reading a book to complete it, Shion was waiting.

Naruto didn't notice how Shion's eyes followed him as he moved to the dresser.
"Naruto," Shion said shyly as her eyes peeked over the top of the book.

"Yeah?"

"Do you think it's proper for Mushi to be here all of the time?" Shion asked concerned. She had seen the Aburame entered the compound from the bedroom window.

"Do you not want her here?" Naruto asked alarmed. "Her beetles won't hurt the baby. You don't have anything to be afraid of."

"No, it's just…" Shion said slowly, embarrassed. "She's been spending every night with Tomu. It's not proper for a young lady."

Naruto finally realized what she was going around her words to say. "They're teenagers," Naruto shrugged his shoulders. "As long as Mushi is wearing the seal it's not as if she can get pregnant."

"But they're kids. They shouldn't be having…" Shion blushed.

"My hearing is very sharp. They don't have sex every night," Naruto assured her which only seemed to make Shion even more horrified.

"What sort of example does that set for Ame?" Shion asked. "If this goes on, Ame is going to think she can do it too."

"Mushi and Tomu are in a committed relationship. I can only hope Ame is as responsible as those two," Naruto answered.

Shion was flabbergasted. "You would hope your daughter loses her virginity at thirteen?"

"No," Naruto said obviously. "Stop being dramatic. I've already had the talk with Ame."

"She's only ten," Shion gasped.

"And she's entering the Academy in a few days. The Aburama, Hyūga, and Inuzuka are all clans whose children learn much earlier than that age as sex is a part of everyday life for them. At the Academy they teach sexual education classes in the first year. Besides, I want Ame to make responsible decisions and prefer to have whatever teenage sexual tension released under my roof than some stupid horny decision that can get her killed on a mission. As the Hokage I've seen the statistics of how many kids who go out in the field and get themselves in trouble because they were caught in compromising situations. Have sex at home, not out in the field," Naruto said in finality.

"I know this is a different culture from what I'm used to but I don't want our child becoming a slut," Shion said with a sudden anger to her voice. "What's to say that this sort of parenting won't lead Ame to becoming a… a… one of those ero-ninja?"

"That's not how the system works," Naruto said while attempting to be patient. "With Ame's genjutsu she will probably end up in the T&I division."

"T&I?"

"Torture and Interrogation," Naruto deadpanned.

"You- you- would allow your daughter to become a torturer?"

"I will allow my daughter to make her own decisions," Naruto said annoyed, immediately picking up on the fact it was 'your' daughter and not 'our'. "Maybe I'm not the best parent," Naruto admitted.
"But I'm realistic to the expectations of our way of life. Would I prefer her not to be a ninja? Yes. But hell, if she wants to be an ero-ninja I'm not going to stop her. It's not the most respectable job but because they do missions where it is often determined that violence is not a suitable option, they have higher survival rates than other divisions sent out onto the field," Naruto argued. "My only regret is that our daughter will have to be eventually sent away to the Priesthood. She isn't born with a choice."

"The Priesthood will be her salvation," Shion murmured bitterly as she turned over in bed. She was determined not to lose her daughter to the violence of Konoha. This village of shadows and leaves had corrupted her and Shion was not going to let it corrupt her daughter.

Naruto grabbed a pillow and a spare blanket and headed towards the couch. It was always something with Shion. She wanted him to be a stricter parent, wanted him to stop inviting so many unannounced guests to the compound, and wanted him to send his only biological daughter to the Priesthood the moment she was finished nursing. Naruto might have signed a piece of paper in an act of desperation to save the village, but he was the fucking Demon Fox and he was not sending his unborn daughter away.

Naruto threw the pillow onto the couch when his ears perked up at the sound of footsteps through the gate. He meditated in the space of his breathing and calmed the heat that had erupted from his argument with Shion. Naruto found a smile when the front door revealed Shikamaru on his porch.

"I'm sure you know what I'm about to say, I'm just here to confirm it," Shikamaru said without wasting any words. "Congratulations Hokage-sama."

"Funny, only when I stopped chasing the dream of becoming Hokage did it manage to chase me." Naruto said as the night wind brushed through his hair. Naruto stepped to the side, "Do you want to come in?"

Shikamaru pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. "No thanks. I'm going to hang out here for a while."

"I thought you were trying to quit?"

"I quit," Shikamaru said, "in front of Temari or any vicinity she can smell it." Shikamaru had another change of clothes in a storage scroll in his pocket and planned to burn the ones he was wearing before he got home.

"I see the living together is working out," Naruto tried to stifle a laugh as Shikamaru lit the cigarette.

Shikamaru believed that sex was the one thing that shouldn't be planned out but Temari had them both on a constant schedule and diet, determined to get pregnant and do things right this time. Shikamaru took a deep exhale of smoke.

Naruto sniffed and realized it wasn't tobacco. Naruto stepped forward and closed the door tightly behind him. "Got another one?"

Shikamaru went in his pocket, grabbed the recycled cigarette box, and gave Naruto a blunt. Naruto crouched down on the stairs of the porch in his boxers. Shikamaru threw Naruto his lighter. Shikamaru leaned against a support beam and tried to enjoy the quiet moment before Temari came looking for him. "The war is over."

Naruto nodded, "The war is over."
The sex was easy. The moments after were harder.

"Hinata," Neji said her name with a mixture of emotions – fulfilled after finally having intercourse with his wife since their wedding night, possessive with a knowing that she had chosen him, satisfied by the intensity of his orgasm, and love. All emotions that Hinata did not possess.

When Neji pulled out, it reminded Hinata of how empty she felt even when he was inside her. Hinata stretched off her knees as Neji rested down into the pillow. Neji rolled over and hugged his arm around her waist. Hinata stared at the door.

"I've been thinking," Neji whispered thoughtfully. "Now that we're trying for a baby we should share a bedroom. It would be more convenient and efficient."

Hinata stared into the deep darkness as Neji's grip tightened around her waist. The bed was uncomfortable, too many pillows, not enough covers, too much Neji.

"And this," Neji frowned as he avoided petting the seal tattoo along her forearm. "I do not think it is appropriate for another man to have access to my wife whenever he wants. This seal needs to come off."

It was true that the purpose of the seal had been quick access in case something happened on the battlefield, but they were no longer at war, and Hinata no longer had any justification to keep it.

Neji waited for her answer, then pulled up, and found her eyes closed. Neji reached down to kiss her parted lips, then tucked in, and went to sleep.

Hinata opened her eyes and stared into the darkness. She waited the long minutes until Neji's body weighed on her, until his hand fell from her breasts, until his hot breath stabbed slow into her neck.

Hinata slipped underneath Neji's arm, picked up her robe from the ground, and closed the balcony doors behind her. She leaned her hands along the railing and for the first time that night, she allowed herself to feel. She closed her eyes and could feel the night air hugging her curves and the moisture of spring kissing her lips.

Then she took one step forward, then another, and she jumped over the balcony railing. The guards on the wall were playing a game of shougi. Lovers met in secret under the lavender while others slept. The wide tall gate of the Hyūga clan held open its door under the moonlight, no longer did it keep people in.

And Hinata walked. Her bare feet found a path as she traveled under the archway of pregnant cherry blossoms. Hinata's bare feet strummed the wet grass, tread the cool earth, and drummed against the hard wood of the bridge. She met the river, as all streams do.

Hinata took one step forward, and then another, until her toes balanced on the railing. In the river was the reflection of a full moon. The image of the Hyūga clan crest remained still as the water floated downstream. The river promised a tempting song to take her away.

Hinata's toes balanced on the railing, muscles stretched to jump. Her hands shook. She stood on the edge.

Move.

She stepped forward and a pointed foot wafted in the air, her leg as pale as moonlight except for the scar on her thigh. She couldn't jump. She couldn't force her body to throw itself into the water and drown until she could no longer breathe Neji's moan of her name, the needs of the clan, or the tears
on her face.

*For the first time she couldn't force her body to move.*

Her voice skipped along the river when a song came to her lips. She had forgotten the words but it was the only song she ever held in her heart. Her knees bent and lifted with the melody. She turned with blessed grace and danced along the red railing of the bridge. Her silk robe fluttered like wings.

Hinata skipped with abandon and landed with ease. Her pointed toes gliding along the curve of the bridge. Her heart thudded a rhythm to her song. In the river was her dancing shadow in the reflection of the full moon.

The song ended with Hinata's smile. She closed her eyes and felt at peace for finally allowing her body to do what it wanted. She was as light as a cloud, floating, free. She thought she had forgotten how to dance.

"I haven't seen you dance in a long time."

Hinata's eyes dawned open. "Why are you here?"

Naruto stepped forward and leaned against the railing next to her toes. Naruto scratched his shaved chin. "Sometimes I stalk you," Naruto shrugged. "I sensed you leaving the compound and couldn't help but to follow." Naruto looked forward, down the still river. "I haven't seen you dance since the Mountain mission."

"Do you remember?" Hinata asked the night.

"I remember," Naruto answered. As Hokage, he had read the mission folder and the details unlocked the barrier to his memories. "I always felt as if I had forgotten something important. I forgot your dance and that was always something I wanted back because I thought I'd never see you dance again."

Naruto grinned inwardly. "If you weren't a ninja, you'd be a dancer. You would probably be in some big theatre in the Capital. You'd be on some big stage and I'd watch you in the audience wondering how I could ever dream of touching you. Oh, but I'd find a way."

Hinata tasted her tears on her lips. "I don't want to forget."

"I don't want you to either," Naruto said sincerely. There was nothing more beautiful than the brief small moments when Hinata allowed herself to be free.

A Cheshire grin reflected in the water. "Hinata," Naruto said, his nose clogged by Neji's scent on her, "You stink."

Hinata yelped when Naruto suddenly pushed a hand against her butt and she very ungracefully splashed into the river. Naruto erupted in a fit of laughter, blinked an eye open when a surge of water rose and a wave crashed towards him. Naruto flipped back over the second railing and was swept into the river below.

Naruto swam under the shadow of the bridge and caught Hinata up in his arms as he emerged for air. She laughed into his hair as he pulled her legs around his waist. Naruto's chest vibrated against her breasts as his laughter joined hers. Breathless carefree childlike laughter.

Naruto reached to capture the bells in her voice and the mirth drowned in a wave of lips that swelled against one another. Naruto released a small wind jutsu that shook the trees until it rained cherry
blossoms. Pink petals flowed down the river.

Hinata could feel the petals brush her hair, drops of gliding water caress her skin, and the love she had for the man who supported her with his arms. Hinata's eyes were as soft as moonlight and her voice as light as a broken bird again attempting to fly, "Yes."

The location of the Kage's Summit was on one of Kiri's tropical islands. The island's prestigious resort and amusement park was just as famous as its bounty of palm trees and soft sea breeze. In Naruto's personal opinion, it certainly was a better locale that the hard cold of Iron country.

Or at least that's what he thought. The monsoon rattled against the windows of Naruto's resort room. It was as if Mei had come back to life to haunt the decisions Naruto has decided to make.

"The Kages have arrived. They are beginning to gather in the conference room," Shikamaru reported. And the rain howled against the windows.

The Hokage stood up from a long night of studying his notes and stretched. The curtains were drawn open and Naruto held a gaze toward the bowed palm trees and surging wave of the oceans. "Sorry, Mei."

Then Naruto turned and left the room. Shikamaru and Naruto met Ino in the hallway. Shikamaru nodded in acknowledgment and then conferred with the security on his radio. Naruto told Ino who guarded the door, "I don't want any interruptions."

The Hokage entered the conference room and greeted the faces of the Kazekage, Tsuchikage, and Raikage. Naruto sat in the empty chair at the round table while the Kages waited to learn the purpose of this summit.

The Hokage began, "The purpose of this summit is to determine what should be done with Kirigakure. The situation in one of the Great Hidden Villages now stands as this: there is currently no viable candidate for a new Mizukage, the hidden village is currently bankrupt, most of their surviving ninja have either abandoned their hitai-ite or have gone missing, and currently all Seven Swords are in my possession. As a solution, the mainland and its assets will be put up for sell to pay back its debtors and we will divide and distribute Kiri's seven clans, the swords, and their islands. In sum, the proposal I am placing before you is the complete dismantling of Kirigakure."

The implications were seen in the Kage's eyes. The Five Great ninja villages would be reduced to four. The power balance would shift. The spoils were tempting.

"You could have just done this yourself," Darui noticed. "We didn't need to be involved."

"Dismantling one of the Great ninja village requires the proper finesse and I do not think it is a task that one can bear alone." Naruto explained. "The balance of power also needs to be maintained."

Naruto motioned to Shikamaru. The Kage's assistants that were present placed a hand on their holster. Shikamaru distributed several folders that detailed the history and kekkai genkai of each of the seven clans of Kiri.

"Each of the Seven Swords have a history with one of the clans. The clan you pick will also determine the sword you will receive. Obviously these clans will not come quietly but they have been crippled by the war, leaving primarily the children and the elderly behind – children that can
become effective contributions to each of our hidden villages. Because there are four of us, we can't split the spoils evenly. One village will have a lesser number than the rest. Since Lightning lost the war, it is only appropriate that Lightning receives less."

Darui frowned but knew it was only his pride that had been hurt. In reality, he didn't expect to come out of this meeting with even one Sword and a new kekkai genkai. "Cloud accepts."

The Hokage nodded. "We will now begin divvying up the clans."

It was like playing a board game but Naruto was well aware it was with people's lives. Naruto allowed Lightning to choose first. Darui shuffled through the files carefully and attempted to discern which clan would be more beneficial to Kumo. Finally Darui decided.

"The Momochi Clan," Naruto said when it was his turn. For two reasons, he had unfinished business with Sandayū and was hoping to attract him to Konoha. And for a boy named Haku.

Suna and Iwa decided the remainder between them until there was one clan left that no one wanted. Naruto knew it was probably going to come down to this. "Konoha chooses the Houzuki Clan."

Shikamaru placed two storage scrolls before each Kage and one before the Raikage. "These scrolls contain the swords. Keep them safe and in your possession."

In less than an hour, one of the Great Ninja Villages no longer existed.

"There is also the matter of the disputed border between Iwa and Suna," Naruto outright addressed the elephant in the room. Kitsuchi frowned. After the successful conquer of Mountain the Tsuchikage had begun to make plans to invade Suna. Gaara was well aware of these plans. The two Kage's eyes met with a suggestion that this war was not yet over.

Naruto cleared his throat to break the tension between the two Kages. "From what I understand, Suna seized Iwa's land because of a drought. With two new clans of a water elemental affinity, I doubt Suna will be as crippled by drought problems as it had been before. Surely, there is no longer any need for Suna to hold on to this land?" Naruto suggested.

Naruto had already discussed the proposal in private with Gaara. Gaara didn't like it but standing down meant avoiding another war. Sometimes, you had to be wise enough to choose your battles. Gaara nodded his head and conceded. "Suna agrees to give up all rights to the land we invaded during the Fifth Shinobi War. All Suna personnel will be evacuated within the week."

Kitsuchi stared at Gaara for a long time in an attempt to judge the character of the Kazekage. It was stupid to take the path of war when you could get what you want through words. Finally, Kitsuchi crossed his arms and relented. "Iwa accepts."

The two countries signed a formal agreement with the signature of the Hokage and Raikage as witnesses.

"And the last item on our agenda today," Naruto unfurled a scroll, "A new peace treaty."

Kitsuchi scoffed but figured he'd play along. Gaara scanned his eyes over the document. It was very similar to the one created after the Fourth Shinobi War that outlined a general agreement that none of the Great Ninja Villages would initiate war unless first provoked.

"The last one didn't work out too well," Darui pointed out. "What could possibly make this one anymore successful?"
Naruto slammed a kunai in the middle of the table to punctuate Darui's question. The kunai stood upright embedded into the wooden table. Naruto pointed. "This is just a kunai."

The Kages watched the display in curiosity. Naruto leaned forward and plucked the kunai out of the wood. "But in my hands, this kunai is a weapon. In my hands, I give it meaning." The Hokage signed his signature to the peace treaty. "This is only a piece of paper until you give it meaning."

Mizuka Houzuki stared at the round structure of Konoha's Academy. She hated this village. It was too dry and too far from the sea. She couldn't even retain her liquid form for very long.

"Are you coming in or are you going to stand out here all day?" Mizuka Houzuki looked up at an older man with a scar across his nose. She despised his bright smile and despised him even more when she discovered Umino Sensei was her home-room teacher.

The classroom of aspiring genin went quiet when Mizuka Houzuki entered the room. It didn't bother her. Hushed whispers had been constant since her clan was forcefully relocated to Konoha.

Mizuka dropped down in a chair in the far corner of the room away from every else. She studied her opponents and judged that the competition would be easy to cut down this year. Houzuki jumped when another girl dropped down in the seat next to her.

"Hi, my name is Uzumaki Ame," Ame said as she held out her hand.

Mizuka didn't like anything about her other than her name. Mizuka stared at the offered handshake, until Ame reached down and attempted to force one but the hand dripped through Ame's fingers. "Don't touch me," Mizuka said scathingly. "Leave me or you will be the first I kill in our graduation test."

Ame gave Mizuka an awkward smile. "But if you kill me during the graduation test, then you fail. That's not how the bell test works."

Mizuka gave Ame a blank stare. "What bell test?"

Ame eyes lit up and enthusiastically explained Konoha's graduation test. "It's supposed to test our ability for teamwork."

Mizuka's jaw fell in horror. It was the stupidest test Mizuka had ever heard. The Bloody Mist test was performed for only one reason: to see who could perform an order from the Mizukage without question or hesitation, even if that order was to kill your classmates. "That sounds idiotic."

Ame repeated the well-known idiom, "There are many leaves on Konoha's tree."

"I am not a leaf!" Mizuka snapped. At her raised voice, only then did Mizuka grow aware of two other pair of eyes watching. Behind Ame came a pair of Hyūga twins.

"Come on Ame, she's not worth bothering." The female Hyūga, Tsugi, landed a defensive hand on Ame's shoulder.

Akarui didn't take his sister's lead as he leaned forward with a smug smile. "It's hard to be scared of someone with dancing goldfish on her underwear."

Mizuka's face immediately turned bright red and exploded in a puddle of embarrassment.

"She exploded!" An Inuzuka laughed.
"Kids calm down," Iruka said as he attempted to get in control one of the largest classes he has ever taught due to the postponement of the academic year.

"Ame-chan," a flash bounced off the Aburame's glasses as he suddenly appeared at Ame's shoulder... or was he always there? "Did you know that kinkaichu beetles mate for life?"

"Pervert!" Tsugi jyūkened the Aburame across the room before he could slip a beetle underneath Ame's skirt to find out the color of her panties. Tsugi pressed Ame's head into her early blooming chest. "Do not dare touch my Ame-chan for one day she will marry me."

There was a dog whistle from the Inuzuka.

A skinny hand from the smallest student in class raised his hand. The Akimichi ate but had such a high metabolism he never got bigger than a stick. "Sensei, can two girls get married?"

"Well Akimichi-kun," the Nara beside him began, "The practical reason for marriage, for a ninja at least, is to ensure that his children and his partner gets a paycheck after he dies. Legally two women can get married but it would be biologically difficult to-" The Nara's attention was interrupted as the Yamanaka boy stole the Nara's book bag off her desk. "Hey!"

"Nerd!" Yamanaka tripped over the thread of shadow and stumbled down the stairs into Iruka. Iruka fell back against the black board while the Inuzuka released the three puppies hiding in her jacket.

During the commotion, Mizuka crawled out of the classroom. She longed for the distant distrust of her class back in Kiri where no one talked to one another. She looked behind her to make sure no one was following but didn't see when her head bumped into someone's knee.

Mizuka looked up at the frightened Momochi sitting in the quiet of the hallway. He was two years older, from another class, and she had never talked to him before because their clans had bee situated on two separate islands. She reached out to the only kindred sane spirit. "This place is crazy."

The Momochi nodded. "Aye."

"Don't you look comfortable?" Tsunade teased as she collapsed in the office chair. It was odd at first to be sitting on the opposite side of the desk. Naruto had already swapped out the name plate and pictures. He had probably already gotten rid of her hidden sake drawer.

Naruto scoffed. He felt anything but at ease. He had a long list of appointments and there were tall stacks of paperwork backlogged from when the government was in an impasse.

"I remember it had on a storming night when I invited you into the office and handed you a mask. It's amazing how fast you've gone from a grunt to the leader of ANBU."

Naruto shrugged his shoulders. "The hat is nothing but another mask. It hasn't gotten easier. Being the Hokage is just one hard decision after another."

Pain tempered Tsunade's retired smile. "Jiraiya was right. You were destined to surpass the first Hokage."

Naruto remembered the Shodaime's strength during the Fourth Shinobi War clearly. "I am nowhere near as strong as the Shodaiame and I personally hope to never be. His strength came from a period of constant warfare and violence without even the cycles of peace we have now. No, power comes at too high a blood price."
"I didn't mean physically." Tsunade posed a question to the Hokage. "Why do you think the Sandaime failed?"

Naruto closed his eyes to think about the question before he answered. "The Sandaime failed because he chose to entrust the darker parts of Konoha to Danzou which led to the creation of Root and the Uchiha massacre. He was a good man but not the ideal Kage. I will not make his mistakes but I will seek to imitate his successes. After all, he was the one who gave me a chance."

"You've grown up so much," Tsunade whispered. She was proud of his wisdom but would always have a chilling regret for forcing the ordeals he had to survive in order to obtain it. There were no more lessons to teach.

"Speaking of chances. I don't know how many more I can give you." Naruto dead-panned.

Naruto slapped a bill in front of Tsunade's face.

"This is the gambling bill you've procured over the span of just a week," Naruto said and felt as if he was lecturing a child and not his predecessor. "First, why are you sending the bill to Konoha? Second, Konoha does not have the money to entertain your vices."

"Shizune and I were celebrating our retirement." Tsunade pouted. Sakura led the hospital and Naruto led village. There was nothing for Tsunade to do anymore but gamble.

The doors of the office burst open as a shadow clone rushed in. The clone dumped the recent pile of approved missions to be filed away by another shadow clone.

"Don't you think that might confuse people?" Tsunade asked doubtfully.

"Only one of us wears the hat," Naruto answered. He found it more efficient for his clones to act as his secretary. They had the authority to sign when they received the paperwork and made going through the paper trail much quicker.

"Look, the elders Koharu and Homura are getting decrepit and you are certainly old enough to take their place."

"I'm not that old!" Tsunade cringed at the idea of becoming a village elder.

"Tsunade," Naruto said seriously. "You've got to find something to occupy your time other than gambling. We all have our vices but this is becoming self-destructive. The Senju clan has no money. You've gambled it all away. The only thing you have left to your name is your grandfather's compound. If you don't stop this gambling habit I'm going to be forced to sell your home. You won't have any legacy to leave."

Tsunade hung her head over the chair and gave Naruto, the only gamble she had ever won, a look out of the corner of her eye. "You are my legacy."

Neji's expression was a blank as he processed the order he was given. The Hokage leaned forward on his desk and explained, "I need someone in the capital overseeing the reconstruction efforts. I am hereby assigning you as the Hokage's authority in the Capital and advisor to the Daimyo. It is very important that we reinstate the tax collection system and relocate the Daimyo back to the Capital as soon as possible. After you've adjusted to life and taken stock of the necessary projects, I want a five-year proposal on how you plan to rebuild with an estimated budget."

"Five years?"
"Five years is a tentative time-frame for the initial stages. Of course, to completely regain what we have lost will take much longer." The Hokage reasoned. There was a hard glare that peeked underneath the hat. "Do you have any doubts about this new assignment? Your role will be an important responsibility in the future security of Fire Country."

"No, Hokage-sama," Neji replied steely while biting his tongue. He knew this was an order.

"Are there any questions?"

"No, Hokage-sama. I understand my role. I will have the proposal on your desk as soon as possible," Neji replied loyally.

"You are dismissed."

Neji bowed and turned for the door but he stopped at the frame. He looked back and the light of the window framed the shadowed outline of the Hokage. "Do not think I don't see your bullshit. How convenient you send me away while my wife is on a mission."

Neji was bitter about the fact his plans to have a child had been stalled when Hinata was assigned a mission after the only night they ever got a chance. Now with the new assignment, his plans were stalled indefinitely.

"I feel wounded you would question my character," Naruto said without a beat. "I truly believe you are the best person for the job."

And the worst part, Neji knew he was right.

"Don't overstep your boundaries Neji Hyūga," Naruto said as he licked his incisors. "I might be the Hokage, my job might be to protect the village, but I didn't get this job by being the nice guy."

The tension between Neji and Naruto was palpable. Both silently recognized what, or rather who, remained between them. "Pack your bags, Neji. I expect you to leave in the morning," the Hokage ordered. And it was final.

Shikamaru lounged in the chair with a cigarette while shadow clones sped through the paperwork that came through the door. The Hokage drew red circles on a map. "Now that Kiri no longer exists we are already getting reports of countries that are trying to rise in the power void." Naruto said as he studied his map. "I'm worried about Ame."

Shikamaru nodded. "Ame played both sides of the war and the current warlord received so much money from both Kiri and Konoha that he has actually managed to hold the position for some time."

Naruto scoffed. "He's already calling himself a Kage."

"And there's Jūgo," Shikamaru added. "He doesn't have much ambition but the ninja are growing really fond of him. The Land of Sound is also projected to grow in the years."

"Jūgo we can work with. I've met the current warlord of Ame. He's smart, he's analytical, and he's patient." Naruto looked up at Shikamaru. "I want him dead."

"Killing him will bring chaos back to Ame. A lot of people are going to die," Shikamaru reasoned the pros and cons. "But he does provide a future threat. From what I've read about him, I agree, he's not going to settle for staying under the shadow of Greater Countries."
Naruto nodded and turned to one of his clones, "Write up the mission briefing and add a reminder for my meeting with the Captain."

Shikamaru exhaled a stream of smoke as he watched the clones shuffle around the office.

"What are your assessments of the Houzuki and Momochi clans?"

"Their compounds should be finished within the next two months along the river, they can't seem to stand each other, and don't see the point of the council."

Naruto rubbed his temple and knew it would be an uphill battle to readjust the cultural differences between Kiri and Konoha. "For now, they will be assigned as lesser clans until they can prove their worth to Konoha. I want you continue to be their liaison. It is extremely important that their transition into Konoha is as smooth as possible."

Shikamaru sighed even though it had been his idea to split up the clans. His list of things to do kept piling up. Perhaps he should stop telling people his ideas.

Naruto leaned over his paperwork when Shikamaru tossed the remains of his cigarette in the trash and stood up from the chair. "And Shikamaru, it's been implied but I haven't formally announced it. Congratulations on becoming the Hokage's advisor of foreign affairs."

Shikamaru hung his head.

"Don't give me that look, Shikamaru. You're the only person never excited about a promotion."
Naruto motioned toward the door. "Let Chouji in on your way out."

"Yes, Hokage-sama," Shikamaru bowed in dismissal.

"Temari is going to kill you when she finds out," Chouji responded to the cigarette smell as Shikamaru passed by with a nod of acknowledgement.

"How can I help?" Chouji asked when he entered the office and met with the Hokage. Naruto pointed to the chair, always an indicator that this was going to be a long meeting. The chair creaked under Chouji's weight as he replaced Shikamaru.

"As you know Konoha is still under a lot of debt from the war and we still need to redirect most of our budget to the Capital. Despite all that, I want to buy the mainland island of Kiri before some rich merchant snatches it up."
Naruto eyed the Akimichi pointedly.

"The Akimichi was looking at it," Chouji admitted. "The mainland presents a bit of a problem. Without ninjas, it's just a simple fishing village with an active volcano. The volcano provides a huge risk and it would take a long-term investment to make it profitable. Personally, I think it will be easier to buy one of the smaller islands, preferably one with a resort, and watch the money roll in. In short, buying the mainland is a bad investment."

Naruto sat back in thought. "I know Konoha needs it but I'm not interested in the money. I'm interested in it geographically. The mainland is the center of the ocean. Its where all sea routes run through. During the war, Kiri essentially stopped all naval trade and crippled our economy. I want to buy the mainland to keep our enemies from obtaining it."

"The Akimichi will probably end up buying it."

"I thought you said it was a bad investment."
"A bad investment for Konoha. Not for us. We can afford it long-term. Konoha can't afford any more loans, even with the money coming in from Lightning and Demon Country."

"That's not good enough. Chouji Akimichi, you figure out how to buy that island," Naruto ordered. "I am hereby declaring you the financial advisor of Konoha. Figure it the fuck out."

"I can certainly think of a few ways but none of them you will like," Chouji replied. "My clan sells Konoha drugs. Konoha in turn could sell these drugs to mainland Kiri to raise the money. Or, the human trafficking trade becomes much more profitable during peacetime since it's harder to obtain displaced persons. Konoha could plunder a few people and make a nice bit of coin out of it."

Naruto frowned.

"Hokage-sama," Chouji answered respectfully. "I know you want to do everything but at this point Konoha can only be stretched so far until you are forced to dip your fingers in murky water. As your financial advisor, I'm telling you, it's a bad investment. Buy a few of the smaller islands. I can help you determine which ones will turn over the most profit in the hopes of buying a piece of the mainland someday. But for now, that's all Konoha can hope for."

"It's a tough reality when a clan has more money than its ninja village."

"Money is power," Chouji told Naruto. "The world might constantly change, hidden villages will rise and fall, clans will disappear and new kekkai genkai will be born, but money will always remain the one constant."

Naruto chewed on Chouji's words. "I'm going to consider your advice and will call you back in after I've made a decision." Naruto didn't agree about the power of money but admitted inwardly that it was used to oil the gears that kept Konoha running.

"Another thing, I understand that the Akimichi bought Tsunade's old gambling debts?"

"Aye."

"I'm sure they are no use to you now that she is no longer Hokage but the Uzumaki clan would like to buy them from you."

"We can make that work," Chouji nodded as he stood. "Next week the family is hosting a dinner party. Here's your invitation," Chouji added before he was dismissed. "Feel free to bring the wife and kids. It's an outdoor BBQ."

Naruto picked up the invitation and gave a smile. "Thanks Chouji, I'll be there."

Now that the formal meeting was over, Chouji popped open a bag of chips. He waved to Sakura with BBQ fingers. Sakura was allowed inside the office as Naruto's next appointment.

Sakura immediately threw up her hands and knew what Naruto was going to ask her. "No, I haven't completed the medical files for all the members of the Kiri clans." Sakura plopped her bum onto Naruto's desk. "I really want to study the Houzuki kekkai genkai but I can't get any of them to attend an appointment. I have to explain that a medical check-up is a standard procedure but it seems in Kiri the reason why anyone went to the hospital was when someone was about to die."

Naruto chuckled at Sakura's instant ranting. "I want their files completed soon but-"

"I'm trying," Sakura interrupted as she combed back her pink hair in frustration and the small shift revealed the diamond on her forehead, "I'm trying to avoid using force but it might come down to
"No, using force will only make them bitter. Make sure they know they won't be unable to take on missions until they get a medical check-up."

Sakura rubbed the headache these new clans were giving her. Even still, there was a lot of resistance to the idea in Konoha.

"I'm glad you're working on those medical files," Naruto tried again and paused to see if he was going to be interrupted by another rant, and then continued. "But I actually called you into my office to promote you."

"Promote me to what?" Sakura asked confused with a hand on her hip.

"The Hokage's advisor of Internal Affairs. Everyone comes in and out of your hospital so you're familiar with a lot of people and you have medical knowledge that I don't have. I think you're the perfect person for the job, if you don't think it will conflict with your job at the hospital of course."

Sakura gave the job some thought. "Why not? It's about time you valued my good advice."

"I don't know if it's always good advice," Naruto snickered. Smoke erupted from shadow clones diving to get out of the way as the Hokage slammed into the wall. Naruto groaned at the familiar taste of Sakura's fist. He peeled himself out of the wall. "I could send you to prison for that."

Sakura gave an unladylike snort. "I'm the Head of Konoha's Hospital."

"I'm the Hokage," Naruto shot back.

"I have a feeling that's going to become an overused line." Sakura rolled her eyes as she leaned back to stretch. She paused when she spotted the Team Seven photo framed on the Hokage's desk. It stood out among all the pictures of his kids. Sakura lifted the picture frame in her hands. "Sometimes, it seems as if it was only yesterday our names were called to be on the same genin team."

Naruto watched the soft emotions in Sakura's face. He lounged back down in his chair. "Are you happy, Sakura?" Sakura turned to Naruto, surprised by the question. Naruto reached to comb his hand through his hair but still hadn't gotten used to the hat in his way. "I know I never fulfilled my promise to you."

Sakura slapped Naruto into the face with the glass of the photo. "I don't care about that stupid promise."

"But if there was a chance…"

Sakura jumped off the desk. "I have a wonderful husband who loves me, two little boys, I'm Head of Konoha's hospital, and your advisor. I used to believe that the value of my life could only be measured by you and Sasuke. And then at one point I realized I was never going to catch up with the insane amount of power you and Sasuke possessed. I had to find my own path."

Sakura walked towards the office door and then turned around. "I am happy Naruto. Are you?" Then she returned to the hospital that was undisputedly Sakura's domain.

Naruto watched the woman that had become akin to an older sister leave the office. Naruto uprighted the Team Seven photo and adjusted the frame back onto his desk.
Ino came through the window.

"Just missed her," Ino cursed as her feet landed on the floor. She wanted to invite Sakura over for a glass of wine, like old times.

Naruto raised an eyebrow. "I've noticed you two seem to be a lot closer than before her memories were erased."

Caught red-handed, Ino didn't deny it. "Maybe there are some memories I didn't unlock. I wanted to start our friendship over." Ino chuckled to herself as she leaned her gaze out the window. "I missed her."

"I missed Ino," Naruto said in turn. Slowly the woman he had come to know during childhood began to shine through the dark turns she had taken. "You seem less angry."

Ino stared at the reflection of her face in the window. "Holding onto my anger was pushing everyone around me away." Then she peeled from the wall and sat a classified folder on Naruto desk. "Here is the finished report from the Kage's summit. It contains all of the moves that the Kage are planning in the next five years, or at least what they think they're planning."

Naruto quickly placed the file into one of the maximum security drawers, locked and activated a seal that kept even a Hyūga from seeing through it. Then Naruto went through a separate drawer and handed Ino an official promotion letter.

"Ibiki's job is yours. You deserve it. Your part was integral to phase one of the plan to defeat Kiri and Kumo. Not only that but I also need you leading the T&I division ANBU branch. There's a Captain's cloak waiting for you."

Ino's eyes lit up with a smug smile.

Naruto thought it was a nice change of pace to see Ino so happy. "What are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to tell my dad," Ino said softly. Both Chouji and Shikamaru had lost their dads in the war. Inoichi was still alive and Ino was undeniably a daddy's girl. "He's going to be so proud of me."

Ino held the certificate to her chest and jumped out the window.

It wasn't more than a minute when Tenten came through the doors. She watched nervously as the Hokage overlooked her mission list.

"Tenten," the Hokage said, "I understand that you aspire to a position of leadership?"

"A position that I have rightfully earned," Tenten replied immediately. It would be a hollow victory otherwise.

The Hokage folded his hands. "With the introduction of the Kiri clans the streets of Konoha have become more unruly and the war have left many destitute and prone to violence. After the Uchiha were removed from the Konoha's police force, the third Hokage wisely decided that it would be best if the police force was comprised of ninja that did not come from a clan, but even today most clans pay off the police and still get away with a lot of illegal activity. I am inclined to agree with the Third Hokage, that it is both important for a ninja to enforce the law and understand the civilian way of life. But he was missing one vital component: strength of character. I need someone who will work with me to clean up the unnecessary dirt that Konoha doesn't need and I need someone who won't be swayed by the influence of the clans. Would you be interested in becoming the chief of Konoha's police department?"
Tenten's jaw dropped and stuttered out her answer, "Yes. I won't let you down. I promise I'll whip the department into shape. It'll be even better than when the Uchiha were overseeing it."

Naruto smiled at her enthusiasm and could see the fire burn in her eyes. "Good, now there are certain things in Konoha that needs to remain untouched. The Uzumaki clan currently oversee all illegal drug activity in Konoha." Naruto motioned to the chair at Tenten's perplexed stare and knew he had a lot to explain.

Tenten nodded after she listened to Naruto's experiences with the street life of Konoha. "It's ingenious," Tenten admitted. "But here's something to think about. How about lowering the prices for the legal drug trade to make them affordable by civilians and career genin? That way they won't have to take the illegal route."

"I wasn't the Hokage before," Naruto agreed. "And I doubt the Akimichi are going to sell any cheaper which means the government will have to offset the costs. But we don't have the money right now. At the right time I do plan on implementing new drug laws but for now, do you understand? I can't fix everything immediately. It's going to take time."

Tenten nodded. "I understand."

"You are dismissed."

Tenten grabbed the paperwork to brainstorm ideas and a rough draft of plans she'll work out in more detail later tonight. When the door of the office closed, Tenten squealed to herself. Finally, all of her sacrifices were paying off. It wasn't Jounin Head but she was promoted to a job that could make a difference. That's all she ever really wanted.

Naruto finally had a few minutes alone in between the string of meetings. He hit his forehead on the desk, pulled the hat over his eyes, and took a nap.

"Hokage-sama!"

Naruto jolted back as Lee came through the door. "You're ten minutes early," Naruto grumbled.

"Of course." Lee answered. "I am always at least ten minutes early. I had come by an hour ago but you were in a meeting. I had come by thirty minutes ago but you were in a meeting. And now, my dedication has finally paid off! How can I help!?"

Naruto rubbed his eyes and adjusted himself back into the chair. He leaned forward and grinned mischievously. "Are you aware that I assigned Neji to the capital?"

"Yosh!" Lee answered. "You assigned Neji to the capital because a beautiful woman has strained your childhood friendship in a tragic love story of duty, honor, and the hardships of being a shinobi! Your passionate love for Neji and your bitter hate that he has become your rival is the thin line that has spared his life. Sending Neji away is a manifestation of your love for him!"

"Uh… sure," Naruto winced. "Anyways, Neji no longer had the capacity to fulfill his former duties in Konoha. I need a new Jounin Head and I've decided to appoint you."

Lee had no words.

"Maybe you can't use chakra but you're one of the strongest ninja in this village. You complete every task set before you and you always go above and beyond the call of duty. Lee, you have earned this recognition."
Lee erupted into tears. The Kage hat fell to the floor as Lee unabashedly tightened Naruto in a manly hug. "You can count on me!" Lee cried. When Naruto's next appointment began to loom soon, Naruto gently pulled Lee away who had cried into the Kage's cloak for a good fifteen minutes.

"I know you will not fail me," Naruto said as he reached to pick up the hat on the floor.

Lee pulled himself together, his bottom lip quivering, as he repeatedly bowed. "I will be the best Jounin Head there ever was." Lee smiled, his teeth gleaming with a heart-warming happiness.

Lee was proof that sometimes hard-work did pay off.

After Lee cartwheeled out the window to tell everyone the good news, Naruto stood up and stretched out of his seat. He hated sitting for too long.

"Hokage-sama, what have I done? I have brought you reports on the movements of Kuro no Keiyakusha." Captain Mantis walked out the shadowed corner of the office, never noticed by Lee and his tears. His Captain's cloak was slightly modified to include a white hood that drew over his mask.

Naruto almost forgotten Mantis was in the office, just as he often forgot Shino's presence even when he didn't have a mask on. The Hokage placed his hands behind his back. "Report."

"Are my hunter-nin almost finished tracking the remains of the terrorist organization? Yes, we are. Although, we have yet to find who is leading or funding the organization."

"I want that to be a priority," Naruto ordered. "I understand their argument but I don't agree with their methods. They need to be dealt with."

"Yes, Hokage-sama," Captain Mantis answered and then disappeared back into the shadowed corner.

Naruto then proceeded to unlock a drawer and spread out the scroll connected to the ANBU tattoos. The scroll was decorated in a web of animals. Naruto activated the seal and summoned the Fox.

Captain Fox appeared with his head bowed.

"Don't you think it's time for you to get your own mask?" Naruto asked.

"I'm sorry. I've been waiting on you to take it back."

Naruto gave permission and Konohamaru took off the mask. He handed the Fox mask back to the Hokage.

"Which mask do you want to replace it?" Naruto asked.

Konohamaru scratched the back of his head. "I guess the one I had before will be fine."

Naruto summoned the Hound mask from the scroll while Konohamaru also shrugged out of the white cloak. Naruto gave an amused smile. "What are you giving me that for? That's yours."

"What are you-" Konohamaru paused as he stared down at the cloak.

"Congratulations Captain Hound," Naruto chuckled as he leaned back at Konohamaru flabbergasted expression. "Is this really a surprise? You proved yourself when you were forced to step into my shoes and take over my responsibilities in ANBU. You did a good job handling things while I was out of the village. And from what I hear, anyone deserves a Captain's Cloak for standing up to my
lover." Naruto teased. "Hinata scares me sometimes."

Konohamaru didn't feel like joking at Naruto's dark humor. He held the heavy cloak in his hands. "Hanabi is missing an arm."

"And Hanabi is alive. You made reasonable decisions no matter how hard they might have been at the time. I need you as my right-hand Konohamaru. And who knows, maybe one day you'll take this hat from me."

Konohamaru laughed. "You enjoy the rolling chair too much to give it up."

"You have a point." Naruto grinned and sat up in his chair. "I do have a mission for you."

Konohamaru replaced the white cloak around his shoulders and the Hound mask over his face. Naruto handed Captain Hound the mission folder.

"I want you to get a team together and gather as much information as you can about Ame's current warlord. When we have enough information, then we will decide the best method to assassinate him."

"Understood, Hokage-sama." Captain Hound bowed and immediately went to work.

Naruto crossed out the last name for the list of meetings he had scheduled for the day. He created a shadow clone to leave in the office. The Rokudaime Hokage retired for the evening and went home.

In the early dawn Uzumaki Naruto took the road less traveled. The small forest trail opened to the wooden building atop the hill.

"Uzumaki-san!" The elder woman at the desk said brightly when Naruto entered through the door. The woman immediately remembered her manners, "I apologize, I mean, Hokage-sama." Naruto chuckled at her greeting. He remembered a few years ago this very woman had thrown a lamp at his head.

"How is everything, Tora-san?" Naruto asked.

"Perfect," Tora answered and brush her white curls from her face. "The new employee is working really well with the children and the check you sent in last week paid for new renovations of the bathrooms."

"Glad to hear. I'm going to pick up the one I dropped off last week."

Tora nodded. "I believe he is out in the yard playing with the other children."

Naruto knew his way around the orphanage well and set off down the hallway. All the lights had been replaced with working bulbs and he could hear the sounds of construction on a new wing. All around him were the changes that the drug money had built.

Naruto paused before a door that led to a closet. When he turned the handle and opened it, the closet was now changed to a nursery. A woman with a uniform turned at the sound of an open door. She smiled in recognition. "How is it going, Hokage-sama?" But she said the title with sarcasm.

"It always startles me to see you here, Maiko," Naruto admitted. For some reason, he always expected to find her on that street corner, waiting to tease him right before he entered his apartment in one of the worst areas of town. Naruto leaned over a crib and watched the peaceful sleep of the
tiniest baby he's ever seen.

Maiko shrugged. "This job sure pays better than what I was doing before. Ever since Nishi died, I've been looking to get out of the business. Funny, I told myself I'd never come back here."

"I said the same," Naruto said as he folded his hands in his pocket. The nursery was decorated with a rocking chair, diaper bins, and cribs that sat under the stars of the wallpaper.

"And what's up with that new employee you recommended? She does nothing but watch that kid that came in last week."

Naruto winked and put a finger to his lips in secret. "Politics."

Maiko shook her head and then she was distracted by a sudden smelly diaper. "When are you getting your orphanage open?" Maiko asked. "We're beginning to get an overflow."

"I have a few houses on the compound set up already. I could be open within the month. Tora-san suggested I should start with the older children and move my way down until I've adjusted to everything," Naruto replied.

Maiko teased, "Has the great Hokage ever changed a diaper before?"

Naruto laughed. "See you next week." Naruto knew he was on a schedule and couldn't linger. He rounded the hallway and passed a room where several small toddlers populated a room of play pens and toys.

Naruto was almost run over by a game of tag. A little girl stumbled over his foot. "Are you alright?"

At the sound of Naruto's voice the blind little girl looked up excitedly. "Naru-kun!"

Naruto crouched down with a smile and asked gently, "Hey Kimi, how are you doing?" Her older brother, Katsuo had died from an overdose earlier in the year. Naruto couldn't save them all.

"Great!" Kimi said excitedly, pulled between wanting to talk to Naruto and winning the game of tag.

"Go ahead," Naruto smiled as he watched her drag her hand along the wall as she raced down the hall.

Naruto stepped out into the courtyard where a red-haired woman was watching the children at play. Naruto stopped beside her. "It is time."

"My name is Amaru and I am one of the last remaining Twelve Guardians of Fire Country," Amaru introduced herself to Neji Hyūga at the front gates of Konoha. The red kanji of fire displayed proudly on the white sash of her hip mirrored the red of her hair.

"I had the Daimyo reassigned to Konoha after the battle with Kiri and Kumo," Naruto explained. Then he leaned down and brushed his hand through the young Daimyo's hair, "And this little guy is Naganori Asano, the Daimyo of Fire Country."

It had been easy for Asano to hide among the children of Konoha's orphanage. Asano had been so far away from the throne before the bomb that he had been raised a normal playful child. Neji calculated that the Daimyo of Fire Country had to be no older than six years old. The young boy hung to his Guardian's leg as if she was a surrogate mother instead of his loyal protector.

Naruto crouched down and gave an easy grin. "Neji might seem like he's got a stick up his ass but
he's a good guy at heart and he is going to take very good care of you. Right, Neji?"

Neji folded his arms when the young Daimyo looked up at him with doubtful eyes. The Daimyo hid further behind Amaru's leg at Neji's unflinching pale eyes.

Naruto chuckled. Asano pouted and asked "Are you going to visit me?"

"Of course. I won't miss a birthday," Naruto winked. "Neji-niisan is going to take you home now."

Amaru patted Asano soothingly and picked up the young Daimyo in his arms.

Neji immediately said, "He's the Daimyo. He should walk."

Amaru frowned. "He's the Daimyo. If he want to be carried he will be carried."

"A child who is going to be a leader and symbol of Fire Country should not be so spoiled," Neji said rigidly. Stuck in the middle, Naruto laughed nervously. This was going to be an interesting partnership. Amaru gave the Hokage a look.

"Hey Neji, remember he's just a kid. Consider it practice when you and Hinata finally have one," Naruto said slyly. "But who knows, five years is a long time."

Naruto and Neji shared a molten stare so long that Amaru shifted the Daimyo onto her hip and began down the road. The tension broke when Neji was pulled toward his duty to protect his ward. Neji proved he could be the better man. He bowed with clenched fists and said, "Take care of Hinata while I am gone."

Then Neji Hyūga walked out the gates of Konoha.

Tomu's jaw dropped when Hohei secretively flashed the ANBU tattoo on his shoulder in explanation to why Hohei has been so busy lately.

Tomu looked down at his feet as they walked across the river. Leaning on the bridge, they could see where Tomu's construction company was beginning to construct the compound for the new clans. Tomu brushed back his hair. Mushi has been busy too.

"Why?" Tomu asked unable to understand. "We're at peace now. What's the point of joining ANBU or doing training if we're at peace?"

Hohei looked out over the river. "We're ninja Tomu, there will always be an end to peace. The ninja who aren't ready for it when it happens will be the ones to die first."

"Isn't it that sort of thinking, that expectation that peace will come to an end, self-defeating? It's that sort of thinking that prevents us from having peace permanently. Naruto is the Hokage now. Things will be different."

"Haven't you learned anything?" Hohei asked. "Even before ninja, there were always wars. Kiri might be gone but there are a lot of bitter Mist ninja out there. Kuro no Keiyakusha may have been defeated but they are still creating weapons to kill us, one of the Great ninja villages is gone but that only means smaller ones are scrambling over themselves to fill the void. It's not over, Tomu. It's not over until we die."

Tomu frowned. His construction company was offering him his job back. Tomu looked down at the hitai-ite Naruto had given him. He had options. Naruto had fought to give him options while his
friends had none. They continued the cycle while he considered escaping from it.

"I won't hate you," Hohei said, "and Mushi won't either."

"I know," Tomu said as he clenched his hand on the railing.

"But," Hohei said as he helped Tomu lay out both sides of the argument. "You possess the last living sharingan. You have excellent reflexes and good chakra control although you lack a knowledge of basic jutsu. You'd be a good hunter-nin. You'd be an excellent asset to Konoha. But if your heart is not in it, don't. This is too much of an important decision to be influence by what Mushi and I have decided to do, because in the very end, we die alone. Maybe we'll be on the same battlefield or on the same team or you're in Konoha, but in the end, we take that last breath alone. No matter what, one of us will be burying the other."

Hohei crossed his arms. "It's time for you to decide who you are Tomu Uzumaki."

The rain tapped steady against the window as Naruto stretched out of his nap and pleasantly found all the paperwork in his office had been completed. Not even Tsunade could have ever boasted such a feat. "You welcome, Boss." The five shadow clones in the office grumbled before they passed out on the floor in exhaustion.

It was about time for Naruto to end his shift and head home (conveniently after Shion falls asleep). Before he left, Naruto closed his eyes and searched for any chakra signatures coming in from a mission. Then Naruto opened his eyes with excitement dancing in them like stars.

Naruto pulled down the sleeve of his Kage's cloak and activated the tattoo on his forearm.

He passed through a shower of rain, wood flew as he slapped his hands against tree bark, and pinned Hinata between him and the tree. Then she stabbed him in the throat.

Naruto coughed as he landed on all fours and splashed in a puddle of water. "What the fuck?" Naruto asked at the unexpected greeting. The trees just outside of Konoha bowed with water.

"This isn't what we agreed on Naruto," Hinata snapped. "You were supposed to send Neji away after I came back from the mission. You didn't even give me a chance to talk to him."

"Shit, Hinata," Naruto snarled as he composed himself. "If it matters so much I can bring you to the capital in seconds. We'll probably even beat Neji there."

The rain poured down drenching the two opposing ninja.

"What is it going to be, Hinata?" Naruto asked. "Do you want to go now?"

Hinata knew assaulting her right after a mission in the cold rain was unfair. She released a tired breath. "Why?"

Naruto relaxed when he saw she didn't have the energy to fight him. He combed his fingers through the blonde strands of his hair. Then he gave her an honest answer, "I was afraid you'd change your mind. Let's face it Hinata, that night I found you, you were naked in your bathrobe about to jump off the bridge. You weren't exactly emotionally stable. But you finally said yes, and I didn't want to let that go."

Hinata stepped forward through the wet puddles of water and pillowed her head against Naruto's chest. "Take me home."
Naruto didn't question her forgiveness. He tightened his arms around her waist and in the blink of an eye, they were in Hinata's bedroom.

Hinata jolted her head around. "I meant your office. I can't report to you in my bedroom."

Naruto threw off the leaden and wet Kage's cloak and it dropped to the ground. His shirt, hat, and pants followed. He flipped back onto Hinata's bed. "Go on, report."

"Naruto, this can't be the precedence. You are the Hokage now. We need to maintain some type of decorum."

Naruto sighed. Then a second later he plopped down in the Kage's chair in his underwear. He threw his wet clothes in a corner. "Now I'm dry and you're still wet. Alright, Hinata, precedence. Report."

Hinata bowed and began, "Anko is dead."

A serious expression drew over Naruto's face. Anko had been missing for some time now. Tsunade had assumed that she might have died in the bombing of the capital but there was never any confirmation and during the war there were more pressing matters to attend to. As Anko's protégé and Hinata's skill in tracking, Naruto didn't have much choice but to send Hinata to look for the former ANBU Captain.

"Did you find a body or the cause of death?"

"I followed Anko's footsteps to Iron Country. It wasn't very hard to track her as she was last seen sleeping with Mifune. Anko was investigating the operations of Kuro no Keiyakusha in Iron Country when she got distracted by something that piqued her interest. I managed to track her to a village and the population spoke of an intense battle which occurred approximately around the same time Mifune saw Anko last." Hinata concluded, "I never found a body but the villagers spoke of black flames that did not die. I have come to the reasonable conclusion that Anko got distracted from her mission by a bigger target and lost the ensuing fight that ultimately killed her. Uchiha Sasuke is still alive."

Naruto yawned. "Seriously Hinata, you're shivering. You're going to catch a cold."

Hinata blinked at Naruto's lack of reaction. "You already knew."

Naruto chuckled. "I know now that Tsunade had been tracking him all this time. She lost his trail a few years back and this is the first time we've had confirmation of another sighting since then."

"I don't think he is in Iron Country anymore. His trail was cold by the time I arrived."

"Hinata," Naruto said seriously. He did not want her to make Anko's mistake. "If you ever happen to see Sasuke in any of your missions, do not engage."

"You're going to just let him go?" Hinata questioned.

Naruto leaned forward. "This isn't an easy decision even though I know he remains a threat to Konoha. But I'm no longer stronger than him and I would lose too many people to take him down. But if he ever enters Fire Country or attack one of our ninja without provocation, then I will deal with him without hesitation."

Naruto placed his feet on the desk and leaned back into his chair. "Is that the end of your report?"

"I am done."
"Good, as the Hokage, I order you to take off those clothes."

Hinata raised an amused eyebrow. "And if I refuse an order? What are you going to do? Dock my pay and banish me from Konoha?"

Her question created an unexpected dilemma Naruto had never considered. "Please?"

The soaked and heavy flak jacket dropped to the ground. Naruto's grin grew wider with every article of clothing she dropped to the floor of the office. The stars lit the smile on Hinata's lips as she slid into Naruto's lap. Naruto signaled the ANBU watching to cloak the office in an obscurity jutsu for some privacy. Naruto leaned forward into Hinata's neck as he rubbed his thumb over her underwear.

He kissed her and then sat back, leaving Hinata with a quizzical expression. "With the confirmation of Anko's death I need a new ANBU Captain."

Naruto watched the conflicting emotions battle in her eyes until resignation won. "I know you don't want to go back into ANBU but I wouldn't be asking this of you if I didn't have a choice. You're Anko's student and she was over both the poison and ero division. You're the only one with both those credentials."

Hinata looked down at the dark swirl on her shoulder. Even in retirement, the tattoo never faded away. "There's no escaping ANBU."

"You can say no." Naruto said but they both knew that was a lie. There was no one else qualified to do the job.

"Anko's old mask will be fine."

Naruto gave a reminiscent smile. "I was sort of hoping you'd pick the Fox. You were hot in that mask."

Hinata brushed the back of her hand against Naruto's whiskers and he purred in response. "That mask only fits one person."

"It fit nicely on your curves," Naruto said unabashedly.

Hinata leaned over and set her hands to the back of the chair until Naruto fell back with the headrest. Hinata hovered over him with a secret smile. "These curves?" Hinata teased as she humped her hips into Naruto's crouch for added emphasis.

His hungry moan forced his head to rear back. "Hina-chan, I missed you so-"

Gravity fought against them as the chair tipped over at their weight. Naruto hit his head on the carpet in a confused blink as Hinata's weight pressed against his chest. On the floor of the office, Hinata erupted in a fit of giggled laughter. Naruto combed his hair back and joined her in laughing at himself, "I'm probably the first Kage to ever fall out of his chair."

Hinata smiled. "And you're probably the first Kage who's still a-"

"Don't say it."

"Genin."

Naruto playfully bucked his hips and watched as the movement caught Hinata by surprise and she fell beside him. The laughter gave way to a breathless comfort. Naruto twisted down and pressed a
kiss to the seal on her forehead that glowed a pale purple in the moonlight.

He lifted her backside and unlatched her bra. Naruto dug his thumb into her wet panties and watched her body arch into him. He caught a breast in his mouth. He could feel her body tense at his touch, tighter, and tighter, and then Hinata sneezed. She pulled away from him embarrassed when another trail of sneezes left her body.

"I told you so," Naruto reprimanded as he pulled up and grabbed the Kage's cloak from the corner. With a wind jutsu, Naruto dried the cloth and then wrapped it around Hinata's shoulders. Hinata pulled the robe tighter around her as she sneezed again and sniffed.

Naruto couldn't stop laughing at her predicament. He pulled her into his lap and wrapped his arms around her to warm her with his body heat. He pressed his back against the side of the desk as the rain gradually came to a stop.

"You were right. I've changed my mind." Hinata whispered against the trail of the darkened scar on his chest. "That night was a mistake. I should not have told you yes."

Naruto hit his head back against the desk. "Why do I keep letting you break my heart woman?" The rejection was like peeling off the scab of a scar. "What now? How are you going to make things work with Neji?"

"I'm not." Hinata said. "Neji can stay in the Capital for all I care. Rejecting you does not mean I choose Neji. I've come to realize that there are still personal demons I have to deal with. All throughout the war I just kept pushing things aside to be dealt with for later. The war is over and I still have to grieve for the babies I've lost. I saw the bomb drop on the capital, I saw my little sister tortured, and I have seen things in ANBU. I still have to deal with the nightmares and the insomnia. I still have to deal with the scars my father inflicted on me. This isn't about the clan. This isn't about Neji. This isn't about you. It's about me. I can't tell you yes because I'm not ready."

Naruto pressed his cheek against Hinata's hair and held his arms around the strongest woman he's ever known. It had taken years for Naruto to resolve and come to terms with his own nine-tailed demon. They both knew now that Hinata was re-entering ANBU and Naruto held the Kage's hat, it was going to be a long road ahead for the both of them. Naruto promised, "I'll always be here for you until the day I die."

Hinata curled into Naruto's understanding arms.

For a peaceful moment they rested in the shadows of Konoha.

The pipes were fixed. No longer did they release and incessant screech. The leak was fixed. No longer did sewer water flood the floors.

Naruto smoothed down one last seal along the bars, took a step back, and observed the decoration along the Kyūbi's new cage. The Kyūbi narrowed his eyes and growled as he attempted to near the bars but was repelled backwards by the power of the seals. The red chakra that used to leak through the bars curled back in on itself, unable to get any farther than the seals.

"You do this, and you realize you'll never be able to use my power again?" The Kyūbi sneered. "I won't be there to help you when you're weak and pathetic and dying."

Naruto crossed his arms and the Hokage's coat hung off his shoulders. A small part of him felt a little bit of pity for the Kyūbi. Naruto patiently explained, "I don't need you anymore."
The Kyūbi released a deep baritone laughter, as if it couldn't possibly comprehend how Naruto could possibly survive without him. Naruto turned on his heels and with each step forward the Kyuubi's laughter began to die and then a sudden break, "Wait."

Naruto's steps echoed off the floor.

"You can't do this to me! I am Kurama, the Nine-tails! You're going to regret this! When I get out I'm going to tear you limb from limb. I'm going to- YOU CAN'T F**KING LEAVE ME HERE BY MYSELF!"

Without remorse, Naruto reached and opened the backdoor of the Uzumaki Compound, closed the door behind him, and placed a final seal on the handle.

For the first time since Naruto Uzumaki was born, did he truly know the meaning of silence.

Naruto walked through the Uzumaki Compound. The walls had been erected and formed a sturdy defense around his mind. The darkness that settled over the compound was different from the congested tension in the sewer. This was a comfortable darkness of which Naruto bore with ease. He stared up at the thousands of stars that sparkled in the night sky, as if each star could mirror each person Naruto has met in his lifetime, some brighter than others but no less important. A full moon made the eternal darkness easier to bear and the moonlight cast plenty light for Naruto to see his path.

Naruto stopped at the training area. There was a figure waiting for him, sitting on the ground, with white hair cascading over his broad shoulders. Naruto joined the figure, sitting beside him in the place that had now become the heart of his mindscape.

"I'm proud of you, kid."

Naruto pouted when Jiraiya's hand came down on his head and shuffled his blonde hair. "Hey, I'm not much of a kid anymore."

Jiraiya chuckled.

"I guess not. You're a man now." Jiraiya rubbed his chin and nodded knowingly, "And now that you are a man I officially bequeath this to you."

Naruto stared curious at a purple cover 'Icha Icha' that was handed to him. Jiraiya leaned against Naruto's shoulder, flipped through the pages, and showed Naruto the contents inside. Naruto's face went red as each flipped page revealed a sketch of Hinata in a host of provocative poses.

Naruto snatched the book away from Jiraiya and stuffed it in his pants pocket. Jiraiya's booming laughter warmed Naruto's chest.

"Perv," Naruto grumbled, and then leaned back against the great pillar of Jiraiya's back. Through his spine, he could still feel the fading of Jiraiya's chuckles.

Jiraiya stilled and noted as he stared up at the large maple tree that shadowed tender memories overhead, "Beautiful place you've got here, Naruto."

But Naruto's breathing had rested against his back. Jiraiya smiled, took out a pen and small book, and added another entry into the "Tale of Uzumaki Naruto."

Against Jiraiya, the closest thing to a father Naruto ever really had, Naruto slept. Naruto Uzumaki breathed in the sweat sound of silence.
Tomu snapped awake when a hand suddenly covered his mouth. He looked around frantically until his eyes settled on the white ANBU mask. "Am I in trouble?" Tomu asked when the ANBU withdrew his hand.

"Follow."

"...in my pajamas?" Tomu asked.

The Boar ANBU nodded.

Tomu didn't know what was going on but when an ANBU said follow, you didn't say no. Tomu jumped out the window into the warm air of spring and followed the ANBU into the open window of the Hokage's Office.

"Hey, Naruto what's going on?" Tomu asked, wondering if Naruto wanted a late-night run of ramen or something. When Naruto directed Tomu to stand before the Kage's desk, Tomu caught the seriousness of the atmosphere. He corrected his initial greeting and bowed, "Hokage-sama."

An ANBU mask was placed upon the desk.

"The war has ended but our battles have not," The Hokage said from his chair. "Every hidden village is weaker than we were before. We've all lost good ninja and have used valuable resources. In the wake of our weakness, crime has escalated and new hidden villages are attempting to establish themselves in the power vacuum. As the saying goes, Ninjas fight for peace but ANBU keep the peace."

Tomu's heart pounded in his chest as he stared at the dark tears drawn on the ANBU mask of Crow.

Naruto lifted from his chair as if the overbearing Kage's hat put a heavy strain upon his back. Naruto walked forward and the cool wind brushed across his face as he looked toward the landscape of Konoha. The unquestioned leader of ANBU warned, "Before you make a decision, know that there is no escape from ANBU. Even after you retire, the acts you have committed will haunt you until your dying breath, the smell of blood will forever remain on your hands, and your understanding of the ninja world will change forever."

The Hokage echoed, "Anbu are the shadows that the trees cast, the blood spilled from our enemies, the fear known in the dark, the stench about a rotting corpse, and the secrets of Konoha. Uzumaki Tomu, do you accept the mask and in turn accept the responsibilities of the ANBU to know shadows when the rest of the world knows light?"

It was Tomu's choice.

The light of the moon glanced off the silhouette of the bone stark mask and outlined the rim of the Hokage's hat. Naruto stood before the sleeping view of Konoha. The wind rustled through the white Kage's cloak and on the back were the words written in blood red kanji, "Fire Shadow."

x

_Every Fire Casts a Shadow, even those Forged by Will_

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