Misstep in the Right Direction

by Solvdrage

Summary

It was just a simple good luck wish. This innocent moment created a connection between two lonely children years before destiny intended. This unintended new connection will change the course of history.
Chapter 1

Umino Iruka sighed as he watched Nara Shikamaru and Akimichi Choji make the Sign of Harmony and begin to talk about how 'troublesome' the spars were. The momentary pause gave Iruka a chance to talk to one of the students in the next spar. The Academy teacher approached his favorite, and by far most difficult, student. Uzumaki Naruto was looking eagerly at each of his classmates. The boy had a firm grip on the collar of his black t-shirt with an orange Whirlpool symbol in the center. Iruka sighed at the combination of eagerness and distrust in the young man's eyes. Naruto was a notorious prankster, much like Iruka had once been. Also like Iruka, Naruto was a prankster to fill a void in his life. Naruto was socially isolated for things beyond his control.

By a tragedy of timing, Uzumaki Naruto was the container of the Kyūbi.

Iruka was forbidden, on pain of death, from revealing the truth to Naruto. Instead, Iruka tried to do what he could to help Naruto out. The teacher, sadly, admitted that he had been as harsh as the other villagers when he first met Naruto. The Demon Fox had killed Iruka's parents, after all. In the short time Iruka had known Naruto, all his concerns about the Fox had vanished. Now, Iruka's main concerns were making sure Naruto paid attention in class, had enough groceries, and did his laundry.

Again, Iruka found himself sighing at something Naruto-related. Iruka had purchased nearly every piece of clothing Naruto owned. The only item in Naruto's wardrobe that Iruka hadn't purchased was the pair of goggles that were practically welded to Naruto's head.

"Naruto..." Iruka spoke as he ended his internal observations. The blond-haired troublemaker looked up and grinned.

"Sup, Iruka-sensei?"

"You're fighting next," Iruka whispered. Naruto instantly brightened and pumped his fist. "BUT!"

Naruto recognized Iruka's tone and calmed down...slightly. "Yeah, boss?"

The teacher allowed himself to chuckle. Naruto only called him 'boss' when Iruka used his most authoritative voice or told Naruto about some of his childhood pranks. "I want you to follow the protocols for the spars."

"But that's a load of crap! We're fighting and that stuff takes forever..." Naruto whined.

"And here I thought you'd be willing to be more patient if ramen was involved..." Iruka said idly. The Academy student's eyes lit up.

"Why didn't you say that in the first place!" Naruto shouted and grinned. "I'm going to be awesome at those lame protocols!"

Iruka sighed and pointed to the ring. "Next is Uzumaki Naruto and..." Naruto chuckled as he took his place. "Uchiha Sasuke!"

Naruto watched as nearly every girl erupted into cheers for the Last Uchiha. 'He's so popular. Imagine how popular I'm going to be when I whoop him!' Naruto thought excitedly. Iruka walked up to his position and sighed. "Uzumaki Naruto, take your position," the Teacher announced. Naruto made the sign of combat and smirked. A loud sneeze filled the air, but that wasn't what ensnared Naruto's attention.

"G-good luck, Naruto-kun," a girl's voice drifted over the silence between Iruka's announcements.
The voice was soft, but Naruto clearly heard the girl. Naruto lowered his hand from the sign of combat and was bordering on shock. He had heard girls call other guys 'kun' before, but none had ever called him Naruto-kun before. Naruto felt a fuzzy feeling in his stomach. It was similar to the rush he got after a really successful prank.

The fuzzy feeling was quickly replaced by a sharp pain on Naruto's right cheek. Evidently, Iruka had started the spar. Sasuke had been quick to take advantage of Naruto's distraction and clocked him. Most of the class erupted into laughter. Naruto sat up and rubbed his cheek. Sasuke, to Naruto's surprise, wasn't gloating. He was simply looking at Naruto like he wasn't there.

'That's a bit creepy...' Naruto thought. The prankster turned an angry glance to the uproarious class. They were all laughing at him. He hated that. They were taking pleasure in his failure. Naruto saw that Shikamaru and Chouji, the two boys who fought before Sasuke and Naruto, weren't laughing. Kiba, his dog Akamaru, and Aburame Shino weren't laughing. That helped Naruto's anger melt away as his gaze worked its way left and settled on the only girl not laughing. Strangely, the white-eyed girl looked mortified instead of amused.

"I-I'm s-sorry!" She squawked before turning and running. The class turned their laughter on the retreating form of the girl. Naruto was once again caught off guard by the mystery girl.

'She apologized?' Naruto questioned himself. He brushed himself off, and, in his highly distracted state, he didn't hear Iruka-sensei tell him to make the Sign of Harmony with Sasuke. Instead, he turned to the laughing class.

"Most of you suck," the troublemaker spat and started to chase after the girl who had wished him luck. Naruto was quick. It was a product of running from annoyed civilians who wanted to 'discuss' his latest prank. Naruto had also gotten pretty good at dodging lettuce or tomatoes, but he didn't expect the girl to start chucking produce at him.

'Well, maybe,' Naruto admitted to himself. Girls had always confused him. Naruto had seen 'friendships' among some of his girl classmates begin, end, and start back up in the space of an hour. It wouldn't surprise him if the mystery girl started chucking produce at him after apologizing earlier.

Naruto caught a flash of tan in the distance. He wasn't sure if he should be annoyed or impressed by the girl's speed. He wasn't mad or anything. Naruto could count the people, other than the girl, he wasn't mad at on one hand. Naruto changed paths and clamored over a small fence separating the Academy training grounds from the academic grounds. His shortcut paid off and he landed only a few feet away from the girl.

"Wait!" Naruto shouted. The girl made an 'eep' sound and tripped a bit. "You okay?"

"I, I'm sorry!" The girl repeated her earlier statement.

"You weren't the guy who clocked me," Naruto pointed out.

"But..."

"Don't worry about it! Me being caught off guard is the only way a chump like Sasuke could beat me!" Naruto thumped his chest as tried to calm the girl down. "By the way, what's your name? I'm, uh, kinda drawing a blank."

"H-Hyūga Hinata," Hinata revealed. Naruto cocked his head to the side as several thoughts fought for the forefront of his mind. First, was the fact that Hinata was from one of Konoha's biggest clans. That was pretty cool. Second, she looked familiar but Naruto couldn't place it. Finally, he
wasn't sure how to deal with her.

'How do guys treat girls who call them -kun?' Naruto thought quickly. An image of Sasuke scoffing and calling the girls 'an annoyance' flashed in his mind. 'That won't work...'

Naruto quickly remembered a time he was running from one of his pranking targets. He had found an out of the way place to hide until the guy calmed down. Naruto saw another guy and a girl talking. The girl had said something about confessing. Naruto wasn't sure what she did, but boy did she look nervous. Naruto assumed she was apologizing for something. The apology must have been awesome, because the guy hugged the girl real tight and called her something-chan. The two then walked off hand-in-hand for ice cream.

'Okay! This'll work. Hinata's apologizing to me for some reason, called me Naruto-kun, and is really nervous. It worked for that guy and he's nowhere near as awesome as me,' Naruto assured himself.

"Well, nice to meet you Hinata-chan," Naruto said with a beaming smile.

*Hinata's POV*

Hinata Hyūga was running again. There was no destination or goal as long as it took her far away from the jeering and laughter of her classmates.

Far away from her latest failure.

Hinata had only wanted to encourage Naruto-kun. Instead, her words had led to a humiliating defeat. Defeat...the word reminded her of the last time she had run like this. It was the day Hanabi had defeated her in the spar. Hinata had been so ashamed of her failure and of the weight of her father's disappointment. She had simply run. That had led to the humiliating and terrifying encounter with the bullies. Hinata had been exhausted, chakra-wise, emotionally and physically, from her spar and the run. Then Naruto-kun had arrived. He tried so hard to selflessly protect her, but all he had received was a severe beating from the three older boys. The only thanks Hinata could show was a few weak protests as Kō dragged her away.

"How can he even look at me now? I've only put him in danger!' Hinata thought while struggling not to cry.

Hinata needed a place to hide until the end of the Academy day. She knew of an isolated nook and was heading there. The Hyūga heiress fervently hoped she could outrun Naruto for a little longer. If she could find a quiet place, perhaps she could find the right words to keep Naruto from hating her.

"Wait!" Naruto's voice rang out and Hinata felt her body freeze up. She tried to stifle a shout of surprise, but it came out as an 'eep'.

"I'm sorry!" Hinata cried out. Her desperation to salvage any chance of friendship with Naruto overrode her desire to continue running.

"You weren't the guy who clocked me," Naruto said warmly.

"But," Naruto's words had caught Hinata as off guard as his sudden appearance. Hinata had to know why he was so casually brushing off her role in his loss to Sasuke. Her next words caught in her throat the second she looked up. Naruto's eyes had a...depth to them that Hinata quickly lost herself in.

"Don't worry about it! Me being caught off guard is the only way a chump like Sasuke could beat me!" Naruto spoke with undeniable confidence. Hinata wished she could find a fraction of that
confidence within herself. A moment later, Hinata came to a realization that caused her heart to beat a million miles per hour, and not from her earlier physical exertion.

'He's trying to cheer me up! He doesn't hate me,' the Hyūga girl thought as a wave of relief washed over her.

"By the way, what's your name? I'm, uh, kinda drawing a blank." Naruto's admission that he didn't even know her name caused her earlier budding hope to falter.

"H-Hyūga Hinata," Hinata managed to force out. The situation was an emotional roller-coaster and it was all Hinata could do to not collapse then and there. Naruto was not making things any easier. He had cocked his head to the side with a faint smile tugging at his lips. Hinata was perfectly aware that her blush wasn't solely due to her running anymore. Naruto was so...cute. He wasn't classically handsome like Hinata's father or Sasuke. Naruto was far too warm and emotional for that label to ever be applied to his appearance. Hinata was actually grateful for the lack of labels one could apply to Naruto. He was such a unique and free spirit. Labels would just seem out of place attached to Naruto.

"Well, nice to meet you Hinata-chan," Naruto said sincerely and with a smile that erased all her previous doubts.

'Wait...Hinata-chan?'

*End Hinata's POV*

Naruto felt relieved that Hinata was smiling. He had to admit, it was a lot better to see a girl smiling than on the verge of tears.

'She's got really cool eyes,' Naruto thought. "Looks like we've missed the start of math," the boy pointed out. Hinata gulped as she realized the new depths to her situation.

"Well, if we're going to skip, let's at least do something we'll enjoy," Naruto said with a grin that put Hinata somewhat at ease. "Hey, do you like zenzai?"

"Z-zenzai?" Hinata nervously parroted Naruto's last word. Naruto nodded enthusiastically. "I...it is my second favorite food."

"Mine too!" Naruto shouted excitedly. "If you're favorite food is ramen, you'll easily replace Iruka-sensei as my best friend!"

"I...I've only had ramen once..." Hinata confessed. Naruto whirled around and grabbed her by the shoulders. The Hyūga girl squeaked a bit in surprise.

"Only once?" Naruto exclaimed. Hinata could only nod a bit numbly. Even in her most optimistic dreams, she had never expected her simple 'good luck' to lead to Naruto being this friendly. "I'm so sorry, Hinata-chan! If I had known you were suffering from the horrible, inhuman, monstrous crime of Ramen Deprivation, I wouldn't have waited so long to help you! Can you ever forgive me?"

"I...There's nothing to forgive..." Hinata whispered. Naruto was close enough to hear her. The boy hummed questioningly. Hinata took a deep breath. "Y...you don't remember a fight you had a few years ago? Where you...fought some older students?"

Naruto cocked his head as he tried to remember. "Were there three of them?"

Hinata nodded. She felt the tears Naruto's kind acceptance had defeated threatening to return. "Y..yes."
"That was you!" Naruto shouted. Hinata would have turned to run, but Naruto hadn't let go of her shoulders. "Those jackasses didn't hurt you or anything did they? You got out of there okay, right?"

Once again, Naruto had done the exact opposite of what Hinata had expected. She had been prepared for Naruto to become angry and disappointed.

She had expected him to walk away like her father always did.

Hinata was not prepared for the honest concern in his voice. She had not been prepared for him to care.

"I...I wasn't hurt..." Hinata forced out. Naruto let out a relieved breath. "But you were! And I couldn't do anything! Kō-san dragged me away before I could help you!"

"But you wanted to help me right?" Naruto asked. Hinata could only nod. "Then everything's cool. It wasn't your fault that Kō guy snatched you and took you home."

Hinata didn't realize her next action until Naruto started giggling. She had actually poked Naruto in the stomach. Her mind was in such a haze that she had to confirm that Naruto was actually real and not the product of a happy dream.

"S-sorry! I...I had thought I had...fainted and that...you were a...dream. No, no one other than Kō-san or okaa-san has ever been this nice to me," Hinata confessed and felt a few of the tears she had been desperately holding back trickle down her cheeks.

"I should be saying I'm sorry! I don't know what I did, but I know making you cry wasn't part of the plan! Man, we really need that zenzai!" Naruto started to panic. He grabbed Hinata's hand without further thought and led her out of the Academy grounds.

Naruto was guiding Hinata through the streets of Konoha. The pair was sticking to the quieter sections of the city. Hinata was grateful that the Academy was far from the Hyūga complex.

Naruto cast a glance at Hinata and grinned broadly.

"Is this your first time skipping class?"

"Yes...and to be honest, I'm a bit terrified," Hinata admitted quickly. Naruto's smile faded away and he chewed on his lip for a moment.

"There's a place you can hide out while I get the zenzai. When we get back, I'll give you a copy of that worksheet," Naruto assured Hinata.

"You knew what the assignment was going to be?" Hinata asked.

Naruto sighed. "Yeah, Iruka-sensei had a feeling I was going to skip today. He exchanged paying for my groceries this week by forcing me to finish the worksheet early. And...he kinda gave me an extra. I get the feeling he doesn't exactly trust me to turn stuff in."

"Thank you," Hinata said quietly as the pair reached Naruto's hiding place.

"Don't worry about it. We're friends right?" Naruto prompted.

"Y-yes! We, we are friends!" Hinata said excitedly.

"Hell yes! I got a friend who isn't old enough to be, like, my brother or something!" Naruto shouted while jumping up and down. His enthusiasm was contagious and Hinata couldn't help but laugh.
"You...you are my first friend too..." Hinata confessed. Naruto took her hand and Hinata suddenly went beet-red.

"Well, I think that makes us best friends," Naruto announced proudly to the world. "I'll be back with the zenzai!"

Hinata pulled the hand Naruto had held for so long to her chest. It seemed like an age ago that she wished Naruto good luck. In reality, it had only been a half-hour at most. Hinata tried a breathing exercise Kō had shown her once. She had just begun to calm down when Naruto returned with the zenzai.

"T-thank you," Hinata said as she accepted the zenzai. The two children ate in a companionable silence for a moment. "I...I can't believe I'm skipping class."

"Today is a day for firsts," Naruto responded sagely.

"I, I still can't believe we like the same food," the Hyūga girl said quietly. Naruto grinned as he popped some more zenzai in his mouth.

"Got an idea," he said after swallowing. "We'll each ask a question and answer it."

Hinata smiled. She liked the idea. It was a chance to get to know her best friend better. "I like that idea."

"I'll start..." Naruto began, but paused to wolf down his zenzai. He swallowed theatrically. "Ok, what are your hobbies?"

Hinata ate her zenzai happily, but with impeccable manners. "M-my hobbies are flower pressing and..." Hinata paused. The demands of her, somewhat precarious, position as Hyūga heiress did not leave much time for hobbies. If she was not at the Academy, then she was training in Jūken, etiquette, or finances. "I...guess gardening."

"Gardening?" Naruto asked in surprise.

"Yes," Hinata reconfirmed.

"That's awesome!" Naruto exclaimed. "My Turn! I love pulling pranks and...I actually garden a bit!"

"W-we have m-more in common than I thought..." Hinata whispered in shock.

"Yeah..." Naruto's voice trailed off as he began to think. "Uh, your turn, Hinata-chan!"

"Ano... What is your dream for the future?" Hinata asked, even though she knew Naruto's answer. She was hoping to experience more of his unshakable self-confidence or gain a new insight into Naruto's life.

"I'm going to be Hokage. When I'm Hokage, more people will have to treat me with respect," the aspiring shinobi stated with absolute certainty.

"Y-you will always have my respect, Naruto-kun," Hinata assured him.

"Thanks..." Naruto said in little more than a whisper as he looked away.

'Was that a...blush?' Hinata thought in shock.
"So, your turn! What's your dream?" The enthusiasm that initially drew Hinata to Naruto had returned full force.

"I...I want to make my father proud," the Hyūga heiress revealed. "It...it is all I've ever tried to do."

"He should already be proud of you! You're incredible!" Naruto was indignant at the thought a parent could be anything but proud of their child. The orphan had an idealized view of the relationship between a child and his or her parents.

"T-thank you, Naruto-kun," Hinata responded safely. She didn't want to dive into her own pain. Hinata felt that she could trust Naruto, but she wasn't ready to air her dirty laundry.

"You're welcome," Naruto said as he stood up. "I think we've had enough fun for now. Let's go take a nap while Iruka-sensei drones on about something boring like why Iwa sucks or something."

Naruto helped Hinata to her feet and the pair of truants headed back to the Academy. Naruto, an experienced skipper, quietly showed Hinata a fool-proof way back into the Academy. The pair had a tense moment when Mizuki emerged from a storage shed. The moment passed quickly and the couple made it back to the class right before the next lesson started. Naruto had memorized the room schedule and perfected playing hooky.

"Math is held in another room for group work," Naruto explained as the pair slipped back in line.

Iruka shot Naruto an annoyed glare as the troublemaker and the heiress took their seats in the back.

"I-is Iruka-sensei mad at us?" Hinata whispered during a lull. Iruka was waiting for the usual argument over which one of Sasuke's 'True Loves' would get to sit next to the Last Uchiha to end before starting the lesson.

"Nah, he'll be annoyed at me for a bit, but it'll be cool later," Naruto promised. Hinata nodded her head.

'I still can't believe I skipped class!' Hinata's mind was still racing.

"Now that the wonders of young love have sorted themselves out for this period, we will begin," Iruka chided the classroom. Every young woman in the class blushed. The majority stole a glance at Uchiha Sasuke. Hinata, however, looked to her left. Naruto was too busy snickering at the looks of annoyance on several of his male classmates' faces to notice Hinata's glance. The scarred Chuunin groaned and began his lesson about the relationship between a Hidden Village and a nation's Daimyo.

Naruto followed his earlier suggestion and took a nap. Hinata swallowed back a giggle at her newly declared best friend's antics. After a while, Iruka concluded his lecture by throwing an eraser at Naruto's head. The boy didn't react with loud indignation like most expected. Instead, Naruto simply sat up and smiled.

"Done already?" Naruto asked.

"Yes, but you will remain after class," Iruka grumbled. Naruto simply flashed a thumbs-up. "Class dismissed."

"Run Sasuke! They're trying to flank you!" Naruto shouted out in alarm. Sasuke looked around and saw a trio of girls trying sneak up on him. The Last Uchiha bolted and escaped the growing
mob. Naruto was cracking up as the classroom emptied. Soon, the only remaining people in the classroom were Naruto, Iruka and Hinata.

"Hinata, I am not pleased that you left campus with Naruto. However, I understand the situation and will not be punishing you or marking this on your record," Iruka explained. 'Mainly because I know how harshly your Clan would treat you,' the teacher added mentally. Iruka pulled a sheet from the drawer.

"Thank you very much, Iruka-sensei!" Hinata bowed deeply. She was relieved beyond words. After she accepted the sheet, Hinata bolted from the room.

"Bye, Hinata-chan!" Naruto shouted and waved. Iruka chuckled at Naruto's antics. The student turned to the teacher and chuckled back. "Hey, uh, Iruka-sensei...I think I kinda like her."

"Like or like?"

"The second one I think," Naruto admitted.

Iruka shook his head. "It looks like we're going to Ichiraku. Teuchi and I obviously have a lot to teach you," the teacher said with a bit of dread.

"Ah...but the Academy just ended!" Naruto whined.

"Naruto, this is one of the most important things you will ever learn," Iruka pointed out to Naruto.

"More important than the Bunshin?"

"Much more important than the Bunshin," the Academy teacher assured the excitable young man. Iruka rose from his chair. "Let's go, Naruto."
Naruto sat on a stool in the kitchen of the Ichiraku Ramen stand and watched Ayame work on food. He had assumed it was ramen, but then he noticed a distinct lack of noodles. And was that eel?

“Whatcha cooking?” Naruto asked while swinging his feet back and forth.

“Oh, just unadon,” Ayame said as she tasted the sauce she was preparing. The young woman nodded appreciatively and finished preparing her meal.

“Why would you eat that? You own a ramen stand! You could eat ramen every day!” Naruto finished excitedly.

Ayame laughed a little and sat down next to Naruto. “I like Ramen as much as the next person,” Ayame started.

“Not as much as me!” Naruto childishly interrupted.

“Not as much as you,” Ayame agreed with a smile. “But, I like to eat other things, too.”

“I'd still eat mostly ramen,” Naruto said authoritatively. Ayame reached across the table and picked up a ladle. She bopped Naruto over the head.

“Well, if you like being called Naruto-chan forever, I guess that's a good strategy. Ramen doesn't have everything you'll need to grow to your full potential,” Ayame chided.

“But! But!” Naruto stammered a bit. “Ramen's the best food ever!”

“Naruto, you need to realize ramen isn't the only food in existence,” Ayame sighed.

“Well, what do you suggest then?” Naruto said with a bit of sarcasm. Ayame promptly ignored the sarcasm and launched into an excited litany of strange, in Naruto's opinion, dishes. Naruto occasionally tried to get a word in, but Ayame was speaking about her passion. The Academy
student groaned and realized this was going to be as bad as the one time he had asked Ino about shopping.

As Ayame was happily explaining the benefits of chazuke over kayu for left-over rice, Iruka and Teuchi were discussing Naruto's latest situation.

“So, Naruto's moved out of the 'girls are icky' stage and into the 'girls are interesting' stage?” Teuchi asked as he poured Iruka some awamori. Iruka tipped his cup to Teuchi in thanks before taking a sip.

“Well, with Naruto, it wasn't really 'girls are icky'. It was more 'girls are stupid for chasing Sasuke when they could be chasing me because I'm so much more awesome',” Iruka explained.

“Good to see our boy isn't lacking in self-confidence,” Teuchi said sardonically.

“I just hope he can gift a little of that self-confidence to Hinata,” Iruka grumbled before taking a large swig of his drink. “There are times where I worry about her as much as Naruto.”

“Hinata, eh?” Teuchi asked and Iruka nodded in the affirmative. “Lovely name. It does sound familiar though...”

“It should. She's the heiress of the Hyūga clan,” Iruka stated simply.

“So, he's going for the 'distant and unobtainable girl' is he?” Teuchi asked before scowling a bit in thought. “But you said that Hinata needed some of Naruto's self-confidence...”

“I did,” Iruka admitted.

“But this Hinata is a Hyūga,” the restauranteur said with particular emphasis on the girl's clan name.

“Hinata is actually a very shy and sweet girl. She's one of the best in my class; fifth behind the Aburame heir, a civilian girl named...Haruno Sakura, Yamanaka Ino and Uchiha Sasuke.”
Teuchi frowned, not because of Naruto's choice in a girl. He was concerned for the girl. Teuchi had never met a Hyūga, but was familiar with their reputation. Shyness would be viewed as weakness in such a harsh clan. Hinata's placement of fifth in a class of nearly sixty aspiring ninja would be considered nothing less than an abysmal failure. Iruka seemingly read Teuchi's mind.

“You know the Hyūga's reputation. I'm afraid the pressures put on Hinata will be too much at times,” Iruka confessed.

“Well, I hope you can help her,” Teuchi said earnestly. “So, before we get further distracted... Are we giving Naruto a talk or the Talk?”

Iruka laughed for a moment. “A talk. Naruto isn't that far into discovering girls yet,” the Academy teacher chuckled. Teuchi laughed back and the two older men got up from their seats and walked over to where Naruto was being bombarded by a lecture on the best oil for frying tempura.

“Oh thank you, Old Man Teuchi! Thank you, Iruka-sensei! You've come to save me! All this lecturing is as boring as the Academy!” Naruto shouted in relief.

“Are you saying I'm boring?” Iruka and Ayame asked simultaneously in a falsely sweet tone. Naruto felt a shiver run down his spine.

“No boss! No ma'am!” Naruto sputtered apologetically. Iruka and Ayame both nodded once, before realizing they had spoken at the same time. The young woman blushed a bit and looked away. Iruka, however, blushed a lot. The Academy teacher cleared his throat to distract everyone from what had just transpired.

“Naruto, we need to talk to you about what happened earlier today,” Iruka started.

“You said Hinata-chan wasn't going to get in trouble!” Naruto interrupted. Ayame looked up from her unadon. She mouthed 'chan?' to her father. Teuchi nodded, but did not speak. Iruka continued his semi-prepared speech.

“I promised Hinata that she would not receive any punishment,” Iruka assured the boy. “However, your concern for her is a good sign for what we are going to talk about.”

Naruto felt that shiver reappear in his spine. It was never a good omen when Iruka-sensei wanted to 'talk'. “What, uh, about?”
“You said earlier that you thought you were starting to like Hinata,” Iruka pointed out.

“Well, yeah. Why wouldn't I start liking Hinata-chan? We've got stuff in common. She's pretty, which makes her wearing that jacket confusing. I thought girls liked to show off how pretty they are?”

“I'll handle this,” Ayame said to the men in the room. “Sometimes, girls feel pressure to 'show off'. This pressure can come from boys, but it actually comes from other girls a lot.”

“Huh?” Naruto was incredibly confused.

“Do the boys get in groups and talk about whoever is a 'threat'?" Ayame prompted.

“Well, yeah! Kiba, Shikamaru, and Chouji sk...hang out with me occasionally and we complain about how Sasuke is such a stuck up prick and how all the girls just fall over if he looks in their general direction,” Naruto loudly complained. Iruka looked annoyed that Naruto was barely trying to hide the fact he skipped.

“Oh...” Ayame said. “Well, the reasons are sort of like that. Some girls chose to avoid presenting themselves as a 'target' or they are just self-conscious about their looks.”

“I don’t get it,” Naruto admitted.

“As long as you make sure Hinata-chan knows you aren't going to judge her, you'll be fine,” Ayame counseled.

“Ayame-chan gave you great advice, Naruto. You should definitely keep that in mind,” Iruka agreed. Naruto was watching the group of adults in front of him and was a bit confused. Teuchi was paying more attention to Iruka-sensei and Ayame-onee-chan than to Naruto. Ayame-onee-chan was paying a good bit of attention to Iruka-sensei when she wasn't giving Naruto advice.

“Oh, Iruka-sensei,” Naruto said idly. 'Why would I judge Hinata-chan? She's the nicest person I ever met!’
“You said you have things in common with Hinata-sama?” Teuchi asked. Naruto perked up at the 'sama' honorific.

“Yeah, Hinata-chan and I have a lot in common. Gotta ask Old Man Teuchi, why did you call Hinata-chan, Hinata-sama?” Naruto questioned.

“Naruto, you know about the Hyūga Clan, correct?” Ayame prompted.

“Yeah, they've got a Dojutsu and are good fighters,” Naruto paraphrased the known facts about Hinata's secretive clan.

Iruka sighed and explained Hinata's position within the structure of her clan. Naruto was bouncing on his stool. He started babbling at a million miles an hour.

“Calm down, Naruto. What are you trying to say?” Teuchi interrupted to make sure his favorite customer actually breathed.

“How cool is that? My best friend is, like, some kind of Warrior Princess-ttebayo!” Naruto leapt off the stool and was gesturing wildly with his hands. Ayame was giggling at the young man's antics. Iruka, however, groaned at the verbal tic at the end of Naruto's sentence. The teacher had thought 'dattebayo' had been vanquished nearly two years ago.

'So, there is a negative to his crush after all,' Iruka lamented in his mind.

It was a rare day when Uzumaki Naruto was excited about going to the Academy. Naruto did have friends, but he didn't have the connection with Kiba, Akamaru, Shikamaru and Chouji that he felt with Hinata. Naruto was fairly certain that Kiba would not appreciate Naruto's gardening hobby like Hinata did.

Naruto's seemingly permanent grin was a full blown smile as he entered the schoolyard. The boy weaved through the knots of cliques easily. Occasionally, Naruto would hear whispers. The whispers were mostly the usual gossip about Naruto being a 'troublemaker'. Naruto didn't really mind that talk.
'What's there to get upset about? I am a troublemaker! I'm the greatest prankster in the history of Konoha!' Naruto thought.

The other whispers were about why Naruto was running around with one of his hands behind his back. Naruto's smile had split his face. He couldn't wait to reveal this surprise!

'Now, I just have to find my target!' Naruto thought excitedly.

Hinata knew the hesitation in her steps did not reflect well on her station. Kō had instructed Hinata on many things. Hinata had always viewed Kō as her, somewhat distant, older brother. Now, Hinata's only positive familial relationship was slipping away. Kō had recently been reassigned to a more general tutoring position. He would no longer be exclusively Hinata's tutor. Today had been Kō's last day as Hinata's closest relative. The young man had apologized and promised to continue to help Hinata when he could find the time.

As Hinata had stood in the entrance to the Academy, a realization dawned on her. The Hyūga Clan was losing faith in her. Hinata wished she had someone to truly confide in. She did not have many close friends that she felt comfortable confiding her doubts in. Hinata felt that Kō, being older and extremely formal, was not a person she could truly bear her soul to. Hinata frowned at the thought of revealing her self-consciousness to Kō. Hinata felt her frown deepening as her thoughts turned to her sister, Hanabi. The two sisters were friendly, but the Clan was doing everything it could to keep the sisters isolated.

It seemed Hinata's only hope for a meaningful friendship was Naruto. They had only spoken for half an hour, but Naruto had lifted Hinata's spirits in a way only Hinata's mother could have ever matched.

Hinata was excited to see Naruto again. He was the opposite of a Hyūga. Naruto's personality was warm, open, and uplifting. In that moment, Hinata realized her desire to see Naruto wasn't merely excitement. It was almost a need. Hinata was longing for unconditional acceptance.

She gathered her resolve and entered the Academy. Hinata avoided the various cliques as she headed towards the main building. Hinata was about to activate her Byakugan to find Naruto, when an arm snaked its way around her from behind.

“Surprise!” Naruto shouted happily. Hinata felt her eyes widen in shock. “I, uh, hope you like them.”
Hinata instinctively nodded. Naruto was holding a few flowers in his hand. The Hyūga heiress quickly identified the flowers. Her heart-rate had been elevated by Naruto suddenly startling her, but the flowers had sent it into overdrive.

“T-they are lovely,” Hinata whispered. “I...m-mallow and lilacs are s-some of my favorites.”

“Awesome!” Naruto said excitedly as he moved in front of Hinata. He was grinning with a bit of nervousness. “I remembered how you said your hobby was pressing flowers. I, uh, chose the colors ’cause they reminded me of your eyes a bit.”

“T-thank you,” Hinata responded quietly. She was not use to such spontaneity. Hinata couldn't help but be touched by how charming Naruto had, unintentionally, been.

“Naruto!” Iruka shouted from across the schoolyard.

“I'll be there in a sec, boss!” Naruto shouted back. “Hinata-chan, I'll be right back.”

Hinata could only nod. She pulled the flowers close, as if she was confirming their existence. The Hyūga heiress blinked away her haze and smiled. She had just been thinking that Naruto was becoming her refuge and he had arrived to lift her spirits almost instantly.

'I never expected this...Naruto-kun,' Hinata thought happily.

“Who would have ever thought that knucklehead could do something like that,” a voice said from beside Hinata. The shy girl jumped a bit and berated herself. Her clan, even Kō, would have reprimanded Hinata for her lack of awareness. Hinata glanced to the source of the voice and realized it was Yamanaka Ino.

“W-what do you mean?” Hinata asked.

“Be romantic! Naruto was pretty good, but nowhere near as good as Sasuke-kun would have been!” Haruno Sakura, Ino’s best friend, piped in.

“S-sasuke-kun? I...I don't see him as the romantic type,” Hinata absentmindedly admitted. She hadn't realized she had even spoken until she felt Ino and Sakura's annoyed glare upon her. Hinata
eepered and drew strength from Naruto's gift.

“You obviously don't appreciate Sasuke-kun like we do,” Ino said dismissively. “Oh, by the way, do you know anything about the language of flowers?”

“A little... I have a book on it...” Hinata revealed.

“Well, you're going to be floored by what Naruto's little gift is saying...” Ino whispered to Hinata. Sakura had leaned into hear Ino's revelation. Hinata had to admit she was curious as well. “Naruto is saying, through his flowers, that he's consumed by the first emotion of love.”

Hinata felt her face heat up and she knew that her blush was probably visible from Iwa.

“I think someone has a crush...” Sakura said in a sing-song voice. “This is great, Ino!”

“Isn't it? Not only does this mean that there is one less rival for Sasuke-kun; Naruto and Hinata's little crush on each other is actually pretty cute,” Ino agreed.

“I...I was never interested in Sasuke-kun,” Hinata protested. 'His eyes remind me too much of my father. Its like they disapprove of everything about me,' Hinata added to herself.

Sakura and Ino did not hear Hinata and the conversation quickly devolved into a debate over who was 'Sasuke-kun's one true love'. Hinata slipped away and began searching for Naruto again.

As she entered the Academy building, a truth dawned on her. She just might have a crush on Naruto. Hinata smiled as she quietly hoped the message of Naruto's flowers wasn't entirely a coincidence.

“Would you care to explain that little stunt, Naruto?” Iruka said after a moment. Naruto was sitting on the edge of the front row desk in the classroom trying to look innocent.

“I don’t know what you're talking about, Iruka-sensei! The heat melted those erasers to the blackboard in the fourth year classroom!” Naruto hastily explained and his illusion of innocence
shattered. Iruka buried his head in his hands.

“We'll talk about that later,” Iruka lamented. “I wanted to talk to you about giving flowers to Hinata.”

“Huh? What about it? She told me her hobby is flower pressing. Those flowers were really pretty and the color reminded me of her eyes. I thought she’d enjoy them,” Naruto explained. He wasn't exactly sure why Iruka was making a big deal of it.

“Naruto, what you did for Hinata is generally reserved for couples,” Iruka tried to explain.

“Well, duh, it takes a couple of people to give gifts. What's the point of giving a gift to yourself?” Naruto asked in confusion.

Iruka blinked once and sighed. “Naruto, giving a girl flowers, especially surprising a girl with flowers, is only done when dating,” Iruka tried desperately not to sound like he was lecturing Naruto.

“D-dating? But, we just became friends and I don't have enough money to take someone awesome like Hinata-chan on a date! You have to help me buy toilet paper! How am I going to pay for like a nice restaurant and stuff like that?” Naruto started to panic.

“You did say that you liked Hinata, remember,” Iruka pointed out to Naruto.

“Yeah, I do,” Naruto said. “Hinata-chan's really nice, she's smart enough to be one of the best of the class and she doesn't chase Sasuke around, which makes her a genius. Oh, she's definitely cute. We've got stuff in common, too.”

Naruto counted off his points on his fingers. Iruka nodded and was clearly thankful that Naruto was at least thinking things through a tiny bit.

“Why are we going over this again, boss? I mean, we talked about this last night...” Naruto continued when Iruka didn't speak. “But you were probably paying so much attention to Ayame-onee-chan that you forgot talking with me...”
Naruto laughed uproariously when Iruka started blushing and sputtering an explanation. Naruto didn't pay attention to what Iruka was saying. The teacher's reaction was enough to make the conversation worth it.

“What am I going to do with you?” Iruka asked. “And don't say make you Hokage. I don't have that authority. I'm going to see about the erasers in Year Four's classroom. Please take your seat Naruto and try to pay attention to the lesson and not Hinata.”

“But Hinata-chan's actually interesting!” Naruto verbally poked at Iruka.

‘Where is Ayame-chan's ladle when I need it? I really need something to get Naruto to behave...maybe a genjutsu or something...’ Iruka thought as he exited the room.

Naruto was so caught up in his amusement that he didn't notice the other students start filing into the classroom.

“Naruto-kun...” It took Hinata's voice to snap Naruto out of his amused daydream. “Thank you again for the flowers.”

“You're welcome, Hinata-chan,” Naruto said with a warm smile. Ayame's advice suddenly pushed itself to the forefront of Naruto's memories.

“Naruto-kun, before you go I have some words of wisdom,” Ayame had said somewhat conspiratorially.

“Oh?” Naruto asked. He was a bit tired and didn't want to sit through another lecture like the one on food Ayame had bombarded him with earlier.

“Compliments,” Ayame said in a definitive tone of voice. She nodded her head in self-satisfaction.

“That's only one word, Ayame-onee-chan,” Naruto pointed out helpfully. A twitch appeared on Ayame's forehead and she reached for her ladle. Instinctively, Naruto covered his head and started blabbering apologies.

“As I was saying, compliments are always a good thing. Remember how I mentioned making
“Sure that Hinata-chan knew you will never judge her?” Ayame reminded Naruto. The young boy nodded while keeping a wary eye on The Ladle. “Well, compliments are a way to let her know. And girls like to be reminded that we are special.”

“But Hinata-chan is special,” Naruto stated simply. “She’s really nice and has the Byakugan.”

“That’s a good start, Naruto-kun. But Hinata-chan probably doesn’t feel that her Byakugan makes her special. Everyone in the Hyūga Clan has the Byakugan. If you are going to mention her eyes, try to say something that she probably doesn’t hear very often,” Ayame was slipping into lecture mode, but Naruto was actually paying attention this time. He felt like Ayame was giving him super-secret intelligence on girls.

‘Mabye, just maybe, I'll actually understand them,’ Naruto thought to himself.

“So, like, compliment the color of her eyes? I mean, they kinda remind me of some flowers I see over in one of the training grounds,” Naruto suggested.

“Very good,” Ayame complimented Naruto’s originality.

“Ok, I think I got it. I should compliment Hinata-chan all the time on stuff,” Naruto said.

“Not exactly. If you compliment her all the time, they’ll lose their impact. You wouldn’t do the same prank every day would you?” Ayame asked. Naruto shook his head. “And you wouldn’t rush into a prank and get caught either, right?” Again, Naruto shook his head.

Ayame grinned. “Think of it this way. You have to treat it like a ‘nice’ prank. Compliment a girl when a good opportunity arises or when you know they need a pick-me-up.”

“Now are you telling me that I'm going to have to pick Hinata-chan up and carry her?” Naruto asked. Ayame’s answer was a bop on the head with The Ladle.

Naruto grinned at the memory. “Well, I just felt you deserved to be reminded of how special you are.”

Hinata blushed furiously and quietly thanked Naruto. Naruto was about to ask if Hinata found the
homework was as boring as he did, when a groan interrupted him.

“Oh great, the one girl not interested in Sasuke-sama is with Naruto of all people,” Tobio lamented. Daichi, who was a real jerk in Naruto’s opinion, snickered about the ‘high and mighty Hyūga deigning to speak with a commoner’.

“Yeah, I am lucky. Hinata-chan’s easily the coolest person, girl or whatever, in the class. You jerks should be even more jealous of me than normal,” Naruto said proudly.

Tobio and Daichi looked furious and were about to start a fight when Iruka returned to the classroom. “Everyone in your seats!”

Iruka’s voice didn’t seem to reach the class. “I said everyone in your seats!” This time the class practically Body Flickered into their seats. Iruka sighed and began the lesson. The teacher’s eyes kept going back to Naruto and Hinata. Iruka was about to say something to Naruto, when he noticed Hinata lean in and say ‘the Hokage will need to know this’. Iruka struggled desperately to contain his smile as Hinata accomplished what he had trying to do for nearly three years. Naruto was paying attention and taking notes.

’Wonders never cease,’ Iruka chuckled as he turned to face the chalkboard.

The next few days were among the best Naruto could remember. He really enjoyed going to the Academy. Naruto was so excited to finally have a friend that was his age. Hinata was a really patient listener. Naruto was trying to get Hinata to talk more. She did not speak as often as Naruto would like, but when she did, Hinata reaffirmed Naruto’s belief that she was the kindest person he had ever met.

“I believe that you will be Hokage, Naruto-kun. You have the strength to never give up,” Hinata had said a few days ago at lunch. The only other person to use the word will instead of if when talking about Naruto becoming Hokage had always been Iruka-sensei. Hinata’s quiet encouragement fed the fires of Naruto’s desires to become Hokage even more.

“You’re just as strong as I am. When I’m Hokage, I’m definitely going to need your help. I mean, your taijutsu is really cool,” Naruto had instantly said to Hinata. “And you are a lot smarter than me. You’ll be able to help me on all the ’economic issues’ I hear Hokage-ojisan talk about when I visit him sometimes.”
Naruto was smiling broadly at the memory when he walked into Iruka-sensei's classroom. He sat down and waited for Hinata to arrive. She was generally one of the first to arrive. Naruto was simultaneously impressed and confused by how Hinata could stay so focused on most of the lessons. They were so boring.

Naruto was becoming a bit nervous as time passed. Hinata hadn't shown up yet. He didn't panic, but did look towards the doors several times as Mizuki-sensei arrived. Iruka-sensei arrived a few minutes later and the lesson began. Naruto was fidgeting in his seat more than usual. It was as if a tide of nervous energy was washing over him. Iruka's lesson and Mizuki's explanation of the homework failed to even register on the most basic of levels.

“Remember, the information we covered today will be on the test at the end of the week. You are all dismissed for lunch. Enjoy your break,” Mizuki said warmly. The buzz of conversation filled the air. As usual, a large portion of the class congregated around Uchiha Sasuke.

Naruto ignored the group, but secretly envied the attention lavished upon Sasuke. The attention validated his existence. The acknowledgment is what Naruto craved. It was one of the reasons he treasured Hinata's friendship. She not only acknowledged Naruto's existence, Hinata respected Naruto's existence. Naruto had few such bonds. He counted Iruka-sensei, Ayame-onee-chan, Old Man Teuchi, and the Third as his family. Thus, he treasured them above all others. Naruto was placing a great deal of hope in his friendship with Hinata.

“Can I help you, Naruto?” Iruka asked as he watched Naruto approach the teacher's desk.

Naruto nodded. “I miss Hinata-chan. Do you think she's okay?”

Mizuki smirked and patted Iruka on the shoulder. “I'll let you handle the young love. You want the usual?”

“Thanks on both counts,” Iruka said with a grin. Mizuki arced an eyebrow questioningly. Iruka's grin broadened into a full smile. “Don't worry, this isn't the first conversation I've had with Naruto.”

Mizuki nodded and walked off. Iruka knelt in front of Naruto and patted the boy on the head. “I'm sure Hinata's fine, Naruto. She's probably just come down with that bug that was going around.”

“I didn't get that sick when I caught that cold,” Naruto pointed out. Iruka turned up his smile to buy some time. He couldn't reveal that Naruto had an elevated immune system due to the Kyūbi
sealed within his being.

“Well, you have really good luck with that sort of thing,” the teacher said to placate the boy’s curiosity. Naruto chewed his lip before shrugging. Iruka was thankful that Naruto wouldn't press that point for a while. “But I'm sure that Hinata will be fine and back to class in a day or two. The Hyūga clan has very good doctors.”

“Promise?” Naruto asked quickly.

“I'm sure of it,” Iruka assured his favorite, if gray-hair-creating, student. Naruto nodded confidently before heading off to eat his usual lunch of instant ramen.

Iruka was glad that his talk seemed to placate Naruto's worries. Naruto focused on the lesson more than either Mizuki or Iruka expected under the circumstances. As soon as the class was dismissed, Naruto rushed up to the teachers. He was running so quickly that he actually had to skid to a stop.

“You guys have extras for today's work right?” Naruto shouted before he even came to a complete halt. Mizuki rolled his eyes and shook his head. Iruka chuckled at the antics of his two closest friends.

“Here, you go. The Hyūga Compound in on the opposite side of the village. The directions are actually pretty simple. When you get to Ichiraku, take a left and keep going until you reach Atsushi's Forge. Then, turn right and keep going. You can't miss the Hyūga Compound. The Hyūga have their clan symbol on the walls to their compound and a guard station at the entrance,” Iruka explained. Naruto nodded rapidly.

“You're the best, boss! See you tomorrow!” Naruto started to run off. “Oh, see you too, Mizuki-sensei!” Naruto added as he pushed through the crowd of Sasuke fans.

He passed Ichiraku Ramen Stand without stopping. Ichiraku was practically his second home, but Naruto was on a mission. It took several minutes to work his way through the crowded streets. Naruto was beginning to feel a bit out of place. The wealth in this section of Konoha was staggering. Naruto had to scrape every cent to afford new bedsheets. It wouldn't surprise Naruto if the bedsheets the Hyūga bought cost more than Naruto spent on food in a year. Naruto felt jealousy push its way to the forefront of his mind. Strangely, he did not and could not direct any of the jealousy towards Hinata. She had given Naruto her respect, acknowledgment and kindness. Naruto firmly believed that everyone he treasured deserved the best in the world.
“Halt,” a Hyūga guard said coldly. Naruto didn't like the tone of voice and refused to be intimidated. Naruto, if he was honest with himself, was only intimidated by three things. The first was Hokage-ojisan's temper. Naruto had only seen the Third lose his temper once and Naruto swore he would never do anything to rouse the God of Shinobi's wrath ever again. The second was Iruka's 'cold' voice. Finally, Naruto was terrified of Ayame's Ladle. He couldn't explain why The Ladle filled him with an instinctive dread. He just knew that The Ladle was not to be trifled with.

“I brought Hinata-chan her homework from the Academy. Hinata-chan is near the top of the class and I don't want her to fall behind,” Naruto stated and held out the folder Iruka-sensei had given him. The guard activated his Byakugan and checked the folder. The Hyūga quickly snatched the folder away from Naruto.

“Do not presume familiarity with Hiashi-sama's daughter. Her standing is not your concern,” the guard sneered. The dismissal in the man's voice rankled Naruto's mood.

“She’s a hell of a better person than you,” Naruto shot back before turning to leave.

“At least she is a person,” the Guard countered. Naruto wheeled around and felt a flash of animalistic rage fill his body. There was a cry in his very core that called for him to unleash the rage on the man.

'No, I am better than this jerk. Hinata-chan, Iruka-sensei, Old Man Teuchi, Ayame-oneechan and Hokage-ojisan would want me to walk away. I can't fight a fellow shinobi of the Leaf.' Naruto calmed himself and walked away.

The next few days drained even Naruto's seemingly endless supply of energy. Hinata had not returned to class. Her absence was a terrible burden on Naruto. Iruka tried to assure his student that everything would be fine, but Naruto would simply escape the Academy and try to sneak a glimpse into the Hyūga Compound. The boy's attempt became so blatant, and so desperate, that the Hyūga Clan brought a complaint to the Hokage.

Thus, Naruto found a new way to get out of Mizuki's lecture on the legacy of the battle between the Aburame and the Kamizuru clan. He was summoned to the Hokage's office by a trio of Jonin. They introduced themselves as Raido, Genma, and Sho. The three Jonin were friendly and openly told Naruto of their position. Naruto's talk with the Fourth Hokage's personal bodyguards lifted the young boy's spirits somewhat. He was bombarding the three Special Jonin with questions about the Fourth throughout the entire walk to the Hokage's Tower.
Naruto considered the Fourth Hokage his hero and so took any chance to learn about the man who defeated the Kyūbi. Raïdo, Genma and Sho regaled Naruto with tales of how Minato Namikaze inspired everyone who ever met him.

“Do...do you guys mind if I ask some more questions about the Yondaime sometime?” Naruto asked hopefully. The three bodyguards smiled, but Naruto noticed how their eyes weren't looking at Naruto. It confused the child for a moment. Soon, however, he realized they weren't looking through Naruto. The men were looking to the past and remembering their beloved Hokage.

“We'd be happy to kid. I think Minato-sama would want to be an example for you,” Genma said warmly. Naruto smiled broadly and nodded.

“Come in Naruto,” Sarutobi Hiruzen said regally. Naruto pushed open the doors and waved to the Hokage. “Please, take a seat.”

Naruto noticed something about Old Man Hokage's tone and complied. “You wanted to talk with me?”

The Hokage smiled. “Naruto, I have heard that you have become friends with Hyūga Hinata.”

“Yeah! She's my best friend...” Naruto’s excitement trailed off. He had so few bonds that losing any one of them was a terrible tragedy.

“I am glad you have made a friend. Unfortunately, the Hyūga have brought your recent actions to my attention,” Hiruzen said gently.

“What are they complaining about? I just want to find out if she's okay!” Naruto gave voice to his frustrations.

“Your concern for Hinata shows your commitment to the Will of Fire. I will make inquiries into Hinata's condition. However, the Hyūga are a very private clan. Naruto, I ask that you not attempt to spy on them again,” the Professor simultaneously praised and warned Naruto. The young man reluctantly nodded in agreement.

The Old Man of the Village shifted subjects and engaged Naruto in some light conversation. Naruto revealed that he had revealed his gardening hobby to Hinata. Hiruzen chuckled at Naruto's
ploy with the flowers. The chuckle became a full blown laugh when Sarutobi managed to make Naruto blush slightly. Once again, Naruto was making the Hokage feel young again.

“Well, I'm going to get some dinner! It was great seeing you again!” Naruto shouted excitedly.

“Good evening, Naruto. Oh, and please, don't skip any more class this week,” the Hokage said playfully.

“No promises!” Naruto said as he jumped off the chair. He stopped at the door and turned around. “If you really don't want me to skip, I'd find Hinata-chan as quickly as possible.”

“I'll be sure to tell Miss Hyūga how affectionately you are speaking of her,” Sarutobi teased. Naruto froze in place and blushed.

“You win, Hokage-ojisan,” Naruto said behind a soft smile. Hiruzen nodded as Naruto ran out of the office. The boy's spirits had been buoyed by the meeting.

The streets of Konoha were relatively quiet. Naruto knew that the civilians had just ended their days in the shops or other businesses. The shinobi were also on their way back from the training fields. Naruto generally used this time to prepare for his pranks. He hadn't pulled a prank in a while and could feel the itch.

'I'll think of something awesome. Maybe something involving water balloons. I haven't done anything like that in a while...’ He amused himself with his overly elaborate planning.

The plans suddenly came to a screeching halt as Naruto saw something out of the corner of his eye.

'That looks like Hinata-chan's jacket' Naruto thought excitedly. He bounded off in the direction of the tan flash. Naruto quickly realized that the tan 'flash' was not moving very quickly at all. Naruto felt his spirits rise with every step he took closer to his best friend.

“Hey! Hinata-chan! Wait up!” Naruto shouted, but became worried when he saw Hinata's shoulders droop. Naruto managed to reach Hinata in time to catch her backpack from falling to the ground. Naruto's worry doubled when Hinata did not respond to his voice or proximity.
“I’ve missed you. You okay?” Naruto asked. He couldn’t keep the nervousness out of his voice. ‘Is Hinata-chan mad at me?’

Hinata still did not respond to Naruto’s words. She simply started to turn around. Naruto gulped and tried to control a sense of dread he had never experienced before.

“Hinata-chan...what happened?”
Chapter 3

Hinata had not felt anything in what seemed like a lifetime. An overwhelming sense of numbness had dominated Hinata's world for so long. The colors of the world seemed dulled and sounds were distant and distorted. She had exited her home, no, the Hyūga Compound, ages ago and had simply wandered the streets of Konoha with her personal belongings.

'I don't even know where I am,' Hinata thought to herself. She couldn't believe how alien her home village looked to her eyes.

Though, if Hinata was truthful with herself, she had never seen much of Konoha outside of the Academy and the Hyūga compound. The most she had seen of the village other than her daily treks between her former home and the Academy...had been the day she had skipped with Naruto.

'Did that really happened?' Hinata silently asked. The entire world was so numb and her memories seemed so distant.

The past few days had been one continuing, waking nightmare and the only recent comfort she could find was that the physical pain had receded to a bearable level.

“Hey! Hinata-chan! Wait up!”

Hinata wasn't sure she had actually heard Naruto's voice. It was strange, she simultaneously wanted and feared Naruto's presence. The short friendship Naruto and Hinata shared had allowed Hinata to experience true happiness for the first time since her mother passed away. She wanted Naruto to sweep in and fill her with confidence and assure her that she was worth something.

However, she was terrified that Naruto would see her so low. Would Naruto look at her like the members of her clan and simply walk away?

'Do I even have family?’ Hinata once again fought against the dark and lonely thoughts that were pushing to the forefront of her mind. Her shoulders slumped and her backpack slid from her shoulders. Hinata vaguely registered the fact that her pack didn't hit the ground.

“I've missed you. You okay?” His voice was so soft that Hinata wanted to imagine it was a blanket. She wanted to wrap herself up in Naruto's presence. On the other hand, the numbness
that was threatening to engulf her would engulf her if Naruto rejected her like the Hyūga had. One of her dreams had been snatched away and shattered in front of her already. There was no way Hinata could bear having her dream of a meaningful, open, and trusting friendship with Naruto destroyed as well.

The years of training her Byakugan had greatly increased her spatial awareness. Hinata could almost see Naruto tense up due to her silence. She took a moment in a vain attempt to compose herself. Hinata was on the verge of tears. Her pain, both emotional and physical, had returned and chased away the numbness as she acknowledged it. However, the pain was not what had brought her to the brink.

It was hope.

Hinata gathered the tattered remains of her courage and hope and slowly turned to face Naruto. She felt her best friend tense up.

“Hinata-chan...what happened?” Naruto asked in a whisper. Hinata could feel the concern in his voice. The concern gave her hope. If Naruto still cared that meant Hinata still had someone who believed in her. As long as she had one person, she could keep moving forward.

“I...” Hinata started to speak, but the words caught in her throat and the tears flowed freely. Without thinking, she jumped forward and gripped Naruto's shirt tightly.

Naruto furthered tensed up. He had no idea what was going on beyond the obvious fact that Hinata was very, very upset. The young man felt like each choked sob was a physical blow. Naruto didn't make a sound and looked to the heavens.

'Rain...of course it would rain when Hinata-chan cries,' Naruto thought. “Ne, Hinata-chan, it's going to rain. My house is pretty close by. No point in getting soaked.”

'Well, beyond my shirt,' Naruto silently added.

“Y-your home?” Hinata managed to force out. Her voice was a bit muffled because she was speaking into Naruto's chest. She could feel Naruto nodding with enthusiasm. Hinata felt safe for the first time since the Hyūga Elders had unceremoniously torn down her world. There was something about Naruto’s presence that made Hinata feel welcomed. It was almost if he was her chō shi, her key, to a larger world.
“Yeah, we can grab a bite to eat and stay out of the rain,” Naruto said with as much warmth as he could muster. He wanted to ask what happened to his best friend, but something in the back of his mind made him hold off for a while. Hinata's lack of verbal response only added to his unease. Something horrible had happened.

Hinata's next action stunned Naruto. He wasn't going to complain, but...

He just hadn't expected Hinata to not let go. She simply shifted to the side so that Naruto could guide her to his house. Naruto shifted a bit so he could carry Hinata's backpack a bit easier. It only took a short time for the pair of Academy students to reach Naruto's apartment. Naruto unlocked his door and led Hinata inside. Hinata looked around the room and saw a stack of papers sitting on Naruto's lone end table. She could clearly read a note that said 'Give to Hinata!' in bold lettering. Hinata took a deep breath as she took in the energy of the apartment.

Naruto's apartment felt less like a museum and more like an actual home.

“You hungry?” Naruto asked as he put Hinata's backpack on the couch. Hinata turned and nodded. She still couldn't trust her voice. Naruto smiled at the subtle nod and walked into the kitchen. “I've got pre-made bentos and instant ramen. What would you like?”

“B-bento,” Hinata said quietly.

“Kay! Have a seat at the table, and I'll bring it out! You want chicken, beef, or tofu?” Naruto shouted from his small kitchen.

Hinata's face scrunched up. Tofu had been all the Elders had been willing to feed her; occasionally, someone had smuggled in other food, but officially all she had eaten during her short imprisonment had been tofu. Hinata swore she would eat a live prawn before she would ever eat tofu again. Naruto noticed her look of disgust and shook his head.

“I can't blame you for not wanting tofu. The only reason I even have that junk is Iruka-sensei wants me to eat something 'healthy',” Naruto said conversationally. He had noticed Hinata's look of disgust, but could not understand why she looked so disgusted. “Chicken then?”

Again, Hinata could only nod. Naruto brought over two bentos and joined Hinata at the small kitchen table. The pair shared an 'Itadakimasu', which Naruto added an extra dose of enthusiasm.
Naruto tried to engage Hinata in conversation. He told her about the happenings at the Academy. The conversation never turned directly to Hinata's situation. Naruto never pressured her for details. Eventually, the pressure, or rather lack of pressure, got to Hinata. She was well aware that Naruto knew something terrible had happened and had occasionally opened the door for Hinata to talk about what had happened. However, he had never directly asked.

“How, why are you doing this, Naruto-kun? Why aren't you pitying me? Everyone, everyone else did,” Hinata whispered as she stared at her pickled vegetables.

“I won't pity you,” Naruto said with a hint of firmness. Hinata's gaze shot up from her bento and directly into Naruto’s eyes. “Pity...I wouldn't want anyone to pity me. Pity...pity makes me think they are looking down on me. 'Oh, I'm so sorry, but at least its you and not me,’” Naruto finished in a tone that sounded alien yet familiar to Hinata. She couldn't find her voice, but this time it wasn't due to her emotional numbness. It was the indomitable look in Naruto's eyes.

“I'll never look down on you. Besides, you don't need pity. You need help and a friend. I need help and a friend. I can't tell you how many times I've put on a brave face to hide the fact that I was frustrated from all my failures. If...If I hadn't heard you wish me luck before that spar with Sasuke, I simply would have left. You gave me a reason to stay and keep trying. We're not perfect, but I know we don't need to be,” Naruto leaned forward as he spoke. Hinata felt as though she had become rooted in place. She couldn't have been moved by any force on earth. Though, she admitted to herself, she wouldn't have wanted to move.

“I...I can't imagine you giving up,” Hinata trembled as she spoke. She could feel a sense of existence returning and she welcomed it.

“If it wasn't for you and Iruka-sensei, I probably would have given up. You have no idea how much you've helped me find the right way,” Naruto's voice lost all its firmness. Instead, a softness had filled the void created by the disappearance of the authoritative tone.

The small fragment of doubt Hinata harbored, and buried, deep in her mind about Naruto's chances of becoming Hokage died instantly. She felt ashamed that she had ever doubted Naruto, even in her lowest and most desperate moments.

“You are so much stronger than me,” Hinata finally spoke.

“Nah, you could probably hand my ass to me if we ever fought,” Naruto said with complete honesty.
“T-that's not what I meant,” the young woman whispered and fought against the upward twitch on her lips. “You...you are stronger because you k-keep going. Naruto-kun, you are strong because even though you fail you get back up and keep trying.”

“Hinata-chan, you can have that strength. I can't give it to you, but I can help you find it,” Naruto met Hinata's whisper.

“Thank you,” was all Hinata could say.

“You're welcome. Now, no offense, but you look like you're about to fall over. You can use my bed,” Naruto spoke gently as he helped Hinata get up from the kitchen table. Hinata was so focused on analyzing the conversation she had just shared with Naruto and with her own fatigue that she didn't register Naruto guiding her to the bedroom.

Hinata screamed as she felt the chakra brand caress her forehead. She could see her father in the background flanked by two guards. The disappointment and shame rolling off him was palpable. Her vision became blurry as the Hyūga Seal Masters declared the 'ceremony' complete.

“Hinata-chan! Hinata-chan, it's okay, you're in my apartment!” Naruto's voice pierced the veil and Hinata bolted awake.

Naruto had both hands on her shoulders and looked absolutely terrified. Hinata was about to ask how Naruto got into the Hyūga Compound when she noticed several odd details. One, the bed wasn't the traditional bed roll. It was a civilian style raised bed. Second, there was a poster on the wall behind Naruto that said “Ramen!”. Third, there was a stack of basic training scrolls next to a picture of Naruto and Iruka-sensei.

Hinata instantly tensed up. 'What am I doing in Naruto-kun's home?' Then, the memories of the night started to become accessible through the haze of her nightmare. Naruto had found her wandering the streets and brought her to his home.

'How did he get here so quick? What...what if he had been in the bed?’ Hinata thought in a panic.

“I was going to the bathroom and I heard you start screaming. I've been trying to wake you up for a good couple'a minutes.”
“I, I had a nightmare...about what happened to me,” Hinata admitted before wincing. Her hand found its way to her forehead.

“You're safe here,” Naruto assured Hinata. “I, uh, think we should change your bandages. You're bleeding a bit.”

Hinata scooted away from Naruto. She couldn't let him see! “Please, I...I can do it myself.”

“I know you can, but you can't see where it's really bad. I can help you. I promise, whatever is wrong won't change my feelings.”

Hinata tensed up even more than she thought possible, but silently agreed. Naruto nervously unwrapped the bandages. He gasped as he saw the hooked lines extending from Hinata's temples to the center of her forehead. He brushed Hinata's bangs out of the way. Naruto felt his temper flare as he saw the manji dominating his best friend's forehead.

“Who did this to you?” Naruto hissed. Hinata looked up and swore that she saw Naruto's eyes flash red for a moment. The moment passed quickly and the anger, while still present, was pushed aside by concern. Hinata found it strangely comforting that someone was angry for her instead of at her.

“My...the Hyūga Clan...I...wasn't acceptable as heiress...” Hinata choked out. “They...removed me.”

“They are full of shit! You are incredible! There is no way in hell you deserved...this!” Naruto growled. Hinata's situation struck him as beyond cruel. Naruto decided that he hated the Hyūga.

He closed his eyes and took a calming breath. Naruto opened them and helped Hinata change her bandages.

“Thank you, Naruto-kun,” Hinata said behind a yawn. She felt better, but couldn't shake the thrill of fear she had experienced during Naruto's moment of anger. There was something primal about it. However, she never feared that Naruto's anger would be directed at her. She had faith in their friendship.
“You're welcome. I'll move my sleeping bag in here, in case you need anything else,” Naruto promised.

Hinata nodded and found a comfortable spot in Naruto's bed. This wasn't her old home, but she felt more welcomed here than she ever did at the Hyūga compound.

The subtle shifting of the bed shook Hinata out of a thankfully dreamless sleep. She slowly opened her eyes and saw Naruto sitting at the edge of the bed.

“N-Naruto-kun?” Hinata asked sleepily. Her fatigue was so deep that she felt it in her bones. On top of that, she felt incredibly sore. It seemed as if the physical toll of her banishment had caught up with her.

“Yep, it's me! Are you able to go to the Academy?” Naruto asked. Hinata barely shook her head. “Oh...well, I'll be back after classes. I'll get your assignments while I'm there!”

Naruto tried to head for the door, but Hinata grabbed his hand. “Please, stay here, at least...at least for today...”

“Okay, I guess you aren't feeling good enough yet,” Naruto said.

'Not good enough,' the words of the Hyūga elders echoed in her mind. Hinata involuntarily flinched.

“Hey, Hinata-chan, what do you want for breakfast? I don't exactly have much here...Ayame-onee-chan generally makes me breakfast or when we get a day off I eat instant ramen!” Naruto finished excitedly. Hinata felt a faint smile find its way to her lips at Naruto's (over) enthusiasm for instant ramen.

'I bet Naruto-kun will declare ramen to be Konoha's official food when he becomes Hokage,’ Hinata thought in amusement. A second thought exploded in front of her. It was truly amazing how Naruto could make her feel like her name; a sunny place. One day, she would thank him for that.

“Cinnamon rolls, please,” Hinata said quietly.
“Okay, I'll be back soon. I promise!” Naruto put every ounce of sincerity he could into his voice. Hinata nodded and watched as Naruto bounded out the door. Once again, she was struck by how safe and welcome she felt around Naruto.

Hinata was in the middle of a dream about seeing the ocean. Kō had told her stories about the ocean several times. Now, she was imagining what it would be like to be on a boat. She could even feel the ship rocking as it pushed through the waves. To Hinata's great surprise, she could smell cinnamon.

'Cinnamon? Oh...I guess Naruto-kun is back...or is he? I've been in a daze for so long...' Hinata pondered her situation as she sat up.

“N-Naruto-kun...you came back?” Hinata asked with a yawn. Naruto didn't say anything, but Hinata was pretty sure he nodded. She frowned. Her dream had been about running away, perhaps becoming a healer. Thus, she had a bit of trouble believing the silent Naruto in front of her was Naruto-kun and not a product of her dream.

“I wasn't a dream the last time you did that, Hinata-chan,” Naruto said between giggles. Hinata shot up and gasped. She couldn't believe she had poked him again. “Sorry, sorry! I didn't mean to startle you. I've only been gone a few minutes. Breakfast is on the table.”

Hinata swung her legs around to sit at the edge of the bed. She was rubbing the sleep from her eyes and silently berating herself. What kept causing her to do that? Maybe, just maybe, she should leave Konoha.

“Has anyone told you how cute you are?” Naruto asked innocently. Hinata stared at Naruto for a moment in shock.

'How can he do that? How can he drive away my dark thoughts and doubts with a few words?' Hinata wondered.

“N-no,” Hinata confessed.

“Huh, it should happen more often,” Naruto said idly. Though, a part of him didn't like the idea of
some of his classmates saying that to Hinata. Naruto had no idea what to make of that impulse and brushed it aside. Naruto smiled as Hinata followed him to the table. The pair started eating after Naruto admitted he had never had cinnamon rolls before.

“Wow, I just figured out something else we have in common,” Naruto let out a satisfied sigh.

“Oh?” Hinata was still whispering, but the forlorn tone was slowly lessening.

“We have great taste in food,” the boy announced with finality. It was almost as if he was warding off someone coming through the door and disagreeing with his pronouncement. Hinata wished she could smile at Naruto's antics. She could feel the desire to smile and Naruto's warmth pushing aside the shroud of gloom surrounding her.

“Th-thank you,” Hinata responded politely.

“Tell you what, Hinata-chan, I'll bring in ramen from Ichiraku tonight!” Naruto excitedly promised.

“If...if you want to,” the girl said after finishing a second cinnamon roll. Her hunger surprised her, but she was thankful Naruto had brought her food with flavor.

“I'll let you try my favorite!” Naruto said happily. His happiness faded, but never truly left as he thought of something. “That is, if you want to try it. I know...things are...well, things kinda suck right now. But, I'll help you get through it. If you want to eat something other than ramen, let me know.”

“I...I would like to try it, Naruto-kun,” Hinata replied. Naruto was doing so much to lift her spirits and had already done so much for her. “B-besides, you...you still need to s-save me from 'Ramen Deprivation'."

“You're right-ttabeyo!” Naruto beamed.

“I...I think I'll go lie down again,” Hinata yawned.

“Okay, I'm going to clean the bathroom. It's, uh, kind of a mess. I hope you haven't been too
grossed out,” Naruto rubbed the back of his head nervously.

“To...to be honest, I haven't noticed,” Hinata admitted. Naruto wished her sweet dreams and immediately bolted for the 'hall' closet where he kept his cleaning supplies. Naruto said a quick prayer to ask for the courage of the Fourth Hokage and stepped into his bathroom. His best friend was a guest in his home and, damn it, Hinata deserved a clean bathroom!

“...disappointed in you, Naruto.” Hinata practically leaped out of Naruto's bed at the sound of the voice. The word disappointed caused her newly applied seal to flare in phantom pain.

“I couldn't leave Hinata-chan alone...not after what happened,” Naruto shot back. Hinata, for some reason, could practically see Naruto chewing his bottom lip.

“Wait...Hinata's here?” Iruka asked. Hinata recognized his voice. She wasn't ready to face anyone but Naruto-kun, but she knew Iruka wouldn't judge her too harshly.

“Yeah, she's in my bed asleep,” Naruto revealed and lowered his voice. “We shouldn't wake her up. She needs her rest. She's...had a horrible couple of days. Her clan is full of assholes.”

“Language, Naruto,” Iruka chided. “Naruto...did they...seal her?”

“Yeah...” Naruto sounded so broken.

“You are keeping an eye on her, then?” Iruka questioned.

“I am. She's in my bed and I'm sleeping in my sleeping bag nearby in case she needs anything,” Naruto explained.

“Naruto...let me know if you need anything and...if Hinata needs 'girl stuff' don't hesitate to go see Ayame-chan,” Iruka suggested.

“Okay, Iruka-sensei. Hopefully, we'll be back soon,” Naruto said with a bit of cheer.
“Hopefully. Again, if you two need anything, I'll help you out,” Iruka reiterated.

“Thanks boss,” Naruto's voice was a bit distant and his 'thank you' was followed by Naruto's door shutting. Hinata pulled the sheets in close. Iruka-sensei was a very nice man and Naruto obviously trusted him. Hinata wasn't sure she knew Iruka well enough to confide in her teacher. The only person she felt safe confiding in was Naruto.

“N-Naruto-kun,” Hinata breathed.

“What is it, Hinata-chan?” Naruto's voice danced across the room. Immediately, Hinata pulled the covers tighter. She had said that...out loud!

“I...I was just...thank you,” Hinata sputtered at first, but finished with the most confidence Naruto had heard from his best friend in nearly a week.

“You're welcome, but I know you'd help me out if I ever needed it,” Naruto said softly as he sat on the corner of the bed.

“Naruto-kun, I've felt more welcomed in your home than I ever did with the Hyūga...I...I just wish I could stay here forever,” Hinata didn't fight the words flowing from her mouth. She was speaking the truth from her heart and knew that Naruto needed to hear them.

“T-thank you,” Naruto responded. He had never felt so appreciated, so needed in his entire life. “Do you need new bandages?”

“N-no, I-I'm fine,” Hinata replied.

“Alright, get some rest, Hinata-chan. I'll be back to check on you, probably with dinner,” the young man said with a gentle smile. Hinata hummed comfortably and drifted back to sleep. Naruto quietly left the room and returned to his kitchen table. Iruka-sensei had dropped off more than just classwork. He had dropped off Naruto's mail. The young man picked up the letter on top of the pile.

“Hinata-chan wants to stay with me...lucky this came today of all days...” Naruto said with a grin and grabbed a pen. “Well, let's get started...”
Chapter 4

The morning had started so well. Naruto had woken up really early and gotten ready for the Academy. He had gently woken Hinata up as well. His day was made within twenty minutes of waking up when Hinata had said she was willing to go to the Academy. Now, Naruto was faced with a situation he had no experience in.

Hinata had asked if she could use Naruto's shower. Of course, Naruto had happily declared that she could use anything in his home. It was only when he heard the water turn on that Naruto realized the enormity of his declaration. The only solution Naruto could think of was to sit still and stare at the wall opposite from the bathroom.

“N-Naruto-kun...is something wrong?” Hinata asked and Naruto breathed a partial sigh of relief. Naruto had been so wrapped up in his thoughts that he hadn't heard her come out.

“N-nothing!” Naruto blurted out. He could feel the trickle of sweat running down the back of his neck. He was very nervous. The last thing Naruto wanted was for Hinata to think he was some kind of pervert. Naruto had a strong dislike for perverts after a situation he experienced when he was younger. He had come across a man harassing a young woman named Moriko. Naruto had even less social experience at the time, but even his six-year-old self knew what was happening was wrong. He yelled at the man to let Moriko go. Naruto had gotten hit when he tried to physically step in. The man had run away before a pair of Uchiha Military Police arrived.

The important thing was that Moriko hadn't been too badly hurt and that the man...hadn't accomplished what he intended to accomplish. Moriko had thanked Naruto profusely and explained that the man was a 'pervert' and a 'peeping tom'. At that moment, Naruto decided that perverts and peeping toms were the enemy. After he told Moriko his decision, she had promised that she would do everything she could to help out Naruto. Moriko had claimed she couldn't do as much for Naruto as he deserved, but Naruto had never been one to turn down a display of kindness.

Moriko was a seamstress and repaired, let out, and generally took care of Naruto's clothes for free. She had also helped Naruto pass the basic reading proficiency test during his first year at the Academy. Naruto really missed her. Moriko had moved to Tanzaku Quarters after she married a really nice guy. Naruto had given his approval in his own special way. He had graffiti'd 'Congratulations Moriko and Yukio' on the abandoned building across from Moriko's shop. Naruto grinned at the memory. That was the only time his graffiti had been met with widespread acclaim instead of widespread derision.

“Oh...you just seemed a bit nervous that's all,” Hinata said.
'I was afraid I'd turn into a pervert while you were in the shower,' Naruto thought, but didn't dare say out loud. “Nah! I'm...perfectly fine,” Naruto assured Hinata.

“I-I'm ready to go...if you need to use the bathroom, it's free,” Hinata told Naruto as she sat on the couch. He could only nod as he walked to the bathroom. He adamantly refused to look at his own shower. *There was a naked girl in there. I don't know if I should be doing a victory dance or ashamed that I want to do the victory dance.*

Naruto pushed the thoughts from his head as he washed his hands. At least Hinata-chan would be back at the Academy.

*Who knows, I might even pay attention today,*’ Naruto thought with a smirk.

Naruto and Hinata went straight to the Academy after leaving the apartment. Hinata had declined Naruto's suggestion that they stop by Ichiraku's for breakfast. She nearly had a panic attack at the thought of stepping outside her now very narrow comfort zone. Naruto could understand why Hinata was so afraid of opening up to people. He had gone through a similar phase after being kicked out of the orphanage. *That* had been a terrible experience, but Naruto couldn't imagine the pain he would have experienced if the caretakers at the orphanage had actually been Naruto's family. Naruto was deep in contemplation when he felt a most unexpected, but far from unwelcome, sensation. Hinata had felt the gaze of the few villagers up at this time of day upon her. In her desperation for a familiar, and comforting presence, she had latched onto Naruto's arm. Hinata hadn't even realized her action for several moments.

“That isn't bothering me, Hinata-chan,” Naruto confessed when he felt Hinata try to pull away. “Heck, I'd pick you up and carry you if I knew it'd make you feel better.”

Hinata felt her cheeks heat up and she instinctively tightened her grip on Naruto's arm. The rest of the walk to the Academy passed in a pleasant and peaceful silence. Nothing needed to be said.

They had each other and that was enough.

Iruka had surprised the two wards of Konoha the second they had entered the classroom. He had told them to sit down, before he went to the back of the room and shut the door. The teacher returned a few moments later and sat on the edge of his desk.
“I've already...altered the roll. It has even been approved by Hokage-sama. I'll be calling roll today, so you don't have to worry about anyone making a big deal about the situation,” Iruka explained. Hinata barely nodded.

“T-thank you, Iruka-sensei,” Hinata whispered after a moment.

“I will always do what I can to help my students. I could never forgive myself if I failed one of you so completely,” Iruka said with complete and total honesty. Hinata's mood brightened at the realization that someone other than Naruto could accept her, flaws and all.

“You're awesome, Iruka-sensei! Thanks,” Naruto added.

“You're welcome. I bet neither of you have had any breakfast,” Iruka observed. Naruto and Hinata both shyly nodded. “Mizuki and the other teachers haven't arrived yet. Go and grab one pastry from the teacher's lounge. Just one Naruto, the other teachers deserve to eat too.”

“But none of them are as good as you! Maybe if they knew that they didn't get to eat because they were super boring, they'd shape up!” Naruto explained.

“I'll recommend that punishment for sub-standard student interest to the Hokage at the next teacher review,” Iruka deadpanned.

“See, Hinata-chan! That's why Iruka is the best! He actually listens to us!” Naruto started babbling to Hinata as he guided her out of the room. Iruka chuckled as he realized he would actually have to speak with the Hokage about fostering greater student interest at the next Academy review.

“What am I going to do with you, Uzumaki Naruto?” Iruka asked rhetorically.

The day went by quietly, much to Naruto and Hinata's relief. The pair paid attention in class and worked diligently. Hinata's work ethic was born of her own long standing habits. Naruto paid attention just in case Hinata missed something. The pair was surprised at how quickly lunch seemed to arrive.
“Hey, Hinata-chan, I brought bentos from home, but I forgot drinks. What do you want?” Naruto asked as they walked outside.

“Water, please,” Hinata said gracefully. She felt confident around Naruto. Hinata knew that Naruto would never crush her under the weight of unreachable expectations.

“Sure! I’ll be right back,” Naruto said with a smile. Hinata nodded as she sat down on ‘Naruto’s’ swing. She hummed in rhythm with her light swings. It was relaxing and she was beginning to understand why Naruto had retreated to this place so often.

“Hinata-chan!” Ino and Sakura’s shout drew Hinata out of her quiet contemplation. Immediately, the dread of being judged and rejected roared forward.

“Y-yes?” Hinata managed to ask.

“We’re glad to see you back. Everyone was really worried about you,” Sakura explained in a comforting tone of voice.

“Really?” Hinata asked in surprise.

“Well, we were all worried, but Naruto was freaking out. I can’t tell you how many times he would skip class only to be brought back by some angry member of your clan,” Ino recounted. “I think it happened four times...”

“I-I...am...no longer Hyūga,” Hinata barely whispered. Her eyes were beginning to well up with tears.

Sakura was about to ask what Hinata meant. Ino cut her off with a shake of the head. “I...Well, we are glad you are back. Anyway, Forehead and I just wanted to let you know, we’re planning a get-together with some of the other girls. If...if you want to come, you are totally invited.”

“I...I don't know...” Hinata gulped.

“Oh, there isn't a date set yet,” Sakura piped in. “Ino-pig and I just started throwing the idea together a little while ago.”
“I'll...I'll think about it...I'm still not sure about many things right now...” Hinata took a pair of deep breaths to calm herself.

“That's okay! Forehead and I haven't nailed down the details yet. We do know there will be ice cream!” Ino added.

“It helps when we lament about how Sasuke-kun hasn't noticed our obvious affections for him. And how mine are True Love,” Sakura said excitedly.

“While I dispute that last bit, because I am obviously Sasuke's True Love, Forehead has a point. Ice cream helps ease the hurt that Sasuke is almost too cool and mysterious to acknowledge us,” Ino nodded as if she had just proven a scientific fact. “Don't you have the same issue with Sasuke-kun?”

Hinata stared blankly at Ino and Sakura for a moment. ‘They are acting like everyone likes Sasuke-kun like they do...' ‘My...issue with Sasuke-kun?’

Ino and Sakura both nodded. The two girls were eager to add more drama around the 'oh so mysterious and handsome' Uchiha Sasuke.

“My...issue with Sasuke-kun...” Hinata started. In truth, she had several issues with Sasuke. The largest were that his eyes were as cold as those of the Hyūga Elders'. Hinata actually was afraid of his eyes. They were nothing like Naruto's eyes. “is that he isn't Naruto-kun.”

“They are so cute,” Ino cooed.

“Absolutely adorable,” Sakura agreed completely. Hinata quickly realized what Sakura and Ino were insinuating and blushed furiously.

“Hey Sakura. Hey Ino.” Naruto said as he handed Hinata her water. Hinata quietly thanked Naruto. The young man noticed that Hinata was observing something very interesting on the ground. He tried to find whatever had captured Hinata's attention, but couldn't find it. Naruto shrugged and chalked his inability to discover what had captured Hinata's attention to her much better eyes. “Did I miss something?”
“Oh, nothing,” Sakura giggled a bit.

“Just a bit of girl-talk,” Ino explained.

“Please tell me you weren't bothering Hinata with that 'Sasuke-kuuuun' crap. You know she isn't a fangirl like the rest of you.” Naruto groaned. Ino and Sakura rolled their eyes at Naruto's mocking emphasis on their typical reaction to Sasuke's name.

“We weren't bothering Hinata and she made it clear on her own, thank-you-very-much,” Sakura giggled a bit more.

“Well, now that you're back, Naruto, we'll leave you two alone,” Ino teased and playfully stuck her tongue out at Hinata.

“What was that all about? I'm not going to have to prank them back to the First Hokage for making fun of you am I? Did they...” Naruto started rambling on about stamping any teasing of Hinata once Ino and Sakura were out of earshot.

“N-no, it...it was actually a very n-nice conversation,” Hinata admitted to halt Naruto's budding rant. She wasn't going to mention that she had nearly cried. It wasn't Sakura or Ino's fault. They didn't know about her...banishment. “They were planning a get-together with some of the girls in the class. I, I was invited.”

“That's cool. You should go...if you're feeling up to it,” Naruto finished quickly. He instinctively knew that he shouldn't pressure Hinata.

“I...I'll think about it,” Hinata nodded at Naruto.

“Gotta question, what do you girls do at those things anyway? Do you sit around eating ice cream and stuff?” Naruto questioned. Hinata was his window into the mysterious world of women and he was curious.

“I...I don't actually know. When...well, I never had a chance to go to one before. But, Ino-chan and Sakura-chan did mention ice cream.”
“HA! I knew it! I told Kiba ice cream would be involved in any girly get-together! I won the bet!” Naruto fist pumped after swallowing a triumphant bite of rice. “Hey, Hinata-chan, what should we do with the twenty ryō we just won?"

“Zenzai?” Hinata asked playfully.

“You really are a genius,” Naruto said earnestly. Hinata smiled a bit at Naruto's comment. “You smiled!”

Hinata started a bit at Naruto's unexpected exclamation. Her smile became a giggle when Naruto jumped up in the air and shouted “Progress!” Her giggle became a laugh when Naruto broke out in a victory dance.

’You truly are my sunny place, Naruto-kun,’ Hinata thought behind her first real smile since her banishment.

Naruto and Hinata shifted uncomfortably as they waited for Mizuki and Iruka to finish their conversation and for the rest of the class to leave. Hinata caught sight of Ino and Sakura leaving. The girls exchanged a friendly wave. Mizuki said his goodbyes to Iruka, Naruto and Hinata. Hinata couldn't help but frown after Mizuki walked by. She had heard enough forced good cheer in her short life to realize Mizuki's insincerity.

“I hope your day went well. You two were awfully quiet,” Iruka said comfortably.

“We were paying attention! You're always telling us to be quiet during class. Why would we want to get into trouble? Well, unless I was trying to distract people from a prank! But we weren't!” Naruto rambled.

Iruka sighed and buried his face in his hands. “Hinata, please help me keep Naruto in line. I sometimes think you are the only one he really listens to.”

Hinata nodded with a small smile gracing her lips. Naruto laughed at Iruka's exasperation. “Moving on, how are you doing grocery wise, Naruto?” Iruka asked
“W-we are doing fine. The only thing N-Naruto-kun is short on is fresh milk,” Hinata informed Iruka. Iruka had begun the process of uncovering his face when he heard ‘we’ leave Hinata’s mouth. The teacher decided he didn’t need light reaching his eyes for a few more seconds.

‘I’m going to have to talk with Hokage-sama about this,’ Iruka wanted to laugh, but contained his desire. Instead, he reached in his drawer and pulled out a ryō note.

“Pick up some fresh milk on the way back home. If there's anything else you need, let me, Teuchi-san or Ayame-chan know,” Iruka said calmly.

“Thanks, Iruka-sensei!” Naruto said excitedly.

“You're welcome Naruto,” Iruka said warmly. The teacher genuinely liked the boy. He just wished Naruto wasn't so unintentionally determined to turn all of Iruka's hairs gray.


“Have a pleasant evening, Iruka-sensei,” Hinata bowed as she wished her teacher good night.

“I'll stop by after preparations for the Chuunin Exams are over. Please, Naruto, do not antagonize the visiting shinobi,” Iruka warned.

“But...but we have to let them know their villages suck compared to ours!” Naruto sputtered. Hinata gaped.

“T-that could cause a war!” Hinata squeaked in shock.

“Really?” Naruto asked.

“Really,” Iruka and Hinata said at the exact same time.

“Oh...that would suck. I'm glad you two told me that,” Naruto laughed nervously as he rubbed the back of his head.
“Hinata, please teach our favorite Hokage aspirant the art of diplomacy,” Iruka pleaded. Hinata nodded and giggled a bit. She felt so...at ease around Naruto-kun and found that she was opening up to Iruka-sensei. She felt like she had just taken a step forward.

The air was beginning to cool as summer gave way to autumn. Naruto had always liked autumn. The changing of the leaves was always amazing to him. He loved the colors, especially the orange.

“Hey, Hinata-chan, I've been thinking of something,” Naruto blurted out.

“What is it, Naruto-kun?” Hinata questioned softly.

“I want to take the graduation exam soon,” Naruto turned to face Hinata. He saw a flash of panic in Hinata's eyes and quickly prepared an explanation. “Not this one! The next one and...” Naruto trailed off.

“I...I hope you'll consider taking it with me. There's no way I'd want to become a ninja without you. We make a great team! If we graduate together and get put on the same squad, we'll be Hokage in no time.” Naruto shouted enthusiastically.

“N-Naruto-kun,” Hinata said after a moment. She was truly touched that Naruto had accepted her so completely and so soon. “there can only be one Hokage.”

Hinata had never felt so comfortable around another person before. Before meeting Naruto, Kō had been her closest friend. However, the formality of the tutor-student relationship always kept them at arms-length. So, her willingness to be so playful with Naruto took her a bit off guard.

“Well...we'll be...Co-kage! Yeah, we'll be Co-kage and get both our faces on the Mountain! Then, everyone will have to realize how awesome we are!” Naruto shouted excitedly as he revealed his new plan.

“I'll get The Hat though,” Hinata responded cheekily.
“What! I want The Hat! I've always wanted The Hat!” Naruto whined.

“If you want it, you'll...” Hinata smiled warmly and looked down. “have to catch me!” Hinata looked up and tagged Naruto. The boy simply stared in shock. Hinata was feeling better faster than he had even dared hoped.

“That's cheating!” He shouted after the retreating form of his best friend.

“We're going to be ninja!” Hinata said over her shoulder. Naruto had gotten over his initial shock and was chasing after her. Hinata couldn't believe she having so much fun. She was smiling without fear for the first time in years. Naruto's acceptance had thrown open the doors of her cage. She knew that the only expectations Naruto had for her were her own.

In that moment, Hinata decided to live instead of simply stumbling through life. She had just taken her first steps into a new world. She couldn't look back anymore.

The Academy was closed because of the approaching Chuunin Exams. Konoha canceled classes so that students who were members of prestigious clans could be squirreled away until ANBU could put the visiting ninja under sufficient surveillance. Naruto, and students from civilian families, viewed the day very differently. The Clans viewed the days leading up to the Chuunin Exams as a dangerous time rife with intrigue. The civilians and village wards viewed the break as a holiday.

Hinata's only memory of the lead-up to a Chuunin Exam was her father instructing Kō to make sure Hinata did not leave the Compound. So, when Naruto suggested they take advantage of the day off to train, Hinata was gripped with apprehension.

“We'll be fine, Hinata-chan. The training grounds are off-limits for foreigners,” Naruto assured his best friend.

“O-oh, right,” She responded. Hinata knew that if any foreign ninja entered the training grounds that they were likely spies and not actual participants. ANBU would likely stop them before they reached any Konoha citizens. Her hand had also instinctively found its way to her Cursed Seal. Once news of her banishment and sealing reached the other Hidden Villages, she would likely
never be a target again.

'Well, not until I become 'Co-kage' with Naruto-kun,' Hinata thought and the happy daydream chased away her apprehension.

“So, what do you want to work on today?” Naruto asked her as they finally found a training ground not in use. Hinata closed her eyes.

“I-I want to see how my Byakugan was affected by...by t-the s-sealing,” Hinata's new found confidence took a serious hit when she mentioned her Cursed Seal and banishment.

“Alright, we can work on that. I don't know how I can help, but I'll be rooting for you!” Naruto tried his best to cheer up Hinata. The former Hyūga heiress nodded and tentatively began her hand seals. As she finished the final seal, she whispered “Byakugan.”

There was no flash of pain or even failure. Instead, her field of vision expanded to practically three hundred degrees and she could see the rough outline of Naruto's chakra circulatory system. Hinata was thrilled that she could still use her Byakugan. She would feel incomplete without it. Hinata may no longer be Hyūga, but the Byakugan was still a source of pride. Still, she was disappointed that not only was her Byakugan's range not what it once was; the clarity of her vision had also deteriorated.

'I should have expected some side effects,' Hinata thought glumly. “Naruto-kun...I'm going to see how long I can keep my Byakugan active. I...I need to see if there were any other...side effects.”

Naruto noticed how Hinata's voice trailed off when she danced around the subject of her seal. “Hey, I remember Mizuki-sensei talking about how the Byakugan can see chakra.”

“It can,” Hinata confirmed.

“That's so cool. Could you watch me create a bunshin? Maybe we can find out where I'm screwing up!” Naruto suggested. Hinata smiled at his enthusiasm.

“Alright, Naruto-kun! Try your best!” Hinata encouraged Naruto. Naruto always tried his hardest to encourage her. Hinata believed it was her time to encourage Naruto.
“Thanks, Hinata-chan!” Naruto replied as he flashed through the ram, snake and tiger seals. “Bunshin no jutsu!”

Naruto gazed hopefully at the cloud of chakra-infused smoke. Hinata, however, gazed at it with a strange mix of disappointment and awe. Naruto had failed to produce a Bunshin, and Hinata finally realized why Naruto had failed.

He was overloading the Clones. Naruto-kun actually had more chakra than her father did!

“N-Naruto-kun...it's incredible...” Hinata said in awe. Naruto looked up and pouted.

“How can screwing up that bad be incredible?” He asked with a bit of hurt in his voice.

Hinata let out a small 'eek' when she realized just how badly Naruto had misunderstood her. Though, she could understand how it had happened. Naruto couldn't see the world the same way Hinata could with her Byakugan. Her best friend couldn't see his chakra shimmering like a gem in the darkness.

“I-I didn't mean it like that! It...you just have so much chakra. You are overloading the clone,” Hinata explained. She quickly thought of a way to explain what she was seeing. “It...it is like putting too much air in a balloon. If you put too much air in it, it'll pop.”

Naruto's pout gradually disappeared. “How much chakra do I have exactly?”

“A lot...I've never seen anyone with this much chakra. You...you have more than m-my f-father,” Hinata once again nearly lost control of her emotions. She could even feel tears well up in her eyes.

“Oh...” Naruto’s excitement died down as he saw the hurt in Hinata's eyes. It was strange seeing tears coming from an active Byakugan. The Byakugan looked so powerful normally, but the tears made it look equally as vulnerable. Naruto was infinitely relieved when Hinata wiped away the tears. “What should I do?”

Hinata was grateful to turn her thoughts away from the Hyūga Clan. She thought about a solution to the problem. Her thoughts wandered towards the graduation requirements. She knew Naruto could perform a henge with almost trivial ease.
‘Naruto-kun won’t have any trouble with that. He can pass the academic test easily when he applies himself. The only reason his grades are so low is because he skips class. Naruto-kun’s taijutsu is also good. The only people he has trouble fighting against are Sasuke-kun and Kiba-kun. He’ll pass that part of the exam without a doubt. I’ve seen him do the Kawarimi no jutsu. I can’t believe the Bunshin will keep him from succeeding! All he has to do is create a minimum of three! Wait!’ Hinata ran through the various graduation requirements in her head.

“Naruto-kun, why are you only trying to create a single clone?” Hinata asked. Naruto cocked his head to the side as he thought of an answer.

“I dunno. Iruka-sensei once said it would help with my chakra control,” Naruto revealed.

“Can you create more than one bunshin?” Hinata asked.

“Maybe, I’ve never tried. I’ve always been focused on creating one. I always thought if I could do one, I could work my way up to three,” Naruto chewed Hinata’s idea over in his mind. Hinata acknowledged that Naruto had a good point. That was the way the Academy recommended learning the bunshin and reaching the minimum requirements. However, no Academy student ever had as much chakra as Naruto.

“You have so much chakra, it might be easier to create as many clones as you possibly can,” Hinata suggested. It was impossible to miss the excitement in her voice. She was curious to see just how many bunshins Naruto could create.

It would also give her another chance to watch Naruto mold his chakra. It was, in a word, beautiful.

“Okay, Hinata-chan! Prepare to be amazed!” Naruto said triumphantly. “Bunshin no jutsu!”

Naruto’s shout was followed by several puffs of smoke. Hinata smiled broadly as she watched chakra spiral out of a strange chakra pathway on Naruto’s stomach. Her smile transitioned into an open mouthed expression of joy.

Naruto had created twelve Bunshins and several managed to remain standing for at least a moment. Two were perfect examples of the art. The others were far less perfect. Naruto had overloaded six of the bunshins. They were identical to all of Naruto’s previous attempts. The final
four flickered for a moment before failing. It was strange, but Naruto had failed to put enough chakra into those particular attempts.

“I made a good bunshin! I did it! I'll be able to graduate! We'll be on the same team!” Naruto shouted and jumped around in pure joy.

Hinata deactivated her Byakugan. The strain had been growing steadily and she was feeling the effects. “Naruto-kun, should we take a break?”

Naruto looked up at the sky and noticed it was approaching noon. “A break sounds good, I'm a bit hungry. I got an idea.”

“What is it?” Hinata asked, though she knew the food Naruto was going to suggest.

“Let's go to Ichiraku. I know you're probably sick of ramen, but Ayame-onee-chan and Old Man Teuchi are really good people,” Naruto said with a soft smile. Hinata returned the smile and nodded. She was aware that Naruto was not close to many people. In fact, she could likely count the number on one hand, even if she included herself. Iruka-sensei's kind words had shown Hinata that Naruto's precious people could accept her as well. It would be nice to start building new friendships.

“I'd love to Naruto-kun,” Hinata agreed.

“Awesome! Hey, Hinata-chan?” Naruto asked as he walked beside Hinata.

“What is it, Naruto-kun?” Hinata asked as she rubbed away some of the pressure in her temples. She could barely remember the last time she had used her Dojutsu so extensively.

“Do you think we'll see any foreigners?”

Hinata chewed the inside of her cheek a bit. “Maybe, Naruto-kun.”

“I bet we could take them,” Naruto declared in a voice full of bravado. Hinata giggled at her best friend's antics.
Ichiraku was busy when Naruto and Hinata arrived. All of the stools were occupied by harried citizens or Konoha ninja. Hinata shrank behind Naruto a bit. Crowds and strangers still caused a sense of panic to well up inside of her. A pair of civilians got up from their stools and exited the ramen stand. The pair stopped and stared at Naruto and Hinata for a heartbeat.

“How did that get a pretty girl?” One of the men asked. Hinata frowned at the cruelty in the voice.

Why are they talking about Naruto-kun like he isn’t a person? I’ve heard civilians talk about Naruto-kun before and I’ve never understood their hate,’ Hinata thought sadly. She even recalled a time where a civilian woman had compared Naruto to the Kyūbi.

Strangely, Naruto didn't seem to notice or, as Hinata preferred to believe, was strong enough to ignore the unbecoming comments.

“Naruto-kun! How are you enjoying your day off?” Ayame greeted one of her favorite customers.

“It’s great! Hinata-chan helped me figure out how to make an actual bunshin!” Naruto revealed excitedly.

“You finally made a full bunshin?” Ayame asked in surprise. Naruto nodded enthusiastically. “Well, I think I'll throw in a little extra pork to celebrate.”

Ayame laughed at Naruto's excited 'whoop!' She flipped a strand of hair out of the way, and finally noticed someone was with Naruto. “Who's your friend, Naruto-kun?” Ayame's smile and emphasis on friend caused Naruto to feel a bit of heat in his cheeks.

“Hey, Ayame-onee-chan, this is Hinata-chan,” Naruto quickly introduced the girls to each other. “And Hinata, this is Ayame-onee-chan.”


“I...I'll have what Naruto-kun is having,” Hinata replied as Naruto helped Hinata to her seat.
“Alright! I'll get right on it,” Ayame said as she started to head to the back. “Oh, and Naruto-kun, for being such a gentlemen, I won't use my ladle.”

“YES!” Naruto reached for the sky in triumph. Today was getting better by the second!

“Ladle?” Hinata asked in confusion. The confusion doubled when Naruto flinched.

Ayame turned around and grinned. “My secret weapon! If Naruto-kun ever starts giving you trouble, say...like forgetting your birthday, I'll teach you how to use it. Nothing gets Naruto-kun to behave like that ladle.”

“You wouldn't give Hinata-chan The Ladle...would you?” Naruto gulped.

“Best not forget any birthdays then...” Ayame said in a sing-song voice. Naruto only nodded at a hundred miles-per-hour. He didn't trust his voice. 'Some friend I am, I don't think I know Hinata-chan's birthday! If I admit that now, I'll definitely get The Ladle!'

Ayame brought out Naruto and Hinata's ramen. “Sooo, today seems like its full of big steps for you, Naruto-kun. First, you create a working Bunshin...then you bring a girl to meet the family.”

“W-what?” Naruto and Hinata dropped their chopsticks. “We...”

“I see, you two are keeping things secret,” Ayame teased. The ramen cook watched the pair eat their meal and failed to contain her amusement as the couple stole the occasional glance at each other.

Hinata and Naruto finished their meal quickly. The meal had passed in a somewhat awkward silence. Ayame's teasing had caught them a bit off guard, but they both knew it was good-natured and not mean-spirited.

“Thanks for lunch, onee-chan!” Naruto said while paying the bill.

“It was delicious, thank you very much,” Hinata agreed.
“You're welcome, you two. Oh, and Hinata-chan,” Ayame replied warmly. Hinata looked up when she heard the change in honorific. “Don't hesitate to keep Naruto-kun in line.”

Hinata felt her cheeks heat up again when Ayame winked at her. Naruto missed the playful teasing and waited for Hinata to finish thanking Ayame.

“So, Hinata-chan, what do you want to work on next?” Naruto asked with a grin.

“I think we should take a minute before getting back to training. But...I'd like to work on improving my throwing accuracy,” Hinata suggested.

“Huh,” Naruto chewed his lip. “Great minds think alike!”

“Hinataaaaa-chan! Naruto!” Sakura called out from across the street. Naruto and Hinata turned towards their classmate. The pinkette came to a halt with a grin on her face.

“Oh, hey Sakura,” Naruto greeted nonchalantly.

“How are you, Sakura-chan?” Hinata was decidedly more enthusiastic.

“I'm fine. How has your day off been?” Sakura asked warmly.

“It's been great. Hinata-chan and I have done a bunch of training,” Naruto revealed.

“Naruto-kun is right. We've accomplished a great deal,” Hinata smiled. “We were just taking a break before going to practice with our shuriken and kunai.”

Sakura blinked a few times. “B-but today is our day off!”

“Well...Naruto-kun and I are going to graduate early. If we are going to fulfill this dream, we are going to have to work very hard,” Hinata stated resolutely. Naruto's eyes became a bit misty and
he was nearly overwhelmed by the urge to hug Hinata and just start crying.

He fought that off, if just barely. It wasn't manly to cry in public. The last thing Naruto would ever want is for Hinata to think he was flaky.

"Besides, what are the odds pretty girls like Hinata-chan and Sakura would ever go for a flaky guy?" Naruto thought with a chuckle.

“Oh...that's amazing. I don't think I'm ready to graduate just yet. I hope you two make it!” Sakura brightened noticeably as she moved away from her self-doubt. “If you are going to try to graduate early, it's even more important that I give this to you Hinata-chan.”

Sakura handed over an invitation. Hinata graciously accepted. “Thank you, Sakura-chan.”

“Well, it was great seeing you two. I've got to go to the market for my family,” Sakura said.

“Yeah, it was nice seeing you too!” Naruto said with genuine warmth this time. Anyone who treated Hinata kindly was okay in his book.

Sakura waved before heading towards Konoha's market district. Naruto and Hinata waved back. As the pair headed back to the training grounds, Naruto took the opportunity to speak.

“I really think you should go.”

“R-really?” Hinata asked.

“Yeah! They took the time to make an actual invitation. It'd be fun,” Naruto encouraged.

“I-if you say so,” Hinata agreed. Naruto was probably right. Hinata had actually always wanted to go to one of these get-togethers. However, the unbearable pressures of her old life prohibited such 'frivolities'.

“So, want to make our shuriken training a contest?” Naruto decided to change the subject.
“Contest?” Hinata questioned.

“Yeah, whoever gets a higher score gets to chose where we eat tonight!” Naruto jumped in front of Hinata. The young woman laughed at Naruto's excitement. She treasured Naruto's enthusiasm and friendship.

“I...” Hinata decided to have fun with Naruto. His expectations were completely different than the Hyūga's expectations. “I will try to chose a restaurant that isn't too expensive.”

“Ha! I knew my warrior princess was still there somewhere!” Naruto said without thinking. A moment later, both aspiring ninja blushed furiously.

'I can't believe I said that out loud!' Naruto thought in a near-panic.

'His warrior princess?' Hinata thought through a blissful haze. “S-so, w-what training ground are we going to use?”

“I, uh, think the range behind the Academy is open,” Naruto shuffled his feet as he spoke. He wasn't sure what was causing his nervousness, but Naruto was convinced that he would never be bored with Hinata.

The next few days passed in relative peace. Naruto was pleased that Hinata wasn't tossing and turning in her sleep as much. The Academy was also going well. Iruka had kept Hinata's exile from becoming gossip. Ami had tried to force an answer out of Hinata, but her attempts had been stopped quickly. Naruto had stepped in and scared off Ami with a vicious glare. Other than that rough patch, all was well. Hinata continued to do well academically. Naruto had even shocked a few of the teachers with his academic improvement. The week closed on a high note as Naruto had gotten high marks on a quiz. In fact, only Sasuke, Sakura, Ino and Hinata had gotten higher grades than Naruto.

“I totally aced that quiz! I couldn't have done it without you, Hinata-chan,” Naruto fist pumped as they exited the Academy.

“You studied very hard, Naruto-kun. I'm proud of you,” Hinata said after a dainty giggle. Naruto's zest for life always lifted her spirits.
“Thanks, Hinata-chan. So, what ice cream are you hoping for?”

“It'd be great if there was a cinnamon roll flavored ice cream,” Hinata said with a smile, but it faded a hair. “The Hyūga weren't...fans of non-traditional foods.”

Naruto hated hearing Hinata so down, but he was glad that Hinata no longer broke into tears at the mention of the Hyūga. “I bet we could figure out a way to make it! That would be awesome!”

“It would,” Hinata agreed. Naruto nodded and noticed that Ino and Sakura were rushing up to meet them.

“Hey ladies,” the lone male in the small group said with a wave.

“Hello Naruto. Hello Hinata-chan,” Ino greeted the 'couple'.

“I'm sooo glad that quiz is over,” Sakura piped up.

“It was a hard one, but you all did awesome. You girls are a lot smarter than most of the guys,” Naruto admitted.

“Forehead, I think Hinata's landed the second best guy in the class,” Ino said approvingly.

“L-landed?” Hinata sputtered. Naruto, for his part, was simply confused. Ino, Hinata-chan and Sakura were speaking Girl. Naruto considered Girl to be a foreign language.

“A distant second, but it's hard to compete with Sasuke-kun. I'd say that Hinata-chan has done pretty well for herself, Ino-pig.” Sakura agreed. Ino and Sakura knew it was a bit unfair to tag-team Hinata like this, but it was all in good fun.

And if they could kick start an adorable romance, so much the better!
“I’d say so!” Ino agreed enthusiastically. “Come on, let's go to the market! We have ice cream to buy!”

Ino led the way and waved her fist in the air. Sakura laughed and pushed Hinata after Ino. Naruto smiled softly as he saw Hinata look over her shoulder.

“Bye Hinata-chan! Have fun! Oh, don't forget to see if the store has that ice cream we were talking about!” Naruto shouted before Hinata got too far away. His smile brightened as Hinata waved back.

Naruto watched the girls disappear around a corner before deciding to go see if Iruka-sensei would let him watch the Chuunin Exam Finals. He made it a few feet before he saw Tobio glaring at him. Naruto didn't even bother hiding his annoyance.

'He may look a bit like Iruka-sensei, but he's nothing like Iruka-sensei,' Naruto felt a grimace find its way to his face as he completed the thought.

“Man, I can't wait until you and Sasuke-sama just quit or graduate early,” Tobio snapped. Naruto raised an eyebrow. There was no way in hell Naruto would ever quit. Naruto had also seen Sasuke training nearly everyday. There was no way Sasuke would ever quit, either. Tobio's statement further convinced Naruto that the other boy was an idiot. “As long as you two are here, no one even stands a chance at getting the girls' attention.”

Naruto smirked. “I'm sorry, I can't hear you over the sound of how jealous you are,” Naruto finished with a dismissive wave as he walked toward Iruka. The boy wouldn't deny that a part of him wanted to deck Tobio. However, Naruto knew that Iruka-sensei, Hinata-chan, Old Man Teuchi and Ayame-onee-chan would be disappointed if Naruto gave in to Tobio's taunting. So, as Old Man Teuchi was fond of saying, Naruto decided 'to be the bigger man'.

He simply walked away.

Naruto found Iruka-sensei filing away the day's quizzes. Naruto sat on the edge of the front desks and waited for Iruka to finish. The teacher smiled as he closed the drawer.

“You did great today, Naruto,” Iruka congratulated his student.
“Thanks, Iruka-sensei!” Naruto responded warmly.

“I bet you want ramen to celebrate?” Iruka chuckled. Naruto rubbed the back of his neck as he laughed along with his teacher.

“Actually...I was wondering if you could take me to the Chuunin Exam Finals. I'd love to see real Ninja go at it!” Naruto said excitedly. Iruka ran his thumb along the scar that dominated his face.

“I think that can be arranged. The first round is tonight. I'll come by to take you at seven,” Iruka said with a nod.

“Awesome! You're definitely one of the best, boss!”

“One of the best, eh Naruto?” Iruka's smile broadened at Naruto's declaration.

“Oh yeah! You're up there with Old Man Hokage, Ayame-onee-chan, Old Man Teuchi and Hinata-chan on the list of coolest people ever!” Naruto smiled. The teacher and the student parted ways. Naruto walked at a leisurely pace back to his apartment. He reached his home and hummed as he unlocked the door.

“Man, I'm looking forward to getting the bed back for a night!” Naruto shouted to himself. He tossed his bag onto the kitchen table and made a beeline to the bedroom. Naruto forced a smile as he flopped backwards on the bed. It was as comfortable as he remembered, but something was wrong. He sat up and looked over to the sleeping bag. Naruto had gotten used to sleeping there while Hinata took the bed. Suddenly, Naruto realized a profound truth.

His home felt very empty without Hinata.
There was an electric atmosphere in Konoha's arena. Naruto had never experienced anything like it before in his life. He would have never expected civilians to take such an interest in shinobi matters. However, there were numerous civilians waving Konoha banners.

'One day, the civilians will be cheering for me like this,' Naruto thought with absolute certainty.

The Hokage-aspirant watched as the crowd fell silent as Old Man Hokage and the High Ninja of Kusagakure and Hoshigakure entered their private boxes. That was one of the things Naruto craved above all else. He wanted the unabashed respect, but not only for himself. Naruto wanted the world to recognize how amazing Iruka-sensei, Hinata-chan, Old Man Teuchi and Ayame-onnee-chan were as well.

“You'll be here one day, Naruto,” Iruka said as he put a hand on Naruto's shoulder.

“Not just one day, Iruka-sensei! A whole bunch! I mean, can't have the Chuunin Exam Finals without the Hokage!” Naruto reminded Iruka.

“True, true,” the teacher acknowledged the point with a laugh. The pair found their seats and joined the capacity crowd in waiting for the first match.

“Hey, boss,” Naruto started to speak as he scanned the crowd.

“Yes, Naruto?” Iruka asked as he exchanged a wave with one of the other Academy teachers.

“Isn't the finals supposed to happen a few days after the start? I mean, the exams only started two days ago,” Naruto pointed out.

“Good eye, Naruto. You're right, there is usually a longer gap between the initial exams and the finals. However, there was a different second exam this year.”
“Why did they change the second exam?” Naruto asked. He couldn't miss Iruka's frown.

“Last year...there was an incident. Ishigakure used the location of the second exam as a proxy battle ground in its civil war. Hokage-sama suspended the normal second exam until security could be guaranteed in the future,” Iruka half explained. He didn't want to go into the details. There had been several atrocities committed by the ruling junta of Ishigakure. Iruka had seen the aftermath of the Third Hokage's anger and it had been terrifying. The Academy teacher believed that the anger was completely justified. A Konoha Genin had been killed in the fighting. That information had been kept from the village at large, but a war had nearly started.

“What!” Naruto squawked.

“It was very tense. Hokage-sama declared the details sealed for six years,” Iruka said cautiously.

The crowd fell silent before Naruto had the chance to ask if Iruka could tell him anything else. Sarutobi had risen from his seat and walked to the edge of his booth. The wizened Hokage launched into a speech about the Will of Fire and the strong relationships between Konoha and her allies.

Naruto closed his eyes as he listened to The Old Man speak. The entire time he imagined he was giving the speech. He could feel the Hokage's Hat upon his head. Naruto reveled in an imagined wind blowing through the official robes of the position.

The boy opened his eyes as Hiruzen finished his speech. That hadn't been a dream, not to Naruto. It was a glimpse into his future. He swore he would work and strive every day to achieve his goal.

“Now! Let the Chuunin Exam Finals...begin!” Hiruzen extolled. The crowd erupted, but none cheered more enthusiastically than Uzumaki Naruto.

Hinata sat on a beanbag chair while eating cinnamon bun flavored ice cream directly out of the carton. Sakura was on another of Ino's beanbag chairs with a container of cream anmitsu resting between her knees. Sakura and Hinata's hostess was sitting on her bed happily opening a batch of chocolate ice cream.

“Ino-chan, where do you get this ice cream from?” Hinata asked. All of Hinata's years of etiquette
training was reprimanding her for being so informal. Hinata, however, decided to embrace her new-found freedom and simply enjoy being with her friends.

“Oh, Chouji's family is the largest producers of food in Konoha. They are either the owners or the main investors in pretty much every food-related business in the village,” Ino explained.

“I...I think I'll have to get more of this ice cream,” Hinata whispered. She may have decided to embrace her new personal freedoms, but Hinata was still a naturally shy young woman.

“Um, Hinata-chan....where will you keep it?” Sakura danced around the subject of Hinata's temporary disappearance. Ino had filled her in on some rumors surrounding Hinata's situation. Their mutual concern for Hinata's well-being forced Ino and Sakura to call a 'truce' in their 'love rivalry'.

Sakura was beginning to think it was one of the best ideas the best friends had ever had.

'Sure, Ino will still be in denial that I am Sasuke-kun's true love, but at least we'll still be friends,' Sakura thought happily between spoonfuls of her dessert.

“Naruto-kun's apartment...” Hinata confessed accidentally. “I wonder if he h-has enough room in the freezer...”

“You're staying with Naruto!” Ino and Sakura shrieked at the same time. Hinata went bright red when she realized her accidental revelation.

'How are they going to react to that?!” Hinata panicked.

“H-Hinata-chan...you two aren't sleeping with each other are you?” Sakura finished the question in a whisper. The color of Sakura's cheeks matched the color of her hair. It was hard to believe that someone as shy as Hinata could be so bold.

Ino put her hands to her mouth. Hinata's eyes went so wide that it appeared as if her Byakugan had activated. Sakura's semi-innocent insinuation was overwhelming Hinata's naturally modesty personality. Hinata's mind was racing.
She fainted.

Naruto jumped into the air and fist pumped as he watched a Konoha ninja defeat a Getsugakure ninja. The Konoha ninja had been very clever. She had used a combination of the small grove of trees at the edges of the arena and a very cool fire jutsu to maneuver her opponent into a better position. The kunoichi had then sprung her trap and caught her opponent in a very simple snare. Naruto's smile only brightened as he sat back down. The proctor had just declared the girl the official winner!

"Snake, Ram, a seal I didn't catch, Boar, either Horse or Bird, and probably Tiger," Naruto recalled and wrote down the hand seals on a napkin. Iruka-sensei had gotten snacks earlier, and Naruto had grabbed a pencil that a betting man had dropped. The napkin was filled to bursting with notes.

"That was so cool!" Naruto said brightly.

"Yumi-san did a great job. I always felt she would go far," Iruka replied proudly. Yumi had been one of the first shinobi Iruka had graduated. His pride swelled as the final fight of the evening was announced. The last fight was another one of Iruka's former students against a fellow Leaf Shinobi. Iruka smiled as the match began. He was glad the final match of the night was between Leaf Shinobi. It would be an entertaining match with a minimal chance of serious injury.

Naruto was cheering wildly and was entertaining everyone around him.

"Young man, are you pulling for one of them?" A well-dressed civilian asked as he wrote notes on a pad.

"I'm pulling for both of them," Naruto revealed to the man. "I really want to see them both succeed. They are fellow Leaf Ninja."

"Ah, so you are a shinobi as well?" the man asked. Iruka flipped the clasp of his kunai holster open. The man had a strange gleam to his eye and was taking a great deal of interest in Naruto. Iruka was doubly protective of Naruto. Officially, he was honor-bound as a shinobi of Konoha to protect the Jinchūriki of the Nine-Tailed Demon Fox. Personally, Iruka had always viewed Naruto as a little brother and, more and more recently, as a son. Thus, a strange man taking interest in Naruto put him on edge.
“Not yet,” Naruto revealed. The boy saw Iruka tense in the corner of his eye. He suddenly realized he shouldn’t reveal much to this man.

“Iruka-kun!” Naruto snickered as he heard Ayame call Iruka’s name. Iruka blushed a bit, but he did not relax his guard.

“Hello, Ayame-chan,” Iruka said warmly and divided his attention between the man and Ayame.

“Hiya, onee-chan!” Naruto waved enthusiastically. The man raised an eyebrow and Iruka’s urge to eliminate the potential threat grew exponentially.

“Hello Naruto-kun,” Ayame said with a wave. “Hello, Iruka-kun,” Ayame finished with a blush. Naruto heard the man next to him snicker before writing in his notebook. Naruto rolled his eyes, but realized that the man was snickering at one of the Konoha ninja catching the other in a genjutsu. The fight was pretty good, but Naruto decided to take advantage of having both Iruka-sensei and Ayame-onee-chan nearby.


“What is it Naruto?” Iruka asked.

“Well...I think I might have made Hinata-chan a bit mad at me,” Naruto said glumly.

“Naruto-kun, what did you say?” Ayame asked. She had an instinctive idea that Naruto may have said something wrong.

“Well, yesterday, Hinata-chan and I were going to practice our shuriken and kunai skills. The two of us decided to make it a contest. Hinata-chan said she would try to choose a restaurant that wasn’t too pricey, ya know,” Naruto started. He looked up at Ayame and Iruka. The two nodded for Naruto to continue. “And, I called her...my...warrior princess...”

Naruto trailed off as he finished the first part of the story. Iruka pinched the bridge of his nose and Ayame bit her index finger to avoid laughing.
“And how did Hinata-chan react, Naruto-kun?” Ayame had recovered enough to question Naruto further.

“Well, she kinda looked away a bit. She turned all red, too. I think she was really mad at me!” Naruto finished in a panic. He scuffed his feet before continuing. “Then when we were training, she would keep looking away and blushing! I can't believe I embarrassed her so much!”

“Iruka-kun, I think it's getting late, don't you?” Ayame asked with a wink. Iruka nodded in agreement. He was smiling a bit, but the old man to his left was still putting him on edge. “I think I'll take Naruto-kun home.”

“That's a good idea, Ayame-chan,” Iruka agreed. He knew that Ayame could put Naruto's fears to rest easier than he could. It would also get Naruto out of the arena. “I will stop by later. There are a few things here I'll have to help with.”

“You promise?” Ayame said hopefully. Iruka gulped and nodded. That hadn't exactly been the reaction he had expected. He wouldn't complain, though.


“That young man has a great deal of promise,” the mystery man said sagely.

“He does. Sir, would you care for something to drink?” Iruka said politely.

“That would be wonderful. Lead the way,” the man said as Iruka and the man got up. Iruka led the man to an out of the way part of the arena before drawing a kunai.

“Ayame-chan and Naruto didn't recognize your henge, but I've trained enough shinobi in my life to recognize even the best transformations. Drop it.”

“Protective of the boy aren't you?” The man asked neutrally.
“I would protect any of my students with my life, but for Naruto I am willing to cut you down,” Iruka said resolutely.

The man smirked and shrugged his shoulders. “Well, aren't you a brave one.”

“W-we killed her didn't we, Forehead?” Ino sniffled.

“I...think we did! How is one of us going to win over Sasuke-kun now? He'd never go for someone who could kill so casually!” Sakura wailed. Hinata stirred as her friend's voices reached her. She blinked the confusion and cobwebs in her mind away.

“I...I'm not dead,” Hinata said quietly.

“Our dreams are doomed! We are going to have to flee Konoha and become missing-nin!” Ino agreed with Sakura.

“Naruto is definitely going to hunt us down for this! You saw the look he gave Ami just for pestering Hinata-chan! I'm glad he did it, Ami is a bitch and all, but what is he going to do to us? It's obvious to everyone that he was head-over-heels for Hinata-chan!”

“Maybe we can get him to realize this was a terrible accident and we didn't mean to kill Hinata-chan!” Ino panicked.

Hinata blushed at the mention of Naruto's feelings, but was growing annoyed that Ino and Sakura weren't listening. “I'm not dead!”

Ino and Sakura jumped a bit when Hinata yelled. The two girls looked over and started blathering apologies.

“I'm sorry, Hinata-chan. I shouldn't have pressed you on your private relationship with Naruto,” Sakura apologized sincerely.
“I-it's okay, Sakura-chan,” Hinata accepted the apology. She decided not to protest Sakura and Ino's accusations of a relationship with Naruto. Hinata realized she wouldn't be able to shake them out of their fantasy.

It didn't help that she had just gotten a very Naruto-like idea. Hinata was going to use this as the basis of a prank. Her fainting spell had been horrifically embarrassing. 'I wonder how I can get Naruto-kun to help me,' Hinata conspired.

“Well, we're glad you are better, Hinata-chan,” Ino reiterated. “Anyway...Forehead mentioned that you and Naruto are planning to take the graduation exam early.”

“N-Naruto-kun and I have talked about it,” Hinata revealed.

“So, what kind of Ninja do you want to be eventually?” Sakura asked in an attempt to change the subject.

Hinata was tempted to blurt out that she was going to be co-kage with Naruto, but something held her tongue. It was true that she wanted to help Naruto reach his goals.

'But what do I want for me?' Hinata thought to herself. 'I can be whatever I want to be. I'm not...restricted by the Hyūga anymore.' She closed her eyes as she mulled over her skills. Hinata had always enjoyed working with plants. She had even produced a medicinal balm in her spare time. Hinata knew she had a ways to go before she mastered it however. Healing. Hinata took a deep breath as she focused on that word. Her early dream had been to heal the rift in the Hyūga Clan. That dream was distant now, but she still had a strong desire to heal.

“I...I want to be a medical ninja,” Hinata opened her eyes as she spoke.

“Like Tsuande-sama?” Sakura asked. Tsunade was a hero to many of the girls in the Academy. The Last Daughter of the Senju was one of the Sannin. Tsunade was the ideal of all kunoichi; powerful, respected and beautiful.

“I...I would like to be like Tsuande-sama, but...but I want to be known as Hinata, too,” Hinata explained with growing confidence.

“I like that...we should create our own path,” Ino said, equally as resolute as Hinata.
“Yatta!” Sakura exclaimed. “Let's all be medical ninja! One day, the Elemental Nations will refer to us as Konoha's Beautiful Medics!”

“Let's hope when we are in the Bingo Book that our picture properly captures how good we look,” Ino said with laugh.

“What the hell was I thinking threatening to cut him down?” Iruka gulped, but didn't back down. He had dug himself in deep, but he wasn't going to start groveling.

“Brat, there's no need to start planning on how you are going to die with dignity. I'm not here for that,” the ninja said dismissively.

“I threatened to kill you of all people!” Iruka exclaimed.

“I'm not going to kill you for that. Hell, if anything I should be thanking you for sticking up for that hyperactive brat.”

“But...you're...” Iruka said in awe. The large ninja's face instantly brightened. This was his opening!

“Yes, you are correct! It is I, Mount Myōboku's Holy Sage! One of the Legendary Sannin! Stand in awe of the man men wish to be and that women wish to be with! I am Jiraiya!” Jiraiya finished his introduction by rolling his head and flipping his hair around like a banner.

“Jiraiya-sama, if I may ask...” Iruka started politely.

“Go ahead, I'm sure you'll want an autograph,” Jiraiya said glibly.

“Why are you here?” Iruka asked. Jiraiya lost his balance and stumbled out of his pose.
“I’m here to do my research!” Jiraiya said in excitement and flashed a double thumbs up. Iruka gaped. That wasn't what the teacher had been expecting. “Oh, and to make sure that the brat hasn't starved to death.”

“That's it?” Iruka could barely manage to recover enough to ask that. His limited recovery was shattered when the Sannin took on a serious look.

“Of course not,” Jiraiya said calmly. Iruka suddenly realized that Jiraiya was carrying on this routine to keep him off guard. The combination of the sudden shifts in persona, Jiraiya's legendary reputation, and the obvious experience of the older man had the Sannin in complete control of the conversation. “I'm here to make sure the brat's seal is in order and to get a feel for the situation in the village. As the village's spymaster, I need to know where to direct our enemies' attention. I have to know where our strengths are so that our enemies think they are weaknesses and where we are weak so that the other villages know we are strong there.”

“Yes, sir,” was all Iruka could say.

“You seem to be as close to the boy as anyone. How's Naruto doing? I want to know more than just information on his mental health and his seal. I want to make sure the boy is living.”

“Well, Naruto is never boring, and that's not taking into account the past couple of days,” Iruka said with a laugh and a shake of the head.

“So, he's well and truly a brat,” Jiraiya said with a smile.

“Hinata has helped him become less of a brat,” Iruka admitted. Jiraiya's jaw suddenly dropped and a strange, and slightly unnerving, gleam appeared in the Sannin's eye.

“That's a girl's name,” Jiraiya said with anticipation and produced his notebook. Iruka groaned and launched into the retelling of the past few weeks. He told the Sannin about how Naruto and Hinata had struck up their friendship. Jiraiya had an unexpected interest in Hinata's banishment and her subsequent status as Naruto's roommate.

“He's already got a live-in girlfriend! Truly! Truly, Naruto is my godson!” Jiraiya exclaimed with tears of unadulterated pride rolling down his cheeks.

“The only reason I even let that slip is because I know you truly care for the brat. If I ever hear that you revealed that bit of information to anyone, including Naruto, I will kill you. If any number of threats make the connection between me and the brat, it isn't too much a stretch to figure out other details about the boy,” Jiraiya commanded.

“Yes, sir,” Iruka gulped.

“Good, now that we've taken care of the threats and exchanged information, I think we should part ways. You've got a pretty girlfriend to see and I have to see if Hiromi's ghost has come back to beat the hell out of Hiashi for his bullshit stunt,” Jiraiya slapped Iruka on the back. “Oh, and expect a letter, a signed copy of the next Icha Icha book, and the means to keep me informed on the brat's progress.”

“Yes, sir,” Iruka said nervously.

“And stop calling me sir. It almost sounds like you think I'm old and respectable.”

Naruto and Ayame were walking through the streets of Konoha in a companionable silence. The young man was gathering his thoughts, and Ayame was allowing the young man time to think. She was also pouting slightly.

“I'm sure Iruka-sensei noticed how pretty you looked, Ayame-onee-chan,” Naruto spoke up seemingly at random.

“I-I did...” Ayame started to protest. Eventually, her shoulders simply slumped in defeat. “Then why didn't he say anything?”

Naruto noticed her pout and took a deep breath. “That guy sitting next to Iruka-sensei was really worrying him for some reason. Iruka-sensei was ready to step in if that guy tried anything.”

“I just thought Iruka-kun was focused on his students and didn't notice me,” Ayame wavered.
between several different emotions.

“The only reason I saw it is because Iruka-sensei wanted me to see him ready for action. He probably didn't want to scare you,” Naruto said idly. He rested both of his hands behind his head and turned to look at his older sister stand-in. It was obvious that Ayame was deep in thought. “Something wrong, onee-chan?”

“Oh, I...just came to a decision,” Ayame admitted. Naruto instinctively knew that it was something personal and he shouldn't pry.

“Hey, onee-chan, thanks,” Naruto said with a quiet sincerity.

“For what?”

“Just being here,” Naruto said in a strangely introspective moment. “I mean, I don't have many people to call family, but I treasure you all.”

Naruto had made his confession right in front of his apartment building. Ayame wiped a tear from her eye before kneeling down. She rested at eye-level with Naruto for a moment before giving him a hug.

“I trust you can find your way to your apartment, little brother?”

Naruto hugged Ayame back. “Yeah, onee-chan. Good night.”

“Good night, little brother,” Ayame said before Naruto ran into his apartment building. The boy stopped in the entrance to wave goodnight.

Ayame returned the wave and made her way back to her home. She couldn't help but feel a bit nervous. It was the Chuunin Exam Finals. There were more foreigners in Konoha now than Ayame could ever remember. It was late at night. She was dressed up.

And alone.
'Why didn't I go in with Naruto? I could have checked if he was low on groceries. Iruka-kun would have stopped by later. He's a Chuunin. He would have protected me,' Ayame thought nervously. In every shadow, she saw an Iwa shinobi or some other enemy ninja. She may have been a civilian, but even civilian education in Konoha covered basic politics. It boiled down to one very simple truth.

Anyone not wearing a Leaf hitai-ate could not be trusted.

“I'm not sure being alone tonight is the best idea,” a voice said from behind Ayame. The young woman panicked and swung violently at the source of the voice.

“Relax, it's me,” Iruka said with a smile as he blocked Ayame's wild strike out of instinct. “Though, that was a pretty good swing. You sure you never wanted to go to the Academy?”

Ayame took a breath to calm herself. Then her eyes hardened. “What were you thinking? Iruka-kun, you nearly gave me a heart attack!”

Iruka proceeded to attempt to actually succeed in giving Ayame a heart attack. The teacher wrapped his arms around her. “I'm sorry.”

“Well, you should be! Couldn't you have let me know you were the one sneaking up on me?”

“I'm a ninja. We're supposed to be sneaky,” Iruka joked.

Ayame huffed. “And here I was going to drop hints that I was interested in a date,” the young woman false-glared at Iruka.

“Oh,” Iruka chuckled nervousl. “Then I guess I should go with my first choice and spring for Mizai's?”

“M-Mizai's?” Ayame's eyes lit up at the name of Konoha's most famous restaurant. “I...I think that is a sufficient apology.”

“You're worth it,” Iruka admitted.
“Stop distracting me, I’m supposed to be mad at you,” Ayame teased.

“Distraction and misdirection are a ninja's favorite tools,” Iruka teased back. Ayame chewed her lip as she had a fierce internal debate with herself. Iruka grew concerned with Ayame’s silence. “Is something wrong?”

Ayame didn’t answer verbally. Instead, she kissed him. The sensation, to Iruka, was akin to being caught in a genjutsu; the world’s most welcome genjutsu.

“How’s that for distraction and misdirection?” Ayame said coquettishly.

“You’d definitely pass my class,” Iruka answered dumbly. “Uh...when is...your father expecting you home?”

“Late,” Ayame whispered in Iruka's ear.

“I...I can handle late,” Iruka said with a smile.

Naruto groaned as Iruka berated the class for not paying attention to the lesson. He was really bored. Hinata-chan had arrived at the Academy with Sakura and Ino. Naruto wanted nothing more than to speak with his best friend. Hinata had taken her usual place next to Naruto. The former Hyūga chided Naruto for his inattention. The two children had eagerly slid back into their familiar routines.

“Have a great lunch, dismissed,” Mizuki announced. Naruto, comically, leaned back in his chair and breathed a sigh of relief.

“I thought that would never end,” Naruto said both to Hinata and the ceiling.

“Iruka-sensei did seem a bit distracted today,” Hinata agreed.

“Wait!” Ino cried out. She quickly ran over to Naruto and Hinata. “I sense gossip!”

“Hi Ino,” Naruto said idly.

“Hello, Ino-chan,” Hinata greeted politely.

“So, what's this all about? I bet this is juicy,” Ino rubbed her hands together.

“I think Iruka-sensei's got a girlfriend,” Naruto grinned. He knew exactly who it was too. In fact, Naruto was about to reveal who Iruka's likely girlfriend was. As he opened his mouth, an image of an angry Ayame brandishing The Ladle like a sword flashed in front of his eyes. “and she would probably kill me if I mentioned her name.”

“You're afraid of The Ladle aren't you?” Hinata asked somewhat bewildered by Naruto's instinctive fear of 'The Ladle'. Naruto only nodded.

“Oh come on Naruto its just a ladle,” Ino groaned. She wasn't going to let some cooking utensil come between her and the single largest piece of gossip in her academic life.

Naruto tensed. “Just a ladle? The Ladle is the stuff of nightmares!”

“Ugh, fine. I'll figure it out on my own,” Ino said in mock-frustration, before waving and heading back over to where Sakura was sitting.

“Anyway, what are your plans for today, Hinata-chan?” Naruto asked. He was eager to just talk with Hinata again.

“I need to go to the hospital and set up an appointment for my pre-graduation physical,” Hinata said as she accepted one of the bentos Naruto offered.
“Aren’t physicals done here at the Academy? I mean, there isn’t much to them,” Naruto opened his bento.

“Well, for kunoichi there is extra...girl stuff that needs to be taken care of,” Hinata explained delicately. Naruto nodded.

“When are you going to try to set that up?”

“I was going to go after school. I should be back home before six,” Hinata said after daintily wiping her mouth.

‘Home...she's coming back,’ Naruto thought in relief. He had a semi-irrational fear that Hinata wouldn't be coming back after the sleepover with Sakura and Ino.

“Alright, I guess I'll do some training on my own. I know! I'll bring in food. There's that restaurant opening up near the edge of the village. Sayuri's or something. I'll pick up something from there!” Naruto said excitedly.

“That sounds great, Naruto-kun,” Hinata said happily. She was thrilled that she had lessened Naruto’s ramen addiction. Hinata would gladly admit to anyone that ramen was one of her favorite foods, but she enjoyed more variety in her diet.

“I can't wait. You won't believe how boring it was at home without you,” Naruto said earnestly.

Hinata smiled softly. 'Home...it's amazing how quickly that apartment has become my home. I have never felt so welcomed anywhere before. Thank you, Naruto-kun,' Hinata thought and wished she could say it out loud.

“We can talk about last night over dinner. I'm sure you and Iruka-sensei saw some amazing fights,” Hinata responded. The pair finished their lunch over small talk and simply enjoyed each other's company.

The rest of the day passed quickly. Iruka dismissed the class, and flashed an amused grin at Naruto and Hinata as they fled the classroom. The roommates stood just outside the Academy’s gates. Naruto had become almost dependent on Hinata's presence. Her unconditional acceptance
was almost like a drug. The void in his life he had once filled through pranks was now being filled through Hinata's, Iruka's, Teuchi's, and Ayame's support and care.

“So, what would you like for me to pick up?” Naruto asked as he threw his book bag over his shoulder. Hinata tapped her chin before smiling.

“Surprise me! As long as it doesn’t have any seafood, I'm sure I'll love it,” Hinata exclaimed.

“And if they have cinnamon rolls?” Naruto asked jokingly.

“I might kiss you,” Hinata replied just as playfully. They both started to laugh, but they each realized what exactly had transpired. Hinata and Naruto’s blushes were instantly noticeable.

“Wow, they really are adorable,” Ino said with a laugh as she walked by.

“It's like something out of a really cute book,” Sakura agreed.

Sakura and Ino’s verbal poke shook Naruto and Hinata out of their daze.

“I-I'll see you back home, Hinata-chan,” Naruto said with a gulp.

“Yes, I-I look forward to it,” Hinata said quietly before heading towards Konoha's Hospital.

Naruto closed his eyes and leaned against the Academy wall. He couldn't understand why his stomach twisted up with hope every time he thought about Hinata. Naruto quickly shook it off and forced his thoughts to focus on the technique he wanted to try out.

“I'll master that and graduate for sure!” Naruto thumped his chest. He was about to walk off when a voice called out to him.

“You! Hold up,” Uchiha Sasuke called out. Naruto hummed in confusion. “You can't be serious.”
“I'm generally not. It's no fun walking around with a stick up your ass all the time,” Naruto shot back. Sasuke's tone was rubbing him the wrong way. “But I'm serious. Hinata-chan and I are going to graduate early.”

“If two dropouts like you are ready to graduate, then so am I,” Sasuke declared.

“Drop...outs?” Naruto asked dumbly. “You know, for being a genius, that's probably the dumbest thing I've ever heard. We haven't quit anything and we're going to graduate *early*."

“Regardless, I am Uchiha. I have the blood of the world's most powerful clan in my veins!” Sasuke said proudly, but with a hint of a snarl. Naruto noticed Sasuke's eyes. They were no longer the creepy empty eyes Naruto had seen on Sasuke after their spar. Sasuke's eyes looked alive.

'*He looks like he was living again there for a bit,*' Naruto grinned. He hated seeing such emptiness in anyone. Naruto knew how painful the void Sasuke was experiencing was. It took all his willpower to prevent a shiver from working down his own spine. *Would my eyes look that empty without Iruka-sensei and Hinata-chan?*

“So, you're proud of being a Uchiha?” Naruto asked, determined to keep the fire in Sasuke's eyes from going out.

“Proud? Proud fails to fully capture the *rapture* I feel at being Uchiha. Once I awaken my Sharingan, I will make sure the entire world will know the Uchiha *still live!*” Sasuke declared.

Naruto smiled at Sasuke. “You know, you're a hell of a lot more likable when you aren't frozen in a block of ice. See you around Sasuke.”

Sasuke couldn't respond as Naruto walked away. After a moment, Sasuke smirked at Naruto's retreating form. *Maybe you aren’t as inferior as I thought you were, Uzumaki Naruto. You will never be Uchiha, but you might push me to greater heights one day.*'

Naruto smiled as he dispelled his bunshins. He had done it! Naruto had finally created three perfect bunshins! The number of overloaded clones had dropped to four. Unfortunately, the number of clones he hadn't put enough chakra into had increased.
“I can't wait to tell Hinata-chan!” Naruto grinned after his triumphant announcement to the world. “Now to become even more amazing!”

_The only problem is, I can't remember the seals all that well,’_ Naruto thought. He flopped to the ground. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the napkin with his notes. “Okay, so its Snake, Ram...”

Naruto crossed his arms and closed his eyes. He was deep in thought as he recalled Yumi’s fight. “It was Monkey!” Naruto shouted after a moment. “Next is...Boar, Horse and Tiger!”

Naruto jumped to his feet and did a dry run through the hand seals. He didn't attempt to mold his chakra. Instead, he just wanted to get the seals down. Naruto practiced running through the seals for a good fifteen minutes before he felt comfortable attempting the jutsu.

“Katon: Edan!” Naruto yelled as he finished the hand seals. The feeling of his chakra molding and rushing outward as a torrent of fire was a rush Naruto had never experienced. In that moment, he decided he wanted to be a master at performing...and teaching ninjutsu. He smiled as he felt the flames leave his lips.

And then his world went red.

The next sound Naruto heard was a beeping and his own coughing. He groaned as he sat up. “I-I guess that means it wasn't a Horse seal after all,” Naruto said mirthlessly. “Ouch, ouch ouch.”

Naruto whimpered a bit at his tender face. It felt like that one time he had gotten splashed with hot ramen broth. He sighed as he leaned backwards. There was no doubt he was in the hospital. He didn't like this place. In the hospital, you couldn't move around. Naruto had only been in the hospital once before. He had been pranking some jerk that had skipped out on paying his bill at Ichiraku. The prank had been successful and two dozen chickens had escaped into the man's shop. It was Naruto's most legendary prank. Unfortunately, the man was an ex-ninja and could run really fast. Naruto had jumped across the gap between two buildings. Tragically, he had misjudged the distance and fallen through the gap. It hadn't been much of a fall, but Naruto had broken an arm.
Naruto had spent two days in the hospital. It was probably the worst days of Naruto's life.

'Well, at least until the days Hinata-chan had been...sealed and missing,' Naruto thought angrily.

Hinata bursting through the door. Naruto’s eyes went wide with worry. 'She's crying! What do I have to do to help her?'

“Y-you're okay...you're okay...” Hinata wept as she threw her arms around Naruto.

“I'm doing pretty good,” Naruto tried to assure Hinata.

“I heard the doctors mention that someone had...had messed up a jutsu...” Hinata sniffled into Naruto's chest. She looked up and Naruto noticed the fear and concern in her eyes. There was something else that Naruto immediately noticed: relief. Hinata was relieved he was alive. The warmth of Naruto's botched Katon Jutsu couldn't compare to how warm Hinata's concern made Naruto feel.

“T-they said that if it was anyone but you...that you would have died! I...I don't know what I would do if I lost you!” Hinata continued. “W-what were you thinking?”

“I...I wanted to become strong...I wanted to do something to make you proud of me...” Naruto admitted. He felt awful because he knew that it was his fault Hinata-chan was worried.

Once again, Hinata teared up and threw herself at Naruto. The hug was a bit awkward. Hinata was simultaneously hugging Naruto while weakly pounding on his chest. “Y-you...wonderful idiot! Don't you remember? I-I told you that you will always h-have my respect! How could you be so reckless? I...I can't be Co-kage by myself!”

Naruto sighed and brushed one of the long strands of hair at the edge of Hinata's bangs. “I'm sorry, warrior princess. The last thing I want is to see you cry,” Naruto confessed.

“Stop distracting me from how mad I am at you,” Hinata pouted, but had calmed down somewhat. She simply lied silent next to Naruto.

“Hinata-chan...” Naruto broke the silence. Hinata hummed and looked up. “Seeing you cry hurt more than messing up the jutsu.”
“How do you do that? How do you always know exactly what I need to hear?” Hinata whispered.

“I don’t know...I guess I can just see it in your eyes,” Naruto confessed. There was a knock on the door. Hinata and Naruto frowned instantly at the forced end to the quiet moment. Hinata got off the bed and into the chair.

“Come in,” Naruto shouted. The doctor entered and nodded at both of the aspiring ninja.

“It is good to see you up and about, Uzumaki-san,” the doctor said with a genuine smile.

Naruto rubbed the back of his head. “More or less.”

“I have some good news. You will be released in the morning. We just want to keep you overnight for observations. Mi...” The doctor announced. He trailed off as he read Naruto's information from his clipboard. The doctor stopped for a moment before looking at Hinata and raising an eyebrow. “Miss Hinata is permitted to stay overnight if she so wishes.”

Hinata’s gaze shifted from the doctor to Naruto. “I...”

“It's okay if you don't want to stay overnight, Hinata-chan. I know home is a lot more comfortable than this place. Besides...this'll give me enough time to prepare an awesome apology. After the stunt I pulled, I'll need a really good one,” Naruto said with a soft smile.

“If you're sure, Naruto-kun?” Hinata asked hesitantly.

“I'm sure. The doctors in this hospital are awesome. I'll be good as new in the morning and apologizing like there is no tomorrow,” Naruto thumped his chest. He was smiling warmly. Hinata giggled as she wondered, once again, how Naruto seemed to know exactly what to say.

“I-I guess I'll go home. I'll let Teuchi-san, Iruka-sensei and Ayame-san know that you are going to be okay,” Hinata revealed.
“T-thanks,” Naruto gulped. “But...do you really need to tell Ayame-onee-chan?”

“Yes, Naruto-kun, she's probably heard rumors and is worried about you,” Hinata chided Naruto.

“O-okay, Hinata-chan,” Naruto said softly. The doctor had been silently watching the entire amusing exchange. Hinata ran over and gave Naruto a quick hug.

“I'll see you tomorrow, Naruto-kun.”

Naruto watched her leave with a smile. *What would I like without you, Hinata-chan?* The young man sighed and turned to the doctor. “So, how much am I going to have to spend on my apology?”

The doctor belly laughed. “I don’t know. How much does a vase of her favorite flowers cost?”

Naruto’s shoulder slumped. “Looks like I won't get to go to Ichiraku's for a while.”

“It's a small price to pay for domestic tranquility,” The doctor joked.

“As long as Hinata-chan is happy, I know I'll be happy,” Naruto missed the man's joke.

“Good lad! With that attitude, I'm sure you two will last!” The doctor said in a congratulatory tone.

“Huh?” Naruto was very confused. The confusion doubled when the doctor shook his head and left the room. *Why do people always act all weird about me and Hinata-chan?*

Naruto was grateful that he was being released from the hospital on a Sunday. He had managed to get some of his money from Iruka-sensei. Naruto had to sit through a nearly hour long lecture on being reckless and attempting high level jutsu before he was ready. Naruto had remained silent during Iruka's concerned rant. Naruto knew he had scared Iruka as much as he had scared Hinata.
He paid attention to every word. Iruka had given him a hug and told Naruto that he was glad he was okay.

Naruto sighed as he remember the lecture. He opened the door to the flower shop fully expecting another lecture. He just hoped Ino wouldn't go off on him.

“Welcome to the Yamanaka Flower Shop!” Ino greeted warmly.

“Uh, hi Ino,” Naruto said nervously.

“Let me guess, you're here to buy an amazing flower arrangement for Hinata to apologize for being an stupid, stubborn boy,” Ino said with a hump.

“Yea...” Naruto said looking down. He knew he deserved everything he was getting.

“Well, I can help with that,” Ino said as she walked around the counter. “You'll definitely need purple Hyacinth. In the language of flowers, that means asking for forgiveness. I'll also throw in some Lily of the Valley, which symbolizes 'return to happiness'.

“Wow, girls really are smarter than guys,” Naruto said in admiration.

“And don't you forget it!” Ino whirled around and pointed at Naruto's chest. “Moving on! I'd also suggest ivy. That symbolizes friendship.”

'And marriage, but I don't think Naruto or Hinata know that!’ Ino thought in amusement.

“Very cool! What colors are these?” Naruto asked excitedly.

“The flowers are either purple or white,” Ino told Naruto.

Naruto thought for a minute. “Roses are pretty, do you have white ones?”
“Of course we do!” Ino smiled as she fought off the urge to cackle. *White roses symbolize eternal love! I wonder if Hinata knows that?* “Anything else you want to say with your flowers?”

“Well...Hinata-chan has pretty eyes. Got any flowers that say that?”

“Just because I'm the most amazing woman in the world, I just so happen to have some variegated tulips that match the arrangement we are making,” Ino smirked and, graciously, chose to ignore Naruto’s muttered 'second'. “And to top this masterpiece of apologetic groveling off, I'll add some Morning Glory.”

“What does that mean?” Naruto asked.

“Willful promises. It's saying that you promise not to be so dumb in the future,” Ino huffed. *It's also telling Hinata-chan you are affectionate with her!*

“You rock, Ino!” Naruto exclaimed. “I don't know how much this costs, but take all this!”

Naruto tried to hand over all his ryō notes. “That's too much, besides, I want to help my two good friends out. And I know you'll need to pick up cinnamon rolls. OH! Go down the street to Susumu's Creamery. They have Cinnamon Roll Ice Cream!”

Naruto watched as Ino went to work on the arrangement. He was confused at first when Ino started cutting all the thorns off the roses. His confusion doubled when she giggled each time a thorn was removed. Eventually, Naruto just decided that Ino was being nice and didn't want Hinata-chan to get poked while looking at the flowers.

“There you go, Naruto. I think Hinata-chan will definitely love all this!” Ino said as she handed over a vase full of flowers.

“This is beautiful, Ino.” Naruto said in true appreciation. “I'll definitely let Iruka-sensei know how good you are at this stuff before his dates.”

“You never told me who he's dating,” Ino pouted.

Naruto gulped. “She's...the type that wouldn't like me telling. A...she would want to break the
news herself...”

Ino shrugged. “I'll find out eventually, I guess.”

“Yeah...bye Ino,” Naruto said with a wave. After leaving the flower shop, he went straight to the creamery and bought Hinata’s favorite ice cream. Naruto carefully navigated the streets back to the apartment he shared with Hinata. He was thinking of a suitably awesome apology speech when he reached the door. Naruto knocked once with his elbow, praying the entire time that he wouldn't drop the ice cream or, god forbid, the flowers.

“Hello?” Hinata asked through the door.

“It's me, Hinata-chan,” Naruto answered.

“Naruto-kun!” Hinata said excitedly as she flung the door open. She gasped when she saw what Naruto was holding. “They are gorgeous.”

“I-I hope this is enough to show how sorry I am for worrying you,” Naruto started.

“It...it's okay, Naruto-kun. I'm just glad you are alright,” Hinata said warmly. She took the flowers from Naruto. Naruto quickly started explaining why he and Ino selected each flower.

“Thank you, Naruto,” Hinata said as she placed the flowers in the center of the kitchen table.

“You're welcome, warrior princess,” Naruto responded with a smile. He handed Hinata a spoon as they both sat down at the table for ice cream.

“I can't believe this time next week, we'll be true shinobi,” Hinata said as she dug in.

“I can! When we are together, I know we can take on the world,” Naruto said with all the confidence in the world.

Hinata returned the smile that had dawned on Naruto's lips. 'You always know what to say,
Naruto-kun. And together, we can do anything.'

Chapter End Notes

I'm aware formatting is funky. I am trying to get some of my work up here at AO3 and used to the system.
Chapter 6

Jiraiya leaned back in his booth and mulled over the conversations he had had since arriving in Konoha.

He was very happy to discover that Naruto was doing well. Jiraiya had 'inspected' Naruto's apartment complex before attending the first round of the Chuunin Exam Finals. On the one hand, the Toad Sage was pleased that the stipend he provided for the brat was being used well. If Jiraiya had returned and found his godson living in a slum, the last active Sannin probably would have gone on a rampage.

'I just wish I had checked inside the brat's apartment! To think, he's already got a girl living with him. I can't wait for Naruto to be ready for a real apprenticeship. I'd take him now, but sensei said Naruto's unusually protective of the girl. It'd be a challenge to convince him to come with me. Besides, I don't want him to get a big head,' Jiraiya thought as he downed a sake cup.

The Toad Sage's thoughts then turned to Naruto's 'roommate'. He had stopped by the Hyūga Compound as a 'courtesy' to one of Konoha's most prestigious Clans. The Hyūga, as expected, were lavish hosts. They showered him with attention and 'graciously' provided a Cadet Member to see to his every need while he was in the compound.

The girl had been attractive in the typical graceful style of the Hyūga, but the true reason for her presence was a bit grating on Jiraiya. She had been nothing but a wedge to keep Jiraiya from having an in-depth conversation with Hiashi. That had actually explained a great deal about the Hyūga situation.

Hiashi's position was balancing on a razor's edge.

That observation had led Jiraiya to doubt whether Hinata's exile had been Hiashi's choice. 'I'll have to figure out a way to contact Hiashi privately,' Jiraiya decided.

Jiraiya's thoughts returned to Naruto, as they often did. 'I really wish the boy was ready. Iruka says Naruto is probably going to graduate early. I think that'll be good for the brat. Naruto's clearly not a genius and has gotten this far on pure guts. I think a couple of years...yeah, a couple of years and he'll be ready for a full apprenticeship.'
The veteran ninja downed another cup of sake before pulling out some paper. “Now...should I ensure the continued comfort and development of my godson as both a person and shinobi? Or turn his current situation into the basis of the next Icha Icha book and get those damn publishers off my back?”

After a few moments of thought, Jiraiya's eyes lit up. “Both! HA! Orochimaru and Tsunade weren't the only geniuses on Team Hiruzen!”

Naruto flopped down with an enormous grin plastered on his face. He had created a new record of five perfect clones. Naruto had pointedly ignored the fact that the number of under-charged clones numbered close to two dozen. It was still an improvement! Hinata shared the smile as she looked up from her notes. She had been focusing on her academics while she rested. Hinata knew she would never match Naruto's chakra capacity. However, she was proud of her exceptional chakra control. The short time she had lived with Naruto had taught Hinata that it was all right to be proud of her own abilities.

“You did wonderful, Naruto-kun,” Hinata praised her roommate and best friend.

“I don’t think I would have ever thought to try creating a mob of clones. Who knows how long it would have taken me to pass the graduation exam without you?” Naruto beamed.

“Naruto-kun, you would have passed on your own. I know you can accomplish anything you put your mind to,” Hinata assured Naruto.

“Thanks,” Naruto laid flat on the grass and watched the clouds. “You know, I can see why Shikamaru does this so often.”

“Does what?” Hinata asked as she put away her notebook.

“Cloud watching. I never expected it to be so relaxing,” Naruto confessed. Hinata shrugged her shoulders and laid down next to Naruto. A quiet moment passed before Hinata giggled.

“We're not going to start calling everything troublesome, are we?”

Naruto sighed theatrically. “It'd be too troublesome to start calling everything troublesome,”
Naruto exaggerated the habits of his friend. Naruto frowned a bit. He hadn't really had time to hang out with Kiba, Shikamaru, and Chouji in a while. Naruto had been focusing all his attention on helping Hinata through her situation.

'Maybe with things getting back to normal, I can have a day where I hang out with the guys. I know Hinata-chan had fun with Ino and Sakura. I should really try to hang out with my other friends,’ Naruto thought.

“Neh, Hinata-chan, I'm going to apologize in advance,” Naruto said softly.

“F-for what Naruto-kun?”

“Skipping class tomorrow,” Naruto admitted.

Hinata shot straight up. “Skip? You haven't skipped class...since, well, it's been a while,” Hinata scolded Naruto while simultaneously trying to avoid the subject of her banishment.

“I know...it's just I haven't hung out with Shikamaru, Kiba and Chouji in a while. This'll probably be my last chance for a while. I know none of them are going to graduate early like we are. I just...I just want to hang out with the guys one last time,’ Naruto explained.

“Oh, well, I still don't think you should skip class,” Hinata pouted.

“I know...this'll be the last time. But, you had the sleepover and I'd like to be with my other friends too,” Naruto countered.

“Oh, I understand. I'll make sure you get the notes. You helped me with keeping up so many times, it's the least I can do,” Hinata gave in.

“I'll also preemptively make it up to you, I'll bring in food from where you want to eat,” Naruto said excitedly.

“You never did tell me where you got the zenzai from that day...”

“Let's do that tonight,” Hinata said as she rolled over on her side. “We're done here, so let's head back home. I'll pick up a few things from the market and you can pick up dinner.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Naruto scrambled to his feet. He helped Hinata to her feet. The two shared a soft smile before walking back to their shared apartment. Naruto counted out enough money for their dinner. He started to leave but noticed that Hinata was lingering near the bathroom. “Something wrong, Hinata-chan?”

“N-no, I'm just taking my time,” Hinata assured Naruto. Naruto smiled and nodded. As soon as Naruto closed the door, Hinata turned back to the mirror. She brushed her bangs away from her forehead and stared at her seal.

“Happy Birthday, Mother.”

Naruto smiled weakly at Hinata's disapproving look as he slipped away. He clambered over the fence and broke into a sprint.

“Hey guys! Wait up,” Naruto shouted. Kiba was the first to notice Naruto.

“Well, look who decided to grace us with his presence,” Kiba smirked.

“Hey, it's not everyday you get to hang out with the next Hokage. You should be excited,” Naruto shot back with his own smirk.

“It's been a while, Naruto,” Chouji said as he fished a bag of chips out of one of his coat pockets.

“Yeah, I've just been busy. You know, training with Hinata-chan and stuff,”

“And stuff?” Kiba asked with an odd look on his face.
“Troublesome stuff. Best not to talk about it,” Shikamaru said as he eased into his usual spot on the grass. Kiba and Chouji exchanged a look and shrugged. Akamaru barked and Kiba pulled a ball out of his pocket.

“So, you're really graduating early?” Kiba asked Naruto as he threw the ball. Akamaru barked happily and chased after it.

“Yep! I can even make a couple of actual Bunshins now!” Naruto shouted excitedly.

“I don't believe it,” Chouji said in awe. Shikamaru didn't say anything but actually opened his eyes. He was wearing a look of complete disbelief.

“I'm with Chouji. I call bullshit,” Kiba scoffed and said the last bit a little loudly. The boys had always been a bit freer with 'adult' language when they skipped.

“Better get ready to give me The Hat!” Naruto boasted as he flew through the hand seals. “Bunshin no Jutsu!”

“Wow, he actually did it,” Chouji breathed. Naruto grinned as he took in the looks of shock on his friends' faces. Shikamaru even sat up. Kiba, Naruto and Chouji had often joked that it would take a small explosion to get their lazy friend to stop his cloud watching.

’Well, me making a couple of clones certainly will shake things up!’ Naruto thought happily. He focused solely on the five perfect clones and ignored the gaggle of over- and under-charged clones.

“So, how long did it take Hinata to figure out to have you make a bunch of clones and hope for the best?” Shikamaru asked.

“Hinata-chan figured it out pretty much the same day we started training together,” Naruto revealed. “Hey, guys, why aren't you all graduating early? I mean, you could all pass right now.”

“Things are different in Clans, Naruto,” Chouji said as he finished off his bag of chips. “I don't know about Shikamaru or Kiba, but I have to master a couple of my Clan's techniques before I can graduate.”
Kiba nodded. “Chouji's right. I'm still working on the Jūjin Bunshin and Gatsūga with Akamaru. Mom says I have to at least master those before I graduate. I've nearly got it, but not quite.”

“My clan's the same way, I've got to get the Baika no Jutsu down first,” Chouji added.

“What about you, Shikamaru? What super cool Clan Jutsu are you learning?” Naruto asked excitedly.

“I've already got the Kagemane down, I just find it too troublesome to graduate early,” Shikamaru said as he laid back down.

“Oh,” Naruto said a bit lamely. The conversation eventually turned to lighter fare. Shikamaru and Chouji laughed long and hard at Naruto's attempt to get Kiba to deliver on the terms of their bet.

“I'm not just going to take your word for it! And before you say anything, I'm not going to take Hinata's word for it either. You two are in cahoots!” Kiba protested.

“Ca-what?” Naruto asked.

“Cahoots!” Kiba repeated.

“But what does that even mean?” Naruto asked.

“I don't know, but mom uses it whenever Akamaru and I get into trouble and one of us tries to pin the blame on the other,” Kiba explained. The other boys shrugged off the explanation and jumped over the Academy fence to meet up with the rest of the class. The boys nearly landed on Sakura as she exited the building.

“Kyaa!” Sakura cried out in alarm and took a swing at the closest figure, which happened to be Kiba. Kiba managed to substitute with a nearby chair and avoided the hit. The chair, however, shattered under the hit.

“Nice punch,” Naruto said in admiration. Sakura blinked twice and blushed a bit at the looks of
shock on each boy's face.

“Um...thanks,” Sakura said nervously.

“Hey, Sakura, I need your help,” Naruto continued after waving off Sakura's nervousness.

“Sure, what is it, Naruto?” the girl asked as she knelt down to pick up the books she had dropped.

“Can you tell Kiba that you, Hinata-chan and Ino did have ice cream at your sleepover?” Naruto pressed his hands together and practically begged Sakura to agree with him.

Sakura smiled as she scratched Akamaru behind the ears. “Of course we had ice cream. Though, I had cream anmitsu, but that did have ice cream in it.”

Kiba groaned and shook his head. He was annoyed that Sakura had forced him to pay Naruto twenty ryō, but Akamaru was relaxed around her so she couldn't be all bad.

“There, Naruto, you happy?” Kiba lamented the loss of his hard-earned money.

“You bet! Well, I'm going to catch up to Hinata-chan! See you guys around!” Naruto waved as he ran off. He caught up with the main bunch of the class fairly quickly. Naruto moved among the cliques, families, and various other groups quickly silently.

‘Hinata-chan probably went straight home,’ Naruto realized. He also realized Hinata was doing this to show how much she disapproved of him skipping. Naruto shrugged it off and continued back to the apartment. The boy decided to cut through the park to get home faster. He saw some of the parents lead their children away from his chosen path. Naruto hadn't paid as much attention to the villagers recently. Hinata-chan, Iruka-sensei, or Ayame-onee-chan had been with him so much that he could draw strength from his friends' acceptance. However, they weren't here. Naruto was alone to face the cold, empty gazes or the sneers of disapproval. The looks cut him deeply. He wanted nothing more than to get home. Naruto wouldn't even get annoyed at whatever Hinata planned to say about him skipping class. He knew that Hinata just wanted him to succeed. Her concern helped him keep moving towards his dream.

Naruto caught the sound of metal striking wood in the distance. He paused and listened closely. 'Someone is training with kunai,' Naruto observed. He approached the source of the sound from an opening in the treeline. The last thing Naruto needed was to be drilled in the face by a kunai.
It was Sasuke. Naruto relaxed just a bit, but felt an odd energy build inside of him. It took a second for Naruto to realize it was the desire to compete with Sasuke.

“Yo, Sasuke,” Naruto greeted the Last Uchiha. Sasuke paused and gave Naruto a barely visible nod. It wasn't a real greeting. Naruto knew that Sasuke had just acknowledged his presence. Sasuke put his kunai away and simply stared at Naruto for a second.

“What are you doing here?” Sasuke eventually asked.


“Of course I am. When I graduate, I'll be another step closer to fulfilling my ambitions,” Sasuke said proudly, both at his statement and at his accuracy. He finished his practice and was satisfied with his own progress.

“Me too! I mean, I can't become Hokage if I'm stuck in the Academy forever,” Naruto smiled broadly at the attempt for conversation.

“You know, I never would have thought of graduating early if it wasn't for you or the Hyūga girl,” Sasuke admitted.

“Don't lump Hinata-chan in with those jerks,” Naruto said heatedly, but calmed down quickly. “But I guess I am influential!”

Sasuke rolled his eyes. “Influential…” Sasuke walked over to the target and began retrieving his practice kunai. “You seem certain that you and Hinata will pass. If you can pass, then I can. I've mastered Katon: Gökakyū no Jutsu. I have solid marks and Mizuki-sensei regularly says my taijutsu is above and beyond most Academy students.”

“You are pretty good. I haven't nailed down any jutsu that isn't one of the Academy ones, but I've got one I'm working on,” Naruto admitted. He kept pushing. He had to get more acknowledgment out of Sasuke. Naruto had no idea where this desire was coming from, but Naruto had always considered Sasuke somewhat of a kindred spirit.
“Hn, so you aren't completely hopeless,” Sasuke said with a ghost of a smile. Naruto caught the fleeting smile and returned it a hundred-fold.

“When is anything ever hopeless?” Naruto questioned. “Well, I'm off. I need to see what Hinata-chan wants to get for dinner with the twenty ryō we won off Kiba!”

Sasuke watched Naruto run off and bitterly pondered his classmate's words. 'Naruto can't understand. What has he lost? If he had experienced Itachi's cruelty like I did, he would realize that there are moments where there is no hope. If he knew that...he would understand why the pursuit of power is so important. I will never feel like that again.'

Naruto unlocked the door to the apartment and strolled casually into the home he shared with Hinata. He smiled as he thought about how it actually felt like a home now. His smile grew softer and more genuine once he saw Hinata reading a training scroll on the couch.

“I'm back, Hinata-chan,” Naruto said with cautious optimism.


“Sorry that it took me so long to get home. I had to get Sakura's help to get Kiba to pay up on that bet. I would have come straight home to get your help, but Kiba wouldn't have believed you, 'cause we're in cahoots,” Naruto explained.

“Oh,” was all Hinata managed to say. She felt a pit in her stomach when she thought about how much time Naruto might have spent with Sakura. It was an irrational fear, she realized, but she experienced it nonetheless.

“Yeah, after that I ran into Sasuke and talked to him at one of the training grounds,” Naruto explained. “The two of us talked about graduating early for a bit.”

“Which took longer?” Hinata asked without really thinking.

“Talking with Sasuke, easy, I had to practically poke him to keep him from spacing out,” Naruto said with a mix of amusement and annoyance. He had completely missed Hinata's tone and intent.
“Did you know that he said we inspired him to graduate early?”

Hinata relaxed a bit. She wasn't sure what caused her jealousy to flare like that. Hinata breathed a sigh of relief as she felt that emotion leave her. “I guess that makes us influential.”

“Heck yeah, we are! So, ready to go to Hachimono? Kiba's treat!” Naruto beamed.

“Kiba?”

“Yeah, this,” Naruto grinned and produced the twenty ryō that Kiba had given him, “was totally Kiba's earlier today!”

“That's enough for a big meal,” Hinata said excitedly.

“I know right? We can eat 'till we're full and not have to worry about cutting into our rent money!” Naruto matched Hinata's enthusiasm. Hinata jumped off the couch and joined Naruto by the door. “I can't wait until we start doing missions. It'll be nice to not worry as much about paying the rent, for groceries and stuff.”

“It will be nice not to have to have our budget be so tight. Do you know if you'll still get your stipend?” Hinata asked.

“Dunno, I think Iruka-sensei said something about getting it until I was sixteen,” Naruto said with a shrug.

“We should find out. It'd be nice if you keep getting it. We could put that in a savings account,” Hinata thought out loud as Naruto opened the door.

“And that's why you're in charge or our money,” Naruto nodded emphatically. Hinata giggled at Naruto's matter-of-fact statement.

“You did a very good job managing your money before I moved in with you,” Hinata assured Naruto.
“Thanks, Hinata-chan,” Naruto replied gratefully. The two children made their way through the streets of Konoha and eventually reached the small restaurant. Hinata and Naruto ordered a meal and decided to take their meal outside. Hinata smiled as they reached the spot she had hidden in the day she had skipped with Naruto.

“Hey, Hinata-chan, remember how we talked about our hobbies last time?” Naruto questioned through a mouthful of rice.

“I don’t think I could ever forget that day,” Hinata gently breathed her answer.

“Me neither,” the boy agreed completely. “I was thinking about how we both said we like to garden.”

“I wish we had a garden,” the girl sighed. Naruto found himself entranced as Hinata traced an ivy vine with her finger. It was in that moment that Naruto began to realize why Iruka-sensei and Ayame-onee-chan made such a big deal about Hinata being a girl. As Naruto listened to Hinata talk about how she thought they could get a flower pot or two for the apartment, he found the entire world felt lighter.

“Maybe we can get flowers after we complete a few missions?” Naruto idly suggested. His mouth felt dry despite taking a sip of his water. There was a knot in his stomach, but it was far from uncomfortable. Hinata nodded and Naruto caught a glimpse of her seal. He hated seeing that...thing on Hinata. Naruto thought it was wrong to seal anyone like that, but to do such a thing to Hinata was inhuman. Something so cruel had no place on Hinata. He blinked twice and quickly ate in an attempt to get his head on straight. Naruto’s first instinct was to run and find Iruka-sensei. ‘Yeah, right. How would I explain that to Hinata-chan? Oh, don't worry Hinata-chan, I just bolted because I was confused by how I started feeling about you.’

“That would be wonderful. I’d like that,” Hinata said with a sad smile. There was only one thing she missed more than the gardens in the Hyūga Compound, and that was her sister. ‘Hanabi, I hope you are okay...’

Hinata looked up and saw that she was the center of Naruto’s world. She was struck by the thought of Naruto's face as a canvas, a painting. Instead of using colors and paint, it was as if an artist had used emotion and the way light danced in his eyes to tell the story. This was a completely new experience for Hinata. She was pinned in place by Naruto’s gaze and the emotion washing over her. Hinata looked to the heavens and noticed the sun was setting. It took a moment for Naruto and Hinata to realize that they had finished eating. They had been so absorbed in their unspoken connection that even the zenzai’s familiar and welcome taste had failed to register.

“I can't believe we stayed out so late,” Hinata let a hint of embarrassment slip into her voice.
“I can,” Naruto responded instantly. “We're together and in our spot.”

“O-our spot?”

“Y-yeah,” Naruto suddenly felt very nervous. Why was it becoming so hard to say what he meant? “I...I just think this place will always be ours and ours alone, ya know? I mean, to anyone else, it's just a couple of bushes and trees. To us, well, it's where everything we have started.”

“Everything we have?” Hinata felt a hitch in her throat.

“Y-yeah,” Naruto managed to speak after a quiet moment. There was so much he felt the need to say, but he couldn’t find the words that do the feelings justice. So, he settled for a smile. His heart leapt when Hinata returned the smile. Maybe, Naruto thought, he didn't need to say anything.

The remaining four days before the graduation exam passed quickly. They had passed the time with last-minute training. Naruto had actually focused on academics. He had made too much progress with his ninjutsu and taijutsu to fail because of the written exam. Hinata had devoted her attention to her shuriken and kunai. The Hyūga had always focused nearly exclusively on taijutsu. Gentle Fist style was the most formidable fighting style in the world. Hinata remembered her former clan's tutors proudly stating that sometimes the mere rumor of facing a Hyūga could win battles. Only the strongest foreign ninja would stand against a Hyūga.

"Strongest," Hinata examined the word. She wanted to be strong. She wanted to be respected. She also knew that Naruto wanted the same thing. The desire to be accepted and respected was one of the many things that drew the two fundamentally lonely children to each other.

However, it was the respect that Naruto and Hinata had for each other that kept them together. Naruto had accepted Hinata, even though she was banished and flawed. He thought she was incredible and was not shy in telling Hinata his opinion. Hinata, for her part greatly admired Naruto’s unconquerable determination and good humor. She, however, recognized and accepted Naruto’s stubbornness and impulsive nature.

Hinata took a deep breath as she refocused. Today was the day.
“Hinata-chan, I wouldn't be this ready without you,” Naruto breathed hastily.

“I don't want to think where I would be without you,” Hinata confessed. Naruto suddenly took her hand as they reached the Academy. Hinata felt her knees become weak for an entirely different reason than her nervousness about the upcoming test.

“Regardless what happens, we'll always have each other,” Naruto swore. He closed his eyes and knew that those words were among the truest he had ever spoken.

Naruto and Hinata pushed open the doors and prepared to enter a new and exciting world.
Chapter 7

Iruka took a deep breath as he entered the Academy's main foyer. He was glad Sasuke, Naruto, and Hinata had listened to his request to arrive early. Iruka would have felt terrible if he had been unable to give his students a bit of last-minute advice.

“I'm very proud of all of you. Today is your first step into a new world. It is my sincere hope that I have provided you with a solid foundation for your futures. It has been my pleasure and honor to be your teacher. I have faith in all of you and wish you all the success in the world,” Iruka finished with a smile.

“You spent all morning practicing that, didn't you Iruka-sensei?” Naruto asked cheekily. Iruka flushed and muttered something about gray hairs under his breath.

“I did. It is tradition for Academy teachers to say something before their students attempt to graduate,” Iruka answered in an encouraging tone after regaining his composure.

“It was a nice speech,” Naruto chuckled.

“Thank you, but I'm sorry. I won't be proctoring this exam. Suzume-sensei and Tamotso-sensei will be giving the exams,” Iruka apologized.

“It is alright, Iruka-sensei. We are glad you took the time to wish us luck,” Hinata bowed as she finished.

“Get going you three. I don't know what I'd do with myself if I caused you all to be late,” Iruka motioned with his head to the door labeled 'Graduation Exams'. Hinata bowed again before heading to the door.

Naruto waved to his favorite teacher and shouted, “Next time you see me, I'll be a ninja-ttebayo!” as he caught up to Hinata.

The 'dattebayo' generated three different reactions. Sasuke rolled his eyes. Iruka sighed, but acknowledged that Naruto wouldn't be Naruto without his distinctive verbal tic.
That was so adorable,’ Hinata thought with a smile. Sasuke walked past the pair and pushed the door open dramatically.

The room was already crowded. There were numerous cliques standing together chatting nervously. Occasionally, a person would point out the new arrivals. The other members of the cliques would scoff and write Hinata, Naruto and Sasuke off as ‘show offs’ or ‘overachievers’. Sasuke ignored the whispers and found a quiet corner of the room. Naruto felt, rather than saw, Hinata tense up beside him.

“Something wrong, Hinata-chan?” Naruto asked and the concern was evident in his voice.

“N-Neji-nii-san,” Hinata managed to force out. Naruto furrowed his brow as he searched the crowd for the source of Hinata’s distress. He found Neji leaning against the wall away from the crowds.

“I didn't know you had a brother,” Naruto whispered, but it bordered on a hiss. If their roles had been reversed, and Naruto had seen his sister again after what had happened to Hinata, he would have bowled over half the people in the room to make sure she was okay.

“H-He isn't my brother, not really. M-my father and Neji-nii-san's father were twins. I call Neji brother because I wanted him to realize he wasn't alone,” Hinata explained.

“Alone?” Naruto started to ask for an explanation, but Neji finally noticed the pair. He didn't move from his spot, but leveled a withering glare at Hinata. Naruto returned the glare. He wanted nothing more than to walk up and punch Neji in the face. Naruto hadn't seen Hinata this scared since that first night after Naruto had found her wandering Konoha after her banishment. Naruto knew how scared of this Neji Hinata was because she was hiding behind him and held the back of his jacket in a death grip. It was almost as if she wanted to disappear.

“I...I'll explain when we go home,” Hinata whimpered. Naruto felt anger coiling in the pit of his stomach and he really wanted to remove the source of Hinata's fear and pain.

“Okay, we'll get lunch to celebrate passing,” Naruto said gently to assure Hinata. Hinata nodded in relief as Naruto lead them away from Neji's line of sight. The two found a quiet spot and sat down. Hinata managed to calm down quickly after moving away from Neji.

“I'm sorry, Naruto-kun. Neji-nii-san always frightened me. He was always so harsh and bitter towards me,” Hinata explained.
Naruto patted her hand. “Don't worry 'bout it Hinata-chan. You've got nothing to be sorry about. If anything, this Neji guy needs to apologize for being such a jerk.”

Hinata nodded in an attempt to placate Naruto. She had never liked being the center of attention and the incident with Neji had drawn the attention of several people. After a few moments, the attention waned and Hinata became far more comfortable.

“Mind if I sit here?” Naruto and Hinata looked up at the girl who asked the question. The girl was one of the older students. Hinata and Naruto noticed that she was wearing a pink blouse and green pants.

“Sure,” Naruto said with a shrug. The girl smiled and sat down.

“I'm Tenten, by the way,” the girl said cheerfully.

“Pleased to meet you. I am Hinata,” Hinata introduced herself.

Naruto smiled broadly. He was more convinced than ever that Hinata was the most polite person in the world. “Uzumaki Naruto!”

“I didn't know anyone was going to try to graduate early,” Tenten said in a conversational tone.

“We are ready. And...we need to graduate. We can't fulfill our dreams in the Academy.” Tenten and Naruto were both shocked by Hinata's words. Naruto was proud that Hinata had recovered so quickly. On the other hand, Tenten hadn't expected the girl to speak with such confidence. The first image Tenten had of Hinata was the younger girl recovering from a panic attack. Tenten recognized the symptoms from the time she had spent studying medicinal ninjutsu and all aspects of human health. Tenten swallowed back a sigh as she recalled her failed attempts to master medical ninjutsu. She had realized that her chakra control would never be precise enough for Medical Ninjutsu. However, she had discovered that she had a different kind of precision. Tenten was good with throwing weapons. She loved weapons. The day she discovered fuinjutsu was almost like the day she was born again. Tenten no longer wanted to be the next Tsunade. Instead, she wanted to become a legend like Tsunade by following her own path.

As she observed Uzumaki Naruto and Hinata, Tenten couldn't help but feel that the two younger kids had a similar dream.
“You two certainly are interesting,” Tenten admitted with a smile. Tamotso-sensei and Suzume-sensei entered the room before Hinata or Naruto could respond.

Tamotso-sensei, whose name caused Naruto to snicker, launched into a longer version of Iruka-sensei's prepared speech. Suzume-sensei added a few remarks thanking all the students for their efforts and loyalty to Konoha. The two teachers exchanged a quick nod. Suzume adjusted her glasses with her right thumb.

“All aspirants will form two lines in front of either myself or Tamotso-sensei,” Suzume ordered.

Naruto leaned in close to Hinata. “Totally lining up in front of Tomato-sensei.”

“Tomato-sensei?” Hinata whispered back.

“Oh come on, please tell me I wasn't the only one to think of that?” Hinata shook her head and tried desperately not to laugh at her best friend's antics. Hinata decided to line up in Suzume-sensei's line a few people back from Naruto. She felt a bit mischievous and wanted to see how Tamotso-sensei would react. Hinata was so caught up in Naruto's planned mischief that she didn't realize who was behind her.

“So, Hinata, how should I address you?” Neji asked and, for once, made no effort to hide his derision or mocking tone.

“I-I am just Hinata,” Hinata answered shakily. The young woman was struggling to control her fear.

Neji smirked in amusement, despite knowing how petty this 'conversation' ultimately was. “Ah, it seems the honored Main Branch stripped you of your name when they discarded you. Tell me Hinata, how does it feel to be so alone?”

“I...I am not alone,” Hinata said quietly. She swallowed back her rising nerves and looked up at the taller boy. Hinata silently cursed her trembling. The young woman was terrified, truly terrified, but she refused to run away. She longed to run away to the comfort and safety of the apartment she shared with Naruto. Hinata felt safe there. She felt welcomed there.

'No, I can't do that. If I can't face Neji-nii-san, how can I face an enemy ninja? If I run away, how
could I face my friends? How could I face Naruto-kun? How could I face myself in the mirror?’

Hinata struggled against her fear.

“You discovered a group of fellow failures to congregate with,” Neji declared. Images of Sakura, Ino, Ayame, Teuchi and Iruka flashed to the forefront of Hinata's memory. Hinata's other friends faded away and Naruto's smiling face dominated her thoughts.

“My friends are not failures.” Hinata said firmly. She was shocked by her own bravery. There was a flash of something in Neji's eyes that betrayed how much Hinata's sudden bravery had shocked him as well.

“I will indulge your illusions for a moment, and ask this question. If they aren't failures then won't you, the former Hyūga failure, only drag them down?” Neji continued his verbal assault.

“Fate...” Hinata mentally inspected the word as she spoke it. Neji, the Hyūga prodigy despite being born into the Branch House, nodded and smiled at Hinata's use of the word. “Maybe I was 'fated' to be a Hyūga failure, but I believe 'fate' has given me the chance to find my own success outside of the Clan. I-I believe I can truly achieve my dreams for the first time in my life.”

Neji scoffed at Hinata's declaration. “You may have discovered a sliver of comfort or false confidence, but fate has decreed your lot in life. Your ‘brave’ words cannot change who you are.”

“No, Neji-nii-san, they can't change me. I am the only one who can change me,” Hinata said with a contented smile. She had pushed past her fear into a new and liberating world. “You can also change yourself. Neji-nii-san, you don't have to be alone anymore. This belief in fate doesn't have to rule you.”

Neji's Byakugan activated of its own volition and the prodigy trembled with rage. “You!” Neji spat venomously and reared back for a Jūken strike. Hinata's bravery wavered and she prepared to dodge Neji's attack or at least minimize the damage.

The strike never came, however. Suzume-sensei had grabbed Neji's wrist and gave the Academy student an angry glare. “I do not know, nor care, what personal issues exist between the two of you. However, I will not allow the two of you to disrupt this examination. Miss Hinata, draw a number and return to a seat. One that is nowhere near your fellow Hyūga.”

“She is not Hyūga,” Neji growled as Suzume let go. Hinata was breathing heavily from a combination of adrenaline and emotional turmoil. She quickly drew a number and retreated to
where Naruto was sitting.

She never spared Neji another look.

Naruto stood up and put a comforting hand on Hinata's shoulder the second she reached him. “Are you okay, Hinata-chan?”

Hinata barely nodded. “I...I will be. I've n-never stood up to Neji-nii-san before. I can't believe I did that.”

“I can.”

Hinata smiled in thanks and the two sat down. The two teachers gave a quick speech calling on the prospective shinobi to uphold the honor of Konoha through their actions. Suzume-sensei reminded the class, primarily Hinata and Neji truthfully, that they were expected to behave professionally at all times. Naruto grumbled at the thinly veiled admonishment. Tamotso-sensei announced that the examination would begin.

“Student number one!” The older Chuunin cried out. A boy from the back got up nervously and followed the two proctors into the next room. The second the door shut, nervous whispers erupted throughout the room.

“So, which number did you get?” Naruto asked as if they were waiting for their order at a café.

Hinata chuckled when Naruto put both hands behind his head. He truly had a gift for putting her at ease. “Number thirteen. What number did you get, Naruto-kun?”

“Six, but I'm kinda bummed about it,” Naruto confessed.

“Why would you be bummed about it?” Hinata asked in naked disbelief.

Naruto grinned broadly. “I wanted us to both get really low numbers back to back!”
That was a reason Hinata expected from Naruto. The class's whispers fell silent as the door to the classroom reopened. Tamotso-sensei and Suzume-sensei strode into the room. There was a collective intake of breath as the class waited for the first student to come back. The two teachers hadn't betrayed a single hint of failure of success. A heartbeat, one that felt like a full minute, passed and the boy entered the room proudly wearing his hitai-ate and a grin that rivaled Naruto at his most exuberant.

“Congratulations!” Naruto shouted and started to clap. The rest of the class, minus Sasuke and Neji, joined the raucous celebration. The young Genin blushed and waved nervously at the excited classroom.

Kijmuta Tamotso idly called for the next graduate, but his mind was focused on the change in the energy of the classroom. There had been an undeniable nervous edge in the prospective Genin. The Uzumaki boy's outburst had been perfectly timed with Genin Hiraki's successful return. Tamotso knew the outburst hadn't been planned. The Uzumaki boy, Naruto the Jinchūriki, Tamotso reminded himself, had acted spontaneously. The Tokubetsu Jonin realized that the spontaneity proved Naruto was more gifted than if the boy had acted with forethought. Naruto had an instinctive grasp of the moods of others. Kijmuta continued to ponder the mystery of Uzumaki Naruto as he mechanically went through the second test. The young woman, a Nara, passed easily. Tamotso followed the Nara girl into the class and took the opportunity to observe Naruto again. Hiraki Seiji had taken the empty seat next to Naruto. That caught Tamotso off guard.

Naruto was metaphorically held at a distance by a majority of Konoha. Only a few individuals were truly close to the boy.

'And all of them are steadfastly loyal and friendly towards the boy,' the teacher noted. Kijmuta was ashamed to admit it, but he had lobbied not to teach the boy. The responsibility for Naruto's education had fallen to Umino Iruka. The young man hadn't been happy at first, but within a few months had practically adopted the boy.

'Perhaps Iruka saw something we didn't,' the Tokubetsu Jonin considered. Tamotso turned his thoughts to the youngest Academy teacher as he followed Suzume and the third applicant into the test room. Iruka was universally liked by his students. However, he was one of the strictest graduation proctors the Academy had ever had.

'But his students also have some of the highest survival rates the Academy has ever had,' Tamotso acknowledged. The third student, a young man from a civilian family, finished his bunshins and was awarded his hitai-ate.

“Is there something on your mind, Tamotso-san?” Suzume asked.

The older teacher nodded. “Yes, Suzume-san. I have decided to nominate Umino Iruka for Tokubetsu Jonin at the end of this term.”
“Do you believe he's ready?” Suzume removed her glasses and cleaned them off with a cloth.

“Absolutely,” Tamotso replied emphatically.

Naruto bounced in his seat as he tried in vain to contain his built-up energy. Hinata giggled at his energy.

“That won't make the others finish their exams any faster, Naruto-kun,” Hinata playfully chided Naruto.

“I know, but they're taking forever,” Naruto complained. “I want everyone to see how awesome we are.”

“Thank you,” Hinata said softly and couldn't contain her blush. Naruto hummed questioningly. He didn't really understand why Hinata-chan reacted that way sometimes. Naruto did recognize it only happened when he used words like 'us' or 'we'. He could tell she wasn't embarrassed or anything like that. The conversation he had with Ayame-nee-chan and Iruka-sensei about the time he had called Hinata-chan 'his warrior princess' cleared up that particular confusion. Regardless, Naruto was still pretty confused by Hinata-chan's reaction. He wasn't saying anything really extraordinary; certainly nothing to cause her to act like that. Hinata-chan was his partner, and in a few days Naruto was firmly convinced she'd be his teammate too. Naruto was just stating the obvious. It didn't hurt that Hinata-chan seemed to appreciate the sentiment, so he wasn't about to stop.

Naruto grinned at Hinata, but before he could say anything Tomato-sensei called the next number. It was Tenten's. “Good luck!” Naruto called out.

“Yes, good luck, Tenten-sempai!” Hinata added her own encouragement. The older girl offered Hinata and Naruto a friendly two-fingered salute. Naruto's attention was quickly captured by Tamotso-sensei nodding at him.

'What the heck was that all about? Tomato-sensei didn't look at me like the other teachers used to. Heck, he almost looked at me like Old Man Teuchi or Old Man Hokage does...’
“Did Tamotso-sensei just nod at you?” Hinata whispered. Naruto wasn't surprised Hinata had noticed Tomato-sensei's gesture. She always had been the more observant of the two.

“I think he did. What's with that?” Naruto asked.

Hinata chewed her lip. *Today certainly has been memorable,* she thought with a bit of humor. It shocked her how 'Naruto-like' she had become since moving in with her best friend. *Or maybe I'm just being myself without all the expectations of the Hyūga burying my true self deep inside?*

“Any ideas, Hinata-chan?” Naruto prompted. He noticed how Hinata had zoned out for a moment.

“Oh, sorry Naruto-kun,” Hinata apologized once she realized how lost in thought she had been. “I don’t’ know. Maybe you could ask him when you take your exam?”

“I'll do that!” Naruto punched his right hand into his left palm.

“I wish I wasn't so close to the end,” Hinata sighed.

Naruto mentally debated his next course of action for a moment. He shrugged before making his decision. “Don't be, you're going to knock their socks off,” Naruto said resolutely as he took Hinata's hand. No one missed the blushes on the two aspiring Genin's faces.

“Thank you, Naruto-kun,” Hinata could barely breathe out the words. Hinata and Naruto sat in a companionable silence for a few minutes. The silence was broken when Hinata noticed Tenten throw the doors to the class room open. Naruto looked up with a grin.

“Congratulations, Tenten-sempai,” Hinata said excitedly. The older girl flashed the 'v for victory' sign and got back in her seat.

“Yeah, congrats, Tenten!” Naruto cheered. Suzume called for the next student. The young man gulped as he walked to the door. Naruto was bouncing on his seat. “I'm next! I'm next!”

“That still won't speed things up, Naruto-kun,” Hinata said teasingly.
Naruto pouted. “But...” Hinata started laughing at the face Naruto had made. Naruto’s innocent ‘what’ caused the quiet laugh to become increasingly loud. Hinata quickly put a hand in front of her mouth to stifle her laugh. It worked and she calmed down quickly.

“I like it when you laugh,” Naruto’s words were practically a smile.

“Sorry to interrupt, but do you two ever stop flirting?” Tenten asked from across the aisle. One of the other students had taken Tenten’s spot during her examination. The two in question were so stunned, and confused, by the question that they couldn’t react in any way. Suzume-sensei’s arrival saved Hinata and Naruto from any further embarrassment. The kunoichi called Naruto’s number and his embarrassment was pushed aside by eager anticipation.

“I can't wait to see your hitai-ate, Naruto-kun,” Hinata said encouragingly. Naruto flashed a thumbs up before bounding out of the room. Hinata sighed as she realized that she was still a ways away from her own test. She was about to talk with Tenten when a voice spoke from behind her.

“Uh, hi.”

Hinata turned and noticed the voice belonged to one of the older students. ‘He seems very nervous. This test is very important. I really can't blame him,’ Hinata thought distractedly.

“How,” Hinata responded politely. ‘I wonder if Naruto-kun's test has started?’

Naruto followed a few steps behind Suzume-sensei. The young man was still bouncing on the balls of his feet. His excitement was practically oozing from every pore. This was the first major step towards his dream of becoming Hokage. In a few minutes, Uzumaki Naruto would be a real ninja!

His excitement waned for a moment when he saw 'Number Five' sitting next to the door to Iruka-sensei's class. Naruto knew immediately what had happened. The boy hadn't passed. Naruto hadn't attempted the graduation exam before. He had been planning on taking the last offered exam, but he had shelved that idea. Hinata-chan, his best friend, had needed his help.
'What kind of Hokage would I be if I didn't help a friend?' Naruto asked himself. Number five obviously needed a friend right now. Naruto knew that if he had failed the exam, he'd be really down. It would take a whole lot of ramen and encouragement from Hinata-chan, Iruka-sensei, Old Man Teuchi and Ayame-onee-chan to cheer him up.

“Hello,” Naruto said as he walked over to the boy. The boy looked at Naruto with hurt eyes.

“What do you want?” Naruto flinched a bit at the tone. He had heard some harsh tones in his short life. There were some villagers that were very harsh towards Naruto. However, this tone was different. It wasn't aimed at Naruto at all. It was aimed at the boy himself.

“I want to ask you a favor,” Naruto answered with a reassuring smile. The brown-haired boy's hurt look was pushed aside by a confused one.

“I just failed the Genin exam! Why would a genius like you want a favor?”

“I'm no genius,” Naruto assured the boy. He leaned in conspiratorially. “Want to hear a secret?”

In spite of himself, the boy leaned forward. Naruto looked over at his shoulder at Suzume-sensei and Tomato-sensei. Suzume-sensei looked really impatient. Tomato-sensei looked...curious. Naruto turned his attention back to 'Number Five'. ‘I'm awful at the Bunshin. I can make three good clones, but you should see the number of horrible ones that come along for the ride.”

“T-thanks,” the other boy said between laughs. “I needed that, but it doesn't change the fact that I'm too slow with my hand seals. I mean, if I can't pull off the substitution, how will I survive on a real mission?”

“What's your name?”


“Well Rikuto, I'm Uzumaki Naruto! You said your only issues were hand seals right?” Naruto asked. He had closed his eyes when he announced his name. Thus, Naruto missed the flash of recognition in Rikuto's eyes.
“Yeah,” Rikuto answered hesitantly.

“Have you ever played string games?” Naruto questioned the older boy. He pointedly ignored Suzume-sensei calling for him to hurry up.

“No, I've never done that.” Rikuto responded in disbelief. “How would that help me?”

Naruto didn't respond, but pulled a bit of string from one of his pockets. He started creating various patterns very quickly. “You should have seen my screw-ups the first few times I tried this. But, I didn't give up and now I'm really good at it.”

Rikuto just watched Naruto weave pattern after pattern in silence. He was stunned when Naruto held the string out to him. “Thank you, but what's this favor?.”

“Just never give up,” Naruto said confidently. Rikuto smiled back. It still hurt that he hadn't passed, but somehow it wasn't hurting quite as bad anymore.

“Hey, we're both going to be Konoha shinobi one day. We've got to have each other's backs,” Naruto said with a warm and inviting smile. Naruto turned to rejoin the Tomato-sensei and Suzume-sensei.

“Naruto!” Rikuto called out. Naruto paused and turned back towards Sohda. “Good luck.”

“I won't need it. I've worked too hard to need luck.”

Hinata was feeling awfully rude. Ogura Arata, as the boy had introduced himself, was clearly nervous and Hinata was practically ignoring him.

’Naruto-kun will pass no problem! I just have to have faith in him,’ Hinata silently reassured herself.

“So...what's your name?” Arata asked.
“My name is Hinata,” Hinata replied politely.

Arata smiled at the response. “That's a very pretty name.”

“Thank you,” Hinata blushed a bit as she instinctively and politely bowed. She may not be Hyūga anymore, but her years of etiquette training were still deeply engrained. It was also strange hearing a compliment from someone other than Naruto-kun, Ino-chan or Sakura-chan.

“What convinced a nice girl like you to take the exam early?” Arata asked.

Hinata cocked her head to the side. “Oh, Naruto-kun and I decided that we were ready to pursue our dreams,” Hinata admitted before giggling a bit. “It doesn't hurt that we need the money.”

“Need...the money?” Arata managed to force out.

“Yes, Naruto-kun's stipend from the village barely covers our expenses. Due to my...s-situation, I am ineligible for a stipend.” Hinata's voice cracked a bit at the end. It was still painful to think about how the Hyūga abandoned her.

“That Naruto guy...is he your cousin or something?” Arata asked. Hinata missed the almost desperate hope in the older boy's voice.

Hinata took a deep breath to gather her thoughts. “Naruto-kun...is my best friend and roommate.”

Arata blinked a few times. “R-roommate?”

“Yes, I moved in with Naruto-kun a while ago. I...had some...family issues and Naruto-kun was kind enough to help me through a very difficult time in my life. I'm as happy as I've ever been with Naruto-kun.”

Hinata was so caught up in her explanation that she didn't notice Arata emotionally deflate. She also didn't hear Tenten's amused laughter. Arata excused himself and walked off. Hinata turned her attention to the door and barely registered a boy with large eyebrows and a short ponytail take
“Welcome to the graduation exam, Uzumaki-san,” Suzume-sensei greeted formally.

“Thanks, Suzume-sensei! I'm really excited about being here, dattebayo!” Naruto practically shouted.

Tamotso-sensei smiled at the boy. 'Yes, Iruka definitely saw something we didn't.' “Your confidence is refreshing, but you must be careful that it doesn't become overconfidence. Hubris has been the downfall of many shinobi throughout history.”

“Hu-what?” Naruto asked dumbly.

“Hubris, Uzumaki-san. Hubris is excessive and dangerous amounts of pride. It is considered by some to be the Fourth Shinobi vice,” Suzume-sensei explained.

“Wow, that is bad. Thanks for telling me that stuff, Suzume-sensei,” Naruto said with a chuckle as he scratched the back of his head.

The two teachers exchanged a glance and nodded at each other. Tamotso-sensei cleared his throat and got Naruto's full attention.

“First, Naruto-san, we will need to see your proficiency with the Henge no Jutsu. Please demonstrate a transformation.”

Naruto nodded. “Who do I need to transform into?”

“Anyone you choose,” Suzume-sensei answered. Naruto grinned as he decided who he was going to use as the basis for his Transformation jutsu. He quickly went through the hand seals and was surrounded by a cloud of smoke.
“Welcome to Ichiraku! My name is Ayame. May I take your order?” Naruto-as-Ayame asked perfectly as the chakra-laced smoke cleared. Naruto wore the same smile that Ayame greeted every customer with.

“May I ask who this person is?” Suzume-sensei questioned as she jotted down a few notes.

“Oh, I’m Ayame! Like I said, I work at Ichiraku. It's the best ramen stand in all of Konoha!” Naruto-as-Ayame continued to play his role.

“Excellent execution of the Henge no Jutsu, Naruto-san. You may dispel your transformation now,” Tamotso-sensei said warmly.

“Sure thing, Tomato-sensei,” Naruto said with Ayame's voice. Tamotso's right eye twitched a little at the nickname. Naruto wasn't aware that Kijumata believed the nickname was probably a form of karma. Soon, there was a puff of smoke and Naruto's appearance returned to the boy’s natural form.

'No...' Realization quickly dawned on Tamotso and he nearly called an end to the test out of shock. 'The last name. The verbal tic. The...hair... his facial structure...I don't believe it. Naruto is their son.'

Suzume-sensei stood up and pulled a wooden kunai from the desk drawer. “Now, Uzumaki-san, please attempt the Kawarimi no Jutsu.”

Naruto's eyes went wide as Suzume threw the kunai at him. He barely managed to get the Body Replacement Jutsu off in time. Naruto gulped as he watched the coat-rack he swapped places with take a nasty hit. 'Oh man, I got lucky! That would have hit me square in the face!'

“Congratulations,” Suzume said after adjusting her glasses.

“You have done very well, Naruto-san.” Tamotso had finally found his voice. “If your use of the Bunshin no Jutsu is on the same level as your Henge no Jutsu and Kawarimi no Jutsu, you will pass spectacularly.”

Naruto nodded. He knew that his clones wouldn't be anywhere near as good as his transformation. However, his training with Hinata-chan had really helped. 'I'll be fine,' Naruto assured himself.
“Here we go,” Naruto said as he ran through the hand seals for his least favorite technique. It was difficult to see through the clouds of smoke, but Naruto swore Tomato-sensei had an eyebrow raised.


“They aren't all perfect, but Naruto-san did succeed in creating four perfect clones,” Kijmuta reminded his fellow teacher.

“Yes,” Suzume took her glasses off and cleaned them. Naruto was beginning to think it was a nervous habit of hers. “Naruto did prove he has acceptable chakra control with his mastery of the Henge no Jutsu.”

Kijmuta Tamotso stood up and smiled broadly. “Uzumaki Naruto, I am proud to welcome you to the ranks of Konoha's Ninja forces. Please, come forward and collect your hitai-ate!”

Naruto jumped straight into the air and yelled triumphantly at the top of his lungs. This was quickly becoming the greatest day of his life. It would only get better once Hinata-chan passed too. Naruto was breathing heavily as he approached the desk.

“It's alright, Uzumaki-san. I promise that this isn't a genjutsu,” Suzume said behind a reassuring smile. Naruto returned the grin and reached out for a hitai-ate. He didn't grab the closest one, but chose one a few rows back. The one he chose just felt like his. He couldn’t pass it up.

“I'm one step closer to Hokage,” Naruto whispered.

“Naruto-san,” Tamotso spoke in a warm and kind tone. “I'll be watching your journey very closely. Congratulations on this first step.”

Naruto smiled at Tamotso and Suzume before walking to the door. The newly promoted Genin paused with his hand on the handle. “Aren't you coming, Suzume-sensei and Tomato-sensei?”

“We have to finish some paperwork. You can wait for us in the hall. This will only take a moment,” Suzume promised the boy. Naruto nodded and shut the door behind him.
“It looks like Hokage-sama was correct,” Tamotso noted.

“His Jonin-sensei will have a great deal of work to help Uzumaki-san with chakra control. However, the boy seems to possess other talents,” Suzume agreed.

“Yes, his status as Konoha's Jinchūriki gives him many benefits. However, I don't think that is his greatest strength,” the elder Chuunin said as he crossed his arms.

“What could possibly be a greater strength than...that?”

“Charisma. You saw how he got Sohda Rikuto to open up to him. Sohda probably would have been a washout if Naruto hadn't approached him. That's not all, I think Naruto will be responsible for a few extra graduations this year,” Kijunma Tamotso lectured.

“You are talking about Naruto's spontaneous congratulations earlier.” Suzume put away Naruto's file. “I have a question for you, however.”

“Ask away.”

“You seem to have quickly grown fond of the boy, even after the disrespect he showed your name. Why is that?”

Tamoto laughed. “Call it karma and leave it at that.”

Naruto decided to surprise Hinata and come in from the back door. He wore his hitai-ate proudly on his forehead. It felt strange holding his goggles rather than wearing them. As Naruto entered the room, he sensed the familiar needling feeling of a glare. The glare was particularly noticeable because of the contrast. Naruto had just thanked a now former classmate for their congratulations.

“What makes him so good?” Naruto heard an older boy ask. Actually, if Naruto was honest, it wasn’t so much a question as a sneer. “I mean, how come she won't so much as look at another guy?”
Naruto had an uneasy feeling about the boy's conversation. He brushed aside the feeling and hurried down the stairs to where Hinata was sitting. Hinata saw him coming and immediately brightened.

“You did it Naruto-kun!” Hinata practically squealed.

Naruto's smile lit up the room around him. “Was there ever any doubt?” Naruto asked as he sat down next to Hinata.

“Of course not, but I can't help but be happy for you.” Hinata returned Naruto's smile.

“Thanks, but not everyone is happy,” Naruto replied with a half-smile.

Hinata furrowed her brow. Her seal was visible for a moment and Naruto had to repress a surge of sadness and anger that started in his stomach and wormed its way to his chest. “What do you mean?”

Naruto thumbed in the general direction of the guy who had sneered at him earlier. “That guy seemed pretty pissed off at me for something.”

“Byakugan,” Hinata whispered. “Oh, Ogura Arata? I think he's a bit jealous of you passing. He seemed quite nervous when he tried to talk to me.”

“He talked to you?” Naruto wasn't exactly thrilled by that thought.

“Arata-san didn't do much talking, truthfully. I actually felt very rude after he left. I did almost all of the talking and he seemed even more nervous after he left.” Hinata chewed her lip guiltily.

“That's it?” Naruto asked as the uneasy feeling he experienced early was pushed aside by a strange bit of relief.

“Well, he did say I have a pretty name,” Hinata admitted.
Hinata-chan did have a pretty name, but for some reason Naruto didn't like Arata pointing that out. Naruto huffed at Hinata's statement. He felt that odd sense of possessiveness at the edge of his mind return. Naruto didn't like the feeling.

“If he was so nervous, why didn't he speak up when I was here?” Naruto asked with a note of genuine curiosity. It was only a note, however. The rest of Naruto's voice was colored by annoyance.

“I don’t know,” Hinata answered after a moment of thought. Before Naruto could respond, Sasuke's number was called by Tomato-sensei. Naruto nodded 'good luck' to the Uchiha. The Uchiha nodded back. Naruto and Sasuke had never been overly friendly, but there was a strange grudging respect between the two boys.

“Sometimes, I don't get people. I can count all the people I really get on one hand,” Naruto grumbled. “What was his angle?”

Hinata nodded in agreement. Her social interactions had always been limited. The Hyūga had made their expectations of Hinata's social interactions very clear. The clan had demanded that Hinata speak only when spoken directly to and to remain as impassive as possible. Her role as heiress, even as short-lived as her time in that position had been, was always to simply observe.

In truth, she was little more than decoration. That somewhat dehumanizing role and the unreachable expectations had been some of the largest factors in Hinata's low self-confidence. The years of 'social responsibility training', her self-confidence issues, and isolation had made her very awkward around others. In some ways, she was as socially awkward as Naruto. They were both...uneducated in the full spectrum of personal interaction.

“I wish I knew. That was all very odd now that I think about it,” Hinata admitted.

The boy who was occupying Ogura's current seat cleared his throat. “Excuse me, I did not mean to eavesdrop, but I could not help but overhear your conversation. I may be able to explain.”

Naruto and Hinata exchanged a look. The new guy struck them as someone they could open up a little bit to. For Hinata, it was the newcomer's words and tone. Hinata could tell that he was choosing his words, and even his tone, to be as polite and friendly as possible. It was the newcomer's hands that put Naruto at ease. Naruto had noticed the small detail when the kid with the huge eyebrows cleared his throat. The kid's hands had been wrapped, but there were small cuts around the lower knuckles. Naruto recognized the source of those cuts. They came from
hitting a training board over and over again. Naruto knew this guy was a hard worker. He respected that.

“That'd be great. What's you name?” Naruto spoke up. Hinata nodded in support of Naruto's decision. She was going to ask that question herself, but Naruto had always been a bit freer with his words. He had always been the more confident of the pair, even before Hinata's already limited confidence had been shattered by her exile and sealing.

‘Though, I am beginning to believe in myself more now than I ever have,’ Hinata admitted to herself.

“My name is Rock Lee!” The now named young man said excitedly. “May I ask your names so that we may be properly introduced?”

“It is nice to meet you, Rock Lee. I am Hinata,” Hinata properly introduced herself. She knew that Rock Lee had heard her name during the conversation with Arata, but would return Lee's courtesy. Hinata was surprised by how polite Lee was being.

“Uzumaki Naruto!” Naruto introduced himself to Lee with as much enthusiasm as he introduced himself to everyone. However, the enthusiasm was a bit more natural than usual. He was also shocked that there was someone that could rival Hinata for title of 'The World's Most Polite Person'.

“It is nice to meet you both. As I was saying, Arata-san's actions are actually simple to explain,” Lee said. He held his left hand at shoulder level with the index finger pointing towards the ceiling to accentuate his point. “He was attracted to Hinata's youthful flames. Arata-san believed he had a better chance of capturing Hinata's attention during your brief separation from each other.”

Naruto grimaced at Lee's explanation. There was a part of him that wanted to go up and yell at Arata, but that part was outweighed by several facts. The first was Naruto was a ninja now. Arata was still a civilian and abuse of civilians by Ninja was a very serious crime. Second, he remembered how stern Suzume-sensei had been in warning off Neji. He had been glad for Suzume-sensei stepping in, but he knew that she'd step in to stop Naruto too.

'She might even take away my hitai-ate!' Naruto thought in a paradoxically calming panic. He cast a quick glance at Hinata and saw the look of shock on her face. That also helped calm Naruto down a bit.
Hinata blinked away her obvious shock. 'How do I even respond to something like that?'

“So, why'd he get angry and walk off?” Naruto asked. He assumed that something had caused Arata to give up and walk away. Naruto remembered what the older jerk had said when he came back from his exam.

“I-I think it's because I didn't pay him much attention,” Hinata admitted as the pieces fell into place.

That eased Naruto's concerns. “So, that's why Sasuke ignores all the fangirls, then?” Naruto asked as he looked to where Sasuke had taken a seat. He wasn't surprised that Sasuke passed. Sasuke may have been a bit of a jerk, but he was good.

“That is likely, Hinata-san,” Lee agreed.

Naruto decided to change the subject. He was tired of talking about this Arata guy. Naruto really didn't want to think about Hinata picking up fanboys. “So, when do you take your graduation exam, Lee?”

“I will be last, though I will not be taking the standard exam,” Lee answered as he watched the ninth potential ninja follow Tamotsu-sensei out of the room. He frowned as he realized the young woman who followed the Uchiha never came back.

“I...I'm not sure I understand, Lee-sempai,” Hinata said gently. She didn't want to pry into a potentially delicate personal matter.

Lee took a deep breath. “I have a medical condition that prevents me from molding chakra. It is strange; I can create chakra normally, but I cannot mold it to wield ninjutsu or genjutsu. However, I will prove to the world that I can be a splendid ninja with only taijutsu!”

“That'll take a lot of work,” Naruto pointed out. Lee nodded enthusiastically.

“Indeed! However, I will endure and overcome any challenge to reach my dream! I am thankful that Guy-sensei has agreed to show me the way to focus the flames of my youth!”
“That is wonderful, Lee-sempai. I do have a question, though,” Hinata said delicately.

Rock Lee nodded. “How will I be able to graduate?” Naruto and Hinata both nodded. “I have a medical waiver signed by the head of Konoha’s Shinobi Hospital, the Hokage, and Guy-sensei. If I did not have this medical waiver or a Jonin willing to take me under his or her wing, I would not be able to continue my life as a shinobi.”

“That’s so cool that you’ve already got a Jonin teaching you! Hinata-chan and I have been doing all our training on our own,” Naruto said excitedly.

Hinata smiled. “We also realize that it will take a great deal of hard work to achieve our own dreams.”

Lee was clearly becoming emotional. “It is so wonderful to see others who are dedicated to working towards their dreams!”

“Number Eleven!” Tamotso called out from the doorway.

“Uh, sure thing...Lee,” Naruto said with a smile. He turned his attention to Hinata. “It's almost your turn! You'll be a ninja in a few minutes!”

“I'm nervous, but excited,” Hinata confessed. Naruto laughed and waved off Hinata’s concerns.

“You've got nothing to be nervous about, Hinata-chan! If they let me pass with my bunshin issues and Sasuke with his 'not being as awesome as us' issue, you’ll pass no problem,” Naruto said excitedly.

Hinata matched Naruto's laugh. Lee even chuckled at the exchange. Naruto spent the next few minutes telling Hinata how the test was organized. He warned Hinata about how Suzume-sensei tested the Substitution Jutsu by not telling when she would throw the wooden kunai.

Tamotso-sensei called Hinata’s number. Hinata took a few calming breaths before standing up and walking to where Tamotso was waiting. Naruto and Lee where both cheering for Hinata. She couldn’t help but smile at their support. Hinata didn't know Lee, at all really, but she was grateful for his earnest support. She meant no disrespect to Lee, but his support paled in comparison to Naruto’s. Naruto’s support was a fundamental part of Hinata’s life now. His support had pulled her out of her dark and lonely place. His support and his smile had saved her.
‘I’m so close to being a ninja. I can almost feel myself growing and changing!’ Hinata felt her own smile grace her lips.

“Welcome to the Graduation examination, Miss Hinata,” Suzume greeted formally.

Hinata bowed equally as formally. “I am honored to be here.”

“Now, Miss Hinata please demonstrate the Henge no Jutsu,” Tamotso-sensei said without preamble, but with a friendly tone.

“Of course, Tamotso-sensei. Is there someone specific I need to mimic?” Hinata asked.

“Please transform into your father, Hyūga Hiashi,” Tamotso ordered. Hinata flinched at the order. Why did they have to chose him? Hinata felt a ghostly pain in her seal and a tremor of fear up her spine.

But she carried out the jutsu.

“Well done,” Suzume said as the smoke cleared. Hinata-as-Hiashi took a single deep breath.

“Thank you,” Hinata said with Hiashi’s voice. Hinata struggled to imitate Hiashi’s stance and tone of voice. It was a titanic struggle. The memories of his harsh treatment were making Hinata want to run away. She wanted to dispel her transformation and find somewhere to hide.

“You may dispel the transformation, Hinata,” Tamotso said gently. Hinata nodded and gratefully undid the transformation.

“The next test will be the Kawarimi no Jutsu,” Suzume announced as she adjusted her glasses. Hinata felt her body tense in preparation. She decided to activate her Byakugan as an added precaution. Hinata’s Bloodline Limit warned her that Suzume-sensei would not be making the throw. It was Tamotso! Hinata quickly went through the hand seals and substituted with the trashcan behind the exam proctors. The Hyūga tutors had always taught Hinata that if she had to use the Kawarimi no Jutsu, that she should use the jutsu to close the distance and, if possible, appear in an advantageous position.
“Truly superb,” the kunoichi instructor said in a tone bordering on awe. The tone caught Hinata completely off guard.

'I didn't do anything that special did I?' Hinata wondered. Regardless, her heart soared at the respect the teacher was showing her.

“You have done well, Miss Hinata. Please demonstrate your mastery of the Bunshin no Jutsu,” Tamotso commanded.

'Mastery...' The word swam through Hinata's mind. 'No, I can't lose focus! I have to show that I can do the Bunshin! I'm so close!' Hinata reprimanded herself as she walked back in front of the teachers' desk. Hinata quickly went through the Ram, Snake, and Tiger seals. The proctors nodded as Hinata produced three perfect clones.

“Congratulations, Miss Hinata. I am proud to welcome you to the ranks of Konoha's Shinobi forces,” Suzume said warmly. Hinata bowed deeply before approaching the desk.

“Before you accept your Hitai-ate, I have a question. This will not affect your graduation in any way,” Kijmuta assured Hinata. The young woman froze a few steps away from the desk.

“What is it, Tamotso-sensei?” Hinata asked with a hint of nervousness.

“How has the application of the Hyūga Clan's Seal affected your Byakugan?”

Hinata swallowed. It was difficult to speak of her seal and abandonment to complete strangers. "I...I lost a bit of clarity on the e-edges of my vision for a while. I-I have begun to recover.”

“Do you know the precise range of your vision?” Suzume asked.

“Not, not specifically. I-I think it is around a mile,” Hinata admitted. Tamotso made a few notes on Hinata's file.
“Your jonin sensei will be instructed to give a thorough evaluation of your Byakugan's range and abilities,” Tamotso revealed.

“Of course,” Hinata said respectfully. She would be grateful for any assistance with her Bloodline. Hinata was truly proud to have the Byakugan. Hinata accepted the Hitai-ate that Tamotso-sensei offered and tied it around her neck.

“You aren't putting it around your forehead?” Suzume asked in shock.

“I will not hide.” Hinata's announcement was almost a whisper, but it was very brave.

Naruto’s reaction to Hinata's 'triumphant' return caused quite the scene. He leapt on the desk and shouted to the heavens about how 'unbelievably awesome' Hinata was compared to just about everyone. His exuberant celebrations caused quite a few laughs. However, there were some who considered Naruto to either be a foolish child or a potentially dangerous wild card. Tomato-sensei calmed down Naruto far faster than anyone expected.

“Naruto-san, I am glad you are pleased by your...friend's graduation, but could you please celebrate on your own time? There are others who wish for the same opportunity to graduate that you and Miss Hinata have enjoyed,” Tamotso calmly explained. Naruto sheepishly apologized and sat back down.

After several minutes, the attention had faded away from Naruto and he was growing bored.

“Neh, Hinata-chan, how many more people are left?” Naruto pouted.

“I’m not sure Naruto-kun. Suzume-sensei did just call twenty-eight. I have to admit...” Hinata trailed off at the end of her observation.

“What?” Naruto asked as he rested his chin on the edge of the desk.

“I really want to go find Iruka-sensei and tell him we passed,” Hinata said with a smile. Suddenly her stomach growled and Naruto laughed.
“And you want to eat,” Naruto pointed out.

Hinata was mortified. Despite her loss of social standing, she was still a very proper and polite young woman. “Y-yes, I was too nervous to eat a very big breakfast this morning.”

Naruto shook his head, which was a very odd action due to his face’s position. “I tried to tell you we didn’t have a thing to worry about.”

Hinata just sighed and put her hands in her lap. This was taking much longer than expected. Eventually, number thirty-six was called and Lee rose from his seat.

“Good luck with whatever they ask you to do, Lee!” Naruto shouted and waved.

“Yes, good luck, Lee-sempai,” Hinata agreed. Lee saluted both of them enthusiastically.

Lee’s ‘test’ was very short and he soon rejoined the graduates proudly wearing his hitai-ate. Tamotsu and Suzume stood at the front of the classroom and gave a rousing speech congratulating, and warning, the class for stepping into the Shinobi World. They spoke of the hardships they would face, but assured them that they would always have their future teammates and fellow Konoha shinobi to support them.

“Now for your first order from a superior officer! All Genin are to report back to this room at 8 A.M. Wednesday morning for Team Assignment! Dismissed!” Tamotsu shouted with authority. A chorus of ‘Yes sirs!’ followed the pronouncement. It was quickly followed by excited cheering by all the ninja who had passed.

The students filed out the classroom, but ran off towards the exit as soon as they were clear of the classroom door. Naruto, Hinata, and Lee hung back from the crowd.

“ Aren’t you going outside with everyone else?” Naruto asked Lee.

“No, Guy-sensei told me he would meet me in the hall,” Lee explained. Naruto was about to ask about Lee’s parents, but Hinata gently grabbed his wrist. The question died on Naruto’s lips.

‘Hinata-chan probably noticed something. She’s really good at that,’ Naruto thought.
“LEE!” A voice boomed down the hall and a shadowed figure flew through an opened window. “YOU PASSED!”

“I did! All of my hard work and youthful determination paid off!” Lee bowed and shouted.

Naruto and Hinata's jaws dropped. Whatever they had been expecting, this certainly wasn't it! Lee...was talking to a very large turtle.

“Holy crap! Lee's sensei is some kind of Ninja Turtle!” Naruto screamed and pointed a finger at the sight in front of him.

“Not exactly!” A second voiced boomed. A smokescreen quickly appeared on top of the turtle and another large figure emerged. He was clearly a veteran ninja. Naruto and Hinata quickly deduced that the tall man wearing a green spandex suit, flak jacket, and orange leg warmers was Guy-sensei. “I am Konoha's Sublime Green Beast of Prey and Eternal Rival to the infuriatingly hip Hatake Kakashi, MIGHTY GUY!”

“N-Nice to meet you...Guy-sensei,” Hinata said nervously.

Naruto leaned in close to Hinata. “Hinata-chan...don't get his attention! His eyebrows might smother us to death!”

“D-don't be rude,” Hinata whispered back as she elbowed Naruto gently in the side.

“Lee! It seems you have made some youthful friends!” Guy exclaimed and put a comforting, but firm, hand on his student's shoulder.

“Yes, Guy-sensei! May I introduce you to Uzumaki Naruto and Hinata,” Lee said excitedly. “They burn with the Flames of Youth just as we do!”

Naruto's bottom lip twitched a bit. Lee had suddenly put a great deal of emphasis on Youth. Guy smiled brightly and Hinata and Naruto swore they saw a ping of light on one of Guy's incisors. “That is fantastic! Now, LEE! You have officially become a shinobi of Konoha and I may now legally take you as my apprentice! As such, I can give you this sublime article of clothing that will
stoke the Flames of your Youth into a roaring inferno!”

Lee had a look of anticipation Naruto could only compare to the look he had when he found out he was going to Ichiraku for the second time. Guy reached into his flak jacket and pulled out a storage scroll. The look of wonder on Lee's face continued to grow. Guy, dramatically, unsealed the scroll.

And revealed a smaller, but otherwise identical, green spandex suit.

“LEE! I cannot tell you how long I have waited for the day I could share the wonders of The Suit with another!” Guy exclaimed and was visibly bawling.

“Guy-sensei!” Lee started to cry as well. The student and teacher embraced and started to alternate each other's names.

“You know, it's actually kinda nice how huggy they are and all,” Naruto said thoughtfully. Hinata turned her attention to Naruto and simply stared in open-mouth shock at her best friend.

“What?” Hinata barely managed to ask. Naruto simply shrugged. Hinata started to push Naruto down the hall. “Lee-sempai, Guy-sensei, w-we'll leave you to your...private moment! We have a lot to do. There are people we need to tell about our graduation and, ano, training! Yes, training!”

Somehow, Guy was standing behind Naruto and Hinata. He put both his hands on Hinata and Naruto's shoulders. “Thank you for your considerate feelings! Now go! Straight into the setting sun! Train until you become Geniuses of Hard Work!”

Lee was taking notes while weeping at the passion in Guy-sensei's voice.

“Uh, thanks?” Naruto said dumbly. “Let's get started with that...training! With...w-warm-up run!”

“Marvelous idea! Run! Run and let all see the brilliance of your hard work!” Guy commended the two other Genin. He didn't have to tell Hinata or Naruto twice. They bolted down the hall without a second look. Eventually, Naruto and Hinata came to a halt outside of Iruka’s classroom.

“What was that?” Naruto barely managed to ask before he burst out laughing.
“D-Don't be...like that,” Hinata tried to scold Naruto for his reaction to Guy-sensei and Lee, but she couldn't help but laugh alongside Naruto.

“Let's show off to Iruka-sensei and then go get some food,” Naruto said after calming down a bit. Hinata nodded and they entered the classroom. Iruka was sitting at his desk grading some papers.

“Iruka-sensei! We did it!” Naruto shouted as he ran towards Iruka's desk. Hinata followed quickly behind. Iruka looked up with a huge smile and hurried towards Naruto and Hinata.

“I'm so proud of both of you,” Iruka said as he hugged Naruto. He gave Hinata a proud smile and nodded at the girl.

“Thank you, Iruka-sensei,” Hinata said politely. “Would you like to join us for lunch?”

“I'd love to, but Ayame-chan surprised me with lunch earlier,” Iruka confessed with a blush.

“Oh man! We missed Ino's reaction didn't we?” Naruto lamented his luck.

“Ino's reaction was...unique,” Iruka admitted. “Ayame wants to thank you for your discretion, Naruto.”

Naruto laughed nervously. Hinata smiled because she knew Naruto was relieved he was going to be spared the 'horrors' of The Ladle.

“I'm sure we'll all see you two later,” Iruka said somewhat cryptically. Naruto and Hinata simply smiled and told their teacher how much they would like that before running off. They were very hungry. As the two newly-promoted Genin weaved through the excited crowd of Genin and parents, Naruto started to laugh.

“We did it!” He shouted as he jumped in the air. Hinata laughed along with Naruto.

“So, where should we celebrate?” Hinata asked in between giggles.
“Not sure, but I vote to eat it at our spot,” Naruto said with a shrug.

“We never did get food from that new place, Sayuri's,” Hinata mentioned offhandedly.

Naruto chuckled nervously. “Yeah, sorry about that.” He had kinda promised to pick up food from there. Instead, he had accidentally blown himself up botching a Fire Release technique.

“I'm just glad you weren't killed. I-I still remember the doctors talking about how shocked they were that you healed at all,” Hinata finished in a whisper.

Naruto's shoulders slumped. “I'm really sorry. I hate seeing you scared or hurt.”

“Everything worked out in the end. Let's focus on graduating!” Hinata finished in a chipper tone.

“So, how'd your exam go?” Naruto rested both his hands on top of his head.

“The henge was...difficult,” Hinata confessed. “They asked me to transform...into m-my father.”

Naruto stopped dead in his tracks and, for a moment, a flash of true anger appeared on his face. It passed quickly and Naruto made a dismissive noise. “That was a bit of a dick move.”

“I wouldn't put it like that, but it was unpleasant,” Hinata half-agreed, half-scolded Naruto for his point and choice of language.

“It wasn't all bad,” Hinata quickly changed the subject. “Suzume-sensei was very impressed by my use of the Kawarimi.”

“Oh?” Naruto's tone was one of expectation.

“She called my jutsu 'truly superb','” Hinata twirled happily as she spoke. “I've never heard anyone other than you be so impressed by something I've done...it was nice.”
“Glad to see other people are starting to realize just how freaking awesome you are. I was afraid I'd have to start going around and beating sense into people,” Naruto announced with bravado.

“Thank you, Naruto-kun,” Hinata managed to say in between giggles. Hinata could easily see Naruto going around Konoha challenging anyone he came across to a fight if they didn't agree with his opinion of her. “How was your exam?”

“Oh, I totally aced it like you did! They were shocked by how good my Ayame-transformation was. Then...then my demonstration of the Bunshin rocked! I really need to figure out some way to pay you back for all that kickass training! There's no way I'd be a ninja right now without your help. It probably would have taken me a long time to get the bunshin down! Oh, there's more! Tomato-sensei said he'd be watching my 'journey' very closely! I think we've found someone who realizes that we'll be Co-kage one day!” Naruto rambled excitedly.

The pair eventually reached Sayuri's and entered the restaurant.

“Welcome to Sayuri’s!” A waitress greeted warmly.

“Thank you,” Hinata said with a bow. Naruto whistled as he looked around the restaurant.

“This place is nice. I now have another reason to regret blowing myself up with that jutsu.” Hinata shot a disapproving look at Naruto joking about his accident with Katon: Edan. That had been one of the scariest moments of her life. She couldn't imagine her life without Naruto. He had become such an integral part of her life very quickly. The thought of losing him hurt more than she could put into words.

“W-Would you like to eat in?” Hinata asked.

“Sure,” Naruto said behind a radiant smile. “We'll get ice cream to take to our spot.”

The waitress led Hinata and Naruto to a booth and placed menus in front of them. “Oh, congratulations on your graduations.”

Naruto and Hinata, who had sat across from each other, beamed at the young woman. “Thanks! We graduated early!” Naruto proudly announced.
“That is incredible!” The civilian woman said respectfully as she twirled a strand of her sandy-brown hair around her index finger.

“We worked very hard to graduate early,” Hinata added.

“Wow, graduating from the Academy...early,” the waitress breathed. “Do you need more time to decide on your orders?”

Naruto and Hinata exchanged a look. “We'd like to order our drinks now, but we'll need a little time to decide on food,” Hinata said politely.

“What would you like?”

“Green tea,” Hinata answered.

“Milk if you've got it,” Naruto responded.

“Alright I'll get your drinks and be right back. I'm Ran if you need anything,” the recently introduce Ran said in a chipper tone of voice.

Naruto and Hinata sat in a comfortable silence while waiting for Ran to return with their drinks. The waitress returned swiftly and placed down the orders; starting with Hinata's. Hinata took the opportunity to ask about Ran's shoes. Naruto's eyes quickly glazed over a bit and he turned his attention to the menu. He saw that Sayuri's had ramen, but he wouldn't order it. Naruto couldn't bring himself to 'betray' Old Man Teuchi and Ayame-nee-chan by ordering ramen from another Konoha restaurant. He sighed as he looked through the menu and his thoughts turned to Hinata's conversation. Naruto was thrilled that Hinata was growing in confidence every day and was feeling more comfortable around other people. It was just that Naruto had forgotten that Hinata sometimes acted like every other girl.

'Or maybe she's never had the chance to act normal? The Hyūga kinda are pricks,' Naruto thought to himself and looked up. Hinata was becoming so carefree. Naruto was having fun just being around her. Naruto was hit by the sudden realization that Hinata's hair was growing out. When Naruto and Hinata had first met, Hinata's hair was pretty short.
'It's still pretty, I just wonder what it would look like really long,' Naruto thought before realizing the direction of his thoughts and quickly using the menu to hide the heat in his face.

“Thank you for that, Ran-san,” Hinata spoke warmly and Naruto could practically see her smile through the menu.

“Have you made a decision on your meal?” Ran asked.

“I'll have Chicken Omurice,” Hinata answered.

Ran wrote down Hinata's order. “And you, sir?”

Naruto beamed. He had never been called sir before. It was a good feeling. “Yeah, I'll have an okonomiyaki.”

“That test must have made you hungry,” Ran teased. “What would you like in it? Dashi or water? And what kind of extra; pork, mochi, or squid?”

Naruto looked up and saw Hinata make a face when Ran mentioned squid.

'Huh, Hinata-chan must not like squid or something. Oh well, it wasn't like I was going to order that anyway. Squid can't compete with pork!' “I'll have it with Dashi and pork.”

“I'll be back in a bit!” Ran announced happily and went to the kitchen to tell the cook Naruto and Hinata's orders.

“Neh, Hinata-chan,” Naruto said to get Hinata's attention.

“Yes, Naruto-kun?” Hinata asked.

“You didn't look thrilled when Ran-san asked if I wanted squid,” Naruto teased his friend a little.
Hinata shuddered. “I don't like foods like squid…”

“What else would you put in that category?” Naruto's natural curiosity had taken over.

“Things like prawn, shrimp and crab disgust me. Well, anything that is served whole-bodied like that. Ew, ew, ew!” Hinata shuddered as she thought of her most hated foods.

“Sorry, sorry!” Naruto laughed as he apologized. “I don't think I've ever seen you get so worked up about anything. I promise, as your best friend, roommate and soon-to-be teammate, that I will protect you from the horrors of crab and anything just torched and thrown on a plate.”

“Thank you, Naruto-kun.” Hinata couldn't help but smile at Naruto's theatrical answer. “So, what don't you like to eat?”

“Uncooked vegetables,” Naruto answered quickly and definitively. “Chouji once dared me to eat an entire raw zu-kii-ni.”

“Zucchini,” Hinata corrected.

“Yeah, that nasty thing!” Naruto accepted Hinata's correction. “I totally ate it all 'cause I'm awesome, but holy crap, it was nasty!”

The conversation quickly shifted to more pleasant fare. The two ninja were happily talking about possibly repainting their apartment when their meal arrived. Naruto and Hinata savored their meal. They had never splurged like this before. Even when she was still Hyūga, Hinata had never eaten a very extravagant meal. The Hyūga were refined and actually had a very strict dietary code. The Hyūga strove for balance and harmony. Hinata had to fight back a snort at that thought.

’I am truly becoming more like Naruto. The clan claims to be seeking harmony, but they only create a horrible system of inequality!’ Hinata thought angrily. It was an odd feeling, but the distance of time was allowing her to take a different view of her situation.

Hinata shook off the dark thoughts surrounding the Hyūga and thought about how much freedom she was now experiencing. If she truly wanted, she could even try one of the 'Five Pungent Spices'. Hinata wasn't sure why onions, scallions, chives, leeks, and garlic were taboo in the Hyūga Clan. She had asked Kō about the spices but he had only said that they caused bad breath
and had other 'undesirable qualities'. Hinata's former tutor had refused to divulge any details because Hinata 'was too young for such knowledge'.

“Wow! This is really good!” Naruto shouted as he ate his food.

Hinata nodded. “It is good. We'll definitely have to come here more often.”

Naruto agreed with several enthusiastic nods as he continued to demolish his meal. The two ninja finished their meal and relaxed in the booth for a few moments before asking Ran for the check. They paid and left a good tip. Hinata and Naruto knew they had indulged themselves, but it was worth it! They had just achieved something incredible. Naruto and Hinata left the restaurant and simply strolled along the streets of Konoha. They talked about anything that came to mind. The conversation wandered from what their friends in the Academy were doing to what plants they would buy after completing a few missions to their favorite colors.

After a while, they reached their spot. Naruto and Hinata had gotten an ice cream cone each. Naruto took a deep breath before deciding to say something that had been bugging him all day.

“Hey, Hinata your hair’s been getting longer,” Naruto pointed out.

“I know, I was planning on cutting it soon,” Hinata said as she played with a strand that framed her cheek. Naruto's eyes went wide in shock. Hinata wanted to cut her hair? The idea of Hinata cutting her hair reverberated down to his very blood as an almost criminal offense.

“Why? Your hair is, like, the single most amazing and pretty thing ever, anywhere! I mean, your hair would be like the First Hokage of hair if you let it get long!” Naruto blurted out in a panic.

Hinata's eyes suddenly grew very wide as well. “M-My hair is pretty?”

“Your everything is pretty,” Naruto said in a tone that made it clear that he believed he was simply stating the obvious. “I mean, someone would have to be blind or an idiot not to notice.”

Naruto felt a twinge in the back of his mind, but ignored it. He was more focused on how red Hinata was getting. Naruto started to become worried when the redness didn't go away.
‘Oh crap! It's like the time I called her my Warrior Princess! What do I do?’

“T-Thanks...so...I-I should let my hair grow to a hime cut?” Hinata squeaked out.

“That's a great idea! I mean, your already my Warrior Princess and all! That haircut was totally made for you,” Naruto said excitedly. He had been beaming, but soon realized what he had said.

'I did it again! What was I thinking?!' Naruto thought in a panic.

Hinata swooned. ‘He did it again. I'm his Warrior Princess... Why does my heart race and my head get so light whenever he says that?’

“You okay, Hinata-chan?” Naruto asked in concern as he grabbed Hinata's shoulder to steady her.

“I...I'm,” 'Wonderful,' Hinata thought but didn't say. She was confused and feeling light-headed, but it was anything but unpleasant. “okay. Maybe we should go home?”

“Yeah, let's go home,” Naruto agreed. The two made their way home. It was passed in possibly the most awkward silence that had ever existed between the two young people. They reached their shared apartment and both were craving some form of activity and distraction.

“Hey...Hinata-chan,” Naruto said a bit hesitantly. Hinata looked over to her roommate and cocked her head to the side. That tone was very unusual for Naruto.

“Yes, Naruto-kun?”

“I think we need to clean up the apartment. I mean, we haven't exactly kept up with it while preparing for the Graduation Exam,” Naruto pointed out.

“T-That's a good idea,” Hinata agreed. Naruto and Hinata quickly agreed to divide the tasks. Naruto would clean the bathroom and take out the burnable trash. Hinata vacuumed and would clean out the fridge. It took some time, but eventually the apartment was cleaned. More importantly, Naruto and Hinata had filed away their confused feelings and achieved a sense of normalcy.
Naruto was sitting on the edge of the bed with a tired, but natural grin on his face. Hinata had taken a spot on the sofa and also sported a pleased smile.

“This place feels better,” Naruto sighed.

“I’d feel better with a bath,” Hinata admitted. Naruto blushed slightly, but nodded.

“Me too,” Naruto agreed.

“You can take yours first. You did clean the bathroom after all,” Hinata giggled.

Naruto returned the laugh. “I get it. I stink. I see how it is.”

“That's not how I mentioned and you knew it,” Hinata pouted.

Naruto’s laugh grew wilder for a second. “I'm just pranking you a bit, Hinata-chan,” Naruto said as he grabbed a towel. Hinata blushed and looked away. She quickly grabbed one of Naruto's many training scrolls to occupy her attention. Naruto finished his shower quickly and traded places with Hinata. Ironically, he read the same training scroll to occupy his attention.

Hinata was about to ask Naruto if he wanted chicken or pork flavored instant ramen for dinner. They had splurged enough today and Hinata didn't want to cook anything that would cause a mess in their clean kitchen. Before she got the chance, there was a knock at the door.

“I'll get it,” Naruto called from the living area. “Hey guys! Come on in!”

Hinata was in the kitchen rifling through the now organized cupboard. “Who is it, Naruto-kun?”

“Iruka-sensei, Ayame-onee-chan, Old Man Teuchi and even Old Man Hokage!” Naruto said excitedly. Hinata bolted from the kitchen and quickly fell back on her years of etiquette training.
Welcome to our home, Iruka-sensei, Ayame-onee-chan, Teuchi-san. It is an honor, Hokage-sama,” Hinata said with a perfectly measured tone. Her bow was precise and she held it for the correct amount of time to show proper deference to someone of the Hokage's status. “May I offer you anything?”

Hiruzen chuckled and nodded at Hinata. “Thank you for being such a gracious hostess, but we actually came by to celebrate your achievements.”

It was only then that the two young people noticed that Iruka was carrying a number of bags. The teacher flashed a lopsided grin. “We've got presents to congratulate you two on graduating.”

“Presents! Man, you guys are awesome!” Naruto said excitedly and practically tackled the Hokage.

“We also brought dinner,” Ayame announced proudly. She tried to hide her nervousness, but couldn't quite push all of it aside. It wasn't everyday she cooked for the Hokage.

“Thanks, but I don't know if our table is big enough,” Naruto admitted sheepishly.

“Don't worry, Naruto. We have a place set up on the roof,” Iruka said with a smile. Naruto and Hinata nodded and returned their teacher's smile. The group made their way to the roof. There was a table set in the center of the roof. There were several covered pots and Naruto's mouth watered at the smell. He started to head for the nearest seat, but Hinata grabbed his hand.

“Naruto-kun, the Hokage should sit down first. He's the highest ranking person here,” Hinata whispered.


“Yes,” Hinata continued to whisper. “Ayame-onee-chan will sit next because she prepared the meal and probably planned this. We'll sit next because this dinner is for us.”

“Wow, Hinata-chan, you really know your stuff!” Naruto complimented his friend. The group sat down in the proper order. The meal was excellent and Naruto was giddy at the incredible ramen Ayame had made for him. Hinata was very touched that Teuchi and Ayame believed that Naruto and Hinata's graduation was worthy of Sekihan. Sekihan was only served on special occasions to celebrate birthdays or wonderful achievements.
The message was clear. Ayame, Teuchi, Iruka, and even the Hokage were proud of Naruto and Hinata. It warmed her heart.

“Ayame-chan, the simmered Hijiki was delightful,” The Hokage complimented the cook. Ayame bowed and profusely thanked the wizened leader. “Now, I believe we have two young people that are expecting gifts.”

Naruto looked for all the world like he was about to explode out of his chair. Hinata was also quietly struggling to contain her own building excitement.

“Why don't you begin, Hokage-sama?” Iruka suggested respectfully. The Hokage smiled and lit his pipe. He had refrained from smoking during the meal out of courtesy for his subordinates and civilian acquaintances.

“First, I wish to express my sincere pride in your accomplishment Miss Hinata and young Naruto. It has been several years since the last early graduations from the Academy. Naruto and Hinata, your hard work and dedication will be an example to all of Konoha.” The Hokage's practiced speech flowed so naturally that it appeared to all as if it was spontaneous.

“Thank you,” the two young people said simultaneously.

“You are very welcome,” the Hokage replied warmly after a drag on his pipe. “I hope you two do not mind practical gifts. First, Naruto's!”

Naruto grinned and leaned forward expectantly. The Hokage shook his head as he imagined the years melting off of him. Naruto had such a wondrous effect on the Kage. The boy's energy and strength of will were a welcomed treasure. “You have been itching to ask how we got the table to the roof haven't you?” Hiruzen asked. Naruto nodded very enthusiastically. “Well, I placed the table in a storage seal.”

The Sarutobi clan's patriarch nodded at Iruka. The teacher inclined his head politely before passing a tastefully wrapped present to Naruto. The boy whistled at the no doubt expensive paper before tearing it apart to see what was inside. It was a book.

“That book explains the fundamentals of the sealing arts. I believe it is a subject you will enjoy. I
have one more gift for you, Naruto,” Sarutobi finished his statement with a flourish. The Third passed another wrapped box to Naruto. Once again, Naruto tore into the packaging.

“Oh wow! This is so awesome!” Naruto screamed happily. It was a high quality set of kunai, ninja wire, and a few trap mechanisms. “Thank you, Old Man Hokage! Thank you, thank you thank you!” Naruto finally gave in to his pent up energy and rushed over to his grandfather-figure. The boy wrapped the Hokage in a huge hug.

“I am glad you are so appreciative of my small tokens,” Hiruzen said as he patted the boy on the back.

“They are, like, beyond awesome.” Naruto released the Hokage and sat back down next to Hinata.

“Now, Hinata, I have a few gifts for you as well,” The Third chuckled. This time, Ayame passed the gifts. Hinata smiled as she accepted the gifts. Her excitement was as evident as Naruto's, but Hinata managed to exercise a bit of restraint.

The Hokage’s gifts were two pair of high-quality Shinobi sandals, three pairs of pants, and mesh armor. Hinata was grateful for the gifts. The Hyūga had not given her any time to collect many items before her banishment. Hinata had been extremely worried about cutting into the limited budget she shared with Naruto to buy supplies. The second package included a set of high-quality kunai and wire similar to Naruto’s. However, instead of the trap mechanisms, Hinata received a pair of fingerless taijutsu gloves.

“You are very generous, Hokage-sama,” Hinata said with a bow. “I am flattered by your kindness.”

“It is a small gesture,” Hiruzen assured the young woman. The thoughtful gifts were anything but a small gesture to Naruto and Hinata.

“I’m afraid my gifts aren't quite as practical,” Iruka said somewhat apologetically. He passed Naruto and Hinata's gifts politely. The first gift was a series of picture frames and a flower press. “I know how much you both love gardening. I bet you two can get some mileage out of those.”

“Thank you so much, Iruka-sensei.” Naruto couldn't hide the emotion in his voice. He opened the small bag and pulled out an invoice. Hinata leaned in close to Naruto and the pair read it carefully.
“You're getting the hinges replaced!” Naruto said excitedly. The hinges on the apartment door were very old and Naruto joked that odds were that the door would fall on him the next time he answered the door.

“Thank you very much, Iruka-sensei,” Hinata said earnestly. “Your gifts were beautifully thoughtful!”

Iruka chuckled. “You both are my precious students. I'll always try my best to help you.”

“You're the greatest, Iruka-sensei,” Naruto choked out. Once again, he bolted from his chair and hugged the gift giver.

Teuchi laughed. “My gift wouldn't fit in a bag.” Hinata and Naruto perked up at that. Teuchi smiled as he captured the two children's attention. “As long as Ichiraku's is open, you two will always get a discount. In addition, my door will always be opened. If you need anything, I'll be there to help in any way I can. You two have had it rough and I want to help you move onto smoother times.”

“Thanks Old Man,” Naruto said softly as he repeated his enthusiastic hugging. Hinata was equally touched.

“I've got gifts as well,” Ayame happily revealed. “The men wanted to purchase these, but I put my foot down.” Ayame got up from her seat and delicately carried her boxes over to her two young friends.

Hinata had an inkling of what Ayame had gotten Naruto and herself. She was very excited as she thought about what was hiding behind the wrapping paper. Hinata actually beat Naruto in opening the box. Hinata's breath caught in her throat. Ayame had purchased a lovely, almost pearly, white kimono with a diamond pattern line with purple on each sleeve. The obi was a very delicate shade of lavender. It was lovely and Hinata was hoping that an occasion that called for such formal clothing would come up soon.

‘I might just put it on one day at home, just to wear it,’ Hinata blushed at the thought.

Naruto smiled as he opened his box to reveal his own formal kimono. “Wow, I bet I'd look like a badass in this!” Naruto imagined himself wearing the black haori overcoat and black and navy
blue hakama pants carrying an extremely awesome katana.

“I can't wait for an excuse to take pictures of you two wearing those!” Ayame practically squealed. Hinata and Naruto smiled softly at Ayame's enthusiasm. “Oh, Hinata-chan, I have one more item. It's not so much a gift as a responsibility, though.”

Naruto was suddenly overtaken by a sense of dread. Ayame's mischievous smile was not helping Naruto's rolling emotions.

“As Naruto is now a ninja and I am a civilian, I can no longer keep him in line,” Ayame announced. The Hokage, Iruka and Teuchi all laughed at Ayame's theatrics and Naruto's nervousness. “So, Hinata-chan, the responsibility of The Ladle is now yours.”

Hinata giggled as Ayame produced the object of Naruto's nightmares. She graciously accepted the cooking utensil/instrument of terror. “Naruto-kun is very well behaved and a...gentlemen,” Hinata finished with a blush. “I don't think I will need it, but will accept this responsibility with a heavy heart.”

The Hokage was rolling with laughter and slapped Teuchi on the back. The two old men could only shake their heads at Naruto's pleading 'You won't, I promise,' look. The evening ended on that amusing note. Everyone helped clean up and all departed with happy hearts. The Hokage and Teuchi decided to get a drink. Teuchi pointedly asked Iruka to escort his daughter home. Iruka was eager to agree. Naruto and Hinata exchanged a knowing look with each other. They were both happy for Ayame and Iruka.

Later that evening, Naruto was sitting on the couch after hanging his 'kickass' kimono in the closet. He silently watched Hinata gently replace the worn out picture frames with the brand new ones Iruka had given the pair.

“You know, except for The Ladle, tonight was the perfect ending to an awesome day,” Naruto said contentedly.

“Tonight was lovely,” Hinata agreed as she glided into the room. She took a seat next to Naruto and smiled.

“But you know what was my favorite gift?” Hinata looked at Naruto and silently asked for him to continue. “Everyone just being here. It made me so happy to know that the two of us aren't alone.”
“Iruka-sensei, Ayame-onee-chan, and Teuchi-oji-san...they have become our family,” Hinata breathed the words. It was a big step for her. She had truly moved on.

“Yeah, yeah, they have. I feel so lucky to have all you guys,” Naruto confessed.

Hinata sighed and rested her head on Naruto's shoulder. “We'll never be alone, again.”

Naruto blushed at Hinata's unexpected action. However, he quickly realized she had quietly fallen asleep. Naruto found himself wishing for this quiet moment to last a lifetime.

“No, my Warrior Princess, we'll never be alone.”
Chapter 8

Naruto was completely engrossed in the book the Third Hokage had gotten him. He was standing over the kitchen table and grinning at his handiwork. The book had suggested several patterns to practice before moving on to the most basic of seals. Naruto smiled as he wiped at his cheek with the top of his ink-stained hand.

“This is so cool,” Naruto whispered. He was struggling to keep his voice down. It was very late at night and Hinata-chan was asleep in the bedroom. Naruto couldn't wait to dive into the rest of the book. The newly minted Genin had even pulled out his relatively unused binder to take notes. 'One day…one day that damn thing will be gone!' Naruto declared to himself.

“N-Naruto-kun?” Hinata whispered from the 'hallway'.

Naruto quickly wheeled around. 'I was just thinking about her and she appears. How does she do that?’ Naruto wondered.

“I...I didn't mean to wake you up. I'm sorry Hinata-chan!” Naruto apologized. Hinata yawned softly and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Naruto stared at her with a blush dusting his cheeks as he realized Hinata was wearing one of his older t-shirts and a pair of sweatpants that were a size too small for him.

“You didn't wake me,” Hinata yawned again. “I just needed some water.”

“Oh, I'm glad my studying didn't wake you up,” Naruto chuckled nervously.

Hinata returned the laugh as she walked over to the sink. “The day we get out of the Academy is the day you start studying. I wonder what Iruka-sensei would say?”

The question was awkwardly worded, but Naruto knew Hinata was half-asleep. He was sure he'd said some crazy stuff when he was out of it. “Probably grumble under his breath for a bit then say something about 'at least your studying',” Naruto finished by mimicking Iruka's voice.

Hinata exited the kitchen gingerly carrying her glass of water. “Probably,” Hinata sighed. “It'll be strange not going to the Academy and listening to his lectures.”
“I know, I'm going to lose so much sleep,” Naruto honestly lamented.

“N-Naruto-kun!” Hinata tried to scold her roommate, but instead laughed a bit. “So, what are you studying?”

“I'm reading that book Old Man Hokage got me! Here, look at what I've done so far, Hinata-chan,” Naruto exclaimed proudly and pointed at his work. “See! This was the first exercise in the book! It's just supposed to be practice with seal-like calligraphy, but I think this is really meant to be like the chakra tubes!”

Hinata blinked at Naruto's excited babbling. She had always known her Naruto-kun was smarter than most gave him credit for, but his was surprising. He seemed to be making some pretty advanced connections. Though, she wasn't sure if the term 'chakra tubes' was a technical one.

"Wait, my Naruto-kun?" Hinata thought in utter surprise. She shook off the thought and took a quick sip of her water.

“Chakra tubes?” She asked. The question as much of a way to distract her from her thoughts as it was to discover how much Naruto had picked up about seals in the short time he had been studying.

“Well, that's not the technical term,” Naruto chuckled nervously and rubbed the back of his head. “The short version is that these are the 'tubes' your chakra flows through when you activate the seal. Can't you see it, Hinata-chan?”

Naruto pointed to the patterns he had been drawing. Hinata followed the patterns and noticed that they were actually two parallel lines. They were so close together that sometimes the ink bled into each other to create a single line. “I think so, Naruto-kun.”

“Man, why didn't they teach us this at the Academy! If Iruka had a class on this stuff, I wouldn't have skipped class as much!”

“This seems to be a very advanced school of jutsu, Naruto-kun,” Hinata pointed out.

“I guess. Maybe it's just because I'm awesome, but working with seals just seems so...natural,”
Naruto confessed. “I'm sure you'd be awesome at this too! I mean, you're great at pretty much everything.”

“Thank you, Naruto-kun.” Hinata's voice was warm despite her drowsiness. “I'm going back to bed. Good night.”

“Good night, Hinata-chan,” Naruto replied warmly. He took a deep breath before turning back to his book. “Okay, chapter four, 'The medium of the seal must...’”

Iruka and Mizuki were sitting at their desks waiting for the school day to begin. The quiet moment before the ruckus of the arriving students was always one of both men's favorite parts of the day.

“So, how was your night with Tsubaki-san?” Iruka asked Mizuki.

“It went well,” Mizuki said quickly. Iruka picked up something in Mizuki's tone, but couldn't place it. “Did you go out with Ayame-san last night?”

“We ate dinner together, but we weren't alone,” Iruka confessed. Mizuki was about to make a joke about Teuchi hanging over Iruka's shoulder, but Iruka quickly continued. “Hokage-sama approached Teuchi-san, Ayame-chan and myself right after Naruto and Hinata graduated. We all had dinner together with Naruto and Hinata to celebrate their graduations.”

“The Hokage?” Mizuki asked in disbelief. Once again, Iruka noticed something in his old friend's tone that he just couldn't place.

“Yes, it was a lovely dinner. Ayame-chan was so nervous! She prepared the entire meal. I don't ever think I've seen her that nervous.”

“She was cooking for the Hokage,” Mizuki pointed out the obvious.

“That's what I tried to tell her. I also explained that the Hokage is a very understanding and considerate man.” Iruka spoke while grinning softly. He could remember pretty much every detail of Ayame's frantic preparation of the meal. She had even brandished The Ladle at Iruka! Iruka
had to chuckle at that memory. The door to the classroom opened before Mizuki could ask Iruka what was so amusing.

“Umino Iruka, may I have a word with you?” Tamotso asked from the doorway.

“Will this conversation take long, Tamotso-san? Class will begin shortly,” Iruka inquired.

“I'm afraid that you will have to miss a portion of the day. This meeting will take some time.” Tamotso remained impassive and ignored the budding curiosity of the instructors.

“Iruka and I had no meetings planned for today,” Mizuki spoke up.

Tamoto took a deep breath. “This was unscheduled. The headmaster, Hokage, and I only came to this decision this morning.”

“What decision?” Iruka asked. He could feel something brewing; something that would change everything.

“Umino Iruka, it is my pleasure to inform you that you have been nominated for Tokubetsu Jonin.” The elder teacher gestured broadly at his pronouncement.

Mizuki’s mouth fell open. “You? Tokubetsu Jonin?”

“I...I don't know what to say,” Iruka muttered in shock.

“Nothing needs to be said. What is needed is for you to come with me, Iruka-san.” Tamotso began to leave the room. Iruka recognized the order and rose to his feet.

“I'm sorry, Mizuki. I'll try to get back and help you as soon as possible.” Iruka bowed before following Kijmuta out of the room.

Mizuki’s face hardened as the door shut. “You aren't sorry. Not yet.”
Naruto and Hinata were jogging along the familiar path towards the Academy. They decided to keep to the same path they occasionally ran. The path was familiar and each had memorized the distance. The pair also wished for the chance to see some of their classmates and friends again.

“Hinata-chaaan! Naruto!” Sakura called out. “Congratulations!”

“Yo, Sakura,” Naruto greeted.

“Good morning, Sakura-chan,” Hinata warmly said to her friend. “How are you?”

“I'm good. To be honest though, I'll miss you two. The Academy will seem, well, not as lively without you guys,” Sakura admitted.

Naruto flashed a lop-sided grin. “I'm sure we'll all be able to hang out when the team they put Hinata-chan and I on isn't out of the village.”

Sakura shrugged. “Yeah, I'd like to hang out with you two. Ino-pig and I need our daily dose of adorable romanticism.”

“Huh?” “W-What?” Naruto and Hinata sputtered at the same time.

“See, that was cute, I'll miss that,” Sakura sighed.

“Where is Ino-chan, Sakura-chan?” Hinata asked to change the subject.

“Oh, she had to help with some Clan stuff this morning. We'll meet up right before class,” Sakura explained. The pinkette suddenly sighed. “Ino-pig and I are trying to figure out what to be rivals over now.”
“Huh?” Naruto asked dumbly. “Aren't you two friends again?”

“Well, yeah, but,” Sakura huffed. “It’s just that we pushed ourselves as rivals. I mean, I trained a ton to get Sasuke-kun’s attention and so did Ino-pig. The two of us realize we need something to compete for now that Sasuke-kun has graduated.”

“Make it something long-term,” Naruto said suddenly. His previous confusion was gone. “You two want something that will drive you forward. How about racing to Chuunin?”

“Huh, that’s not a bad idea. I’ll run that by Ino-pig later. Hinata-chan, Naruto, it was good seeing you two. We’ll have to catch up when we have more time! Bye!” Sakura said warmly as she ran towards the Academy.

“I’d love that, Sakura-chan!” Hinata replied.

“Bye, Sakura!” Naruto waved. Naruto and Hinata resumed their run. They eventually reached the park.

“So, a bit of taijutsu work or chakra control?” Naruto asked as he stretched.

“A bit of taijutsu,” Hinata answered. “After my Byakugan, my taijutsu will be my greatest contribution to our team.”

“Yeah, your taijutsu is awesome,” Naruto agreed. “What do you want to work on?”

Hinata thought for a moment. “I need to learn to adapt my Jūken to different terrain. I won’t always fight on even ground. I need to work on my footing.”

“That sounds good. I always pick up a trick or two whenever we spar!” Naruto shouted excitedly and jumped to his feet. Hinata returned Naruto’s grin and got to her feet. The two slipped into their respective stances. “On three?”

“Three,” Hinata agreed. The two children counted to three before launching into an enthusiastic spar. Naruto and Hinata trusted each other completely and felt comfortable sparing at a furious pace. Naruto decided to challenge Hinata’s footing. He didn’t go all out and aim any kicks at...
Hinata's knees. Instead, he did everything possible to force Hinata into uneven ground or to keep Hinata moving. Hinata for her part, was trying to keep Naruto away from rough terrain. She may want to learn to use the terrain better, but she also wanted to win.

The two practically danced with each other for several minutes before they came to a halt. Hinata smiled as she held a knife-hand strike at Naruto's chest.

“I win,” Hinata beamed. If she had been using her Jūken, she would have won decisively.

“Actually, it's a draw, Hinata-chan,” Naruto countered. Hinata gave Naruto a disbelieving look which was countered by Naruto smiling broadly and flicking his eyes towards Hinata's leg. Hinata followed Naruto's eyes. Naruto's hand was in a fist about two inches from her thigh. “If I had a kunai...”

Hinata shook her head. “Naruto-kun, you are very sneaky.” Hinata's tone had no disapproval. They were shinobi. If Naruto hadn't done everything possible to win the spar, Hinata would have been disappointed. She honestly didn't want Naruto to fight fair on missions. Hinata wanted Naruto to win and come home. He was her rock and she couldn't bear the thought of losing him.

“Thanks! I can't believe I finally managed to tie you!” Naruto said excitedly.

“Shall we work on chakra control, Naruto-kun?” Hinata asked as she brushed a bit of dirt off her pants. Naruto's stomach suddenly growled and the pair burst out laughing.

“Eat at home?” Naruto asked.

“I think that would be best,” Hinata answered. “I don't think we'll be able to splurge again until we take a few missions.”

“At least we'll always have Old Man Teuchi's discount,” Naruto pointed out.

“I know. We'll always have a place where we are welcome. It's a lovely feeling,” Hinata agreed. The two unassigned Genin decided to walk back to their apartment. They had trained a good bit and needed a break. Hinata reopened the conversation by asking if Naruto believed Ayame would be the Hokage's personal cook.
“Of course, I mean, who else will be a personal cook when we become Co-kage?” Hinata laughed at Naruto's adamant declaration. The two walked at a relaxed pace through the slowly filling training grounds. Hinata paused and took the time to smell some flowers that Naruto didn't recognize.

“Don't worry about it, Hinata-chan. They are pretty flowers and who knows when we'll have a chance to be this relaxed again?” Naruto preempted Hinata's apology. Hinata smiled.

“Thank you, Naruto-kun.”

“You're welcome. Want to play tag?” Naruto suddenly asked. Hinata giggled and nodded her head in agreement. “Cool...you're it!”

“Naruto-kun!” Hinata cried out in surprise. Naruto took off running towards their shared apartment.

“First one home gets to wear The Hat on the first day!” Naruto shouted over his shoulder. Hinata laughed at her treasured friend's antics and took off after him. Naruto barely managed to beat Hinata back to the apartment. Hinata was disappointed that she had lost, but was pleased with her improvements. The two slipped inside and ate some of the leftovers they had in the refrigerator. Ayame had really gone overboard with the amount of food she had made. However, Naruto and Hinata would never complain. They were extremely grateful for the kind gesture.

After the meal, Naruto and Hinata simply relaxed for a few minutes. Naruto enthusiastically threw himself at the book on Fuinjutsu the Hokage gave him. Hinata was practicing with her Byakugan. She was trying to track a single stray cat as it made its way through a nearby alley. The cat eventually became bored and fell asleep on a sunny windowsill. Hinata deactivated her Byakugan and rose from her meditative stance. She was very pleased with her endurance and progress. Hinata was suddenly struck by a realization and checked the small closet where their supplies were stored.

‘I'm still not use to this long hair,’ Hinata thought to herself. ‘I do like how it looks though.’

She moved aside a bucket filled with cleaning supplies and checked her basket of shampoo and other bath supplies. Hinata picked up the shampoo and felt the weight.

“Naruto-kun, I'm almost out of shampoo,” Hinata called out.
“Want me to come with you? I mean, if you need anything other than shampoo, I can help carry it,” Naruto responded from the kitchen. Hinata blushed at the realization that Naruto knew her that well. It gave her a warm feeling in her heart. She had never been so accepted and understood by anyone before.

“All I need is shampoo. I'll just run to the shop and be right back,” Hinata answered.

Naruto leaned back in his chair and looked around the corner. “Okay, I'll be here when you get back.”

“Thank you,” Hinata said breathlessly. She knew it was more than just a casual promise that he'd simply be at the kitchen table excitedly studying the sealing arts. It was a deeper promise that he would be there for her. Naruto wouldn't abandon her like the Hyūga. Hinata had the sudden urge to hug Naruto. She swallowed back that urge because of her own insecurities. Would that be appropriate? Would that change things? Hinata wondered at the possibilities. A part of her wanted to take that step into the unknown. However, she still craved the stability of her friendship and relationship with Naruto.

'Maybe I should talk with Ayame-onee-chan,' Hinata thought and missed that she had adopted Naruto's habit of referring to Ayame as an older sister. “I-I'll see you in a little bit, Naruto-kun.”

“See ya, Hinata-chan,” Naruto said with a wave. He watched Hinata walk to the door, but his focus was on Hinata's hair. She had let it grow really long.

'Well, it's not really long. Hinata-chan's hair only goes to her shoulders now, but it's longer than the haircut she used to have,' Naruto mused. His thoughts wandered into a new territory. Naruto had found himself wondering what it would be like to run his hands through Hinata's hair. That line of thought made it very difficult to focus on his study of fuinjutsu and not on the powerful blush on his cheeks. 'Maybe I should talk with Iruka-sensei.'

Naruto shook off the thoughts, even though he found them to be suprisingly welcome. He had finally finished chapter eight of the book! Naruto had really enjoyed the book and seemed to have an almost instinctive grasp for seals. “Man, I wish they would have taught this in the Academy. I would never have skipped!”

Now, Naruto was ready to attempt to make a simple storage seal. The young man quickly gathered the supplies and an empty ramen cup. He laid out the scroll and began inking the patterns that would act as the chakra conduits. Naruto was pleased that the ink dried so quickly. Naruto
was well aware that patience was not one of his great strengths. Patience and calmly waiting was definitely was one of Hinata's strengths. Naruto placed the empty ramen cup on the seal.

“Here goes nothing,” Naruto said to the wall. He channeled his chakra into the seal matrix and held his breath as the ramen cup puffed away. “So far...so good. I guess the lack of explosions is a good thing...”

Naruto waited a few minutes before attempted to unseal the ramen cup. Naruto put a tiny bit of chakra into the seal, and waited. Only for nothing to happen. Naruto crossed his arms in annoyance and stared at the defiant seal. He was almost challenging the seal to do something, anything really.

The seal, after another second, happily obliged. The ramen cup shot out of the seal like a rocket and hit the ceiling. The cup hit so hard that it actually crumpled. Naruto's eyes went wide as one of the plates in the cupboard.

“That...was...so...**cool!**” Naruto shouted and ran to the trashcan and grabbed ever empty ramen cup he could. He threw them in an empty bag and grabbed his sealing supplies. The possibilities of his new discovery were dancing in his head.

Hinata hummed to herself as she walked down the street toward home. The walk helped focus her thoughts on the future. The former Hyūga heiress still had trouble believing the progress she had made! She had graduated *early* from the Academy and had been praised by the examiners. Hinata allowed herself to indulge in a vindicated smile. However, she was far more proud that she was growing as a person and a ninja. Hinata was proving her worth to her self!

As she rounded the corner, she saw a young woman painting. Hinata became curious and approached the girl.

“Excuse me,” Hinata greeted cautiously. The young woman looked up and Hinata was struck by how familiar she was. Hinata struggled for a second to place the girl's long brown hair and brown eyes. “I'm sorry if this is forward, but may I ask what you are painting?”

“It's alright,” the artist responded. “I am drawing the Takeda Warehouse. It was the first civilian
building built in Konoha.”

“You're art is fantastic,” Hinata said admiringly. “Oh! Please forgive my rudeness. I am Hinata.”

The artist turned and responded to Hinata's polite bow. “It is alright. My name is Kurama Yakumo. Are you a Hyūga, Hinata-san?”

Hinata looked away and towards her left. “No...I am not Hyūga. I am simply myself.”

“My apologies for treading into difficult ground. How long have you been a ninja?” Yakumo apologized and quickly shifted the subject to Hinata's hitai-ate.

“I graduated yesterday and will receive my cell assignment tomorrow morning,” Hinata answered.

Yakumo looked at Hinata excitedly. “Kurenai-sensei mentioned that an Academy student named Rock Lee was graduating this week! They say that he is trying to prove that he can succeed as a shinobi using only one of the three shinobi arts!”

“L-Lee-sempai did graduate yesterday,” Hinata answered quickly. Yakumo's sudden enthusiasm had caught her off guard. “He wants to prove that he can be a successful ninja with only taijutsu.”

“So...it can be done!” Yakumo said mostly to herself. “Did he mention how he got approval for graduation?”

Before Hinata could answer, Yakumo calmed herself. “I'm sorry. I just became very excited. My clan was made aware of Rock Lee and it gave us all hope that I could become a ninja as well.”

“I am sure Lee-sempai would be delighted to hear that he has inspired you,” Hinata said neutrally. She knew that 'delighted' might be a bit tame. Lee-sempai would probably be beyond ecstatic and claim Yakumo's hope as a victory for 'Youth'.

“Hinata-san...I know we just met...but could I ask a favor of you?” Yakumo asked breathlessly.
Hinata knew that favors should never be given lightly. However, she had a pretty firm idea of what the favor would be. “Of course, Yakumo-san.”

“The next time you speak with Rock Lee...could you tell him how much hope he has given my clan?” Yakumo asked nervously.

“I would be happy to, Yakumo-san. Lee-sempai would be honored to learn of how he has inspired the Kurama clan,” Hinata responded.

“How did you recognize my clan?” Yakumo was very impressed.

Hinata pointed to Yakumo’s easel. “The symbol on the hinges...it’s the symbol of the Kurama Clan. I was tutored in details of all the major clans of Konoha when I was still a Hyūga.”

Yakumo felt her mood brighten again. The Hyūga consider us a major clan! You are very observant Hinata-san. I am sure you will be a fantastic, shinobi.”

“Thank you, Yakumo-san,” Hinata said with a bow. Yakumo put a finishing touch on the painting and quickly returned the bow.

“You are welcome, Hinata-san,” Yakumo replied with a smile.

“It was a pleasure meeting you. I really must be getting home. My roommate, Naruto-kun is probably waiting to show me his progress on his fuinjutsu studies,” Hinata said politely.

‘A boy?’ Yakumo thought in shock. “Of course, I did not meant to keep you,” Yakumo said politely. She, however, saw her sensei Yūhi Kurenai walking down the street. Yakumo waved to her teacher. “It seems that my own time is up. My genjutsu tutor is here. Thank you for the lovely talk, Hinata-san.”

“Yes, it was a very nice to meet you,” Hinata said as she walked towards home. As Hinata rounded a corner and saw a beautiful ninja approach Yakumo. Hinata experienced a flash of a strange familiarity with the woman, whom Hinata assumed to be Yūhi Kurenai. Hinata shook off the odd feeling and headed for home. Hinata was an observant young woman and was very detail oriented. She often saw things her friends missed. However, there was no missing the odd movement from the roof of her apartment complex. Hinata instinctively knew Naruto was involved. Her instincts were rewarded a heartbeat later by Naruto.
“This is so cool!” Hinata shook her head at Naruto's excited shout. She quickly made her way to their shared room and put away her shampoo. Next, she joined Naruto on the roof. Hinata's jaw actually dropped at the sight awaiting her on the complex's roof. Naruto was running back and forth activating nearly a dozen different seals. After a second, the seals would actually launch a piece of trash or other random item into the sky like a bottle rocket.

Naruto came to an almost comedic stop in his mad-dash when he noticed Hinata. “Hey, Hinata-chan! You won't believe how awesome this is!”

Hinata giggled at her best friend's infectious enthusiasm. “I saw it from almost a block away, Naruto-kun.”

“Wow! They were launching that high?” Naruto asked. Hinata nodded in confirmation. “Oh, man, this'll be great when we get our teams! These will make great traps!”

Hinata nodded. Her mind had immediately made the connection. If Naruto's seals were launching trash that high, then they could definitely launch kunai. “How long is the launch delay?”

Naruto smiled at Hinata's curiosity. “Depending on how I draw the squiggly trigger, I can get a delay of six seconds. I'm sure with more practice I can get it closer to twenty seconds.”

“That's amazing Naruto-kun. You've only been at this for around a day and you're making incredible progress!” Hinata praised Naruto.

“Thanks, Hinata-chan! I had another idea earlier. We can use this to help you with your Byakugan!”

Hinata ran her left hand through her hair. “What do you mean, Naruto-kun?”

Naruto jogged over to Hinata and grabbed her hand. “Think about it! I can adjust how hard the seals launch their item. If I put a ball in the seal instead of trash, you can practice your dodging and stuff!”

Hinata's eyes went wide at the thought. It was brilliant. Hinata had been thinking long and hard about ways to exercise her Byakugan. “I can practice some advance aspects of my bloodline!
Thank you, Naruto-kun!

“You don't need to thank me! I'm just repaying you for all your help! Besides, we're partners and we'll always have each other's backs!”

“I'm glad you're my partner, Naruto-kun. I wouldn't dream of being with anyone else,” Hinata said earnestly as she smiled.

“If I did dream of partnering with someone else, it'd probably be a nightmare. Especially if it was with that Neji asshole or Sasuke!” Naruto shuddered.

Hinata frowned at Naruto's description of Neji. The relationship between the Hyūga prodigy and the ex-heiress was very strained, but Hinata still held out hope that she could one day repair her relationships with the Hyūga Clan. “I'm sure that would be quite the nightmare.”

“I don't think I'd be able to sleep for weeks!” Naruto poured every ounce of overacting he could muster into his false lament. “So, want to train a bit?”

Hinata looked to the sky. She did a quick calculation and pegged the time as somewhere around three o'clock. “Sure, I'd like to try out your idea.”

“Alright! I think we should only start with a few. I haven't exactly mastered this yet…” Naruto confessed.

“Maybe we should start with three?” Hinata asked. Naruto nodded over-enthusiastically. “I'm ready when you are.”

Naruto positioned the paper seals in small piles. “Okay, I'm going to have to substitute to keep up, maybe.”

“That would be good training too, Naruto-kun” Hinata agreed before activating her Byakugan.

“Yep!” Naruto agreed with Hinata's agreement. “Don't think I'm going to go easy on you because you are Hinata, Hinata-chan!”
Hinata watched as Naruto moved a few random items around and got into position. She took a breath to prepare herself and fought back a laugh as Naruto gleefully rubbed his hands together. Naruto acted faster than Hinata anticipated and she barely dodged the empty plastic bento box that came from her left. There was a sudden flash behind her and she rolled forward.

'Naruto is actually substituting with items!' Hinata thought in shock as she dodged an empty ramen cup. Naruto was substituting with items and jumping between the three small piles. The 'attacks' were coming from roughly the same angle, but Naruto's patterns were very unpredictable. Hinata was dodging the attacks easy enough, but was mostly testing her Byakugan's ability to track multiple items all around her. So far, she was very pleased.

Hinata jumped over an empty water battle that Naruto had fired at her feet and landed a few feet away from one of Naruto's Substitution piles. Her body tensed as she prepared to dodge another item. However, it never came.

“Ah man, I'm out!” Naruto whined as he plopped to the ground. “You did pretty good, Hinata-chan.”

“I want to be very good,” Hinata admitted as she sat down. Naruto chuckled a bit and shook his head. “What?”

“Nothing, I'm liking the way you're thinking. We can always improve! I mean, we're not ready to be Co-kage yet,” Naruto said with a smile.

“I can't wait to find out our team,” Hinata changed the subject.

Naruto instantly brightened. “I know! I wonder what our Jonin will be like?”

“I'm sure whomever our Jonin instructor is will be incredibly talented,” Hinata said diplomatically.

“They'll have us kicking even more ass in no time!” Naruto jumped to his feet. “Let's eat dinner! I can't wait 'till tomorrow!”

“I can't wait either,” Hinata rose to her feet with a smile on her face. “We are taking a huge step forward!”
The conversation turned to whatever came to the two young peoples' minds. At first, it was the standard fare. Eventually, Naruto changed the subject to something that made him slightly uncomfortable.

“Ne, Hinata-chan...do you think we'll run into ghosts on a mission?”

“Ghosts?” Hinata asked in surprise.

“Well, yeah, I mean...if we ran into one...” Naruto gulped.

“Maybe it would be a friendly ghost?” Hinata tried to reassure Naruto.

“Maybe.” Naruto wasn't convinced by Hinata in the slightest. “I'm getting hungry. Ready to eat?”

Hinata nodded. “Sure, it has been a long day.” The two went inside and ate a quiet dinner. Hinata noticed Naruto would occasionally look around the room as if searching for something. She became increasingly worried by Naruto's nervousness. In order to allay her own growing worry, she activated her Byakugan while washing the dishes. Naruto seemed to have calmed down. Hinata shook her head. She couldn't believe how easily she had gotten caught up in Naruto's near panic.

'I never imagined Naruto would be afraid of anything, much less ghosts,' Hinata chided herself. She finished the dishes just as Naruto came back from taking out the garbage. There was nothing out of the ordinary that Hinata could detect with her bloodline. She reentered the main room and saw Naruto skipping ahead in his book on sealing.

“Is something wrong, Naruto-kun?” Hinata asked.

“Nah, I'm good, Hinata-chan. I'm just looking for spiritual seals,” Naruto explained.

“I think there are already plenty of seals around Konoha, Naruto-kun,” Hinata said in attempt to calm Naruto.
“Oh?” Naruto asked hopefully.

“Yes, I'm sure the Hokages have taken steps to protect us,” Hinata explained.

“That makes sense...I can't see Old Man Hokage letting ghosts run around Konoha,” Naruto admitted. After a few moments, Naruto nodded and closed his book. “Thanks Hinata, I feel a lot better.”

“You're welcome Naruto-kun,” Hinata said with a smile.

“I don't know about you, but I'm ready for bed! The sooner we go to sleep, the sooner we'll find out who our Jonin sensei will be!” Naruto shouted excitedly. Hinata let Naruto use their bathroom first. Naruto quickly got ready. He bounded out of the bathroom wearing his pajamas and an excited grin. “I can't wait!”

Naruto flopped down on his bedroll in the corner of the bedroom. Hinata giggled at the return of Naruto's natural enthusiasm. After Hinata finished getting ready, she slipped into the bed. “I can't believe how close we are to being real shinobi.”

Naruto rolled over. “I'm so excited that I don't know if I'll be able to sleep!”

The next morning, Naruto woke up well before the alarm. He practically jumped out of his bedroll. The young man was shocked that he had actually slept so well. Hinata slipped out of bed groggily. She had gotten nervous several times during the night and hadn't slept very well at times.

“You alright, Hinata-chan?” Naruto asked as they prepared a quick breakfast.

“I'm okay...” Hinata paused and yawned. “I'm just waking up, still.”

The roommates finished their breakfast and headed for the Academy. Hinata managed to quickly recover from her restless night. Naruto's natural energy and optimistic enthusiasm swept aside her own fatigue. The pair were happily chatting about their future missions. Naruto was utterly convinced their first mission would be a bodyguard mission. Hinata believed it wouldn't be something quite so grandiose. She was expecting something simple, like an escort mission, to be
their first assignment.

Naruto shrugged. “I just know it'll be awesome.” A moment later, Naruto looked up and began to wave. “Oi! Sasuke!”

Hinata looked up and saw Sasuke approaching from the opposite direction. The Uchiha didn't respond verbally, but nodded at Naruto and Hinata. Naruto snickered at gaining some form of recognition from the stoic Uchiha. Hinata politely returned the nod.

“So, Sasuke, you ready to get assigned to a team?” Naruto asked excitedly.

Sasuke seemingly appraised Hinata and Naruto for a heartbeat. “I would prefer to work alone. Others will slow me down.”

Naruto and Hinata exchanged a look. “What are you talking about? If anything, having a team will make you even more awesome! I mean, I would have never graduated early if it wasn't for Hinata-chan.”

“Naruto-kun is right, Sasuke-san,” Hinata said in support of Naruto. “I would have never recovered from my...situation if it wasn't for Naruto.”

“I've never received any help,” Sasuke countered. The last Uchiha stuffed his hands into his pockets and kept walking towards the Academy.

“You've never asked for any,” Naruto pointed out. “Most of the girls in the class would have loved to have helped you.”

“Would you have?” Sasuke asked Naruto. He turned to Hinata. “And what about you, Hyūga?”

Naruto's face hardened when Sasuke called Hinata 'Hyūga'. “I would have.”

“If you would have asked...I would have tried to help you,” Hinata answered.
“So you say,” Sasuke said neutrally. He didn't wait for Naruto and Hinata to respond and simply walked away.

“Wow, I've seen him almost every day for a long time...and I still can't believe that he can be angry almost all the time,” Naruto scoffed.

“I feel sorry for him,” Hinata said sadly. “He never let anyone help him.”

“He'll be on a team soon. I think he'll be alright,” Naruto said with a shrug. “Old Man Hokage will probably put him with us.”

“Do you think so?” Hinata asked in surprise. She hadn't really thought about being on the same team as Sasuke. Hinata had quietly hoped to be on a team with someone like Tenten.

“Well, we're all the same age. How could they not want a team of geniuses in the same cell?” Naruto countered.

“T-true,” Hinata admitted. She was a bit unsure of Naruto's declaration that she was a genius. Hinata knew that title belonged to people like Neji, Sasuke, and Naruto. ‘Naruto is just a different kind of genius. His genius is his charisma,’ Hinata thought to herself. “And when Sasuke awakens his Sharingan, our cell would have two Dojutsu.”

“Huh?” Naruto asked. “I know you've got the Byakugan, but what does Sasuke have?”

“Sasuke-san hasn't awakened his yet, but the Uchiha clan was famous for their Sharingan,” Hinata explained.

“The Shari-what?” Naruto asked after flashing a quick glance to the nearest clock.

“One of the Three Great Dojutsus. I don't know much about it, but rumors say it allows its wielders to instantly copy jutsus,” Hinata explained patiently.

“Oh, not cool! That's cheating!” Naruto hissed accusingly. Hinata giggled at Naruto's vehemence as they entered the classroom. There were only a few prospective Genin already there. Tenten waved as she saw Naruto and Hinata enter the room. The two younger Genin returned the wave
and headed to where she was sitting. The others in the room were Sasuke, Neji, and three former civilians neither Naruto nor Hinata recognized.

“Hey you two,” Tenten said with a smile.

“Good morning, Tenten-sempai,” Hinata greeted warmly.

“What's up, Tenten?” Naruto asked as he sat down.

“I'm just excited to finally become a real kunoichi!” Tenten managed to avoid squealing in excitement...barely.

“We're all one step closer to our dreams. How could we not be excited?” Naruto asked.

Tenten laughed. “Good point.”

A few more of the recently graduated Genin filtered in while Tenten, Naruto, and Hinata were talking. The influx didn't put a dent in the trio's relaxed conversation. However, the next arrival made a 'grand' entrance.

“Good morning, my most youthful friends and colleagues!” Rock Lee announced proudly. He noticed Hinata, Naruto, and by association Tenten. Might Guy's apprentice bounded down the stairs and joined his friends.

As Lee was heading towards the other three young people, Naruto leaned in close to the girls. “He's actually wearing it...”

Hinata nodded and whispered back. “We shouldn't be surprised, Naruto-kun. Lee-sempai does idolize Guy-sensei.”

“Wait...you mean there is actually a second person in Konoha who dresses like that?” Tenten asked.
“Add about twenty years to Lee and you’ve got Guy-sensei,” Naruto pointed out. Naruto, and Hinata, had both taken to calling Might Guy ‘sensei’ out of respect for his position as a Jonin.

“Huh, I don't think I can say much. I went through a phase when I was six where I dressed like Tsunade for a few months,” Tenten admitted.

Lee smiled broadly at his friends as he reached their spot in the middle of the class. “Good morning, Naruto-san and Hinata-san.” Lee flashed a thumbs up and a radiant grin.

“Mornin' Lee,” Naruto said with a lopsided grin.

“Good morning, Lee-sempai,” Hinata returned the greeting with a polite bow.

“It is a fantastic morning, indeed! Today, we begin our journey as marvelous shinobi of The Leaf!” Lee took a seat. “Hello, Tenten-san. I apologize that I didn't greet you properly.”

“Don't worry about it Lee-san,” Tenten verbally waved off Lee's apology. The chatter filling the room quickly died as the door near the teacher's desk finally opened. Tamotso-sensei entered the classroom and appraised the assembled Genin.

“Good, you all arrived promptly. You followed orders. This is a very good start to your careers. I am proud of all of you. This class has great promise. Several of you have overcome incredible adversity to reach this point! All of you, though, have worked hard and dedicated many years of struggle to become Genin. I'll spare you the usual talk of bringing honor and glory to Konoha, the Hokage, and your clans and families. You are all exceptional and don't need to be reminded of something so basic. Besides, most of you have heard me ramble too much over the years anyway!” Tamotso finished. Most of the older Genin laughed at their teacher's joke.

“Besides,” Tamotso drew out the word. “You're more interested in the information in this folder.” The sensei held up a manilla folder. The entire group of young people leaned forward expectantly. Tamotso didn't say a word and chuckled as the classroom filled with expectant energy. “Team One will be Nishio Bunko, Takei Daika, and Morisue Yukio.”

Naruto groaned as the next team also was not his team. “Team Three is Hagane Tenten, Adachi Nobu, and Shio Katsu,” Tamotso announced.

“I hope your team is a successful one, Tenten-sempai,” Hinata whispered.
“Thanks, Hinata-chan,” Tenten said warmly. She chose the familiar honorific. Tenten was starting to like the younger girl. ‘We’ll have to hang out later. It'll be nice to hang out with a fellow serious kunoichi!’ Tenten thought to herself.

The small group ignored the next team because no one heard their name.

“Team Five is Yasui Kaede, Hyūga Neji, and Uchiha Sasuke,” Tamotso revealed.

“Huh, and here I thought we’d be on a team with Sasuke,” Naruto whispered to Hinata.

Hinata nodded. “I am surprised as well. It does look like the Hokage wants a team with a Byakugan and Sharingan, though.”

“You called it,” Naruto acknowledged.

Teams Six, Seven, and Eight were announced and the only name Naruto recognized was Ogura Arata. He was on Team Seven. There was no way Naruto would have wanted to be trapped on Team Seven. Naruto knew that arguing with your teammate wasn't exactly the best way to impress your Jonin sensei.

“Finally, Team Nine...” Tamotso paused dramatically. “Hyūga Hinata, Rock Lee and Uzumaki Naruto! Congratulations to all of you. Twenty-seven is an absolutely fantastic number of graduations and I am confident that you will serve Konoha with honor! Your Jonin sensei will arrive shortly. Take this time to get together with your Teams. I will pray for your successes.”

Tamotso bowed to the assembled ninja. Naruto and all the others bowed back. Sasuke and Neji, however, barely inclined their head. The older teacher smiled at the young shinobi before exiting the classroom. In the shuffle, Uzumaki Naruto smiled.

He was one step closer.
Naruto, Hinata, and Lee had moved to sit with each other. Hinata's and Naruto's grins had not left their faces. They could not have hoped for a better team. Lee's permanent smile seemed even brighter than usual.

"So, when do you think Guy-sensei will show up?" Naruto asked Lee.

"Guy-sensei believes in being very prompt, Naruto-san! I assure you that he will be here shortly!" Rock Lee said enthusiastically.

"I can't wait to start training!" Naruto said excitedly.

Hinata smiled along with her teammates. "I am also excited for this new opportunity."

The instant Hinata finished her optimistic declaration, the door to the classroom was nearly torn from its hinges. A green blur burst into the room. Naruto and Hinata noticed that Lee had a look of joy that was unlike anything the two had seen.

"Team Nine, I am Might Guy. Please, follow me!" Guy finished with a thumbs-up. Lee bolted from his seat.

"We're not going to have to wear one of the suits, are we?" Hinata whispered to Naruto.

Naruto gulped. "Don't even joke like that."

The roommates steadied themselves and followed their new teammate and Jonin instructor out of the class room. Might Guy led Team Nine to a nearby training hall. The Genin saw three seats and were given permission to sit by Guy.

"Congratulations on making it this far!" Might Guy said with his natural enthusiasm after turning to face the Genin with a flourish. "It is a proud Konoha tradition for Genin teams to give a brief introduction! So, let us begin with names, hobbies, goals for the future, and..."

Guy paused and rubbed his chin. Naruto, Lee, and Hinata waited almost with baited-breath for Guy to come up with a final choice. "Favorite food!"

Lee's hand shot up. "Guy-sensei!"

"Yes Lee?" The Jonin asked.

"May I begin?" Lee asked quickly. Guy flashed a thumbs-up and Lee lowered his hand. "My name is Rock Lee! My hobbies are discovering new ways to master taijutsu! My dream for the future is to show the entire world that it is possible to be a splendid ninja without ninjutsu or genjutsu! It is impossible to dislike food, but I particularly enjoy medium spicy curry pilaf!"

"I am sure that with hard work and dedication that you can make your dreams a reality!" Guy nodded. "Now, miss, would you care to go next?"

Hinata nodded. "I am Hinata," she said firmly. "My number one hobby is flower pressing. My dream for the future is...to become a world-famous medical ninja. I also want to be Naruto-kun's 'Co-kage'. My favorite food is definitely cinnamon rolls."

Might Guy had been briefed on Hinata's situation. Thus, he was not surprised when his kunoichi
charge did not give a clan or familial name. Guy masterfully hid his thoughts. There was something...off about Hinata's predicament. It was true that she had lost her position as heiress, but that alone should not have been grounds for exile.

'I will have to look into that. If there is the potential for any danger to one of my students, I must be vigilant,' Might Guy thought to himself.

"A most noble goal!" Might Guy commended his second student. He noticed that Naruto was practically bouncing on his seat in anticipation of his turn. "It is your turn now. Embrace that energy! It will serve you well!"

"I'm Uzumaki Naruto! My hobbies are being with Hinata-chan and everyone I count as our family! I am going to be Hokage one day and surpass all previous Hokages! Without a doubt, the single greatest food ever conceived by humanity is ramen! All kinds of ramen!"

It was very hard for Might Guy not to break down and simply forgo the True Genin Test. The test was not only required by the tradition and laws of Konoha, but served a vital role in preparing potential Genin for the truth of the world. The Academy Exam was simply a tool to ensure that prospective Genin had the physical and mental tools to carry out their future duties. The True Genin Test had a very clear purpose. Could the young shinobi put aside the Academy mindset that glorified individual achievement? Were they willing to put aside their individual 'needs' for the needs of the squad.

Might Guy had high hopes for Team Nine, but the Genin had to validate Guy's hopes themselves.

"Thank you for your wonderful introductions. Allow me to extend the same courtesy! I am Might Guy, Konoha's Sublime Green Beast! My hobbies are my intense training regime and my Eternal Rivalry with that infuriatingly hip Hatake Kakashi! I find it impossible to hate any food! Though, if I had to choose a single favorite, I would select super-spicy curry chicken! My dream for the future is to ensure you all become proud shinobi of Konoha if..."

The three Genin exchanged nervous look. Hinata cautiously raised her hand. Guy acknowledged Hinata with a nod. "Guy-sensei, what do you mean by if?"

"I applaud your insight, Hinata," the Jonin began. "The Academy Exam you all passed recently was merely to ensure that you possessed the potential to be shinobi. I am proud to say that there is no doubt about Team Nine's potential. Now, Konoha requires that your raw, youthful potential can be harnessed. Tomorrow, I will administer the True Genin Test. This will determine if you are truly ready to become Genin."

"B-But we all worked so hard to graduate!" Naruto blurted out. "What good would sending us back to the Academy do?"

Might Guy held up a hand to prevent Naruto from beginning an undoubtedly impassioned rant. "It is a safeguard. Many Academy graduates aren't ready to face the rigors of actual Shinobi missions. This test is to ensure that only the Genin with the correct mindset, as well as mental and physical talents, will undertake missions for Konoha."

"Guy-sensei, are you saying this test is to make sure that only those with the greatest promise become full Shinobi?" Lee asked.

"Your attitude and insight are truly remarkable!" Guy answered with a definitive nod. The Genin were about to press for more information when Might Guy smiled broadly. "This attitude will ensure you, and your teammates, can fulfill their promise."
"Guy-sensei," Naruto raised his hand and wildly waved it back and forth. "Guy-sensei!"

"Yes, Naruto-san?" Guy asked.

"So, when is this 'True Genin Test'?" Naruto asked with overly dramatic emphasis on 'True Genin Test'.

"The test will be tomorrow morning at eight a.m. I want you all to arrive promptly at that time at Training Ground Four." Guy crossed his arms.

"Is there anything else we should know, Guy-sensei?" Hinata questioned.

Guy rubbed his chin. "Eat well tonight. I recommend a carbohydrate-rich, low-fat meal with moderate, preferably lean, protein. Eat around eleven hours before we begin tomorrow. A light breakfast rich in carbohydrates around two hours before the test is also something I recommend. I want you all at your best for this. You will need every advantage to pass."

There was a moment of contemplative silence. "Any other questions?"

Naruto, Lee, and Hinata shook their heads. Guy nodded once. "Very well, I will see you tomorrow to decide your fates as Shinobi."

The three Genin rose to their feet and bowed to their, hopefully permanent, sensei. Naruto turned to Lee and Hinata. "Hey, you guys want to head somewhere so we can start planning about this? It sounds like a big deal."

"I believe it is a bit more than 'a big deal', Naruto-kun," Hinata said quietly. She was shocked by how much Naruto was underplaying the importance of Guy-sensei's test.

"Yes, Hinata-san is correct. This is one of the defining moments of our careers and lives. We must be steadfast and prepared to succeed!" Lee's voice rose with conviction as he spoke.

"I know, I know. That's why we have to get ready for it now! I'm thinking that we need to find out what each other is really good at and start thinking about plans and stuff. I mean, I couldn't pull off a prank without planning things out. This is a bit more serious than a prank."

The other two members of Team Nine nodded in agreement. Naruto led the way back into the Academy. On a whim, they passed by the classroom where the team announcements were made.

"This is unacceptable," Neji hissed through the door. "How can any responsible Jonin be this late?"

Team Nine paused just out of sight. They heard someone, almost certainly Sasuke, grunt in disapproval.

"M-Maybe he was delayed by a mission?" the kunoichi of Neji and Sasuke's team asked nervously.

Hinata and Naruto could feel the glare the girl received from the two 'prodigies'. Team Nine didn't want to cause any problems, but quietly hoped that Team Five could work out any issues they may have. They moved on quickly and exited the Academy. Naruto decided to lead them to a picnic table and they sat down.

"So, who wants to start?"

Lee and Hinata exchanged a look. "Um, Naruto-san, what shall we discuss?"
"Well, basic skills and such," Naruto started. "I'm good with traps and I've figured out this really cool thing I can do with seals."

Lee caught on and "I am learning some amazing taijutsu techniques from Guy-sensei."

"I have the Byakugan and the basics of Gentle Fist," Hinata said mostly to Lee.

"So, what are you planning, Naruto-san?" Lee questioned.

"I have an idea, but without knowing what this test is..." Naruto groaned. "Let's see if we can track down Iruka-sensei."

"Naruto-kun, we just got here," Hinata pointed out. She refrained from mentioning they only gave the most basic information about each others abilities. Naruto chuckled nervously and rubbed the back of his head.

"I'm just trying to make sure we succeed! There's no way I'm going to let you two go back to the Academy if I can do anything about it!" Naruto pounded his fist into his other palm as he made his declaration.

"Naruto-san, do you know where Iruka-sensei is?" Lee asked.

"Uh...Ayame-nee-san probably knows," Naruto replied.

Hinata giggled. "I am craving some ramen."

Lee had a feeling he stumbled into an addiction. One, to his budding horror, was likely mutually enabled.

Iruka listened attentively to the headmaster, the Hokage, and Tamotso-sempai. The headmaster, an elderly Jonin who lost an arm in the Third Great Shinobi War, concluded his contributions to the meeting by praising both Tamotso and Iruka's dedication to the future of Konoha. The Hokage gave the headmaster and Tamotso a nod as permission to leave. Tamotso rose after the headmaster. Tamotso and Iruka exchanged a respectful look.

Hiruzen was silent for a moment as he refilled his pipe. "You have been surprisingly silent, Iruka-sensei."

"This is a honor, Hokage-sama. It is just...I'm afraid it caught me completely off guard," Iruka confessed.

"You are a shinobi, Iruka-sensei," the Hokage pointedly reminded the teacher. "Which brings me to the next point of this meeting."

Iruka instinctively sat straighter and directed his entire focus on the God of Shinobi. The Hokage pulled a ledger from a drawer and, with deliberate slowness, opened it. Iruka immediately recognized the ledger as his own.

"You have an exceptional record, Iruka-sensei. In fact, you have nearly as many successful A-rank missions as some of Konoha's most renowned Jonin-level shinobi. However, it has been over two years since your last mission beyond the walls of Konoha," the Hokage said.

"I have been teaching, Hokage-sama," Iruka said nervously.

"And doing an exceptional job. You would not be here if we had any concerns about your
abilities in the classroom. Tokubetsu Jonin is quite the honor. However, the long length between your missions is a concern." Sarutobi puffed on his pipe after he finished his point.

"I assume I am being reassigned, temporarily, to the Active Roster?" Iruka asked, somewhat unnecessarily. He already knew the answer.

"Temporarily, the Academy cannot afford to be without one of its finest teachers for long. Tomorrow, you are to report for mission assignment. It will be a simple C-rank, but of course, you will receive other missions of varying ranks. You have only been nominated for promotion. Iruka-sensei, you must earn it," Hiruzen said definitively.

"Yes sir," the teacher responded to the order.

The Hokage chuckled to himself. "You are dismissed, Umino-san. I am sure there are several people you will wish to inform of your change in status."

Iruka blushed. "Well, a couple." He also noted the change in how the Hokage addressed him. It was a way of reminding Iruka that he was not a teacher at the moment. He was a shinobi again. There were different expectations and rules. Iruka would have to quickly return to that core of violence within himself.

Hiruzen's chuckle became a full-blown laugh. "I am sure Ayame-chan will appreciate the new increase in your income. Trust me, Umino-san, she will eventually appreciate a change of pace."

"T-Thank you, Hokage-sama." Iruka bowed after standing. Sarutobi nodded in response and refocused on the other paper work for the day. Iruka exited the Hokage's residence and decided that he really needed some ramen and Teuchi's awamori.

Might Guy was jogging towards the Hokage's tower to hand in his preliminary assessment of his Genin Cell with a broad smile on his face. He was very optimistic about his apprentice's two teammates. As he rounded a corner, he noticed that his Eternal Rival was finally heading for the Academy.

"Kakashi! Good afternoon," Guy greeted his friend and rival.

"Yo," Kakashi said neutrally. "You've already met your team?"

"Yes! I already had faith in Lee, but Naruto and Hinata have an admirable youthful fire," Guy boasted and flashed his rival a thumbs-up. Might Guy suddenly became serious. "I hope you are still not angry about the team assignments."

Kakashi stopped. "I'm not angry anymore," he paused and sighed. "I'm just disappointed that I won't be able to fulfill my debt to sensei."

"I am sure you will have many opportunities, my friend," the taijutsu-specialist said solemnly.

"Thanks Guy. I've got to go see what this latest crop of Genin is like," Kakashi grumbled. Guy nodded, but frowned. He had a feeling Kakashi would take out his frustrations about the team selections and his other deep-seated issues on Team Five.

"I have heard that Hyūga Neji and Uchiha Sasuke are supremely talented," Guy said with as much positivity as he could muster.

Kakashi shrugged, clearly he still was not thrilled with the team assignments, and said his goodbyes. Might Guy could only sigh and resumed his trek to the Hokage's Tower.
"Excuse me, Guy-san," a voice called out to Guy. The Sublime Green Beast of Prey was beginning to wonder if there was some kind of unyouthful conspiracy to prevent him from delivering his report.

"May I help you?" Might said as he turned to face the voice. He recognized the man as Umino Iruka.

"I was curious as to how Naruto and Hinata were doing," Iruka said sheepishly.

Might Guy smiled broadly. "They are doing excellent. I have high hopes for all of Team Nine!"

"I'm glad to hear that. You wouldn't happen to know where they are, would you?" Iruka asked.

"I am afraid not. They left with my precious apprentice Rock Lee to discuss the True Genin Test." Guy looked towards the Hokage's office. He was concerned his record of punctuality would be damaged by all the delays.

"Knowing Naruto and Hinata, they dragged Lee to Ichiraku Ramen," Iruka said with a laugh. "I was heading that way myself. Guy-san, I think you have a team of incredible potential."

The Jonin smiled at the teacher and nodded. The two parted ways and Might Guy quickly entered the Hokage's Tower. He paused in front of the office of the Hokage's and knocked.

"Enter," the Hokage ordered. Guy obeyed and entered with a smile. Hiruzen looked up and returned the grin. "Ah, Might Guy. It is good to see that at least some of my Jonin are punctual."

Naruto sighed along with Ayame. "So, you haven't seen Iruka-sensei at all?"

"No, I went to visit him at lunch, but Mizuki-san said Iruka-kun was in a meeting," Ayame huffed.

"Dang, we need to ask him about the True Genin Test! There's so much at stake and I don't want to put our futures at risk!" Naruto groaned.

Lee put down his chopsticks. "Naruto-san, I do not believe you need to dampen your spirits with this unseemly doubt. We must have faith in each other and our abilities."

"I'm not doubting we're going to pass!" Naruto grumbled. "It's just I don't want to take any chances, ya know? We've got more riding on this than most. This is test has our dreams on the line! We're going to pass no sweat, but I don't want to worry about tripping up."

"That's a great attitude for a future Hokage to have," Iruka said out of nowhere. Ayame and Naruto looked to the teacher excitedly. Hinata waved at the teacher and Lee bowed politely.

"Thanks, Iruka-sensei. So...any hints?" Naruto asked expectantly. Iruka shook his head.

"Just one, Team Nine...trust in each other," Iruka ruffled Naruto's hair. Teuchi had emerged from the back. Iruka nodded at the ramen chef. "Would you mind if I had a private word with your daughter?"

"If any other man in Konoha asked, I'd throw a cleaver or two at them. I ask that you two don't take too long." Teuchi crossed his arms and shot the couple a pointed look.

"We'll be back before the second lunch rush," Ayame promised her father. The aspiring chef and shinobi teacher quickly excused themselves and headed for a quiet place to talk.
Lee and Hinata turned towards Naruto. The pair could tell Naruto was forming an idea. Naruto tapped his chopsticks against his bowl as he finalized his thoughts.

"I think I figured something out," Naruto said as he turned to face his expectant friends. "What one thing has Guy-sensei and Iruka-sensei been telling us all day?"

"That we need to believe in each other," Lee answered. "Guy-sensei and Iruka-sensei both focused greatly on how we should support each other."

"Teamwork...that's what Guy-sensei will be testing us on!" Hinata interjected excitedly. "It'll definitely be one of the big things. This test is probably to see if we can work together as a cell."

"Teamwork...that's what Guy-sensei will be testing us on!" Hinata interjected excitedly.

"Tomorrow's test is beginning to make more sense. The Academy prepares us individually, but this test is designed to see if we are capable of carrying out missions as a Genin cell," Lee mused.

Hinata nodded in agreement. "I believe that Guy-sensei will be looking for how our abilities compliment each other as well."

"Yes, Guy-sensei will wish to see what kind of youthful synergy our abilities can create!" Lee was clearly thrilled.

"I think we've got a plan now," Naruto said with a smile. "Team Nine, we're ready for our futures."

The conversation turned to lighter, non-shinobi affair, for several minutes. Lee and Naruto had a small race to see who could put away a bowl of ramen the fastest. After the impromptu eating contest, Lee said his goodbyes.

Naruto and Hinata could not believe their luck. Lee was going to be a great teammate and, the two children hoped, an even better friend. Hinata paid Teuchi for their meal and Naruto waved excitedly at one of his favorite people. The pair walked in contented silence for a short while.

"Naruto-kun," Hinata eventually began. "We have come so far."

Naruto smiled. "I wouldn't have gotten here without you. I'd still be floundering on the Bunshin...more than that, I'd be alone."

"You saved my life after my banishment. I couldn't have continued if you hadn't found me that day. I would have been broken as well as...sealed." Hinata's breathing became labored as she recalled that dark day.

Almost instantly, she found herself wrapped up in a comforting embrace. The gesture was simultaneously expected and unexpected. Naruto's half-hug, only half because he had his arm draped around her shoulder as they continued to walk, had caught her off guard with its spontaneity. Hinata had learned to expect Naruto's ability to say or do whatever was needed to drag her up from her lowest moments.

"You'll never be broken. I'll be your super-glue," Naruto promised. Hinata giggled at the wording of Naruto's heartfelt declaration. She was so grateful for Naruto being her best friend.

"Thank you," Hinata managed to say. However, they both knew it was all that was needed.

Naruto and Hinata quietly exited their apartment after eating a breakfast like the one Guy-sensei
Naruto and Hinata quietly exited their apartment after eating a breakfast like the one Guy-sensei recommended. The sun was still rising as they worked their way through the village towards Training Ground Four. Naruto actually really enjoyed this time of morning. The village was draped in this really cool orange glow. It was also really quiet. The quiet, aided by Hinata's presence, really helped him contain his nervousness and excitement. As they entered the acres of training fields, Lee approached his teammates.

"Good morning, Naruto-san and Hinata-san!" Lee said in greeting.

"Morning, Lee," Naruto said with a bit of a laugh. "So, will Guy-sensei give us time to warm up? Or are we going to have to get there a bit early to start on our own?"

"Guy-sensei will give us some time to warm-up," Lee revealed. After a pause, Lee continued. "Have you come up with a more detailed plan, Naruto-san?"

Naruto shrugged as the group entered Training Ground Four. "I'll have to see what Guy-sensei has in mind. Like you said yesterday though, we have to believe we'll pass."

Team Nine arrived ten minutes before 8 a.m. Naruto was lamenting to Lee about how he wasn't ready to use Katon: Endan when Guy-sensei arrived.

"Good morning! I see you are all prompt and already channeling your youthful energies into being productive activities!" Guy praised his prospective students. "Now, I must apologize for this..."

Naruto, Lee, and Hinata had no time to react when Guy-sensei disappeared. The next thing Team Nine knew, Guy was standing a few feet away and he had their hitai-ates! "Your test is simple. In order to pass, you must retrieve your hitai-ates."

"That's not fair!" Naruto blurted out.

"Fair or unfair, it is the test," Guy replied. "In the center of Training Ground Four, is a dead oak. There are two keys in a storage scroll. Those keys will unlock the chests that hold your hitai-ates. The chests with your hitai-ates are located on a small sandbar in the stream that separates this training ground from Training Ground Six. Only those who recover their hitai-ates will pass. I will also be trying to delay and stop you from achieving your objectives."

"But!" Hinata started to question Guy's test. All teams were made up of three shinobi! How was this test possible?

"No buts! You have four hours!" Might Guy declared before he disappeared via a body-flicker.

"This is going to be a challenge," Naruto groaned. "The good news is, Guy won't be going all out against us. I have a plan, but I'll need ten minutes."

"Ten minutes for what?" Lee asked nervously.

"To make some seals to cover you two. The test is still going to be about teamwork. Let's stick to what Iruka-sensei and Guy-sensei said yesterday." Naruto pulled out some of his supplies and began producing a few of his 'launcher-seals'.

"Do you have a plan, Naruto-kun?" Hinata asked.

"Absolutely, Hinata-chan. We've got to get to the dead oak. You two's greatest strengths are your taijutsu. I'm good with seals and traps, which won't help much until we get to the dead oak. My 'launcher-seals' will provide some long-range support while you keep Guy-sensei busy. No matter what happens, we all need to get to the storage scroll with the keys together."
Iruka thought to himself as he headed towards Konoha gates. The temporarily-reassigned teacher shifted his pack as he approached his first destination. Ichiraku was still closed, but he knew Ayame would be up practicing her culinary arts. She had been inspired by her success at cooking for the Hokage and revived a lifelong dream. Ayame wanted to go to the Culinary Academy in Marasai.

Iruka was going to help her achieve her dream. He was going to give her every ryō from this C-rank.

He stopped in front of the door and knocked twice. The door opened slowly and Ayame peered out. "So, you're about to leave?"

"It is just a C-rank mission. I'm escorting a newly-wed couple back to their home village. It should only take a week at the most," Iruka promised.

"You could still be attacked," Ayame said worriedly as she fully opened the door.

Iruka wrapped her in a hug before she could say anything more. "Have I ever told you my ninjutsu specialty?"

"Not really," Ayame admitted.

"Barrier ninjutsu," Iruka revealed. "I am skilled with creating protective barriers. They are very strong and if I can get them up in time, my clients and I will be very well protected."

"That helps a little," Ayame breathed into Iruka's chest. "I guess I've just gotten spoiled with you around all the time."

"I'm only temporarily being reassigned to active duty. After I complete a few missions, Hokage-sama will confirm my promotion and I'll be back in the Academy."

Ayame nodded. "I'm going to miss you."

"Me too," Iruka agreed quietly.

"I'll be right back," Ayame said as she slipped away. Iruka didn't say anything, but was curious as to what she was up to. The young woman came back carrying a small bag. It was obviously bentos. "I made your favorite and included some for your clients."

"Thank you, Ayame-chan," Iruka said with absolute sincerity.

"If you want to thank me, come back safe," Ayame sniffled. She was incredibly nervous.

"Nothing in heaven or on Earth will prevent that," Iruka said confidently. "I must meet my clients. Besides, the sooner I leave the sooner I can get back."

"O-Okay, be safe," Ayame said quickly. In a moment of boldness, she gave Iruka a quick kiss on the lips. "For luck."

"With that, I could handle an S-ranked mission," Iruka lightly joked. "I should only be gone a few days."

Ayame watched Iruka leave after a few more goodbyes. She quickly returned to preparing Ichiraku for opening. Her father joined her after a few minutes. Teuchi listened politely to his daughter ramble for most of the morning. Ayame's word choices were very telling.
'I am going to need to have a conversation, with Iruka when he gets back,' Teuchi chuckled at his thought and Ayame's fretting appraisal of her dish's presentation.

Lee couldn't help but smile as his team worked their way towards the dead oak. His teammates were feeding off each others building confidence. Naruto's plan was simple, but effective. The younger boy had positioned Lee in front, because of the boy's taijutsu focus. Lee also, proudly, recognized that it was a show of trust. Hinata had been placed in the middle so that her Byakugan could have the best coverage of the surrounding area. Naruto was in the back so that he could react to any frontal assault and continue to plan strategies for the team.

'I would have never expected Naruto-san to be so...devious. He will make a splendid shinobi!' Lee thought excitedly.

"Lee-san! Naruto-kun!" Hinata said in an even tone of voice. She did not whisper, because the Academy had taught that whispering actually draws attention to one's self and actions. "I saw movement. Guy-sensei is going to make his first move!"

Naruto nodded. "Great work, Hinata-chan. Lee, get ready! Just like we talked about!"

Guy exploded from the trees and began to engage Lee without preamble. Lee aimed a kick at Guy's ribs after dodging a strike from the Jonin. Guy caught the kick and used it to throw Lee at the charging form of Hinata. Hinata barely managed to roll out of the way and sprang to her feet. She immediately went on the attack.

"She's amazing," Naruto said in admiration as he helped Lee to his feet. "And remind me never to be hit by that kick of yours!"

"We will be sparring eventually," Lee pointed out with a wry grin.

"Woohoo," Naruto exclaimed sarcastically. "Let's help Hinata-chan! Make sure I can get a clear shot!"

Lee nodded in agreement. Together, the two boys charged at Guy. Hinata had been putting up a valiant fight, but Guy was too fast and too strong. He was dodging or deflecting her attacks. Hinata had even been incorporating some non-Jūken techniques into her assault. She had used a variety of kicks. Hinata had tried sweep-kicks and even a few jump kicks.

'I have to keep him off balance. Everyone knows how Hyūga fight, but I'm not Hyūga anymore.' Hinata used a backwards handspring to escape an ax-kick from Might Guy that shattered a fallen log. Her Byakugan gave her a heads-up that Naruto and Lee were coming to support her.

Lee arrived first and launched himself at Guy in a flurry of crushing kicks and punches. Hinata still maintained complete situational awareness thanks to her Byakugan. She could clearly see what Naruto's strategy was. So, she rejoined the attack and started pushing Guy towards Naruto.

Guy spun left to dodge a flying kick from Lee. The older Genin smiled as he went prone. Guy arced an eyebrow in wonder. He didn't have to wait long as Hinata leapt over Lee and attacked with palm-strike. Guy easily deflected the blow, and was pleasantly surprised when Hinata immediately substituted away. He cast a glance over at Naruto to see why the blond-haired boy hadn't joined in the attack.

Might Guy had looked just in time to see Naruto unfurl two scrolls. Naruto had a huge grin on his face as he channeled chakra into both scrolls. Might Guy was intrigued as he jumped over a kick from the prone Lee. Suddenly, a flurry of rocks and sticks exploded from the scrolls. They were
moving at such a high speed that the Jonin actually had to use the substitution jutsu. Guy 'retreated' with an enormous smile on his face.

Naruto rushed over to his friends. "You two alright?"

"I am properly warmed-up! That was a most exhilarating encounter!" Lee was incredibly enthusiastic about the brief skirmish with Guy-sensei.

"I-I'm fine. Did I really last that long against a Jonin?" Hinata asked in between breaths.

Naruto laughed. He actually laughed. "Of course you did, Hinata-chan. You're the strongest person I know."

"Yes, Hinata-san! You were most exceptional!" Lee agreed and flashed a thumbs up.

Hinata found herself blushing at the praise and attention. Her time as a Hyūga had been marked by vocal disapproval by the clan's elders and crushing silence from her father. The positive reinforcement and support was a welcomed change.

"Let's get to the Oak," Naruto suggested. Lee and Hinata nodded in agreement and Team Nine moved quickly to the Dead Oak. Naruto found the storage scroll and quickly examined it. He made some mental notes about the layout of the calligraphy on a professionally made scroll. Lee and Hinata, still winded from their encounter with Guy-sensei, watched as Naruto unsealed the keys. They exchanged nervous looks as Naruto started giggling.

"We called it!" Naruto shouted triumphantly. He got up and walked towards his teammates. As he approached he held both keys up for Hinata and Lee to inspect.

"What do you mean, Naruto-kun?" Hinata asked. Naruto didn't respond, but instead tossed Lee and Hinata a key.

"If you give us these, you won't pass!" Lee shouted. "I'm legally Guy-sensei's apprentice! You take the key and pass!"

"Two things," Naruto said as he held up two fingers. "First, Guy-sensei never said anything about only two people passing. He said that we had to recover our hitai-ates. Second, take a look at the keys."

Hinata's eyes went wide as she realized a very important detail. "The keys are identical!"

"Exactly," Naruto grinned.

"So, we were right! This test is designed for us to demonstrate our willingness to work together in any circumstance!" Lee said in amazement.

"Heck yeah, buddy!" Naruto held out his fist. Lee grinned and bumped Naruto's outstretched fist with his own.

"I wonder if any of the other teams have figured it out?" Hinata wondered out loud.

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Yasui Kaede balled her hands into tight fists. She couldn't handle this. At first, Kaede had been beyond thrilled that her teammates were a pair of gorgeous looking geniuses. That was before their harshness began chipping away at her resolve. Kakashi-sensei's impossible test had nearly caused her to throw up, despite her empty stomach.
I...I can't do this,' Kaede thought forlornly. 'Maybe I need another year in the Academy.'

Kaede looked in the direction of where Neji was fighting Kakashi. The Hyūga prodigy was doing so much better than Kaede could even hope to do herself in her most optimistic dreams.

She truly wasn't ready. "Kakashi-sensei!" She yelled at the top of her lungs. Kaede looked up as Kakashi kicked Neji in the gut and disengaged with almost comical ease.

The masked Jonin appeared in front of the young woman faster than her eyes could track him. "You've been awful quiet, miss."

The tears came freely now. "I can't do this. I'm not ready to be a full shinobi. I-I know you said that if we failed to get a bell before the alarm went off we'd be sent back to the Academy. W-Well, Kakashi-sensei, I need to go back to the Academy."

"Are you absolutely sure? I want to make sure this isn't a spur of the moment decision," Kakashi pressed.

"I'm absolutely sure. I-I'm not ready and I don't think I could work with Sasuke-san and Neji-san." Kaede wiped away a few of her tears.

"Then, this test is over. A shinobi must be aware of all the variables in a mission, especially their own self," Kakashi said sagely. He then patted Kaede on the head. "Good luck next year. I read your reports. I think you have some potential, but I will still need your hitai-ate."

"Thank you, Kakashi-sensei. I wish I could have had a chance to learn from you. You are a legend according to my dad," Kaede said and was feeling a bit better even as she handed over her hitai-ate.

"Tell Jojima I said hello," Kakashi smiled and turned his head to the side. "I better go inform Neji and Sasuke of what is going on."

"Of course, Kakashi-sensei," Kaede said after bowing politely. She quickly exited the training ground.

Kakashi watched her go for a moment. 'A shame, but I think she'll eventually be a dependable kunoichi.' Kakashi finished the thought and sighed. "Neji and Sasuke, a word."

The two geniuses approached their prospective Jonin instructor. "The exam is over. Kaede washed out. Do either of you have any idea why?"

Sasuke was the first to speak. "She couldn't handle the pressure."

"No, she couldn't. Kaede actually told me that you two put the most pressure on her. She felt she couldn't live up to the bar the two of you set," Kakashi said firmly.

"Fate decided her place. It is not our place to coddle any potential teammate. They must stand on their own. If a team is destined to fail, then it will fail. If it is destined to succeed, then nothing can stop it. Clearly, Kaede's destiny lies elsewhere." Neji crossed his arms.

Sasuke grunted after Neji finished. "The Hyūga's pretty much right. I don't share his obsession with fate, but if she had the strength to be a part of this team she would have succeed."

Kakashi noticed the strange agreement the two boys were sharing. Neji and Sasuke had a grudging respect for each others abilities. "That is rather harsh," Kakashi pointed out. He decided to test his theory.
"It is a harsh world we live in," Sasuke snapped. The Uchiha boy had no patience for those who believed the shinobi world was a game or some idyllic fairytale where good always triumphed over evil. It was a bloody catastrophe full of sacrifice.

"Those who do not understand this have no place being shinobi," Neji agreed darkly.

The legendary Copy-nin frowned behind his mask. The two young shinobi in front of him had a very damaged world view. I will have to include that in my report, 'Kakashi thought. The Jonin knew why he had been selected for these two. One, his skills would allow Kakashi to hopefully further develop two of the most promising young men of their generation. Second, once Sasuke awakened his Sharingan only Kakashi could train the Uchiha boy. Finally, the Hokage had hoped Kakashi could connect with Neji and Sasuke and instill them with Obito's ideals.

'Their future superiors will have their work cut out for them,' Kakashi sighed. "It seems you two still have a lot to learn. This test had a very specific purpose. A purpose the two of you with your pride in sight completely missed. I think another year in the Academy will do you both good. As such, I'm going to ask you to turn in your hitai-ate."

Sasuke practically growled as he complied. 'Itachi was in ANBU at this age!'

"One moment," Neji forced the words out. He turned his back and replaced his hitai-ate with a simple cloth wrap. The Hyūga prodigy handed over his hitai-ate with great reluctance.

"You two are dismissed," Kakashi said neutrally before disappearing in a swirl of leaves. Neji and Sasuke exchanged a harsh glance and stormed off. The weight of their failure was unbearable.

Tenten pulled herself into the tree. She was trying to figure out the point of the exam. Her, absolutely terrifying, Jonin-sensei had informed Team Three their test was to collect a scroll with some important information and bring it to him. It had sounded easy enough at first, but then the Jonin had started playing mind-games with them. Katsu and Nobu had scattered as soon as the word had been given. Tenten had stared in shock at the Jonin.

Morino Ibiki only responded by flashing a sadistic grin.

She had taken off after that. Tenten had first found Nobu. Tenten's goal had been to gather her team and act like a team. Nobu had blown Tenten's mind in the worst way, unfortunately. He had straight up asked her if she was 'Ibiki's plant'. He hadn't even called Ibiki sensei! Ibiki had followed Tenten and launched an attack. Tenten and Nobu had fought together for a short time, but the boy had decided to save his own skin and fled. Ibiki had faded into the woods.

Tenten checked her stocks of sealed weapons and thought about her encounter with Katsu. It had gone well at first. They had agreed to go to where Ibiki-sensei had said the scroll would be. Katsu had run over to the scroll's location and had gasped in shock. Tenten got him to stop cursing quickly enough to explain what had happened. Ibiki had taken the scroll! Tenten let a few choice words fly as Ibiki decided to make another appearance. She and Katsu had covered each others retreat and decided to separate for a while. It had been Tenten's plan. She had slipped a note into Katsu's pack telling him where to meet her.

"Ugh, I can't believe Ibiki-sensei gave us such incomplete information. How can we succeed in a mission if we've got horrible intelligence?" Tenten lamented.

"The Shinobi world is cruel and information is life," Ibiki said from the other side of the tree. Tenten paled at the Jonin's sudden appearance. She quickly stood up and unscrolled a kanabō. "Going for a powerful weapon to offset your disadvantages. That would be the correct course of
Tenten ignored Ibiki's 'helpful' jab and swung the heavy club in the direction of Ibiki's voice. The Jonin laughed as he used the tree as cover. He noticed at the last second that there was an explosive tag active on the kanabō. Ibiki wasn't laughing as he substituted away.

The infamous head of Konoha's Torture and Interrogation Division was smiling. 'What an interesting girl.'

Team Nine had moved on after Naruto had created a few more scrolls and checked their trump cards. Lee, Hinata, and Naruto were all confident about the coming part of the test. They were fully expecting Guy to launch an attack at any moment. It was a bit nerve-wracking that Guy hadn't made an appearance since the Dead Oak.

"Alright, Hinata-chan and Lee, the plan's straightforward. We pull this off, we pass," Naruto spoke carefully.

"I am ready, Naruto-san." Lee nodded to demonstrate his eagerness.

Hinata took a calming breath. The excitement and tension was almost too much. "We can do this."

The sandbar and the chests were clearly visible. Team Nine paused at the edge of the treeline.

"Hinata-chan, where is Guy-sensei?"

Hinata centered herself at the core of her vision. "Guy-sensei...is hiding in the trees. I think he's watching us."

"Well, this is a test and he does need to see how awesome we are," Naruto pointed out with a grin. "I think it's time to really show him."

Team Nine exploded from the forest in a triangle formation. They kept the formation tight to minimize the chances of Guy-sensei landing in the middle and ending their charge before it began. They made it to the edge of the stream when Might Guy arrived with a mighty shout of "Dynamic Entry!"

Naruto barely managed to dodge the attack, but Guy landed in a crouch that allowed him to quickly counter Hinata's opening attack. Lee immediately launched into a ferocious assault to support Hinata. Guy managed to grab his leg and flipped Lee quite easily. "Excellent cooperation!"

"Thanks! Have some more!" Naruto shouted as he jumped into the taijutsu fray. Naruto knew his taijutsu wasn't the strongest, in fact compared to Hinata-chan and Rock Lee it was down right amateurish. However, it forced Guy to focus on him for a bit.

Might Guy was impressed. His earlier belief that he could have passed Team Nine at their meeting had been validated. However, he was having a blast watching and countering the sublime teamwork of his students. Team Nine was strong in their taijutsu, even Naruto. Guy already knew that Lee was a polished taijutsu specialist with unlimited potential. Hinata had learned a great deal of the fearsome Jüken of the Hyūga before her mysterious exile. She also had excellent chakra control and good reserves. Naruto, due to his status as Jinchūriki and an Uzumaki, had incredible physical and chakra reserves. Might Guy was also aware of Naruto's botched attempt to a Katon: Endan. Naruto was also dabbling in fuinjutsu. This team had the potential to be incredibly balanced.

"He's kicking out butts! Trump Cards!" Naruto shouted and brought Guy out of his mental notes.
 Might Guy had just jumped over a sweep kick from Hinata and spun out of the way of a pair of ax kicks form the boys.

Suddenly, he was bombarded by several stones launching out of the Lee and Hinata's hands! Naruto had also used his malfunctioning storage seals to bombard the Jonin with even larger stones. Guy's grin began a full-blown-bright-enough-to-blind-someone smile. The attack was so inventive! He didn't even have time to perform the substitution jutsu. So, Might Guy simply smashed all the stones. Except for the ones that were launched by Bunshins! The phantom stones caused Guy to overextend just a hair. However, that seemed to be part of the plan as Lee and Hinata made a break for the chests. Naruto was continuing to bombard Might Guy with debris launched from his seals. Might Guy looked over his shoulder and laughed as his apprentice Rock Lee smashed one of the chests with a kick before unlocking the other. Hinata had also unlocked a chest.

"ENOUGH MY STUDENTS! THIS TEST HAS BEEN CONCLUDED!" Guy bellowed. Team Nine froze. "Please, come here so I may give your evaluations!"

They all approached Guy, but Hinata and Lee did not let go of the three hitai-ates they carried. Lee and Hinata traded one pair. Lee had opened the chest that had Hinata's hitai-ate just as Hinata had opened the chest with Lee's. Rock Lee grinned as he politely returned Naruto's hitai-ate. Naruto wasted no time in giving Lee a high-five.

"Team Nine, you may put your hitai-ates back on! I am honored that I will have the sublime pleasure of guiding you down the path of the shinobi! I cannot recall a team that so flawlessly grasped the true meaning of this test! Now, we can truly begin to stoke the Flames of our Youth together! Congratulations!" Guy exclaimed with unadulterated pride.

Naruto, Lee, and Hinata all cheered. Naruto, as usual, went beyond simple celebrations and wrapped Hinata up in a huge hug. The young woman squeaked in surprise as Naruto began to spin her around. He continuously shouted, "We passed!"

Eventually, he put down a very dizzy Hinata and gave Lee a high-five.

"We have accomplished something great," Lee said with pride. Naruto shouted a wordless cry of joy in agreement.

"Team Nine," Guy interrupted the celebrations reluctantly. "your first orders are simple."

The three official Genin calmed down immediately, or in Naruto's case, almost calmed down. "Yes, Guy-sensei?" Lee asked.

"Tomorrow you will report to the Hokage's Tower for your official Ninja Registration. We will meet as a team here in Training Ground Four at 1:30 in the afternoon. Tomorrow will be a formal introduction. I will be going over the areas you all need to improve on. I, Might Guy, promise to help temper the iron of your spirits in the Flames of Youth and turn it into steel! If we work together and become Geniuses of Hard Work, we can achieve wonderful things!"

"Thank you, Guy-sensei," all three Genin said in unison.

"Now go! Towards the setting sun! Enjoy this time of youthful celebration! Tomorrow, we march into our new lives!" Guy was nearly overwhelmed by his emotions.

Lee...was completely overwhelmed. "Guy-sensei!"

"Lee!" Guy exclaimed.
"G-Good afternoon! We will see you tomorrow!" Hinata stammered in shock. Naruto nodded enthusiastically.

"Yeah! We'll see you tomorrow! We've, uh, gotta tell some people how we did!" Naruto gave his support to Hinata.

Guy and Lee broke off their emotional moment for an instant. Might Guy flashed a thumbs up, and blinding smile, at his other two students. "Yes! Team Nine will be spending so much time together in the future! I do not wish to take away from your time with the other vital people in your lives!"

Hinata and Naruto smiled at their friend and new sensei. Hinata bowed politely and Naruto extended a fist respectfully. Guy never wavered in his thumbs-up. Naruto and Hinata left the training grounds, but their smiles never left their faces.

"I am sooooo hungry!" Naruto blurted out.

Hinata giggled at Naruto's exaggerated hand motions. "We are going to start missions soon. I think we can splurge."

"Yeah! We'll each get paid for our missions, so that'll be a good way to save up some cash," Naruto agreed. "Let's go to that Sayuri's place."

"I would like that," Hinata smiled.

The pair made their way through the village at a relaxed pace. Hinata and Naruto's pace was a combination of celebration and exhaustion. They had fought hard against Guy-sensei.

"Hey, Hinata-chan, your Byakugan was amazing today," Naruto complimented Hinata. "We wouldn't have passed without you!"

"Don't sell yourself short, Naruto-kun! You came up with the strategy that helped us pass. We also can't forget about Lee-sempai. He held off Guy-sensei and saved us both," Hinata reminded Naruto.

"Yeah, Lee did awesome too. Heck, you two did a lot more than I did." Naruto rested his hands behind his head.

"We all worked together. That is what was important," Hinata said diplomatically. Naruto smiled softly in agreement. The two continued to head into the village proper in a comfortable silence. It was nice to simply catch their breath after the test.

Naruto looked to his left and noticed a familiar face. "Oi! Tenten!"

The older girl looked over and frowned. Naruto and Hinata immediately noticed her lack of hitaiate. The exuberance Hinata and Naruto had been experience ebbed as they saw Tenten deflate a bit.

"Hey, you two," Tenten said as warmly as she could manage. She fought down a flare of jealousy before continuing. "Congrats on passing."

Naruto could hear the disappointment in Tenten's voice. He decided to let Hinata take the lead on speaking. 'Hinata always knows how to say what needs to be said the best,' Naruto thought.

"Thank you Tenten-sempai," Hinata bowed. "Naruto-kun and I were going to have a meal at Sayuri's to celebrate the results of our exam. We would love to share a meal with a friend."
"It'd be great!" Naruto chimed in. "The food is good and the prices don't make you go 'HOW MUCH?' like some places."

Naruto was talking out of the side of his mouth. Sayuri's was the only restaurant other than Ichiraku Naruto had ever been to. He really had no idea, but his enthusiasm seemed to make Tenten feel a bit better. If there was one thing Naruto sought to do, it was make his friends and allies smile.

"I wouldn't want to intrude on your date," Tenten teased. "Though, I can walk with you for a while. My parent's apartment is in that area."

Naruto and Hinata blushed, and in Naruto's case blushed and stuttered, for a moment. The two Genin nodded in agreement as they tried, with some difficulty, to regain their composure.

"That's cool." Naruto had managed to recover first. "I'm sorry about your test."

"You don't have anything to be sorry about, Naruto-san," Tenten huffed. "If anyone has anything to be sorry for, it's that flipping idiot Nobu!"

"Why did he not work with you as a team?" Hinata asked.

Tenten shook her head. "Our Jonin started off with some really strong head games. I can't even remember half of it. All I remember is feeling this creepy dread and doubt. I tried to get Nobu to work with me, but Ibiki had been tailing me. He really screwed with Nobu's head and got him to distrust me. We sparred with Ibiki for a bit. I managed to get away. I had to sacrifice a kanabō though."

"Ouch, what about your other teammate?" Naruto asked and felt a bit guilty about asking all these questions.

"Katsu-san wasn't bad. We worked together pretty well. It's didn't matter though. Even though we impressed Ibiki-san, Nobu basically stabbed us in the back and tried to pass on his own. Ibiki-san went off on him after he called off the test. I don't think Nobu will be going back to the Academy. At least, Ibiki-san had good things to say about Katsu and I. You know what's the worst part?" Tenten grumbled.

Hinata chewed her lip. She knew exactly what Tenten was thinking. "The worst part was how close you were to passing."

"Exactly," Tenten sighed. "I better get home. I'll have to figure out how I'm going to explain things to my parents."

"Don't worry too much about it," Naruto said with the most reassuring smile he could muster. "Your parents will support you. Heck, you impressed the Jonin it sounds like. That's something."

"I supposed so," Tenten looked down as she spoke. She quickly looked up and smiled broadly. "You are the most optimistic person I've ever met. Thanks for helping to cheer me up a bit you two."

"You're welcome, Tenten-sempai," Hinata replied politely. The older girl waved and dashed off towards her home. Hinata and Naruto paused for a moment before Naruto spoke again.

"We really got lucky with our team." Hinata nodded at Naruto's statement as he continued. "I think being on a team without you would have been a nightmare."
"Fortune has truly blessed us Naruto-kun," Hinata agreed.

Eventually, the pair reached Sayuri's. They had a simple lunch. Naruto and Hinata were not extravagant people, due to their situations. Still, they greatly enjoyed the meal and each other's company. Hinata and Naruto were each other's rock.

That night, Hinata was having difficulty getting to sleep. It was strange, she thought. Sleep was not coming easily, but she felt completely at peace. Naruto had saved her from her melancholy and the potential abyss that had nearly engulfed her following her exile. His presence had helped her heal faster than she ever dreamed. Hinata's world had expanded in new and amazing ways. Now, it was her time to move forward. She would still be at Naruto's side, but this time she would be his equal.

A small smile graced her lips and Hinata enjoyed her first truly peaceful sleep in a long time.
Morino Ibiki enjoyed the 'public anonymity' walking around in broad daylight provided. The civilians of the village gave him a comfortable berth, but not out of fear. They respected his status as a veteran shinobi. Ibiki knew that some rumors of his profession made the rounds, but for the most part the civilians only knew he was steadfastly loyal to Konoha. The nods of respect and greeting were a welcomed change from the reactions he usually got in his line of work. Ibiki even smiled at the though.

As he entered a utilitarian apartment complex, his smile took on an edge. He was visiting a fellow Jonin after speaking with the Hokage. Ibiki stopped in front of the apartment and knocked twice.

The next sound the head of the Torture and Interrogation Department heard was the unlocking of a few deadbolts. As professional as Ibiki's associate was, there were likely several security seals worked into the windows and doors as well. The door finally opened and Hatake Kakashi stood in the doorway.

"Well, this is a surprise. Come on in, I'm sure Hokage-sama sent you here for a reason."

Ibiki entered. "Thank you."

Kakashi's apartment was the typical ANBU apartment. It was almost completely bare. This wasn't a surprise as most of the people who fully submerged themselves in the shinobi world used their apartments only to sleep and physically recover once out of the hospital. The most defining feature of Kakashi's apartment was a well-stocked library...of Icha Icha books.

"How did Hokage-sama take us failing our teams?" Kakashi asked as the two Jonin took a seat.

"Hokage-sama was disappointed. He had high hopes for both us and the potential teams. We were not censured in any way. I do believe that both he and the Council want to retry the Uchiha and Hyūga experiment at a later date."

Kakashi groaned. "I'll be saddled with that I assume. I can tell from your tone that you probably won't be nominated for another go as a Jonin sensei."

"Not for a while. Jiraiya-sama has requested my assistance in establishing a stronger intelligence network in Degarashi Port," Ibiki explained.

"Degarashi Port is the largest port in the world in terms of both size and amount of cargo moved. I can understand needing a strong HumInt presence there, but why you?" Kakashi was running through all the facts about the world's greatest port. He also remembered one of his first missions after...after Rin to deny the port's use to Kirigakure in one of the many Shadow Wars that followed the Third Great Shinobi War.

"My brother," Ibiki revealed. Kakashi quirked his one visible eyebrow questioningly. Ibiki continued. "We've discovered that he has been taken in by the Wasabi family. Idate hasn't become a 'house' shinobi so Hokage-sama won't be making any changes to Idate's bingo book entry."

The Copy-nin was silent for a moment. "Idate is the Wasabi's runner in the Todoroki Shrine Race. That's our in with the family. You'll be offering the carrot of Konoha's support for the family. I'm sure we've sweetened the pot for Idate as well."

"He'll be dropped from an B-rank to a D-rank Missing-nin if he accepts," Ibiki revealed. "The capture-on-sight directives will also be rescinded."
capture-on-sight directives will also be rescinded."

"Solid? We'll have started the process of a formal alliance with the ruling family of the city," Ibiki smirked dangerously.

"As long as Idate can run, that is." Kakashi nodded. "He was always a world-class runner. That being said, it shouldn't take that long to establish that HumInt Network."

"I'll also be part of the team going after Aoi if we can get any information out of Idate."

Kakashi narrowed his eyes. "That'll mean a hit inside Amegakure. The last thing we need is to piss off Hanzō of the Salamander."

"Konoha cannot allow the scroll and sword of the Nidaime Hokage to remain in the hands of a foreign nation. It is a grave insult to our honor."

"True, but you haven't explained why you won't be a Jonin instructor next term and why you are here." Kakashi crossed his arms.

"Isn't it obvious? My secondary mission will put me into direct conflict with Amegakure and Hanzō is not the forgiving type. I will have to remain within the village for some time," Ibiki replied.

Kakashi accepted the point, even as he realized he was being roped in to another Genin team next term. "There's a graduate you want looked after."

"Her name is Hagane Tenten. She's a shinobi I will be keeping my eye on. The second she hits Chuunin, I'm requesting her for the Intelligence Division," Ibiki declared.

"You think she'll be able to handle being stuck with the Hyūga and the Uchiha?" Kakashi asked with a chuckle.

"I'm more curious about if they can handle her," Ibiki bragged.

Naruto and Hinata had just taken their Ninja Registration Form photos and were heading to the training ground to meet with Guy and Lee for training. They were curious as to what Guy would have them do on their first day.

"I bet Lee had his picture taken first thing and is already training," Naruto wagered.

"It would not surprise me, Naruto-kun," Hinata agreed with a smile. She admired her teammate's work ethic.

"We better step up our game or Lee will leave us in the dust. He's going to be an awesome ninja," Naruto said with complete respect.

Naruto and Hinata reached the training ground. Lee and Guy were stretching. Guy looked up. "Welcome Naruto and Hinata! Are you ready for your first official day?"

Hinata nodded. "We are very excited for this opportunity."

"Oh yeah, this is what we've been dreaming of our entire lives," Naruto agreed.

"Excellent! Excellent!" Guy exclaimed. "Today will be a light workout. I mainly want to learn
about your skills, level of physical fitness, chakra control and the like!"

"So, Guy-sensei, how are we going to get started?" Naruto asked.

The Jonin smiled broadly and flashed a thumbs-up. "First, we will start with physical endurance. There is a Dōjō on the outskirts of Training Ground Twelve. It is a building I purchased specifically for training any Genin teams I have and will ever have. I will head there now. In seven minutes, I want you all to run to the Dōjō as fast as you can."

Guy put an alarm clock down and set the timer. He then disappeared using the Body Flicker technique. Hinata and Naruto immediately began to stretch. It wouldn't be enough, but they were hoping Guy-sensei wouldn't hold it against them. The timer went off and Team Nine dashed off towards the Dōjō.

'The Dōjō is over three miles away!' Naruto scoffed, but kept running. He knew he was in good shape and that Hinata was as well. Naruto cast a glance to his right and saw Lee running at a solid pace. Team Nine passed through Training Ground Six and saw that Team Two had passed their test.

Hinata was really breathing hard as she tried to maintain the punishing pace she had set for herself. She wanted to push herself to her limits. Hinata had decided on a new mindset after she had permanently moved in with Naruto. She would always push herself to improve. Hinata wanted to improve as a shinobi and a person. This was a small step, but a step none-the-less.

The ground became rocky and uneven as they neared the Dōjō. Team Nine was forced to slow down just a bit. Lee managed to pull ahead and broke out into a sprint as the Dōjō came into view. Naruto and Hinata did not want to lose face with Guy-sensei and also broke out into a sprint. The two younger Genin practically collapsed as they entered the Dōjō.

Guy clicked his stop watch. "Excellent, your 5k times are very good. Naruto, you had a time of 19:56:34 and Hinata your time was 19:58:13. This speaks well of your endurance. Our training will help improve your physical conditioning to new heights! Before we truly begin, I want all of you to take a cool-down walk. Walk around the Dōjō for about six minutes and be sure to practice regular breathing. Go ahead and get started so we may begin the true training!"

"I haven't run that fast for that long ever," Naruto forced out between breaths.

"We'll get better, Naruto-kun," Hinata assured Naruto. The cool down passed quickly as they caught up to Lee. Team Nine approached Guy-sensei and bowed. Might Guy returned the bow and instructed his team to stretch as he explained his plan.

"Today, we will start with a light-spar so that I may critique your taijutsu and other abilities. I want to learn your skills, weaknesses, and potential before we start on missions," Guy explained. "To ensure fairness, I will ask that you all draw straws. That will determine order."

Team Nine drew straws. The order would be Hinata first followed by Lee and Naruto. "Excellent! Lee, while I work with Hinata, please show Naruto around the Dōjō!"

Lee bowed deeply. "I will be honored, Guy-sensei!"

As the boys began their tour, Guy turned his attention back to Hinata. "Now, I want to critique your taijutsu. Obviously, I do not know the workings of Gentle Fist so I cannot help you with the advanced techniques. I do know a great deal about taijutsu. Our goals will be to refine your Gentle Fist. In the future, you may be the founder of an entirely new taijutsu style."

Hinata's face lit up at the thought. 'An entirely new taijutsu style?' "S-Shall we begin Guy-sensei?"
Might Guy slipped into a Gōken Stance and grinned broadly. "Whenever you are ready!"

Hinata ran through the familiar hand-seals and reveled in the complete change of perception that signaled the activation of her bloodline limit. She slipped into a basic Gentle Fist stance and charged Guy head-on. Guy avoided the first flurry of attacks. He had deftly side-stepped Hinata's assault and took in her stance. It was solid for someone her age. The openings were small enough that most of the opposition Hinata would face could not effectively exploit. Hinata's motions were also controlled and efficient.

'The Hyūga considered this a failure? There had to be something more,' Guy thought. He decided to take a swing at Hinata and launched into a very 'lazy' combo. Hinata easily avoided the first by twisting out of the way. She transitioned the spin into a block of Guy's second punch. The spin continued and allowed her to avoid the final punch and launch a counter-attack. The attack was a simple roundhouse kick, but it would have been a very solid attack against most opponents.

'That was instinctive and natural. Impressive,' Guy observed. The sensei and the student sparred for a few more minutes. 'I believe I have enough for an assessment.'

"That's enough Hinata," Guy said warmly. Hinata eased out of her stance and bowed. The Genin was in awe of her sensei. He wasn't even winded while Hinata was having trouble fighting the urge to flop down and just sit. "I have a few questions."

"Y-Yes, sensei?" Hinata asked between breaths.

"Do you know any ninjutsu beyond the Academy Three? Also, have you have any genjutsu knowledge beyond the basics of breaking a genjutsu's hold over you?"

"Before my...banishment..." Hinata had to pause. She had recovered greatly from her emotional trauma, but the subject of her banishment from the Hyūga was still a raw and delicate subject for young woman. "Kō-sempai had begun to teach me the basics of the Hakke Kūshō."

"Thank you for the information," Guy said with a bow. "I will have a training regime prepared by the time we meet tomorrow. If you would be so kind as to retrieve Naruto and Lee for me."

Hinata returned the bow. She didn't have to activate her Byakugan to find Naruto and Lee. All Hinata had to do was follow the sound of the two boy's voices. Lee and Naruto were wildly discussing how to incorporate seals into the team's 'arsenal of awesomeness' as Naruto so eloquently put it. Hinata walked around the row of training dummies and noticed that Naruto had rearranged several of them.

"Look at it this way, Lee," Naruto said with a grin. "These poor schmucks, from Kirigakure or wherever, round the corner. The first guy hits the pressure-triggered seals. Of course, they don't go right off with the first guy. There will be a few seconds of delay, but only for part of the reason you're thinking of."

"Obviously, the delay will allow more enemy shinobi to enter the blast radius. However, shinobi cells always put enough distance between each other so that explosions or area-of-effect jutsu's aren't as likely to take out the entire cell. However, the shinobi will remain close enough to communicate and cover each other." Lee crossed his arms as he explained. That was the basics of team positioning that was drilled into every Academy student.

"And for a chakra pulse to travel along the network to activate the other explosive tags. I got the idea from reading about explosive tags in my book." Naruto grinned broadly.

"Um...Naruto-kun...doesn't your book only cover the basics?" Hinata asked as she approached her
teammates.

"Well, yeah, Hinata-chan, but this idea just came to me! I haven't worked out the details, but I can get this!" Naruto exclaimed as he whirled around to face Hinata.

"We have faith in your natural talents, Naruto-san!" Lee assured his friends.

"Definitely," Hinata agreed eagerly. "Oh, Naruto-kun, Guy-sensei wants to see you. You'll be sparring so Guy-sensei can test your abilities."

Lee nodded. "Yes, Guy-sensei will want to discover the best way to help you reach your potential!"

Naruto beamed at his friends' support. "Thanks you two." Hinata returned Naruto's happy smile. The young man rushed off towards Guy. Naruto found his sensei stretching as he waited.

"Ah, Naruto! What did you think of the Dōjō?" Guy asked with a smile.

Naruto returned the smile. "It's awesome. I just don't get why your training dummies are so heavy."

"The dummies are so heavy because I had them custom made. My fighting style goes through training dummies very quickly," Might Guy explained. "I can provide more details later! Right now, Naruto, I need to see your abilities!"

"Hinata-chan gave me a warning, Guy-sensei!" Naruto said as he slipped into his taijutsu stance. Guy entered his Gōken stance. Naruto wasted no time and attacked. His form was solid, but it wasn't exceptional like Hinata's and Lee's taijutsu. Guy was impressed though. Naruto would be very good after training more with the team. Might Guy also knew that Naruto's true strengths were ninjutsu and fuinjutsu. Naruto would be groomed to be the long-range support for the team.

Guy blocked a spinning strike from Naruto, only to have the young boy drop to the ground. As Naruto fell, he executed a spinning kick. Guy was impressed. Naruto had no set style and was 'winging it'. Guy had an idea of how to train Naruto in taijutsu.

'This will be fun,' Guy admitted to himself. "That is enough Naruto. Your primary role will be supporting Lee and Hinata with your fuinjutsu and eventually ninjutsu. Earlier, I heard you talk about your jutsu repertoire."

"My repe-what?" Naruto asked while standing in a lazy stance. Guy-sensei hadn't told him to stand normally, so he adopted a half-normal, half-stance...stance.

"Collection," Guy said with a smile that the light of the Dōjō practically pinged off of. "You know the Academy Three and 'blew yourself up' attempting another jutsu."

"Yeah, I think I messed up the chakra mix or hand seals in it," Naruto admitted.

"Which jutsu were you attempting?" Guy asked in a 'thoughtful' pose. He was standing perfectly straight with his right elbow resting on his left wrist as he held his chin between his index finger and thumb.

"Katon: Endan, Guy-sensei," Naruto answered while wondering how Guy-sensei had entered that pose without him noticing.

"A C-rank technique. I am confident I can guide you towards the proper use of the technique!" Guy flashed a thumbs-up at Naruto.
"Thanks Guy-sensei!" Naruto said excitedly.

"Let's return to our teammates! I will speak with all of you for a few moments!" Guy responded with excitement that rivaled Naruto's.

Naruto followed Guy into the Dōjō's central hall. Lee and Hinata quickly joined them. Guy smiled at his students. "Naruto and Hinata, I will spar with Lee for a moment. I want you two to start exercising your core."

Naruto and Hinata gave Guy a questioning look as he practically got on the ground. He made a triangle with his body as the long end, his left arm as the short leg, and the ground as the other leg. "This is one of a few exercises I'll be showing you."

Might Guy put his right hand behind his head and then brought his right arm down towards his left. "I want you to do at least fifty of these before Lee and I finish our spar!"

"Is this going to be our normal workout, Guy-sensei?" Hinata asked.

Guy still hadn't gotten up from his exercise position. "Do not worry, Hinata! We will soon begin our proper training! Not everyday will be this relaxing!"

Hinata and Naruto exchanged a quick glance. If this was what Guy-sensei considered 'relaxing', what would a hard workout be like?

Iruka bowed as the Hokage dismissed him from the office. The on-hold teacher was eager to see the two people who mattered to him the most. First, he wanted to see Ayame. Iruka had thought about her constantly during the mission. He had actually thought about Ayame more than Naruto. Iruka had considered Naruto to be his little brother and, occasionally, even his son. Iruka would never stop worrying about Naruto, but the teacher knew he had to have faith in Naruto.

'Besides, Might Guy is very reliable and will help bring out all of Naruto's potential,' Iruka assured himself. 'Naruto and Hinata are in good hands.'

The Chuunin flicked his eyes towards the bank. He had a little to deposit for himself after the clients had given him a bonus. Iruka had desperately tried to dissuade the newlyweds, but the two had been so impressed by how the highwayman had surrendered at the mere sight of Iruka's flak jacket. The groom had paid Iruka on the spot. It had thoroughly embarrassed the teacher.

Iruka smiled as he approached the bank. It was good to be home. Suddenly, his heart caught in his throat. "Ayame-chan!"

The aspiring chef looked up in surprise before running up to Iruka. "You're already back!"

Iruka and Ayame quickly embraced. "I told you that it was a short C-rank. There was only one highwayman and he surrendered the second he saw my flak jacket."

"I'm so glad your back," Ayame whispered as they ended the embrace. "Were you headed to the bank too?"

"The clients gave me a bonus. I-I actually want to talk about that with you. How soon do you need to be back to the stand?" Iruka questioned.

"Father gave me the day off," Ayame admitted. "I was working on my admission to Marasai."

"That's actually what I wanted to talk about," Iruka confessed. "We can talk about it over lunch if you haven't eaten."
Ayame nodded. "I'd like that."

The couple went to a nearby cafe. Ayame immediately asked about Iruka's mission. Iruka revealed that the C-rank was completed so quickly because the clients had a wagon. The highwayman, as Iruka had previously mentioned, had fled like a flushed game-bird the second he had seen Iruka's flak jacket.

"He ran screaming something about 'Don't eat my soul!' I think the poor man was scared of genjutsu." Iruka leaned back in his chair and smiled.

"I can't blame him," Ayame breathed. "Genjutsu can be horrifying."

"Genjutsu is the least understood of all the shinobi arts," Iruka said as he naturally slipped back into his well-rehearsed lecture on genjutsu.

Ayame giggled. "You really want to get back into the classroom don't you?"

"I love teaching as much as you love cooking," Iruka said with a contented smile. "How is your savings for Marasai shaping up?"

"At the rate I'm saving, it'll take years," Ayame lamented. "I need around twenty-two thousand just to pay the tuition and another five thousand for room and board."

Iruka listened intently. "Then the thirty-eight thousand I made from my C-rank will cover it."

"W-What?" Ayame wasn't sure she heard Iruka correctly.

The shinobi smiled. "I am using my C-rank to pay the remainder of your tuition."

"B-But you might need that money! Why would you spend so much on me?" Ayame stammered.

"I will be going on a B-rank soon. As for why, I'd do this...well," Iruka suddenly felt his throat go dry. "Well, because I love you."

Ayame's eyes went wide and she sat silently for a moment. "C-Could you say that again?"

"I'm using my pay from the C-rank to pay for your tuition," Iruka restated.

"No, you idiot, the important part," Ayame said, only partially, in jest.

"I love you," Iruka said firmly. Ayame reached across the table and kissed Iruka. In public.

Today had become a very good day.

Naruto had sprawled out on the couch the second he had gotten back to the apartment with Hinata. Hinata had gone straight to the shower and Naruto was more than happy to let her. The young man was exhausted and the thought of moving was currently abhorrent. Guy-sensei had really worked them to the bone. Team Nine's Jonin Sensei had tested their endurance, chakra control, and even their ability to read maps.

There was a very unwelcome knock at the door. Normally, Naruto would be thrilled to have a visitor. Naruto was way too tired to be thrilled at the moment. "Hello?"

"Naruto, it's Iruka," Iruka said through the door.

'Well, that changes things,' Naruto thought as he pried himself off the couch. "I'm coming, Iruka-"
Naruto opened the door with a huge grin. "Hey, Iruka-sensei! What's up?"

Iruka chuckled and rubbed the back of his head. "I wanted to check on you guys. How was Guy-sensei's training?"

"Want to come in? I'll tell you all about it," Naruto said. Iruka nodded and entered the apartment. Naruto quickly headed to the bedroom. He stopped with a hand on the doorknob. "Hey, Hinata-chan, I'm going to shut the door. Iruka-sensei is here."

"Alright, Naruto-kun. I'll be out in a minute." Hinata answered.

Naruto turned back to Iruka. "Guy-sensei is going to be awesome! He works us real hard, but that'll make us so strong!"

Iruka smiled approvingly. "He is one of the most respect Jonin in the village."

"That's so cool. I can't wait to see how badass Hinata-chan and Lee will be in taijutsu soon! They'll be able to take down anybody! Guy-sensei said he'll help me with ninjutsu too!"

Naruto rambled for a minute about seals, ninjutsu, and Hinata 'gut-punching a missing-nin'. Iruka laughed and ruffled the young man's hair. "You are doing very well. I'm proud of you and Hinata."

"Thanks, Iruka-sensei. How's the Academy?" Naruto asked.

"I don't know. Hokage-sama has me doing missions again. I've been nominated for Jonin, but I haven't taken actual missions in a while. I just got back from a C-rank mission." Iruka sat down in the chair Naruto gestured at.

"Oh man, you have to tell us all about! Don't say anything until Hinata-chan gets here!" Naruto said excitedly.

"Where is Hinata?" Iruka asked.

"She's, uh," Naruto stalled and his eyes flicked back to the bedroom.

"In the shower?" Iruka finished.

A blush appeared on Naruto's cheeks. "Yeah, that." Iruka didn't press Naruto on that point. "Uh, would you like something to drink?"

"I'm fine, thank you." Iruka shook his head. The door opened to the bedroom opened and Hinata joined Naruto and Iruka at the table. Iruka spent a few minutes quizzing the pair on how they liked their cell assignment.

"Neh, Iruka-sensei," Naruto cut off another question about Guy's training. "Now that Hinata-chan is back, can you tell us about your mission?"

"I'd be happy too." Iruka leaned forward towards two of his favorite students. "As I told Naruto earlier, I'm not teaching at the moment. Hokage-sama, Tamotsu-sempai, and the Headmaster of the Academy have nominated me for Tokubetsu Jonin."

"Congratulations Iruka-sensei," Hinata said politely.

"Thank you," Iruka responded. "In order to be promoted officially, I have to go on a few
"Thank you," Iruka responded. "In order to be promoted officially, I have to go on a few missions. My last mission was a C-rank mission. C-ranks are generally escorting civilians, hunting for animals, searching for missing people."

"Did you fight any enemy ninja?" Naruto asked expectantly.

"No." Iruka shook his head. "C-ranks generally deal with predatory animals, bandits, or highwaymen. I encountered only a single highwayman. He ran way the second he saw my Flak Jacket."

"I am glad your presence protected the clients," Hinata said politely.

"Naruto, you're going to have to wait a while before your first C-rank. I'm sure Guy-sensei will want to get a better feel for your abilities and have your team carry out a few D-ranks."

"Ah, man," Naruto whined.

"But Naruto-kun, D-ranks will be a chance for us to save up some money with little risk to ourselves." Hinata put a calming hand on Naruto's shoulder.

"Hinata's right, Naruto," Iruka said quietly. "I think I'll take my leave. You two look like you could fall asleep standing up."

Hinata giggled. "We are very tired. Good night, Iruka-sensei."

After Iruka left, the two Genin went to sleep. Naruto was asleep the second he got into his bedroll. He was pretty sure Hinata fell asleep the second she crawled in the bed. They woke up on time for the next morning and jogged to Might Guy's Dōjō. Naruto and Hinata were proud that they had arrived a full fifteen minutes before the scheduled time.

Naruto's jaw dropped as Hinata pushed open the Dōjō's door. Lee was already doing a jump rope exercise. "He looks like he's been here an hour! It's only 7:30 in the morning!"

Hinata and Naruto jumped a bit as Guy put his hand on their shoulders. "Don't worry, my precious students! Lee has only been here twenty minutes! I am very impressed by your own punctuality!"

"We're eager to get started, Guy-sensei," Hinata responded diplomatically.

"Excellent! I am pleased that you jogged from your home! I want you to take a while to stretch a bit before we get started!" Guy instructed. He left Naruto and Hinata to their own devices and went over to Lee.

"Lee! It is time to work on your blocking and dodging! Follow me!" Guy motioned excitedly and led Lee to a section of the Dōjō. Guy and Lee stopped in front of three strange devices arranged in a vague triangle. The devices had arms of various lengths, and Hinata noticed gears at the bottom. Lee got in the middle of the triangle and Guy pulled a lever. The three pillars started spinning and Lee began blocking, jumping over, or dodging the arms.

"That's...actually really cool," Naruto admitted.

"Ingenious," Hinata agreed. Guy approached Naruto and Hinata with a grin on his face.

"I am glad you approve! You will be ready for that level soon! Today, however, I have specific exercises prepared for each of you! First, Hinata! Follow me!" Guy said excitedly.

Hinata rose to her feet and bowed. Naruto followed suit. "What about me, Guy-sensei?" Naruto
"Eager to train! Excellent, Naruto! While I walk Hinata through her exercise, I want you to practice the Leaf Concentration exercise. You have proven you can use the single leaf. This time, I want you to extend your arms."

Naruto gave Guy a confused look for a moment before doing as instructed. Guy held a leaf at the tips of both of Naruto's middle fingers. "Do you want me to hold the leaves using my chakra?"

"Of course, Naruto!" Guy said proudly. As Naruto held the leaves in place, Guy placed one on his forehead. "Remember, the goal of this exercise is not to simply hold the leaves in place but to spin them!"

Naruto was focusing intently on his exercise, and thus he did not speak. Instead, he nodded sharply and redoubled his focus. Hinata felt a small smile grace her lips as she watched Naruto's determined efforts. She quickly turned to follow Guy to her exercise.

The station was a raised circular track. Once again, Hinata noticed that it was motorized. "Um, Guy-sensei, may I ask a question about your equipment?"

"Of course, Hinata! A shinobi must train more than just the body!"

Hinata smiled at Guy's encouragement to speak her mind. "Where do you get all this equipment? It all seems very complex."

Might Guy extended his arm and gave a very enthusiastic thumbs-up. "I built it all myself! It is a great way to train the mental energies that produce chakra while helping to prepare the way to train the physical energies as well!"

'I had no idea Guy-sensei was so multi-talented,' Hinata thought. "Amazing, Guy-sensei. What kind of training will I be doing at this station?"

"I did some reading last night. As you are no doubt aware, the Hyūga jealously guard the secrets of Jūken. I cannot help you with true Jūken, but I can help you adapt the principles of Jūken to other similar styles. In Fu Rong Hui's writings on the world's great taijutsu styles, it is theorized that Jūken and Pa-kua share a common origin," Guy explained.

Hinata was amazed at her sensei's knowledge. Furthermore, the thought of creating a new style was enticing. "I-I am ready to being, Guy-sensei!"

"You will start with Circle Walking. Pa-kua is a highly mobile style. Jūken is designed to utterly devastate an individual opponent. Pa-kua is more suited to multiple opponents. Circle Walking was originally designed to help a practitioner's situational awareness. You possess the Byakugan and already have fantastic awareness. For you, Circle Walking will be a way to minimize the chances of you being surrounded."

Hinata blinked at the detailed explanation. "Can you provide a scroll on this taijutsu style?"

"Absolutely. Before we begin, I want you to copy my stance. The stance for Circle Walking is different from your standard Jūken stance." Guy slipped into stance that at first seemed awkward to Hinata. The foot placement was too...horizontal and narrow.

'Though, it makes sense. It is designed for circular movement, Jūken is designed for an steady advance,' Hinata thought to herself. After several minutes and multiple corrections, Guy told Hinata she was ready to begin Circle Walking. She climbed onto the station and entered her new stance. Hinata immediately noticed the track was far more narrow than she initially realized.
Might Guy left Hinata to her exercise and went back to where Naruto was practicing with the Leaf Concentration exercise. "Guy-sensei! My arms are tired!"

"Excellent work on the exercise. You may stop now. Tell me, how many times did your leaves fall?"

Naruto gratefully followed Guy-sensei's orders. "Well, the ones on my fingers dropped three times. It mostly because I was holding them out straight for so long."

"Very good. Take a moment to stretch. I will go over your role in Team Nine," Guy commented. Naruto was thrilled to hear the details of how he would be part of the team. "You have a very important role, Naruto. Lee and Hinata are both taijutsu specialists. Your role will be to support and protect their advances with ninjutsu and fuinjutsu. I will not neglect your taijutsu, but our primary focus will be on making you a splendid ninjutsu specialist!"

"That's awesome! I bet you'll be able to help me with my fuinjutsu, too!" Naruto exclaimed.

Guy shook his head. "Somewhat. Fuinjutsu is a rare art and you are truly blessed to have such an instinctive grasp of the art. However! You cannot neglect your practice and training in that, or any other, ninja art!"

"Yes, Guy-sensei!" Naruto acknowledged his teacher with a face-splitting grin. There was no way Naruto would stop practicing fuinjutsu! One, it was too much fun. Two, learning about seals was crucial to a goal Naruto held as dear to his heart as becoming Hokage.

"Now, let us collect your teammates!" Guy ordered warmly and excitedly. Naruto nodded and followed Guy to each station. Lee emerged from Guy's strange blocking machine with a huge grin on his face. Naruto admitted to himself that the contraption actually looked kind of fun.

"How was your workout, Lee?" Naruto asked.

"It was exhilarating. I am currently on the lowest setting, but I am eager to improve," Lee replied.

"We've all got to start somewhere," Naruto said in support. He turned his attention to Guy-sensei for a momentarily. "Hey, Guy-sensei, will I use that thing you had Lee training with?"

"You will make use of the mechanized dummy very soon!" Guy assured Naruto.

Naruto smiled at the thought. Guy's training dummy looked like a very cool way to work on his taijutsu. Hinata was practicing walking in circles.

"Hinata, you may finish your current lap. After that, please join us," Guy said excitedly.

Hinata finished her exercise and quickly joined her team. Team Nine stood at attention and Guy's smile was almost blinding.

"So far you have all done excellent work. Our next exercise is about working in the field. We won't be doing a mission just yet, but this will prepare you for when we begin them!"

Naruto and Hinata were disappointed that Guy wasn't going to start them on missions, but they didn't want to press their sensei too soon. Guy lead the Genin out of the Dōjō to one of Konoha's many training grounds. Strangely, Guy-sensei took Team Nine to the very edge of the training ground instead of the center as Lee, Hinata, and Naruto expected.

"I am sure you all are wondering why we are here, and how I will train you in working in the
field," Guy said the second he stopped walking. Hinata was the first to nod. "You must cross Training Ground Twenty-six without being detected by Team Yonai. If you succeed, tomorrow I will introduce you to advanced shinobi techniques. On the other hand, if you fail, I will punish you all."

"Punish?" Lee asked his sensei and role-model.

Guy nodded. "I will intensify your training to ensure that you overcome your shortcomings."

'Intensify?' Naruto and Hinata thought at the same time. For some reason, that word was absolutely terrifying.

"C-Can you give us any more information, Guy-sensei?" Naruto asked with a forced chuckle.

"On missions, you will not always have complete information. This is an exercise in caution and your abilities to move and think like true shinobi," Guy responded.

Team Nine exchanged a few glances before slipping across into Training Ground Twenty-six. Naruto had decided to take point. He turned to his teammates and nodded. Hinata had been around Naruto long enough to know what he was about to ask. She quickly and wordlessly her Byakugan.

"They are Chuunin," Hinata mouthed.

Naruto and Lee exchanged a troubled look. "You have more bad news, don't you?" Naruto mouthed silently back.

"They are looking for us," Hinata responded.

"We need to get going," Lee communicated using Konoha's sign language.

Naruto and Hinata nodded in agreement. They moved quickly as they could without sacrificing stealth. Hinata kept her teammates appraised of the Chuunin searching for them. Naruto called Hinata and Lee over to his position. He informed them via hand signs that he was going to set off a timed distraction. Naruto found himself wishing for a simple genjutsu.

'Maybe Guy-sensei can teach us one. I don't know if I have the control for it, but Hinata-chan probably does,' Naruto thought quickly. He set up his Trap Seals and armed them with smoke bombs. Team Nine made it a little ways-away before a member of Team Yonai arrived to investigate Team Nine's passing. Lee, Hinata, and Naruto were using Academy Concealment techniques. The Chuunin saw and managed to avoid Naruto's obvious trap, but it had been a ruse. The kunoichi used a bit of chakra to quickly disable the simple snare-trap. The chakra was just enough to trigger the smoke bombs.

'That is our cue,' Lee thought as the team made their move. Team Nine moved very quickly from their locations. The smoke gave them a bit of cover and freedom to move at a rapid pace.

Hinata's eyes suddenly went wide. It was an instinctive and unconscious reaction to what she had seen. "We're being boxed in!" Hinata told Lee and Naruto using hand signals.

'I shouldn't be surprised. These guys are Chuunin. We're out of our league right now. Speed is crucial right now,' Naruto thought quickly.

"We have move," Naruto said out-loud. Time was of the essence. Lee nodded emphatically and Hinata gave a single nod in agreement. Team Nine began to move very quickly to avoid being surrounded and discovered by the Chuunin.
"Hinata-chan, how close are we to the edge of the training ground?" Naruto signed to Hinata. He knew that with her Byakugan that she could see his hand signals even though he was in front of the team.

Hinata moved quickly to catch up to Naruto and Lee followed closely behind. "Training Ground Twenty-four is about two hundred meters to our east."

Naruto smiled. "Good, let's keep going."

Lee agreed with a salute and took point. The Genin picked up the pace. Naruto noticed Lee and Hinata tense out of the corners of his eyes. Something was up, but he couldn't place it. Naruto turned to Lee, but his teammate simply faded away.

"Genjutsu," Naruto spat the word like a curse. He pooled his chakra to dispel the genjutsu. His first attempt was sloppy, but Naruto pumped enough chakra into the attempt to succeed.

Naruto's perception 'unraveled' and was restored to a more natural state. He frowned at the first thing he truly saw. Hinata was sitting around the ground pouting with one of the Chuunin behind her. Naruto, despite his disappointment, was impressed and almost enamored by the mix of determination, disappointment, and drive dancing across her face. Naruto flashed an apologetic smile at Hinata. He was well aware that Hinata had probably tried to warn him and Lee about the Genjutsu, but the boys had already fallen prey to the illusion. Naruto turned his attention to Lee who was wearing his disappointment on his green spandex sleeves.

"Don't feel too bad, kids," one of the Chuunin said with a soft smile. "That was a multi-layered Genjutsu. Even with the young lady defeating the first layer almost instantly, you all couldn't have broken free fast enough."

"You're not the ones who will have to have their training 'intensified' by Guy-sensei," Naruto grumbled.

The kunoichi stepped forward authoritatively. "Like Rokuro said, you guys don't need to worry too much. You all did pretty good for a bunch of fresh-faced Genin. We'll put a good word in for you with Guy-sempai."

"Thank you," Lee replied.

Rokuro laughed. "Something Köhei and I were wondering..."

"What is it?" Hinata asked politely.

"Which one of you guys set up the sealed trap? That was hilarious! I think it's been months since we saw Tomomi get so annoyed!" Köhei jumped in.

Tomomi huffed and looked away. Naruto chuckled and raised his hand. "That would be me."

"Little punk," Tomomi grumbled under her breath. Team Yonai escorted Team Nine to where Guy was waiting. True to their word, Team Yonai gave the Genin a fair report and praised their teamwork. Guy thanked the Chuunin for their assistance and filled out a form stating that they had completed their D-rank mission.

"What the heck was that, Guy-sensei?" Naruto asked in shock.

"I must agree with Naruto-kun's curiosity, if not his tone, Guy-sensei," Lee agreed.

Guy's face didn't reveal anything. "I wanted to give you a practical test. Team Yonai is one of
Konoha's best Genjutsu teams. Rokuro is a member of the Kurama clan and Kōhei and Tomoi are members of the newly-established Yonai clan. They are personal acquaintances of mine and I knew they would test which aspects of the Flames of Youth you all need to stoke. I am pleased by your skills, but there is a great deal of work that needs to be done."

"Guy-sensei," Hinata spoke up as soon as her teacher finished. "Will you be focusing on our defense against Genjutsu?"

"I will train you in recognizing Genjutsu, but I cannot teach you advanced defenses against the subtle art." Guy crossed his arms as he answered. "Let us return to the Dōjō. I have much to introduce to you all today!"

"Yosh! I look forward to discovering new training methods, Guy-sensei!" Lee exclaimed. Naruto grinned and nodded excitedly in prospect of learning new jutsu overrode Naruto's earlier annoyance almost instantly. Guy lead his charges back to his Dōjō for additional training.

Guy spent a full hour having Team Nine recognizing simple Genjutsu. Hinata could quickly recognize the presence of Genjutsu thanks to her Byakugan. She had asked Guy about techniques that could disrupt Genjutsu on a large scale. Unfortunately, Guy only knew of a few vague theories. After the Genjutsu practice, Might Guy shifted his focus to Taijutsu.

"Now, I will introduce you to a core aspect of how I will train you all," Guy announced. "Please follow me."

Team Nine followed their teacher to another section of the Dōjō. "I am introducing you all to training weights."

"Training weights?" Lee asked.

Guy nodded. "Yes, these are not 'technically' weights. In truth, they are based on seals to simulate weight."

Naruto's eyes lit up like Guy had given him a Chuunin Vest for his birthday. Naruto struggled to contain his excitement and continued to listen to Guy-sensei.

"I want you to start out on the level that I set for you," Guy instructed. Lee and Hinata graciously agreed. Naruto agreed as well, but Guy gave him a pointed look. "Naruto, I know you are a budding Fuinjutsu expert. You can study these seals, but you are expressly forbidden from altering them in any way."

Naruto deflated a bit at Guy's command. "I understand, Guy-sensei."

"Before I give you the weights, I want to go over the other rules regarding their use." Team Nine perked up as Guy continued to instruct them. "Traditional Training Weights, and the Weight Seals, are a very useful tool, but they can cause very severe damage if they are overused. So, in order to prevent injuries, you are to only wear them for eight hours a day. As you continue to progress as Shinobi, I may allow you to wear them for longer periods of time."

"I am eager to being this new type of training, Guy-sensei!" Lee's excitement and anticipation were bubbling over.

"Good! I will give you the weights now!" Guy shared his student's excitement. Lee stepped forward and Guy walked Lee through how to activate and use the weight seals. Naruto jumped at the chance to get the seals next. Guy shared the same explanation, but Naruto found it really difficult to follow along with Guy-sensei's words. He was too interested in studying the seal network on the weights.
'Besides, Hinata-chan will listen closely!' Naruto reminded himself as he inspected the chakra conduits on the weights.

Hinata, for her part, was thinking about Genjutsu. Her chakra reserves weren't large enough for her to focus on ninjutsu, but her control was excellent. Genjutsu could be a great tool in her arsenal. She thought back to her encounter with Yakumo. Yakumo’s clan, the Kurama, renowned for their mastery of Genjutsu. 'Maybe I can get Yakumo to help us.' Hinata thought at first, but she doubted Team Nine would have much opportunity to meet with Yakumo given Guy's intense training.

"Hinata, please come here. I will walk you through the weights now," Guy said patiently. Hinata obliged and paid close attention to Guy’s instructions. She put on the weights and nearly lost her balance.

"Now, we shall go to the final stage of today's training. I want you to take some time to move around and get a bit used to your new weights."

Hinata, Lee, and Naruto spent the next few minutes simply getting used to the new weight. It was a challenge at first, but they quickly learned to at least move somewhat normally. After a few moments, Guy-sensei called them back to his location. The next activity was focus-mitt training. Guy worked with Lee because Guy was more familiar with Lee's fighting style. Hinata and Naruto worked together because of their own familiarity with each other.

"Naruto! I know you are not used to the weights, but you must continue to execute your kicks sharply! You cannot slack off! Restart the exercise! I know it is hard, but if you are to be Hokage one day, you can never settle for 'good enough!'" Guy admonished Naruto as he began to let his technique suffer. Naruto nodded forlornly as he started over. The young man had never worked this hard in his life.

"You...can do it, Naruto-kun," Hinata tiredly cheered on her best friend. She was probably as physically exhausted as Naruto, but she continued to support him. Hinata admired the fact that Naruto's second effort was even better than his first. Naruto would never give up. Hinata desperately wanted to be able to emulate that.

Guy ordered the partners to switch positions. Naruto was quick to encourage Hinata to keep pushing through her exhaustion and aching muscles even as he struggled to hold the focus mitts up. Hinata feed off Naruto's encouragement and finished the exercise with Guy only calling her to keep the effort up once.

"Excellent work my students!" Guy said happily. "We are finished for the day!"

Naruto managed to smile once at Hinata before theatrically collapsing to the ground in a heap of exhaustion and overacting. Hinata giggled at the antics. Lee smiled broadly at Naruto's attempt at humor. Guy shook his head at the sight. He was glad there was youthful camaraderie amongst his charges.

"I will give you all the day off from official training tomorrow on two conditions. The first is that you wear your weights for at least three hours and no longer than six. Second, you cannot do any strenuous activities! Your bodies need time to recuperate! Am I clear, my students?"

"Yes, Guy-sensei! I will follow your instructions!" Lee shouted and bowed deeply.

"Clear!" Naruto said from his position on the ground as he flashed a thumbs-up.

"Thank you, Guy-sensei," Hinata said politely.
Guy grinned at his team. "Excellent! You are all dismissed...after you take off your weights and perform a series of cool down stretches."

Hinata, admirably in her mind, managed not to sigh at Guy-sensei's last second proclamation. She helped Naruto to his feet and took off her weights. Lee was far more reluctant to stop training, but did as Guy-sensei ordered. The three students performed their cool down exercises and received Guy's permission to leave.

"I'm tired," Naruto said flatly. "I'm so tired that I'm not even wanting ramen."

Hinata stumbled a bit due to her own exhaustion. "I want nothing more than to just get to our house."

Something about Hinata's words sent Naruto's addled brain for a loop. There was a warmth that Hinata's use of 'our' that filled every corner of Naruto's mind.

"It's always nice to go home together," Naruto agreed.

Now, it was Hinata's turn to embrace a warmth that filled her aspect of her being. She had always craved acceptance, even before her exile. Naruto's acceptance was so unconditional and earnest that it completely overshadowed any of the token gestures of acceptance her former clan had provided. Hinata was overcome by a sudden impulse, and in defiance of all her etiquette training, whirled to face Naruto. Her muscles ached at the sudden exertion, but she found she really didn't care.

"W-What did I say?" Naruto asked. He was a bit nervous by Hinata's reaction and there was a nagging sensation in the back of the boy's head. He was really worried he had said something wrong.

"Something very sweet," Hinata said airily. Naruto had no idea, but Hinata seemed to be as happy as Naruto had ever seen her. So, he decided to simply keep going on that track. There was something in Hinata's smile that struck Naruto. He felt an unexplainable, but fierce, determination to protect that smile.

The two youths continued on in companionable silence. As they reached the apartment, Naruto stopped dead in his tracks. Hinata felt him come to a halt and turned to see Naruto take on a look of despair. It was something she didn't think was even remotely possible.

"W-What's wrong, Naruto-kun?"

Naruto looked at Hinata and his face was almost ashen with concern. "We live on the fourth floor."

Hinata's muscles felt like they were burning at the mere thought. "W-We do have to get to our apartment."

"Lean on each other for support?" Naruto suggested.

"Always," Hinata said with a weary smile. The two slowly, very slowly, made their way to their apartment. They could barely stand, but they drew strength from each other and made it to the bed.

"I-I think I'm going to take a break before I get ready for the night," Naruto yawned as he sat on the edge of the bed. Hinata flopped down and stretched out luxuriously.
"Did you ever think we could be worked that hard?" Hinata said quietly. Naruto flicked his eyes towards Hinata and saw she had a contented smile on her face.

Naruto smiled back despite being as tired as he had ever been. "Nope, but it will be worth it. Guy-sensei and Lee are really going to help us get strong."

"I can only imagine what it is going to be like," Hinata said warmly. "We will definitely reach our dreams now."

Naruto nodded as the fatigue he had been fighting for a while overcame him. 'Maybe if I just rest a bit,' Naruto thought to himself. "I never doubted you for a second," Naruto said verbally.

"Thank you, Naruto-kun," Hinata responded with a yawn. The two started to talk about anything that came to mind. Eventually, the conversation slowed as the two Genin succumbed to their own fatigue.

"Ow," Naruto groaned as he felt how sore he was following the intense training Guy-sensei had put Team Nine through. He tried to stretch his legs, but his feet hit a wall. That, Naruto thought, was definitely odd. His bedroll was in the main room away from most of the walls. Naruto couldn't have moved that much in his sleep. Unexpectedly, he felt the pillow he was resting on move.

"What?" Naruto asked himself and flicked is eyes around the room. Then, he noticed his Ramen poster. "How?"

Naruto's confused thoughts sudden became nervous ones. He heard a soft sigh to his left. Quickly, he sat up and realized he was in his bed. Naruto hadn't slept in his bed since Hinata-chan moved in.

Hinata sat up slowly and rubbed the sleep from her eyes with the heel of her palm. Naruto found himself watching Hinata quietly instead of bolting from the room like he should have.

'Somehow, I'm not sure should have is right,' Naruto gulped.

"N-Naruto-kun?" Hinata asked between yawns. Her eyes instantly shot open. "Naruto-kun?"

"Good...morning?" Naruto's greeting was less of a greeting and more of a question.

"G-Good morning," Hinata replied somewhat hesitantly.

'We slept in the same bed! I'm a boy. Hinata-chan is a girl. That's only allowed if your married! I remember hearing some of the adults talking about that once! They were really upset that Moriko and Yukio were sleeping in the same bed before they got married!' Naruto thought in a whirlwind. "Are you sore from yesterday?" Naruto asked distractedly.

"A bit," Hinata answered shyly. She knew Naruto's question was innocent, but there was something almost awkward about it.

"Me too," Naruto added. "I, uh, I'll get breakfast started."

"Thank you, Naruto-kun," Hinata said genuinely. She watched Naruto slide off the bed and head into the kitchen. The young woman breathed a sigh of relief. 'Naruto-kun and I shared a bed. That's only supposed to happen when a couple is... Hyūga Elders always talked about how that is highly improper and leads to accidents! I hope the accident doesn't involve the oven. It's on the verge of breaking and we can't afford a new one! I should talk with Ayame-onee-chan about this."
Naruto finished making breakfast and called out to Hinata. Hinata joined Naruto at the table. They ate in, for likely the first time since they had met each other, an uncomfortable silence.

'I'm going to have to think of something so that I can talk to Iruka-sensei alone,' Naruto thought quickly.

'I can convince Naruto that I have 'girl stuff' to take care of so that I can talk with Ayame-onee-chan,' Hinata thought just as quickly.

"Hey, Hinata-chan, I've, uh, got to get some more Fuinjutsu supplies," Naruto said in an off-hand manner that was anything but. He was distracted by where his thoughts were leading. 'You have to marry a girl if you sleep together,' Naruto repeated silently. 'Marrying Hinata-chan wouldn't be bad at all, I guess, but only grown-ups get married. We're ninja, but not really grown-ups yet.'

"Would you like me to come along?" Hinata offered politely. "I'm sure I can pick up some of the..." Hinata paused for a heartbeat. "girl stuff I need."

"There is a store closer to the apartment," Naruto pointed out. "I won't be gone long and it'll be more fun to hang out here when we both get back."

"That is a good idea, Naruto-kun," Hinata agreed. "I would like to spend the day relaxing in the house." "The store you are talking about is close to Ichiraku. I can slip away and talk with Ayame-onee-chan."

"Yeah, so we'll catch up later," Naruto said with a smile. His smile was genuine at the thought of spending time with Hinata after he got all this 'might-have-to-get-married' stuff sorted.

Hinata returned the smile. She was unaware of Naruto's thoughts, but also was looking forward to having a quiet afternoon with her best friend. They had not had a 'normal' afternoon since before their graduation. 'Maybe those days were the old normal and our training with Guy-sensei will be the new normal.'

"I would like that," Hinata said in response to Naruto's unsaid plans. 'I hope that nothing changes, Naruto-kun. I am happy as I have ever been. If that has to happen, how would things really change?'

The two finished their breakfast. Naruto stood up first and smiled at Hinata. "Well, I'll catch up with you later. Have a good one, Hinata-chan!"

"Thank you, Naruto-kun. I hope you get all the supplies you need." Hinata returned the smile.

Naruto nodded and got his wallet Gamma-chan and his book-bag. Hinata collected the small amount of money she had saved herself. The two exchanged one last smile and went their separate ways. Naruto and Hinata felt more awkward about not talking with each other about the way they had woken up than if they had talked about everything.

'I want to talk with Hinata-chan about this,' Naruto thought to himself. 'but I have no clue what I want to say. The last thing I want to do is make her upset about anything.'

Naruto sighed as he thought about everything Hinata had been through. She was happy and he swore he'd make sure she would stay that way. Naruto felt himself picking up the pace as he headed for Iruka's classroom. 'I have to time this to avoid Sakura and Ino. They may be my friends, but they'd spread all sorts of rumors.'

He looked to a nearby store window and noticed the time. "I guess I should get my supplies and slip in during lunch."
Naruto set off to another store with a smile on his face. He really needed both the time to think of how he was going to talk with Iruka-sensei and the supplies to continue practicing and producing his awesome seals. As Naruto entered the store, he wondered what Hinata-chan was up to.

Hinata waited quietly until the last delivery man left before she approached Ichiraku. She felt strangely confident as she walked towards the humble restaurant. Hinata chalked up the surge in her resolve to the nature of her bond with Ayame and Teuchi. Ayame and Teuchi were like the family relationships Hinata had always dreamed of. Ayame was the patient big sister Hinata had prayed for after her mother's death. Hinata was grateful to have an older girl she could confide in. Hinata truly and graciously counted Ino and Sakura as her friends, but those two couldn't really help Hinata with her current situation.

'It doesn't help that this would only confirm their crazy theories...' Hinata thought with a self-distracting giggle.

Ayame was alerted to Hinata's approach by her quiet giggle. "Good morning, Hinata-chan!"

"Good morning, Ayame-onee-chan," Hinata replied with a warm smile. The younger girl noticed the ghost of a blush on the cook's cheeks. "I-I was wondering if you had a minute to talk?"

Ayame noticed Hinata's tone and nodded gently. She opened the door to the restaurant and motioned for Hinata to come in. Hinata bowed graciously, and somehow all the comfort and confidence she had gathered was being replaced by a nervousness.

"Well, what a nice surprise!" Teuchi said as he came down the stairs from the family apartment. "How are you, Hinata?"

"I am doing well, Teuchi-san, and you?" Hinata asked politely. Teuchi smiled. He knew that Hinata had a far more pressing conversation with his daughter, but was pleasantly surprised by Hinata's impeccable manners.

"Eager to live another day," Teuchi answered with a content smile. Hinata returned the smile and believed she could physical feel Teuchi's quiet support. The ramen chef was more of a grandfather than Hinata's biological grandfather had ever even considered being.

She was grateful for it.

"Father, I will need to speak with Hinata-chan in private. I will be down to help as soon as I can," Ayame told her father. Teuchi caught the message hidden in both his daughter's tone and body language and simply nodded. Hinata and Ayame went into the family's apartment and took a seat on the couch.

"So Hinata-chan," Ayame said after a moment. "What do you need to talk about?"

"I-I think I have to marry Naruto-kun," Hinata decided to 'ease' into the conversation.

Ayame gave Hinata a disbelieving, if good-natured, look. "You two are very close, but I'm not sure you kiddos are ready for that leap yet."

"Well..." Hinata blushed for a few reasons. One, she remembered why she was speaking to Ayame in the first place. Two, Ayame's statement made Hinata realize just how close the former Hyūga was to Naruto. It was comforting to be so close, but also strangle scary and exciting at the same time. Normally, boys and girls were nowhere near as close as Naruto and Hinata were.

'Then again, what about our situation is normal?' Hinata thought.
"Oh boy," Ayame sighed. "Start from the top, Hinata-chan." Ayame prepared herself to explain what a crush was to Hinata. She thought back to what Teuchi, and her mother before her death, had said when Ayame had gotten her first crush.

Hinata chewed her lip for a moment. "I slept with Naruto-kun last night. When I was...still a Hyūga, the Elders were adamant that any 'couple' that slept together get married. It, it would be very improper if Naruto and I...well..."

Ayame was silent for several seconds. Hinata felt the older appraising her...judging her. She could feel memories of her father and his harsh judgments surfacing.

"Did you leave your clothes on?" Ayame asked after a moment.

Hinata blanched. "O-Of course!"

"Then I'll have to hold off on working on the wedding menu for a few years," the older woman said with a smile. Hinata could swear she saw mirth dancing in the cook's eyes.

"B-But we slept in the same bed!" Hinata protested.

Ayame held up her finger and her smile ballooned. "But you didn't sleep together. There's a difference between sleeping together and sleeping together that I'll explain later."

"So, what did Naruto-kun and I do last night?" The young Genin managed to squeak out.

"Like I said, you just fell asleep in the same bed." Ayame smiled. "Oh, and Hinata..."

"Yes, Ayame-onee-chan?" Hinata asked nervously. She could feel the mischief rolling off the other woman.

"I noticed that you never said anything about being against marrying Naruto-kun," Ayame pointed out with faux-innocence.

All the color that had disappeared from Hinata's face early in the conversation came flooding back. She hadn't realized what she hadn't said. "I, we," Hinata tried to explain herself. It didn't work well.

"Oh, don't worry, it's cute," Ayame continued her friendly teasing.

Hinata almost gulped and quietly she hoped Naruto was having an easier day. Somehow, Hinata was convinced Naruto was going to have a similarly eventful experience.
Iruka buried his head in his hands and took a deep, calming, 'I'm obviously stalling for time' breath. Naruto was always welcomed in Iruka's home, but a part of the teacher had always known Naruto's visits would likely be unique.

"Naruto, please slow down and start from the top," Iruka said patiently.

Naruto chuckled nervously. "Well, Iruka-sensei, I kinda have to marry Hinata-chan soon."

"I gathered from your panicked shouts from when you practically ran through my door," Iruka said with a smile. "What happened to make marrying Hinata 'necessary'?"

The young man laughed again and the forced nature of the laugh was apparent to the universe. "It started early yesterday, Guy-sensei worked us really hard! That was actually really awesome. I can't wait to see how strong this training makes us! Hinata-chan, Lee, and I will be super badass!"

Iruka knew Naruto's rambling and excited focus on his training would take center stage until Naruto 'got it out of his system'. Naruto wouldn't be able to calmly explain his situation until he wore himself out. Iruka let the boy continue babbling about how much Guy-sensei's training was going to help him and Hinata become strong. Naruto's rambling had a negative effect on Iruka however. The teacher would constantly find his thoughts wandering back to his own marriage plans and hopes.

"And how did that cause your current...predicament?"

"Well...I mightasorta slept with Hinata," Naruto admitted sheepishly.

The pieces quickly fell in place and Iruka smiled in a soothing combination of relief and amusement. "You won't be marrying Hinata yet. Naruto, you're thinking of a differing kind of sleeping together."

"I don't get it," Naruto grumbled.

Iruka chuckled. "Don't worry, I'll explain it when you are ready."

"But, Iruka-sensei, I'm already a shinobi," Naruto pointed out.

"This is something completely different," Iruka said with a smile. "Trust me, I'll be explaining everything before you know it."

"Then why can't 'before I know it' be now?" Naruto asked in an annoyed and confused tone.

Iruka sighed. He needed more time to prepare. It wasn't for lack of confidence in his ability to explain it to Naruto. Iruka knew he was a good teacher. But this was Naruto. Iruka had really come to view the rather obnoxious child as a little brother...or at times, a son.

'Naruto is a soldier now, and will eventually have to kill. How can I legitimately say the process of making life should be kept from him when I taught him the process of taking life?'

"Well, I have a few things to take care of today. I'll be by later. It's been a while since the two of us just hung out," Iruka caught himself from adding 'like brothers' or 'father and son' to the end of his statement.
Naruto's face lit up. "Really? Where would we go? I mean, we usually go to Ichiraku, but you're always there nowadays!"

Iruka laughed and traced his scar with his thumb. "We'll think of something."

Hinata was humming happily as she looked for supplies for her flower pressing. She found a few things she needed and headed for the exit. On a whim, she passed through the painting section. Hinata felt a smile work its way to her lips as she recognized Yakumo.

"Good afternoon, Yakumo-sama," Hinata said after getting Yakumo's attention. Hinata's tone, inflection, and even the timing of her words was perfect.

"Good afternoon, Hinata-san," Yakumo replied with an equally formal smile. "You don't have to address me so formally."

"You are the heiress of one of Konoha's oldest clans and we have only met a few times," Hinata replied in a friendly tone.

"Well, shall we consider this enough times to become friends?" Yakumo asked.

Hinata continued to smile warmly. "Of course. I have a question, Yakumo-san."

"Ask away, Hinata-san," Yakumo replied and was pleased by the decrease in formality.

"Is Rokuro-san still laughing at Naruto-kun's paint trap?"

Yakumo covered her mouth as she laughed daintily. "His amusement is now annoyance. I have reminded him that he nearly fell into a newly graduated Genin's trap! I haven't had this much fun with our little game of tease and counter-tease in a long time."

"I'm sure there's a story for that," Hinata prodded.

Yakumo nodded. "A very interesting one, actually."

Hinata picked up the items she needed, as did Yakumo. The two young women chatted aimlessly as they paid for their items.

"So, why is Rokuro-san a favorite teasing target?" Hinata asked.

"I prefer to think of it as retaliation," Yakumo said warmly. "It began when Rokuro-san joked about my paintings. It was good-natured, of course, but I have always been very...proud of my art. I take advantage of every opportunity to get back at Rokuro-san and he takes every opportunity to get back at me."

"So, it's almost like a game?" Hinata asked.

Yakumo smiled. "That's an excellent way to put it, Hinata-san."

Hinata giggled as a bit of realization hit her. "I thought we were trying to stop being so formal, Yakumo-chan."

"You're right. I guess I don't have much of a chance to be 'normal'," Yakumo said as her cheeks flushed. Yakumo caught the unintentional double meaning, but she was confident Hinata wouldn't notice.
Naruto stared up at the building and felt a twinge of nervousness in his gut. He had never been to this part of Konoha before. In fact, the few times Iruka-sensei and Mizuki-sensei had brought Naruto's academy class here Naruto had skipped.

"I'm a full-fledged ninja now! I am a fuinjutsu specialist! I can do this," Naruto said to psyche himself up. He walked up the stairs and entered the enormous building. It was busier inside than Naruto had expected.

"I have no idea where to start," Naruto grumbled to himself. He saw a large desk and approached the older man sitting behind it. "Excuse me, sir."

"Yes? Welcome to the Konoha Library and Archives. Do you need help locating something young man?"

Naruto blinked at the old librarian. He hadn't expected anyone to be so polite to him outside of his narrow social circle. It was a very nice surprise.

"Um, yes sir. I am looking for the fuinjutsu section," Naruto admitted.

"Your Ninja ID number?"

"012607," Naruto repeated from memory. Hinata had helped him study and improve his memorization while they had been at the Academy. The librarian thumbed through a large book for a moment.

"Very well, Genin Uzumaki. You have access to the public sections of the library and the Level One Shinobi archives. Please, follow me."

The librarian rose from his seat and motioned for Naruto to follow him. The Genin followed behind his older guide and couldn't believe how many books and scrolls the library possessed. The librarian paused in front of a pair of large doors.

"This is the fuinjutsu archive. If you need help in the public area, please come find me. If you can't locate me, ask for Osamu. I will come find you. If you need help in the restricted area, Manabu-san will be able to assist you," Osamu explained.

"I appreciate it, but why won't you help with the restricted area?" Naruto asked.

"Manabu-san is both the guard and the archivist for the restricted area. He will be able to answer your questions and ensure security of the area. Fuinjutsu is a very powerful art. It is why the Uzumaki clan was so feared," the Librarian explained.

Naruto's eyes lit up. "I have a...clan? W-Where could I find books and scrolls about them?"

"Information on the Uzumaki clan and its connections to Konoha can be found in the historical references area," Osamu explained. Naruto fought the urge to raise an eyebrow. Osamu spoke incredibly stilted.

"Thank you. I, uh, should probably get started," Naruto said with a smile. The librarian nodded once and headed back to his desk.

Naruto took a deep breath. He pushed open the doors and was a bit disappointed. The public area of the fuinjutsu section was little more than a hallway. At the end of the hall, a man Naruto assumed to be Manabu was standing in front of a second set of doors.
Naruto spent a few minutes going through the public books. He saw a few details that really stood out and copied them into a notebook he had bought from the store near Iruka-sensei's house. The books Naruto used didn't really expand on his actual knowledge of fuinjutsu. Old Man Hokage's book had taught him the basics. Naruto was amused by the calligraphy pointers. He made a mental note to ask Hinata if she had any pointers.

Eventually, Naruto got bored of the 'public' books and approached the man at the desk. "Um, excuse me...Manabu-san?"

Manabu looked up and managed to hide his start. "Yes? How may I help you?"

"I would like to access the Level One area, please," Naruto said as he pretended not to notice the man's start.

"Of course. I have to say, I'm impressed someone so young is taking up fuinjutsu. It's a really rare art," Manabu said congenially.

Naruto's concerns about the man's early jolt began to melt away. 'He's probably bored. I bet I'm the only person who has asked for access in a while...'

"Thanks Ol...Hokage-sama says I have a real 'knack' for it! There is so much awesome stuff you can do with seals," Naruto excitedly explained.

Manabu chuckled. "It's nice to see enthusiasm in this place. Some people treat it like a mausoleum."

"What's that?" Naruto's face scrunched up as he tried think of what that word meant.

"Mausoleum is another word for grave," Manabu explained. Naruto quickly decided that he wouldn't use that word for a while.

"Oh right. So, if I want to check out something in the Level One archives, how does that work?" Naruto asked to change the subject. Everyone in the library had been kinda weird. 'No wonder I never came here...'

"The Level One archive is a restricted archive. Civilians cannot access it, but there aren't any restrictions for anybody of Gennin rank or higher on checking anything out. Most of the scrolls and books cover more advanced seals, but they aren't really dangerous in any way."

"Thanks, Manabu-san!" Naruto said as the Chuunin opened the door to the Level One archives. The Genin dashed into the room and picked the first book he came across. "The Five-Seal Barrier Technique..."

"That. Sounds. Awesome!" Naruto quickly grabbed the scroll and dashed back to Manabu. "So, do I check this out here?"

"I'll sign it out here and then you can sign it out officially at the front desk," Manabu explained.

Naruto thanked the Chuunin as soon as the final pen stroke was completed. The young man bolted to the front desk. He completed the check-out process and was relieved to step out side.

'I really want to learn about the Uzumaki clan, but that place creeped me out! It might be worse than being in the hospital if you ignore the injuries!'
welcomed the change from the stresses of being a shinobi and being an heiress respectively. Hinata had decided to stop by the Academy and visit with Sakura and Ino.

'I think it would be nice for Yakumo-chan to be introduced to more people our age. I remember how the isolation was almost as bad as...as Father's disappointment in breaking me down,' Hinata thought to herself. Somehow, the admission was liberating and she found herself allowing herself to smile just a little bit more.

"Oh-my-gosh!" Ino shouted happily as she grabbed Sakura's arm. "Hinata-chan! You came to visit!"

"Hello, Ino-chan, Sakura-chan!" Hinata greeted her friends. "May I introduce you to Kurama Yakumo?"

"Pleased to meet you," Yakumo said politely.

Sakura smiled warmly. "It is always nice to meet a friend of Hinata-chan's."

"So, what brings you two to the Academy?" Ino asked with a grin.

"Guy-sensei gave my team the day off," Hinata began. "I ran into Yakumo-chan at the store and thought it would be nice to see all of my girl friends."

"That's nice," Sakura agreed. "I'm kinda surprised to see you without Naruto, though."

Hinata took a moment to think about Sakura's comment. The roommates and best friends were practically inseparable. It actually was fairly unusual for them not to be together. "We both had our own errands to run. I had to pick some items up from the store and Naruto-kun wanted to research fuinjutsu."

"Naruto's picking up fuinjutsu? That's a rare skill," Ino pointed out.

"He is very talented in it," Hinata revealed. "Anyway, how are you two doing in the Academy?"

Sakura shrugged. "We're doing well. Sasuke-kun isn't in our class anymore. I'm kind of embarrassed to say that if it wasn't for some advice Naruto gave us, Ino-pig and I wouldn't have a real goal."

"Forehead's right," Ino admitted. Yakumo was shocked at the nicknames that seemed simultaneously demeaning and endearing. "Sasuke had been our focus for so long, we had no idea what to do. Luckily, Sakura remembered Naruto's advice about 'racing' to Chuunin."

"I remembered it after trying to talk with Sasuke-kun after he returned to the Academy. I couldn't believe that he didn't pass. He was so angry and wouldn't talk to anyone except for this older Hyūga."

Hinata's flinch did not go unnoticed by the other girls. "The older Hyūga was...is my cousin Neji. He was always very harsh with me and had a fatalistic outlook on the world. I'm afraid he'll introduce some of his world view to Sasuke."

Yakumo put a hand on Hinata's shoulder. "Are you alright, Hinata-chan?"

"I-I have always been a bit afraid of Neji-nii-san. The thought of a person becoming like him is very unnerving," Hinata hugged herself. Ino and Sakura exchanged glances. If the person Sasuke was associating with made Hinata this scared, Ino and Sakura truly began to reconsider their position on Sasuke.
"I'm sorry," Sakura said quickly. She instantly brightened. It was only partially an act to cheer up her friend. "What's being a ninja like?"

Hinata was grateful for the change of subject. "Tiring," she answered truthfully. "Our sensei, Might Guy, has been working us very hard individually. Guy-sensei gave us all the day off to recover."

The conversation turned to basic, lighter fare. The two Academy students asked about Iruka-sensei. Hinata explained the popular teacher's situation. The former Hyūga's explanation trailed off as she noticed a twitch form above Ino's right eye.

"So, Iruka-sensei is in a committed relationship with Ayame from Ichiraku? And Naruto was afraid to tell me because of a fear over Ayame's...ladle?"

"Yes, but Naruto-kun refers to it as 'The Ladle'. He is quite terrified of it," Hinata revealed with a giggle.

"Lunch break is over! Everyone return to class," Mizuki shouted. Sakura and Ino groaned a bit.

"It was great seeing you again, Hinata-chan," Sakura said with a truly happy smile. "It was also nice to meet you, Yakumo-san."

"We'll all have to get together sometime!" Ino added before she joined Sakura in heading back to the Academy. Yakumo and Hinata stayed in place for a few moments.

"You certainly have an interesting group of friends," Yakumo said with smile.

Hinata nodded in agreement. "Yes, I'm glad to have so many. I'm also glad to include you among them."

"Thank you," Yakumo responded. She truly enjoyed the few moments she had spent with Hinata. The slightly younger girl made everything...quiet.

Naruto was sitting at the kitchen table when Hinata came back. He smiled broadly at his best friend. "Welcome home, Hinata-chan!"

"Thank you, Naruto-kun," Hinata answered. "How was your day?"

"It went really well! I visited Iruka-sensei on my way to study seals. I've found a new type I want to work on. How was your day?"

"My day was lovely. I ran into Yakumo-chan, Ino-chan, and Sakura-chan. I wish we had more time to catch up, but they had to return to class," Hinata explained.

Naruto nodded. He was kind of jealous of how many friends Hinata had. Naruto only really had Hinata as a 'true' friend. The young man was confident that Lee would end up as a great friend, but the two boys hadn't known each other very long. He quickly shook off those thoughts and continued to grin warmly at his closest friend.

"As hard as Guy-sensei works us, I'd still rather do his workouts than sit in the Academy! No offense to Iruka-sensei!" Naruto quickly added.

"I wonder when we will start missions?" Hinata pondered.

"Let's ask him tomorrow!" Naruto declared. Hinata giggled at Naruto's boundless enthusiasm.
They decided to eat a quick meal and talked aimlessly about whatever came to mind. As night approached, they made sure to say their goodbyes and head to their usual sleeping arrangements. Hinata got in the bed and Naruto got into his bedroll.

He really did miss his bed, though.

The next morning, Guy-sensei had praised his team for arriving on time. He immediately set them to warming up. As the somewhat eccentric Jonin headed off to prepare the day's lesson. Hinata decided to speak to Lee about Yakumo.

"Ah, Lee-kun, I forgot to mention something when our team first met."

Lee paused for a fraction of a second while stretching. "Yes, Hinata-san?"

"A friend of mine, Kurama Yakumo heard of your story and it has given her and her clan hope that she can become a shinobi as well. I haven't found out what her situation is, but she was thrilled to hear that you became a shinobi," Hinata explained.

"Yosh! I was unaware that my situation was an encouragement to others! I will have to work even harder now!" Lee exclaimed.

Naruto shook his head. He really enjoyed Lee's enthusiasm. 'I'd love to spar with Lee. I'd probably get rolled over, but it would a great chance to test myself.'

"Alright, my students! Continue to stretch for a few more minutes and we will get started!" Guy announced. Team Nine continued to stretch until Might Guy called them into the main area of the Dōjō.

Team Nine stood at attention as Guy paced in front of them. "My students! I have come up with our new schedule! We will work for three hours each morning on team-based exercises and general training! The next phase of our day will either be a D-rank mission or several hours of specialized training!"

"Guy-sensei," Naruto said as he raised his hand to be acknowledged. The Jonin nodded and gave Naruto permission to ask his question. "What is today going to be?"

"Today, we will complete a D-rank mission!" Might Guy announced. Hinata and Naruto were visibly excited about the opportunity to receive a bit of income. They weren't in any financial trouble, but it would be nice to have a bit of leeway with their expenses.

Lee raised his hand and stretched for the heavens. "Guy-sensei! What kind of workout will we be doing today?"

"Today, we will continue with the exercises we began at our last training session!" Guy explained exuberantly.

Team Nine trained on various exercises for a while. Hinata sparred against Lee while Guy-sensei trained with Naruto. Guy-sensei wanted to see how Hinata incorporated the principles of circle-walking into her taijutsu. He also wanted to see how Lee would handle himself against a highly mobile opponent. The goal for Naruto's taijutsu was to refine it and stress to the young man that his success in hand-to-hand combat relied on maintaining the initiative.

"Excellent work, everyone!" Guy called out. As the Gennin cell gathered around him, he continued with his lesson. "Now, we will work on how this team will work together in the field! All of you are skilled with taijutsu! Lee and Hinata are naturals at the art. Naruto's strengths are geared towards supporting the team with ninjutsu, fuinjutsu, or in taijutsu. I want us to work on
Naruto, Lee, and Hinata nodded as Guy lead them to a nearby training ground. Immediately, Naruto turned to his teammates. "Should we stick to the plan we worked out in the Genin Test?"

"It was a sound plan! I think it will serve us well," Lee agreed.

Naruto nodded. "Just to be safe...Hinata-chan, can you check the training ground with your Byakugan?"

"Byakugan," Hinata whispered after finishing her hand-seals. "It is a lightly wooded area. There is almost no cover outside a few areas of trees. If I'm right, it looks like this area was purposefully arranged."

"Probably not tight enough to use the exact plan from our test," Naruto mused. "Alright, I think I have a new plan."

Might Guy smiled as he listened to his team work together. *They are truly Geniuses of Hard Work. To think, most of Konoha cruelly wrote them off as hopeless failures. I will make sure that their doubters never forget how wrong they were! Team Nine, I will make you splendid shinobi!*

Iruka made his way to the front door as he heard the knock. He had been preparing how to give 'The Talk' to Naruto. Thus, he wasn't really expecting any visitors.

'It could be about a mission,' Iruka thought as he opened the door. He barely contained his surprise when it wasn't a fellow shinobi summoning him to a meeting with the Hokage. Instead, it was his future father-in-law.

"Teuchi, how are you?" Iruka asked with a grin.

Teuchi returned the teacher's smile. "Doing fine, doing fine. May I come in?"

"Of course! You are always welcome in my home," Iruka said earnestly. His earnestness fell a bit as he realized one of the reasons Teuchi was visiting. He was checking to see where Ayame would likely be living sooner rather than later.

"Thank you, Iruka," Teuchi said earnestly.

"Can I get you anything?"

The ramen shop owner shook his head as he entered the living room. "No thank you." Teuchi caught sight of Iruka's collection of books and quirked an eyebrow. Iruka caught Teuchi's gaze and chuckled sheepishly.

"Naruto, uh, needs the talk," Iruka admitted.

"How did that happen?" Teuchi laughed.

Iruka shook his head and joined in the laughter. "Hinata and Naruto fell asleep in the same bed after their Jonin-sensei, Might Guy, worked them into the ground."

"So, that's what Hinata wanted to talk with Ayame about," Teuchi said as he took a seat.

"I'd wager it was. Naruto didn't mention Hinata meeting with Ayame-chan," Iruka agreed. "I know Naruto thought he had to marry Hinata."
"Ayame was practically in tears after Hinata had the same thought," Teuchi laughed. "Ayame has been talking about marriage all morning."

It wasn't exactly a subtle way to begin the conversation, but Iruka had been expecting Teuchi to mention the relationship between Ayame and himself eventually.

"I've been thinking about the subject myself," Iruka admitted. "Please, have a seat. I think this conversation is going to take a while."

Teuchi took a seat across from Iruka. "I hope it will be quick. I just want to hear your intentions for my daughter. She's all I have left. Her happiness is everything that drives me."

"Her happiness drives me as well. I did provide the entire payment from my C-rank mission for Ayame-chan to pay for her tuition to Marasai."

Teuchi actually smiled. "She tried to hide that. I asked her about why she came home in such a great mood a while back. Ayame wouldn't answer my question and glided to her room."

"I...also told her that I love her," Iruka confessed.

"You're a good man, Iruka, and you are making my daughter very happy in many ways. I just have a single question," Teuchi said as he crossed his arms.

"Ask away," Iruka said calmly.

"When are you going to propose?" The ramen chef asked bluntly.

Even prepared, Iruka was mostly caught off guard. It took him a moment to compose himself. "I have been giving it a lot of thought. Ayame will probably apply to Marasai soon. But the Bijū in the room is...well, I still have to complete my B and A ranked missions. I'm almost guaranteed to run into hostile shinobi, rogue summons, or armies. There are no certainties on missions like that."

Teuchi fell silent for several moments. "Thank you, Iruka. I will pray for your safety."

Iruka couldn't find his voice and simply nodded. He politely made conversation with Teuchi as the other man decided to leave. The conversation had been very short, but it had driven home reality for Iruka in a way all of his training had failed to do. He had to survive these upcoming missions. There were too many people who needed and loved him. He would succeed. Iruka had no other choice.
Naruto was a bit torn on the realities of D-rank missions. The mission had not been anything like his image of kick-ass ninja missions. Naruto had been thrilled to actually get his first mission and when Guy-sensei had led them to the Hokage's office, Naruto had actually paid close attention. He had only spent a minute or two figuring out how he would set up the office when he became Co-kage with Hinata-chan.

It had been a bit of a downer to hear that Team Nine would be making deliveries for the post office instead of rescuing hostages, escorting dignitaries, or something exciting. The young man thought that the D-rank was something civilians or Academy Students should be doing.

A minute of thought had allowed Naruto to see a few positives of the mission, however. First, it was a break from Guy-sensei's training. Naruto had always had a bit more stamina than most of his friends, but even his endurance was tested by Guy's training. The second fact that made him appreciate this D-rank was that he wasn't the only one getting paid. Hinata-chan was also getting a pay check on this mission. This single mission would take care of their rent for a few months.

Hinata and Naruto had always been frugal and had simple tastes. They had no doubt that their payment could be stretched for a while.

"Lee! How are we doing on packages?" Naruto asked.

The green-clad ninja turned and beamed at his friend. "I only have three packages left! Hinata-san has two left. Do you have any left?"

"I've got two," Naruto replied. "I wonder what we're carrying?"

"We...we shouldn't worry about it," Hinata said as she returned from dropping off a number of letters. "On higher ranked missions, we could be carrying secret documents or intelligence. It would be our duty not to look."

"Man, Hinata-chan, you're amazing," Naruto said with complete admiration.

"Hinata is correct!" Guy said as he suddenly materialized in the midst of his Genin Team. "This is excellent training! Curiosity and a desire to learn are natural parts of your youthful nature, but remember my precious students, that you must temper those desires with discipline!"

"Of course, Guy-sensei!" Lee exclaimed and, somehow, pulled out a notepad. Guy-sensei's apprentice jotted down the words.

Naruto grinned broadly as he headed to the next house. He double-checked the addresses on the letters and packages before knocking on the door. An older man opened and stared at Naruto for a heartbeat. Naruto tried desperately to keep his smile from fading.

"Can I help...you?" The man asked.

"Are you Fukui Shoichi-san?" Naruto asked politely. The man nodded. "I have a package and three letters for you, sir."

Shoichi looked at Naruto cautiously. "You didn't open them did you?"

"Of course not, sir," Naruto answered quickly. "These are your packages. It'd be really rude of me to go digging through your mail."
Fukui-san seemed placated by that answer and accepted the packages. "Thank you young...man."
Naruto waved and wished him a good day. He didn't frown until he had rejoined Hinata and Lee.
"Is everything alright, Naruto-kun?" Hinata asked. Naruto forced his frown away and grinned at his teammates.
"Yeah, just thinking of a few annoying things. It isn't anything to worry about," Naruto assured his friends.
"If you ever need to talk, we are here for you, Naruto!" Lee loudly promised his teammate.
"Thanks, Lee," Naruto said genuinely. Guy had a frown on his face as he realized what had happened. The individual at the home Naruto had visited had harbored unfounded doubts about Naruto's character. Many in Konoha still doubted the Fourth Hokage. Guy felt a twinge of shame in his gut, but managed to hide it from his students.

Guy's concerns were washed away as he saw his team interact. Naruto had decided to better coordinate their actions. He worked out a system where Hinata would check the surrounding area with her Byakugan and pass the packages or letters to either Naruto or Lee. The boys would quickly deliver the packages and return to the team. Naruto's new system cut down on the time Team Nine spent on the mission. As always, Guy was keeping a close eye on how his team interacted and handled the mission. They were likely not aware that the true purpose of D-rank missions was to gauge how well a team worked together. A secondary purpose was to see how each individual responded to following orders that they were not thrilled with or did not fully support.

'My students are not hesitating to do their best. They may have not been originally thrilled by the mission, but they have taken to it with gusto!' Guy observed.

Team Nine quickly finished their mission and Might Guy led the young Genin back to the Hokage's tower to report the completed mission. It was impossible for Naruto and Hinata to hide their excitement at seeing the Hokage.

"Good afternoon, Hokage-sama!" Naruto shouted with unmatched exuberance.

The elderly Hokage lit his pipe and smiled. "Good afternoon, Naruto, Hinata, Lee, and Guy. I take it your mission was a success?"

"Yes, Hokage-sama," Might Guy answered. "Team Nine is hear to report mission complete!"

"Excellent!" The Hokage said warmly. "Please see Haruka-san for your pay vouchers. I look forward to congratulating Team Nine on many more successful missions!"

Team Nine all beamed and happily collected their pay vouchers. They were dismissed by the Chunin and followed Guy-sensei out of the Hokage's office. At the bottom of the stairs, Guy asked for his team's attention.

"Excellent work today, my students!" The Jonin said warmly. "We have had a very successful day! You three may have the rest of the day to train on your own and attend to your personal business!"

"Thank you, Guy-sensei," all three Genin responded at the same time.

"Guy-sensei, will we be meeting at the same time tomorrow?" Naruto asked.
The Sublime Green Beast flashed a thumbs-up and a dazzling smile. "Of course, Naruto! Routine is important for your development!"

Naruto and Hinata bowed to their teacher. Might Guy flashed another smile and motioned for Lee to follow him to their Apprenticeship training. The two roommates exchanged excited grins.

"We've got our rent money for the rest of the year!" Naruto gushed.

Hinata nodded excitedly. "I hope we get a few more missions! It would be great to not worry about our finances!"

"Do you want to go to the bank first, or home?" Naruto asked.

"Home," Hinata answered immediately and brushed her left sleeve. "I really want to take a shower."

"R-Right," Naruto answered. "That sounds like a good idea."

"I wonder how our friends' day at the Academy went? We haven't seen Tenten-sempai since the True Genin Test..." Hinata wondered out loud.

Tenten glanced up and watched the other Academy Students filter out of the grounds. She sighed as she returned her attention to her notes. The nature of Ibiki's Genin Test was resounding in her head. Intelligence was life. Tenten had begun observing and taking notes on every student in the classes. Currently, her notes were very basic. Tenten had two folders. The first was students who had failed their Jonin-sensei's Test and the other contained information on the students who were about to take their Academy Genin Test for the first time. Unfortunately, her information wasn't very complete.

'I have a few months,' Tenten thought to herself as she wrote down a bit of information on Sohda Rikuto. It had really shocked Tenten to overhear Rikuto talking about how Naruto was the reason he was still in the Academy. The budding kunoichi made a note to find Naruto and Hinata to ask them about that. Truthfully, she also wanted visit with them. The two were genuinely nice. Their situation was unusual and Tenten suspected there was a lot of other issues behind everything. She also doubted that anyone would come out and admit the causes of Hinata and Naruto practically being outcasts.

The inquisitive kunoichi grumbled as she finished writing down the latest information on her classmates and closing her files. As she sealed her 'intelligence reports' into a storage scroll, she noticed her graduating class's valedictorian approaching. Hyūga Neji was wearing his traditional scowl in addition to his simple Hyūga robes and a white silk band around his forehead.

"Can I help you?" Tenten asked neutrally as Neji came to a stop on the other side of the table.

"I want you to cease your spying on me," Neji said without preamble.

Tenten crossed her arms and returned Neji's harsh gaze. "I'm not spying. I'm observing, there's a difference, Neji-san."

The challenge in Tenten's voice was not lost on Neji, but it was certainly unexpected. "Your...observations are almost universally considered spying by your peers. I am concerned that you might discover secrets that would make my position on any future team...difficult."

Tenten desperately fought the urge to quirk an eyebrow. She failed, and instead allowed her eyes to narrow. "It's actually the opposite, Neji-san. I'm doing this to make my position on a future team easier. You know the purpose of the real Genin Test. Ibiki-sensei taught me that intelligence and
information is life. I am not going into that test blind again."

"Admirable," Neji admitted, but Tenten wasn't convinced of the Hyūga's sincerity. "but I will not permit your observations."

"Well, since you asked so nicely," Tenten started and added just the right amount of biting sarcasm. "I'll stop my observations of you."

Neji didn't miss the sarcasm and his pale white eyes narrowed. His eyes shifted from 'infuriated' to their normal 'mildly annoyed at the entire world' and Neji nodded. "I am glad we could come to...an understanding."

Tenten returned the nod, but rolled her eyes after Neji turned on his heels and left without saying another word. She decided it was time to go herself and rose from her seat.

'I promised Neji that I wouldn't observe him anymore, and I won't. I also never said anything about not investigating. He's hiding something big. I definitely need to talk with Hinata now. She used to be Hyūga.'

Tenten made it to the gates of the Academy before stopping and groaning. She had no idea where to find Hinata and Naruto. There was also the chance they could still be working with their Jonin-sensei. 'How the heck am I going to find them?'

"I'm glad you're taking my lesson to heart," a voice Tenten instantly recognized said with dark amusement.

Tenten jumped at the voice even as she realized it was Ibiki. She was embarrassed that she was so easily startled, but proud that she landed in a solid taijutsu stance with a hand on a weapon scroll. "Ibiki-sensei?"

The feared Tokubetsu Jonin smirked approvingly at Tenten's reaction. "I'm not your sensei anymore, girl."

"You taught me a great deal in the real Genin Test," Tenten countered. "Um, what are you doing here?"

"I am going on a vital mission for Konoha, soon. The Academy is in the same building as the Hokage's offices. Your activities have been entertaining." Ibiki rolled his shoulders as he spoke.

"Oh," Tenten squeaked. Ibiki was every bit as intimidating as he had been during the test. "I, uh, need some help."

"Keep in mind, that everything has a price," Ibiki pointed out.

Tenten nodded. "Okay. Do you know where Uzumaki Naruto and Hinata live?"

Ibiki brow furrowed at the question. "I do. Before I name my price and give my answer, I need to know what you are going to use this information for."

"I need to get Hinata's help in getting some of my information straight...and I want to visit my friends," Tenten admitted.

'She wants to confirm some information on the Hyūga Clan,' Ibiki deduced. "I will give you the address, but in exchange you will have to swear to pass your next Genin Test and strive to become a Chuunin as quickly as possible."
"I was going to do that anyway," Tenten grumbled. Ibiki's chuckled and the sound really creeped the young woman out.

Ibiki pulled a small notepad out of his pocket and wrote down an address. "Memorize this. I cannot allow you to write it down."

Tenten memorized the address and turned her attention back to the veteran Jonin. "Why are you helping me out? You said it yourself. You aren't my sensei anymore."

"Let's just say, I believe you have potential...and you'll help me prove a point in the future," Ibiki revealed before walking off. Tenten let out a breath she hadn't realized she had been holding. She quickly pushed the nerve-wracking encounter out of her mind and rushed to the address she had memorized.

Naruto and Hinata were sitting at the kitchen table and staring at their pay vouchers. "So...what are we supposed to do with these?" Naruto asked tentatively.

"I-I think we need to deposit them, but I-I don't think we have a bank account," Hinata answered in an equally tentative voice.

"Actually, I think we do," Naruto pointed out. "That stipend we get has to go somewhere. We should probably go find Iruka-sensei."

Hinata chewed her lip and nodded. "Iruka-sensei would definitely be the one to know. He's probably the only person who'd help us reliably, too."

"Yeah!" Naruto exclaimed. "He's probably the only person I trust as much as I trust you."

Hinata blushed and shyly mumbled thank you. The two friends got out of their seats and Naruto extended his hand with a smile. Hinata looked at the hand and blushed furiously before taking it carefully. Naruto laughed as he led Hinata to the door. "I can't wait to tell Iruka-sensei about our mission! Maybe we can stop by Ichiraku and let Teuchi-oji-san and Ayame-onee-chan know too!"

"I-I'm sure they would like that," Hinata agreed. Her mind was marveling about how natural her actions with Naruto felt.

There was a knock at the door and any further thought was interrupted. Naruto cocked his head to the side. "Hello? Who's there?"

"Hello, Naruto-san! It's Tenten," Tenten answered on the other side of the door. Naruto and Hinata exchanged a quick glance and a smile.

"Hey, Tenten-sempai!" Naruto said warmly as he opened the door.

"Good evening, Tenten-sempai," Hinata said politely.

Tenten flushed with a little embarrassment as she saw that Naruto and Hinata were holding hands. "Sorry to...interrupt, but I just wanted to stop by and say hello. We hadn't seen each other in a while."

"We were actually thinking about trying to find you today," Naruto admitted. "Hinata-chan and I were about to go to the bank. Want to come along?"

"Oh, no thanks. I just wanted to say hey," Tenten admitted quickly. She noticed that Hinata and Naruto hadn't let go of each others hands. "I'm sure you two have a lot to do, but Hinata-san, may I ask you a quick question?"
"Of course, Tenten-sempai," Hinata answered.

"The Hyūga Clan has two 'houses' right?" Tenten asked. Hinata nodded nervously. The older girl also noticed that Naruto gave Hinata's hand a bit of a squeeze. 'Wow, they really are all lovey-dovey,' Tenten thought with a smile. "Are there any techniques that are restricted to one house only?"

Hinata nodded. "Y-You are correct, Tenten-sempai. I-I would be careful about mentioning that to many people. The Hyūga are very secretive."

"I know, but I just had to confirm something. I've been researching potential teammates, and something Neji said earlier today got me thinking. Thanks for confirming a theory! We'll have to catch up sometime. Enjoy your date!"

"D-Date?" Naruto and Hinata stammered at the same time. Tenten waved and left with a mischievous grin on her face.

"We should probably find Iruka-sensei," Naruto said after a moment. Hinata nodded and the two headed out to find Iruka.

They were still holding each other's hands.

Iruka was nervous when Teuchi had returned after his earlier visit. He was doubly nervous when Ayame walked in as well. Teuchi said he wanted to cook Iruka a meal that wasn't ramen to thank him for paying for Ayame's tuition. Iruka was worried that he had planted a seed of worry in his future father-in-law after their conversation on B and A-ranked missions. The teacher truly hoped Ayame wouldn't pick up on any of her father's worries.

Luckily, the get together was going wonderful. Iruka was infinitely grateful that the only emotion Ayame was reading from her father was approval at her relationship with Iruka.

Teuchi was singing a folk song off key in the kitchen while Iruka and Ayame were engaged in a quiet conversation about anything that came to mind. Naturally, the conversation turned to the amusing encounter with Naruto and Hinata.

"So, Hinata thought she had to marry Naruto too?" Iruka asked between chuckles.

"She did!" Ayame rested her head on Iruka's shoulder as she tried to get her own laughter under control. "The cutest thing was that she didn't object to marrying Naruto-kun! It was almost as if she was asking for my approval."

"Well, we are practically family for those two," Iruka admitted and Ayame nodded in agreement. "Naruto was pretty much the same. Though, Naruto was probably more...energetic than Hinata."

"Oh, I don't doubt that," Ayame agreed. "He's practically on a permanent sugar rush!"

Iruka looked at the door in annoyance as a very enthusiastic knock echoed through his home. His annoyance evaporated as he heard a key turning and a loud "Hey, Iruka-sensei! Hinata-chan and I are coming in!"

"We're in the living room," Iruka shouted. Ayame and Iruka blinked a few times as they realized Naruto and Hinata were holding hands. The two adults started laughing mirthfully. Naruto was complaining about Iruka and Ayame laughing and making Hinata uncomfortable. Hinata, for her part, simply blushed.

"Oh, we sooo have to give them The Talk," Ayame whispered.
"I was planning on doing that tonight anyway," Iruka agreed with a smile. "Good evening, Naruto and Hinata. What brings you to my house?"

Hinata managed to get her blush under control and quickly found her voice. "Iruka-sensei, we need your help with our pay vouchers."

"You completed a mission today?" Ayame asked.

"Hey, Ayame-onee-chan!" Naruto said warmly. "We were totally awesome on our mission!"

"That's great, Naruto-kun! I'm proud of you as well, Hinata-chan!" Ayame beamed.

The two young people smiled broadly as they took a seat. Iruka cleared his throat. "So, what do you need help with?"

"Iruka-sensei," Hinata said politely. "We aren't sure if we have a bank account to deposit our pay vouchers."

"Ah..." Iruka breathed in understanding. "I know Naruto has an account. His stipend has to go somewhere, after all."

Naruto leaned in close and whispered, "I told you so." in Hinata's ear. Hinata giggled at Naruto's playful tone. Ayame, for her part, leaned in and whispered how the two Genin definitely needed the talk.

"When do you finish with your Jonin-sensei?" Ayame asked.

"I believe we are going to train all day tomorrow," Hinata revealed. "It will likely be later in the afternoon."

"When you get done, come by the stand and I'll help you set it up," Ayame offered.

"I would appreciate the help, Ayame-onee-chan," Hinata finished her thanks with a bow.

Ayame turned back to Iruka and winked. "You know, Hinata-cha...I think we need to have a bit of girl talk..."

"That's a good idea, Ayame-chan," Iruka agreed theatrically. "I think Naruto and I should take time to catch up too..."

Suddenly, Naruto was nearly overwhelmed by a sense of forboding. "Uh...Iruka-sensei, we're going to have that chat you mentioned earlier, aren't we?"

Iruka chuckled and ran his index finger across his scar. "Naruto...we're just going to have a Talk."

Naruto and Hinata exchanged a nervous glance. Teuchi's guffaws weren't helping the young roommates' nerves. Ayame and Iruka split the pair up and led them into separate rooms.

"I'll make it up to them by starting a pot of ramen. I have a bit of beef left over..." Teuchi promised as he shook his head.

After quite a while, Iruka and Ayame emerged from the rooms alone. They went straight to the kitchen table and sat down.

"That went well," Ayame said proudly. Iruka nodded in agreement.
"I thought they handled everything with maturity," the teacher observed. They watched Naruto and Hinata emerge. Occasionally, the two would exchange a shy glance in each other's direction. They would promptly blush a brilliant crimson and look away.

"Naruto and Hinata! I made some beef ramen!" Teuchi announced. Hinata and Naruto brightened instantly at the mention of their favorite food.

"Is it alright for us to stay?" Hinata asked nervously. "We wouldn't want to impose..."

"Hinata...I consider you family. You too, Naruto," Iruka said in a gentle tone. "The two of you are always welcome in my home."

"Thank you, Iruka-sensei!" Naruto said brightly. Fortunately for Naruto and Hinata, the conversation never turned to the awkward topic covered earlier. Naruto regaled his hosts with a recount of the mission. He went out of his way to put significant emphasis on Lee and Hinata's contributions. Hinata stepped in to compliment Naruto on his strategy to be more efficient on the mission. The adults were glad to see that some of the earlier awkwardness began to melt away.

After profusely thanking their adult mentors and friends for dinner, Naruto and Hinata left for their apartment. Everyone knew Guy-sensei would work them very hard. A few moments after the two Genin left, Ayame snorted.

"Hinata-chan asked a question I wasn't prepared for," Ayame said and let the statement hang in the air.

"I hope it wasn't too awkward," Iruka said and allowed his natural protectiveness to bleed through.

"She asked if sex was why the Hyūga forbid eating onions," Ayame reported.

"The Hyūga don't eat onions?" Iruka asked.

Teuchi took a sip of his drink. "Onions are one of the five pungent spices. Some philosophies state that if you eat cooked onions, garlic, leeks, scallions, and chives that you will increase your sexual desire beyond acceptable levels."

"I did not know that," Iruka said. "That's certainly a question I wouldn't expect."

"How did Naruto handle The Talk?" Teuchi asked.

Iruka smiled a lopsided grin. "I think it is the first time I've ever managed to keep Naruto quiet."

Naruto and Hinata woke up and prepared for the day as they always did. However, they had a bit of trouble making eye contact with each other. Eventually, Naruto got fed up. He definitely didn't like acting so awkward around Hinata. 'This is Hinata-chan! We can share anything. She's my best friend, partner, and if I can't be open with her, I can't be open with anyone!'

"Hey, Hinata-chan," Naruto spoke up suddenly. He steeled himself and looked into Hinata's eyes. "I know Iruka-sensei and Ayame-onee-chan talked about some...stuff last night. All of it had to do with sleeping together and was a bit embarrassing."

Hinata nodded, but didn't speak. Naruto was determined to fight off the awkward silence. "You're my best friend and partner. I know that you're a girl...and that you are pretty. If...that comes up, we can deal with it, but I don't want to stop talking with my best friend."

"O-Okay, Naruto-kun. I-It was just a shock last night," Hinata admitted with a blush. "We've been
through so much together...we can face everything together like we always do."

Naruto beamed. "Thanks, Hinata-chan."

"Um...Naruto-kun," Hinata spoke up. Naruto hummed as he looked up and noticed that Hinata was blushing a bit and pressing her fingers together. "Do you really think I'm pretty?"

"Of course, Hinata-chan! I mean what I say!" Naruto thumped his chest. "Are you ready to go? I just know Guy-sensei is going to teach us something awesome today!"

Hinata nodded and the roommates left to go meet up with their team. Guy and Lee greeted the pair with the same genuine enthusiasm, warmth, and energy as they always did. The Sublime Green Beast had each student continue on their previous exercises for a short time. Eventually, he called Team Nine away from their assigned exercises.

"My students! Today, I am going to teach you a vital shinobi skill and chakra control exercise! Hinata and Naruto, this skill will help with your ninjutsu and Hinata's Jūken! Lee, do not be discouraged! This skill does not require you to mold chakra, merely to control the amount of chakra you push to your feet!" Guy finished by flashing his famous 'Nice Guy Pose'.

Lee whooped and returned Guy-sensei's 'Nice Guy Pose'. "This is excellent news, Guy-sensei! What do we have to do in this most youthful and valuable exercise?"

"Well, Lee! This is called 'Tree Walking'! Observe!" Might Guy said with enthusiasm as he approached one of the walls of the dojo. He simply continued to walk and strolled up the wall. Guy paused near the ceiling. "You can use 'Tree Walking' on any surface to climb using your chakra! The trick is to find the right amount of chakra to stick to the walls! Too little and you'll slide off! Too much and you'll rocket away!"

"That is so cool!" Naruto shouted. He turned to Hinata and grinned. Hinata returned the grin and giggled at Naruto's boundless energy.

Might Guy made his way back to the floor. "I want you all to be very careful when attempting this exercise! If you feel like you are falling, don't fight it! Simply try to control your fall. Your safety is paramount! Do you understand, my students?"

Team Nine nodded. Guy smiled and handed out markers to each of the Genin. "This wall was designed for practicing this skill! I want you to mark how far up up the wall you make it! Your goal is to reach the white line near the ceiling!"

The Jonin gave the signal to start and Team Nine began the training with gusto! Naruto and Lee struggled with the exercise and made it up the wall almost purely on momentum. Hinata had incredible innate chakra control and began to grasp the exercise quickly.

"Excellent work, Hinata!" The Leaf's Noble Gentlemen praised his kunoichi student. Hinata smiled broadly at the praise.

After nearly two hours, Guy called a halt to the training. "This is not an exercise I expected any of you to complete in a single day!"

Lee and Naruto let out a relieved breath, even though they were both panting from exhaustion. Naruto and Lee both had incredible physical endurance, but this chakra control exercise was more than a simple physical exercise. Guy was pleased to see that they both had reached about five feet up the wall. Hinata had made it around seven feet. 'My students will reach the goal of fifteen feet in a few days! I am very proud of their progress!'
"I am proud of your progress! We will continue this exercise and I know you will succeed and become even greater Geniuses of Hard Work!"

"Guy-sensei?" Naruto asked while raising his hand...even though he was still lying on his back.

"Yes, Naruto?" Guy answered.

"I've heard you use say that we can become Geniuses of Hard Work before. What does that mean?"

Guy entered his World Famous Thinking Pose. "As you know, there are individuals who are called geniuses because they are born with great natural talent! They did not truly earn their title, even though they may eventually prove they deserve it! You all are talented, but sadly, very few have recognized your potential! So, I have decided to help you become Geniuses of Hard Work! A Genius of Hard Work is someone who becomes wise by knowing themselves! They overcome all the obstacles in their paths and achieve greatness that surpasses anyone born with the title of genius!"

"Yosh! Do you truly believe we can become Geniuses of Hard Work, Guy-sensei?" Lee asked as he sat up.

"Yes! More than that, Lee! I know that you three are already becoming Geniuses of Hard Work!"

"Thank you, Guy-sensei!" Team Nine said as one. Guy was moved to tears by their unity and potential!

"You area dismissed for the day! Go! Go stoke the Flames of your Youth so that you may continue on your journeys to become true Geniuses of Hard Work!"

The next week saw Team Nine training furiously on the Tree Walking exercise. Hinata quickly reached the White Line and Guy-sensei allowed Hinata to move onto the next phase of the exercise. The goal of the exercise was to be able to not only reach the White Line, but to walk back to the ground. Naruto and Lee managed to complete the first phase of the 'Tree Walking' exercise around the same time. It took great effort, and the boys were rightfully proud of their accomplishments.

Team Nine also performed several more D-rank Missions. Iruka and Ayame took the time to teach Naruto and Hinata how to deposit their pay vouchers and how to keep track of their accounts.

A few days after Team Nine's fourth D-Rank mission, Naruto had finally completed the second phase. He approached Guy-sensei while watching Lee come very close to completing the exercise. "Excuse me, Guy-sensei!"

"How may I help direct the Flames of your Youth, Naruto?"

"I'd just like to say that the 'Tree Walking Exercise' has helped with my seals! My chakra control has really gotten better! I've noticed that I can set the timer on the seals a lot better!" Naruto explained happily.

Guy's response was cut off by Lee's triumphant exclamation. Naruto and Guy turned to see Lee trying to explain high-fives to Hinata. Naruto couldn't help but laugh at Hinata's confusion and Lee's blinding smile. Might Guy motioned for Naruto to follow him over to where Lee had finally shown Hinata how to give a proper high five.

"Congratulations my students!" Might Guy shouted proudly. "You have achieved something to be very proud of!"
"Thank you, Guy-sensei!" Lee bowed deeply. Naruto and Hinata also thanked their teacher.

"You are all very welcome! Your success brings me great pride as your Jonin instructor! Tomorrow, we shall focus solely on D-rank missions! I want to reward you for your dedication to the path towards becoming Geniuses of Hard Work!"

Team Nine felt excitement bubbling in their guts. They instantly knew Guy-sensei was going to reveal something else that would amaze them!

"After that! I shall introduce you all to advanced training! Team Nine, gifted youths, you have earned the right to learn your first jutsu!"
Might Guy always woke up before dawn. He had always been full of energy, but recently had achieved a level of enthusiasm that baffled him. Guy knew that his joy was caused by Team Nine's exceptional growth in such a short time. Lee, Hinata, and Naruto were practically the living embodiment of his philosophy of "Genius of Hard Work". The Genin's dedication to the Will of Fire was equally as rewarding.

The Green Beast smiled as he quickly finished his morning rituals and prepared for his solo training. His hand was on his apartment's door when a knock split the morning's stillness. Guy quirked an eyebrow as he called upon the memory of each knock. It wasn't Kakashi's knock, nor Ebisu's. Shinobi tended to develop a unique knock for each of their comrades' homes. It was a way to subtly identify themselves. Guy smiled as he recognized Genma, his old Genin Team comrade, was visiting him.

Guy opened the door slightly. "Good morning, my friend."

"Morning Guy. Surprised you slept in so late today," Genma returned the greeting in his traditional flippant and casual tone.

"I'm surprised you are still awake. When will you be going to bed?" Guy countered.

"Later," Genma said with a smirk. The two teammates laughed for a moment before Guy invited Genma in. "So, how's the sensei-thing working for you, Guy?"

Might Guy smiled broadly. "It has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. My students are fantastic and I think Team Nine has the potential to be splendid shinobi!"

"Yeah..." Genma said and Might Guy noticed that the Hokage Guard had a far away look. "That's part of why I am here."

"I hope my students have not been acting unyouthfully," Might responded to his old friend.

"Nothing like that," Genma laughed. "I actually haven't run into Naruto since the Hyūga filed the complaint against him a while back."

"When Hinata was banished..." Guy nearly growled. The entire situation with Hinata was highly unusual and, frankly, wrong. Hinata had lost her position as heiress. That much was obvious to almost anyone with cursory information. However, she was still Hiashi's first-born daughter and a member of the Main Branch of the Hyūga Clan. Hinata should not have been expelled from the Main Branch, much less from the entire clan. Might Guy knew there was something else at play. He could not get any information from the Hokage and the Hyūga were as insular as ever.

"That caused quite the stir among the Jonin," Genma agreed. "The Hyūga didn't help their position in Konoha with that one. I was on a mission with a Hyūga. Hoheto, I think, and he was being subtle. Everyone knows you and I were on the best damn Genin team in Konoha together."

"The Hyūga were seeking information on Hinata," Guy stated.

Genma nodded. "Like I said, this Hyūga was trying to be subtle. I didn't tell him anything, because I really don't know a thing about Hinata. Something about this situation is really fishy."

"That is an understatement if I have ever heard one, my friend. I've tried making my own inquiries, but the Hyūga are too secretive and Hokage-sama has not provided much information."
Guy crossed his arms.

"I can tell you've taken a shine to your team," Genma responded with a nod. "I'll see what I can dig up. The Hokage Guard Platoon has a bunch of connections."

"I would be in your debt," Guy said with a sincere bow.

Genma laughed. "Guy, you and Ebisu still owe me from our third C-rank when I saved you from that stampede of cattle."

"We were not in any danger from the stampede," Guy grumbled.

"No, you weren't," Genma agreed. "You were in danger from the owner though. Don't forget that I know Ebisu and you started the stampede when training."

The two old teammates continued to speak for a few minutes. Eventually, Genma left to get some sleep after his mission. Guy decided that his Flames of Youth wouldn't dim if he cut his normal workout a bit short. He needed to speak with the Hokage.

Naruto knew he wasn't the smartest shinobi in the Leaf. He didn't have book smarts like Sakura and Ino. Hinata-chan definitely had him beat when it came to how to act in public and in little tidbits on history and shinobi protocol. He did, however, have confidence in his ability to notice details relating to training, other people's training, or people teaching him something.

'Guy-sensei looks like something is up,' Naruto thought to himself as he put a can into the recycling bin strapped to his back. 'I need to talk with him...'

"Uh, Guy-sensei?"

"Yes, Naruto?" Guy asked with his normal enthusiasm and, surprisingly, patience.

"I kinda need to run to the bathroom. We're near the creek and all that running water..." Naruto lied.

"Hurry back! Your teammates will need your help to complete the mission," Guy answered with a smile. Naruto nodded and dashed off. He went through the motions and hurried back. The young man noticed that Hinata and Lee were further down from Guy and Naruto's position.

"Guy-sensei, I've noticed that you've been focusing on something all day. It isn't anything Team Nine has done is it? I mean, we've worked hard and..." Naruto started to quietly and nervously ramble.

"Team Nine has been exceptionally youthful. You, Lee, and Hinata have been everything a teacher could want," Guy explained and was pleased to see Naruto's face light up with pride. He leaned closer and talked in an even voice. "You are one of the few people who know any specifics about Hinata's...situation. I am giving you a direct order as your superior that you cannot tell anyone, Hinata included, what I'm about to reveal."

Naruto nodded. "I promise, Guy-sensei. I don't like keeping things from Hinata-chan though. She's my best friend and my partner."

"It is good that you have such a positive relationship with Hinata!" Guy said with enthusiasm. "That being said, I don't want her to have any undue stress because of this information. My old teammate, Shiranui Genma, informed me this morning that the Hyūga Clan is making inquiries into Hinata's progress as a shinobi and her living conditions."
"Those jackasses tossed her out into the night and put that...thing on her. They don't have the right to ask about her. If I had my way, they'd only be allowed to talk to her when we become Co-kage and they'd be telling Hinata-chan how sorry and stupid they are," Naruto hissed. Guy was worried for a moment that he would become angry enough to start channeling the Kyūbi's chakra. Fortunately, the moment passed and Naruto's features brightened. "Genma's a cool guy. We talked once about the Fourth Hokage."

"Genma is one of my oldest friends," Guy said to distract Naruto away from his anger. He could tell it was bubbling just below the surface.

"Awesome," Naruto beamed. "So, have you heard anything else about the Hyūga?"

Guy shook his head. "No. I think they were mostly concerned with her Byakugan."

"Well, screw them. Hinata's a lot more than her awesome eyes," Naruto declared. "Thanks for trusting me Guy-sensei."

"You are welcome, my student!" Guy shouted. "I would get back to the mission. You will have plenty of time to practice the jutsu when we begin tomorrow!"

Lee and Hinata looked up from their job as Naruto ran up to rejoin his team. "You are very excited about our first jutsu, Naruto!" Lee shouted.

"Don't you know it, Lee! We are going to shock people with how awesome we are!" Naruto responded with equal vigor.

"I wonder what my jutsu will be?" Hinata asked as she finished filling her bin.

"Guy-sensei will probably teach you something that takes advantage of your totally awesome chakra control, Hinata-chan," Naruto theorized. "I can't wait to see it!"

"Naruto is correct! Your jutsu will likely mesh with your youthful talents," Lee agreed.

Team Nine conversed casually as they finished off the D-rank. The talk shifted towards days off.

"So, what do you do on your days off, Lee?" Naruto asked.

Lee beamed. "I go fishing! It is very relaxing and allows me to enjoy the peacefulness of nature!"

"I've never been fishing," Naruto admitted.

Lee stared at Naruto for a moment with his mouth agape. "You will enjoy it! I know you share my zest for action, but it is nice to relax. Not to mention, you can keep the fish for dinner."

"Sounds like fun," Naruto admitted.

"On our next day off, I will take you fishing!" Lee declared. Naruto smiled warmly and nodded in agreement. It was an exciting thought to hang out with a friend. Outside of Hinata-chan, Naruto didn't really have many close friends. He counted Lee, Ino, and Sakura as friends. Kiba, Shikamaru, and Chouji were friendly, but Naruto hadn't seen them in a while and wasn't sure he could count them as friends.

"You've got a deal," Naruto beamed. "Looks like we'll be having fish, Hinata-chan."

Hinata smiled at Naruto. She was very happy that Naruto was forming bonds with their teammate. Hinata cared deeply for Naruto, but was worried that he wasn't forming enough friendships. "As
long as you remember your promise from Sayuri's."

"Don't worry, I swore to protect you from the horrors of things just torched and thrown on the plate," Naruto laughed. "I plan on keeping that promise."

The D-rank mission was welcomed by Team Nine, but the anticipation of learning their first jutsu was overwhelming. Naruto's jutsu was easy to guess. Guy-sensei would likely help Naruto perfect Katon: Endan. The jutsu would allow Naruto to support Lee and Hinata from a distance.

As for Lee's and Hinata's jutsu, Naruto didn't have a clue.

He mulled over the possibilities as he brushed his teeth. The young man hummed as he thought of several ideas. Hinata who was standing next to him, doing some girl-stuff that Naruto had come to accept, turned towards him.

"What is it, Naruto-kun?" Hinata asked as she put down the pad she had been using.

"Just thinking," Naruto admitted. "Tomorrow Guy-sensei will let us know what jutsu we're learning. I was just trying to figure out what we'll be learning."

Hinata tapped her lip with her index finger. "Guy-sensei did tell us we will all have specific roles in Team Nine. Lee-kun and I will focus on taijutsu. Our jutsu will likely help with our skills."

"I remember," Naruto confirmed. "He said I'll be a ninjutsu and fuinjutsu specialist, so that I can back you and Lee up on missions. I already started learning Katon: Endan."

"I think Guy-sensei will help you master that technique," Hinata agreed cautiously. She was still uneasy whenever Naruto brought up that technique.

Naruto smiled reassuringly. "I can't wait. What about you? What do you want to learn?"

"W-Well, I'd love to learn medical ninjutsu. I'm not sure Guy-sensei knows any of those jutsus, but I know he'll teach me something wonderful!" Hinata started shyly, but quickly finished loudly. She didn't want to seem as if she wasn't grateful for Guy-sensei's teachings!

Naruto chuckled. "Hinata-chan, I'm sure you'll be as awesome at learning new jutsus as you are in everything else."

"T-Thank you, Naruto-kun," Hinata replied with a blush. She had finally gotten used to Naruto's unconditional support and instantaneous compliments. The latest 'Talks' with Ayame-oneechan had made Hinata realize that there was a new aspect of her relationship with Naruto.

Hinata had never been so thankful that Ino and Sakura could not read minds. The consequences would be so embarrassing! How would Naruto react? How would that change things? Hinata was as happy and comfortable as she had ever been! In a word, she was scared.

"You're welcome, Hinata-chan. Hey, I'm going to grab something to snack on. Do you want anything?" Naruto asked with a giant grin.

"No, thank you. I believe I'm going to bed. Good night, Naruto-kun," Hinata finished with a bit of a blush.

Naruto nodded and his smile seemingly grew larger. "Good night, Hinata-chan." He watched Hinata leave the shared bathroom, which was mostly taken up by Hinata's girl stuff, and sighed. He quietly headed to the kitchen and grabbed a simple sandwich and plopped down at the table.
As he chewed, he thought back to the last minute in the bathroom. Naruto had hoped that his declaration a few days ago had ended any awkward moments between Naruto and his best friend. The declaration had headed off most weird situations, but it had the unintended side-effect of giving Naruto a lot of time to think about the situation.

First, he had really started to notice just how pretty Hinata really was. Naruto had always known Hinata was pretty. It was just one of the fundamental facts of life. Water was wet. Hinata was pretty. Rain came from clouds. Hinata was pretty. It was that obvious and natural. Now, though...now he was noticing details that were sticking with him and bringing a blush to his cheeks. A few of the details that really stood out to Naruto was how elegantly Hinata carried herself. Every move she made seemed to be designed to put others at ease or make them feel welcome.

Then, there were two of Naruto's favorite details. Hinata's grace only seemed to slip in two occasions. The first way for it to slip was when she became curious about something. Hinata would lean her head to one side and hum. Her long hair would slide to one side. Naruto found it really cute. The second time Hinata's grace slipped was when she suddenly became determined or incredibly focused on something. Sometimes, Naruto had heard older guys say a girl looked 'hot' when they were even better looking than usual. Naruto certainly believed the steely look Hinata got in his eyes made her a different kind of attractive. That look also brought a heat to his cheeks sometimes.

'So, I guess that counts as hot,' Naruto thought to himself. He could think about that later. The young man grabbed the scroll he had checked out from the library and started reading. *The Five-Seal Barrier is a fuinjutsu of incredible defensive potential...'*

"Yosh! My adorable students, it is time to learn your first jutsu!" Might Guy greeted Team Nine as they completed their warmups.

Team Nine rushed across the Dojo to Guy and stared at him with complete awe. The Jonin responded to his student's excitement with a broad grin.

"Hold tightly to that enthusiasm, energy, and optimism!" Guy began. "That positive energy will eventually become a core of perseverance! With perseverance and effort, even the humblest shinobi can achieve great things! My own father never advanced beyond the rank of Genin, but he never gave up! My...my father gave his all to Konoha and even when he gave his life, he smiled! Might Dai is my example and my hero!"

Team Nine's awed looks softened a bit. They could hear a softness in their naturally exuberant sensei's voice that they were unfamiliar with. The revelation was also some of the first scraps of personal information Might Guy had let slip.

Guy quickly redoubled his grin. "I will tell you more of my father later. However, I'm sure you are very eager to start your training with your new jutsu!"

"Heck yeah, Guy-sensei!" Naruto shouted.

"First, I will reveal what I will be teaching each of you! Naruto, I will help you master Katon: Endan so that you may use it without endangering yourself!"

"Thank you, Guy-sensei," the hyperactive Genin said respectfully.

"You are welcome," Guy replied with sincerity. "Now, Lee! You will also learn a technique, but due to the nature of the technique and your unique situation requires highly individualized
Lee nodded. "I...understand Guy-sensei. Will I be able to share the techniques forged in the Flames of my Youth with my teammates?"

"The technique is...powerful." Guy chose his words carefully. "Lee, you are permitted to discuss the technique in general terms with Hinata and Naruto. However, you are not permitted to discuss any of the methods regarding how to use the jutsu. If the jutsu is not used responsibly, it is extremely dangerous."

Guy did not reveal any concrete details about the technique, but his warning about danger was not aimed at Lee. He knew that Lee would follow orders and accept necessities wonderfully. Guy was truthfully trying to head off Naruto's curiosity. Though, his concerns were lessened by Naruto's experience with the Katon: Endan and Hinata's presence.

"Finally, Hinata! I know you have your heart set on learning medical ninjutsu," Guy began. Hinata's face took on a series of emotions. First, she was excited. The combination of joy at her dream being acknowledged by her sensei and the hope that she would finally be learning medical ninjutsu. However, she noticed an unusually tentative glint in the corner of Guy-sensei's eyes. The conflict continued, but disappointment nearly outweighed her excitement. Hinata was thrilled to be learning a new jutsu, but was saddened that Guy-sensei wouldn't introduce her to medical ninjutsu.

"Yes, Guy-sensei," Hinata confirmed with polite neutrality.

"I am sorry, Hinata. This technique is not connected to medical ninjutsu," the Jonin admitted sympathetically. "It does, however, require incredible chakra control, which will provide a valuable foundation to your future studies!"

Hinata nodded. "I understand, Guy-sensei." A pang of disappointment still remained in the back of Hinata's mind, but her sensei had mollified her somewhat.

"Excuse me, Guy-sensei?" Naruto spoke up while raising his hand. Guy smiled and nodded at his student. "How are we going to get started?"

The Leaf's Noble Beast smiled. He reached into a pouch in his flak jacket and produced a simple scroll. "Naruto, I want you to study this scroll. It contains the proper hand-seals for your jutsu. Today, I simply want you to practice the hand-seals for Katon: Endan."

"Yes, Guy-sensei," Naruto agreed half-heartedly. He was expecting to simply be told the correct order and told to start launching fireballs. Truthfully, Naruto was a bit bummed out.

"Now, Lee...we will have to develop the specifics of your jutsu in secret on the Hokage's orders." A second scroll appeared in the Jonin's hand. "Today, you will be following the instructions contained in the scroll. Lee, you must know that the contents of the scroll are a C-rank secret. Unless the Hokage or myself give you permission, you may not show the contents to anyone."

Lee bowed deeply as he accepted the scroll from his mentor and idol. "Of course, Guy-sensei!"

Guy smiled and gave Lee his finest thumbs up. "Lee and Naruto! You may begin studying the scrolls! Remember, to not deviate from the instructions I have left you!" The two boys bowed and headed off to work on their assignments.

"Hinata, please follow me," Might Guy commanded as soon as the boys had headed off. Hinata dutifully followed her commanding officer. "Your jutsu is on the surface the simplest. However, I am teaching you this jutsu as a cover to help you refine and master the Hyuga's Vacuum Palm.
independently of the Clan."

The last pang of disappointment quietly died and Hinata's pale violet eyes took on an excited gleam. "I am ready to learn, Guy-sensei!"

Naruto sat on a cooler and watched Lee's behavior carefully. It was honestly hard to believe that Naruto's borderline-excessively enthusiastic teammate was calmly sitting in the dirt half dozing next to his fishing rod. Lee's trademark grin still adorned his face. That put Naruto at ease.

Still, he was having fun. "Oi, Lee." Naruto said (relatively) quietly. Lee's eyes opened and the trademark energy returned full force.

"Yes, Naruto? Are you still enjoying yourself?" Lee asked hopefully.

"Heck yeah," Naruto admitted with a nod. "I was just curious about a couple of things."

"I will endeavor to sate your curiosity!" Lee responded with a smile.

"Well, we've been working on our jutsus for almost a week now. I've managed to get Katon: Endan down pat and I've made some progress on a few new seals. Hinata-chan has nailed her Air Palm jutsu. It sounds like you've made a ton of progress on your jutsu too..."

"My jutsu is incredibly complex. I have only begun to scratch the surface, but Guy-sensei said that I have surpassed his expectations as a Genius of Hard Work," Lee explained. He noticed Naruto's mood falter. "Is something wrong, Naruto?"

"I was just hoping we'd all have learned our jutsus by now," Naruto admitted. "Team Nine's done a dozen D-rank missions. We can Tree Walk in our sleep and our teamwork is probably the best in Konoha." Lee listened to Naruto's words carefully.

"You believe that we are ready for a higher rank mission," Lee pointed out. Naruto nodded and Lee thought for a moment. "I, too, believe that we are ready! Have you talked to Hinata-san about our readiness?"

"I was going to talk to her tonight about it over dinner," Naruto revealed.

"Naruto, you are going to cook for her?" Lee asked with clear amusement.

Naruto either missed or ignored his friend's humor. "Yeah, she's helped me out a lot since we met. Besides, I've always wanted to try cooking something other than instant ramen."

"Ah, I hope that Hinata feels we are all ready for a C-rank mission! I am eager to see how we have stoked the Flames of our Youth through Guy-sensei's training!"

"Heck yeah! That's enough talk about ninja-stuff! Today's our day off! Let's catch some more fish!" Naruto matched Lee's enthusiasm and eagerly reached for his borrowed fishing rod.

"Say, Lee..." Naruto asked after he cast his lure back into the water. "What's the biggest fish you've ever caught?"

Lee turned to his friend and smiled. "I caught it when I was nine and I was with my uncle..."
was also giving her time to dive deeper into the simple jutsu Guy-sensei had taught her.

'Guy-sensei was right. It was an excellent cover to help me fine-tune my Hakke Kūshō, but I think even Guy-sensei missed the potential of the jutsu,' Hinata thought to herself.

"Ah come on!" Naruto grumbled from the kitchen. Hinata quickly activated her Byakugan. Naruto had everything perfectly under control, but was growing impatient at how slowly the cooking was proceeding. The former heiress was pleasantly surprised by Naruto's skills in the kitchen. She was completely confident in Naruto's ability to master anything he set out to learn. However, Hinata had not expected Naruto to show such talent so quickly.

Hinata 'eeped' as her stomach growled as her mind placed an image to the smells she had been experiencing for the past couple of minutes. Quickly, the young woman buried her attentions into the anatomy scroll to forget about her mortification.

"Hinata-chan!" Naruto cried out as he entered the commons area. "I've got dinner."

"Thank you, Naruto-kun," Hinata said graciously. "It smells amazing."

"You're welcome! I really hope you enjoy it," Naruto said hopefully.

"Naruto-kun, you put your heart into it," Hinata responded with a gentle smile. "That means the world to me."

Naruto blushed a tiny bit at Hinata's statement. His blush multiplied in intensity when he noticed that Hinata's cheeks had a dusting of a blush as well. Dinner started after the traditional giving of thanks. Naruto was on the edge of his seat as he waited for Hinata's opinion on his cooking. Hinata was silent as she ate.

"This is amazing," Hinata declared with wide eyes. "You are incredible, Naruto-kun!"

"Thanks, Hinata-chan," Naruto replied as he soaked in the simple praise. The conversation turned to Team Nine's day off. Naruto regaled Hinata with tales of how his fishing trip with Lee progressed. Hinata shared her relaxing day of indulging in her hobby of flower pressing. The conversation was light and the partners were enjoying the quiet moments.

"Naruto-kun. "Hinata-chan." The shinobi blushed as they realized that they had spoken at the same time.

"Go ahead, Hinata-chan," Naruto said by virtue of finding his voice much faster.

Hinata took a heartbeat to regain her composure. "T-Thank you, Naruto-kun. Did Lee-kun mention any progress on his jutsu?"

"Lee said his jutsu was incredibly complex. He hasn't mastered it yet, but Guy-sensei is impressed by how quick Lee is picking it up," Naruto revealed.

"That is good to hear. I was hoping that we had all mastered our jutsus," Hinata said quietly.

Naruto grinned. He was amazed at how alike he and Hinata were where it counted. "I was thinking the same thing."

"Naruto-kun..." Hinata weighed her next words carefully. "I-I think Team Nine is ready for a C-rank mission."
Haruno Sakura had heard that one of the older students had been ruffling some feathers through her 'intelligence gathering'. The Academy, or most of it, was growing annoyed by the brazenly overt spying. Sakura, however, had every reason to believe that the older girl had the right idea. It didn't hurt that Hinata had vouched for her.

'Might as well,' Sakura thought with a mental shrug.

"Excuse me, Tenten-san?"

Tenten looked up from where she was packing her bag. "Can I help you?"

"Actually, yes," Sakura began. "Hinata-chan mentioned once that you graduated and went through the 'true' Genin test."

Tenten nodded. "I did. It wasn't what I could have expected."

"How difficult is the test?" Sakura asked. "Are there any hints you can give me?"

The older girl nodded with a smile. "You know how boys are dumb?" Sakura laughed at the question. Tenten's smile grew broader. "Well, the best advice I can give is...do your best to keep them from being really dumb."

"Let me guess, your 'intelligence gathering' is your way of finding out how to keep the boys from being dumb?" Sakura asked.

"Got it in one," Tenten confirmed.

"Say, Tenten...Ino-pig and I are going to try to visit Hinata-chan later. Would you like to come with us?"

"That sounds great," Tenten answered happily. "I'll have to let my parents know first."

"I vote we meet at the Yamanaka's Flower Shop," Sakura suggested. Tenten smiled at the response and the two girls separated for a bit. As the young prospective-kunoichi returned to her seat, Tenten decided that this might be one of the better things to happen due to her 'information gathering'.

Team Nine was grateful that Guy-sensei had declared today 'a light mission day'. They had trained for a few hours and completed a single D-rank Mission. The D-rank wasn't strenuous at all, as it was a simply a few deliveries. Naruto actually enjoyed the mission a great deal after one of the clients complimented Naruto on his hard work.

"Yosh! I think we can safely head somewhere to talk. Guy-sensei said that he was going to meet with some of the Jonin about a 'development'." Lee motioned in the nebulous direction of Konoha proper.

"Should we get something to eat?" Naruto asked.

"If you two want to," Hinata replied. "I promised Sakura-chan and Ino-chan I'd meet up with them after the Academy lets out."
"Oh, okay," Naruto acknowledged. "Let's find a place to sit and talk."

"May I suggest the curry restaurant about a block from the Academy? That way we can have our conversation and Hinata can meet her friends without delay!" Lee provided.

"That is an excellent suggestion," Hinata agreed. Naruto simply shrugged his shoulders and smiled. Some curry didn't sound too bad at the moment.

The walk wasn't too long to the little shop. Team Nine took positions so that they had eyes on every window and door, even without Hinata's Byakugan active. Lee and Naruto ordered something to eat, while Hinata simply ordered some tea.

"This is a nice place," Naruto said with a smile. "I think our conversation will go smoothly here. We've all talked about this one on one, but I think we need to say it as a group. Are we ready for a C-rank?"

"I-I think we are," Hinata answered first. She still harbored a reluctance to step outside her comfort zone, but her constant exposure to Naruto, Lee, and Guy-sensei had not only repaired her self-confidence, but reinforced it. "Our teamwork is excellent and we have all made so much progress on our jutsu. We can do this."

Lee was beaming at Hinata's declaration and flashed her the most enthusiastic thumbs-up Naruto and Hinata had ever seen. Naruto, for his part, was very proud of his partner and her growth since getting kicked out of the Hyūga Clan.

"Well, if we have Hinata-chan's vote of confidence, I say we're in good shape!" Naruto declared.

"Yosh! We will plead our case with Guy-sensei tomorrow! I meet with Guy-sensei later today for more training! During our time together, I will discover his feelings on our progress."

Naruto grinned at Lee. "Good idea, Lee."

"Thank you, Naruto. As proud shinobi, we must always be aware of how to best serve our village," Lee said.

"I like the way that sounds!" Naruto laughed. "So, we're set it sounds like?"

Hinata and Lee exchanged a look. "I believe we can convinced Guy-sensei," Lee confirmed.

"Alright! I'm so excited!" Naruto beamed. He cast a quick glance over Lee's shoulder. "Looks like the Academy is letting out."

"Yes, I should probably go meet up with Sakura-chan and Ino-chan," Hinata said with a smile. "I'll see you later."

"Have fun, Hinata-chan!" Naruto shouted as he waved goodbye to Hinata. He was wearing a wide grin as he turned to Lee. "Say, how long do you have before training with Guy-sensei?"

Lee gave Naruto an inquisitive look. "I have a few hours. Why?"

"I want you to meet a few of my friends. It'll be something fun that isn't training," Naruto pronounced with an excited grin.

Tenten was the last to arrive at the Yamanaka flower shop. The other girls were chatting about music and hobbies. "Sorry I'm late, I had to tell my parents my plans."
"Glad you could make it!" Ino said from behind the counter. The other girls turned and waved to Tenten.

"What I miss?" Tenten asked with a grin. Hinata blushed a bit and Tenten laughed. "Ah, quizzing Hinata on what it's like living with a boy?"

Hinata continued to stammer nervously. She wasn't ashamed about living with her best friend, but her friends' good-natured teasing played against Hinata's shy and reserved nature.

"Ano, there's someone I'd like to invite," Hinata spoke up. The girls nodded. If Hinata vouched for someone, they were willing to accept the person. "I'll take you to her Clan's compound."

"Clan compound?" Ino asked. "There aren't many girls our age in the other Clans. If there were, they'd be in the Academy with us or graduated with you."

"Her name is Kurama Yakumo. I'm not sure why she's not at the Academy," Hinata revealed.

Sakura crossed her arms and grinned. "Well, I bet she'd like some company. I can't imagine how crazy not being able to see all of you would make me!"

The plan was quickly agreed upon and the young women went out into the world.

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Across Konoha, Naruto, Lee, and the other boys were shamelessly loitering outside of a local shop. They had purchased a bite to eat, but had decided to hang out across the street. Naruto and Kiba were sitting on the top of the fence, Shikamaru was laying on his back in the grass, Chouji was leaning against the fence continuing to snack away, and Lee had challenged himself to test his balance on one of the posts.

"We really haven't had much of a chance to hang out," Naruto supplied.

Kiba snorted and tossed a bit of his snack to Akamaru. "Between Clan training and your Genin team, I'm surprised our parents and senseis haven't figured out a way to train us in our sleep."

"I enjoy training a great deal, but even that would be excessive," Lee agreed. Naruto couldn't believe his ears and simply stared blankly at his teammate. Lee saw his friend's reaction and raised one of his copious eyebrows. "Is something wrong, Naruto?"

"I always thought you'd jump at the chance to train twenty-four hours a day..."

"Naruto, sleep is a vital component in health and recovery," Lee retorted matter-of-factly.

Chouji suddenly coughed and pointed towards a nearby dry goods store. "Check out the getup on those guys."

Naruto and Lee looked at the group. They were wearing simply white robes with a green sash draped around their shoulders. "What the heck are they wearing?" Naruto asked.

"Good question," Kiba agreed and suddenly five faces turned towards Shikamaru.

"We know you're awake," Chouji laughed.

"Troublesome," Shikamaru grumbled. "They're pilgrims. Probably connected to the Old Faith. They're pretty rare. That religion isn't common anymore."

The other five boys made various comments or sounds of faux-understanding. "Hey Lee...do you
"A-Are you sure we won't be intruding, Hinata-chan?" Yakumo asked while wringing her hands together. Hinata and Yakumo had separated from the other girls. Sakura, Ino, and Tenten reluctantly returned home to finish their assignments. Yakumo had greatly enjoyed the chance to socialize with girls her own age. Sakura and the others had been very complimentary of her artwork and boosted her confidence a great deal. It provided the push to allow Yakumo to make this request of Hinata. However, as they approached the training grounds, Yakumo's confidence faltered slightly.

"I am sure that Guy-sensei will not mind. He will probably be excited that someone wishes to embrace 'the Flames of Youth'." Hinata giggled.

Yakumo cocked her head to the side. "Flames...of Youth?"

"Guy-sensei's interpretation of the Will of Fire," Hinata explained. Yakumo hummed as she considered what Hinata exactly meant.

Suddenly, a booming voice shocked the girls out of their thoughts. "Ah! Hinata! It is good to see that you are fanning the Flames of your Youth! I see you are not alone. May I be introduced to your precious comrade?"

Yakumo recovered admirably from the shock of a first meeting with Might Guy. "Good afternoon, Guy-sensei. My name is Kurama Yakumo. It is an honor to meet you."

"The honor is mine!" Guy responded politely and entered his renowned 'Good Guy Pose'.

Before he could continue, Lee jogged up and bowed to his sensei. "I apologize for my tardiness."

Guy laughed and clasped his hand on Lee's shoulder. "You are still ten minutes early from our agreed-upon time! Your punctuality has not been infected and there is no danger of you becoming infuriatingly hip like Kakashi!"

The girls simply watched the exchange silently. Yakumo leaned closer to Hinata. "Who is Kakashi?"

"I-I don't know..." Hinata replied.

"Ah! Forgive me, Lee! Allow me to introduce you to Kurama Yakumo!" Guy announced loudly.

Lee bowed politely. "It is a pleasure to meet you! I am always glad to meet the friends of my comrades."

Hinata looked back-and-forth between her two friends and noticed a bit of a blush on their cheeks. "T-Thank you, Lee-kun."

Yakumo was glad her long hair was hiding her blush. She wouldn't admit it out loud, but her excitement about Lee's example had become hero-worship. Of someone she had only just met and
was already using a familiar honorific for!

Guy watched the exchange with a subtle grin. He gave Hinata an amused wink before turning to Yakumo. "What brings you to our Recreational Taijutsu Training?"

'Recreational?' Hinata thought.

Fortunately, Yakumo recovered far quicker than Hinata, but was still very nervous about her planned speech. "I-I would like to ask for your assistance. Lee-kun, your example of becoming a shinobi through determination and mastery of one of the shinobi arts has given my Clan great hope. I...I would like to ask that I be allowed to train with you and your sensei so that I may exceed the minimum physical requirements to enter and graduate from the Academy."

"I would be honored! However, your position as heiress and common courtesy require me to discuss this matter with your parents very soon! Today, we will introduce you to the basics of physical training so that you may properly fuel your Flames of Youth!"

Hinata saw Yakumo's expression brighten considerably. "Thank you so much!" The Kurama heiress said with excited warmth.

"I must take my leave," Hinata announced politely. "I hope your training goes well. I will see you tomorrow, Lee-kun and Guy-sensei."

"Have a pleasant evening, Hinata!" Guy-sensei announced proudly. He turned to his apprentice and potential new student, but was considering the subtle hint Hinata had dropped. Lee's tiny moment of recognition had told Guy everything he needed to know. His Genin believed they were ready for a C-rank mission.

'I admire their Youthful enthusiasm. They mastered their jutsu far quicker than I expected. Perhaps they are ready...' 

Hinata turned the key to her apartment and announced she was home. She couldn't help but smile as Naruto's excited reply echoed from somewhere in the kitchen. There were many times, now that she was living with Naruto and a member of Team Nine, that her history as a Hyūga seemed distant.

She was happy.

The smells from the kitchen suddenly ripped her from her reveries. It surprised her that Naruto had managed to fill the apartment with such wonderful smells. She didn't doubt her partner, but he had never really seen him throw himself at cooking.

"Hinata-chan! I just realized something awesome!" Naruto grinned as he waved in the direction of the rather impressive meal he had created. "Cooking is like seals! All I ever had to do was follow directions and pay attention to the parts. I might be able to make my own ramen!"

Hinata could only smile and laugh at Naruto's enthusiasm. "I'm proud of you. The food smells amazing."

"Thanks Hinata-chan! I think it'd be fun if we cooked together next time," Naruto revealed as he tended to the last stage of his meal.

"I would love to cook dinner together!" Hinata agreed excitedly. "I'll set the table."

After dinner began, Naruto and Hinata began to focus on the upcoming C-rank.
"I think there's a chance I know who the clients could be," Naruto said as he passed the rice to Hinata.

Hinata accepted the rice graciously. "Oh? Who do you think it could be?"

"When I was hanging out with Lee, Kiba, Shikamaru, and Chouji, we say this big group of Pilgrims. It'll probably take them a few days to rest up and get supplies. At least that what we think," Naruto revealed...mostly. He left out the part that Shikamaru was the one to do most of the thinking.

"Pilgrims? Religious travelers?" Hinata asked. She was curious and the opportunities for personal growth excited her.

"I think Shikamaru said they belonged to the Old Faith," Naruto revealed.

Hinata hummed as she recalled some of her lessons from her days as a Hyūga. "The Hyūga were once members of the Old Faith. Religion fell out of favor after the Sage of Six Paths emerged. I'm not sure why though."

"Oh well, they'll be paying us to protect them later!" Naruto boasted. The conversation turned to how their friends were advancing in the Academy. Naruto and Hinata were both excited for their peers to join them as shinobi.

Naruto and Hinata had opened a window as they ate. Now, as they finished putting away the dishes, some music snaked its way from a nearby building. It was a pop song that Naruto wasn't really familiar with. Hinata had heard it earlier when the girls had gone window shopping in the civilian areas of Konoha. She started to dance after she put away the last of the dishes. She twirled and caught a glimpse of Naruto's...attempt at dancing.

Hinata stifled a giggle at Naruto's expense, but was slightly caught off guard by the look in Naruto's eyes. "Is something wrong Naruto-kun?"

"Nothing's wrong...it's just well..." Naruto didn't finish the explanation, but his slight blush spoke volumes.

"Thank you," was all Hinata felt she had to say. Her intuition was rewarded by Naruto dawning a very warm and pleased smile. "Naruto-kun, have you ever danced before?"

"No, why?" Naruto asked.

"Well, it's just..." Hinata wasn't sure how to address Naruto's 'shuffling'. "I think your enthusiasm is great. Maybe I could teach you some dances one day?"

"That sounds fun! Want to start now?" Naruto asked happily.

"I'd be honored," Hinata said with exaggerated formality. "Now, listen to your sensei..."

Naruto laughed as Hinata began her lesson. She was truly happy.

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Might Guy was sitting in a bar nursing a drink. He was deep in thought about his team. Team Nine was clearly eager to test the fruits of their labors. Hinata's emphasis on see during her farwell to Lee was impressively subtle. It would have undoubtedly slipped past a civilian and perhaps most Chuunin. However, Guy was an accomplished Jonin.

'So, I must carefully consider all the facets of my youthful team,' Guy thought to himself. First,
even though Naruto had not been present when Hinata had dropped the hint to Lee, there was no
doubt Naruto was on board with the idea. It was simply inconceivable that Hinata had not
discussed the idea with Naruto. The two were practically one mind.

'My youthful students are no doubt in one accord about their desire for a C-rank and the chance
to test their Flames of Youth against the world,' the Jonin concluded.

There was also no doubting their teamwork and motivation. They were all completely in tune with
each other. Guy had seen the way they trusted each other and the rather ingenious strategies they
had worked on while warming-up or working on conditioning. That was another piece of
evidence that they were ready. A final piece of evidence was their skill. Lee had nearly
accomplished his goal of opening the First Gate. Naruto had corrected his previous error with
Katon: Endan and was a budding Fuinjutsu expert. Hinata was also making incredible strides. She
had not only mastered the Chakra Needle, but had begun applying its principles to mastering the
Hyūga Clan's Vacuum Palm Jutsu. Lee and Hinata were also incredibly talented at taijutsu. They
were encouraging and pushing Naruto to improve as well.

In short, his team were true Geniuses of Hard Work.

"Fancy seeing you here, Guy," Kakashi said as he materialized in the seat next to the Sublime
Green Beast.

"I find it a good atmosphere to think," Guy confessed. "The drinks are also good quality."

Kakashi motioned for the bartender to bring him 'the usual'. "I take it you're here because of
Naruto."

"Partially," Might Guy agreed. "I just decided that my adorable Genin are ready for a C-rank."

"It hasn't been that long since they graduated. Are you sure that you aren't rushing things, Guy?"
Kakashi asked.

Might Guy raised his glass and smiled triumphantly. "Team Nine has already completed eight D-
rank missions. Each of my students has mastered a jutsu. I feel they are progressing marvelously."

"I'm impressed Guy," Kakashi said genuinely. "How is Naruto?"

"You would be proud of him. The Will of Fire burns as brightly in him as the Flames of his
Youth! He cares for each of his teammates."

"Has he been affected by...well...you know?" Kakashi prodded.

"As far as I can tell there is no...influence...There is no evidence that Naruto is even aware of his
heroic and youthful stewardship of Konoha," Guy explained.

Kakashi smiled behind his mask. "Sensei's wish for Naruto seems to be coming true. I think that
will help him rest easy."

"I am glad that the Fourth's Legacy is being respected," Guy agreed.

'You have no idea how truly accurate that is, Guy. I wish I could tell you and Naruto...' Kakashi
thought hopefully. "Since my team fell apart, I could help train Naruto and Hinata in ninjutsu and
genjutsu. If I get a team, I'll introduce them to your 'Flames of Youth' for taijutsu training."

"That is a very youthful offer, Kakashi! I have a feeling that I will have the chance to take you up
on that offer soon!" Guy agreed.
"We'll see. It seems Hokage-sama wants to try the Hyūga and Uchiha experiment again," Kakashi confessed.

"I feel as Hokage-sama does, my friend. You can reach those two wayward youths and restore their Will of Fire!"

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Kakashi grumbled.

Guy pointedly ignored Kakashi's mood. "After we return from our C-rank, I believe that it would be an excellent time for you to assist Naruto and Hinata! Lee requires specialized training and I can help him with the Second Gate."

Kakashi's visible eye widened. "Your apprentice can already open one of the Gates?!"

Guy smiled at Kakashi's harsh whisper. "My Lee may not be a Genius cast from your mold, but he is truly a Genius of Hard Work!"

"That's good to hear. Konoha could use more of that spirit. Too many shinobi expect glory to fall into their lap just because they were born in this village," Kakashi then caught a dip in Guy's mood. "And don't worry, Guy. As your friend, I promise to only corrupt Naruto with my infuriating hipness. I'll leave Lee alone."

Kakashi's mood brightened at Guy's aghast expression. It lasted for only a few seconds before Might Guy flashed his usual smile.

'It is nice having a dependable friend,' Kakashi thought. 'If only I had a few more, I might've stayed sane.'

Team Nine arrived perfectly on time after completing their usual 5k warmup. Strangely, Guy was waiting at the entrance of the dojo with his arms crossed. He was not wearing his usual exuberant expression and was the stereotypical unreadable Jonin.

"My students, I know you all have been in collusion." Team Nine dropped a bit, but eventually Naruto recovered enough to sheepishly raise his hand. "Yes, Naruto?"

"Does collusion mean 'working together in secret'?"

Guy beamed in his usual manner. "Yes, exactly that! Very good Naruto." His expression slipped back to his stern state. "You all believe that since you have learned Tree Walking, your jutsus and have achieved a state of Youthful Harmony amongst yourselves that Team Nine is ready for a C-rank mission."

The Genin were silent for a moment. Everyone, even the speaker, was surprised by the voice that broke the silence. "W-We are ready for a C-rank mission, Guy-sensei. I believe that we deserve the opportunity to test our growth and become true shinobi. Our teamwork and trust in ourselves won't be able to develop with only D-rank missions."

Might Guy was now convinced. If he had found evidence that Hinata was being pressured into pushing for a C-rank by her teammates, Guy would not have allowed the mission. However, Hinata's conviction and passion had firmly assured that the C-rank was something all of Team Nine wanted.

"Very well. I will support you all in your Youthful Development. There will be no training, and we shall depart immediately so that we may receive a C-rank Mission," Guy announced in his
Nice Guy Pose.

His Genin were all visibly excited and filled with a healthy amount of pride. Team Nine followed their Jonin sensei to Konoha's Administration Building near the Academy and Hokage Residence. Guy's smile never left his face and nearly tripled in intensity when he saw a small group of Academy boys give Naruto and Lee respectful nods or youthful shouts of good luck. Naruto and Lee quickly returned the shouts. Guy was displeased, however, to note that the boys were skipping and decided that he would alert the Academy to their habits at a later time.

Team Nine entered the office and the Hokage looked up with a smile. "Ah, Team Nine and Might Guy. It is a pleasure to see you."

"Thank you, Hokage-sama," the shinobi of Team Nine said as one.

Hiruzen lit his pipe. "I take it you are here for a mission."

"Yes, Hokage-sama. However...we are not requesting a D-rank mission. I would like to request a C-rank mission, as my adorable Genin have proven their dedication to the Flames of Youth."

Hiruzen listened carefully to Guy's words and observed the posture of the Jonin and his students. "Team Nine has not been out of the Academy for very long. What makes you feel that they are prepared for a C-rank mission."

"My students have all mastered Tree Walking and at least one jutsu," Guy announced proudly. "Most importantly they have sublime teamwork and a dedication to the Will of Fire."

"Team Nine, did you arrive at this decision as a single entity?" Hiruzen asked the Genin.

"Yes, Hokage-sama," Hinata answered first.

"Sure did, Hokage-sama," Naruto decided to refrain from calling him Old Man Hokage. It was obviously an attempt to butter the man up. "Sure, Lee and I talked about it when we were fishing, but Hinata brought it up at dinner before I could even hint at it!"

Lee bowed. "We have achieved admirable synergy of our youthful thoughts and actions!"

"Very well," the Hokage declared. "Team Nine, you are hereby assigned a C-rank mission. Your orders are to provide security for pilgrims heading to the Shrine of the Rabbit Goddess. Konoha demands that you represent the village with professionalism and valor. Demonstrate the brilliance of your Will of Fire."

"Yes sir, Hokage-sama!" the Genin acknowledged firmly.

Hiruzen smiled. "The pilgrims will be leaving from the Primary Western Gate at 8:00 tomorrow morning. You have the rest of the day to prepare for your mission. Dismissed."

Naruto and Hinata could barely contain their rolling emotions. They were enveloped in a heady combination of excitement, nervousness, and awe at their current situation. Naruto was thrilled for the chance to take another step towards securing the title of Hokage. Hinata was thrilled that she had taken a very substantial step in recovering from her trauma and exile.

The pair had stopped by Iruka's home to let him know the great news. Iruka had naturally been very worried, but after a long conversation, his concerns had been mollified somewhat. He was impressed by the rate Hinata and Naruto had both improved. After wishing them good luck, and providing them with some first aid supplies and MREs, Iruka spent another ten minutes giving
every piece advice he could think of to safeguard the two Genin.

"We'll have to think of something to thank Iruka-sensei," Naruto said as he and Hinata entered their apartment.

"I'm sure we'll find something to let him know how much we appreciate his help," Hinata agreed. "I'm also glad you've learned how to make storage seals. Somehow, I'm not sure we could have carried everything Iruka-sensei gave us."

Naruto and Hinata laughed at the truth in Hinata's words. It did not take Naruto and Hinata long to pack, thanks to Naruto's skill with fuinjutsu and Hinata's natural organization.

"Hinata-chan, I can't imagine going on this mission without you. I trust Lee and Guy-sensei and respect them...but they aren't you. I won't ever trust and respect anyone as much as you. Hinata-chan, you're my partner, and there's no way I'd be doing this without you."

The young woman blushed and, to her surprise, saw that Naruto was blushing too. "T-Thank you, Naruto-kun." It took her a moment to compose herself after the intensity of the moment. "I couldn't ask for a better partner."

Naruto beamed at Hinata and gave her a hug that left her in a state of mental-bliss-overload. "Good night Hinata-chan. We're going to need our rest to amaze our clients and kick some bad guy ass!"

"Good night, Naruto-kun," Hinata whispered. Sleep, to Hinata's surprise, came easily, and her dreams were full of peace and acceptance.

Ichimusai had just finished leading his brothers and sisters in a prayer for a safe journey as the Konoha Shinobi arrived. Ichimusai was an elderly man, but carried himself with an almost regal bearing. His white robes and dark green sash were nowhere as vibrant as they had once been, but Ichimusai considered that a point of pride. He had held the faith for far longer than most. His features were weathered from years of pilgrimages, missionary work, and personal austerity.

"Good Morning! I am Might Guy, Jonin of Konoha. May I introduce you to my Genin Team?"

"Of course, I would be honored to know our physical protectors," Ichimusai said politely.

Might Guy smiled broadly and motioned to his team. "This is Rock Lee, my apprentice. Hinata is the kunoichi of our team..." The Jonin noticed a flash of emotion in the older man. He cast a quick glance to the other pilgrims and caught a few whispering to themselves. 'There is some kind of interest in Hinata. I must be wary. I doubt they know about the Hyuga's Juinjutsu, but I cannot take any chances.'

'This girl...I recognize a spark of the Divine within her! The portents...the stars may be right...'

"And this is Uzumaki Naruto," Guy finished smoothly.

Ichimusai bowed. "A pleasure to meet you all. I am Brother Ichimusai, eldest of this humble congregation."

"Nice to meet you too, Ichimusai-san!" Naruto shouted excitedly and put an arm around Hinata's shoulder. "We're going to make sure that you reach your holy site safely and on time! You can count on all of us!"

"Your youthful enthusiasm will certainly lift our spirits," Ichimusai said warmly. He looked up
and saw Might Guy smile briefly shine brighter than the sun. It was a bit disconcerting, but his enthusiasm and confidence buoyed his mood.

It was finally time. Naruto, Lee, and Hinata exchanged eager glances. This was their chance. They were ready to begin leaving their mark on history!
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

There is a background mention of a M/M relationship in this chapter.

Uzumaki Naruto, in spite of his hyperactivity, was actually a very laid-back individual. He enjoyed 'going with the flow' and also tried to see the best in people. Naruto was still starved for positive attention, even though Hinata's presence had filled that void with her warm and comforting presence. Right now, there was something setting Naruto on edge. The clients weren't even trying to hide their whispers. It annoyed Naruto that they were speaking a very weird language, but he knew exactly what they were doing.

They were judging Hinata-chan.

Every action and word they said was putting Naruto on guard. He was patrolling near the center of the procession and decided to approach Guy-sensei. The last time Naruto had needed to talk to his sensei in private, Guy-sensei had given good advice. Naruto could definitely use some right now.

It had been a day and a half since Team Nine and the Pilgrims had left Konoha. Currently, they were resting so that the Pilgrims could have their daily prayers. If Naruto was going to get Guy-sensei's advice, this was his best shot.

"Hey, Guy-sensei...can I talk to you for a bit?" Naruto asked quietly. Might Guy read the situation and nodded. The experienced taijutsu expert led Naruto away from the Pilgrims, Lee, and even Hinata. Konoha's Sublime Green Beast knew Naruto needed to speak in confidence.

"What is it, Naruto? Is everything all right?"

The blond-haired boy shrugged his shoulders. "I guess. The clients are just putting me a bit on edge. A few of them keep scoping Hinata-chan and I'm starting to worry."

"I have noticed their curiosity as well. Naruto, I know that the Will of Fire would drive you protect your teammates without orders, but be prepared for anything," Guy ordered. He leaned in closer. "The Hyūga Juinjutsu is almost unheard of outside of Konoha. We must assume they are after the Byakugan."

Naruto nodded, and his face became hard. He wasn't going to let anyone lay a hand on his partner.

Iruka was moving through the forests of Hi no Kuni at a speed he had never achieved before. The Hokage had summoned Iruka and informed him of an urgent B-rank mission. The former teacher had not even had time to say goodbye to Ayame or Mizuki.

'A Genin-team got in over their head. I hope I get there in time,' Iruka thought. There was a pit of terror weighing heavily in his stomach. The teacher could not deny or rule out the possibility that he was rushing to save students he had taught in the Academy.
The prospective Special Jonin recalled the mission details as he tried to push through the fog of his worry and raging emotion. Team Twelve had been delivering a small relic to the village of Akiraka Nawana that had recently been restored in Konoha. The message Hokage-sama received from the Jonin-sensei had reported that a small group of missing-nin from the Sugi Village had taken refuge in the town. They had attacked the Konoha Shinobi believing that Team Twelve had been sent to track them down.

'Team Twelve did very well, but they were out numbered. I'm glad none of the team were killed,' Iruka thought as he caught sight of the outline of the village's buildings against the rising sun.

The Chuunin stopped leaping through the forest canopy and approached the village on foot. One of the civilian gate guards saw him approach and held out his hand. Iruka halted as ordered. The situation was dangerous already and he didn't want to complicate the matter.

"Shinobi-san," the gate guard began in a nervous tone. "Welcome to the town of Akiraka Nawana. One of the Genin is waiting inside the gate house. She will speak with you and confirm your identity."

Iruka nodded and followed the guard into the small gate house. The Genin immediately perked up when she saw Iruka. "Iruka-sensei? What are you doing here?"

"Hello, Manami. Hokage-sama sent me as back-up. I know what you're thinking. 'Why did Hokage-sama send Iruka-sensei?' I'm being promoted to Jonin and the Hokage felt my barrier ninjutsu would be helpful."

"How do you always do that?" Manami asked with a mix of humor and annoyance.

The prospective Tokubetsu Jonin grinned. "Whenever you are trying to figure something out, you always trace your right earlobe with your ring finger."

Manami squeaked out an 'oh.' The town's guard was convinced that the newly arrived ninja and the silver-headed young lady knew each other. He nodded and returned to his post.

"I'm glad you're here, Iruka-sensei," Manami admitted. Iruka had only been her teacher for a half-year, but he had made a powerful impact in his short time. "Taiki-kun is patrolling with Yūto-sensei."

"What about Akihito?" Iruka asked.

Manami smiled a bit. "He's doing okay. Akihito-kun keeps joking that his girlfriend Shiori will probably like the scar because it'll make him more manly."

"Sounds like he isn't too badly hurt?" Iruka followed up.

"The doctor in this town did a really good job. Akihito-kun isn't in any condition to fight, but he'll be okay. That Doton technique went clean through his shoulder, but missed the bone," the kunoichi explained.

The Chuunin nodded. "I'm glad to hear he will recover. Now, what's the current situation?"

Manami briefed Iruka on the situation as best she could. The girl repeated a few of the details Iruka already knew, but the teacher was glad Manami was being thorough. The most important information Manami provided was that the Missing-nin were Chuunin level and specialized in Doton and Suiton jutsus. The Suiton user would be a larger threat in the current environment.

Akiraka Nawana was located on a river a few miles down from an ancient dam. The nukenins would be able to use their jutsu with far less drain on their chakra reserves thanks to the large
amount of water available.

"How did the nukenin escape?" Iruka asked.

Manami looked relieved that her team wasn't being blamed for allowing the escape. "We had just delivered the relic to the chapel when the Town's Elder invited us to a dinner. Pretty much everyone in the town showed up. One of the councilors announced we were 'skilled shinobi from Konoha', and that's when all hell broke loose."

"The missing-nin thought the meal was a trap and panicked?" Iruka posed a theory.

"Yes sir," Manami confirmed. "The woman started prepping a ninjutsu. Taiki-kun, well, he jumped in front of the Village Head and started casting a genjutsu to protect the civilians and the team. Akihito-kun and Yūto-sensei immediately tried to engage the other missing-nin in taijutsu. I used my Doton: Doryūheki to provide protection for the fleeing civilians."

"You all did a very good job," Iruka praised the Genin. "When will Yūto-sensei return?"

"He left about two hours ago. I think he'll be back so that Taiki-kun can rest."

Iruka smiled at the young woman. "I'd like to meet with the Villagers and get a feel for the lay of the land. We can wait for your teammate and sensei there."

"Sure thing, Iruka-sensei," Manami replied. Iruka steeled his resolve as he headed towards the Community Center. His presence was as much a reassurance for Akiraka Nawana as it was to support Team Twelve. Iruka could not show worry. All he could show was confidence.

The spirit of a town depended on it.

Hinata deactivated her Byakugan with a smile gracing her lips. The mission was going very well. The former Hyūga was proving to be a valuable asset on the mission, and the clients were especially gracious. One of the priests had been surprised that a shinobi knew of the Old Faith. The conversation had been pleasant and Hinata enjoyed the feeling earned from impressing someone. It was an uplifting experience. She constantly felt as if she impressed Naruto-kun. The acceptance still warmed her heart, but had begun to feel expected. It was comfortable. This feeling was fresh and definitely helped solidify her self-esteem.

"Hey, Hinata-chan!" Naruto called out. Hinata smiled. Naruto-kun's enthusiasm and care may be expected, but she treasured it beyond anything else. In some ways, Naruto-kun's presence in Hinata's life was as necessary as air.

"Good evening, Naruto-kun," Hinata returned the greeting. "How is the camp set up progressing?"

"It's great," Naruto confirmed. "Guy-sensei is overseeing everything."

Hinata nodded. Suddenly, Naruto locked eyes with Hinata. The intensity was unlike anything she had seen in Naruto. It was simultaneously protective and supportive.

"Hinata-chan, I know you can handle yourself...but I've noticed the clients judging you. I-I wanted you to know that I'll always have your back."

"Your support is why I have made it this far. I...I treasure that while you've been there for me, you haven't smothered me. Naruto-kun, even though we've been living together in your home, I've felt like I have been living my own life. Thank you."
"To be honest," Naruto began. "Until you moved in, my apartment felt less like a home and more like a place I just slept at. It always feels empty without you in it."

"Our apartment is the truest home I have ever known," Hinata agreed.

Naruto decided to change the subject. He was glad Hinata was affirming his own thoughts, but something about the conversation felt almost melancholy.

"So, have the clients been judging you?" Naruto asked.

Hinata shook her head. "I don't think so. They seem to be amazed that someone outside of the Old Faith is even aware of its existence. I think one tried to convert me earlier," Hinata finished with a laugh. "You should have heard him talk about how the Moon is sacred and reflects the beauty or sins of mankind."

"So, the moon is like a mirror that reflects beauty and goodness?" Naruto asked.

"I suppose so yes," Hinata confirmed.

"Well, it's definitely reflecting you," Naruto said. "You're more beautiful than the moon."

The declaration was so heartfelt, so simple, and so Naruto that Hinata nearly cried. She almost heard another declaration in the words. The unspoken possibility simultaneously frightened, elated, and comforted Hinata.

"T-Thank you, Naruto-kun. Y-You are like the moon, too. You were my light during a very dark emotional and spiritual night."

In that moment, Naruto and Hinata were unaware of the wider world. It was nearly perfect.

Unfortunately, nothing perfect can last. "Excuse me, Shinobi-san and Kunoichi-san!"

Naruto groaned. He felt like something had been building. At least the pilgrim running towards them looked friendly enough. "Ichimusai-sama has invited all of your team to dine with him. He has sent me to escort you to his tent."

"That sounds good!" Naruto was happy to have something other than rations. An actual semi-home-cooked meal sounded really good.

"We would be honored," Hinata replied with a bow.

'If whatever that moment was had to get interrupted, there are a lot worse ways,' Naruto admitted.

The two Genin followed the pilgrim, whose name they didn't catch, back to the leader's tent.

Lee was waiting outside with a warm smile. "Guy-sensei is already inside! I felt it would be polite to wait for my teammates!"

"Thanks a ton, Lee," Naruto responded. Team Nine headed into the tent together. The smells! 'Oh man, whoever cooked did a great job!' Naruto thought. He caught sight of a small grill and couldn't deny that even the vegetables looked appetizing.

"Yosh, my students! Let us thank our clients for the generous and youthful hospitality!" Might Guy flashed a thumbs-up at his Genin team. The three young people enthusiastically thanked their clients. Ichimusai laughed heartily as the hungry Genin tore into the food.
"I remember when I was their age! I didn't think there was enough food in the world!" The religious leader laughed and offered Lee another helping of food. The taijutsu-focused shinobi graciously accepted the meal.

Guy laughed as well. "I was the same! My students are in the springtime of their metabolism!"

The older men and women enjoyed the levity the shinobi provided.

Naruto decided to jump start the conversation. "I bet you guys have seen a whole lot of really cool places."

"We have been blessed to see a great deal of Creation," Ichimusai confirmed. "Is there a place you would like to hear about?"

"Have you ever been to the beach?" Naruto asked. That was one place he'd always wanted to go. The idea of the ocean sounded really cool.

Ichimusai smiled. "We have been to several beaches. One of my favorites is in the Land of Wind. It is very far to the south, past the desert. The sands are as white as the clouds of a peaceful day and the water is as blue as your eyes, young man. It is a beautiful place...the fact that I meet my partner there...well..."

"Added bonus?" Naruto questioned.

The old man laughed. "Added bonus."

"Ichimusai-san! May I ask if you have ever been to the city of Kitanohoshi?" Lee asked excitedly.

"Oh yes, it is a fantastic city. Possibly the finest in the Land of Mountains. I hope you get the chance to visit it one day! The city itself is carved into the mountain. The Architects created a true wonder of the world. But I'm sure you were more curious if I have been there during the Great Tournament. I have...and it is as incredible as you imagine."

The rest of the meal passed in excited tales of travel, dreams, and plans for the rest of the journey. Naruto felt his concerns melt away.

'With clients this nice, what could possibly go wrong?'

Yūto-sensei sat down across from Iruka in the community's tavern. "Akihito may have found our enemy."

"Akihito found the nukenin?" Iruka asked as he sat down his chopsticks.

"Seems an old codger in this village has a bit of a hobby. Stargazing. Akihito decided to try his hand at it. He noticed some smoke near the dam."

"The dam..." Iruka leaned back in his chair. "There could be hostages."

"I believe so. We'll have to strike quickly. I want us to take the lead on securing the hostages. My Genin can prevent the remaining nukenins from escaping."

"I'm glad you have faith in your Team," Iruka complimented. "When do we move out?"

"Four hours," Yūto said emphatically. "There is no one who is the master of a forest at night like a Konoha shinobi. These Sugi Village upstarts think they are talented in forest combat. We'll show
them who the true masters of the woods are!"

"Of course," Iruka agreed. The next hour was spent with the Genin of Team Twelve. Manami retrieved the blueprints for the dam from the village elder. Every detail of the dam and the surrounding countryside was committed to memory.

"The two ways the missing-nin will try to escape are here," Akihito said as he pointed to one spot on the map. "and here."

"I agree." Taiki gazed at the map. "I'm worried about the supports mentioned in that maintenance report."

"Odds are the missing-nin have rigged them with explosive tags," Iruka complained. "We need to be prepared for that."

"Mhmph," Manami made a hurt noise. "They are so selfish. Blowing the dam would not only kill the hostages they may have, but would make the village unlivable for years!"

Yūto shook his head. "These nukenins aren't thinking rationally. According to both the citizens of Akiraka Nawana and the Bingo Book, our targets are lovers fleeing the male's arranged marriage. If they can't escape, we must be prepared for a suicidal act."

"I can't believe anyone can be that desperate," Taiki whispered.

"It's the fate of nukenins," Iruka explained sadly. "Shinobi villages and clans cannot allow their secrets to fall outside of their control. Missing-nin, nukenins, are constantly hunted. Our foes probably felt they had finally found someplace safe after years on the run. You guys spooked them and they simply panicked."

"Man, if they had just kept their heads down we'd have moved on and not been any the wiser." Akihito rubbed at his wounded shoulder.

"They'll pay for that mistake," Manami declared. "They attacked us and put dozens of people in danger."

"Manami and Taiki, prepare for combat. Akihito, you still haven't recovered enough. I need you in that observatory." Yūto pulled out a radio headset out of a storage scroll. "Channel four. Keep us updated."

"Yes sir!" The three Genin acknowledged their sensei and scurried off to prepare.

"You should be proud of your team. They are handling this situation well." Iruka watched as the team left.

"I am proud of them. Honestly, I'd let these nukenins go as they barely rate as C-rank Missing-nins, but there are six people who work at the dam missing. If these two hadn't taken hostages..."

"But they have, and they need to be brought to justice for it," Iruka reminded the Jonin. The teacher just hoped that his allies would make it out of the coming battle unharmed.

The Junrei Shanoii Otoko was a common path for trade caravans and pilgrimages. Great wealth flowed through the mountain passes. The potential wealth was very attractive for bandits, and armed gangs infested the mountain passes. Merchants, travelers, and religious pilgrims dedicated a portion of their budgets for hiring shinobi cells or conventional mercenary companies for protection. A common question asked by many civilians was why the shinobi villages near the
mountains – Konoha, Kusa, Taki, and Ame – or an enterprising band of mercenaries didn’t simply wipe out the bandit infestation.

The reason was simple: money.

Escort missions were a regular source of income for the villages, particularly Kusagakure and Amegakure. It would not be financially viable to wipe out the bandit lairs. The search-and-destroy missions were also very manpower-intensive. Shinobi would not only have to root the bandits out of their caves and rugged hamlets, they would have to occupy the territory to prevent looting. There were only three scenarios where a village would move in and wipe out bandits. The first was if a missing or nukenin took public control of a bandit clan. The second was for revenge if the bandits killed a shinobi of the village. Finally, the shinobi villages would be extremely merciless in the event of war. Konoha especially would brook no threat to its supply lines if the Fourth Great Shinobi War erupted.

These factors led to the creation of an odd parasitic/symbiotic relationship in the mountains. Only the bold, stupid, or desperate bandit clans would dream of attacking a shinobi-escorted caravan or group of travelers. Mercenary Companies understood that any attack was 'just business'. The Shinobi Villages held grudges.

Currently, an upstart bandit clan was preparing to assault a large procession of pilgrims escorted by three shinobi, children really, and the most ridiculous looking old man anyone had ever seen. The bandit's clothes were a mishmash of styles copied from noble houses and famous mercenaries. He had shaved his hair, from his mother's side, to avoid embarrassment. In place of his odd-colored locks, he had extensive tribal-style tattoos.

"Captain Shinachiku! Our scouts are back! We'll be in perfect position for an ambush!"

"This'll put us on the map! We kill those shinobi and rob the Pilgrims, and soon we'll be extorting protection money from the nearby villages! I told you, boys! I'm going to make us princes!" Shinachiku declared.

The twenty-nine bandits roared as they got into position. Shinachiku laughed to himself, "I'm going to live like a king!"

Rock Lee sighed and shook his head. "I do not believe our future adversaries have a concept of stealth."

"Even if Hinata-chan hadn't been tracking their scouts, there's no way we'd not be on alert after that," Naruto added. There was a clear edge of adrenaline and nerves in the young man's voice. This was the lead-up to their first real combat.

Hinata toyed with her fingers. It was a nervous habit Naruto had seen a few times. "W-We have trained for this...

"Team Nine," Guy-sensei said in the most serious voice his students had ever heard from their beloved sensei. "You have trained hard! I am proud of all of your hard work. Most importantly, I am proud of your teamwork, Flames of Youth, and Will of Fire."

Ichimusai and his partner were standing next to Guy-sensei. "You will have our prayers as well."

"Thank you all," Naruto found his voice first.

Hinata bowed politely. "We will not let you down."
"Guy-sensei! Ichimusai-san! I swear on the Flames of my Youth that I will help my teammates defend you all splendidly!"

Might Guy stood straight and entered into his goodest of Good Guy poses. "I will stand beside you in the upcoming battle! I have complete faith in your abilities, but I must help safeguard the boundless potential you, my precious students, possess! The enemy's numbers are great! However, if we stand together we will prevail! Our Flames of Youth will become a raging inferno and cleanse these mountains of our foes!"

The speech was so very Guy-sensei. The members of Team Nine couldn't imagine any other pep-talk from their teacher and felt their spirits buoyed by his very presence.

Iruka substituted with a metal desk as the Water Bullet crashed into the wall behind him. The 'hostage rescue' operation was clearly SNAFU: situation normal, all fouled up. First, there were no hostages. The dam operators were working with the Sugi Village nukenins. Yūto and Iruka had been greeted by dozens of crossbow bolts upon their arrival. One of the engineers had rigged up a very inventive quasi-automated turret. That man, Takeo Iruka half-recalled, might receive a D-rank entry in a bingo book. He wasn't a shinobi, but his design had been inventive and dangerous. If he sold his design to other villages or organizations, it could cause Konoha a few headaches in the future.

'They had been resting and preparing to flee,' Iruka mentally complained as the woman, who Iruka now knew was named Tsubame, threw seemingly every shuriken in this region of the Land of Fire at the Chuunin. Iruka countered with a few kunai of his own.

Iruka had a strategy behind his throws. Two of his kunai had 'flash tags' wrapped around the handles. The fairly expensive tags had fuinjutsu formulas that primed the tags to activate once the kunai hit something. Iruka managed to close his eyes just as the kunai struck the wall. Tsubame cried out in shock as the tags blinded her for a moment. Iruka took the initiative and charged.

The Konoha Chuunin landed a solid kick to Tsubame's core. The young woman gasped as the breath was knocked out of her.

"Surrender," Iruka barked an order.

"S-So we can go back to the Sugi Village to die? You didn't have to come here!" Tsubame yelled back. "Suiton: Teppōuo!"

The simple D-rank Supplementary jutsu did little more than knock Iruka backwards, but it allowed Tsubame to escape through a nearby door.

"Crap!" Iruka grumbled as he got to his feet. A series of rumbling crashes latched Iruka into place. "Shit!"

If there was ever an occasion to upgrade a curse word, it was this situation. Tsubame, Kichiro, and their accomplices had detonated the explosives on the dam. The teacher rushed to the location of the explosives he had seen and desperately wished the nukenin hadn't used their explosive tags. The Sugi Village had always been skilled in creating tamper-proof explosive tags.

'Only Jiraiya-sama or maybe one day Naruto could deal with those seals,' Iruka complained silently.

Much to Iruka's horror, the supports were giving way. A collapse at the dam would kill hundreds and displace thousands.
"Yūto! The nukenins detonated some explosive tags, the dam's structure is damaged!" Iruka called into the radio.


Neither could Iruka.

Truly, Doton: Doryūheki would be the perfect jutsu to shore up the dam. The Earth-style Wall would be the simplest way to prevent a catastrophic destruction. Sadly, Iruka's jutsu arsenal was limited to the Academy three, a handful of Barrier Ninjutsu, and two genjutsu. The only barrier ninjutsu that would be of any use was the Aiankurosu Fūsa. It was a basic barrier, but had the advantage of adhering directly to the target. The jutsu would strengthen the supports. That would be the easy part.

'No point in waiting,' Iruka declared to himself. He flashed through the hand-seals and reinforced the structural integrity of the dam's supports. Barrier ninjutsu wasn't designed for this particular use, but the teacher-at-heart had no other options.

The sixth and final support had used most of Iruka's chakra. 'I-I've never used this much chakra before...' Iruka slipped to his knees as his entire body burned from the strain of using the Aiankurosu Fūsa so many times. As he felt the dizziness of chakra exhaustion set in, a new wave of terror filled his core. The groaning of metal refilled the chamber. Iruka's "Iron Cloth Blockade" was holding. This was much, much worse. The water was putting strain on the weakened section Iruka was in.

Driven by sheer determination, Iruka attempted another Aiankurosu Fūsa. His chakra coils screamed in protest. The wall was no longer on the verge of collapse. Iruka, however, could barely keep physical contact with the wall to maintain his Aiankurosu Fūsa active.

"Shinobi aren't supposed to put compassion over the mission," a voice behind Iruka sneered. The Konoha Chuunin maintained contact with the wall. He wasn't sure if his jutsu could remain active without a constant influx of chakra. Out of the corner of his eye, Iruka noticed Takeo aiming a crossbow at Iruka's back.

"I guess I'm a terrible shinobi then," Iruka snarked.

Takeo glared at the Chuunin. "You'll be a dead shinobi. This should have been easy, but they had to send the one ninja who would put such a piece of shit hamlet's survival higher than taking out two nukenins. Now, I'm going to have to get another round of cosmetic surgery to hide from another ninja village. Why do you assholes have to be so persistent?"

Iruka was sure that there was a perfect witty one-liner for this situation. He just couldn't think of one in his current state. Takeo mumbled, 'screw it', under his breath and prepared to fire. At this range, Iruka couldn't dodge and without much chakra the odds of him substituting without hand-seals was very low.

The expected whistling of a flying bolt never materialized. Instead, Takeo gasped and fell to the ground with an audible crash.

"Hold on, Konoha-san," a second completely unexpected voice from behind Iruka called out. The voice was somewhat muffled, probably by a mask. It was becoming difficult for Iruka to see due to his physical, mental, and chakra exhaustion. The shinobi was clearly wearing a blue robe, a baggy brown outfit under the robe, and a Kirigakure Hunter-nin mask. The Hunter-nin pressed his
hands against the wall. Almost instantaneously, the entire wall was reinforced with ice. "My ice will remain for three days."

"W-What about my comrades?" Iruka asked after releasing his 'Iron Cloth Blockade'.

The Hunter-nin sighed. "I only caught a glimpse of the battle. My target was the talkative terrorist who nearly killed you. The Genin were defending the Jonin after he took a severe blow. He should survive, but the two Missing-nin escaped."

"Damn," Iruka hissed. "They are going to be okay?"

"I believe so," the mysterious Hunter-nin assured the Konoha Chuunin. "I must collect my target. The villagers will be arriving shortly to assist you."

"How do you know that?" Iruka asked.

It was obvious that the Hunter-nin was smiling behind his or her mask, the gender of the Kiri shinobi was hard to tell as Iruka had never encountered someone who broadcast so many mixed signals. "I have my ways."

Iruka watched as the Hunter-nin collected 'Takeo' and shunshined away in a flurry of snow and frost.

'This mission definitely earned its rank...' Iruka thought as he collapsed on the ground.

Team Nine had used Hinata's Byakugan to coordinate their response to the thirty bandits stalking their clients. Hinata reported that the bandits were armed with a variety of simple weapons ranging from knuckle dusters and clubs to hatchets and the occasional ill-maintained sword.

"Hinata, how are the enemy forces organized?" Might Guy asked.

Hinata focused her Byakugan on a few enemy groups. "The enemy is divided into four groups. The largest group is the best equipped. There are a dozen men in that group."

"Swords and hatchets?" The sensei asked. Hinata nodded in confirmation. "And the other groups?"

"There is a group of six bandits approaching on our left flank. Lightly armed, no substantial armor. There are two other groups of six similarly equipped trying to encircle us. The group approaching to the rear has one well equipped soldier."

"How well armored are some of the flanking groups?" Naruto asked.

Hinata focused again. "The right flanking group has simple leather armor. The left flanking group...almost nothing."

"Okay," Naruto acknowledged. "I think I should take the armored group. My ninjutsu can punch through the armor quickly. Lee's taijutsu can wreck the other guys."

"What about Hinata? What role will she play?" Lee was curious to see what Naruto was planning.

"Hinata-chan can deal with the bandits trying to attack us from behind. Armor means squat against her Gentle Fist. She'll also be able to protect the pilgrims. They like her the most anyway. Hinata-chan, you can keep them calm."
Might Guy smiled. It was good to see the team working together so well. "We must take our positions."

Hinata quickly approached the pilgrims and informed them of the incoming attack. The clients were amazed by Hinata's Byakugan. A few of the pilgrims had heard rumors of the Byakugan's abilities. Actually seeing the abilities was far more incredible than any rumor. Hinata desperately tried to project confidence. The former Hyūga tried to emulate Lee, Guy-sensei, and Naruto's boundless confidence.

'This is my first battle as a shinobi. I can do this. I have to do this. My teammates, innocent people, and my future are depending on what I do here! I cannot fail!'

The six bandits were being led by a garishly dressed 'captain'. His style seemed to be simply lifted from whatever local fashions were popular at the time. He carried a large pole-arm and brandished it like a conductor's baton. Two of the bandits threw their lone javelins at Hinata. The kunoichi didn't even need her Byakugan to see that the throws were wildly inaccurate.

It was one of the worst intimidation tactics Hinata had ever seen.

The first bandit reached Hinata and smiled lecherously. "I don't think we should kill this one! We could make a pretty penny off her!"

A wave of horror and revulsion swept through Hinata. As her mind processed the words of the bandit, a white-hot rage mingled with her fear. She would not be taken. The women in the pilgrim's procession would not be taken.

"Hakke Kūshō!" Hinata screamed. The wall of chakra infused air struck Hinata's target with a level of raw fury Hinata never expected. The Hyūga Art sent the man flying. Hinata heard the crack as the man's head hit a rock. Her Byakugan gave Hinata a terrifying view of the criminal's limited chakra fade away.

The man's life simply faded away.

"W-What the hell!" One of the bandits exclaimed in fear. "She's just a girl! What the hell!"

"You're right she's just a girl! We have numbers!" The leader barked. "Kill the wench!"

The criminals exchanged a wary glance at each other. They seemingly took strength in their remaining numbers before charging.

Their leader stayed back, a nervous bead of sweat working its way down his cheek.

Lee smiled as he blocked the lazy swipe of one of his opponents' clubs. Even though the enemy was using a wooden weapon, Lee barely felt the impact. His training with Guy-sensei had been far more intense.

Guy-sensei had also been free of any foreign substances that clouded his mind and slowed his actions.

It was shameful how someone could willfully poison their body to such a degree. Lee decided to quickly end the confrontation with such an affront to Youth. He didn't waste energy with a fancy kick. Instead, he simply struck the enemy with a backfist. This combat move allowed Lee to position himself to counter the charge of another bandit. The taijutsu specialist's front kick hit true. There was no hiding the sound of breaking ribs or the gasping cry of pain.
Psychological warfare was a valuable shinobi tool. Rock Lee lacked the capability to use genjutsu or ninjutsu. He did not lack the mindset to be a proper shinobi. The young man knew exactly what effect his brutal hit and his unerring smile was having on his opponents.

The momentum of the remaining four bandits was ebbing away. Lee decided to redouble his efforts. A quick jump kick knocked one bandit unconscious. A flurry of jabs rendered the fourth bandit little more than a groaning mound of pain. The fifth and six bandits turned and ran.

Lee simply dealt with them with a simple kick and punch to the back of the head.

Victory was his!

Naruto flashed through the hand-seals for Katon: Edan as the six bandits charged his position. They were screaming obscenity-laced battle cries. The young shinobi had never heard any talk so vile. His main influences and exposure to adults were good examples: the Third Hokage, Old Man Teuchi, Iruka-sensei, Ayame-onee-chan, and Guy-sensei.

These were terrible examples of adults.

Naruto knew that he was facing an enemy. The bandits would hurt, rob, do other horrible things, even kill his clients. They would kill him without hesitation. They would kill Guy-sensei, Lee, and Ichimusuai without even pausing to think about their actions.

They would kill Hinata-chan.

There was no way in any hell Naruto would fail his friends. A strange feeling worked his way into his chakra as Naruto fired off his jutsu for the first time in anger. His intended target got incredibly lucky and tripped. The fireball passed over his prone form and struck the raving bandit behind him.

Naruto would remember the scream and the sound for the rest of his days. The flames were fueled by chakra. They burned for a long time at much higher temperatures than normal.

"He! He can breathe fire!" a bandit shouted. In a panic, he threw his knife at Naruto. The shinobi dodged the clumsy throw and activated one of his launcher seals with a pulse of chakra. Naruto's launcher seal sent half a dozen kunai firing form the palm of his hands. The storm of metal hit true. Two kunai embedded themselves in the panicked man's neck. He collapsed to the ground with a gurgled scream.

A third bandit lost his mind. His screams vaguely resembled words. His swings vaguely resembled attacks.

Naruto put an end to his ravings with a kick to the knee and a pair of jabs to the head.

The remaining three bandits paused in their assault. "He's just a kid..."

"How the hell is he even real?" Another growled. The fourth simply turned tail and ran. "You coward!"

The other two counted to three at the same time. Naruto was really starting to wonder if they had been drinking before the battle. They advanced uphill against Naruto. It was almost comically easy for Naruto to finish hand-seals for Katon: Edan before his enemies came within twenty feet of his position.

Naruto only needed one more use of his jutsu to eliminate his final enemies. The two bandits were
so close together that the Fire Release jutsu hit both men. This time, Naruto didn't spare a second glance to the corpses. He had other concerns.

He had to know if Hinata-chan was okay.

Hinata used her Chakra Hari to slow the charge of the bandits. She aimed for the thighs, knees, and gut. Her chakra needles, the jutsu Guy-sensei had taught her, were basically more damaging senbon. They could not kill under most circumstances. Hinata didn't expect her jutsu to kill.

She only needed to limit their maneuverability. Her greatest strengths was how her agility and chakra control allowed her to apply her Jūken techniques with devastating effect. Hinata had another talent that increased the efficiency of her limited Gentle Fist knowledge. The kunoichi had been studying to become a medical ninja. Her knowledge of anatomy surpassed any of her peers.

The first bandit was dispatched with a Palm Bottom. Hinata's strike transmitted chakra directly into the man's heart and lungs. It was brutal, but that was the original, the true, purpose of Jūken. That was the reason the 'Gentle Fist' was feared. Hinata vaguely recalled that some in the Hyūga had started to focus on the Gentle Fist's ability to shut down tenketsu and disrupt chakra. That particular focus was likely an attempt to position the Hyūga Clan as a replacement for the Uchiha in Konoha's Military police.

A bandit swung wildly with a farming sickle. Hinata dodged it, but the garishly dressed bandit captain managed to slash Hinata's shoulder.

'If it wasn't for my Byakugan, I would have been cut in the neck!' Hinata realized with a horrible dropping feeling in her stomach.

Her fear honed her senses and helped her achieve greater clarity with her Bloodline than ever in her life. Hinata knocked one charging bandit away with a sweep kick.

"Die you little demon!" Hinata heard one of her enemies shout.

'Saru...Inu,' Hinata finished the two hand-seals required for her Chakra Hari. She fired off the needle over her shoulder. With her Byakugan, she could see the enemy as clearly as if he was standing in front of her. Hinata had aimed for center-mass, but the enemy made an unusual choice. He was halfway through settling into a Horse Stance. His mouth was open in preparation for another insult.

The chakra needle entered his gaping maw and pierced his brain. He dropped like a sack of rocks.

"There aren't enough ryō on the planet worth this!" One bandit shouted. He turned to run, but the captain cut him down.

"I'm not going to have my reputation hurt like that!" The captain flicked the blood off his short sword. He glared at Hinata. "I was going to take you, but I think I'd get more fame by killing you!"

Hinata glared at the hateful man. She slipped into a standard Jūken stance. The man spit in annoyance at Hinata's lack of verbal retort. He raised his sword above his head in an odd stance. Hinata didn't wait for her enemy to make the first move. She hated all the killing she had been doing. However, this man and his forces would not stop preying on innocent people.

They were less like people and more like rabid wolves.

Hinata slid at the man's ankles and upended him. She locked eyes with her opponent and saw the
unadulterated terror in the man's eyes. There was rage and denial as well.

"I was destined for greatness! Not to be humiliated by a girl!" Shinachiku raged. Those would be his last thoughts as Hinata hit his heart with a concentrated Jūken strike. The force of the strike, her own slide, and Shinachiku's position prevented the dead man from landing on Hinata.

"Hinata-chan!" Naruto's voice rang out. "Are you okay?!"

Hinata lay on the ground, breathing heavily. She was exhausted. Now that she was coming off her adrenaline rush, the emotional strain was as great as her physical and chakra exhaustion.

"I-I'm not hurt, but I'm not sure," Hinata confessed. She knew one thing for sure; Naruto-kun and her team would be there for her.

It was a long three days for Team Nine. Guy-sensei, and Ichimusai, had talked to each of the Genin. The gesture was greatly appreciated, but Naruto and Hinata really wanted to talk to Iruka-sensei. Still, Naruto and Hinata were very thankful for the support of their team and clients.

The shrine wasn't what Team Nine had been expecting. Naruto and Lee had made a wager that it'd be a large pagoda or a shrine complex. It was neither. Instead of a massive building, there was an island in the middle of a large crater lake. On the island, was a series of standing stones.

Team Nine accompanied Ichimusai to a small barrack-style building at the edge of the island. The old man smiled broadly. "Our congregation is beyond grateful for your efforts, shinobi of Konoha. We shall never forget that you were more than paid escorts. I will record your efforts into the histories of our congregation."

"Yosh! It was not just our duty, but our Youthful Pleasure to defend you!" Guy replied to the kind words. The three Genin of Team Nine smiled at the words Ichimusai offered.

"Now, I am not sure if this is against the regulations of your village, but I would like to offer a simple gift to each of you..." Ichimusai stated cautiously.

Guy flashed a thumbs-up. "It is legal. There are no regulations that prevent clients from showing their gratitude for a job accomplished with unusual youthfulness!"

"Excellent!" Ichimusai clapped his hands. "Now, Lee-san! My partner, Tomio, informed me that you are an avid fishermen when not on duty. Is that true?"

"Yes, Ichimusai-san! I enjoy fishing a great deal!" Lee confirmed.

Ichimusai went to a cart and selected a scroll. "This is a tide chart for the coast of the Land of Fire. I hope that you have occasion to use it!"

"This is an incredibly thoughtful gift! You have my sincere thanks!" Lee responded with tears of sincere joy forming at the corners of his eye.

The pilgrims smiled at Lee's enthusiasm. Tomio was particularly amused and his laughter was a match for Guy's at its heartiest.

"Uzumaki Naruto," Ichimusai pronounced. "I remember the conversation we had after my prayers two nights ago. You mentioned that you are a student of the shinobi art of fuinjutsu, we have several books on the shinobi arts. A few of our congregation were once shinobi candidates, after all. This is a book we received in a trade with a group of merchants from the Land of Copper a few years ago. It is worn out, and I feel its spirit would be much happier being used for its original
purpose rather than sitting in an aging crate."

One of the pilgrims, a younger man stepped forward. "Ichimusai-sama, are you sure we cannot give him one of the other books? You are aware that I am from the Land of Copper. That book is of great sentimental value to me..."

"Hayato-kun, I know you are a person who values his connection to the past. You were once a Shinobi Academy student in Ishigakure. There is a Conclave of our faith coming up soon in that Land. You will have a chance to form meaningful new memories. Perhaps, we can stop by your home village." Ichimusai's smile never wavered.

"I-I was unaware I would have the chance to go home," the now named Hayato admitted. "I would still request that I keep the book. It is one of my treasured personal items."

Ichimusai's smile remained, but it became that of a teacher. "All things are transient. Only the spiritual world, which one day we may be honored with entry, is permanent. This book is paper and ink. What is important to you isn't the material. It is the psychic. It is the memories you possess. Treasure memories. They are all we can carry with us into the Real of Spirit."

"I...I have much to learn it seems," Hayato accepted Ichimusai's position. "I will strive to create memories...starting today."

"I'll let you in on a little secret. I'm always learning. For example, I'm still trying to learn how I put up with Tomio after all these years..." Ichimusai joked.

Tomio cried out with a jokingly indignant, "Oi!"

Ichimusai handed the book over to Naruto. The young man's face lit up at the gift. "This is awesome! I'll remember this gift. Thank you so much, Ichimusai-san!"

Guy, Hinata, and Lee blinked at Naruto using the correct honorific for someone. That rarely happened so quickly. Generally, Naruto had to really warm up to someone to add an honorific to their name or create a nickname for them.

The priest turned to Hinata next. "Hinata-san. Thank you for your efforts against the enemy captain. I also appreciate knowing that our faith is still remembered by the world-at-large. This book is a history of our faith. I ask that you help keep us from being forgotten. This is a book of medicinal plants. Several of our young people mentioned hearing you discuss a medical ointment."

"Yes," Hinata said as she accepted the two books. "My dream is to be a medic-nin. I created the ointment to help recover from...some intense spars in my past. I humbly accept the gift of the botany book. As for the book on your faith's history, I am honored that you have selected me to keep your memory alive."

After one final meal with their clients, Team Nine returned home. Their mission had been a complete success, but they couldn't help but realize how it had changed them.

The Genin of Team Nine were truly shinobi for the first time in their lives.
Kurama Yakumo sometimes was a contemplative person. As an artist, she had to meditate on many factors. Form, function, emotion, necessity, and a dozen other concepts had to be considered as she brought the images that danced in her imagination to life. The heiress could hear the relief from her joints against the frantic panting of her lungs.

"Don't droop, Yakumo-chan." Knife-like annoyance intertwined tightly with the gnarled roots of admiration at the relaxed nature of the voice. Eye contact was the last thing on her mind, but she met her training partner's gaze. The blissful abyss of dreams was emitting its siren call and pleaded with Yakumo to rest. Her associate seemed to either phlegmatically accept the Kurama heir's exhaustion or was so infuriatingly optimistic and deliciously fit that he failed to register something as trivial as physical exhaustion. "It puts pressure on your lungs. Standing straight allows for easier breathing."

The knife-like annoyance started to win the mental struggle. Rock Lee was, once again, absolutely correct when the subject turned to taijutsu and physical conditioning.

"You know best." Yakumo's annoyance was still overpowered by her fatigue.

"I just hope to one day have a mastery of taijutsu that is comparable to you mastery of genjutsu," Lee replied.

Yakumo couldn't groan in exasperation. From any other guy, that would be an attempt at flattery. Lee's compliment was just a manifestation of his steadfast belief. It was as close to a pass as the Kurama Clan was a family of subsistence farmers.

"Thank you, Lee-kun," Yakumo replied. The knife-like annoyance returned to its sheath without protest.

"You're welcome. I am proud of your improvements!" Lee slipped into his good-guy pose and flashed a winning smile. "I believe we have stoked the Flames of Youth enough for now. We can meet up tomorrow for a light workout."

Emotionally, Yakumo held a match next to a fuse. "Lee-kun...would you like to join me...for a r-recovery meal?"

Rock Lee only had a little bit of free time before he met with Guy-sensei for the rest of the day's light training. As a disciplined disciple of the Flames of Youth and intense taijutsu training, he should stick to his very regimented schedule.

As a teenager, Konoha's Green Whirlwind took the hint the very pretty girl was dropping. Yakumo was testing the waters to see if she had a 'shot' with Lee.

"I would be honored!" Lee readily accepted. He would be remiss in his dedication to the Flames of Youth if he didn't stoke this particular aspect of his youthful fire!

Uzumaki Naruto could barely contain his excitement and relief to be back home with Hinata. Team Nine had returned to Konoha and had quickly been debriefed. Hinata had been stunned to discover that the bandit leader she had killed was the subject of a surprisingly large bounty for a criminal without chakra. Naruto hadn't been stunned at all. The young man had just learned to accept that the incredible was normal when it came to Hinata. He took a second to look up from
his practice with the Five-Seal Barrier technique. Hinata was sitting on the edge of the bed with a notebook in her lap. Occasionally, she would hum and tap her lip with a finger. A heat haze suddenly clung to every surface. There was only a single area of clarity.

Hinata.

It was suddenly a bit hard to breathe. Not in the 'Guy-sensei just put us through a 'medium' workout' kind of way. Naruto couldn't really put it to words. It was not exhaustion. In a lot of ways, Naruto had never felt an energy like this! It was almost like a jolt of static electricity starting in his gut and spreading throughout his body like spilled water.

"So...what are you reading?" Naruto was trying to control his emotions. He wasn't doing very well at controlling his emotions. Frankly, he didn't care much about controlling anything at the moment.

Hinata looked up and smiled. "Oh, I was..." Naruto's interest was overwhelming and sent a thrill of energy running through every inch of her being.

"I'm still real," Naruto confirmed as he took hold of Hinata's hand.

The former Hyūga blushed. "I did it again." She didn't bother to stifle her amusement. Everything about Naruto made the world seem so much brighter and more open. Hinata's life had truly dawned when Naruto entered her life. The night Naruto had found her had been the darkest of her young life, in reality and mind. From there, she had 'taken her name'. She had entered the light of the sun.

As she ran the tip of her free thumb across her forehead, she accepted that her mark of slavery to the Hyūga had set her free.

Naruto's glare was venomous, but Hinata harbored no shock, anger, or hurt. The glare was not directed at her. It wasn't even really directed at the seal itself. The ire was reserved for the Hyuga's act of discarding her so casually.

"I don't hate my seal anymore," Hinata confessed. "We wouldn't be here without it."

"I know," Naruto agreed with the barest hint of reluctance. "It's just..." Naruto met Hinata's eyes and saw the current her thoughts had just taken. He understood.

"Together," Hinata promised. The single word held so much promise and hopeful searching.

"Together." Naruto reinforced Hinata's spiritual promise.

What happened next was natural and inevitable. Instinctively, the two young shinobi knew they had been building towards this moment for a long time. They had nearly taken this step after Naruto declared Hinata more beautiful than the moon. There would be no more delaying or interruption.

Naruto and Hinata's moment was quick and chaste. The two teenagers did not bolt apart as if they were suddenly opposing magnetic poles. Naruto rested his forehead against Hinata's and smiled.

Hinata returned the smile, but wondered why she wasn't exploding with glee. After all, she had just shared her first kiss with the central person in her heart and life.

"I'm so happy," Hinata whispered.

"You've always made me happy," Naruto built on Hinata's point. "I guess...we're, uh, boyfriend
and girlfriend now?"

"We are," Hinata confirmed with the brightest smile Naruto had ever felt from Hinata.

"That means we can do that again?" Naruto asked, wide-eyed and hopeful. Hinata rewarded Naruto's hope with a second kiss. After all, she was just as eager to explore this new aspect of their relationship as her partner.

Might Guy was enjoying the tranquility an independent cool-down run provided. He needed time to further assess the strength and weaknesses of his team. Guy was also trying to avoid falling into the trap of overconfidence. As Guy had admitted to himself and others several times, Team Nine was practically the physical embodiment of Might Guy's ideals. Lee, Hinata, and Naruto were all advancing in skill, enthusiasm, overall Youthfulness, and most importantly in wisdom. The progress of Team Nine filled Guy with pride. And it was becoming increasingly difficult for the Jonin to keep his pride from twisting into hubris.

'I need to meet with someone who will not be afraid to give me a brutally honest assessment...Time to visit my Eternal Rival! For once, his infuriating hipness will be an asset for the Flames of Youth!'

The first location Might Guy investigated was the Memorial Stone. Kakashi was a man that existed in a prison of his own making. The prison bars were forged of survivor's remorse and his quest for redemption in his lost friends' eyes. Guy was under no illusions that he could break the restraints surrounding his close friend, but he liked to think that his constant contests were metaphorically filing away at the bars.

Fortunately, Might Guy had known Kakashi since the Academy. He had picked up on a few of his friend's 'tells'. The search for Kakashi didn't force Guy to delve too deeply into his investigative or scouting repertoire. Konoha's Taijutsu Specialist simply relied on patterns and memory. He quickly tracked Hatake Kakashi to the Hokage's Tower. The infamous masked shinobi was leaving the tower. Guy read his friend well. The Copy-nin had just finished a mission.

"Good afternoon my Eternal Rival!"

Kakashi nodded before heading over to the spandex-clad warrior. Guy noticed that the copy of Jiraiya's novel, Icha Icha Shenanigans if Guy read the spine right, remained in Kakashi's pocket. "Wasn't expecting to see you until later today, Guy."

"I was training independently of my team. There progress is incredible, but I feel they...and I...could use an outside opinion on their progress. It would also be an opportunity for you to assist Naruto to ensure that the Fourth Hokage's wish is being fulfilled."

'To make sure his son is reaching his potential,' Kakashi desperately wanted to add. "Yeah, I'd like that. When will Team Nine be training together again?"

"We will meet tomorrow for some light training," Guy confirmed.

It was evident that Kakashi was grinning behind his mask. "I'll be there. What time?"

"For you? Nine a.m. For my students? Seven," Might Guy answered with his booming laugh.

"I actually might show up on time," Kakashi countered. "If only to avoid more of the higher-ups trying to push Hyūga Neji and Uchiha Sasuke off on me again."
Guy raised one of his legendary eyebrows. "So soon? They failed your test just a few months ago."

"That they did," Kakashi confirmed. "A strong-willed kunoichi might be able to push the team towards passing. Neji and Sasuke have an odd respect for each others abilities. They aren't friends, but I can see the potential for those two working together."

"High praise from you, in a manner of speaking," the Sublime Green Beast pointed out.

Kakashi shrugged his shoulders. "I guess it is. We'll see how they do if the Council forces a repeat."

"That is a concern for the future," Might Guy assured his friend. "I look forward to seeing how you assist young Naruto and Hinata!"

"Don't want me corrupting your apprentice with my infuriating hipness, eh?"

Kakashi roared with laughter at the absolutely aghast look on Guy's face. This wasn't the full-time mentorship Kakashi had wanted with Naruto...but it was a start.

Tamotso-sensei did his best to glare at the girl who had replaced Uzumaki Naruto as the 'problem' of the Academy. Honestly, the Academy Proctor had no issue with the girl's activities. They were truly worthy of a shinobi. Unfortunately, several of the young woman's classmates were not so forward thinking.

"Miss Tenten," Tamotso began. "I'm sure you are aware of why I have called you into my office."

Tenten nodded. "My classmates don't understand the value of information."

"Correct," Tamotso confirmed. "Some of the civilian families are unnerved by your thoroughness. The Academy, and the Jonin, have no issues with your actions. They are a testament to your potential. Consider this a critique on your technique and not on your actions."

"Any...pointers?" Tenten asked.

The teacher thought quietly for a moment. "You are treating your information gathering as reconnaissance in hostile territory. This is espionage. Subtlety is your best weapon."

Tenten's face was a dance of contemplation, consideration, and finally a nigh-horrifying realization.

"Gossip...you want me to gossip?"

The sensei nodded. "You must blend in. Miss, you are showing excellent combat reconnaissance abilities. If you truly want to become an expert intelligence agent, you must learn to be far more subtle."

"I...have a few friends who might be able to help on the gossip front..."

"Yamanaka Ino and Haruno Sakura?" the Academy proctor asked with a poorly contained smile. When Tenten responded with a nod, he continued with a warm and approving tone. "The Yamanaka are a solid choice. Ino-san's father is a member of the Intelligence branch."

"Thank you for the advice." Tenten's words trembled with the weight of possibilities and eagerness. Tomatso dismissed her and Tenten decided to go try to track down Sakura and Ino. It
would be nice to talk with her friends, and get some information about what could possibly happen with the upcoming graduation.

Konoha was buzzing with energy and Tenten found it all infectious. Her information gathering could wait. She was actually looking forward to visiting with her friends.

Then she saw it. Down the street, Naruto and Hinata were walking hand-in-hand towards the supermarket. Tenten wasn't surprised by the sight. She had seen those two holding hands in the past. In fact, pretty much everyone in Konoha had seen those two acting like that at least once.

Tenten could recognize something few others could, however. Unlike the other times Naruto and Hinata went out in public like this...the two 'love-birds' were fully aware of what they were doing and the message they were sending.

"Oh, I have to let Sakura and Ino know!"

Naruto hadn't been this happy in a long time. Sure, he had been happy a lot. This was just a new kind of happy that he had only felt a few times before.

_The best part is that Hinata-chan will be at home when I come back!_

The young Uzumaki was also thrilled that he was building a very strong friendship with Lee. It was even better that Naruto and Lee had a chance to see what was up with Naruto's other friends from the Academy.

Naruto was surprised when it wasn't Kiba who acknowledged the two men of Team Nine's arrival first.

"Good afternoon, Uzumaki-san," the new guy began his greeting. He nodded at Lee. "I do not believe we have been properly introduced."

It was embarrassing that Naruto couldn't remember this guy's name. Naruto remembered Sohda Rikuto's name...and he had met Rikuto for all of three minutes. This guy, S-something, had been in Naruto's class.

"It's been awhile," Naruto said smoothly (he hoped). A bit of info popped into Naruto's head. "You still near the top of the class?"

The other boy brightened, despite most of his features being hiding behind sunglasses and his jacket's high collar. "I am currently fourth. I must admit, that I am surprised you remembered. Why? You never seemed to pay much attention to most of the Academy class."

Naruto was relieved that he had sold his cover so well. He just had to keep this act going until Kiba finished taking his sweet time sauntering over to the group. "Well, we're ninja. I have to be subtle at something."

"I'm surprised you even know what subtle is, Naruto," Kiba said with a grin that was somewhat forced. He was showing off his Inuzuka fangs. "Shino's keeping a low profile so he can catch people off guard."

"That sounds like Shino," Naruto agreed. "This is my teammate and buddy Rock Lee."

"Nice to meet'cha," Kiba semi-translated Akamaru's bark. Around that time, Shikamaru and Chouji had made their way to the group.
This was a different kind of fun than Naruto was used to. Fuinjutsu was fun. Training was fun. Playing 'Don't wake the neighbors' Ninja tag with Hinata was fun. This was just utterly randomness. There was no pressure. There was no plan. Lee and Chouji were debating curry joints. Shikamaru was actually animated when talking with Shino about shogi.

"Oi, Lee...Naruto..." Kiba grunted as he collapsed following a valiant effort to beat Lee in a pushup contest. "You have gone on a C-rank right?"

Lee flashed a thumbs-up. His unyielding friendliness and energy brushed past Kiba's jealously of his endurance. "We succeeded in escorting a number of pilgrims safely to their holy site."

"That's cool," Kiba absent-mindedly acknowledged. He wasn't going to let Lee, or Naruto, stay ahead of him (and Akamaru) forever. When Kiba got home, he and Akamaru were really going to push their respective parents for more advanced Clan jutsu! "Your team might be getting another one soon. I heard my sis talkin' about a village that's asking for a shinobi vet and a maybe some Genin to take care of some problems they've been having."

Naruto perked up from listening to the rather hilarious debate between Shino and Shikamaru. It was honestly unbelievable to see those two so...enthusiastic...about anything. "What kind of problems?"

"An odd pack of wolves. They are attacking...wrong. They aren't really eating the livestock. They'll wound an animal or two to lure out villagers, then attack."

The Uzumaki hummed. "Maybe they are trying to get rid of the people?"

Shikamaru raised an eyebrow and exchanged a look with Shino. "Why would wolves do that?"

"I dunno," Naruto admitted. "Seriously though, we're ninja and semi-smart wolves surprise you?"

The other boys found they couldn't refute Naruto's point, but that didn't stop Akumaru and Kiba from trying. Lee naturally jumped to his teammates defense. Shino and Shikamaru simply watched the far too energetic exchange. It was good to have a bit of a break from missions and school.

Might Guy grunted as he blocked Kakashi's snap kick. The two Jonin had met back up with each other after their earlier meeting. Kakashi had accepted Konoha's Sublime Green Beast's challenge with unusual vigor. Obviously, Kakashi was aware what Guy's next words would be..."My Genin have been requested for a C-rank mission."

"Providing cover for Tsume's girl?" The Copy-nin asked as he narrowly avoided Guy's counter attack.

"Hokage-sama feels that Hinata's Byakugan would be incredibly useful."

The sole surviving student of the Fourth Hokage launched a few jabs at his best friend. "Not to mention that Naruto could seal a corpse away for Forensics to study."

"That is the plan," Guy confirmed. "I apologize my infuriatingly hip friend, but your training session with Naruto will have to wait."

Kakashi was visibly disappointed. "I expect a full report from him after this mission. Hunting odd beasts requires a different set of skills than fighting off some drugged up bandits."

"I assure you that I will include you in Team Nine's training upon our return."
The spar continued for a while. Occasionally, Academy Students paused to try to catch a glimpse of the two elite shinobi. Guy was thrilled that he was helping inspire Konoha’s future ninja. It truly validated his philosophy!

Many hours later when Guy observed his team enter the dojo, the emotional details were incredibly obvious. Perhaps the timing of this mission was more fortuitous than Guy had anticipated. Naruto and Hinata had clearly been holding hands mere moments before entering the dojo. Lee seemed to be in an almost transcendent youthful state of mind. He was proud that his students were having a life outside of the shinobi world, but he needed to see how they would react in a mission setting.

"Good morning my students!" Might Guy greeted his Genin charges. "Today we will be learning a valuable truth of the Shinobi world!"

"Really? What is it, Guy-sensei?" Naruto asked excitedly.

Lee nodded with equal excitement. "I, like my teammates, are always eager to advance as splendid shinobi of the Leaf!"

Hinata nodded in agreement with her friends. Guy took a breath and continued. "Today, we are learning about the quick turnaround! Team Nine has been selected for a C-rank mission. Hokage-sama believes that our team and our abilities are best suited for the mission."

The two young men exchanged a look. Naruto took the lead and raised his hand for Guy’s attention. The taijutsu enthusiast nodded to acknowledge Naruto. "Guy-sensei, this mission is to track and get rid of some wolves attacking a village isn’t it?"

Might Guy’s curiosity had been piqued. "Naruto...Lee, how did you hear about this mission?"

"It's a C-rank!" Naruto attempted to cover himself and his friends. "Kiba, one of our buddies, mentioned that his sister is being sent to the village to heal the livestock! Lee and I figured that Team Nine would be the best bet!"

"Yes, Guy-sensei!" Lee quickly jumped in to help bail out Naruto. "We concluded that Hinata’s Byakugan would allow us to locate the wolves quickly. My taijutsu will allow me to quickly handle the wolves, while Naruto can use his peerless fuinjutsu skill to bring these mysterious animals back to Konoha for study."

The Jonin wasn’t sure if he should be proud of his student’s deductive abilities or worried that they had figured out the mission already. ‘I may have to speak with the Academy about operational security.’

Hinata wasn’t sure what was going on, but she was thrilled that her teammates had faith in her Byakugan. She was also incredibly curious about the medical ninja that would also be in the mission.

Guy sighed. "I am proud of your deductive abilities. We will be taking this mission, but as we travel, a lesson on Operational Security is in order..."

Iruka loved Ayame a lot, but he wasn't going to deny that he was happy to be given the all-clear to return to the Academy for a 'check-in'. The jonin-in-training missed his old stomping grounds a great deal. Iruka was certain that Mizuki was keeping everything in line. Naruto had graduated early and was doing a fantastic job as a member of Team Nine.

'Heck, I bet Mizuki considers his job a vacation now,' Iruka thought with a smile.
The Academy was just like Iruka remembered, even without the nostalgia that colored his thoughts. It was loud and boisterous. Students were being students, while teachers were drilling the novices on military, academic, and the other subtle arts. The familiar feelings and thoughts flooded back.

'I really can't wait to get back here,' Iruka admitted gladly.

"Iruka-san!" A familiar voice called out. It wasn't Mizuki, but Tamotso was a welcomed acquaintance. "I didn't expect to see you back at the Academy for a long time."

"I'm not officially back, but I wanted see how things are going back at 'work'."

Tamotso laughed. "Knew we couldn't keep you away."

"A few more missions outside the village and I'll be back to stay," Iruka added. After a hearbeat, he smiled. "Is Mizuki around? I haven't had a chance to see him in a long time."

Tamotso's face darkened for a moment. "He's in Classroom Four. It'll do him some good to see you. Mizuki needs some...support...right now."

"That sounds a bit ominious," Iruka said defensively.

"He's in a rough place. I think he relied on you more than we realized."

That simultaneously filled Iruka with pride and worry. Mizuki never seemed to be emotional 'paper-mâché'. 'I hope I can help him with a visit,' Iruka thought.

"I'll see if I can help," the on-hold teacher said evenly. The pair parted and Iruka let his memory guide him through the halls. It was good for Iruka to be back where he belonged. There was definitely a rush when on a mission, but he honestly wasn't meant for the front lines. He'd leave that to men like Jiraiya-sama and others.

A familiar hushed whisper flowed through and under the door to a classroom. 'Mizuki's back is to the room,' Iruka theorized. He quietly opened the door using his recently refreshed ingrained techniques. Iruka was correct. Mizuki was dutifully, mechanically, transcribing something on the black board. The room was so much quieter than Iruka's last classroom. Ino, Naruto and Kiba had decided that they would set their personal volume to excessive and the world could just deal with it.

"This is your homework. The Code must be deciphered in order to reveal the full assignment," Mizuki ordered harshly. "Dismissed."

"Mizuki! It's good to see you!" Iruka shouted happily as the last students filed out of the room.

"Iruka," the other teacher's voice was flat. "Good of you to grace us with your presence."

Umino Iruka was a very trusting person, especially with Mizuki, and simply took the statement at face value. "You know how missions are."

"No, I don't. Do you know how long it's been since I had a real shinobi mission? I've been stuck here at the Academy!"

The vehemence in Mizuki's voice was thick, dangerous, and fiery. It was also completely unexpected. "Stuck? Mizuki, we're shaping the next generation of Shinobi. The impact we are having on our students will last for decades. One of the Hokages will be our student in the future!"
"Who? Naruto? Uchiha Sasuke?" Mizuki shot back. "I know you're proud of every student, but let's be honest. Who out of our students doesn't have some huge flaw that could bring down the whole village? Shikamaru is so lazy that he barely passed despite his genius. Naruto..."

Mizuki paused to scowl. "The majority of village and Shinobi corps don't trust him as far as they can throw him. Sasuke has the support of the village, but he's so damaged I doubt he'll be able to hold it together long term."

"I didn't know you felt this way," Iruka said. He added the worst possible emotion to his words for the current situation; pity.

"There's a lot you don't know, Umino." The embittered Chuunin Stormed out of the classroom leaving a stunned potential Special Jonin in his wake.

Iruka stood silently and wondered just how deeply his absence had impacted Mizuki. There was also the terrifying doubt if they were even friends anymore...

Lee was feeling mighty pleased at the moment. He was very excited about the mission Team Nine had been assigned. It was truly a challenge that would test the Flames of Youth each member possessed. Curiosity burned brightly as Lee considered the reasons for the belligerent wolves' assaults.

'That is for more learned minds than my own! It will take another kind of genius to figure out! My fellow Geniuses of Hard Work will take care of the Wolves! Hinata shall locate them. I shall defeat them, and Naruto shall seal them away for study!'

The Green Beast of Konoha, as Yakumo had playfully dubbed Lee, was confident that the team would quickly and skillfully complete the mission. The second Lee's thoughts turned to Yakumo-chan, an entirely new heat found its way to his face. Lee was quickly realizing and accepting that he was growing quite affectionate towards Yakumo-chan very quickly. He needed advice on how to approach this new and exciting Youthful endeavor!

Luckily, he knew just the person to ask for advice! He was lucky that Uzumaki Naruto was one of his best friends. His most tenacious associate seemed to be most experienced of his peers in this vital arena!

Naruto's accessibility was also another huge boon. There was no angst or fear of derision when Lee simply approached Naruto and asked, "Naruto, my friend, may I discuss something with you?"

"Fire away, buddy." Naruto was approachable, but still very alert as Team Nine moved towards their mission location.

Lee took a steadying breath. "You have experience courting girls. The relationship you have with Hinata is inspiring. How did you approach starting a relationship?"

"Uh, I'm not really sure," Naruto admitted. Lee lost his footing for a moment. "I was just there for Hinata-chan. She was going through a really tough time. I just supported her, ya know. We went through everything together and we'll keep going through everything together."

The older Genin pondered Naruto's words for a few moments. "The relationship is based on support and respect?"

"Yup!" Naruto confirmed. "There are some other things that help too..."
As Lee produced a notebook seemingly out of thin air, Hinata decided to approach the Veterinarian Shinobi that Team Nine would be working with. She had heard that Inuzuka medics were far more combat-focused than any other medic-nin. It didn't matter if the patient was human or animal, the nigh-feral instincts of the Inuzuka drove them to the front lines.

Hinata had no intention being a hospital-bound doctor. The Hyūga Clan may have cast her out, but the gifts provided by Jūken and the Byakugan were combat oriented. The kunoichi had no intention of throwing away years of training so casually.

'Not now! I'm finally seeing true progress in my Jūken thanks to Guy-sensei!'

"You don't need to be nervous about anything," Hana said without turning around. "The triplets won't bite. No guarantees about me, though..."

The joke evaporated any trace of tension. Hinata felt confident in approaching the Chuunin. "Excuse me, Hana-sempai...I was wondering if I could ask you about medical ninjutsu."

"Absolutely! Let me get a few of the standard questions answered off the bat. The basics are the same for humans and animals. Second, medical ninjutsu takes incredible mental discipline and chakra control."

Hinata nodded. She was partially surprised that she was read so easily, but the younger kunoichi wagered that she had picked up some of Naruto's emotional visibility.

"Thank you," Hinata responded genuinely. "How did you first become a medic-nin?"

"I've always been interested in healing. Trying to help keep my clan's ninken partners just as healthy as the rest of the Clan. Why are you interested in medical ninjutsu?"

"Because I chose it. I know I can be a strong medic, and I can be a combat-medic. The only combat medic in the world is Tsunade. I can follow in someone's footsteps without being in their shadow. I can walk my own path, without being in anyone's shadow. More importantly, I can stand beside my comrades and save them like they saved me."

The Veterinarian smiled. "That, pup, might just be the best answer I've heard in a long time."

Kakashi hated to admit when he was wrong. His ideal team would have still been Naruto, Sasuke, and either the ex-Hyūga girl or whoever ended up being Top Kunoichi. The Copy-Nin had never given a single thought to this Tenten girl, but he should have paid attention. Ibiki was never impressed by anyone not a Chuunin or higher.

This kunoichi was the real deal and Kakashi was man enough to admit it. The girl had lots of potential and was clearly working to reach it. Tenten had also taken Ibiki's lesson's to heart. She was skillfully dividing her attention between the discussion on standard tells of hostile shinobi infiltrating a bandit gang and recording information on her potential teammates. Word had reached the Jonin that Tenten had caught a good bit of shit for her information gathering. It was a very good sign for her future that she told her detractors to choke on it.

'This girl has moxie,' Kakashi appraised positively. If he had paid closer attention to the Academy before, Kakashi would have pushed very, very hard to have a team of Naruto, Sasuke, and this Tenten girl.

Ibiki was no longer the only one impressed by this girl. She was going to climb the ladder fast. Cold Blooded Kakashi's ideal team may have been out of reach. He was likely going to be
saddled with a pair of incredibly dysfunctional geniuses, but he finally saw a solution.

He needed a kunoichi who wouldn't back down in the face of Sasuke and Neji's issues. Fortunately for Kakashi, Tenten likely had more balls than ninety percent of the male Academy students and was definitely the toughest kunoichi in the Academy by a few dozen leagues.

"She'll do," Kakashi decided. He'd also make sure he pushed her hard. It might force Neji and Sasuke to shape up. The plan was good, not great, but Kakashi could live with it.

He'd still rather have Naruto on his team.

Naruto was ready to complete his part of the mission. Honestly, he was a bit bored at the moment. Hinata-chan was taking the lead so far. Naruto's...girlfriend...was doing a great job at tracking the wolves with her Byakugan. She had found it easy to track them considering she could see in nearly a mile in every direction or almost six miles when she focused on a specific direction.

As Hinata led her teammates towards the wolves' last location, Naruto's thoughts returned to two vitally important points.

First, the budding fuinjutsu expert was hugely, awesomely proud of Hinata-chan! She had nearly been destroyed when Naruto had found her. The Hyūga bastards had stomped all over her confidence and thrown her out into the world with a backpack and a few bandages. Now, Hinata was a full shinobi. She was determined to learn medical ninjutsu. Most importantly, she wasn't letting her junin define her. She had moved on.

Naruto hadn't moved on.

He was going to master fuinjutsu and get that thing off Hinata's forehead. Naruto was determined to get rid of the only physical flaw he saw in Hinata.

The vehemence and rage in Naruto's thoughts caught him completely off guard. 'What the heck was egging all that on?'

Honestly, Naruto was a bit scared by his emotions. 'Focus on the mission. Focus on the mission.' The mantra was quickly created and quickly used to center his thoughts.

"The wolves are resting in the thicket on the other side of this hill," Hinata reported and freed Naruto from his internal turmoil.

"Yosh! It is time to free this village from their unyouthful burden!" Lee's enthusiasm brought a smile to Naruto's face. The dark thoughts were very far away now. It was a welcome relief.

'No amount of anger, enemies, or sadness can touch me if I have these two,' Naruto declared to himself.

"Hey, Hinata-chan, what's around that thicket?" Naruto asked with a smirk. His usual confidence was back and it was bringing a plan with it.

"A field for the most part, and a rocky hill behind it," Hinata reported.

Lee perked up, more than typical even, and smiled at Naruto. "I think I see your plan, Naruto! It may take some time to get into position."

"Got it in one," Naruto beamed. "Hinata-chan, keep an eye on those wolves. It's almost showtime."
Might Guy had remained in the small village, publicly to put the village at ease with his presence. Truthfully, he wanted to test his Genin. They had as much potential as he dared to dream, but reaching that potential required independence.

He cast a quick glance towards where Inuzuka Hana was finishing another autopsy on an animal. This was the third autopsy. The first two had been on animals killed in different ways. First, she had discovered that the wolves had driven the unfortunate herd of sheep into a very fast flowing, very deep river to drown. The second group of animals to fall had been the oxen that pulled the trade wagons. They had been systematically led into the wilds and crippled.

The final group of animals to fall to the wolves were the few dogs the village had before the arrival of the pack.

"Guy-san," Hana growled as she covered the deceased...murdered...dog with a shroud. "It looks like these wolves are hunting for sport...or waging war...on this village. I really hope your students kill them all."

The vehemence was suprising, even for an Inuzuka mourning the murder of a fellow canine. "What outrage have they committed?"

"The dogs...they were lured out...villagers say it was female wolves who did it..." Hana paused to compose herself. "These wolves...all these killings have been for sport."

"Cruelty for the sake of cruelty?" Guy asked in shock. 'What are you about to stumble into, my students?'

Lee was very grateful for Hinata's Byakugan and Naruto's fuinjutsu. The current plan was going to allow Team Nine to set the pace of the battle. Yes, Lee knew that the 'battle' was against wolves. The wolves however had shown unusual and dangerous intelligence. Rock didn't want to take a chance. These beasts needed to be put down. They were rabid, vicious monsters. Guided by Hinata's Byakugan, Team Nine successfully planted Naruto's ingenious timed seal traps. The vicious wolves had no idea that the shinobi had infiltrated so close to their hovel and withdrawn.

"Five...four...three...two...one!" Naruto counted down in Konoha Battle Sign Language.

At the bottom of the hill, the seals on the traps decayed as designed. Jets of flame erupted from each of the six traps. The roar and glare of the flame triggered the wolves instinctive fear of flame. In a panic, the wolves fled towards the perceived safety of the hill.

There were seven wolves in total. In their unthinking flight, they had been forced far apart by the terrain. Two reached Hinata's position first. The kunoichi fell upon the cruel animals in a flurry of Jūken strikes. Foreign chakra flooded the animals' organs causing them to rupture. 'Gentle Fist' continued to demonstrate why it was so incredibly feared. Hinata had barely landed a solid blow, but it had been catastrophic. Jūken was destructive when used against a human used to having chakra radiate from their core. Wolves were invaded by a completely alien energy.

The kunoichi might have well tossed the wolves into lava.

Lee was the next to launch his ambush on the fleeing wolves. The first wolf fell to the hammer blow of the taijutsu expert's ax kick. Lee's kicks were powerful on their own, but augmented by momentum, gravity, and his training weights, they were beyond effective. Lee's kick reduced the lead wolf’s head to something resembling a bag of chunky soup.
The other two wolves paused in shock at the sudden and overwhelming violence. Lee had landed in a crouch and immediately hit the next wolf with a snap kick that crushed the rearing beast's throat. The final beast lunged at Lee with the expressed purpose of tearing the shinobi's throat out. Rock Lee countered by rolling backwards and kicking the predator in the gut. The wounded animal let out a yelp of surprise and pain before landing awkwardly on its neck, dying instantly.

Naruto caught a glimpse of his girlfriend and his teammate/bro defeating their targets with tiajutsu. Hinata-chan and Lee were both amazing in tiajutsu and could do some serious damage in any way they needed to in close combat. Now, Naruto knew he wasn't a slouch in tiajutsu. His training under Guy-sensei with Lee and Hinata-chan had forced his tiajutsu to go from 'meh' to 'passable' to 'very solid' in a short time. Still, Naruto wasn't confident his tiajutsu could finish off the wolves fast enough at his current level.

His ninjutsu was a completely different ballgame.

Naruto had gotten very comfortable with his hand-seals for Katon: Endan. He wasn't going to blow himself up again! The wolves had no idea what was about to hit them. Naruto took a running leap off one of the craggy rocks and positioned himself above the wolves. The targets had no idea they were in Naruto's sights. The chakra-infused fireball struck one of the wolves directly. Naruto's attack incinerated the unfortunate canine to be struck directly. The second hostile animal was burned so severely and thrown back by the blast that death was nearly instantaneous.

"Hinata-chan! Lee! Did we get all of them?" Naruto cried out as he landed. Lee flashed a thumbs up as he was confident he had eliminated his targets. Hinata took a deep breath and focused her Byakugan.

"We did it! All of these...monsters...are dead! The village and their livestock will be much safer now!" Hinata smiled broadly. There was always a rush that came after a success. It was amazing that she had so many opportunities to not only better herself, but others.

Naruto returned the smile. He knew this entire moment was beautiful. Hinata was always beautiful in his mind, but the sunlight and triumph reflecting in her eyes was soothing. Naruto turned his attention away from Hinata. Lee was also radiating triumph.

The Uzumaki considered how different Team Nine was reacting to this victory than the bandit's defeat. There had been a lot of soul searching after the battles against the raiders. They may have been scum, but the bandits were still people. Even with the indoctrination Konoha instilled, there was still pangs of conscience. This victory was as guilt-free as a mission could possibly be.

As Team Nine made their way back to the village, Might Guy dispelled his Shadow Clone. Konoha's Sublime Green Beast was not a habitual user of ninjutsu, but he knew his fair share of techniques. A shinobi could not be promoted, save in the rarest of circumstances, to Jonin without two elemental proficiencies.

The memories from the Shadow Clone filtered back to Might Guy and he felt a doubly powerful surge of pride. Team Nine's Jonin Sensei was very impressed by his charges' teamwork, strategy, and poise. He had always expected great things from his students, but they were progressing faster than he ever imagined. There were flaws in their plan, techniques, and execution to be sure. He had a second Shadow Clone dealing with the fires. So, the real Might Guy waited. His team was making good time, despite their occasional 'pit stops' to celebrate their success. The Jonin wouldn't hold such displays of Youth against his charges.

They were still children after all.
The Shinobi life was cruel and often short. Every moment Team Nine could enjoy like this was to be treasured and encouraged.

Once again, a flood of memories reached Guy. His remaining Shadow Clones had put out the last of the fires. The plan was a teachable moment and Guy planned to exploit such an opening in Team Nine's training when they returned to Konoha. Might Guy whistled a rather Youthful tune as he strolled towards the town's gates. He was looking forward to that lesson.

There were several scenarios running through Guy's head. As a Jonin, he was required to think at least six moves ahead on nearly a dozen possible situations. Naruto running back and forth between two very cross groups of people while Lee and Hinata seemed to be playing minders to said group wasn't one of the scenarios. The Jonin decided to approach the situation tactfully and watch as things developed.

"Are you sure?" Naruto asked. The civilian the hyperactive blond-haired shinobi had addressed merely grunted something vaguely affirmative.

Naruto flashed a thumbs up to Group Number One and dashed over to Group Number Two. Guy couldn't quite hear what the conversation entailed. Eventually, Naruto whooped and pointed at Lee with both index fingers. Lee returned the point with a tentative double thumbs-up.

Naruto eagerly returned the gesture. A few somewhat tense moments later, the two groups dispersed.

Might Guy was eager to hear the details. His students were certainly full of Youthful surprises. They might actually be ready. 'I wonder what my infuriatingly hip rival would say to that idea...'
Chapter 17

Hatake Kakashi smirked behind his mask as he watched the gears turn in his (probably) best living friend's mind. Might Guy still hadn't figured out how Kakashi could drink without removing his mask. Kakashi wasn't about to spoil one of his favorite pass-times by revealing his secret. There were only two people in Konoha that Kakashi was certain had figured it out; the Hokage and Maruboshi Kosuke. The Copy-nin started to wrack his brain to figure out how 'The Eternal Genin' had divined Kakashi's favorite little trick.

"My Eternal and Impossibly Hip Rival," Guy suddenly grumbled, wresting Kakashi from his musings. "I was hoping I could talk to you about my Genin."

"They aren't too much trouble for you to handle, eh Guy?" Kakashi ribbed his friend a bit.

"Quite the opposite! They are all excellent students and I am quite proud of them," Guy responded with unbridled enthusiasm. Kakashi was pretty darn sure this was another facet of their rivalry. Might Guy was well aware of the verbal 'attack'. The infuriatingly positive response was in all likelihood a riposte.

"They seem like a good group. I know Naruto and Lee are ideologically sound, but how's the ex-Hyūga?"

"Hinata has a strength of will that is most admirable! She has been instrumental in tempering and guiding Naruto and Lee's enthusiasm in positive directions, as well as providing the Kurama heiress guidance towards becoming eligible for active service," Guy explained proudly.

"Great to hear," Kakashi said smoothly. His tone was flat, but he was pleased with the news. "Naruto and her still shacking up?"

"They are roommates, yes," Guy confirmed. "Naruto and Hinata have recently embarked on a youthful courtship, but they are acting responsibly."

"Heh, there are some people keeping an eye on Naruto who are going to love that news," Kakashi observed.

Guy's eyes darkened. "I hope that these people have no intention of manipulating my students' Youthful Relationship."

"Don't worry," Kakashi said calmly. "No manipulation. Just various flavors of amusement ranging from wry to enthusiastic-bordering-on-parody."

"That is a relief," Guy relented. "My students deserve a chance to discover the nuances of a Youthful relationship on their own."

Kakashi laughed. "Aren't those two practically married already?"

Team Nine's Jonin was silent for several moments. "I believe you are correct, my Eternal Rival. Naruto and Hinata do appear as if they have been in a state of matrimony for some time..."

Conversation lapsed as the two Jonin enjoyed their drinks. Eventually Guy asked, "Would you be available to help train Naruto and Hinata in their ninjutsu this week?"

"Guy, buddy, I thought you'd never ask."
Tenten grinned as she finally perfected a kunai trick she had read about in an obscure book about the Warring Clans Era. The aspiring kunoichi wasn't simply satisfied with pulling off the technique once. No, when she said perfected, Tenten meant it! She had created a Sharingan-less variant, but it had taken three hundred and twenty-nine attempts.

Yes, she had counted.

No, she was not obsessive compulsive when it came to ranged combat.

It was a hobby. A very healthy, completely normal hobby. And she would pin-cushion any and all who disagreed. In celebration, she was going to eat so many sesame dumplings. The great thing about being an active kunoichi is she could splurge every once and a while.

As she approached the edge of the training ground, she noticed she wasn't the only one 'splurging'. One of the younger students, and a fellow 'remedial', was watching her with shocking intensity.

"How? How did you pull off that technique without the Sharingan?" The 'Last Uchiha' asked her feverishly.

Tenten smiled at the attractive boy. "Practice. Lots and lots of practice."

"There's more to it than that," Sasuke countered through narrowed eyes and clinched fists. "No one can be that good without a Sharingan."

"You're right," Tenten agreed. "I can be better."

Sasuke snorted at the response, but surprisingly there was no rancor behind it. "We'll see."

"Hey, when I make Jonin before everyone else at the Academy, you definitely will." Tenten crossed her arms.

"You aren't like the other 'kunoichi' in the Academy," the younger student stated bluntly.

Tenten rolled her eyes. Translation: 'You aren't trying to get in my pants.' "You aren't trying to get in my pants. 'What, career focused and trying to make sure I don't die like a chump on my first mission?"

A smirk formed on the Uchiha's lips. "Exactly."

'Okay, I guess I can see why the others are trying to get in his pants...' Tenten admitted to herself.

"Well, I'm off to make sure that the cause of my death isn't sleep deprivation," the ranged weapons specialist confessed.

"Sensible," Sasuke stated.

"Uh, bye?" Tenten sort of asked. The Uchiha nodded and departed. As the prodigy left, Tenten wondered "Why are all the hot geniuses so emotionally stunted?" aloud.

Kurama Yakumo was exhausted. She was sweating enough to fill the koi pond at her cousin's home. There was a soreness in a muscle that the heiress wasn't even aware she had twenty minutes ago.

"Yakumo-sama..." Kurama Unkai approached cautiously. He still feared the potential of Yakumo, but a whisper of optimism was hovering in the back of his mind. The heiress was improving.
Yakumo had become as stable as anyone had ever seen her.

"Y-Yes, Uncle?" Yakumo asked through labored breaths and nerves.

"I have been watching your progress. In fact, your progression has been the talk of the entire clan. As the acting head of the clan, I simply must know how you have made such fantastic improvement. We were...cautious...with our expectations after previous events. The current developments are creating a great deal of hope for the entire Kurama Clan."

"I-I'm talked about? They aren't...they aren't afraid?"

'It will be a simple white lie...an understatement..." "They are not afraid, Yakumo-sama. They were just surprised as you previously professed to wanting to become a kunoichi solely with genjutsu."

"Oh," Yakumo flushed. Whether it was embarrassment or exertion Unkai could not tell. The heiress quickly recovered...mostly and continued. "Improving my physical condition will allow me to enter the Academy. I...may have gotten assistance from Lee-kun's sensei in entering the Academy."

A moment of fury appeared on Unkai's face, but it passed quickly. "Why was I not informed? This is a momentous turn of events."

"I-I wanted it to be a surprise the Clan when I became a Shinobi. With the assistance of Team Nine, I have every confidence I can complete all aspects of the exam!"

"This confidence suits you," Unkai said with smooth flattery. "I just hope in the future you will keep the entire Kurama clan abreast of your actions. You must remember, Yakumo, that your every action reflects on all of the Clan."

"Of course, Uncle," Yakumo acquiesced. "I...I just wanted to show the Clan that I could act decisively like you always preach and that I could foster relationships on my own that can help the Kurama Clan..."

"Your heart was in the right place," Unkai responded gently. After a cursory goodbye, the acting Clan head departed. Yakumo watched him go, but a little voice in the back of the heiress's head whispered, "He was lying."

It was the final day of Team Nine's recovery period following their C-rank mission. Hinata was off having a 'Girls Day' with Yakumo, Sakura, Ino, and Tenten. That meant Naruto and Lee were hanging out Kiba, Chouji, and Shikamaru.

"I'm so ready to graduate," Kiba complained with Akamaru quickly yipping in agreement.

Chouji nodded. "It'll be nice to be a full shinobi. Maybe I'll get lucky like you guys," Chouji said with a gesture towards Lee and Naruto. "and find a girl."

"Not only will you probably meet a girl, you'll probably beat all of us to getting married," Kiba declared confidently. "Badass when you need to be, nice every other time."

Shikamaru and Akamaru both nodded. The two young men of Team Nine exchanged a somewhat confused look.

"Long troublesome story involving an escaped deer and a bear," Shikamaru partially revealed.
"Troublesome? Troublesome?" Kiba asked, completely flabbergasted. "We were awesome! Hokage-sama gave us credit for a damn C-rank and you call that 'troublesome', Shika?"

"Sorry Shikamaru, you're practically my brother, but I'm with Kiba on this one," Chouji confessed.

Naruto made an 'x' pattern with his arms. "Okay, timeout!"

There was an edge of command that made everyone, even Akamaru, nearly snap to attention. Naruto, unaware of the authority he put behind his simple words, continued unabated. "You can't just tease an awesome story like that and not tell it!"

"Exactly! That would be most unyouthful!" Lee quickly verbally dog-piled his friends.

"Fine!" Shikamaru relented. "Chouji and Kiba...you take this one, I'm getting back to cloud watching."

The other two boys quickly grinned as they launched into the story involving the bear and the escaped deer. This, Naruto quickly decided, was a great way to end a recovery period.

Team Nine met at Guy's Dōjō at the usual time. The Genin were very eager to resume training. They considered it a powerful way to bond as friends and comrades. Hinata, Lee, and Naruto fell into the familiar routine of warm-ups and mental preparation even without Guy-sensei currently being present. Conversation flowed naturally and freely, but only when the intensity of the Genin's preparation permitted.

Guy turned to his comrade. "Well, my Eternal Rival, your professional opinion?"

"I still kind of hate you, Guy," Kakashi deadpanned. "This is basically two-thirds of the team I wanted. In spite of that, you deserve credit for what you've done. I watched Naruto when I was still in ANBU. Didn't think anyone could get him focused."

Guy chuckled. "Do not be so quick to praise me, I believe Hinata has played quite the role on that front."

"Ha! Leave it to a woman," Kakashi laughed as he reviewed Guy's notes on his team. "Well, I'm not going to steal your apprentice. I've got a plan. Naruto and Hinata could use some training in tracking."

"I'd wager you have a regimen that allows you to maximize your time with both students," Konoha's Green Beast grinned.

"Don't you know it."

Lee and Naruto were engaged in an epic retelling of Chouji, Shikamaru, and Kiba's adventure with the escaped deer when Hinata flashed a hand-sign announcing that Guy and a guest had entered the training floor.

"Well, my most youthful students! We will have some rather unique training this fine day! Lee! We shall continue our endeavors in perfecting opening the Gate of Opening. I hope to be able to introduce you to some of the taijutsu schools that rely on the Gates. Now, Naruto and Hinata, may I introduce you to my Eternal Rival? This is Hatake Kakashi; a skilled, if infuriatingly hip, Jonin of Konoha. He will be directing your training this fine day!"

Kakashi flipped a lazy one-eyed gaze at his friend. "Hmm? Did you say something, Guy?"
Guy knew Kakashi was smiling behind his mask and decided to play along. "Curse your insufferable coolness, Kakashi! Naruto! Hinata! Do not become infected by his hip and cool nature!"

"We promise Guy-sensei!" the two Genin said as they choked back a laugh.

The Copy-Nin turned his attention to his temporary students. "We won't be learning Jutsu, but other techniques Shinobi need. Hinata, your tracking needs work. Naruto...you need to round out some of your skills. Follow me, we're going to the woods."

Before obeying Kakashi, Hinata and Naruto looked to their Jonin sensei for permission. Guy smiled and nodded. Only after receiving permission did the two Genin follow the cyclopean warrior. Naruto and Hinata were walking a few steps behind the Jonin, who appeared to be perpetually smiling behind his mask.

"So..." Naruto drew out the word in an attempt to break the silence. "How do you know Guy-sensei? You two seem to be friends."

"And rivals," Kakashi confirmed with a hand wave, a laugh, and nary a look back. "It's been this way since the Academy. I'm glad you all have a sensei as dedicated to the Will of Fire as Guy."

"Guy-sensei has helped us grow as shinobi," Hinata added.

"She speaks," Kakashi teased as he entered the woods. "I'm looking forward to teaching you some trade secrets that will benefit your roles on Team Nine. Hinata, you're the tracker. The Byakugan gives you an edge almost no other Shinobi in the world can match. However, it isn't enough to be a complete kunoichi. What I'm going to school you in is some other tracking methods. Well, that's a lie. Pakkun and Akino will be training you."

The mysterious Jonin bit his thumb; drawing a bit of blood. A flurry of hand seals later, there was a puff of chakra-laced smoke. Hinata cocked her head to the side as two dogs appeared.

"Afternoon, Kakashi," the smaller pug wearing a Konoha Forehead protector said casually. "You need something?"

The other tan mutt barked in support of the pug. Kakashi smiled and shook his head. "Good to see you Pakkun and Akino. I'm going to need you to teach Hinata here a thing or two about tracking."

"Hmmm," Pakkun hummed. He turned his attention to Hinata. "Tell you what...if you do a good job, I'll let you touch my paw."

Kakashi laughed. "Laying it on thick, aren't you?"

"Motivation never hurt," Pakkun said dryly.

"Now," Kakashi announced as he turned to Naruto. "Naruto, you are with me. Guy told me about your ability with Fuinjutsu. I also remember chasing you down occasionally after a prank back when I was ANBU..."

"You were ANBU?" Naruto asked excitedly.

Kakashi nodded. "And you ran me ragged three times. Which is one of the reasons I want to teach you a few tricks."

Naruto nodded. He caught that Kakashi had said 'one of the reasons', but decided not to press.
"Now, that kind of endurance and your...unique...tactical abilities provides a great foundation for a very important job."

"What kind of job?" Naruto begged for an explanation.

The Jonin sighed, but the barely visible smile continued to reside behind Kakashi's mask. "Sometimes missions go south. They go south hard and the only option is to bug out. To save your friends and comrades even at the expense of the mission."

Naruto couldn't believe what he was hearing. That was the most un-ANBU thing he had ever heard!

"I know what you're thinking: 'That's the most un-ANBU thing I've ever heard!'. You'd be right. I guess I was never the best ANBU, but I put it all out there for the village. Now, I'm going to put it all on the line to train you. Prepare for suffering!"

Naruto gulped. This isn't going to be good...

Tenten wasn't sure if cursing or thanking her luck was in order. She wanted to thank her luck because, as a teenage girl, she was the center of attention for two very attractive boys. The urge to curse her luck came from one very obvious fact. Hyūga Neji and Uchiha Sasuke had more baggage than Ino and Sakura after a shopping trip. Still, Tenten couldn't deny that she enjoyed the attention from Neji and Sasuke and the jealousy from the other girls.

'Joke's on them. I'm career focused at the moment,' Tenten announced, mostly, to herself.

"You keep secrets," Hyūga Neji's words brought the soon-to-be kunoichi's attention to the present. "I misjudged you earlier in this term. After my own observations, I realized why you were so intently observing everyone."

Tenten crossed her arms and smirked. She had won this little battle and was being offered a white peace. "What, Neji-san have you realized?"

"Teams," The Cadet Hyūga declared succinctly. "You know exactly how the teams are formed. More so, I am convinced you have further information regarding the makeup of the next set of teams."

"Good to see you're still clever, Neji-san," Tenten teased. "Yes, I do."

Neji nodded. "I would ask a...favor...of you."

'This could be fun,' Tenten thought. Diplomatically, she responded, "Favors aren't just handed out."

"Of course, but Tenten-san, your skill with shurikenjutsu is renowned in Konoha," Neji stated.

"Flattery will get you everywhere," Tenten gloated. "What is the favor?"

The Hyūga prodigy kept his flat, perfectly in command look. "I am working on a jutsu that I must keep secret from nearly everyone, but I have no way to test and develop the technique with confidence. That is where I require your aid."

Tenten hummed. He needs my tendency to keep secrets. Everyone has pretty much seen Ibiki talking to me before. My shurikenjutsu means I'm going to be throwing pointy objects at him..."
"I'll help you with your defensive jutsu," Tenten probed.

The 'innocent' statement punched clear through the aura of Hyūga control "You are perceptive."

"Yup," Tenten pointed out in a chipper tone that made Neji frown. 'I wonder how much I can tease this guy...'

Any further attempt to flirt with, uh, tease Neji was derailed by an explosion in the woods behind them. The two shinobi-in-training were quickly in a combat stance, but that wasn't necessary. Instead of an attack by hostile forces, a very singed Uzumaki Naruto skidded to a stop with a grin on his face.

"Nice work you two. Good situational awareness," a blasé voice commended the two Academy Students before strolling over to the prone form of Naruto. Tenten flashed a shocked look over to Neji. Even if that guy was a Jonin, how the heck had they let him sneak up on them like that?

"Hey, Kakashi-sensei, I win that one." Naruto sat up with a smile.

The Jonin gave the Genin a flat look. "I blew you up. I'm not sure you are aware what 'winning' means."

"Yeah, but!" Naruto shouted. "You said my goal was to draw you away from my allies. I did that. I also drew you into an area with other allies! Ones that I know are really, really good!"

The Copy-nin blinked before he turned to face the Academy students and back to Naruto. "So you did."

"Now, what?" Naruto asked hopefully.

Kakashi rubbed at his chin and started his casual stroll back into the woods. "Well, you've already got traps down on a basic level. We could work on getting the set-up time down..."

"See ya Tenten!" Naruto shouted as he dashed off after Kakashi. The kunoichi in training watched as Naruto left.

"Tommorrow then," Neji said causally before leaving. Tenten shrugged. Her life was already weird. This latest situation really didn't faze her the more she pondered the trajectory of her career.

The kunoichi sighed. "I really need a hobby..."

Naruto chuckled nervously as Hinata fretted over his slight burns and frayed clothing. "I'm fine Hinata-chan. Kakashi-sensei and I were just training."

"Did the training require you to be blown up?" Hinata huffed. Naruto flinched at Hinata's tone. The memory of his jutsu screw up had really scarred her.

"I'm sorry. I-I should've remembered. I'm sorry," Naruto apologized frantically.

"Just...be careful," Hinata pleaded. Quickly, she changed the subject. "How did the training go?"

"Pretty great," Naruto admitted. He was smiling. "Kakashi-sensei has taught me a lot about evasion tactics. You? How'd your training go?"

"Kakashi-sensei's summons have begun to teach me alternative tracking skills. I can't always rely on my Byakugan. There are many things my Eyes cannot detect."
"Man, we're going to be even better shinobi once Kakashi-sensei and Guy-sensei finish this round of training!" Naruto exclaimed.

"I believe we will continue to grow," Hinata agreed with Naruto's boisterous statement as only Hinata could.

Hinata smiled and latched on to Naruto's arms. The young man chuckled. "I thought you were mad at me."

"Not mad, concerned," Hinata chided and corrected her best friend and boyfriend. "I forgot boys can't pick up on being subtle."

Naruto laughed. "Ino, Sakura, Yakumo, and Tenten are corrupting you."

Hinata stuck out her tongue and made a playful 'bleh' sound in Naruto's direction. The couple started to laugh as they worked their way back to their shared apartment. As they traversed Konoha, the two young shinobi passed a bar that was popular with Jonin, including a pair of renowned experts in the fields of taijutsu and ninjutsu.

Hatake Kakashi and Might Guy were sitting around a table with some of their compatriots and friends.

"You're serious, Kakashi?" Sarutobi Asuma asked as he stubbed out a cigarette.

Yuuhi Kurenai sighed. The beautiful, and freshly promoted Jonin, had to agree with Asuma. "I do believe that is Guy-san's decision."

"I had been considering nominating them," Guy jumped in the conversation. "It would be quite unyouthful if I didn't confess that part of the reason I was so eager for Kakashi's assistance was to hear his opinion on my charges. I felt they were ready, but I did not want to risk their safety if they were unprepared."

"They've been fully registered Shinobi for less than a year," Kurenai prodded. She was curious about Team Nine's abilities and why Kakashi and Guy were putting so much stock in their readiness.

"My apprentice, Lee, has already mastered the Gate of Opening," Guy stated proudly. That caused Asuma and Kurenai's jaws to drop.

"How?" Asuma gaped. He was so stunned, he hadn't realized his new cigarette had dropped out of his mouth. "I've been trying to master that for two years!"

Kakashi chuckled. "The kid may suffer from Guy's fashion sense, but I've never seen anyone pick up Taijutsu like Rock Lee."

"How good is this kid, Guy-san?" Kurenai prodded.

Guy laughed. "He will surpass me before the age of twenty at the rate he is advancing. The Fires of Youth burn brightly, yet with complete control, within him. I am proud to call him my student."

Asuma took a sip of beer. "What about the others?"

"Young Naruto is truly an Uzumaki!" Guy declared.

"Fuinjutsu?" Asuma issued his follow up question.
Kakashi received a nod from Guy and answered the question with, "I've seen him in action. He's developed a fuinjutsu turret. Originally, Naruto just screwed up making a storage seal. He quickly found out what he did wrong...and started using that screw up to make a very reliable and fairly stealthy weapon."

"And Hinata used to be Hyūga," Kurenai added.

"Fortunately, she suffers from none of that clan's arrogance. Very solid in Taijutsu. She is the one who killed the bandit warlord Shinachiku."

"Huh," Asuma huffed. "That's not too shabby for a fresh Genin on her first mission. For a non-Shinobi, he was no slouch. Not a bad notation in her ledger."

"I had nearly decided on my own, but this conversation has convinced me," Guy announced. He grabbed his sake cup and downed it.

"Team Nine will be nominated for the Chuunin Exams in Kusagakure!"
Naruto loved 'Free Form Fridays'. Guy-sensei declared these every so often and let Team Nine train in whatever they wanted. Today, Lee and Hinata-chan were sparring. They were both very skilled in Taijutsu and were sparring at a level Naruto just couldn't keep up with. Now, Naruto knew he wasn't a slouch at Taijutsu. Guy-sensei was a great teacher. Uzumaki Naruto was also teamed up with Lee and Hinata-chan. Naruto's closest friends were Taijutsu beasts.

They took to Taijutsu like Naruto took to seals. *Probably better,* Naruto admitted.

Still, Naruto was no slouch when it came to Fuinjutsu. He had invented "Launcher Seals". Naruto had come up with a few new seals recently. The latest creation was a 'Spider' Seal. Naruto was pretty proud of that one and was looking forward to using it on a mission.

'We've all made a ton of progress!'

There was something...odd...about today's Free Form Friday.

Guy-sensei was not here. Team Nine's teacher was never late. Naruto couldn't remember a time that Guy had ever showed up on time! Sensei was always at least fifteen minutes early to everything!

Naruto put the finishing touches on his latest project and put the seal aside. He was actually kind of weirded out by Guy-sensei's absence.

"Hinata-chan! Lee! Can we talk for a bit?" Naruto called out when he was sure his friends weren't about to resume their spar.

"Yosh! Of course, Naruto! Communication is essential for a successful and harmonious team!" Lee replied with such warmth it put the sun to shame.

"Is everything alright, Naruto-kun?" Hinata asked.

"Has Guy-sensei ever been late?" the student of Fuinjutsu asked his teammates.

Hinata and Lee exchanged a look. Lee kicked up a small breeze with his head shakes. "No! I must admit, that this was quite unusual. Even the day we were observed by Guy-sensei and the unnaturally hip Hatake Kakashi, Guy-sensei arrived on time."

"There must be some reason Guy-sensei is not here yet," Hinata hummed.

"I trust our sensei, but this is weird." Naruto shrugged.

"Yosh!" The booming call of Might Guy filled the dojo. "Your faith in my instruction warms my heart! It is most youthful!"

"Sensei!" Lee cried out. He bowed to his teacher, mentor, and inspiration.

Welcome back to the Dojo, Guy-sensei," Hinata greeted her Jonin instructor.

"Hey, Guy-sensei!" Naruto chimed in. The young man added an exaggerated, but respectful, two fingered salute.

"My students, if you would accompany me to the garden!" Guy requested. "I have a very
important and serious topic I wish to bring to your attention!"

Team Nine exchanged a concerned look. This was a tone of voice they were not used to from Guy-sensei. Dutifully, the Genin followed the Jonin to the garden.

"Chakra is the melding of the physical and spiritual," Guy had told Team Nine the first day the garden had been revealed. "The Dojo itself hones the body. This garden is where you can hone the spirit."

Hinata and Naruto took a seat. Lee remained standing, practically at attention. The unifying feature was a broad grin from all three of Might Guy's students.

Guy returned the smile with enthusiasm unknown to mankind. "I am so proud of your Youthful progression! My students, you have exceeded my expectations as your sensei! Team Nine has made me very proud!"

"Thank you, Sensei," the three Genin said as one.

"You are welcome! Your hard work warms my heart!" the Jonin cheered. "I assume you were all wondering why I was tardy today?"

Nods and whispers answered Guy's question. The Leaf's Noble Gentlemen couldn't help but continue to beam. His throat bobbed as he swallowed back the urge to cry Youthful, Manly Tears at the incredible nobility of his students.

"My tardiness was due to a very important meeting. This meeting directly impacts you all."

The words hung in the air. Lee, enthusiastic as ever, simply continued to stand at attention. Hinata chewed at the inside of her lip. Naruto was excited for the possibility. He bounced on the balls of his feet and refused to entertain the thought of containing his eager grin.

"In a few months, the Chuunin Exams will be held in Kusagakure. This is the first Chuunin Exams outside of a Great Shinobi Nation. I believe that you are all ready. The growth, physical strength, mental strength, fortitude, and the power of your Youth have truly been a wonder to watch grow."

Guy was pleased as punch, non-alcoholic of course, at the discipline his Genin displayed.

He continued, "Now, it is time to present you with an opportunity. I believe that all of you are ready..."

Team Nine finally gave in to their curiosity and youth to exchange a series of nervous glances. Might Guy simply grinned.

"… for the upcoming Chuunin Exams in Kusagakure!"

Tenten was not sure how she had come to tail Mizuki. Three days ago, Tenten had overheard several teachers discussing coverage for the upcoming graduation exams. Mizuki was the teacher for her class. He would likely have information on the potential Jonin-sensei for the next round of teams.

The soon-to-be kunoichi had found a partial list of Jonin on the first day, but she had also found other troubling details.
First, Mizuki was very focused on making sure he wasn't really being followed. After the second day's attempts to track her teacher down, Tenten was convinced that the list had been left out in the open to 'throw her a bone'. It was just…

The list hadn't been a reward. The list had been a message. "Here is what you want, now go away." Mizuki was going above and beyond the norm for a shinobi. He was riding the shuriken's edge between normal and actively ditching a tail. Tenten had been ditched successfully. Still, she was pleased by her performance. Mizuki was a Chuunin. All things considered, Tenten had done a pretty decent job.

That didn't mean she wasn't worried.

Which was why she was heading to the T&I department to see her quasi-mentor. Tenten marched to the front desk as if she was expected. She was expected, honestly. Ibiki-sensei had extended an offer for Tenten to visit whenever she wanted.

"Is Ibiki-sensei available?" Tenten asked one of the Chuunin in the public lobby.

The Chuunin fixed Tenten with a glare. It was a struggle, but Tenten managed to hold eye-contact for a few seconds. She was exceptionally pleased that instead of looking down at her feet that her eyes only flicked to the side for a heartbeat.

"Ibiki-san wasn't just blowing smoke up our asses. He really has found an Academy Student that might actually be worth it."

Tenten took a moment to commit this Chuunin to memory. He wore his hitai-ate as a bandanna. The glasses were also unusual. The lenses were a highly reflective silver that appeared opaque. His uniform was solid gray with a high collar and lapels. A mnemonic helped focus Tenten's memory.

"Is he here?" Tenten questioned. She was on a mission and would not be deterred!

"Focused, good." The Chuunin nodded. "He is out of the village on a sensitive mission."

"Crap," Tenten mumbled. "Well, thank you."

The Chuunin bowed politely, but his grin was troubling. "Good luck with the actual Genin Exams."

"Am I being attached to another crazy team?" Tenten interrogated the interrogator.

"You have no idea," the Chuunin cackled as he exited.

Tenten groaned. "I hate mind games sometimes."

Naruto leaned against the pool cue as Team Nine discussed Guy's nomination. Lee took aim at the four-ball. "Guy-sensei has placed great trust in us."

"So, what do you think?" Naruto asked.

"This is an incredible opportunity for Team Nine to show our growth as proud shinobi," Lee answered. "If we are not ready to become Chuunin, I believe we are ready for the chance to become Chuunin."
"I agree," Hinata piped in from her seat.

Naruto blinked. Her voice was even and melodious. The confidence sent a shiver down his spine. Hesitation, doubt, and apprehension were completely absent.

"So, we are in?" Naruto asked his best friends.

"Yosh! I cannot express in words how excited I am for this opportunity! Team Nine can demonstrate how we are fueled by the Flames of Hard Work to the entire world!"

The burgeoning Fuinjutsu master grinned. "Wow, you're all-in on this, Lee!"

"We all need to be," Hinata declared.

"Let's do this," Naruto declared.

"After my game with Hinata," Lee announced before sinking the last ball. "That makes our contests 16-15, Naruto! I have closed the gap and will soon overtake you!"

"Why am I not included in this count?" Hinata asked with an undercurrent of laughter.

"Because we haven't beaten you," Naruto admitted.

"Today will be the day!" Lee declared. "Prepare yourself, Hinata!"

Sakura sipped at her tea. She had to remain calm. There was no need to panic. Tenten had not just revealed that certain teams were extremely likely. The top academic student could take solace in one fact.

"How sure are you?" Sakura asked through a series of calming breaths.

Ino was not so calm. "How can you just accept this?"

"Who said anything about accepting this, Ino-pig?" Sakura didn't quite snap.

Tenten and Ino could only blink in surprise. This was an unexpected side of their friend.

'Shannaro!' Sakura declared internally. 'I'll never give up on being with Sasuke-kun!'

"How did you find out, Tenten?" Ino asked. There was hope in her eyes. The Yamanaka desperately wished for some potential 'out' of the probable team assignment.

"Hints dropped by several people in T&I. I've also been… gathering intelligence at the Academy," Tenten explained.

"You've managed to overhear the teachers talking?" Sakura continued the 'interrogation'.

"Actively," Tenten teased.

The table fell silent for a moment. "Well… even if it doesn't work out the way I dreamed, there will be opportunities to impress Sasuke-kun still."

Tenten groaned, audibly and purposefully, at Sakura's statement. Uchiha Sasuke was hot. He was just cold, distant, and moody. She saw the appeal. Tenten just didn't get the fanatical devotion
"Speaking of teachers," Ino piped in. "Am I the only person who has picked up on how angry Mizuki-sensei seems to be?"

"You mean, at everything and everyone?" Sakura added.

"That," Ino confirmed. "What happened?"

Tenten leaned in close to her friends. "Iruka-sensei is being fast tracked to Jonin. Mizuki is pissed he wasn't considered for a promotion."

"Wow, he's taking it hard..." Sakura sighed. "Oh well, we will all be with our cells soon."

"The Academy isn't as nice without Iruka-sensei," Ino agreed.

Tenten shrugged. "Like you said, Sakura. It won't be our problem soon. We'll all be with our cells. Mizuki-sensei and his anger issues will be someone else's problem!"

Sakura chuckled nervously. "I just hope he doesn't blow up too bad on some poor kid... or anyone else for that matter."

"I'm sure it'll be fine," Ino stated optimistically. "So... just how sure are you about teams, again?"

As Sakura leaned in expectantly, Tenten realized her friends were quite determined when they wanted to be. There would be no escape. 'I just hope someone is having an interesting day...'

Kurama Yakumo was enjoying a quiet afternoon painting in the park. Art had always been her escape from the pressures of her status and a medium for her genjutsu. Now, Yakumo had found a new benefit for her art.

It was *wonderful* for resting after physical exercise.

The physical exertion would be worth it very soon! Yakumo was due for another physical test very soon. The clan elders were very optimistic about her chances.

'Not that optimistic,' a traitorous voice in the back of her mind pointed out.

Yakumo put down her brush and looked away. There was no one else around, but Yakumo couldn't shake the feeling that someone was giving her a disapproving glare.

'I am going to pass, or at least get closer! I can do this! I'm so close. The minimums aren't impossible anymore! Lee-kun has shown me the way!' Kurama Yakumo countered with fervor.

The words may have rang slightly hollow in her own ears, but they were her words. She was determined to stand by her convictions. As she retrieved her brush, a manic intensity overtook her art. The lines became *bold*. The colors exploded and became more intense.

'I've heard Lee-kun talk about Naruto-san's seals. I wonder...' Yakumo smiled as she considered how to provide a *practical* application for her genjutsu. If there was a way to mix her genjutsu directly into her paintings...

Yakumo would be responsible for a completely new school of art!
The thought calmed the heiress considerably. Yakumo would also love the chance to have a reason to spend time with all her friends. Her good cheer pushed the traitorous voice deeper into her subconscious and Yakumo merrily continued painting. She loved the boldness of this piece.

As she continued with gusto, a new set of voices traversed across the park. "How… how can we not overcome you?"

"Yeah, Hinata-chan, how did you get so good at billiards?"

Yakumo laughed at Lee-kun's and Naruto-kun's questions. Her good humor continued with Hinata's answer of, "Ano… I'm not sure. Billiards was an activity the Hyūga clan never took part in. Guy-sensei introduced the game to all of us at the same time."

"I guess you're just a natural at-" Naruto started.

"Yakumo-chan!" Lee accidentally cut off Naruto. He quickly realized his faux-pas. Yakumo waved as Lee wheeled to face Naruto. "Forgive me for interrupting, my friend!"

"You're fine, Lee!" Naruto exclaimed with a grin. "She's prettier than I am."

Hinata giggled at the wink Naruto gave her. She no longer went beet red when Naruto did something Naruto. Hinata still blushed, but nowhere near as much.

She still loved those moments.

"How have you all been?" Yakumo forced through the laughter.

"Great!" Team Youth shouted as one. Yakumo's good humor continued unabated.

"Is there a but?" Yakumo teased.

The two young men looked down in shame. Hinata simply beamed. Naruto nudged Lee, and the Green Beast nodded. "We can't defeat Hinata at billiards!"

"Oh," Yakumo responded with a single syllable.

"Oh?" Lee asked.

The Kurama heiress smiled triumphantly. "Way to win one for the girls, Hinata-chan!"

Lee and Naruto gaped. Girls did work in packs! "But…"

"Boys get to be Hokage," Hinata pointed out.

Yakumo nodded. "Yes! Let us have this one triumph!"

"Okay," Naruto agreed. Lee nodded as well. The tone the girls used left no room for argument.

"What has made today 'great'?" Yakumo asked.

Team Nine communicated through a series of eyebrow quirks, shrugs, and hums. Lee's grin became even brighter. "Well, Yakumo-chan, Guy-sensei has nominated us for the Chuunin Exams!"

"That is wonderful! When are they?" Yakumo chattered. "When will the matches be? I would love to cheer for you at the arena!"
"I'm sorry, Yakumo-chan," Lee apologized… while taking her hands into his own. "The exams are not in Konoha this time. We have been nominated for the exams in Kusagakure."

"Kusagakure?"

"Afraid so," Naruto answered Yakumo.

"That is… exciting," the genjutsu specialist hedged her statement.

"Very exciting, Yakumo-chan!" Lee exclaimed.

"When will you be leaving?" Yakumo asked.

"Soon!" Lee answered.

"Well… technically we haven't officially signed up, yet." Naruto rubbed the back of his head.

"Team Nine will almost certainly be participating," Hinata answered. "Our official decision will be made in the morning."

A giggle escaped the heiress's lips. "Sleeping on it?"

"Yes," Hinata responded.

"Would anyone be interested in joining me for some lunch?" Lee asked.

Yakumo practically knocked over her easel and stool in her eagerness to agree. As she chattered happily to Lee, Hinata prodded Naruto.

"I get it," Naruto mouthed. "We'd love to join you but I think we have stuff..."

"The oven," Hinata pointed out. "You said you'd clean the oven and the kitchen."

"Do I have to?" Naruto whined.

Hinata gave Naruto a mock glare. "Yes. If I'm cleaning everything else, you can clean the entire kitchen."

"Sorry Lee..." Naruto apologized. The roommates/couple successfully extracted themselves from the park, before Naruto turned to Hinata. "You are playing matchmaker."

Hinata smiled shyly… with her Byakugan active. "I'm not playing matchmaker. Lee-kun and Yakumo-chan are doing that themselves. I like to think I'm… helping."

"Helping?" Naruto asked.

"Helping," Hinata confirmed.

Tenten was starting to get worried. She was having trouble understanding why no one in Konoha seemed to be intervening with Mizuki's descent into super-assholishness. It worried her a bit, but she figured that someone had eyes on the situation.

'Especially if Mizuki is getting so sloppy that I can follow him,' Tenten rationalized. Still, she couldn't help but worry.
Tenten would talk to her next Jonin-sensei about it. She was still holding out hope that her cell's sensei would have a connection to Ibiki-sensei or the Intelligence Division. Her focus needed to be on preparing for her team.

'If I had to bet, I'm going to be stuck with Neji and Sasuke...' Tenten thought as she re-positioned the mirrors she had hidden near the Teacher's office. Today wasn't a good 'fishing' trip. No one had gotten sloppy. Yesterday, she had seen that Team Eight would be Inuzuka Kiba, Sakura, and Aburame Shino.

Tenten had almost felt bad not telling Sakura which team she had ended up on. Sakura had just looked so hopeful. It would have been like metaphorically kicking a puppy. Tenten couldn't bring herself to do that.

"The student library is this way, Hanabi-sama," Neji's unmistakable voice worked its way up the stairwell.

"Thank you, Neji-san," a young girl, whom Tenten assumed was Hanabi, responded. The tone was far too formal and professional for girl's age.

"It is the duty of the Cadet Branch to assist the Main Family," Neji said dutifully. It wasn't hard to hear the buried resentment.

The two Hyūga came into view and paused at one of the landings on the stairs. Neji made eye contact with Tenten. The two Hyūga actually seemed impressed by not only how long Tenten managed to hold the eye contact, but how she disguised her discomfort by switching her attention to Hanabi.

"Snooping again?" Neji asked. His tone carried the same infuriating mix of teasing humor, curiosity, and outright mockery that drove Tenten bananas.

In retaliation, Tenten only huffed. She smiled at Hanabi before turning back to Neji. "Intelligence gathering, actually."

"For what?" Hanabi asked. Tenten liked hearing child-like curiosity in her voice. The professionalism was just creepy in a kid that young.

"Teams," Tenten answered. "When you're about to graduate, maybe I can show you some tradecraft. Shodai knows none of the boys think far enough ahead."

Hanabi, heiress of the Hyūga, smiled. "Boys are weird. I think that would be… cool."

Neji rolled his eyes. "Hanabi-sama, remember that your every action reflects on the main family. It is unbecoming of someone of your stature to be so familiar with a stranger."

"O-Of course," Hanabi gulped out the words.

'Poor kid. Neji would be intimidating at that age,' Tenten sympathized.

"We must be on our way. Good luck with teams..." Hanabi stumbled over the words.

"Tenten! It's a pleasure, Hanabi-sama," Tenten quickly introduced herself.

"Good luck, Tenten-san," Hanabi finished.

The two Hyūga went on their way. Tenten started when she heard Hanabi whisper to Neji, "She reminds me of Onee-san."

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'I'll have to mention that to Hinata!' "You no longer have a sister, Hanabi-sama," Neji said triumphantly.

'I'll leave that part out..." Tenten quickly decided.

"I'll see her again when we are both ninja," Hanabi declared.

Resolved, Tenten headed off to visit her favorite not-sure-what-kind-of-couple-they are. Hinata could probably use some good news.

Naruto grumbled as he scrubbed away at the burner of the stove. 'I thought this was just an excuse...'

As Naruto tossed his well-used washcloth into the nearby hamper, he started to realize that he wasn't as annoyed as he thought. Cleaning had always been a bother, but something about helping Hinata take care of their apartment made any complaints seem petty.

"Hinata-chan! I've got the kitchen finished!"

"I have two things left to put away! The laundry is almost done!" Hinata called back.

Naruto grinned. "We're almost like grown-ups."

"Almost," Hinata agreed. Naruto could easily picture Hinata bouncing on her feet with a cheeky grin on her face. "We're still allowed to have fun though."

"What do you think though?" Naruto asked. "Do you want to go ahead and sign the form Guy-sensei gave us?"

Hinata hummed as she entered the kitchen. "Naruto-kun, is it wrong that I'm both scared and excited about the Chuunin Exams?"

"Heck no! I'm feeling the same way. I have no clue what to expect, but this is huge!"

"Let's sign it!" Hinata cried out. She practically jumped over the counter and grabbed a pair of pens. She handed Naruto a pen. "Together!"

"Together is kind of our thing," Naruto reminded his best friend, partner, and girlfriend. The girlfriend bit wasn't something he was 100% used to, but he was all for it!

Hinata blushed at her best friend, partner, and boyfriend's words. "It is."

The pair wasted no time in signing the release forms. Hinata and Naruto stared at the next great step in their life.

"Any clue what Kusagakure is like?" Naruto asked.

Hinata shook her head. "Not really. I heard someone in m... the Hyūga Clan mention something about giant mushrooms once."

"Big old toadstools? That's cool, I guess," Naruto hummed. "Have we got anything left to do here?"
"I think we have taken care of everything," Hinata answered. "Let's go to Ichiraku to celebrate!"

Naruto jumped up in the air; whooping in triumph. He went to collect his jacket and a thought crossed his mind as he reached down. "Hey Hinata-chan! Who do you think we should have water our plants?"

"Tenten!" Hinata shouted.

"That's a good choice!" Naruto responded.

"No, Tenten is here!" Hinata responded.

"Hey Naruto!" Tenten called out.

Naruto strolled into the living room with a smile. He was glad to see his friend. "How's it going, Tenten?"

"Pretty good," Tenten replied. "Ready to be assigned my actual team."

"I'm sure you'll be on a great team!" Hinata promised with all her heart.

Tenten felt really bad about her next statement. "I'm going to be on a team with Neji and Sasuke."

"Oh," Hinata whispered. The two young women felt awful due to circumstance.

"We all need ramen now, don't we?" Naruto asked. "Let's go enjoy a bowl… or nine."

"I'll need a double order," Hinata sighed.

"Are you sure you wouldn't mind a third wheel?" Tenten asked.

"Heck no!" Naruto declared.

"Tenten, you are one of our friends! We would love to spend time with you," Hinata said forcefully.

"Besides, it's not like Hinata and I want to spend all our time just the two of us. Seventy percent maybe."

Tenten laughed at Naruto's jib. *Those two are almost like a married couple...*

Conversation was light as the friends walked to Ichiraku Ramen. Naruto purposefully guided the chat away from Tenten's upcoming purgatory.

Naruto, Hinata, and Tenten were greeted with a hearty, "Welcome back to Ichiraku, Naruto and Hinata! I'll whip up the regular. Has your friend eaten with us before?"

"Old Man Teuchi, you know it! This is Tenten. She's awesome!" Naruto's statement was exuberant.

"Uh, I haven't eaten here before, sir," Tenten answered the question. She still wasn't quite used to Naruto's enthusiasm. *Still, it is nice to have someone so supportive.*

"I'd get you a menu," Teuchi said. "But you've got the best menus sitting next to you. They could probably set the stand's record if they wanted."

Tenten could barely keep up as Naruto and Hinata launched into an encyclopedic explanation
about the various types, flavors, and finer details of eating ramen. Naruto's passion wasn't too surprising. Hinata's passion? That certainly had caught Tenten off guard!

"So… how big are the bowls here?" Tenten asked. Teuchi showed a bowl. "That's a big bowl. I'll take one miso pork."

"The usual!" Hinata and Naruto cried out happily.

The ramen chef nodded and went to prepare the orders. It was as good of an opportunity as Tenten was likely to get for this topic.

"Hinata… I ran into someone at the Academy today," Tenten said cautiously.

"W-Who was it?" Hinata asked. She was confident it wasn't Neji. Tenten had complained a few times about Neji when the girls had hung out. 'Who could it be?'

"It was Hanabi." Tenten wasted no time. She simply told Hinata.

"Imōto?" the former Hyūga gasped.

"Your sister?" Naruto practically jumped out of his chair. Hinata had mentioned her sister occasionally. Naruto didn't press the subject as it was one of the touchiest subjects surrounding Hinata's banishment from the Hyūga.

"What did she say? How was she? Was she happy?" Hinata rapid-fired the questions.

"She was heading to the Academy Library. Hanabi-sama seemed very mannerly, but there were signs she was still a little girl in there. Happy? Seemed that way, but Neji was her 'minder'…" Tenten reported.

"Oh." Hinata wavered between happy and disappointed. She didn't want Neji's fatalism infecting her beloved sister.

"Don't worry too much," Tenten said with a smile. A comforting hand found its way to Hinata's shoulder. "Hanabi-sama seems like a clever one. I heard her say she'll see you again when she becomes a ninja. So, your kid sister hasn't picked up any of Neji's jerk-ness via osmosis."

Hinata brightened and hugged Tenten. Naruto basked in his best friend's happiness. He did have a question. "Uh, what's os-mo-sis?"

"Short version?" Tenten asked. Naruto nodded. "Basically, just picking up a person's character from being around them all the time."

"Dang."

Teuchi and Ayame arrived shortly after. "Ayame-onee-chan!" Naruto and Hinata did their simultaneous greeting thing. The meal was awesome.

Tenten just wasn't sure where Naruto and Hinata were putting all that ramen. After the third bowl, the two 'partners' raced to finish the last bowl.

Hinata won.

Naruto cheered.

Tenten was completely confused.
Still, it was some of the most fun she had experienced in a long time. 'I should do this more often...'

The next morning, Naruto woke up to a sight he wasn't used to. 'Just because I'm not used to it, doesn't mean I don't like it...'

At the foot of Naruto's unfolded futon, Hinata was sitting with a smile on her face. "Good morning, Hinata-chan."

"Good morning, Naruto."

"So... What's up?" Naruto asked.

"I had a fantastic idea!" Hinata exclaimed happily.

The second Naruto sat up, Hinata flopped next to him and rested her head on Naruto's shoulder. His back went ram-rod straight at the uncharacteristic display. "W-What was it?"

"Iruka-sensei will be back at the Academy soon. I can get him to send messages to Hanabi-chan!" Hinata explained. "I can get my sister back!"

"That's awesome!" Naruto shouted.

"I know! The timing is perfect! I'm sure that when we get back from the Chuunin Exams, Iruka-sensei will be back at the Academy as a Jonin!"

Naruto was swept up in Hinata's excitement. It was times like these that Naruto was glad they didn't have many neighbors. "You'll have plenty of time to think of the perfect thing to say to your sis, too!"

"Eep!" Hinata squeaked out. "Naruto-kun! What will I say to Hanabi-chan in a letter?"

"Hey, whatever you decide will be great. I'm sure your sis will love it!" Naruto praised his partner.

"I... You're right."

"You just needed some support!" Naruto declared.

Hinata smiled. In thanks, she kissed Naruto on the cheek. "Let's go let Guy-sensei know our team is signing up. I can't wait to take this next step!"

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