The Chūnin Selection Exams were war games plain and simple.

Or, Team 7 was forged in battle.
Sakura scanned the paper in front of her again, needlessly. She had memorized the words after her second reading. It was a registration form for her entrance into the exams. Beside her, Naruto and Sasuke had their own papers.

“So are we going to do it?” Naruto asked fidgeting. He had been excited ever since Kakashi-sensei mentioned the word chūnin. Sasuke was also full of energy but Sakura couldn’t tell if it was excitement or concern.

“Are we ready?” Sakura asked back flipping a kunai between her fingers.

Sasuke’s eyes flickered between his two partners and then to the registration forms. “We’re more ready than the other two rookie teams.”

Sakura bobbed her head in agreement, but that wasn’t saying much. They hadn’t even been genin for a year, yet, but Team 7 had an experience that most rookie teams didn’t. “That still doesn’t mean we’re ready,” Sakura said.

“Maybe we aren’t supposed to be ready,” Naruto offered up hesitantly, his brown furrowed. “I mean, these are offered twice a year right? And the location moves each time?”

Sasuke nodded and Sakura adopted a thoughtful expression.

“Maybe this is to actually get us ready,” Naruto said thinking aloud.

“It is safer,” Sakura admitted, not having thought about it that way. “This is our home, with our instructors.”

“Our tests, our advantage,” Sasuke added drumming his fingers against the table where they were seated. “We wouldn’t get this type of advantage anywhere else, not even in allied villages.”

“And it’s not like Kakashi-sensei could not have entered us,” Naruto continued. “What with Sasuke-teme on our team. Everyone wants to see him perform.”

Sasuke shot the blond a disgruntled look at the thought of performing for the masses.

“He has a point, Sasuke,” Sakura said. “You and the other clan heirs in our generation are likely going to draw in big crowds for the finals.”

When Kakashi-sensei gave them the registration forms the first thing Sakura did was pull all the information about the exams she could. They had learned the was usually three tests, sometimes with a preliminary round after the second test if the number were too high. There wasn’t any information on the examiners, they likely changed each year to keep participants from getting too much information.

One thing was clear the Chūnin Selection Exams were war games, plain and simple. The ultimate goal was for villages to prove to their allies and their enemies how strong they were. Chūnin were the perfect rank to do this at, as genin battles would be boring and no one was willing to share jōnin secrets. Chūnin, just getting the hang of the skills that would make them great, assuming they survived to move up to the next rank, made the perfect spectacle.

“So we’re doing this?” Sakura said needlessly.
The boys nodded and Sakura smiled. “Then let’s get ready.”

--

Kotetsu wasn’t surprised to Team 7 among the group of genin caught up in their little test. Not that they were caught, really, but they were waiting, watching. The chūnin knew his partner had spotted the rookies as well, ever since that day Team 7 had returned to Konoha chūnin pair had kept a subtle eye on the squad.

The duo had heard of the brutal sparring matches between the team and with another rookie genin. They hadn’t been far from the place where Uzumaki nearly lost it in public. Overall, though, Kotetsu had to admit, they were handling everything rather well. Still, Kotetsu wondered how well they would handle the exams.

From his spot under a henge, he noticed Team 7 staying toward the back of the crowd, unlike Gai’s team who, despite their act, wasn’t fooling anyone. The Uchiha boy had flashed sharingan red eyes and seemed to give a silent message to the kunoichi who nodded slightly as if he had confirmed something. Kotetsu was glad the medics had managed to lessen the burn scars on Uchiha’s face because even as lighter they looked painful and shocking.

The kunoichi gently tapped a finger on Naruto’s shoulder and the blond grinned. They had a plan then. Kotetsu snorted when Naruto suddenly began shouting. “Hey! What’s going on here? What’s up with this shitty genjutsu?” The blond complained. “Let us through!”

The bulk of the exam hopefuls began muttering to themselves, asking what genjutsu? Izumo frowned because Naruto had ruined the game with this group. “Aww man, you ruined our fun!” Kotetsu complained, dropping the technique and allowing everyone to see the proper floor number.

“Ha!” Naruto said obnoxiously, lacing his fingers behind his head. “Not my fault it was so obvious!”

The crowd, especially the older genin who recognized Team 7 as a rookie team, muttered angrily at being shown up by a brat fresh from the academy.

Kotetsu smirked, they were trying to make enemies it seemed. Wonder why that was?

--

Sakura followed her boys into the room that held the contestants. There were far more shinobi from other villages than she thought there would be. Sakura recognized teams from Grass and Sand right away. Especially Sand. It would be hard not to notice the team of three from Sand that Team 7 had encountered only a few days previous.

Naruto had been sought out by the Third’s grandson, and while talking animatedly to the entire team (as Sakura and Sasuke hadn’t been willing to leave Naruto unaccompanied) Konohamaru had bumped into the Sand genin dressed in all black.

Team 7 had not reacted well to the hostile visitor.

Sakura almost thought ANBU would get involved but after the redhead, who made her instincts cry out DANGER DANGER AVOID, appeared out of nowhere the other guy backed off and Team 7 absconded with the honored grandson. Sakura knew her boys couldn’t wait to run into the redhead during the exams, and honestly, she was looking forward to it as well. They did not like being made uncomfortable in their home by interloppers.

Enemies aside, Sakura trusted her team to have her back so walked into the room calmly and without
hesitation. Apart they could kill their enemies, together they could decimate anyone who got in their way.

--

Sasuke didn’t like the other rookies. Kiba and Ino were too loud. Hinata was too soft. Shikamaru and Chōji were useless. Sasuke really didn’t have anything against Shino, but the last Uchiha really didn’t like him either. So while his teammates led him to the cluster of the other rookies, Sasuke remained silent and aloof.

Sakura and Ino shared a small smile and spoke hesitantly. Kiba bragged arrogantly as if Sasuke and Naruto hadn’t trounced him in a spar not so long ago. The others were mostly silent if not talking amongst themselves.

Sasuke didn’t like the other rookies, but still, when the gray-haired teen came over to scold them for being too loud Sasuke stood in front of his comrades and told him to get lost. Kabuto, as he introduced himself, tried to play the ‘just trying to help card’ but Sasuke wasn’t buying it. He could recognize a snake when he saw one. Maybe that is why he didn’t react when the Sound ninja moved to attack Kabuto.

--

Naruto twitched. His body wanted to move, to react to the attack so close to him, but when Sasuke and Sakura didn’t move, he forced himself to stay put. Naruto wasn’t sure how he felt about Kabuto, who failed that many times and tried to give advice? He obviously wasn’t that good, and hadn’t Sakura said something about a maximum amount of times you could retake the exams before you were booted to the genin corps? Naruto made a mental note to ask her when he got a chance.

Naruto knew it would have been different if one of the other rookies had been attacked. Together Team 7 had come to the conclusion that while they were likely prepared for the exams, the other rookies were not. So Naruto had weaseled a promise from his twitchy teammates to, if possible, protect the others. Naruto wasn’t asking them to go above and beyond, but to simply lend a helping hand if necessary and like with their little show with the genjutsu test let everyone know they were the rookie target to go after.

They were strong enough to handle the exams, or at least strong enough to survive. The others weren’t. Team 7 was ready to give anything to keep each other alive. They would do anything, just like Kakashi-sensei had taught them, and nothing would stand in their way.
Sakura smiled. This smile was not a nice thing, it was sharp, vicious and Hinata felt as if the pink-haired kunoichi was going to devour her. Just as quickly as it appeared the smile vanished. The Hyuuga heiress watched Sakura take her seat and for a moment was grateful that their seats hadn’t been closer together. Instead, the blank-eyed girl was seated next to Naruto.

Naruto, the boy who she a crush on. Naruto, the genin who was declared MIA with his team, not all the long ago. Naruto, who had returned to Konoha with his team, beaten and broken. Naruto offered Hinata a hesitant smile that made the heiress blush. For a long time now she had admired Naruto and his never give up attitude. It had made Hinata want to be better. When she had heard Naruto’s team had gone missing on their mission she had wept for them.

Hinata had a better idea of what being a shinobi truly meant than the rest of her team did. Being a Hyuuga, the clan heir had forced her to learn from very early on just what it meant to be in service of the village. Hinata had attended more funerals that most of her cohorts from the academy. Since her 3rd birthday, Hinata had been present at each memorial and funeral of fallen clan members. The Hyuuga clan was very large and their sacrifice to the village reflected that.

Beyond even that, though, Hinata had grown up with a brutality that she doubted her classmates had witnessed. The stark inequality amongst her clansmen and the harsh grip the main family held on the lives of those born into the branch family was what she liked to think of as the Hyuuga’s shame. No, Hinata didn’t believe that her classmates had ever witnessed their grandfather torture a cousin for some insignificant slight.

Still, for all of Hinata’s understanding, she could not entirely comprehend the new Team 7. Naruto was sharper, even the small hesitant smile he offered her was more like the baring of teeth that anything else. Sakura was harder. Where before stood a giggling fangirl, not ready for the life of a shinobi, was now a young woman with a spine stronger than steel. Sasuke was dangerous. Hinata could see the madness lurking just beneath the sharingan eyes he flashed so often. Apart their jagged edges viciously raked any who got too close, together they formed an almost impenetrable defense against those who would harm them. Hinata was glad they were from her village.

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Naruto wanted to bang his head against the table. A written test. The first part of the exam was a written test! Sasuke with his creepy red eyes could cheat his way through and Sakura was smart enough to not need to cheat, but Naruto, for all his growth and improvement was hopelessly out of his depth.

‘Sasuke-teme is going to kill me,’ Naruto thought morosely. He was going to fail and drag his team down with him. Mentally Naruto screamed in frustration. Why this? He could do literally anything but this.

Beside him, Hinata silently made it possible for Naruto to read her answers but the blond shook his
head ever so slightly. Too obvious, the proctors would see it.

Kakashi-sensei hadn’t taught them any information gathering techniques. Team 7 wasn’t an infiltration squad and never would be because even before that mission Team 7 was destined to be a front line team. Line breakers they were sometimes called, squads during times of war that would be brought in to decimate the enemy ranks. It was what Kakashi was, and it was what he had begun training them as.

Naruto paused. He wasn’t part of an infiltration team, there was almost no way he could complete this test. Why give the test if many of the teams couldn’t possibly finish it? If the important part was the information gathering, then why offer so many chances when the person is caught cheating? Why not eject those caught in the act right away? Naruto spun his pencil around his fingers as he thought. The sentinels were high chunin to tokubetsu jōnin level, if they really wanted too they could fail everyone for cheating. So the cheating and information gathering couldn’t be the real test, or at least not all of it.

Naruto growled softly to himself. There was something he wasn’t seeing!

That’s when Naruto understood.

The last question that had to be the real test.

--

The proctors of this exam were rather lenient when it came to cheating. Sasuke could hear Kiba’s dog barking and the Hyuuga’s eyes were not subtle either. He knew his own sharingan red eyes had drawn some attention and that’s that gave it away that the test was about more than simple information gathering.

He hoped Naruto had figured it out as well. It appeared so as the blond had put his head down some time ago and appeared to be resting.

The eyes of all of the sentinels made him itch. Being watched as well as being forced into such close quarters with enemy shinobi made Sasuke want to regroup with his team and get to a better vantage point. As it was now, without Sakura or Naruto at his side, he was left vulnerable. Sasuke had the feeling the exams were going invoke more of these types of feelings.

Sasuke honestly expected the exams to be more combat oriented, but maybe that came later. Sasuke wasn’t the type of shinobi to enjoy this type of testing. Maybe in another life, Sasuke would have been part of a stealth team or one that specialized in infiltration and information gathering.

Sasuke was familiar with how the Hokage and his advisors tried to balance the teams, create certain specialized squads, from overhearing his father back before the massacre. As it was now, Team 7 was slotted to become the heavy hitter team from his graduating class. Team 8 was currently slotted as tracking, as a main branch Hyuuga would never end up on the frontlines (Sasuke didn’t know why that was, but the information still held true). Team 10 was interesting, as all Yamanaka-Nara-Akimichi squads were because currently, they were a support team that could be paired with a tracking team to capture targets. But they had the potential to become a frontline team like the elder Ino-Shika-Cho squad had become during the wars.

Another life, that would have been the only way for Sasuke to end up an infiltrator. The last loyal Uchiha had to be a frontline fighter, a show of strength, especially after their first real mission went FUBAR. Still, his meager training, supplemented by the mad dash with his team didn’t feel like enough when he was sitting in a room full of killers.
Sakura turned her paper over and put her pencil down. The test had been difficult, incredibly so but she knew her answers were correct. Before the Wave mission, Sakura had been what many would call a book ninja, all book smarts with no real physical abilities. Of course, now she was more than a match for almost anyone she came across, but just because her other skills had grown sharper it didn’t mean she had let her mind grow softer.

It was lucky she hadn’t felt the need to cheat as, like Naruto, Sakura didn’t have the ability to do so without getting caught. Further, Sakura wasn’t sure any information she could have gotten from cheating would have been correct. What would be worse, not having the information or getting the wrong information? Sakura shuddered the wrong information. That’s how everything started that day, the old bridge builder and his lies. Not working with a complete set of data had broken them, torn them apart and even now they were trying to piece together who they were again.

Sakura stared down at the thin spiderweb-like scars that littered her hands. She had split her knuckles over and over again and now her hands were covered in thick roping scar tissue. Sasuke’s face was a mass of whirls and raised lines that resembled the fire he could manipulate so easily. Only Naruto had escaped without a physical reminder of their time in captivity, but she knew he had the same mental scarring that they did.

Sakura gave a soft huffing laugh. Team 7 was held together with scar tissue.

Ino smirked when Sakura appeared to finish her exam. The blond had taken a stab at answering the questions herself but quickly found herself outmatched. She then realized the only way to pass this exam was to cheat and Sakura provided the perfect opportunity. ‘Let’s see Sakura put that big brain of hers to work,’ she thought.

Part of her felt bad for deciding to use her mind transfer jutsu on Sakura after everything her rival had gone through but really, Ino didn’t have much of a choice at this point. Chōji and Shikamaru were pretty useless in this situation and that left it up to her to save them. Out of the sight of the proctors, Ino made the unconventional hand sign to begin her jutsu.

Ino felt herself freeze. It wasn’t a voluntary action, but rather her teammate using his family’s just to control her movements. Smoothly Ino saw herself pick up her pencil and fill in the answers to the test. ‘How?’ She wondered. How could Shikamaru know all this? She had known Shikamaru since they were both young and the young Nara had never seemed anything but below average and terribly lazy.

Ino watched as her exam was filled out right before her eyes each question answered completely and when Shikamaru finished she found herself writing something at the very top of the exam.

Then, she felt the shadow possession release and Ino was alone, staring at the message Shikamaru had left for her.

“DO NOT USE THAT JUTSU ON TEAM 7”

“Asuma said flicking ash from his cigarette.

The three rookie squad leaders had found themselves, almost, lost without the trio of young shinobi
that followed them around. That shared feeling resulted in their unplanned coming together.

Kakashi’s one visible eye widened momentarily when Asuma said Ibiki’s name and he slouched back into his seat. “Great, this is will either go very well or very bad.”

“What do you mean?” Kurenai asked curiously. She hadn’t recognized the name, Kakashi noticed. He often forgot just how green of a jōnin she was.

Kakashi shot a look at Asuma who shrugged so Kakashi just sighed. “He’s a sadist with a rather specific skill set,” Kakashi said teasing the female jōnin with the information as his mind wondered how his team was handling the first part of the exam. During their trips to T&I they hadn’t yet run into the foreboding man. Most of their sessions were with helpful Yamanaka clan members and for good reason. Ibiki was well known for his skill set.

When she continued to look confused Asuma answered. “Interrogation and torture,” he said bluntly before taking a drag off of his cigarette.

“Oh,” Kurenai said softly. “Will your squad be alright?”

Kakashi just shrugged, there was no way to know for sure. “He won’t be making use of any physical skills, but depending on how heavy handed he gets,” Kakashi paused and looked at the sky. “Like I said, this will either go very well or … not.”

The three sat in silence watching Asuma’s smoke twist and turn into the sky.

--

Ibiki stared out into the crowd of genin with a smirk. He rarely mingled with the lower ranks and he had never dealt with the three rookie teams that he could spot sitting among the others. As he began answering the loud Inuzuka rookie’s outburst, the tokubetsu jōnin also began weaving a subtle genjutsu to increase paranoia and he could feel the sentinels up the low-level killer intent they had been flooding the room with since the exam had begun.

It was rather mild, but Ibiki could see it had a strong effect on several hopefuls. None of the rookies seemed too affected, but the interrogator did see some bristling from Kakashi’s squad.

Ibiki knew from the reports that Team 7 had been forcefully introduced to the kind of stressors that he was throwing at the genin today. Being separated from their teams, being watched, the constant low-level killer intent and the layers of genjutsu to promote paranoia and fear. He wondered how they were taking it, they hadn’t ran screaming from the room yet, so Ibiki had to give Kakashi credit, he had trained them well.

"Because… at times, information is more important than life… and on missions and on the battlefield, people risk their lives to get their hands on it,” Ibiki aid pulling his headband away allowing the genin to see the scars that littered his skull.

A quick glance around the room gave Ibiki a hint as to who would not advance past the next around. The genin whose faces turned ashen gray and whose will he could see bleed out of their eyes. Those were the weak ones. Curiously he turned to Team 7. All three had gone stock still and stone-faced. Good. He saw one Konoha genin twitch in the direction of the last Uchiha whose face was covered in burn scars.

He explained the importance of information, even for those what weren’t infiltration or information gathering squads having the mission parameters that were off by even a name could result in death or worse. From the corner of his eye, Ibiki saw Kakashi’s blond student flinch back as he explained this
"The ability to be courageous and survive any hardship…," Ibiki said strongly these kids, these genin needed to hear this. Almost none of them knew what it really meant to be a shinobi. But they would soon learn. "These are the abilities needed to become a chūnin captain. Those who can't put their destinies on the line… who cling to the uncertain future of "there's always next year"… and walk away from their chance… those pieces of trash who can only make such cowardly choices do not deserve to become chūnin!"
The forest was a relief. Team 7 had welcomed the dark shade of the trees, the covering of leaves, and vines. The moment they stepped into the forest of death the three felt themselves stepping back weeks. No longer were they participating in the chūnin exams, instead they were engaged in a fight for their lives.

“Naruto, clone perimeter 7, and 14 meters out make them something small,” Sakura said softly.
“Sasuke, take point, report any non-standard movement. We’ll flank you.”

With practiced ease, the boys fell into line with Sakura’s plan. It was one they had made use of before when Kakashi-sensei had passed out from chakra exhaustion. Since the clones didn’t take much effort for Naruto he would send out anywhere from 15-35 clones, henged as small animals to maintain the non-standard perimeter distance that Kakashi-sensei recommended. People always looked for sentries within 10, 15, and 20 meters, so using increments of seven worked to throw others off. Team 7 also got into the habit of using the sharingan to detect movement so either Kakashi-sensei or Sasuke were always on point acting a look out of sorts.

“Naruto, hand Sakura the scroll,” Sasuke said flashing his red eyes. “If it comes to close combat there aren’t many here who could keep up with her.”

Sakura grinned slightly and took the scroll. Sasuke was, of course, correct thanks to the strength she had harnessed any taijutsu fights were over before they even began. Only the truly powerful and skilled had a chance. “So what now?” Naruto asked louder than his teammates liked. “Where are we going?”

“We have a scroll to find.”

--

Neji had noticed them, how could he not with the loudmouth blond practically painting a target on their backs? He knew Lee and Tenten had noticed them as well but his teammates hadn’t registered them as threats, not truly. Sure, Lee wanted nothing more than to fight the last Uchiha, something Neji wouldn’t mind doing himself, but the Hyūga boy knew they hadn’t seen it yet.

For all the hardship Lee suffered he didn’t know true fear, nor did he know how it felt to grow up in what basically amounted to hostile territory. Neji had lived his life trying desperately to become stronger, to spit in the face of the main branch all the while struggling to stay out of the elder’s way. More than once he had been tortured by someone who claimed to be his family for some slight real or imagined.

So yes, Neji had more than enough experience spotting predators and he wanted nothing more than to test his skills against their own. Part of him want to fight them and crush them, how dare they act as they do? So what they spent a few months in hell? He had spent years under his clan’s thumb and
suffered for it! What made them so special?

“Neji?” Tenten called. “Ready to move?”

Like always Neji forcefully buried his anger and his trauma and nodded curtly. Team 7 could wait, they would come across them at some point but until then, it was time to begin.

--

“Are we going to do anything about the Rain ninja following us?” Naruto asked casually as Team 7 jumped through the trees of the forest.

Sasuke just made a generic Uchiha grunting noise and Sakura shook her head. “Not yet,” she explained. “I think it would be best to handle it when we stop for a while. We are too close to a water source for comfort.”

Naruto had caught the scent of a river not far from their location about the time they noticed the Rain team. So as to not alarm them, Team 7 had continued on their path, not straying too far from the river all the while looking for a better place to engage.

Naruto nodded in acknowledgment and the three easily led the Rain team just out of range of the water source. “Let’s rest here for a moment,” Sakura said in an over-loud voice, it was meant to carry and draw out their opponents. The boys fake grumbled but Team 7 left the tree top and settled on the ground where Sakura put on quite the show.

The girl with short pink hair huffed and puffed like an out of shape civilian while Sasuke and Naruto bickered in the background taking what looked like hateful swipes at each other.

The Rain squad appeared out of nowhere but Team 7 was ready for them. Right away the squad jumped into action. Naruto saturated the area in clones who worked to find and tag each attacker.

Sasuke’s sharingan flashed red as he drew one of the Rain squad into single combat.

The last thing the Rain Team saw was Team 7 coming down on them.

--

They hadn’t meant to, not really. They hadn’t planned on killing the team from Rain Sakura thought as she stoically washed away the blood that covered her hands and arms.

Team 7 was more than prepared to kill enemies but they hadn’t set out kill if it wasn’t necessary. It hadn’t been accidental though. It started off as a simple skirmish. The Rain team though they were ambushing Team 7 but in actuality Team 7 had been waiting for them. The problem occurred when it became obvious to Team 7 that their opponents were genjutsu users.

It took a moment and suddenly Sakura was back in that dark, damp cell. She could smell blood. She could taste it. Then she heard Naruto scream. They had done that once they figured out how fast Naruto healed. They would break his bones, over and over again forcing his team to listen to his cries of pain. In that moment Sakura wanted blood.

Sasuke dragged her out of the genjutsu screaming. The last loyal Uchiha didn’t know what she saw but he read the murder in her eyes and gleefully helped take apart their opponents.

Sakura hadn’t set out wanting to kill them, but in the end, she wasn’t sad about it either.
Shikamaru narrowed his eyes. Ino’s plan was poorly thought out and dangerous, and he could see from the look of anger on his blonde teammates face that she had read his thoughts on his face. “Well, Shikamaru, do you have a better idea?” Ino asked placing her hands on her hips angrily.

The Nara genin scowled but nodded with a sigh. “This test is actually in our favor,” he explained. “Ino-Shika-Cho teams are primarily snatch and grab, this is perfect for us, except…”

“Except what, Shikamaru?” Chōji asked curiously.

“Except in this situation we are hopelessly underpowered compared to all of the other teams,” Shikamaru explained, his hands going into his thinking seal. “Our training tactics have been focused on snatch and grab, we haven’t worked on upping our hitting power yet. Our chakra coils aren’t ready for that kind of training, but most of our peers in this exam happen to be heavy hitters or even line breakers. This puts us at a disadvantage until we get our own training in that field.”

Even when the time came for that kind of training, Shikamaru knew it would mostly be for Chōji. Shikamaru and Ino were worth more using their family jutsu than they were punching enemies.

“So what are we supposed to do?” Ino asked growing exasperated with her teammate and his not-answers.

The young Nara smiled grimly. “We do what any other team like ours would do in this situation. We find an escort.” And as it just so happened Shikamaru knew just the team he wanted to ask.

“‘We have more guests,’” Sasuke said dryly. Team 7 had set up camp in a few of the wider tree tops a day or so after dealing with the Rain team.

“Looks like it’s Ino’s team,” Sakura said staring down at the other rookie squad.

“I wonder how they are doing?” Naruto mused with a grin. “I’m surprised Shikamaru hasn’t quit already, he’s so lazy.”

“It’s Ino’s fault,” Sakura said easily. “She wouldn’t let him.”

Sasuke grunted in agreement the blonde was forceful in her demands. He was just glad that she hadn’t begun bothering him about dates again after his return to the village. Sasuke was sure the Yamanaka clan would be minus one if she had.

“What are they doing?” Naruto asked curiously leaning dangerously over the branch where he had spread out. Team Asuma was a squad on a mission. It was easy to tell because even Shikamaru was actively helping.

“They are looking for something,” Sasuke said narrowing his eyes. “But it’s not a scroll…”

Naruto frowned but a thoughtful look overtook his face. “Maybe they are looking for us?”

Sakura’s eyebrows practically hit her hairline in surprise. “Why would they be looking for our team, though?”

“Hn,” Sasuke scoffed with a smirk as he realized just what Nara’s play was. “They don’t have a lot of hitting power, remember the spar? If they are looking for us, it’s for one reason.”

Team 7 shared a smile. “Protection,” they said together.
“Exactly,” Sasuke agreed. “The question is now, what do we do about that?”

Naruto grinned foxily and waved his teammates closer.

--

It was supposed to be a game, a prank. Naruto swore and jerked Ino back, practically throwing her. It wasn’t supposed to turn into this.

The blond had talked his teammates into pulling a little prank on Team Asuma. They were supposed to catch them in one of the easy traps Naruto had set, it wasn’t supposed to be dangerous. And truthfully it wasn’t. Everything had been fine, they had trapped the other Rookie team and gotten Shikamaru to admit why he was there, Sakura had even started cutting them down from the ropes that bound them when he arrived.

The shinobi’s headband had said Grass but once he pulled away his false face, Shikamaru had hissed the name Orochimaru. Naruto didn’t recognize it but everyone else did. Sakura’s eyes got really wide and even Sasuke trembled so Naruto knew this wasn’t good.

It wasn’t until someone said the words, Densetsu no Sannin, that Naruto truly understood.

There was no chance.

--

Sasuke trembled as a wave of oppressive chakra once again overcame him. His breath caught in his throat it felt as if his heart had stopped beating. Sasuke hadn’t felt this way since the Massacre.

They were hopelessly underpowered. Even the six of them could no truly hope to scratch the monster before them. Orochimaru the traitor, the snake summoner, the Sannin, had been a ninja for longer than Sasuke had been alive, for longer than Kakashi had been alive.

Still, Sasuke would not abandon his team. That was why he grabbed a kunai and stabbed it into his thigh, breaking the hold Orochimaru had on him. Sasuke breezed through the hand signs and shot fire toward the sannin, not expecting it to be anything other than an annoyance.

Just as he expected the sannin practically slapped the jutsu out of the air and advanced, it still gave Naruto and Sakura enough time to grab Shikamaru and his squad and get out of there. Sasuke did his best to follow but they had no plan, no safe place to fall back too and worse no backup.

--

Sakura ended up dragging Shikamaru and Chōji as they fled from the snake-like man chasing them. Though for Orochimaru it was more like leisurely following them. Sakura could still hear his hiss like laughter as they ran. He was calling for them.

“You won’t outrun me, children,” he called from somewhere behind them.

“He’s right,” Sakura said loud enough for the others to hear. “We can’t outrun him.”

“We don’t need too,” Shikamaru said grimly. “This isn’t just an exam anymore, we get to the forest’s edge and we alert one of the proctors.”

“That won’t be as easy as you think,” Sasuke said finally catching up with the others. “We have to get through this entire forest, which is dangerous enough as it is, plus all of the other genin who still
want to kill us.”

“The tower is closer!” Naruto said jerking his head toward the tower. “There had to be people there too if it’s the finish line here.”

“Naruto’s right, we’ll never make the fence line from here,” Ino said grimly, her voice shaking. Shikamaru scowled and nodded. “Fine, the tower.”

“Not yet, I’m afraid,” a voice said from in front of them.

The only thing Ino could hear was her own frantic breathing. There was blood in her mouth and moving her shoulder made her feel like she was going to throw up, but still, she pushed herself to her feet. She could see the bodies of her teammates and of Team 7 around her. Naruto was crumpled at the base of a tree. Chōji was laid out in a small crater somewhere to Ino’s left she remembered Orochimaru slamming him down and Chōji hadn’t moved since. In front of her Ino could see a flash of pink, Sakura was curled up just laying in the dirt in front of her. She had taken a hard hit to the torso and hadn’t been able to get back up.

What worried Ino was the body that lay some way ahead. It twitched and jerked and the dark hair made Ino fear it was Sasuke. Shikamaru had been swallowed by one of the sannin’s summons just before Ino had lost consciousness and was nowhere to be seen.

Slowly and painfully, Ino stumbled to Chōji first and though she could faintly see his chest move up and down but she had to know for sure. She let herself fall into the crater the sannin had created and let a few harsh sobs escaped her when she felt his pulse beneath her fingers.

Ino stumbled on her way to Naruto. Everything hurt and more and more blood was appearing in her mouth but she kept moving and inhaled sharply when she found Naruto still alive.

Ino had resorted to crawling as she moved to take care of Sakura. She had stumbled and been unable to stand but still, she had to make sure her friend was okay. She had to know. The last person within view, it was probably Sasuke she thought again, was still jerking and twitch and there was no sign of Shikamaru anywhere, so Sakura had to be okay.

The pink haired kunoichi groaned when Ino reached her the blonde squeezing her friend’s hand as blurry green eyes opened. “Naru’ an’ Chōji ‘re okay,” Ino managed. “Some’ wrong wit’ Sasuke an Shika.”

Sakura groaned and forced herself upright. She nodded to Ino and gently helped the blonde into a more comfortable position. Ino watched as the pink haired girl look around and almost seem to change right before her eyes. Sakura had gone head to head with the snake sannin. She had gotten scary close and even surprised him with her strength before being batted away like an annoying fly.

Ino could barely move but she watched Sakura seem to spot something, another body past Sasuke. It had to be Shikamaru, Ino thought as he vision slowly went black.

Sakura felt nothing. She received the report from Ino and made herself move. The pain was an illusion, that was what she told herself during those weeks. When her feet cracked open and bled, when her nail beds, raw, and bleeding ached. An illusion. Not real. Nothing was broken. She had a gash on her side that she could feel seeping through her clothing and a cut above her eye that was
still oozing blood but that didn’t matter, she had endured worse. What mattered was finding Shikamaru and Sasuke.

Konoha was odd that they prized the lives of their shinobi so much. Graduates from the academy were told over and over, the lives of your comrades were worth more than anything, even the mission. That part was never said aloud but they all heard it.

Comrades before the mission and the Village before yourself. This was the creed Konoha shinobi lived and died by.

Sakura could remember Kakashi explaining this to them one night, early on in their suicide run. He told them a story of a shinobi who put his comrades above the mission and brought a war down on the village. Kakashi told them how he used to curse that man and how he found him with a sword in his gut, his shame bleeding away with his life. He told them how he lived his life in spite of the stupid, stupid man who broke the Shinobi rules.

Kakashi also told them of a squad leader who put the mission before his teammates and of a boy who died alone in a cave trying to rescue his friend. Kakashi made it clear which people he expected his team to emulate.

That was why Sakura could stand even though all she wanted to do was lie down and die. Ino had said Chōji and Naruto were alright but there was something wrong with Sasuke and Shikamaru. Sakura zeroed in on a twitch and jerking body and quickly rushed to it. The clothing was destroyed, burnt and covered in dirt and blood, but Sakura felt her heart rate pick up when she got close enough to see who it was.

Shikamaru.

Working on auto-pilot Sakura flipped him over onto his back, scanning for what was causing the convulsions. After a moment she searched one of her pouches and pulled out two anti-venom tablets, both of them being the highest grade she could get and forced them into Shikamaru’s mouth. Orochimaru had made liberal use of his snake summons and had even bitten at Sasuke a few times, thankfully missing, so she had no idea what kind or how the sannin made use of poisons.

The convulsions didn’t stop and Sakura could the heat radiating off of the other genin. He had a terrible fever. “What is this?” She muttered spotting a strange seal on Shikamaru’s neck while she looked him over for other injuries. It almost looked like a bite mark.

Sakura dug through her meager supplied and swore when she couldn’t find a suppression seal. She had carried a few with her for the exam but it looked like they had gotten lost during the fight. Sakura forced herself to her feet and stumbled over to Naruto her blond teammate was still down for the count but she knew that he had a few suppression seals on him and his clothing and supplies looked like they hadn’t been damaged much so she carefully searched his gear and triumphantly pulled out a seal she needed.

Sakura wasn’t really sure what Kakashi-sensei had said to get the blond so interested in sealing, their teacher had told them all things during their time in captivity, things to help them survive or to take their minds off the pain and it was something they didn’t talk about. All she knew was that now that they were back Naruto had developed a fondness and something of an aptitude for sealing.

She forced herself to move faster and reached Shikamaru in hardly any time at all. Making sure to carefully regulate her chakra Sakura pumped enough chakra into the seal to activate it and slapped the seal onto Shikamaru’s neck. The seal would push his chakra down low, so as not to allow any spikes that could lead to the seal activating. It would also probably keep him unconscious for a while.
longer.

Still, it was all she could do without knowing more or having access to be equipment.

“Sakura,” the short haired girl whipped around, ignoring the way her ribs cried out and spotted a limping and bruised Sasuke.

Sasuke quickly flashed the ANBU hand signs that Kakashi had taught them for proving identity and the pink haired girl left herself relax a little.

“What’s wrong with him?” Sasuke asked coming closer.

“Unknown seal,” Sakura reported. “He had been convulsing and displays a raised body temperature. The convulsions stopped once I put the suppression seal on, but because of that he’s not likely to wake up anytime soon.”

“The others? Naruto?” Sasuke asked scanning the area with his sharingan.

“Ino was mobile, Naruto and Chōji hadn’t moved but Ino reported they are alive,” Sakura said trying not to stumble over her words. “We need to find shelter, and soon.”

“Right, let’s them get up,” Sasuke agreed. He may not like team Asuma much but he wasn’t going to leave them behind after having fought together like they had, they were Leaf Shinobi after all.
Okay, wow. This chapter did not go where I had planned for it to go it’s so much longer than I planned and Team 10 just really took over here. These guys basically just did whatever they wanted and I wrote it all down. Hope you guys like traumatized child soldiers ‘cos this ‘verse is to explore what happened to Team 7 and how that changes everything around them. This probably the biggest change because as Team Asuma quickly learns, when you run with the big dogs you gotta catch up fast.

Ino staggered to her feet swaying dangerously. “You have to stay upright Ino,” Sakura said firmly. “If you can walk, you walk. We are having to carry Naruto and Shikamaru as it is.”

The pink haired girl had explained as she helped Ino stand, almost as a way of distracting her from the pain that it was a rule. Ino had never heard of the rule before and Sakura easily explained. “If you can stand, then you can walk, if you can walk, you can run,” Sakura said with an easy shrug. “If you can’t then we’ll carry you.”

She wanted to ask where her rival had learned that rule, the question was on the tip of her tongue but she knew better than to ask. She knew, even without asking it was a holdover from their suicide run with their teacher and now fleeing a monster in their own village Ino didn’t have the strength to ask.

The light haired blond just nodded sluggishly and smiled weakly at Chōji. Her teammate was up and moving slowly. She knew that Chōji would be fine and at this point was more worried about Shikamaru who hadn’t moved and was draped over Sakura’s back. Even Naruto was less still than the Nara boy, who was still unconscious, as he was being carried by Sasuke.

“Where are we going?” Chōji asked.

“The tower,” Sasuke said shortly. “Sakura and I will pick up scrolls as we go, it’s the safest option. We can’t spend another night in this forest.”

Kakashi never wanted students. He never wanted to be a teacher. If Kakashi had been given his way, the silver-haired man would have never left ANBU. Living and working in the shadows, never having to think beyond his next mission and living behind a porcelain mask was not the life his sensei would have wanted for him, but it was infinitely easier.

As ANBU there was no past and no future, there wasn’t even a present for these agents because at any time they could be disavowed during a mission gone wrong or left to die on a battlefield that no one knew existed. ANBU was just existing, and even then only in the barest sense of the word.

Kakashi had hated it. He had hated that life, the constant missions, never seeing the light of day, he honestly thought it was the worst punishment a village could inflict upon its shinobi. But it was so easy.

Still, when the Hokage pulled him from the shadow ranks Kakashi had, petulantly, began taking as many high-ranking long-term missions that they could. These missions took him outside the village
for days and sometimes weeks or months at a time. It was almost like he had never left ANBU.

Still, the Hokage, a father, was used to petulant children and quickly took him to task. Grounded him essentially. That had been maybe two years ago and thus began the endless string of possible students. It began with an apprenticeship offer which Kakashi instantly shot down. He was no Minato.

Next, it was a full team of brats that Kakashi ruthlessly pit against one another and sent back to civilian life in disgrace.

The second team came uncomfortably close to passing. Two members were close and worked well together, Kakashi had made sure that for their next assignment they were paired together but the third cost them everything and the jōnin had him flagged for possible defection from the village. Three months later, just as Kakashi suspected he would, he had received a notice that his warning was well given.

The third team had had promise, and likely if they had been given to any other sensei they would have passed but Kakashi had ruthlessly tested and failed them like all the others.

There had been a fourth, fifth, and sixth team that were tested and failed without effort on Kakashi’s part. It wasn’t until the seventh team, the only team to actually earn the Team 7 title that Kakashi passed a team. He remembered seeing the sunny blond, the angry Uchiha and the enamored civilian and Kakashi wanted nothing more than to flee. Close, they were too close. It hurt to look at them. It hurt to speak to them. So he didn’t.

Kakashi was a master of deflection and of ignoring his problems. They didn’t train, they barely met outside of the required D-ranked missions and Kakashi was fine with that. Slowly, though it became easier and no longer did the sight of Naruto’s blond hair make his chest hurt and make it hard to breathe.

Eventually, the uchiwa fan on Sasuke’s clothing didn’t make Kakashi’s guilt rise up and threaten to swallow him whole.

Finally, he could look at Sakura and not see another girl in her place.

So they took a C-ranked mission.

It was supposed to be easy.

It was supposed to be a simple escort mission.

Only C-ranked because of the distance.

They were not supposed to be captured.

His team was not supposed to be tortured in front of him.

He was not supposed to be beaten so badly that he couldn’t do anything.

They were not supposed to touch his kids, his pack, his pups.

Kakashi had taken extreme pleasure in killing them.

Now though, his team was participating in the chunin exams. If he had a choice, Kakashi wouldn’t have recommended them. While they might have the raw power to excel and a mindset that is better
able to handle the jump in rank Kakashi knew his team was still new. Their scars had yet to harden and remained soft and shiny. It hadn’t been for the ‘suggestion’ from on high his rookies would not be anywhere near this exam.

That was why he had sent the pack after the kids. His pack was used to protecting the team at a distance because he had enlisted their help after being released from the hospital to add a little extra protection.

Kakashi’s ninkin were above chūnin rank individually. Together as a whole, they were around special jōnin rank, so Kakashi was not concerned about the pack running around the forest without him. They were more than enough for just about any team of genin, even the obvious chūnin plants the other villages had sent (the Kazekage’s daughter, for example, she was obviously a plant but that wasn’t surprising considering his youngest’s condition). Still, there should not have been a reason for the pack to engage or for the pack to seek him out.

When Pakun found him Kakashi felt himself go incredibly still. It only took the name “Orochimaru” slipping from his summon’s mouth to get him moving. “Did you engage?” Kakashi asked knowing the answer.

“He attacked us first,” the dog said. “We lost sight of the kids and of the snake but we’ve got his scent and we are ready.”

Kakashi could feel the familiar feral mindset overtake his normal lazy, nearly incompetent persona and he snarled. “Where?”

“The snake is still in the forest,” Pakun said and they were off.

--

Sasuke growled under his breath. Sakura jabbed her elbow into his side at the sound. “Naruto and Shikamaru are still out and it’s getting dark,” Sakura said. “We have to stop. Plus Ino’s getting worse. I’m worried that she’s bleeding internally.”

“Doesn’t mean I have to like it,” Sasuke muttered. “Stow the dope and Nara in the tree hollow. Akimichi, Yamanaka you watch them. Sakura will stand guard outside and I’ll patrol.”

Sasuke gave his teammate a final look and disappeared.

“Is Sasuke-kun, okay?” Ino asked.

Sakura didn’t answer her question. “Change your bandages and check on Naruto and Shikamaru, we’ll be back soon.”

Ino shared a look with Chōji and moved to check on her unconscious teammate.

--

**Orochimaru was stronger than Shikamaru could fathom. Not even the seemingly monstrous Team Seven stood a chance. It had taken only a few minutes before Shikamaru saw their inevitable defeat.**

*That was the problem with being a genius. Everything move so slowly. Seconds inched by and days drag on and on, all the while Shikamaru’s brain raced. There were times when he knew what people would say to him before they even said it, he knew from watching their posture, from their personality and the situation they were in. Everything was so predictable.*
That’s why he loved clouds so much. Even judging the wind speeds and direction didn’t let him predict what shapes the clouds would take it was often slow enough that to really notice the changes he had to focus, slow his mind down and watch.

No one else understood just how smart Shikamaru was. His sensei had an idea but only his father came close to really understanding. Shikamaru had been five years old when he wandered into his father’s office and spotted a pattern that the intelligence division had been missing for weeks. It took Shikamaru twenty minutes. Shikaku had quietly praised his son but had refused to let the knowledge of just who spotted the pattern get out. If anyone else had known the lazy Nara boy would have been snatched up before he could even start the academy.

After that his father had urged Shikamaru to take up strategy games and helped his son find ways to turn off his mind as much as possible. Sleeping, cloud watching and being with Chōji were the ways that worked the best.

But now in the forest, in charge of two teams and facing down one of the legendary sannin Shikamaru was cursing his brain, because all he saw was their defeat. No matter what they did the combined Teams Asuma and Kakashi were outmatched in every way.

--

“We aren’t here for you,” the genin wrapped in bandages said.

Ino and Chōji stood in front of the hollow tree where their teammate and Naruto lay.

“Where is Uchiha Sasuke?” The girl demanded. “And the kid Orochimaru-sama sealed?”

“We are here for them!” The loud-mouthed male shouted. “So just hand them over and we might not even kill the rest of you.”

Ino stepped forward, and Chōji joined her, standing shoulder to shoulder. “Not happening,” the blonde said fiercely as she drew a kunai. “You’ll have to get past us first.”

“Gladly.”

--

“Fall back!” Shikamaru called. “Fall back! We need to regroup!”

Ino and Chōji immediately fell into line with Team 7 lagging just behind but Shikamaru had considered that. In theory, they trusted his judgment but he knew they were used to a different commander that would translate to a delay.

The Nara boy quickly plucked one of the smoke bombs that had gotten mixed in with his things, Ino was a huge fan of them and crushed the seal thus activating it. The smoke cover would maybe buy them 45 seconds. If Orochimaru was feeling generous.

Thankfully the sannin felt like playing with his food and only his eerie chuckle could be heard echoing through the smoke.

“Nothing we do is hitting this guy!” Naruto vented as loud as he dared.

“Because we are outmatched,” Shikamaru said grimly. “We lost the battle the moment he showed up.”

“But there has to be something!” Naruto cried out.
“Don’t you get it?” Shikamaru snarled. “We aren’t walking away from this! This guy is so far out of our league, he’s S-class!”

“Shut up,” Sasuke demanded breaking into the conversation. “That doesn’t matter anymore. He’s here and we are going to deal with it.”

“Sasuke is right,” Sakura agreed. “What we need is a plan and that’s exactly what you are going to give us, Shikamaru.”

“I can’t,” the Nara boy protested. He looked ready to tear his hair out but it was Naruto who turned to him and spoke.

“You don’t have a choice.”

--

This was her first real fight. Training and sparring didn’t count and Ino didn’t consider the way Orochimaru had wiped the floor with them as much of a fight either. But her with her blood pounding in her ears and the breathing ragged and sharp, Ino considered it a fight.

The gentle ringing of bells made her head spin. “Weak,” the Sound kunoichi spat. “You Leaf ninja are all the same, pathetic.”

Ino swallowed back bile, the sound based genjutsu had caused her to vomit once already and she wasn’t going to let it happen again.

The clearing around the hollowed out tree was a mess. Deep ruts from Chōji’s fight with the other two sound genin left the ground uneven. Ino stood strong before the entrance of the tree, senbon with little bells scattered all around her. Even as the battle raged Ino had to admit the vicious sting of bitterness that welled up inside of her. Chōji was fighting the other two genin by himself while Ino was struggling with the kunoichi.

Team Asuma was not a group of individual fighters. Ino was support, interrogation, she was not destined to be a line breaker like Chōji could be or even like all of Team 7 seemed to be, but here, alone on the battlefield she needed to become one, and do it fast.

Being a Yamanaka was to be both instantly trusted and feared. There were three clans that you never looked in the eye. The Uchiha, the Hyūga and the Yamanaka. Ino grew up learning psychology at her father’s knee. By the time she started the academy Ino could use her training to know anything she wanted to about her classmates. She could have anything she wanted by the time she was ten, she had all the friends she could ever want and even the instructors were easy to read. Ino didn’t have Shikamaru’s brain but she wasn’t stupid and she knew better how people worked than he ever would. She just didn’t look sometimes. Sometimes it was easier to pretend, like with Sakura when her team finally came home.

Sometimes it is easier to pretend not to see the things that she could see, not to know the things she knew about people. Her father Inoichi had told her, that the burden of being a Yamanaka was seeing things and not talking about it. Using the family jutsu he had seen terrible, disgusting things. He had seen the minds of the worst sort of people and he knew that one day his daughter would do the same. Their job was to see these things, to do what they did and never speak of it. To use their gifts for the sake of the village and never bring attention to the fact that they did.

Something too many people forget though when they saw her father puttering around in the flower shop or saw Ino squealing over a boy was that Yamanaka clan could do more than just see into the
mind of others.

This was something the sound kunoichi wasn’t familiar with, but she learned in the end. With the world spinning and Ino knowing that she had no backup, no protection but also knowing that her teammates were just behind her. That Shikamaru, one of her best friends, was hidden behind her unable to protect himself, Ino did what any good Konoha shinobi would do.

Kin, the sound kunoichi, was a big talker. It was easy to get her talking. She practically forgot that this was life or death. Ino let the other girl talk, let her flip her long dark hair and think that she had won.

Ino had never performed this technique. It was B-ranked, and her father had told her she wasn’t ready for it. She had only just perfected the Shintenshin no Jutsu and the Shinranshin no Jutsu was very different, but she knew it was her only chance. She had to protect her team.

“Shinranshin no Jutsu!” Ino screamed using the words to help her focus her chakra. Ino snarled when she felt the technique connect. Shinranshin no Jutsu was a mind control jutsu. It was one of the most feared techniques the Yamanaka clan had in its possession and the moment Ino felt the connection she reached forward and ripped.

Kin jerked and drew a kunai and at the blonde genin’s direction moved.

--

Chōji was the first one to fall. Shikamaru had known it was coming but he sent his best friend in, anyway. The Nara boy had no chance of holding Orochimaru with his shadow possession and neither could Ino bind him with the mind-body transfer, his will was likely to be too strong.

So the plan was to try and confuse him. Chōji and Sakura went up close. Orochimaru put them down hard, but Chōji went down harder. Shikamaru could see the small crater that the sannin had created with his friend’s body. Sakura had been thrown away like one would fling a kunai.

A second later hundreds of Naruto’s clone littered the battlefield. It was too late, it had taken Orochimaru less time that he calculated to stop Chōji and Sakura. The rest of the plan was going to fail.

Still, in the madness, the others did their parts. Ino spread the flammable liquid Shikamaru had cobbled together with a smoke bomb powder and a plant that had oily secretions. Sasuke lit up the forest like a wildfire and Shikamaru watched it all fall apart. Orochimaru tore through the clones like tissue paper and almost gleefully disabled Naruto. The blond not moving after the strike to the stomach.

Ino went next and then it was just Shikamaru and Sasuke standing shoulder to shoulder. “Kukukuku,” Orochimaru laughed. “What terribly amusing children, but I’m tired of playing with you. Uchiha Sasuke, I’m here to speak with you.”

Shikamaru felt Sasuke tense.

“Come with me,” the sannin said, his voice like honey. “I can give you the power you seek. You’ll never be weak again.” He promised. “You’ll have more than enough power to reach your goal... to kill Itachi.”

--

Chōji threw his arms around Zaku, holding him in a mockery of a reverse bear hug, and squeezed.
The Akimichi clan was known for their strength, both physically and mentally. The Akimichi clan endured all things when other crumbled. Still, for all the strength of his clan Chōji was soft.

He had always been a gentle boy, sensitive and kind, Chōji could remember his mother worrying about his gentle disposition when he joined the academy but Chōza had calmed her and spoke to Chōji that night.

His father had spoken to him of the duality of shinobi. How a man can be gentle and kind but when turn around a slice through an enemy’s throat without hesitation. Chōza told him about how sometimes he couldn’t sleep because he remembered the things he had done for the village, but how he would get up early that next morning and made breakfast for Chōji’s mother. It wasn’t right, but in the end, it was the life of a shinobi. Killer, lover, soldier, father all wrapped up into one person that had to find the strength to wake up each morning.

How can you love a person who does terrible things, Chōji had asked his father, how do you come home and love your family after doing terrible things? This question is one that he had asked himself every day. He had even asked the smartest person he knew but Shikamaru did not have an answer and ultimately neither did his father.

So, Chōji knew he was soft. He knew he was weak. He knew that compared to the others form his graduating class Chōji wasn’t much of a shinobi but hearing Ino scream and feeling his own blood trickle down his neck from his ears Chōji felt something like a switch get flipped. The duality of shinobi was one where a man could be a father, a florist, a brother, or a baker in one moment.

Chōji took a deep breath and squeezed pulling his arms tightly to his chest, putting pressure on his enemy’s torso. Zaku screamed but Chōji could still feel the snapping of ribs and clenched tighter still.

The duality of shinobi was one where mothers would kiss their children, sisters would tell stories and women would smile at the pretty boy across the table from her.

Chōji did not stop until he heard the crack of the Sound genin’s spine snapping and the screaming stopped.

The duality of shinobi was one where genin were children in one moment and killers in the next.

---

Shikamaru didn’t know who Itachi was, not right away. He had been young, the same age as Sasuke at the time of the Uchiha massacre but his father had kept the young genius far, far away from anything about it. It was part of the reason Shikamaru didn’t spread his IQ around after the Uchiha’s very own genius lost it and murdered everyone, the title of genius didn’t have such a good reputation behind it anymore.

“Don’t talk about that,” Sasuke snarled.

“You’ll never be strong enough here,” the snake hissed with a mocking smile on his lips. “But you know all about weakness, don’t you, Sasuke?”

The snake moved forward gracefully. The sannin were once Konoha’s most dangerous weapons a team to be feared across the nations and now ⅓ of that team was face to face with two genin and, remarkable as they were, they didn’t stand a chance.

“When they took you did they hurt you? Did they tear into you? Rip you open? Break your bones?” Orochimaru cooed. “They did, didn’t they? And you just laid there and bled, just like the night your
brother slaughtered your family and left you to die.”

“Shut up!” Sasuke roared his hand quickly coming up and performing a seal-less fire jutsu. Shikamaru felt the heat from the jutsu and had to step back to keep from getting singed.

“Weak,” Orochimaru purred slinking out of the smoke and fire like it wasn’t even there. “But I can taste your potential. You just lack the final push.”

Shikamaru watched in horror as the older shinobi’s neck seemed to stretch out in Sasuke’s direction. Almost without his consent, Shikamaru felt himself move, he fell into a familiar stance and forced his shadow to move. The light of the forest almost wasn’t enough but the still burning flames of Sasuke’s last jutsu were more than what he needed. His shadow shot outward and connected with the sannin’s and when the connection was established no one moved.

“Sasuke, disengage, now!” Shikamaru demanded his voice shaking with strain. The shadow possession was weak, his chakra was low but Shikamaru couldn’t risk letting him free. “Get out of here!”

“But,” Sasuke started half confused but mostly angry.

“Run!” Shikamaru demanded feeling that the shadow possession was only moments from breaking. “RUN!”

--

Ino was screaming.

There was a dead girl her hand clutching a kunai that was buried deep in her gut.

Ino was a few away just screaming.

Chōji was covered in blood.

He could see it covering his best friend and the shocked look in his eye.

An enemy stood in front of him. He stunk of fear but Shikamaru didn’t care much about that because Ino was screaming.

From the tree hollow the shadows spilled out. Inky blackness crept along the forest floor closer and closer to the last sound ninja standing and Shikamaru snarled. His chakra flared and the shadows bent to his will.

The sound genin screamed as the shadows spilled out onto him. Climbing limbs, grabbing where they should not be tangible.

“Ino, Chōji,” Shikamaru said. “Did he hurt you?”

Ino had stopped screaming and nodded once. Chōji gave his friend a wild, frightened look and Shikamaru nodded.

“Then die,” he said to his captive.

--

“Foolish boy,” Orochimaru hissed angrily. “That gift wasn’t for you!”

It had been a foolish move. Orochimaru had spoken the shadow possession with ease, but Sasuke
was gone. Sasuke was safe. Shikamaru didn’t know what the sannin wanted with the last loyal Uchiha but Shikamaru was a Konoha ninja was they protected their own, even at the cost of their own lives.

That was why when Sasuke had appeared again and engaged the sannin again while Shikamaru tried to gather enough chakra to breathe.

Everything was blurry after that. Shikamaru had never been so close to chakra exhaustion. Everything ached and his coils burned like his straining lungs. He was going to die in this forest and his teammates were going to die with him, Team 7 and Team 10, they were going to die here, he had thought.

He didn’t know how he did it or where he found the chakra but he did. The snake had Sasuke cornered and his neck was growing again. Shikamaru didn’t know what the sannin had planned but he knew, somehow he knew that he couldn’t let that happen.

“Kawarimi no Jutsu!”

Shikamaru gasped in pain barely biting back a scream. The pain was all consuming, it was burning, it was devouring him.

Faintly he could hear the sannin crouch down next to him, and something that sounded like the baying of wolves in the distance.

“But, a mind is such a terrible thing to waste...should you survive find me and I’ll make you, boy, you could be great,” Orochimaru said.

Shikamaru screamed.

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“Looks like you guys had some trouble,” Sasuke said, his sharingan activated and covered in soot.

Sakura didn’t look much better, she was covered in blood and had pieces of gore-flecked all around her. “Naruto, you okay?” She called out of her other teammate. The blond looked as good as ever, but the hand over his stomach where the seal sat made her uneasy.

The normally sunny blond nodded distractedly and Sakura’s attention turned to Team 10. Ino and Chōji had their arms wrapped around a shaking and jerking Shikamaru. Bodies littered the ground all showing allegiance to the Sound village.

“They Orochimaru’s?” Sasuke asked Naruto quietly. The blond had moved to join his teammates leaning against Sasuke, uncaring of the state of them.

“Yeah,” Naruto said. “Woke up just in time to see Ino and Chōji take two of them out, then Shikamaru woke up and tore the other one apart with his shadow.”

Sasuke’s eyebrows shot practically his hairline “They did this?”

“You know that people are capable of anything when they hit a corner, Sasuke,” Sakura chided. It wasn’t safe to underestimate anyone, especially other Konoha shinobi. “This was their Wave mission.”

A moment of silence fell upon unexpectedly before Naruto broke it. “What happened to you guys? Run into trouble?”
Sasuke shrugged. “Just some spies,” he said thinking back to the strange team they had encountered. “We took care of them though,” the Uchiha boy said with a dark smile that spoke of blood and bodies.

Sakura rolled her eyes and took it upon herself to explain. “That Kabuto guy, from the first part of the exam, remember? He and his team were spies so Sasuke and I took care of them. We ran into Kakashi-sensei and the pack hunting for Orochimaru. He told us to meet him at the tower before nightfall, so we should get moving.”

“Sounds good to me!” Naruto said. “I’m sick of this stupid forest.”
Kakashi was waiting on them when they arrived. Sasuke tossed the scrolls for both teams aside and went to his teacher’s side. “Report,” Kakashi demanded scanning his team and the extras they had brought in.

Sakura appeared at his side and Sasuke knew that Naruto was still with Team 10. Sakura began their report, and Sasuke could see even behind the cloth mask he always wore that Kakashi was furious.

“Shikamaru, you’re with me,” Kakashi said when Sakura had finished. “Naruto, you’re next.”

Naruto scowled but knew better than to argue with Kakashi when he was in commander mode.

The lazy jōnin gave an eye smile that implied pain if Naruto gave him trouble. “You’ve got a day or so to rest. There are medics available, I’d suggest taking advantage of that.”

And with that Kakashi and Shikamaru was gone.

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Sakura herded everyone to the medics. Sasuke watched as she stood guard over everyone who was healed. Sakura only had to stop Ino from unconsciously attacking a medic once.

Sasuke scowled at Sakura’s coddling of Team 10. The pink-haired kunoichi had wrapped an arm around Yamanaka and gave Akimichi a firm pat on the shoulder when Kakashi took Nara away to deal with the seal on his neck. And now she took their arms and led them around like children.

He could see them, all wide-eyed and shaking. Sasuke saw them looking for their missing teammate without meaning too and part of Sasuke, the same part that clung so dearly to his team and his loyalty to the village, hoped Nara was okay because he owed him. That seal clinging to Nara’s neck was meant for him, the sannin had been aiming for him.

It was because of that, he would tolerate Sakura’s softness and Naruto’s protectiveness. Yamanaka and Akimichi were Nara’s team, and Sasuke owed Nara so Sasuke would deal with them until he could square up what he owed the other boy.

--

Naruto knew Sasuke didn’t care for his and Sakura’s adoption of Team 10 but as Naruto looked at their blood covered clothing and haunted eyes he saw something infinitely familiar. They looked like them after they had crawled back to the village.

The forest had been terrible. It had been bloody and dark and terrifying but it wasn’t the worst thing Naruto had ever lived through. Naruto had suffered even before his team fell into the hands of their torturers on that fateful mission. Team 10 was like Sakura had been. The pink-haired kunoichi had been soft before the Wave Mission, Naruto had seen it in her eyes, that before she was targeted with her team, she had lived a good life.

Team 10 was the same. They came from good clan families. They had friends and family members that loved and cared for them but the forest had stripped everything away and Naruto wasn’t sure if they would have time to heal up, to harden up, before the next round of the exams.

Because of Orochimaru they only had two days to rest before the end of the second part of the exam. No one would tell them what was after that but the way Kakashi-sensei had mentioned it made
Naruto think that they weren’t done just yet.

--

Team 7 was not happy. Sasuke’s scowl was so deep it had to be pulling at his scars and even Naruto felt like growling. Only Sakura managed to keep a professionally blank face as the newest Proctor explained the rules.

Evidently surviving the forest wasn’t enough.

Evidently beating all the people they had beaten wasn’t enough.

No, instead the proctors wanted to thin the herd. They had to fight in preliminary matches. It was a mistake, Sasuke thought darkly. Pitting his team against anyone but maybe some low level chunin was just asking for a bloodbath. Sasuke stopped and found Sakura’s eyes and then Naruto’s. Maybe, just maybe a bloodbath was what they wanted.

Sasuke smiled. He could do a bloodbath the Uchiha were good at bloodbaths

--

Sasuke was up first. His opponent was from Rain but it didn’t much matter where the shinobi was from because he would never be going back there.

Before he had jumped down from the walkway that surrounded the arena in the middle, Kakashi had stopped him. To outsiders, it looked like a trusted sensei offering a bit of last minute advice but the iron grip on Sasuke’s shoulder Kakashi had whispered six words. “Don’t make me come down there.”

Keep your head, Kakashi’s words said. Don’t over do it. But they said nothing about what Team 7 had planned.

As much as Sasuke hated it there was nothing they could keep from their sensei. Hatake Kakashi was one of the best and no matter how good they were, a group of genin was not nearly good enough to best him.

Sasuke merely grunted and jumped down to face the Rain Shinobi. “I won’t even need my Sharingan for this,” Sasuke taunted and then Sasuke moved. The last loyal Uchiha rushed forward as soon as the proctor said go.

The enemy dodged what would have left him split from navel to nose and lashed out with senbon that Sasuke easily batted away. It was a game. Just as much as a game as the training exercise with the other rookie teams had been. Sasuke wished for a moment that Naruto was beside him as he hunted his prey but easily brushed it off, Sasuke was hunting solo today.

--

Kakashi watched his most explosive genin tear his opponent apart. He could see the look of disgust on Kurenai’s face, hidden as it was, just as easily as he could see the approval on the half-hidden face of the Sand jōnin across the arena.

Too many years of peace had made the world forget just dangerous Konoha was, but Kakashi’s vicious little rookies were more than ready to shatter that notion. Kakashi shook his head and tsk’ed softly as he watched Sasuke bat the Rain shinobi around like a toy. As much as he hated to admit it the Uchiha were always more feline than canine.
“I tried so hard to teach him not to play with his food,” Kakashi said mournfully.

It was Naruto, bright, sunny Naruto who called down to his teammate with a voice full of blood lust, “Hurry up Sasuke, I want my turn too!”

Kakashi watched his student bring his hands up for a fire jutsu that didn’t require hand seals. It engulfed the Rain shinobi. There was nothing left.

As luck would have it Naruto was next.

--

“I hope Kiba gives up,” Sakura said watching the Inuzuka taunt her blond teammate. “Naruto would feel bad if he accidentally killed him.”

Kakashi hummed in agreement but he knew if he needed too, he could step in and save the other boy. As dangerous as his kids were, Kakashi was even more dangerous at this point only the blond boy’s tenant would cause a problem if Kakashi had to interfere.

It was strange how well controlled the boy was, Kakashi thought. All throughout their captivity not once had Naruto lost control of the fox. A flash of bright red eyes and an inhuman snarl did not mean a loss of control. Kakashi had studied under the Fourth and was close to the previous jailer as a result. Kushina had more than once displayed similar traits to the boy who shared her family name but never truly lost control. There was just something about the iron wills of the Uzumaki.

Naruto’s bout with Kiba was more akin to an overly rambunctious puppy playing a little too rough than Sasuke’s match of a kitten toying with a mouse. Naruto bounced to and fro barreling into Kiba and Akamaru never letting the Inuzuka boy get his feet underneath him. Naruto’s match was longer than Sasuke’s match had been but in the end, Kiba went down with a crack that signaled a broken shoulder.

“He’s gotten quite good at that move,” Kakashi remarked much to Kurenai’s disgust. “He managed to change it enough so that Kiba’s shoulder wasn’t destroyed.”

--

Ino’s skin felt too tight. There was panic bubbling in her chest and she knew if she opened her mouth she would scream and never stop. Shikamaru stood beside her, strong and dark and Ino heard his sharp intake of breath when her name appeared on the screen. Ino vs Gaara.

“I forfeit,” Ino announced with little fanfare. She was in no shape to compete, especially not against the strange and discomforting redhead. Her head throbbed in time with her heartbeat and even though a dark part of Ino wanted nothing more than to rip-tear Inoichi had taught her to look underneath the underneath. To see what truly made a man with a simple look on their eyes.

When Ino looked into Gaara’s eyes she did not see a man. All she saw was death.

--

Shikamaru’s match was brutally short. The curse mark on his shoulder throbbed and burned. Kakashi had warned him, explained what the mark was and how only his will power kept the monster at bay. The Nara were extremely willful by nature. It came from generations of imposing their will on others with their shadows. So when the mark flared and burned Shikamaru pushed it
back with a snarl and a flair of shadows.

When his opponent mocked Ino, Shikamaru’s eyes flashed darkly but he did not falter. Shikamaru was in full control when his shadow lashed out and snared the rain ninja. Shikamaru’s mind was clear when he used his shadow to suffocate the shinobi. The mark burned and throbbed but Shikamaru’s mind was clear and his actions were his own.

--

Sakura offered Lee a sharp grin and moved. Green and pink clashed, taijutsu versus taijutsu. Lee would strike faster than most genin could see but Sakura would be there with a firm block, steady and unmoving.

They traded blows back and forth. Lee was more technically skilled, taijutsu was his life and it was easy to see but Sakura was stubborn and refused to bow.

“You are a worthy opponent, Sakura-chan!” Lee cried happily.

“So are you, Lee,” Sakura agreed.

“It is unfortunate that I must beat you and bring an end to our contest,” Lee said with genuine regret in his voice.

“Well, you’re right about this being the end,” Sakura agreed with a smile. “But it won’t be you who wins.”

For all that Lee was superior in taijutsu, Sakura was not so limited with a flick of her wrist, the wire trap she had slow put into place during their sparring activated. Razor sharp wire almost seemed to appear out of nowhere and encased the green-clad ninja. Lee shifted carefully, drawing blood through the thinner parts of his uniform as the wire dug into his skin.

Sakura smirked and twitched her fingers slightly making the wire tighten. “It’s Uchiha wire,” Sakura told him. “You’ll never cut it and even if you could break it using pure strength it would leave you in no condition to fight.”

Lee’s eyes glinted, almost excitedly and Sakura knew that Lee would not give up. “Call the match proctor,” Sakura told him. “If Lee tries to continue he’ll die and he doesn’t need to die here.”

The proctor did not call the match at that moment and Lee bled for it. Lee lost for it.

Sakura respected the strange green-clad shinobi. He was powerful and fast, even if he was too idealistic. That was why when he managed to break the wire, bleeding as he was, she moved quickly to finish the match. He would have out lasted her, his stamina greatly out paced her own, but Sakura’s desire to win was greater than even his fighting spirit. She would not be left behind.

Quickly Sakura weaved a dark and sinister genjutsu. Lee’s physical chakra was overwhelming but his spiritual chakra was weak, as her strength began to fail Sakura activated her genjutsu. Lee began to scream and only then did the proctor called the match.

--

Chōji couldn’t stop staring at the blood. It was dry but Chōji could easily remember it leaking from Lee’s skin and dropping into the ground. Chōji’s opponent, a kunoichi from the Rain village, didn’t seem to notice the blood.
Chōji and the enemy kunoichi measured each other before the proctor gave the go-ahead to begin. Chōji was tired it was easy to see. The Akimichi heir’s body ached all over and he had noticed a slight tremor and ringing in his ears since his fight with the sound ninja in the forest. The kunoichi looked dirty but otherwise in much better condition. Chōji knew before he even stepped into the area what his chances of winning were.

Chōji took a moment and let his eyes flicker to Shikamaru up on the catwalk above, Chōji’s best friend gave a slight nod and Chōji exhaled softly. “I forfeit.”

--

Sasuke watched Neji toy with his cousin in their match. The elder Hyūga was brutal and some part of Sasuke could respect that, the same part that wanted to punish his older brother for the slaughter of his clan. Part of him also sneered at the older genin’s weakness. Neji’s rage and hatred for his clan, for his cousin was out in the open shining, glittering like an unpainted tripwire. Neji left himself open for punishment and for rebuke from the clan elders but Sasuke could see Neji clearly thought his momentarily revenge was worth it.

Beside Sasuke, Naruto was growing angrier. “Don’t move, idiot,” Sasuke chided grabbing his blond teammate when he started forward.

“But Neji!” Naruto started, righteous anger burning in his chest.

“This is a clan matter, Naruto,” Sakura said joining in her teammate’s conversation. She looked bothered but like Sasuke she knew it wasn’t their place to interfere. “Neji is taking it too far but pay attention, okay? You can tell this thing between them is personal.”

“But Hinata never hurt anyone,” Naruto said, obviously bothered by the brutal beating the soft-spoken girl was taking. “Whatever problems Neji has with his clan, he shouldn’t take it out on her.”

“Hinata is the daughter of the clan head,” Sasuke said, dark eyes fixed on the rather one-sided fight below them. “To Neji she is everything that is against him. She represents his oppression and this is only chance to fight back.”

“Oppression?” Naruto questioned, obviously confused. “What do you mean.”

Sasuke, having been the second heir to the Uchiha clan, had known how the Hyūga maintained order. He had been young when his parents died but ninja children were expected to grow up faster and accept the realities of their world sooner.

Sakura had been sat down with Ino after they became friends in the academy by Inoichi. The elder Yamanaka had explained, with a child in mind, about the different clans. Sakura wasn’t sure what had made the clan shinobi take pity on her and made sure she was in a better position than other non-clan shinobi. Inoichi had taken the time to carefully explain the Hyūga situation at a child friendly level.

“Just listen to Neji.” Sakura said biting back a wince at a particularly hard hit the girl in the arena took. “This isn’t our place.”

Naruto held back reluctantly and listened to the bitter boy take his pound of flesh from his younger cousin. Hinata stood proudly and bravely even without Naruto’s intervention. It was only when Neji moved in for a death blow did others finally step in, Kakashi among them even though Team 7’s commander looks bored.

The last two matches speed by, Temari, the Kunoichi from the Sand Village, beat Tenten easily.
Finally, Shino pulled out a win against the last Sand shinobi finally bringing the spectacle to an end.

Sasuke listened to the Hokage congratulate them on moving forward in the exams. He narrowed his eyes at the idea of the third stage being such a public event. Sasuke was a shinobi and the idea of performing as entertainment for the masses made his skin crawl.

Beside him, Sasuke could feel Sakura’s own unease, the pink haired girl likely already thinking of the dangers that sort of venue would present.

Hyūga Neji vs Uzumaki Naruto

Naruto grinned, a bloodthirsty smile when his next opponent name was drawn.

Uchiha Sasuke vs Gaara

Sasuke eyed his redhead opponent with excitement.

Nara Shikamaru vs Temari

Shikamaru tried to ignore the dark whispers in his mind when he saw his name and who he would be facing.

Haruno Sakura vs Shino

Sakura gave her opponent a brief thought but her mind quickly turned to what came next.

Kakashi met her eyes and offered a reassuring smile from behind his mask, and for the first time since they left the forest, Sakura felt the tight feeling in her chest lessened.

End Notes

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