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**Forlorn**

by tigerowl

**Summary**

Jiraiya will admit in hindsight that safeguarding small ninja-children is probably not his calling. Naruto and his self-righteous blathering? That’s fine; he was responsible for the kid, regardless. But taking in Hidden Sand’s scorned, pint-sized jinchuriki? And some mini-genius farm kid from the Water Country? Yeah. He owes a written apology to Konohagakure for taking them in.

FF Collaboration of tigerowl and Isumo1489
Child of the Water Country

Chapter soundtrack: “Hoshizora” by Nao

Haku stared with wide gray eyes as his father lunged for him. The man had retrieved the knife that had always been kept in the storage shed and bore down on his child, the blade already tinted crimson. Forgotten in the corner lay Haku’s murdered mother. Her bloody hand prints stained the wall beside her. The young boy was screaming as he stumbled in retreat, but beneath his terror he felt his insides boil as he was consumed with the will to survive.

“Mama! No! Please!” Haku dodged his father’s deadly strike, tumbling down to the hard, wood floor. Still her body lay unmoving. Her face was hidden by the frantic tangle of her dark hair.

The boy backed away from his father, who was shouting unintelligibly at him to hold still. Haku cowered back to a far wall, bumping into a bucket of water his mother had brought in barely a half hour before.

Haku squatted in the fresh snow, curiously observing the remnants of a snow man he had made the day before. It had melted and then refrozen into a thin layer of ice in the frigid morning air. His mother watched him from afar as she fed the chickens.

Life on a farm was simple, peaceful and something she had always wanted for her Haku. Before she had made her home in the farming town with her husband, her life had been troubled by shinobi wars. So long as she drew breath, she had sworn, her son would have no part in the violence. She noticed him crack through the sheet of ice with a delighted chirp.

“Haku, don’t play in that water, you’ll catch a cold!” She called out to him. He was too busy playing to pay her any mind.

The cold water stung his bare hands and he drew them back in a startled gasp, “Ack!”

His interest was quickly drawn to the glistening, frozen puddle he had discovered. He traced a small finger over the surface and smiled sweetly at his rippled reflection. In a harmonious moment of nature meeting human inquisitiveness, Haku had inadvertently tapped his chakra for the first time.

A shining thread of water rose up from the puddle, surprising him. He watched in awe as the droplet followed gracefully as he waved his hand about. Haku brought up his other hand that was puckered red from the cold.

He slowly shaped the water with both hands as he would a handful of clay. It was fascinating how easy it was to manipulate, almost like magic. It felt like a natural thing to do.

“Amazing!” Haku purred in delight, attracting his mother's attention again, and she dropped her bird feed in shock.

She ran over to him and dropped to her knees, watching in stunned horror as Haku shaped the water into a small sphere.

“Mama, look what I can do!” The boy was very pleased with his handiwork, “I have special powers Mama! I can make the water-!”

She cut him off, seizing both of his wrists. Haku looked up her, rattled, and the sphere splashed
uselessly back into its place of origin. Her face was wracked with panic. It unnerved him; he had never seen her so worried...

“...Mama?”

His mother dropped one of his hands, and slapped his cheek in warning. It had been hard enough to get his full attention. Immediately, Haku squealed and recoiled in pain, cradling his injured face with his free hand.

“Mama...” He said softly, feeling a warm tear slide down his cheek, “I'm sorry, I didn't mean to do any...anything wrong...”

He looked up at her again, and saw that she had begun to cry as well. He was not able to understand it, that day, why she had been so upset by his discovery. Suddenly she pulled her son into a tight hug, burying her face into his ebony hair.

“Haku, never...never do that again, do you understand me? You must stay safe.” Her voice was stern, but it cracked as she continued, “Please, never do that again...don't let your father see...”

He clung to her, sobbing, “Oh Mama, I'm so sorry. I...I promise, I'll hide it...”

“You little monster! Hold still!” His father swung his knife again, slicing Haku's shoulder.

“Papa no! No!” Haku was howling, terrified, scrambling along the wall. His shoulder throbbed, and his desperate screams went unheard.

The frightened boy tripped over the bucket of water his mother had fetched earlier and knocked it down. Its contents spilled out onto the floor, causing his father to slip.

The water.

His memory from earlier returned once he noticed the water. Maybe it could protect him?

“Papa, stop!” Haku cried out. He felt a magnetic and instinctual pull help him grip the water. His energy surged with a rush of adrenalin and something else...something that gathered in his stomach and flowed out to all parts of his body. The temperature in the house dropped abruptly, stupefying his assailant. A gust of wind swirled as a tremendous power drew on the moisture in the air.

“Monster!” His father was incomprehensible upon seeing his son's mysterious power.

Before his father could bring the knife down Haku let his instinct take over. His desperation to survive opened the floodgates of his power as energy poured out of him and ice pillars filled the room from all directions. The child’s eyes were wide.

His father stood motionless and his weapon clattered noisily to the floor. Haku had impaled him through the center of his chest. Holes had been punched through the roof and walls. The young boy clapped his hands over his mouth in shock as he watched his father slide sickeningly down to the floor.

Haku hid in his room after he and his mother had discovered his power. He stood quietly by the door and eavesdropped.

“You lied to me!” His father's voice boomed, shaking him.
He heard his mother's response, “Darling, please…” She was crying, “I...I never knew it would be passed down to Haku...we are peaceful! You have nothing to fear!”

“You're one of them, one of those Clan people!” His father snarled. Haku could hear a glass object being shattered.

“Please! I never meant any harm, I'm sorry...” Her voice was pleading. Haku became extremely uneasy as he listened to his father's shouting. Never had he heard the man speak so angrily in his life. He knew something was very wrong.

“He's a monster! You're a monster!”

Haku's eyes welled with tears, ‘Papa thinks...I'm a monster?’

“We'll keep it a secret! He won't hurt anyone...” She was begging now, “No one else will know...”

Haku listened and it was uncannily quiet. After a moment, he heard his father speak, “Yes...no one will know...”

There was a pause, and then his mother screamed...

Haku gasped, “Mama?” He raced out of his bedroom and into the fracas. He watched in terror as his father pulled a knife out of his mother's side and she slumped to the floor.

Utter disbelief was visible on Haku’s face. He stood rooted to the spot as his father approached.

Haku trudged through the snow as tears ran freely down his bright red cheeks. His bare feet ached as he trekked through the snow. His farm was out of sight now, as well as his parents. Just as he had been taught that crops and animals could die, so too could his parents. Now he was alone.

“Mama...” He muttered to himself. He had never known such grief before.

He wandered all the way into town and fumbled along down the street. Haku then felt something cold land on the end of his nose.

A snowflake.

It was beginning to snow and Haku felt his heart sink lower in his stomach. Things were not going to get easier for him. His shoulder no longer hurt and had stopped bleeding, but he could not comprehend why his father had done what he did.

He dashed under the cover of a bridge and dusted the white powder off of his ragged clothes. Haku sat down on the ground, incapable of crying anymore. Instead he wondered how he was going to proceed. The temperature was dropping and his stomach was growling.

Haku could not deny his hunger.

“Oh, be quiet...” He mumbled. He sighed in exhaustion. It had been a long walk, and on top of his heartache he was cold and ravenous...

‘What's going to happen to me?’ Haku pondered as he felt his eyelids droop, almost considering a nap. A cold breeze instantly sobered him, and he scooted closer to the edge of the overhang. He sat in silence for a long while, until time seemed to lose all meaning.
After a while, snow thickly blanketed the ground. It was then something caught his attention...the soft treading of footsteps. They were close.

Haku watched as a man passed by. It was a very tall man with short, black hair. He looked formidable in a flak vest and his face was hidden by bandages. Haku observed with wide, discerning eyes as the man halted and sensed his presence.

The man with the bandaged face glanced over at him curiously and stared at him for a moment. Their gazes locked, and Haku had a curious moment of kinship with the stranger. Haku could not put his finger on the reason why, but he knew that this person would understand him.

For a moment he was tempted to speak, but he thought better of it. Haku averted his gaze, nearly embarrassed. Disinterested, the man looked away, and as quickly as he appeared, he vanished.

Haku felt his insides twist. Something was strange about that man: plainly different from other people. He almost felt inclined to stand up and run after him. Maybe it had been a mistake not to ask for help?

Still, he hesitated; Haku had been just as intimidated by the man's gaze as he had been intrigued. To speak to him seemed nearly out of the question. All Haku knew at that moment was fear. There were other people in town: they might offer food or shelter, if he was fortunate.

Hunger took over his mind at last. Food was absolutely imperative for his survival. Haku stood up, and tottered out into the snow shower. He stood in the middle of the street where he had seen the man, yet it was now empty. Again, disappointment seized Haku. He had waited too long and now the stranger was gone.

Haku sulked down the abandoned road, his heart feeling numb. The snow may have begun to freeze it and now all rational thought seemed to be slipping away just as the tall man had.

Then...a smell.

Haku caught the scent of something edible. His head snapped to his left, where a garbage can stood. The boy experienced a moment of repulsion, hoping he would not have to pick through refuse to find food, but his empty stomach urged him on. On tip-toe the young child peered into the trash can, hoping for anything that would appease his hunger.

A growl came from behind him.

The dog was small but glaring daggers at him; likely just as hungry as he was. Haku would not have his one chance of nourishment be taken away. He was prepared to fight for it.

“This is mine.” Haku hissed in a hoarse voice, “Don’t even try it!”

The mutt bristled, obviously starving. The child could sympathize for it on a small level. In a way, he and the dog had much in common. They were both alone, cold and famished. But Haku had something that the dog did not.

“I have special powers.” Haku warned, hoping to unnerve an animal that had no ability to understand him.

It only growled in response, and then leaped at him, not at all threatened.

Haku's eyes narrowed. This was no challenge; he deserved to live far more than the dog did. Fighting was, after all, in his blood.
He evaded the dog's snapping jaws, and delivered it a rough yet ungraceful kick in the stomach. The animal crumpled to the ground in pain, whining pathetically.

Haku was startled. He had never had to compete with another for survival before. Earlier he had saved his own life and now he was struggling to make it on his own. Fighting, although instinctual, was still very new to him. It had by now occurred to him that defending himself would be one of his most important life skills.

Haku watched with sad eyes as the dog skittered away.

“T'm sorry.” He whispered, feeling sympathy for the animal. Again he peered into the garbage can and did not find much that was edible.

A half-eaten apple looked rather inviting, even if the skin was beginning to turn brown. Desperate, Haku lunged for it, snatching the precious morsel. He sat down next to the garbage can and sniffed the apple inquisitively.

It was not really fit for eating, but still, food was food.

“Boy?”

Haku dropped the apple in surprise; he had not noticed anyone nearby. He turned and saw a man who he did not at all recognize. This one was an older, overweight fellow wearing a very concerned expression.

Haku regarded him carefully and said nothing, and then finally picked up his apple again.

“Boy?” The man repeated, “What are you doing out in the cold?”

Haku detected a hint of compassion in the man's voice. ‘Maybe he has better food than this?’ Haku wondered.

He put the apple down and looked up at the man with beseeching, storm-colored eyes.

His voice was soft, “I have no place to go...”

The fat man seemed alarmed.

“No place to go, little guy?” He was replied, and then asked, “Where are your parents?”

Haku knew the answer. Dead. But different words left his mouth, trying to cover up what had really transpired.

“I...I don't have any parents, mister.” He answered quietly. The fat man nodded in understanding and a sort of sorrowful look came over his face.

“I'm sorry to hear that,” The fat man said, “Well that makes two of us, then. I didn't have any parents either.”

Haku's eyes lit up quickly with an idea. ‘He's like me! Maybe I can stay with him!’ He had passed up the opportunity earlier, and it may not be wise to do so a second time. If his survival depended on it, he would find someone to connect with.

“Do you have any food, mister?” Haku asked, this time in a bit louder of a voice.

The fat man seemed to have expected the question. “You look like you could eat a horse, I bet.” The stranger said, “Sure! I bet I’ve got something to spare! Follow me.”
Haku eagerly followed the fat man, his stomach writhing in pain.

He scampered after the man down the street and around a corner. There he beheld a large cart brimming with supplies, and yes! Food at last! Haku rushed up to the cart and helped himself, reaching into a paper bag, and withdrew a slice of bread.

The fat man chuckled, “Go right ahead. Take what you need. Here, let me fix you some of this stew. A friend gave me more than enough for my trip!”

Haku nodded while he bit large pieces out of the bread. His older companion spooned stew into a bowl for him and handed it to him with another slice of bread. With a sigh he sat down next to Haku on the cart and watched him eat. Sadness was visible in his eyes.

“You know, little guy,” The man said softly, “You aren’t the only orphan in the Water Country…it’s really quite a shame what goes on in these lands. So many families have been torn apart…”

Haku sat quietly and listened, chomping his bread with thankful bites.

“When I was young, I had no one to look after me either.” The man admitted, “I lost my parents and had to depend on a schoolteacher until I was old enough to take care of myself. I know how hard it is for you, and how hard it will continue to be for you.”

Haku nearly choked on a wedge of potato and finally slowed down, carefully lapping up the stew and kept his attention on the man. The round man had possibly saved his life, Haku noted. Knowing his limitations and that he had won the stranger’s sympathy, Haku decided to beg for the man’s help, as graciously as he could.

“Please mister, you’re very nice. I am a hard worker and I can read and write a little! I know that we just met, but…will you let me stay with you?” His voice was timid, nearly quaking.

The fat man observed Haku for a moment, still with those sad eyes.

“It may not do much good to stay with me. I’m sorry little one, but I’m afraid I have no shelter to offer you. I’m a merchant, and I’m on my way to Kuro to do some trading business up there. Nearly all I do is travel, and I haven’t the money to buy a home yet. I may not be the person you can depend on.” He explained.

Haku felt panic rise within him, and tears welled up in his eyes.

“Alright then little fellow, don’t fret! I’ll let you come with me for as long as you like, or, until better care can be found for you.” The fat man decided, “Do you have a name?”

Haku appeared overjoyed, “I’m Haku!”

The fat man laughed heartily at the boy’s smiling face, “Nice to meet you, Haku!”

Haku felt a sudden swelling of hope inside his chest. “I promise mister, I’ll help you with your
work and I'll never cause you any trouble!”

In his excitement, he nearly tugged the man's arm off, but the man was only happy he could help, “Alright, alright, settle down there Haku! And my name is Hiroshi, if you don't mind.”

Haku wore a jubilant grin, “I don't mind at all sir! Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

Hiroshi chuckled to himself and privately wondered what he was getting himself into. Haku was really a rather energetic and simple bundle of joy. It was not difficult to bring a smile to the child's face. And Hiroshi quickly realized that Haku had the same effect on him.
Chapter Soundtrack: “Twice” by Little Dragon

“...I could never love you Gaara, in fact I...I hate you...I hate you for taking her away from me!”

Gaara stood, observing his uncle with disbelieving eyes. How could this be happening? How could this be real?

“Uncle...?”

“Karura never wanted to die...and she's dead because of you! You're the reason my sister is dead!”

Gaara felt tears sting at his light green eyes. His mother...died because of him?

Yashamaru grunted in pain, his body was crushed and his death was drawing ever closer thanks to his red-headed nephew's sand.

“You...you've never known what your name means, have you?” His uncle growled, biting back the agony of his mangled body.

Gaara stood, tears flowing freely down his cheeks. His uncle, the only person he believed had ever cared for him, had tried to assassinate him. But what hurt him more than the idea of Yashamaru himself trying to kill him, were his dying words...

“Gaara: a demon that loves only itself...that's what you are...” Yashamaru spat, glaring at the broken hearted six-year-old.

“Your mother named you that in hopes that if you lived...you would live to curse the village responsible for your creation...”

‘A demon? Am I evil?’ Gaara was confounded. The news was too much for him to take in all at once.

Yashamaru smirked at his nephew as his eyes drifted shut, “And you know what, Gaara...?”

The red haired boy stood quivering by his uncle, paralyzed with fear and sorrow.

“...Karura was right...”

After a moment, Yashamaru's shuddering body was still and silent. Gaara observed the passing man with narrowed eyes, the tears slowing, as his thoughts swirled in a storm of anguish.

Gaara walked down the street, his feelings deeply hurt...as usual. ‘Monster!’

'Why did that boy say that to me?' The red haired child wondered, ‘I only wanted to help him...’

He recalled the other children in his village playing ball together. He yearned to join them, to be a part of them and to not have to be alone.

At one point the ball had escaped their grasp, and he only meant to return it to them...

But they were afraid of him; terrified. Some screamed at the mere sight of him. It pained him to
hear those shrieks of fear, and watch them scatter like grains of sand in the wind. He never meant to harm anyone, but none of the other children made the effort to get to know him.

Gaara only wished them to stay…to keep him company for whatever time they could spare. When they fled from the ball yard he reached out to them, his sand partially preventing their escape. It was just an innocent gesture, a cry for love that no one understood.

But they were horrified and unwilling to accept his power. Unwilling to accept him. He had hurt the other children when they struggled to flee; he saw it happen, though he would never hurt them intentionally. ‘I never meant to…’

Yet Gaara was still determined to prove that they had no reason to fear him, and no reason to run away when he approached.

So he visited the young boy’s house in the hopes of apologizing because his injuries had been the worst. He had even brought ointment with the intent of easing his pain. He came to the door and then...

“Monster!” The door quickly slammed shut.

‘Why did he say that when I only wanted to help?’ Could he ever make a friend?

A moment later he left, walking in contemplative silence down the street.

“You filthy little demon! I saw what you did today! We’re all better off without the likes of you!”

Gaara’s attention snapped to the man who had berated him. It was salt on a raw wound. He had no desire to be a monster, and he did not view himself as one, but every other person must have seen something different from what Gaara thought he saw in the mirror. ‘Why does it have to be this way? Does no one want me? My brother and sister are scared of me! Dad is scared of me! Everyone! Everyone-!’

He had no way to stop it; the pain willed his sand into action, in a violent effort to end his torment. To silence the cutting words. The man barely made one more jeering taunt before sand swiftly wrapped around him. Moments before rationality reinstated itself, the confrontation was over.

Gaara killed that man on the street and no one had seen him do it.

It was a horrific sight and as Gaara came out of his rage he quickly realized his crime. Was it right to defend oneself if the assault went straight to the heart? He fled, wishing there was a welcoming place to go. He left the man dead in the alleyway, secretly praying that he had not proved his cruel words true.

‘Gaara: a demon that loves only itself…’

The words thundered in his ears, the last words of his beloved uncle. The person he had killed in defense of his life.

Gaara felt a distant roar inside him, coaxing him to let go, to stop trying to understand how unjust the world was.

‘I’m alone…I’ll always be alone.’

His insides burned. It hurt: the inescapable pain of reality.

You don’t need these worthless humans…
Gaara felt his heart miss a beat. ‘What was that voice?’ So placating, and yet savagery and bitterness stitched into every fiber of its voice.

‘Is it me? Or is it what's inside of me?’ Gaara could no longer ignore the words of the tailed-beast imprisoned within him.

_We are all that matter now, they mean nothing..._

Gaara clapped his hands over his ears, futilely attempting to ignore the barbarous voice.

“No!” Gaara cried, “Leave me alone! I'm...I'm not a monster!”

The thing...he could feel it grinning.

**Of course you are! Why else would they treat you so unfairly?**

“No!” Gaara sank to his knees.

For a moment it was quiet, and then the voice returned, louder and more aggressive than before.

**Let me out! I can save us. We can be free...make them suffer for what they've done!**

“No! I won't hurt anyone else! Never again!” Gaara staggered to his feet, still covering his ears.

Despite his pleas and protests, inside, he felt himself giving in. He felt the brutality of the thing within him soothe him, somehow making it seem alright to kill; to inflict pain on others.

**Let me out.**

“No!” Gaara was screaming, running down the street with a newfound speed. His eyes fell upon the open gates of his village, and then...the people. Those lining the sides of the road, faces familiar and unfamiliar...all of the people in Suna that caused him such grief.

**Make them suffer!**

Sand whirled threateningly around his feet, with no way for Gaara to control it. The boy's legs were quaking, his small hands raking wildly at his locks of crimson hair.

The struggle was at its peak, and Gaara felt himself slipping, letting the thing within him gain more control. And its influence was also somewhat appeasing...the strength and power...it was so overwhelming to feel it course through his small body.

“No...” Gaara stumbled to his knees again, sobbing, and giving in.

**It's alright...** The demon purred, **After they're all dead...you'll still have me,** It smiled, **And I won't leave you alone.**

‘I don't want to be alone...’

Gaara looked up with an inexplicable grin on his face. The tailed-beast’s power was euphoric.

He felt a feral growl of triumph escape his throat, a laugh that Gaara was sure was not his.

Suddenly, justification was abundant. It was refreshing. It was alright to kill others simply because they deserved it. His life mattered more than anyone else’s. They would feel all of the pain and
misery that they had inflicted upon him.

Gaara's grin grew wider, and he gave his full attention to the beast inside of him.

Gaara's fussing had attracted a lot of attention. A few people looked over at him with concern. That concern was reserved mainly for themselves.

**Kill them all.**

The red haired boy stood up, his spindly legs steady beneath him. His sand circled around him, awaiting his command.

Then there were two faces…faces he knew very well. They held some sort of value to him: value that the voice had tried to get him to ignore.

‘Wait…I know them…’ Gaara hesitated, desperately trying to recall the two children he saw standing at the far end of the road, staring at him with alarm.

**They don't matter! Kill them!**

‘No! I know them!’

A girl with light blonde hair watched him worriedly, her brother standing beside her. Gaara watched as his name soundlessly crossed her lips in confusion.

‘Temari? Kankuro?’

**Kill them now!**

Gaara understood why he faltered at the sight of them. ‘My brother and my sister…’

**They don't care about you.**

Gaara felt a twinge of electric pain course through him. ‘Maybe that’s so but…I care. I won't hurt them…’

Gaara felt Shukaku rattle his insides in fury, and radiate a huge burst of chakra, startling many of the nearby shinobi.

**Do as I say!**

Demonic strength consumed his body, and a whirlwind of sand then encircled him. The young boy felt his teeth gnash in immense effort as he endeavored to restrain the power and bloodlust rising within.

He then realized that this power would not be easily stopped.

‘I won't let you hurt them, not anymore!’

Gaara panicked as the tailed-beast howled viciously inside of his head, willing his feet to move. He felt himself slowly approaching his fellow villagers, hands raised, sand flying at them, knocking them away.

Temari and Kankuro stood motionless; horrified.

He heard the cries for any sand nin to stop him, by any means. Gaara watched in fear as kunai and
shuriken flew towards him, glinting menacingly in the daylight.

Shukaku laughed.

A barrier of sand repelled every weapon, while the rest of the sand was busy at work crushing any other shinobi. He was hurting them...again.

Is this why they hated him? Because of this power? The power he couldn't control?

‘I don't want them to hate me...’

Gaara gazed sadly at his older siblings as the cowered helplessly on the sidelines. His heart wrenched and for a moment, he felt his will suddenly severe his connection with Shukaku. The sand dropped to the ground and time slowed down.

‘I will find a way to control it, and then they won't have to be afraid. Then I won't have to be alone ever again.’

His mind was set and fully focused.

‘Then I will leave...and I will come back...when I'm safe for them.’

Gaara found the strength he needed, and in a whirlwind of sand he departed from Suna.
A set of brilliant, blue eyes stared downcast at the ground.

It was a warm, sunny day, and a six-year-old with messy blonde hair sat quietly on a swing outside the Ninja Academy. The cool breeze swept a few stray leaves past the boy's lonely face.

If loneliness was an illness then Naruto would have been confined to a hospital for it.

His home was in Konohagakure, the Village Hidden in the Leaves, even if it was painful to admit. He had been shunned and ostracized for the length of his young life by his fellow Leaf villagers.

Unknown to Naruto, the reason for his unhealthy solitude was that he was the container of a monstrous demon that had attacked Konoha the night he had been born. As a result, contemptuous shinobi and mistrusting citizens kept their distance from the otherwise harmless child.

He had no concept of what he could have done to bring such cruelty unto himself.

‘I've been so nice to everyone, but why do they always ignore me? What did I do?’

Naruto sat in silence, pondering the reason for his misery.

“Hey!”

The blue-eyed boy looked up, and noticed two girls his age looking at him strangely from a bench.

“Hey!” The girl with the light blonde hair called to him again, “What are you doing over here all by yourself?”

A girl with pink hair stood shyly next to her, trying to hide her head from view.

Naruto felt an enormous smile explode onto his face, ‘Wow! They're actually talking to me!’

He hopped up from his spot on the swing and went over to them.

The blonde girl had her hands on her hips and appeared far more confident than her friend.

“Well?” She asked again, “Why are you all alone?”

“Because no one ever wants me around.” Naruto answered honestly. It was awkward, he had never fully participated in a conversation before, and talking to the girls felt refreshing.

“Why is that?” The pink haired girl stepped out from behind her friend.

“I don't know. They always treat me that way, I guess.”

The blonde girl shook her head in disapproval, “Well that's just silly. You can play with us if you like to...um, what's your name?”

“Uzumaki Naruto!”

“Okay, Naruto. I'm Ino; my dad owns the Yamanaka flower shop.” Ino then turned to her friend,
“And this is Sakura. Don't worry if she's acting funny, she's trying to hide her big forehead.”

“Ino!” She squealed, “Don't talk about it!”

“What? It's not really such a big deal.”

Naruto had a better look at the girl called Sakura. She had green eyes and pale pink hair; though he did not see much of a problem with her slightly spacious forehead.

“There's nothing wrong with your forehead Sakura. It's kinda nice.”

Naruto's words seemed to shock the self-conscious girl.

“You...you really think so?”

Ino nodded, “Yeah he's right. When you don't hide it, it makes you look cute.”

Sakura smiled, glad her forehead was being admired rather than spotlighted for its size.

“So you'll really let me play with you?” Naruto was elated at the nice girls' offer.

“Sure, come on,” Ino answered, leading them along down the path, “We can go play on the slide, I'll race you there!”

Ino ran ahead, and Sakura and Naruto laughed as they followed her.

The next morning, Naruto was as happy as the proverbial clam. Never in his life had he ever played with other children, and it was something that he was looking forward to with his new friends Ino and Sakura.

He recapped in his mind how wonderful that day had been.

‘We played and played until the sun started to go down, and they even invited me to come back and play today! This is great!’

In fact, Naruto was in such a pleasant mood, he had even brought along two extra cups of miso ramen for his new buddies.

He sat on the swing anxiously.

He had checked his clock before he had left home: it was nearly ten o' clock. A goofy, excited grin was plastered on his face when he saw two small figures approaching from the other side of the academy.

“Hey Ino! Hi Sakura!” He called out to them as they neared.

The two girls paused and looked at him for a moment. The hazy, morning light blurred the expressions on their faces. Still too excited to sit and wait for them to approach, Naruto sprang up and trotted over to them.

“Hi guys! I brought somethin' for ya'! It's my favorite–”

Naruto quieted his rambling when he noticed the odd looks on the girls' faces.

“Hey, um...are you okay?” He asked, not understanding their silence.
Ino gave him a fierce glare, her mouth pursed in a tough line.

“I went home yesterday and told my dad about you, Naruto,” Ino snapped at him, “And do you know what happened?”

Naruto shook his head, worried over the answer.

“He yelled at me! It was horrible! He says that I'm never supposed to go near you again…so…so there!”

The boy winced. Why? Why was this happening?

“I'm sorry, Naruto,” Sakura apologized, “But, my mommy and daddy don't want me talking to you either…I'm really sorry…”

Naruto's head was spinning from the magnitude of rejection.

Sakura and Ino…they had all had so much fun the day before. Why? Why were his new friends doing this to him?

He watched as the girls turn to leave and panic set in.

“Wait!” Naruto cried, “I don't understand! We're friends and... I promise I'll be nice! I won't do anything wrong! Don't go…”

Ino huffed and turned her back on him.

“Come on Sakura, let's go.”

“Please don't leave me all alone again…” Naruto sniffled helplessly.

Sakura gave him a pained look.

“I… I'm sorry…” She whispered, before taking off after Ino, leaving Naruto behind.

‘They...they left me…’ Both cups of ramen slipped from his hands and fell to the ground, spilling their contents on the dusty path.

A single tear slid down his whiskered cheek, and he swiped it away with the back of his hand.

Naruto turned and ran in the opposite direction from where Sakura and Ino had come from.

He ran back into town alone as he had done many times before.

‘Why did they go? I...I thought that they liked me…’

Naruto stumbled down the deserted street, under the beaming light of the morning sun. His head was hung in great dismay.

The dull, resonating ache of loneliness bit at his insides again. It hurt when he realized that he could barely make friends, let alone keep them...

He sniffled quietly to himself as he trudged along his usual path, and then stopped, noticing two people ahead of him.

Naruto gave them a brief, but observant glance. They wore green jackets and fish-net shirts, and
had forehead protectors with the Hidden Leaf symbol on them. They were ninja...Chunin, he had
heard was their rank, and they looked much older and more experienced than the Genin he had
seen outside of the academy.

They smirked at the small boy.

“Looks like the beast still walks these streets freely...” One of them muttered. The other stared at
Naruto soundlessly, a look of utter repugnance in his eyes.

The blonde haired boy looked at the two shinobi again for a moment, and then continued, too
broken-hearted to listen to any derogatory comments they may have saved for him.

Angered by his innocent gesture, the silent shinobi shot forward and grabbed hold of Naruto's
arm, and squeezed threateningly.

“Ow! Hey! Let go of me!” The boy yowled, not expecting an attack from a member of his own
village.

“Did you let go, demon?” The enraged ninja hissed, “Did you let my sister live? She's dead
now...and you...you're still alive...”

Naruto had no idea of what the infuriated ninja was speaking about. The troubled Chunin grunted
in surprise when his companion halted him with an outstretched arm.

The other shinobi did not want to linger, “Enough Takeshi, you know the law. Besides we have a
mission...”

“No.” His partner hissed again, hoping to get some kind of retribution: that hurting the boy may
hurt the Kyuubi.

Naruto felt tears sting his eyes. Why did people hate him so much?

He held his ground, knowing he could not outrun them, and prepared himself for a flogging that
never came.

“Stop it.”

The voice was young, like his, but obviously aware that what was happening was wrong.

Takeshi and his partner observed the young boy indifferently.

“Oh…it's just that little Uchiha kid, you know, Itachi's brother.”

The distraction snapped Naruto's attacker out of his rage.

“Don't you have a mission, you said? You should go. He didn't do anything to you.” The boy
with the onyx eyes spoke again.

Naruto only stared at him.

The two Chunin begrudgingly admitted that the child had a point. Without a word of apology,
they left, promptly forgetting about Naruto. The young Uchiha approached him.

“Are you okay?”

Naruto nodded with an impressive poker-face, knowing that deep down his heart was still in
tatters.
“I’m Uchiha Sasuke.”

“Uzumaki Naruto…”

The sound of pain in the blonde’s voice unnerved Sasuke. What had they done to the boy who called himself Naruto? He had seen him around the village from time to time, but Sasuke hardly knew a thing about him.

“I recognized those two,” Sasuke added, “They aren’t friendly. You should stay away from them.”

Naruto could not bring himself to answer. He was so rattled with pain from what Ino and Sakura, and then the chunin had done. Trying to make friends with Sasuke seemed ridiculous.

Naruto looked at Sasuke who wore an expectant expression.

“…thanks…” He said quietly.

Too embarrassed to let the other boy see him upset, Naruto fled, returning to his apartment where he could be alone cry.

It was noon. Naruto had not wasted much of the day before he had gotten a grip. He had taken a number of his few but valuable possessions (which included lots of instant ramen) and packed them in a bag. He had gotten the idea to sneak away. ‘Most of the time when people don’t say mean things to me, they ignore me. If I am so good at not get noticed, I can probably get out of here and find a better place.’

This was it, he decided. He could take a hint. Maybe there was another place he could be treated humanely. Maybe he would build a thicker skin out there in the world. Maybe he would find a way to get people to respect him.

‘If I can find a place where they won’t recognize me…then…someone may like me!’

His hopes were not very high, of course, but he was willing to take a chance. Additionally he was unsure of where he could go after escaping Konoha. His plan was to take the road to a new town and cross his fingers.

Naruto left his apartment and slinked through the lower district, effectively packed up for a journey, and wore a determined expression on his face. He stuck to the dark alleyways; devoid of the bustling foot traffic out on the main road. It was not worth it to endure the pain any longer if there was a chance he may discover acceptance elsewhere.

At that thought of finding a new home, he recalled Sasuke. He had been nice and helped him without being asked. But Naruto kept in mind that Ino and Sakura had been nice earlier…and they had turned on him.

He shook the idea from his head. What was left in Konoha that he could possibly stay for?

‘No…this time I can do it. People won’t hate me anymore.’

It was a relief when he passed through the wooded area near the village gates. There were few people here and he did not have to put much effort into sneaking. It was quiet and peaceful, and it helped give him the strength to press on and seek happiness.

Yellow-blossomed forsythia bushes lined the gate. The flowers smelled nice and he slowed down
a bit to admire them.

A small voice nearly made him jump out of his skin.

“Naruto?”

The blonde boy turned around and faced the voice's owner. It was a girl.

She had black hair and silvery-white eyes. He recognized her in a moment.

“Oh...Hinata, uh...hi.”

Naruto had first met the shy girl near the Ninja Academy. While he sat gloomily on his swing, he noticed a girl sitting at the base of the tree in total silence. He had realized she was quiet and shy, but had grown accustomed to her presence as she would often sit with him near his swing almost every day.

She was not a talkative companion, but she was far more pleasant than most people who acknowledged him.

Hinata observed him quietly.

“Naruto, are you alright? You s-seem upset.” Her stuttering was still understandable, even with her soft voice.

He looked at her sadly, “No Hinata, I...I'm fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“...yeah. Don't worry about me, I'm okay.”

Hinata noticed the backpack he had with him, and she quickly put two and two together.

“Are...are you going somewhere?”

“Yeah.”

“By yourself?”

“Yeah...”

She looked distressed, “W-where are you going?”

“I...I don't really know.”

They were both quiet for a moment.

“I see...” Hinata spoke quietly.

Naruto still felt the dull ache in his chest. The loneliness had become a cage that he so badly wanted to escape.

“Well, I just hope y-you'll come back s-soon then...” She informed him.

The blonde boy was confused, “Why would ya' say that Hinata?”

A blush crept up over her cheeks.
“Um...w-well, you see...I...” She found it very difficult to articulate, “I know that I'll miss you every day by our t-tree...until you come back...”

The hope that had been dwindling like a flickering ember inside of Naruto quickly flared up.

‘Hinata will miss me? She wants me to come back...so then...maybe I will!’

Naruto grinned at her reassuringly, “Sure thing Hinata! I'll be back soon, and then we can sit under our tree all the time!”

Hinata smiled in response, “R-really? That would be wonderful.”

He was suddenly invigorated and ready to explore, and he rushed out of Konoha's gates, calling over his shoulder, “I'll see you soon, Hinata-chan! I promise!”

It was something that she nearly died with joy from hearing. Not only had he given her the honorary suffix, but he had promised to see her soon.

And Uzumaki Naruto never breaks a promise.
Meetings at the Dark River

Chapter Soundtrack: “Haru Kaze” by Nao

Low-hanging clouds rolled slowly overhead, blocking all sunlight.

Haku hummed to himself pleasantly as Hiroshi narrated yet another one of his many stories, tugging his cart along the road with Haku onboard.

“When I was young, I had the chance to meet a skilled ninja who at the time, was preoccupied with a mission—”

“A mission?”

Hiroshi sighed softly. It was difficult to explain everything to the farm boy who had no real knowledge of the outside world. In particular, Haku had no concept yet of what a ninja was, or even his ties to being a descendant of such a warrior.

“Yes, Haku. Ninja partake in tasks and jobs of varying difficulty, or so I've been told.” Hiroshi went on, “Well anyway, the one I ran into was quite helpful. If it wasn't for him, the thugs attacking me, who coincidentally he was after, would have—”

“His mission was to look for people, Hiroshi-san?”

‘How do I put this to an innocent little kid?’ Hiroshi wondered, pursing his lips.

“Uh...sort of. He rather beat them all bloody and saved me in the process. I haven’t seen many shinobi in action since that day. It was an impressive sight.” The man smiled fondly to himself. He had grown a certain respect for ninja with intentions of doing good in the world.

Haku looked up to his companion with a quizzical look on his face.

“Hiroshi-san, did you ever want to become a ninja?” He asked; his eyes shining a color identical to the sky above.

Hiroshi chuckled in response, “I suppose I did when I was younger, but unfortunately the opportunity never came to me... These days I'm more concerned with making a living than running around tossing shuriken at enemies. But who knows? Maybe you will succeed where I have failed!”

Haku perked up. From what he had been told the life of a shinobi was an adventure. That would be something far better than becoming a merchant or a farmer.

“You mean maybe I can train to be a ninja, Hiroshi-san?”

“Well, don't get your hopes up too high, little one. It's hard enough to get an education these days, let alone one as a shinobi,” Hiroshi answered, “But it is a possibility. You're still very young, Haku. There’s a chance you'll be discovered.”

Haku gazed out into the depths of the surrounding forest, deep in thought.

“I do want to become a ninja: one who is strong and can protect others...” He muttered to himself, just loud enough for Hiroshi to catch his proclamation.
He found Haku was not a typical child. He was uncannily thoughtful for a boy his age and had a complex for improving himself.

In fact just a few days earlier Hiroshi had been surprised at how quickly he picked up on reading and simple math skills. Were his parents really farmers as Haku had said?

It was odd. An astute farm boy.

Well, maybe not that odd: every now and again a gifted person was born.

Haku was a child; still absorbing information and developing skills. It was a point in his life where his future abilities would be determined by his environment and experiences.

Hiroshi was quiet for a moment and thought to himself. Hopefully, the child had not had many negative experiences besides being an orphan. He wanted to change that; to give the boy a chance.

And yet already the child had a dream. Sadly it was one that Hiroshi was quite sure that he would be unable to help Haku with. ‘Maybe I can find him a good teacher? One that walks down the righteous path…’

“Hiroshi-san?”

“Hm?”

“Thank you for letting me stay with you, Hiroshi-san.” Haku gave the man a genuine smile.

The cart jerked upward as it went over a rock on the dirt path. Haku quickly grabbed hold of a parcel that nearly fell from the sudden movement.

Hiroshi chuckled, “I should be thanking you really, Haku-chan. You've been excellent company.”

Haku was quiet, but still wore the blithe expression on his face while he held onto a porcelain pot.

It had been several days of traveling northward and a brief ferry crossing before they left the snowy weather of the Water Country behind. Both Hiroshi and his ward easily adjusted to the warmer climate.

Their arrival in the town called Kuro was a relief, and a place where Hiroshi intended to see if he could spot any welcoming shinobi who may be in the trading town. He was also aware their chances were slim.

Hiroshi acknowledged that it was missing-nin and outlaws who preferred the quiet towns devoid of village ninja. One such place was Kuro, and Hiroshi feared that Haku may get mixed up with the wrong type of people here.

The odds of actually running into a good teacher for Haku were very low just about anywhere they went. Being morally sound, he wasn't about to hand the boy over to some blood-thirsty assassin who had no more intention than to turn Haku into one himself.

Hiroshi deliberated silently as he trudged into the city, with Haku swinging his legs off the edge of the cart. ‘Maybe I'm over-thinking this… He may not be at all up for a shinobi lifestyle even if he got lucky…’

Haku was a frail, rather...feminine looking child. He did not outright appear to be ninja material.
However, despite Hiroshi's hesitation, it was apparent that something inside of Haku was meant for that path.

The boy's spirit was also heart-warming.

“Hiroshi-san, are we in Kuro now?” The boy observed the bustling street he and his companion were travelling down, with many different people going off in every direction.

“Yes, Haku-chan, we're here.”

“And we're going to sell these things you have here?” Haku gestured to the mound of items he had been guarding during their journey.

“I'm going to sell them,” Hiroshi gently corrected, “It'd be a bit tedious for you to try to sell goods to such a tough crowd little one! I think you should just watch for now.”

“Alright.” He saw no reason to argue. Haku had been raised on a farm and was aware he would be useful to Hiroshi up until a certain point.

The cart pulled to a stop on the side of the road, and Haku leaned back with a long sigh. It had been quite a trip, and it was the farthest from home he had ever been.

Memories flooded back to him, and he breathed out again, wondering what he would be doing at that moment if his parents were still alive. And how he had found his special power, and Hiroshi, and the man with the bandaged face.

‘That man was like me’, Haku thought to himself. ‘Alone.’

It was a weak comparison, but Haku could not shake the odd feeling that he would definitely see the stranger again. And even more to his surprise, he realized, was that he wanted to find him. He made sure not to say anything about it to his heavy friend.

The boy frowned to himself while Hiroshi was busy setting up his stand. Haku had been frightened of that man, and the more he thought about it, the more he wanted to see him.

‘That man...he was strong. I could feel it. I want to be strong, and maybe if I had went with him...’

Haku suddenly felt a wave of guilt come over him. How could he be so ungrateful? Hiroshi, though lacking any presence of intimidation, was certainly a wise choice on his part. He had offered Haku necessities and a chance at life.

He had been given no more than an icy glance from the man in the Water Country.

Power was all that he would have expected from such a person. And he didn't need power.

Did he?

The overcast day kept many people from venturing outdoors, although a few did stop by to do business.

Haku watched with mild interest as Hiroshi interacted with his customers. He made note of how polite some were, and those who weren't. Also he noticed things they were looking for and what kinds of people stopped by.

After a while his observation got boring.
He could be home chasing the chickens around his yard right now; a delightful activity. Haku also made note that he would not be going home. Not this time.

With a yawn Haku settled down and curled into a ball on the cart. Quickly sleep took him, for he had been worn out with his long journey and everything he had taken in that day.

Hiroshi bade farewell to his last customer and then turned to Haku. He chuckled to himself upon seeing him asleep. He took a spare blanket he had in supply and draped it over the slumbering child. A young woman stopped by his cart and smiled at Hiroshi. She found Haku cute.

“My! What an adorable little girl you have there!”

The comment was made with the best intentions.

“Thank you! Though he's actually a boy.”

“Oh.”

The woman smiled at Hiroshi uncertainly before walking away, a little embarrassed by her mistake. He merely sighed; that was the fourth time that day he had received that comment. He glanced over to Haku, wondering why that was.

‘He doesn't resemble a girl that much...his hair is still pretty short.’ Hiroshi paused and noted the child's face. His features were very delicate, ‘Those big dark lashes though...and that china-doll face...makes him look like he has some noble-blood.’

Hiroshi looked out onto the emptying street, and then towards a vendor a few feet away. He caught the tempting aroma of confections as it drifted on the breeze, ‘Oh...that's chichi-dango over there...’

His sweet tooth beckoned. Hiroshi momentarily observed Haku.

“I'll be back in a minute...” He said quietly, before venturing over to the dumpling stand.

It was dark. Haku rolled over and bumped his head against the porcelain pot.

“Ow...” He sat up and rubbed his forehead as his eyes blinked open.

Why was it so quiet?

Haku looked around, and saw no more than an empty street and a darkening sky. He felt his blood run cold: where was Hiroshi?

“Hiroshi-san?” He called softly.

There was no answer, and Haku quickly stood up, looking around frantically. He saw nothing familiar. It was getting cold and he did not understand why Hiroshi was not with him.

‘Oh no... Did a bad ninja get to him? Is he hurt?’

Haku wandered around the street in a small circle, his hands wringing together nervously. The feeling of being alone again was so overwhelming that he had difficulty thinking straight.

‘I've got to find him. Where could he have gone?’

“Hiroshi-san?” He spoke louder, but received no response.
Haku paused in his circling and gasped.

What if he was injured? He recalled the agonizing end his parents had met and the sudden, partly rational fear for Hiroshi's life overtook him.

“Hiroshi-san!” Haku was calling out into the emptiness of the main avenue, darting about on swift legs.

His head was pounding and his thoughts became a tangled mess.

‘*Where is he? Where is he? Why did he leave me alone?’*

“Hiroshi-san!” Haku’s panic intensified and he scurried under the cover of trees, retracing their route along the forest path.

The woods were quiet and the grass was damp beneath his feet. ‘*I'm alone...I'm alone...’*

“No! Please no!” Haku pleaded, “Hiroshi-san, are you there?”

He raced farther into the line of cedar trees, tripping over his own feet. After a minute of his desultory search he stumbled down to the wet earth and wailed.

‘*Now I'm alone. He must have found out about my power and left me.’*

He pulled his knees up to his chest and sobbed. His logical functions shut down and yielded to grief once again. He had no idea of whether Hiroshi had left him or if he had become another victim of violence.

Haku’s small frame rattled as he cried. He had not been able to bring himself to do it any sooner. He cried for his parents, for the dog and for himself. Why did things always turn out this way?

He heard a foreign noise in the background, despite his tears. He couldn't place it, but it was a constant, soft sound that helped him focus.

Haku sniffed and wiped his damp cheeks with the back of his hand.

“Huh?” He gazed ahead and then noticed a glimmer a short distance away. A river ran parallel to the town, flowing gently.

The sight of water was curiously soothing to Haku. He stood up, still drying off his cheeks on his scruffy shirt, and took small steps toward the body of water.

He stopped at the water’s edge and frowned down at the dark water.

He recalled how his ability to manipulate water and ice had gotten him into a lot of trouble. It flowed undisturbed, as if it were mocking him, mocking his pain.

“I lost Mama and Papa...all because of...” Haku sniffled, struggling with the weight of the terrible memory.

Despite the trauma he had gone through, Haku liked the power he had. It felt just as normal as taking a breath of air or knowing how to walk. He never would have used his ability to harm anyone, if his father had only accepted him as he was.

For a moment he stood staring accusingly at the water. He was upset his parents were gone and that Hiroshi had disappeared. Was it a sign? Was he really meant to be alone?
“I am not a bad person...” Haku affirmed, “And my power isn't bad either...”

He raised his hand and watched in reserved delight as the water rose up at his command. It made him feel better.

Haku waved his hand forcefully to the left, making the thread of water fly up above the surface. The ribbon of shimmering liquid coiled gracefully as he directed it, easing his heartache.

‘*I like my power and I will use it to become a strong ninja...’*

Smiling at the thought of one day becoming a shinobi, Haku continued with his activity…until he was interrupted.

“**Whoa!**”

The shout from behind him startled Haku so badly that the serpent of water that had once been airborne, splashed quickly back down into the river.

Haku turned around and faced the newcomer.

“Wow! That was awesome! How did you do that?” The boy was about his height and was incredibly loud.

Haku took a moment to regain his composure before answering.

“I don't really know. I just can.”

The other boy was grinning. Haku assumed he had no idea that the power he possessed bothered most people.

“That was so cool! Can you do it again?”

“Um...sure.” Haku indulged the newcomer by showing off a bit more, raising more of the water into the air. He smiled to himself proudly as he noticed the other boy's awe.

“That's really something...”

Haku observed the boy. He was a mess; there was no other way to describe him. His blonde hair was tousled and full of leaves. Dirt was smudged on his face and...just about everywhere else on him. His clothes were even more tattered than Haku's.

It couldn't have been more obvious that he had been out in the wilderness for quite some time.

Haku looked at the boy curiously. He was unsure of how to act since he had hardly ever had contact with other children before.

The blonde boy flounced up to Haku, apparently thirsting to socialize.

“Hey! I'm Uzumaki Naruto! Who are you?” Haku's ears were hurting.

Why was he so loud?

He answered in a quiet voice, “I'm Haku.”

Naruto grabbed his hand and shook it, “It's great to meet you Haku! You're the first person I've seen outside of Konoha!”
Haku picked up on Naruto's enthusiasm and found himself smiling as well.

“Konoha?”

Naruto looked dumbfounded, “Don't tell me you haven't heard of the Hidden Leaf Village!”

“I'm sorry. I haven't.”

The blonde boy folded his arms across his chest and huffed, “Well jeez! It's only the best ninja village around! I'm out here because-”

“Did you say ninja village?” Haku could not believe his luck. Not only had he met a friendly youth like himself, but Naruto was actually from a village of shinobi!

Naruto nodded, “Yeah, I'll be going back there soon to see Hinata-chan, but I've been away for a couple of days so I can train myself. Maybe you can come too!”

Haku wasn't sure if he was dreaming or not, considering this stroke of good fortune. However his head was still spinning due to the disappearance of Hiroshi, and his fear of losing his only friend irked him to no end.

Naruto took a deep breath and then dropped his backpack to the ground with a thud. He landed on his butt next to it and stretched his arms.

“Man I went pretty far! I'm starved!” Naruto continued to puzzle Haku as he retrieved a cup of what appeared to be noodles from his bag.

Haku sat down as well, still surprised Naruto had actually liked his ability rather than feared it.

“Want some?” Naruto was preparing the cup ramen, and he held out an extra for Haku. Haku hesitated. Naruto had poured a thermos of lukewarm water into his meal and then tore into it.

The dark haired boy watched Naruto slurp his food rapidly, as if he was rushing just to move on to a second helping. Haku thought it disgusting to eat that way.

He lost his appetite.

“No thank you, Naruto.”

The blonde boy shrugged and then stashed the extra cup back in his bag. He continued his messy meal contentedly.

Haku sighed inwardly. This was turning out to be a weird day.

He had to say something; now that he was aware that Naruto had actually come from a ninja village it may be his only chance for the training he wanted.

“Naruto?”

“Mff?”

“What's it like in your village?” Haku went straight to the point, “Can I train to become a ninja there?”

Naruto sighed and put down his empty cup, his face became solemn upon recalling Konoha. In his heart he knew it was a great place, just not particularly for him, but he promised himself he would find a way to change that.
He tilted his chin up in the air in thought, “Well...”

Haku looked at him with great anticipation.

“Training to become a ninja is hard no matter who you are. Do you think you have what it takes?” Naruto tried to unnerve Haku, but he only succeeded in confusing him more.

“Do I have what it takes?”

“Yeah, you know: jutsu, weapons, skills...that kind of stuff.” Naruto himself understood very little of what he was talking about.

Haku shook his head. What was a jutsu? He had lived on a farm for Heaven’s sake!

Naruto took a closer look at Haku.

‘He’s kinda...scrawny and...I don't know...’

“Well, you can do that cool thing with the water so that's a start...” Naruto tried to form a list of assets, “Can you fight?”

“I can with water.”

Naruto shook his head, “No Haku, I mean like punching and stuff. I heard people at the academy call it something but I don't remember what exactly. Anyway, can you?”

“No, I don't know how.” Haku felt embarrassed. He hadn't taken into account that he would have to be able to fight in more ways than one. He felt disheartened by the idea.

By some miracle, Naruto came up with another idea, “Well, you can learn to fight and stuff later! But are you good at anything else? Like medicine? How fast are you?”

If Haku could remember correctly, he could be impressively fast when he wanted to be. Yet he was not certain if his speed could compare to a ninja's. He decided to give it a shot anyway.

“I'm fast.”

“Good! Let's see!” Naruto jumped to his feet, his energy practically radiating off of him. It made Haku feel tired just by looking at him.

Haku stood up as well, ‘I'm fast. I can prove it. I have skill...’

It was the first time in Haku's young life he had heard three specific words used in the same sentence.

“Tag! You're it!”

In a flash of yellow, Naruto was gone.

Haku stood where he was, completely perplexed, “I'm afraid I don't understand, Naruto.”

Naruto sighed in exasperation and leaped down from his hiding place among the tree tops.

“You're ‘it’, so you know, you gotta run after me and try to catch me. That way I can see how fast you are.”
Haku was still bewildered that the blonde boy jumped in and out of trees like it was nothing, which could explain all of the foliage he was covered in. He shook the thought out of his head and nodded.

“Alright.”

‘I don't think I can get up into the trees though...I suppose I'll have to find a way to keep him on the ground...’

Naruto laughed gleefully as he disappeared into the tree tops again, and Haku quickly pursued him while on the ground.

“Why don't you just come up here Haku? You're pretty fast!” Naruto called down to him, leaping from tree branch to tree branch.

Haku frowned up at him, “I...can't jump that high...”

“Then you'll never catch me!”

Naruto certainly wasn't concerned with stealth; his laughter echoed through the entire forest and made it easy for Haku to follow him. It was frustrating for the dark eyed boy to stay grounded.

Luckily Haku had something that Naruto had not counted on: brain power. He was clever enough to fix his problem.

‘Naruto makes it seem that I can only catch him if I chase him around. But maybe if I...’

“Too slow!” Naruto laughed while jumping over Haku's head. He raced like a yellow blur back towards the river.

Haku was not willing to be out-done. He nearly matched Naruto's speed and let him lead the way through the forest while he waited for the blonde boy to play into his still-forming trap.

“Come on Haku! I thought you said you wanted to train as a ninja!” Naruto taunted playfully as he bounced around the treetops with ease.

Haku remained quiet in his pursuit, waiting for the right moment to strike...

Suddenly Naruto made the mistake of coming too close to the water's edge.

‘Now!’ Haku waved his hand in a diagonal motion he had practiced before, letting a thin jet of muddy water land a direct hit on Naruto's face. His accuracy was alarming and his timing was flawless.

“Wah!” The blonde boy slipped from the tree branch, blind-sided by the attack. Since his calculations had served him well, Haku quickly pounced on Naruto with a triumphant smile as he collided with the ground.

“I got you!”

Naruto was still hollering in laughter, aware that Haku had used wit rather than speed to catch him, but he was impressed all the same.

He spoke between pants, “You're...not as...fast as...me...”

“Not yet.” Haku admitted it with a smile since he had still proved himself.
“I didn’t expect a trap!” Naruto dried is face on his sleeve once he had caught his breath.

Haku felt accomplished; if only Hiroshi had seen how well he had done!

Hiroshi!

Haku leapt to his feet, remembering his friend and how he had not completed his search.

“Oh! I need to find Hiroshi-san! It’s getting dark.”

Naruto looked up towards the red and pink sky and then to Haku, “Who’s Hiroshi?”

“My friend. I fell asleep a little while ago and when I woke up I couldn't find him.” Haku explained. He didn't feel as panicked as he had before, but he was still worried enough to keep looking.

Naruto slipped his back pack on and also stood.

"I'll help you find him!” Naruto volunteered. His main reason to help was that Haku was an enjoyable playmate, and he did not look forward to being left alone again.

“Thank you.” Haku was glad Naruto had decided to come along. It took a moment for Haku to get used to his new companion as they ventured back towards the town.

‘He’s like me…more than Hiroshi or the man with the sword...Naruto wants to be a ninja.’

Haku was startled when Naruto spoke up in a normal tone of voice.

“So...does this make us friends?”

Haku smiled, “It would be an honor to be your friend, Uzumaki Naruto.”

By the time they had returned, street lamps were already lit, and the sun sank slowly beneath the horizon. At that point, Haku was certain of one thing about Naruto...

He liked to talk.

A lot.

He was uncertain why Naruto was so chatty, however it was pleasant to have someone his height to speak to.

“The people in my village don't like me much,” Naruto went on about Konoha, “I don't know why. So I'm going to become a powerful ninja so they'll stop hating me and start respecting me.”

Haku could understand that feeling.

“Why do you want to become a ninja, Haku?”

He looked to Naruto as they walked down the side of the street. He knew the answer to that.

“I...I need to become stronger to protect the people who are precious to me. I haven't been able to do that...” Haku recalled how he had failed his parents, “And if I train as a ninja I can find a way to save people...”

Naruto nodded, “Yup, that's a good reason! I like that reason.”
“Haku!”

It was a deep, bellowing shout that made both boys turn around. A large man was jogging up the road and he appeared greatly distraught. Haku’s face lit up as he saw that his companion had not abandoned him after all.

“Hiroshi-san!” Haku darted over to his fat friend and hugged him in great relief.

Hiroshi frowned at the farm boy, “Sweet lord, Haku! I've been looking all over for you! I don't want you running off like that again, you hear me? This place isn't safe.”

Haku bowed his head in apology.

“I'm sorry Hiroshi-san, it's just that when I woke up you were gone and I thought you had left, so I went to look for you...” He rambled, “I was worried.”

Naruto watched the exchange, waiting for a chance to introduce himself.

“You should have waited for me, Haku-chan. I was only getting some dango.”

Haku had never heard of such a thing before, “Dango?”

“Try it,” Hiroshi reached into a paper bag and handed him a skewer of pink and green dumplings, and then turned to Naruto, “So, who's your friend here?”

“I'm Uzumaki Naruto!”

Hiroshi chuckled at the spirited boy, “Hello Naruto! I am Hiroshi and I take it you've already become acquainted with Haku.”

Haku bit into one of the dumplings and he found that he liked its light sweetness. He took one of the dumplings for himself and passed the skewer on to Naruto. He also had never tried dango before, but devoured the remaining treats easily.

Hiroshi chuckled, “I guess I'll just have to buy some more. Why don't you boys just wait by the cart?”

Naruto casually tossed the stick aside, and hoped that Hiroshi would still be willing to share the upcoming dessert. Haku returned to his companion’s cart with Naruto beside him, and they sat down while Hiroshi returned to the vender.

“Wow. I guess it wasn't really that hard to find your friend after all, huh Haku?” Naruto observed.

Haku forced a smile. It turned out to be just that. He had indeed overreacted. Though Haku believed Naruto wouldn’t understand the feeling of panic that came over him earlier.

Naruto shook some if the leaves out of his golden hair, “I sure am dirty! I've been working really hard to get stronger since I left home. I can't wait to go back...then I can just sit with Hinata-chan by our tree.”

“And I can come with you?” Haku confirmed.

“Yup! Then you can meet Hinata-chan. She's really nice!”

Haku laid back and sighed, “I'd like that...”
“Have you two settled down?” Hiroshi returned with two skewers of dango and Naruto looked at them expectantly. “I suppose Naruto will be staying with us for a while?”

Naruto shook his head, “Nah, not for too long. I'm gonna go back to Konoha for ninja training and Haku's coming with me.”

Hiroshi was stunned, “Konoha? What are you doing away from Hidden Leaf?”

“Yes, trying to get stronger, but I'm going back soon.”

You're a bit too young to be wandering by yourself if you ask me, Naruto,” Hiroshi handed him the dango that he had been staring at, “Are you all by yourself?”

“Yeah.” He chomped gratefully on the sweets.

How had no one come looking for this child yet? He was too young to be out on his own!

Funnily enough, the good shinobi who could help Haku with his ninja training happened to be a six-year-old. It was something Hiroshi was not expecting.

“So Haku-chan, would you like to go to Hidden Leaf to train as a ninja?” Hiroshi asked.

Haku looked excited at the idea, “Yes, I want to go with Naruto.”

Hiroshi nodded to him. It was settled then. He had not anticipated it to be so simple.

Haku noticed an odd sight while he was watching the sun set.

A small dark cloud appeared in the distance, silhouetted against the rosy sky. It seemed to be moving.

He looked at it curiously for a moment, watching it as it came near. After a quiet moment, Hiroshi and Naruto noticed it as well.

“What the heck is that?” Naruto asked with one last mouthful of sticky dango.

No one could answer. What once appeared to be a cloud, turned into a mass of furiously whirling sand: that was approaching at an unsafe speed. It nearly resembled a funnel-cloud, but was far too small to be a tornado.

That was when Haku decided he really was having a weird day.

The three of them looked on in shock as the sandstorm halted several yards away from them, kicking up dust and sand as it slowed to a stop.

Hiroshi's dango slid off of the skewer and plopped down to the ground. ‘I guess today is not my day for snacks… what is going on?’

Naruto and Haku stared with wide eyes as the sand thinned and then ceased its motion, revealing a person amidst the center of the swirling wind.

“That's really cool!” Naruto commented, feeling the same awe as he had felt meeting Haku.

The sand cleared, and what remained was a small boy with a shock of red hair. His eyes were bloodshot and he was trembling uncontrollably, suffering from extreme exhaustion. Haku took a few steps forward and then stopped.
He could feel the immense power the boy had, just as he had felt it with the man with the bandaged face.

The red haired boy stared at them silently for a moment, shaking. Hiroshi looked at him, unsure of what he could do.

“Hey are you alright?” Naruto promptly asked.

Haku watched with baited breath; the power that he felt was flickering. The boy was going to collapse.

The boy's voice was weak and pained, “...help me...”

The three watched as he sunk to the ground, landing with a soft thud. While Haku and Hiroshi stood in stunned silence, Naruto could not help himself:

“...WHOA...”
Ero-Sennin

Chapter Soundtrack: “Bluebird Story” by DJ Okawari feat Jumelles

Hazy steam drifted upwards from the hot springs.

It was a relaxing afternoon until a woman with dark hair turned to her friend after hearing a peculiar noise from outside.

“You didn't hear that? It sounded like someone talking or...giggling... am I going crazy?”

Her friend nodded, “Yeah, I'm pretty sure I heard something to that effect.”

Both girls peeked over the fence, but their eyes met nothing but the surrounding forest. A loon called out an eerie cry as they suspiciously scanned the area.

The dark haired woman shook her head and settled back into the water.

“Maybe we're just imagining things...”

Her friend nodded again and did the same.

Little did they know that they were in fact the subject of one ninja's undivided attention.

Stood in the high branches of a sycamore tree was none other the Legendary Sage Jiraiya, renowned author of the Icha Icha Paradise series. He scribbled notes down furiously while watching the girls bathe, it was after all...

Very important research.

“Heh, heh, this is probably the best yet...” He muttered excitedly to himself.

He had recently returned to the Fire Country and dropped by the Leaf Village; however his research there had been nothing short of a disaster when a certain green-spandex clad jounnin caught him near a women's changing room, and accused him of disrupting the girls' “Springtime of Youth!”

“Feh...weirdo...” Jiraiya frowned as he recalled.

What did he know anyway? Why, Jiraiya was quite certain he was overflowing with youthfulness, and was by no means disturbing anyone's “Springtime”.

The small town called Kuro had given him the perfect opportunity to seek new inspiration for his story. Boy did he ever get it. In the midst of his work, he abruptly felt a fierce wind catch him from behind.

Reluctantly, Jiraiya tore his skillful eyes away from the girls and looked behind him. Approaching at an alarming speed was what appeared to be a large whirlwind of sand and debris. The wind was heading straight his way.

“What the-?”

He had no time to evade it, and was hurled from his hiding place with tremendous force and sent hurtling through the air until he crash-landed in the middle of the hot springs on his head. Tree
branches and stones rained down beside him.

“...ow.”

As if the encounter had never happened, the gale continued on, leaving Jiraiya bruised and soaked with his notes soggy and unreadable.

“Damn gust’s gotta screw up my brilliant notes and-!”

“Eh-hem!”

His attention was redirected by the sound of someone clearing their throat noticeably loud from behind him. He jumped to his feet and faced the throng of savagely angry and nude women beginning to surround him.

“Oh, hello there ladies! You're all looking lovely today.”

The dark haired woman who thought she was hallucinating before smirked at their discovery.

He received a merciless beating at that point in time, and because the women were both beautiful and not trained in combat he had no choice but to take it without retaliation. The spandex-wearing jounin from Leaf seemed like a mere greeting card after that.

“...WHOA...”

Haku wasn't certain what had just happened. Out of nowhere, a swirling mass of sand blew into Kuro and dissipated to reveal a small red haired boy.

It was enough to throw Naruto for a loop.

“Are you alright?” The blonde was shouting even though the boy who had appeared was currently unconscious.

Haku sighed to himself upon seeing his friend's reaction, ‘He is very excitable…’

He and Naruto went to the boy's side to inspect him.

He was deathly pale and covered in perspiration. His face was drawn up in a look of total despair. Naruto was quiet for a long moment before asking, “Is he dead?”

Haku frowned to himself. Was he dead? He of all people should be able to recognize such a state.

He placed his hand carefully over the nameless boy's parted mouth.

He drew a weak breath.

“No he's breathing, Naruto!” He reported.

The blonde boy had a look of worry etched onto his face. He could not explain why he was so concerned for the well-being of a person he didn't even know.

Naruto lowered his voice, “What do you think happened to him?”

Haku shook his head, “I don't know.”

“What in the world is this about?” Hiroshi wondered out loud as he squatted down beside the two children in his charge, “This poor child just tumbled out of cloud of sand! That's not something
you see every day.”

“Hiroshi-san, is he hurt? I can't tell why he's in so much pain.” Haku observed as the boy twitched and jumped without any clear reason.

Hiroshi shook his head, “It's hard to tell, Haku, he could be very sick. Maybe it was all that sand-?”

Naruto folded his arms and squinted his eyes, “Nah, I don't think so. It kinda looked like that sand was keeping him safe.”

Hiroshi and Haku both looked at Naruto strangely. He certainly did have an interesting perspective, although a huge cloud of sand didn't at first look...safe.

“We have to help him, Hiroshi-san.” Haku resolved and Naruto nodded in fierce agreement.

Hiroshi looked immensely overwhelmed, “I don't know…I already have you two to look after, and this little one seems to be in very bad shape. I’m not sure where to start…”

Haku looked at him pleadingly, “But we have to do something!”

“Please, Hiroshi-san?” Even Naruto called to him with familiarity. He already had taken in two children, what was one more?

Hiroshi nodded to them, “Alright, Haku, go fetch some water for this poor child. Naruto, there should be a small bedroll by the cart. Can you spread it out for him?”

Both answered in unison, “Yes, Hiroshi-san!”

They both dashed back to Hiroshi’s cart to go about their appointed tasks. Hiroshi bent down and scooped up the small boy, wondering what had happened to him.

He laid the boy out on the futon Naruto had quickly prepared, and Haku returned hastily with a bowl of water. Hiroshi helped the boy into a sitting position.

“Okay Haku, now just tip some of that water into his mouth.” He instructed.

Meticulously, Haku let the unconscious boy take a small sip of water, and he involuntarily leaned up for more. Hiroshi noticed this behavior and concluded that the boy must have been without food or water for a long while.

“Is he gonna be alright?” Naruto was leaning against Haku's shoulder to get a better look at the red haired boy.

Haku was nearly as antsy as Naruto was.

Hiroshi sighed, “I think he'll be alright. We'll have to keep watch to see when he wakes up. Maybe then he can tell us what happened to him.”

“Right.” Naruto put on a serious face and crept up onto the cart beside Haku. Hiroshi sat down as well with another deep sigh. Good grief.

And as if their day hadn't been long enough, Hiroshi watched with detached concern as a white haired man with red markings under his eyes lumbered towards them in a seemingly foul mood.

He walked with a limp and a scowl was plastered on his face as approached. The cart's occupants looked at him soundlessly until he stopped in front of them. A twig was stuck in his hair.
Just as Jiraiya was about to begin ranting to the odd troop about what mayhem he had went through he felt as if he had been warped back to Konoha.

Bright blonde hair, ocean-blue eyes, and that face...

It was the spitting image of his former student!

Jiraiya blinked his eyes in disbelief. He must be losing his damn mind. He was well aware that his protégée had a son years ago who resided in the Leaf Village and was under the care of the Third Hokage.

And he knew that the child had been named Naruto.

There was no way he could have snuck away without someone taking notice. This was an important kid!

He took a moment to regard the blonde child, trying to verify if it was indeed the one he had in mind. The small boy just gave him a questioning look and seemed ready to shout a snappy remark.

The resemblance was just plain freaky, ‘This is him alright…but how the hell did he get here? That is negligence if I ever saw it!’

It quickly occurred to the sage that he ought to return to boy to the Leaf Village as soon as possible. If he didn’t he could be held responsible if the Kyuubi fell into the wrong hands.

After a few moments of ordering his thoughts Jiraiya remembered why he was so infuriated.

“Right...have any of you seen a tornado pass by here by any chance?” Jiraiya asked, pulling debris out of his long, white locks.

Naruto immediately identified the man before him as a complete weirdo.

Haku gestured to the unconscious boy as an answer and Jiraiya gave the child a quick glance.

Okay, so the kid was outlandish…but something on the boy’s arm immediately drew his attention.

A faintly visible, calligraphic arrangement was glowing on the boy’s upper arm.

A seal?

He mentally groaned, ‘Well I’ll definitely have to look into this circus then...’

“He just showed up in a dust-storm, though I am not sure how.” Hiroshi explained to the sage, “He may have some sort of illness or...well, it’s hard to say.”

Jiraiya nodded, “I think I may know what the kid's problem is. He certainly caused a bit of trouble for me.”

He remembered the earlier incident when he had been brutally assaulted by a crowd of angry, naked women…all because of some red haired imp!

Naruto decided it was time to share his two-cents.

“Hey old man! Why the heck is your hair so long?” Naruto could no longer contain himself, “What are ya trying to pretend you're a girl or something?”
“You aren't exactly the definition of normal yourself kid.” He countered, “You’ve got leaves sticking out of your hair like me, if you didn’t notice. What is this? Lord of the Flies?”

“Hey!” Naruto stood up and pointed a finger at Jiraiya, “You can’t talk to me like that old man! I'm going to be the Hokage someday!”

Jiraiya smirked, “Oh really? Then what are you doing outside of the Leaf Village, eh squirt?”

Naruto was fuming while Haku could only watch.

“I’m training that's what!” Naruto barked, nearly falling off of the cart.

“Right...”

Hiroshi smiled slightly; Naruto would never run out of energy.

“Naruto, sit down before you hurt yourself,” The fat man admonished, “My apologies sir, he's had a difficult day.”

Jiraiya shrugged, “Yep, so have I.”

Haku was again keener to detail than his friend.

“Are you a ninja, sir?” Haku asked curiously, noting his forehead protector with the kanji for ‘oil’ on it.

The sage seemed to inflate, “Why yes! I am the Legendary Toad Sage Jiraiya, today gracing you with my presence!”

Naruto didn’t buy it.

“You still look like a crazy old man to me...” He snickered.

Jiraiya snorted, “You're right, Hokage-sama, I'll deal with you later.”

He then turned to Hiroshi, “I'm afraid I'm a bit behind on my research at the moment, but I'll come back in the morning to check up on the sand kid. And the smart-mouth too, he’s strayed too far from home.”

The pudgy man nodded, “I'd appreciate it. Will he be alright until then?”

Jiraiya was busy trying to air out a saturated note pad, “Er...yeah, just keep that squirt hydrated and he'll live. He’s too exhausted to cause any more trouble.”

The merchant nodded uncertainly and Haku looked curiously at the Toad Sage. He wasn't exactly what he had expected a ninja to be like and apparently Naruto shared his opinion.

Jiraiya departed, cursing under his breath that his notes had been ruined.

‘Damn sand kid...’

The next morning dragged in slowly.

Sunlight peaked over the horizon and Hiroshi was snoring loudly. It had been a difficult night.

To his good fortune, Naruto managed to tucker himself out and fall asleep. Haku on the other
hand kept a quiet, overnight vigil over the nameless boy even against Hiroshi’s wishes. He was determined to make sure that he would be alright.

It wasn’t easy. Haku had the task of giving the boy water, and at some points slipped in and out of consciousness while on watch. Hiroshi had gone through it as well, yet he would often wake up to the incoherent rambling of the red head and his thrashing.

The man could only wonder what made him suffer so. It appeared that Jiraiya hadn't explained enough when he said to keep him hydrated. In Hiroshi's opinion, he needed to be hospitalized; he was just that ill.

At one point in the night, Hiroshi thought the boy was dying when he suddenly began screaming bloody murder into the darkness of Kuro’s streets. He had certainly given Hiroshi and his wards a good scare.

Naruto, however, almost immediately fell asleep again afterwards, and Haku was desperately trying to console the unconscious boy. Hiroshi wasn't sure there was much else they could do besides what Jiraiya had instructed.

Hiroshi had to wonder: Did the Legendary Sage in fact know what was afflicting the boy? He had only a brief look at him and had not made a big deal out of it, even though he appeared to be at death’s door.

Or maybe the emotional equivalent.

Haku was still awake at daybreak.

He was slowly beginning to nod off as the sun rose in the sky. He was too anxious over the boy’s condition to get any rest. Still, he began to succumb to the effects of his sleep deprivation.

Haku rested his chin against his chest. The bowl that had once contained water for the red haired boy was empty, and slipped out of his hands silently.

‘I can’t fall...asleep...’

Haku began to snore gently just as Naruto sat up and stretched. He looked over to Haku, noticing his predicament. He stood up and looked towards Hiroshi who was next to him on the ground.

‘I guess I’ll let them sleep. Now I have a chance to train!’

His definition of training was jumping around through the treetops until one could do it blindfolded. And so he went on his merry way. ‘When I finish, I'll make ramen for everybody and see how the new kid is doing!’

Naruto leapt up into a nearby tree and wondered to himself if he would be able to show Haku to jump in the same fashion. It would be a helpful ninja trait.

Two green eyes blinked open.

The light was painful at first, but after adjusting, they were able to take in the surrounding sights.

‘Where am I and...why am I so comfortable?’

Gaara turned his head slightly to look at the cushion he had been resting on. A bedroll. ‘I'm not on the ground?’
He then turned to his right and nearly had a heart attack upon finding another person so close to him just sleeping.

‘I thought everyone was afraid of me!’

Gaara gazed at the snoring boy. He felt strange seeing someone so relaxed. The boy curled up beside him on the cart seemed so peaceful…it was an expression he could hardly recall.

Gaara observed the dark haired boy beside him curiously. He couldn't be much older than himself and he appeared careworn.

He sat up groggily. His head felt like a scrambled egg, and he rubbed his temples gingerly while he tried to remember what happened. Yashamaru, Temari, Kankuro…and his escape from Suna.

What a nightmare it had been. The voice that had been inside his head was at the moment silent, although during the night he could hear it whispering to him.

It told him to get up and do terrible things. Yet he was in no physical or emotional state to obey and so the voice died down. But he didn't know how long it could last.

Haku had felt the shift in weight on the cart, and opened his eyes a margin to observe the movement. ‘Oh...he's awake...' He felt his eyelids droop again.

‘He's awake!’

Haku's eyes snapped open in surprise: the ailing boy was awake and seemed to be just fine, as Jiraiya had predicted.

The boy looked inquisitively at Haku, as if he had no idea how to act.

He really didn't.

Haku couldn't help but smile as he so often did, “Good morning! How are you feeling?”

Gaara's brain was experiencing an overload. ‘What did that boy just say? Was he just nice to me? Does he actually care?’

Haku was still smiling even when he gained no immediate response. The boy seemed frazzled and unaware of what had occurred between the time he had pleaded for help and the present.

“I'm Haku.” He spoke again, trying to encourage the boy to talk.

The response was concise.

“Gaara.”

Haku nodded, “Nice to meet you, Gaara.”

Gaara felt compelled to say the same; it was nice to meet Haku, a person who wasn't out for his blood, but no words came to him.

Somehow Haku seemed to understand, “Are you thirsty?”

He didn't wait for an answer, and he stood to refill the bowl with water from a nearby well. Gaara stared at the sight and thought to himself, 'Wow, I must have died and went to that really nice place.'
While Gaara sat on the cart contemplating the situation he was startled by a loud shout from his right.

“Hey! Haku! Is he awake yet?’

‘Oh no! I must be in that other place!’

As Haku walked back bearing a full bowl of water he regarded Naruto as he returned to the cart. Gaara was sitting up wasn't he? Did Naruto really have to ask?

Oh well.

“Yes Naruto. This is Gaara.”

With a flying glomp, Naruto spastically soared through the air and onto the cart to greet Gaara. He landed a bit too forcefully and knocked Gaara from his seat at the edge. He tumbled to the ground in bewilderment.

What a first impression that was.

“Woops! Sorry Gaara,” Naruto pulled him up and dusted off his shirt, “You know Haku and I were really worried when you blew in here and-”

“What is the matter with you children?” Hiroshi was awake, and not pleased with how Naruto had been throttling the red haired boy.

The blonde boy rubbed the back of his head sheepishly, “I didn't mean to send him flying like that, honest!”

“Here you go.” Haku handed the bowl of water to Gaara and he gratefully accepted it.

“...thank you.”

Naruto huffed.

“Take it easy, Naruto, he’ll be fine.” Hiroshi chuckled, patting the boy's head.

Naruto considered his actions for a moment and decided to emulate Haku’s behavior, in the hope he could make another friend.

“I'll make us some breakfast,” Naruto volunteered, impressing Haku and Hiroshi, “Maybe you can tell us how you got here, Gaara?”

Gaara finished gulping down the water he had been given. He nodded to them, not very sure how to explain it.

While Naruto was busy fishing through his bag for ramen, Hiroshi was relieved to see Jiraiya appear. He looked very pleased and he was flipping through a new notepad.

“Well, well,” The sage got a good look at Gaara, “It seems like the sand kid is alright.”

Gaara looked towards Jiraiya strangely. He was having a hard time getting used to all the odd people he met. Haku watched Jiraiya with admiring eyes, while Naruto only sniffed disdainfully at his presence.

“Kid, what's your name?” Jiraiya was never too blunt.
Gaara gave the man a fierce look, inclined to bite back, ‘Why should you care?’ Or ‘Leave me alone! For the first time I've actually met some nice people.’

But what he said was, “Gaara.”

He had a default response. Jiraiya put his research pad away and went over to the red haired boy beside the cart. He had overheard a rumor a few days earlier that the Kazekage's youngest child had been reported missing.

Even more curious was that small squads of chunin and jounin had been quietly dispatched to search for the boy throughout the five countries had not recovered him yet. It was unusual that the Kazekage wouldn't start an uproar amongst all of the hidden villages when his son had vanished.

The smell of foul play hung in the air.

There had to be a reason for the boy's disappearance.

Jiraiya still wasn't very interested in such a chaotic political situation, but the fact that the boy named Gaara had blown into Kuro in a whirlwind of sand, causing him grief in the process, was enough to make him suspect the kid was the one in question.

Gaara's intense eyes reflected a painful experience.

And his use of sand made Jiraiya conclude that the boy was certainly the Kazekage's son. He knew for a fact that the Fourth Kazekage could manipulate gold dust, and he had a hunch that his children may also carry such an ability. He had also heard through the grapevine that the jinchuriki of Suna was unpredictable and dangerous despite his young age.

“Let me have a look at your arm, Gaara.” The Toad Sage tried to be casual about it.

Gaara looked at Haku and then to Hiroshi; they didn't seem to object. He lifted his arm and let Jiraiya inspect it, not caring for the reason why he wanted to do so.

‘I thought so…this must be the imperfect seal of the Shukaku.’

In his vast knowledge of seals, he quickly recognized Gaara's 'ailment'. Not only did he have the jinchuriki from Hidden Leaf on his hands, but he had also discovered the one missing from Suna as well.

‘Boy do I need a drink…’

“Alright.” He allowed Gaara to lower his arm and Naruto and Haku took a seat beside the boy. Naruto passed around cups of instant ramen. Haku, remembering how Naruto had devoured his noodles the last time, felt his appetite disappear again.

Gaara only picked at the ramen disinterestedly.

Hiroshi turned to the sage, “Well, is anything wrong sir?”

‘No, unless I admit the fact that we have two demon-jailers right in front of us. Heh! I doubt the Kazekage wants Gaara back for friendly reasons, now...how do I break it to the merchant?’

“Nothing is, er…wrong per se. However, I'm under the strong impression that I should bring these two back to Konoha with me for safety purposes.” Jiraiya indicated Naruto and Gaara who were slurping noodles.
Gaara paused, his eyes widened and he turned to Naruto, “...this is...good.”

Naruto was thrilled, “I'm glad ya like it Gaara!”

Gaara couldn't believe how friendly the blonde boy was, although he did find his volume a bit high.

Haku gingerly nibbled at the noodles, forcing the image of a binging Naruto out of his mind. Hiroshi watched them interact.

“Why only Naruto and Gaara?” He had to ask.

“I believe they would be of special interest to the Hokage. Naruto especially, since he ran away from home.” Jiraiya didn't want to get into too much detail.

“I understand. It would be better that way. I'm in no position for supporting children on my own, and they deserve a much better life than what I'd offer,” Hiroshi agreed, “But, if you must take Gaara and Naruto then I would like you to take Haku as well.”

Jiraiya mentally groaned, ‘Aw crap...I mean two is already bad enough...’

The fat man noticed the disapproving look on the Toad Sage’s face, “It's the only thing I'd ask of you! The boy needs training as a ninja and Konoha is where he can get it, right?”

‘Damn, how do I weasel out of this one?’

“Er, well, I'm not in the habit of bringing just any kid to Hidden Leaf to become a shinobi. His chances of becoming one are slim,” Jiraiya tried to be convincing, “Sorry, I'm only taking these two.”

Hiroshi sighed, “I see.”

‘I'm sorry Haku, maybe I can take you there myself one day...’ The hefty man lamented inwardly.

Haku had been listening and was completely devastated by the news. He turned to Naruto and Gaara, painful silence gripping him. ‘How can I become a ninja now?’

Furious, Naruto threw his ramen cup at Jiraiya.

“Oh yeah? Well, we're not going anywhere until you let Haku come with us!” Naruto grabbed the boy protectively by the shoulders and then turned to his red haired companion, “Right, Gaara?”

‘Haku is nice so why shouldn't he be allowed to go to Konoha?’

“Haku comes with us.” Gaara agreed and made Naruto’s face lit up.

‘What brats...’

Jiraiya frowned at the Kyuubi container, “...oh, fine. But I don't want trouble out of any of you, got it?”

Haku was once again jovial, “Thank you, Jiraiya-sama!”

The Toad Hermit smirked to himself, finally a bit of respect!

Although Hiroshi was happy it had somehow worked out for the three youngsters, he had also felt somewhat disappointed. He wouldn't have anyone once they went with Jiraiya to the Hidden Leaf
Jiraiya whipped out his notepad again and turned towards Hiroshi, “It’s settled. I'll be back at noon to pick them up. That should be enough time for good-byes right? Anyway, I have a bit of research to do until then.”

The merchant nodded, “Very well.”

The sage was gone a moment later, eager to continue his “research”

At that point, the three boys had finished their breakfast, although Naruto's had been cut abruptly short.

Naruto and Haku were chattering excitedly, while the more reserved Gaara listened, liking the way they described becoming shinobi. The merchant sighed to himself.

How hard could a farewell be?

“Parting gifts?” Haku asked as Hiroshi led them through a town market, “But Hiroshi-san, we don't need any gifts.”

Naruto begged to differ, “Presents would be nice.”

Gaara frowned at Naruto. Did he often take advantage of people this way? Or was this a special occasion? Haku shared his thoughts.

“No I suppose you don't,” Hiroshi replied, “But I want you to all have something to remember me by while you're off training to become ninja!”

“We won't forget you Hiroshi-san.” Haku said quietly.

Gaara detected the distress in the boy's voice, although Naruto was not as conscious of it. He made a bee-line for a dango vender and pointed to it enthusiastically.

“Hey, Hiroshi-san! I know what I want for my present!” The blonde boy was excited, “See, normally I would ask for ramen but I get ramen all the time. So if I get dango I'll think of you every time I eat it!”

Hiroshi saw the childish logic in his reasoning, “Alright, Naruto.”

Naruto was busy selecting his snack while Haku spoke to Gaara.

“Gaara, where exactly did you come from? If you don't mind my asking?” He asked quietly, knowing it was more of a personal subject.

“...the Village Hidden in the Sand.”

Haku nodded, “I see. I'm from the Water Country.”

Haku was easy to confide in, Gaara decided, although he wasn't prepared just yet to tell him how and why he had left Suna. Thankfully, the black haired boy didn't ask any more questions.

“Thanks, Hiroshi-san!” Naruto munches on his skewer of dango, and pranced back over to his companions.

Hiroshi then turned to Gaara. He hadn't known the boy for that long, but already he was
beginning to grow on him. He was reserved, almost shy. And his quiet nature was refreshing.

“Anything you had in mind, Gaara?” He asked.

Gaara was startled. ‘A present? For me?’

This was something he was sure wouldn't happen again to him for a very long time. He scanned the area, not seeing anything he really wanted. Typically, a child his age would want sweets or a toy, but when he did finally find something that struck his fancy, Hiroshi was slightly confused.

“I can use that.” Gaara pointed to a gourd that was large in proportion to his height. Hiroshi was puzzled why he would ever want such a strange thing as a parting gift.

“Are you sure Gaara? Do you really want...that?” Hiroshi clarified.

Haku also was perplexed, “Why would you want that?”

Gaara went up to the vender. An old woman watched as he removed the cork from the top of the gourd and then raised his hand. His companions watched in stunned silence as Gaara summoned the sand that was scattered all over the street.

There was quite a lot of it. The sand lifted off the ground at Gaara's whim and neatly slipped into the gourd. Hiroshi, although caught off guard by such power, understood why the boy wanted it.

A container.

Naruto and Haku watched in awe as they had before.

The blonde boy grinned to his friend, “Wow, he's kinda like you Haku, but with sand instead of water.”

Haku nodded, “Yes, I guess so.”

Hiroshi nodded to the red haired boy, “Alright Gaara. I'll get it for you if you want it.”

The old woman nearly had a heart attack watching, and quickly wanted to appease the boy with the frightening power, “Go on, just take it and go.”

How fortunate!

Gaara wrapped his arms around the large gourd and waddled back to his companions.

“I just want to keep my sand with me.” He explained.

Naruto nodded, “Yeah, I can see why. Hey Haku, maybe you should get one too but for water instead.”

Haku shook his head, “No, I...I don't want anything. I'll always remember Hiroshi.”

The merchant could understand why Haku was having a difficult time with the idea. Yes, Haku was overjoyed that he had the opportunity to go to the Village Hidden in the Leaves, but he was hesitant to leave Hiroshi.

The merchant had saved his life and become his dear friend in the process. It wouldn't be as difficult for Naruto and Gaara to say goodbye.

And Hiroshi admitted to himself that he would sorely miss the boy from the Water Country as
Hiroshi composed himself; this was no time to get emotional. The kids had a future now, and a seemingly bright one at that. It was all he had to know.

“Come on you three,” Hiroshi waved them on, “Let's get ourselves some lunch before Jiraiya-sama returns.”

Thankfully that would take a while.

The boys followed Hiroshi, all the while Naruto complained at why Haku hadn't gotten a present (and that he was wishing for more dango as well, but not for its sentimental value).

“There’s something I want you to have Haku,” Hiroshi told him as they walked into a tea house, “I know it would mean a lot to you.”

Haku was still firm in his decision, “But I don't want anything Hiroshi-san.”

The merchant chuckled, “Well that’s just fine Haku, but I want you to have it anyway.”

Gaara eyed the teacakes spread out on the table hungrily. It had been days since he had eaten properly, and he was about ready to eat a horse, or at least the remainder of all Naruto's ramen.

“Are ya hungry, Gaara?” Naruto gave him a slap on the back, “I am too!”

He apparently was always hungry.

And the close contact Naruto was introducing him to almost made Gaara want to give him a good whack. Still, he wanted to exercise more self-restraint; a small, first step on his way to learning to control his power. Even if it was tough to get used to, surely it was a change for the better.

Gaara wondered if Haku had the same feeling about Naruto.

After lunch, Naruto began to describe the beauty of Konoha as they returned to Hiroshi’s stand. Jiraiya was waiting for them.

The sage was busy with editing his book however, and wasn't too anxious for their arrival.

“Are there lots of ninja in your village, Naruto?” Haku absorbed all of what he was told, even if it had been slightly exaggerated.

“Yup! Tons of them!” He answered. He was eager to go home; he hadn't expected to miss it so much.

Gaara spoke up, “My village has lots of ninja too.”

Naruto squinted his eyes in realization, “Oh...yeah that's right. Where are you from again, Gaara?”

“He's from the Hidden Sand Village.” Haku informed him.

Naruto had heard of the place before, but not in detail, so he only nodded to Gaara. It was when he caught sight of Jiraiya his pleasant mood turned sour. He disliked the sage for a reason he could not yet put his finger on, even if he did hold a mild respect for the old nin. One day, he would understand what that “research” was all about.

“Hey, old man! Tell me again why we have to travel with you?” The blonde boy complained.
Jiraiya didn't even look up from his work, “Because I'm the only one around who can take your sorry little butts to Leaf...”

Naruto was offended, “Quit talking like that to us, old man!”

Naruto lacked the ability to practice what he preached.

“I apologize for my lack of respect, Hokage-sama, but you aren't exactly rolling out the welcome wagon either...” He muttered to himself after that, “...squirt.” Jiraiya couldn't believe that he had to be the one to find the runaway Kyuubi vessel.

Gaara frowned at Naruto as well as the sage. He had to put up with this bickering for the entirety of their journey? He wasn't looking forward to it.

“Haku,” Hiroshi beckoned the farm boy over, “Come here for a moment will you?”

He slipped away from his companions and went up to his guardian, “Yes, Hiroshi-san?”

“Take this,” The fat man handed Haku a long scarf; it looked almost new, “It's from the Water Country. I just want you to have something from your homeland while you're...while you're training.”

It wasn't very useful since the weather would be warmer in Fire Country, however the boy was overcome with gratitude. The gift meant a lot to him.

Haku tied it around his waist and beamed up at the thoughtful merchant, “I...um, thank you Hiroshi-san!” The boy felt tears sting his eyes but he held them back.

He was supposed to be happy right? He was going to a better place where he could achieve his goal. So why was he so sad?

“I know you've been through much, Haku, even if you haven't told me all about it,” Hiroshi patted him on the head, “But I just want you to know that I believe in you-”

The merchant turned to the other boys as well, “I believe in all of you. I know that you'll all make fine shinobi someday.”

Jiraiya snickered inwardly, doubting the notion. They hadn't shown very much promise and had all appeared to be misfits. Still, he knew it was a sentimental moment and he decided not to ruin it.

Naruto sniffled loudly; he too had grown attached to the old merchant.

He and Haku gave Hiroshi a big hug, and when Gaara only watched with mild curiosity, Naruto dragged him into it as well, nearly suffocating him.

Jiraiya sighed; did farewells really have to be this difficult?

Hiroshi chuckled at Haku and Naruto's sad faces, (and Gaara's blue one) they certainly were an odd bunch; a group of outcasts, but they were his outcasts, and he was fond of them all.

“Well, farewell for now,” He each patted them on the head one last time, “I'm sure we'll see each other again sometime.”

Naruto nodded, “R-right...” He then chuckled to himself, “Heh, I'm starting to sound like Hinata--chan...boy do I miss her!”
Gaara turned to Naruto, “Who's...Hinata?”

While Naruto rambled on about his only friend in the Leaf Village, Haku smiled at Hiroshi.

“I promise Hiroshi-san, I'll become a strong ninja and...I'll come back and take you to Konoha when I can.”

The merchant nodded to Haku, “I know, Haku.”

“Are you ready?” Jiraiya asked, putting away his naughty book, “You don’t have to go if you don’t want to.”

“I apologize Jiraiya-sama, it’s time,” The merchant nudged his wards along, “Go on now boys.”

“Bye Hiroshi-san!” Naruto bade him farewell, ready to go and see Konoha again, busying himself by making verbal jabs at the toad hermit.

Gaara's green eyes scanned over Hiroshi for a moment, but a small smile formed on his face, “Goodbye.”

After the Kazekage's son had followed after Naruto, Haku looked up at Hiroshi, still hesitant to leave.

“Go on, Haku. It's alright.” The fat man assured him.

Haku nodded, ‘I...I must go to the Hidden Leaf Village.’

“Come on Haku! Let's GO!” Naruto called back to him.

With one last smile, Haku ran after his friends, promising to himself that he would make Hiroshi proud.

Three days later, Jiraiya was about ready to kill himself.

Or at least kill Naruto.

He was becoming insufferable, while Gaara and Haku at least remained quiet. Still, Jiraiya wasn't the paragon of patience and understanding these days, nor was he a very nurturing parent-figure either. He was very out-of-practice with kids and it was beginning to show.

“Hey! Old man! Are we there yet?” Naruto walked alongside the sage while Gaara and Haku kept a safe distance away.

Jiraiya's explosion was imminent.

“Well? Hey old man! Are you listening?”

The Toad Hermit's brow twitched, ‘I'm gonna strangle this kid!’

“Naruto,” Haku tried to prevent the explosion, “I think Jiraiya-sama is a bit tired.”

The blonde boy squinted his eyes, “Ya really think so?”

Jiraiya led them along in wrathful silence, trudging with heavy steps and bloodshot eyes.

“He looks fine to me.” Naruto shrugged.
Gaara shook his head, “Haku means you're bothering Jiraiya-sama.”

‘Just stay calm; we're only a day's walk from Konoha-’

“Am I bothering you Toad-Sage-Guy?” Naruto couldn't restrain himself.

“Yes.”

The Kyuubi's vessel smiled in satisfaction, “Good!”

PUNT

Naruto was booted into the tops of a nearby oak tree like a field goal.

Suddenly, Jiraiya felt much better, “Now, where were we?”

Haku watched as Naruto hurtled down through the branches, his face was red with indignation.

“What was that for, old man?” The boy squawked, “What do I look like? A football?”

Jiraiya paused and looked at him, “No, I just had to put some space between us. Now let’s be on our way.”

Gaara and Haku followed, but Naruto pounced on Gaara's gourd.

“Hey, wait a minute guys!” Naruto was still determined to get on the sage’s nerves. “See, if he really is a legendary ninja he should be able to teach us some ninja techniques and stuff! I want to see him prove it!”

Haku and Gaara halted. Although their energetic friend went a bit overboard at times, they were interested in ninja skills as well.

Jiraiya groaned when he noticed he had lost the favor of his other two wards, “Aw, sheesh, not you too! I mean you guys were actually pleasant! Are you really going to listen to this blonde squirt?”

Haku nodded.

The sage slapped his forehead in frustration.

Naruto folded his arms across his chest triumphantly, “Well? Let's see it old man!”

“You brat! We're only a few hours from Konoha and you have to pull this crap?”

“We’re not going anywhere until you teach us a ninja skill.” The blonde confirmed.

Jiraiya cursed under his breath and then smiled devilishly at him, “Alright then, I'm sure this won't take long.”

Gaara sighed to himself. Was Naruto the only one who didn't realize Jiraiya was going to give him a hard time?

“Of course it won't take long! I can take anything you dish out!”

Apparently yes.

Jiraiya shrugged, “Very well then. I'll test all three of you. We'll begin with the basics of chakra
control. I believe that you have all heard this term at least once, correct?"

Gaara and Naruto nodded, while Haku stood uninformed.

“What's chakra?”

Naruto was quick to answer his question, “It's the energy that helps ninja do stuff!”

Could he be any vaguer?

Gaara mumbled a better definition into Haku's ear while Jiraiya continued to explain.

“To start, I want you each to select a tree; a tall one. And climb it.” The sage stated simply.

Naruto laughed, “That's easy!”

“Is it? Well good for you, squirt, because there are few children your age I know who can get up a tree without using their hands.” Jiraiya added.

Naruto was floored.

No hands? Run up a tree? No jumping?

Gaara frowned, he wasn't very well acquainted with trees...this wouldn't be an easy task for him either.

“So...I suppose we just...focus our chakra in our feet?” Haku once again proved he had brains.

“Aaaand the farm boy gets it!” Jiraiya hollered, “Now, get to work! Oh...and here.”

He handed each of them a kunai, “Make a mark when you reach your limit. I doubt you'll get very high.”

Jiraiya made himself comfortable on a nearby boulder and took out his newest volume of Icha Icha Paradise for editing.

Naruto still was adamant about impressing the sage, “No problem!”

He lunged for the oak tree while Gaara and Haku watched. He built a tremendous amount of speed, but lost focus when he began to travel in a vertical direction. Naruto tumbled backwards with a startled cry.

The record to beat: 4 inches.

The Toad Hermit glanced over at the boy who was bent double at the base of the oak.

“What's the problem squirt? You didn't have any trouble getting up into that tree before!”

Gaara turned to the sage, “...you helped him.”

True: in a painful way. Jiraiya smirked, “Oh, that's right...”

Naruto stood up and brushed himself off, “Oh yeah? I'll show you!”

This time Gaara ran up a tree as well, although he didn't exceed Naruto's record by very much, he at least landed on his feet. Haku felt nervous; he had never used chakra before, at least, he hadn't noticed himself using it.
He got a better grip on the knife in his hand and concentrated. ‘Okay, I need to focus my chakra...focus it to my feet...’ He had made the educated guess that the force he drew upon to manipulate ice was what this “chakra” was. He did his best to feel it out intentionally.

The grass beneath his sandals bent away from the force of his chakra, though Haku didn't let the achievement get to his head. ‘Now...how much do I need to use?’

That was the question of the day.

It seemed like Gaara and Naruto hadn't figured that out yet; neither of them had gone beyond ten feet as they dashed at their trees. ‘I guess I'll have to take a chance...’

Haku got a running start while Gaara and Naruto both came back down to the ground. They paused to watch him.

The dark haired boy ran and then felt himself set foot on his chosen tree.

‘Focus...my...chakra...’

His feet stuck to the tree.

So naturally he kept running.

And running.

And he felt no need to use his kunai, he was so focused, he knew that he wouldn't fall.

‘Whoa, Haku!’ Naruto gasped and Gaara watched in shock as the farm boy went up...and didn't come back down.

Suddenly, there was a thudding sound, and a few leaves floated down from the cedar tree. Jiraiya looked up and smirked.

“The farm boy really does get it...” He muttered, fascinated.

It was unprecedented. This was probably no ordinary farm-kid.

“I...I'm at the top Jiraiya-sama.” Haku announced, still surprised over what he had accomplished.

The sage nodded, “I can see that. It appears you have perfect chakra control, Haku. Come back down and we'll try something a bit harder for you.”

He then turned back to the other two boys, “Hey, did I say you could stop?”

Determined now more than ever, Gaara and Naruto began racing up their respective trees with twice the previous effort.

While Jiraiya led Haku to a nearby pond, he considered to himself that Gaara and Naruto had a difficult time with their tasks because of all the chakra they had to tame. They both had immense reserves.

He turned to the farm boy and pointed to the small pond behind him, “You did well, kid! Now, apply the same concept to the water. Focus your chakra to your feet, and you can walk across the surface.”

Haku found it all too easy. Water? Water was completely at his command, although, that was
something Jiraiya was unaware of thus far.

Haku nodded, “Yes.”

Gaara watched from his tree as Haku strolled out onto the water's surface effortlessly. He gestured for Naruto to observe as well. They were both riddled with envy that it came so easily to him.

Haku walked back and forth over the pond, as if he were still on land. Even though he had the opportunity to brandish his power, he feared Jiraiya may not take it as well as Naruto had. So he hid it.

Jiraiya sighed, what next? Ask him to fly? ‘I bet he can do it too…’

“Alright Haku, that's enough. Hiroshi was right about you; you have the makings of a great ninja, but that doesn't mean you can slack off, got it?” Jiraiya said as he left the water.

Haku nodded, “I understand.”

The farm boy quickly rejoined his companions to give them a few tips.

A brilliant farm boy and two jinchuriki...

‘I need a drink.’

With Haku's advice, Naruto and Gaara were able to make it half way up their trees. Yet after a short while, Jiraiya herded them on, assuring them they would have plenty of time to practice in Konoha.

By the end of that day, Naruto had deflated himself, reducing his insults to the sage once every 15 minutes instead of twice every five.

The three boys were overwhelmed at the sight of Konoha's gates. Even Naruto was relieved to have arrived back at his village, even though the people there may not be as happy to see him.

Jiraiya looked up to the guard standing watch.

“Hey! Open the gate will you?” His voice was gruff, “I need to speak with the Hokage.”

“Of course, Jiraiya, sir,” The guard answered respectfully and then looked to the sage’s companions as the doors slowly swung open, “Um, you’ve brought children with you?”

The three boys looked at each other excitedly. Konoha at last!

The Toad Hermit sighed.

“I was trying to be a good person and bring them to a decent village, but they are making it really hard for me. You want ‘em?”
Friends Hidden in the Leaves

Chapter Soundtrack: “Peruna” by Akeboshi

Jiraiya, The Legendary Toad Hermit is highly regarded (usually) for his amazing abilities including his marvelous sealing and summoning techniques, as well as the Rasengan. His knowledge and skills are well respected.

But, somehow, all that knowledge becomes irrelevant when one is hunched over at a bar, visibly distressed, with three small children nagging at said person.

Well, at least one was still nagging...

“Hey old man! What are you doing? We've been here for hours so let's get going!”

Naruto stood on a stool next to the sennin and bombarded him with questions, while Haku and Gaara sat quietly waiting for further instruction. Konoha wasn't what they had expected, or rather, Jiraiya was a poor tour guide.

Either way, they hadn't done very much since their arrival.

They had been in the Leaf Village for about two hours, and Jiraiya had made a bee line for the nearest tavern, wanting to strip away the tension Naruto had so generously bestowed him with during their return journey.

It wasn't the wisest move.

The bartender wasn't sure what to make of the sage sitting there with three small children at his side. He didn't say anything and went about serving Jiraiya, after all, a well-paying customer doesn't need their privacy invaded. Although, the yappy kid was annoying.

“Old man, when am I gonna get to go see Hinata-chan?” Naruto bent down to get a better look at the buzzed ninja.

Jiraiya had his head bowed down on the counter, and he mumbled a feeble response to the blonde boy. Who was this 'Hinata' he kept rambling on about anyway? Psh...he could care less.

Why the hell did he have three kids with him anyway? He had been through this kind of rigmarole twice in the past! But a third time? ‘Third time's a charm…’

Two jinchuriki and a farm boy…it was the oddest congregation he had ever seen.

“I'm gonna need another drink...” The sennin muttered; his head lolled weakly on his folded arms.

Neither Haku nor Gaara could make heads or tails of the sage’s odd behavior. Haku, being the most perceptive, had come to the conclusion that whatever was going on was not the most wholesome activity they could be participating in.

“What is this stuff anyway?” Naruto yanked the bottle of sake out of the man’s hand easily. He inspected it with an inquisitive sniff, and Haku and Gaara watched curiously while he took a sip.

Jiraiya wasn't moving, and Gaara could hear the faint snores coming from under the man’s mop of white hair. Why is he sleeping now? He was wide awake a second ago...
In disgust, Naruto spat out the strong rice-wine, “Nyah! That stuff is gross!”

He handed the bottle to Haku, who passed it along warily to Gaara.

‘Why did Haku just hand me this?’ Gaara inspected the alcoholic beverage. Jiraiya had been guzzling down its contents for quite a while; there must have been a reason.

Before Haku could advise him against it, Gaara tipped back the sake and put the bottle down.

‘Whoa.’

“This stuff is...” Gaara’s face scrunched in reaction to it. It was nasty.

“Hey old man! Snap out of it!” Naruto gave him a few reviving slaps on the cheek, “I'm fed up with waiting for you!”

“Ugh...” Jiraiya heaved himself up and looked to the kids.

A blonde, a redhead and then dark hair. The colors made him dizzy, but he stood up anyway and paid the tab for his numerous drinks.

“Thank you very much, sir.” The bartender wasn't sure if the sennin had meant to leave as much money as he did, but again, he said nothing about it.

“Be careful, he doesn't look so well.” Haku led the drunken sage along by the hand carefully, “Maybe he had too much to drink...”

The four of them walked down the street with Jiraiya muttering insensible babble and occasionally pausing to shake his head as if he were some sort of irritated dog.

“Now that you mention it...” Naruto acknowledged the ninja's state, “He does look a bit sick. We'll take him back to my place for a rest.”

They agreed it was the best course of action if the sennin had to be such a burden.

Gaara tugged his gourd along, it swung gently on his back while he walked beside Naruto. The Village Hidden in the Leaves was much different than his home. Trees and plants were everywhere and there was not a grain of sand to be found.

The red haired boy had even been surprised he was shivering slightly, for he was not yet adjusted to the cooler temperature of Konoha.

‘This is the place where I can learn to control my power and...’ The thought of his painful departure from Suna glanced across his mind again, ‘...maybe I can stop the voice from talking to me...’

He was thankful he didn't have to listen to the psychopathic demands of the demon imprisoned inside of him for the moment. But any time the voice returned would be too soon.

‘I'll just ignore it then.’

Suddenly, Jiraiya sniffed and then appeared to have snapped out of his funk.

“Oh, my head...wait a minute,” The sage groaned, “Where are you taking me?”

“To Naruto's place.” Haku answered.
Jiraiya was less than pleased with that response, “Like hell you are! That place is probably a nest of wild animals and ramen!”

Naruto whipped around and snarled at the halted ninja, “What? Fine! You can't come then!”

They just stood there, wondering what to do. Jiraiya quickly realized that disorganized six-year-olds and a wicked buzz didn't mix.

“We're going to the Hokage,” The man announced, “There's a lot of explaining I have to do on all three of your accounts, especially you, you little brat!” He pointed to Naruto.

It was becoming increasingly obvious that Jiraiya and Naruto lived to bother each other.

“I only did what I had to do…” Naruto retorted, but knew that he shouldn't have so recklessly fled from his village.

“Sure…”

The three children followed Jiraiya in the opposite direction, and ahead of them a large tower came into sight.

Haku looked up, observing the structure as they approached. Back in the Water Country he hadn't ever seen a building so tall before.

“What is that?” He murmured.

Naruto quickly answered, “That's the Hokage's tower! Cool huh?”

It wasn't anything new to Gaara. He recalled a similar tower that had been built for the Kazekage as well in Suna. ‘My father is the Kazekage…and he only wants me dead…’ The boy considered.

Would the Hokage want the same?

Sarutobi Hiruzen blew a puff of smoke slowly from between his teeth.

“Naruto, the last thing I need is to send a search party after a young boy such as yourself.” The Hokage sighed, “Your safety is of great priority, however you should know better than to abuse my protection.”

The Kyuubi container stood guiltily in front of the Hokage, while Haku, Gaara and Jiraiya stood behind him and watched.

A rebellious expression lingered on the blonde boy's face even while the Hokage lectured him on the path to becoming a shinobi and a respected citizen of Konoha.

“It isn't proper for anyone, child or adult, to run about and do whatever he or she pleases,” The Hokage added while he inhaled on his pipe.

“I will have your word that from now on you will remain inside of Konoha until you are told otherwise by myself or an instructor, is that clear?”

“…yes, Hokage-sama.” Naruto's voice was low and annoyed.

It was just a bit of ‘training’, no big deal right?

Apparently the Lord of the Leaf Village thought otherwise.
Naruto was tired of listening to adults condescend...he would rather visit a friend waiting for him by his favorite spot!

And what did these wise elders really expect? Naruto wondered to himself as the Hokage continued on about showing respect and obeying rules: he had no family, no parents; no one and nothing to teach him anything. *They want me to follow rules, but hardly anyone talks to me! I find out what I do wrong after I do it and then they yell at me!*

He didn't have anyone to tell him anything. Not even that socks were supposed to match when you wore them...or that girls get upset when the toilet seat is left up. The common-sense things that others were taught by parents and families he had to discover on his own.

Always the hard way.

After ending his lecture, the Hokage turned to Haku, “And who is this?”

Jiraiya nudged him forward, “Well? Go on kid.”

The dark haired boy stepped up and bowed respectfully, “I am Haku of the Water Country, Hokage-sama.”

It was a pleasant change for Hiruzen to talk to a polite child for once. Between Naruto and his young grandchildren he was *constantly* being challenging by youngsters.

“Do you have a family name, Haku?”

The farm boy paused. The others had often introduced themselves with family names (with the exception of Gaara), and he felt awkward when he couldn't give an answer.

“I...I don't know my surname, Hokage-sama.” Haku replied honestly.

The old man nodded, a wreath of smoke ringed around his head, “I see...”

Hoping he wouldn't have to, Jiraiya sighed when he spoke up for the boy.

“As far as I can tell, this kid came from a farm on the lands that surrounded the Mist Village,” The sennin leaned in and lowered his voice, “It's *really* suspicious. This kid may have lived a commoner’s life, but his chakra control is so advanced he must have shinobi lineage.”

The Third understood, “You suggest he is of ninja descent?”

“There’s no other explanation,” Jiraiya shrugged, “It's freaky. He could be a survivor of one of the clans that had been ravaged in Mist during the war.”

Haku had listened carefully and faintly understood. He dimly recalled his father ranting about he and his mother belonging to the ‘clan-people' before he had been killed.

“I am descended from a clan,” Haku said suddenly, startling his companions as well as the skilled ninja, “My father told me I was, so he...he tried to...”

“He what?” The sennin was impatient with his hesitation.

Haku hadn't expected he would have to confess to his family tragedy upon arriving in Konoha. Although he feared that admitting the truth would affect his chances for ninja training, he decided it was worth the risk.
He looked at Gaara and Naruto and then to the Hokage.

“He killed my mother...and then he tried to kill me.”

There was a silence.

Naruto and Gaara only stared at their docile friend; never had they expected that gentle Haku could have been through such a horror.

Jiraiya and Hiruzen were less surprised.

“So he was fearful then,” The Hokage then looked directly at Haku, “How did you survive?”

“I...I ran away.”

Jiraiya saw through the lie immediately and shook his head. The Hokage had already assumed the answer.

“Very well, your story is proof enough, since you have no ties to the Hidden Mist Village. You are welcome here,” The Sandaime declared, “I only have one question for you, Haku.”

“Yes sir?”

“Can you tell me of any special abilities that you have?” The Hokage asked.

Naruto couldn't keep his mouth shut, “Yeah! He can control water! It's SO cool!”

Jiraiya lightly whacked the blonde in the back of the head, “Shut up, squirt. He didn't ask you!”

Naruto glared viciously at the sennin.

“What Naruto said is true,” Haku said quietly, “Water and ice...I can use however I want.”

Jiraiya raised an eyebrow, “Er...I didn't know about that one. Heh, it looks like we have another unique Kekkei Genkai in Konoha, eh Hokage-sama?”

Naruto pouted even more. He had at last realized Jiraiya had been sarcastic while referring to him as the Hokage. Gaara noticed Naruto’s reaction and sighed inwardly.

“Just more paper work really; there’s no use in prizing shinobi with blood limits over those that have none...” Sarutobi sighed, knowing that recording Haku's progress would span the course of the boy’s lifetime.

Despite the random child winding up in Leaf and needing to be raised, the information on one of the survivors of the Water Country’s old clans would be invaluable.

Seeing he was through, Haku went to stand by Naruto who had gone quiet.

Gaara took this as his cue and stood before the Sandaime.

“I already know who you are,” Hiruzen’s voice was guarded, “You are aware that your home is in Sunagakure, yes?”

Jiraiya mentally slapped himself.

Crap. He had forgotten the Hokage wouldn't be very pleased with having the One-Tailed jinchuriki as a resident. For political reasons, the Leaf Village was technically not supposed to
have more than one jinchuriki: the Kyuubi was promised to Konoha when the First Hokage had been arranging peace treaties. To take in anymore could anger any village that found out.

Would the Hokage even consider sending him back to Suna? Back to his death?

It was bad enough Gaara hadn't even responded to the hostile Hokage's question, but Jiraiya assumed his input may be the last straw for the Third.

‘Screw it.’

“Hokage-sama,” The sage chose his words carefully, having a hard time of doing so with his still-buzzing head, “You know as well as I that if the Kazekage was truly concerned with the boy’s welfare he would have doubled his efforts to locate him. I mean, sheesh, the kid’s in Konoha now! Obviously he wasn’t trying very hard to find him—”

“The Kazekage had ended his search two days ago, according to a report I received.” Sarutobi took a deep drag on his pipe.

“Oh, er...” Jiraiya hadn't been informed. What could he say? He was a hermit after all, and distanced himself from anything that didn't revolve around his precious research.

Gaara stood quietly while Haku and Naruto watched the discussion.

“So I guess he doesn't want the kid back then after all?” The sennin inquired.

“No, he assumes this child is dead...saving some work for him,” The Hokage answered simply, “It would be unwise to return Sabaku no Gaara to the Kazekage...who believes him to be long deceased.”

“You mean...he should stay here?”

The Hokage sighed, “...we'll have to keep this quiet.”

Jiraiya grinned to himself, “Well that will be a kick in the pants for him when the Chunin Exams roll around, huh? How will you explain that if the sand kid is participating?”

Hiruzen said nothing and took a very long drag.

“Where does Jiraiya-sama keep going to do his research?” Haku asked while Naruto led them through Konoha, drawing a few stares.

The sennin had once again left them up to their own devices.


“He leaves us alone a lot.” Gaara said quietly.

“He's just a jerk, that's why.” The blonde asserted.

Gaara, who walked behind Haku, suddenly paused when he felt a pair of eyes on him. He looked back, wondering who may have been inspecting him.

Haku noticed his actions and also stopped, while Naruto obliviously kept on walking.

“What is it Gaara?” The dark haired boy asked.
He said nothing in response, and noticed a set of curious white eyes examining him from across
the street. It was a boy, young like themselves, with long, dark hair tied back. He stood next to a
tall man who Gaara supposed was his father.

He felt a twinge of jealousy over the boy for a moment. He had never felt such attachment to
anyone in his family.

“Gaara?”

The boy kept watching him, as if he could see right through him. Gaara felt almost compelled to
lash out at him but he willfully suppressed the feeling.

Gaara turned back to Haku, “Nothing. Let's go.”

“Home at last!” Naruto leaped inside of his apartment and tossed his back pack aside.

Haku and Gaara gingerly ventured inside after him. It was a strangely decorated place.

The walls were painted a pale green, and there were potted plants placed in strange places
throughout the apartment. Laundry, both dirty and clean, was sprawled out covering the entire
floor. Gaara didn't have much of an opinion on Naruto's living space, but Haku did.

“Do you live here by yourself, Naruto?” Haku asked rhetorically.

The clueless blonde answered, “Yup, just me. I guess you guys will be staying here too. This is
gonna be great!”

Suddenly Gaara was as alarmed as Haku was. Live here? The place was in shambles!

“Naruto,” Gaara spoke up, “This place is a dump.”

Haku agreed and couldn't restrain a small laugh.

Naruto's cheeks brightened and he retorted, “Well I...I haven't been here in a while, that's all! I'll
have this place cleaned up in a jiffy!”

Gaara appeared skeptical about the comment. It looked as if the place hadn't been cleaned in
years.

Naruto scrambled around lifting armfuls of clothing and tossed them into a closet. Gaara watched
with amusement as Haku rushed to help him.

Haku was very orderly for a farm boy and felt the need to clean things. Either that or he felt bad
for the disorganized blonde and only wanted to assist him.

Gaara didn't make a move. What the heck was this? Weren't they supposed to be training to be
ninja? How was this anywhere near relevant to their goal?

Naruto finally stopped when the floor was visible, but Haku continued on cleaning other
miscellaneous objects.

“He's a bit weird isn't he?” Naruto asked Gaara while they observed him engaging in chores he
had often helped his mother with back in the Water Country.

“So are you.” The red head answered bluntly, then added, “...me too.”
Naruto grinned, “Heh! We're weirdoes!”

Gaara became quiet again. Was it even something to be proud of? Their individuality? He'd give anything to be normal so he could live a better life and not be hated by his village.

“Naruto,” Haku was currently in the kitchen, “Why don't you wash yourself up? You told us you wanted to see your friend soon.”

Naruto looked down at himself. Oh...

What had Jiraiya called it? 'Lord of the Flies'?

He was a mess like his apartment. And it wasn't very reassuring that Haku had been reduced to doing his dishes for him. How would they function together?

“Yeah, I guess I am kinda gross,” Naruto chuckled, “I'll clean up and then we'll go see Hinata-chan!”

As the blonde ran into the bathroom trailing dirt and leaves behind him, Gaara set down his gourd.

“Haku, please stop cleaning.” It bothered the red haired boy to watch Haku pick up after their loud friend.

“It's alright, I like to clean,” He replied while looking around for a dish towel, “It reminds me of home.”

It was quiet except for the sound of a shower running and Naruto babbling to himself. Gaara sat quietly in a chair in the kitchen, recalling what the Hokage had said.

“Did your father really try to kill you?”

Haku was silent for a minute and then answered, “He did.”

“My uncle tried to kill me.”

Haku looked at him, “Is that why you left your home?”

Gaara nodded.

Haku knew better than to ask how he had gotten away with his life. But judging by the similarities all three of them shared, he guessed they had both escaped by parallel means.

“Do you think Naruto...?”

“Probably,” Gaara answered shortly, “I don't know why anyone would want to hurt him though.”

“Maybe he just left Konoha to become stronger like he said,” Haku mused while drying a plate, “He said he has a friend so...maybe people like him.”

“Maybe.” Gaara wasn't sure why Naruto had left such a great village like Konoha in the first place. Something must have been wrong.

“Um, Gaara?”

“Hn?”

Haku smiled sheepishly to him, “Can you help me with the dishes? Naruto has left quite a mess.”
The red head groaned inwardly. He didn't like housework, but knowing their blonde companion he supposed he'd have to get used to it.

“Fine.”

Clean and excited, Naruto had practically shoved his friends out the door and ran to the Ninja Academy. Gaara was thankful he had decided to leave his gourd back at Naruto's apartment, because he was sure he wouldn't have been able to keep up with him bearing all the extra weight.

“Naruto slow down!” Haku called ahead to him. He and Gaara trailed behind the blonde who was running as if he were gunning for first place.

“Naruto, you said she'd be waiting for you so what's your rush?” Haku called again.

He slowed down to let his companions catch up, “I don't know. I just really want to see her I guess.”

Gaara gave Naruto an annoyed look while he took a moment to catch his breath. The blonde only laughed merrily. Hinata would be surprised to see him.

“Come on guys, hurry up! It isn't far!” Naruto could no longer wait and rushed ahead. With a sigh, Haku and Gaara followed, hoping they wouldn't have to do this often.

They passed by a squad of training genin as they neared the academy, and a few shouted some rude remarks to the blonde boy.

He was too busy to hear them. However Haku was rather appalled by their impolite language. Gaara began to doubt how Haku believed Naruto's fellow villagers liked him.

Suddenly, Naruto paused and then leapt up into the cover of a tree, gesturing for his friends to follow. Gaara leapt up as well, while Haku walked up casually, proud of his chakra control.

“Look there she is, see?” Naruto pointed to a swing on a nearby tree, where a dark haired girl sat.

“Who is that with her, Naruto?” Haku whispered.

She wasn’t alone.

A pink haired girl stood next to her, talking up a storm, while the quiet girl listened intently. Gaara thought his eyes were being fooled for a moment. Pink hair? He blinked a few times.

Naruto, on the other hand, was taken aback. He recognized both girls, but was still keen on impressing Hinata. After a silent moment of Naruto grinning to himself he stood up on the branch.

“Hey! Hinata-chan!”

Gaara and Haku shook their heads. What was the point of stealth if Naruto would only blow their cover by increasing his volume?

The white eyed girl immediately looked up into the tree, and her pink haired friend turned as well. Naruto jumped down and Gaara and Haku followed after a moment.

“N-Naruto-kun?” The quiet girl squeaked.
Haku noticed her timid voice. How could such a loud mouth and a shy girl become friends? Naruto ran up to her. His face was one big grin, “Hi Hinata-chan! I told ya I'd be back!”

She nearly fainted when he hugged her. Was this a dream?

“I-I know...” Hinata answered softly. Her face was so red it resembled the shade of Gaara’s hair.

“Hi...Naruto.” The pink haired girl said with a small smile.

Naruto looked over the top of Hinata's head, “Oh...Sakura, um...hi.”

Sakura? Gaara made note of her name, as did Haku. Time to get acquainted with the people of their new village.

Sakura appeared guilty-looking, and when the blonde finally backed away from Hinata, she bowed her head in apology.

“Naruto, I...I'm sorry for what I did to you. It wasn't fair. Ino she...” Sakura watched as the boy's face became mistrusting, “Ino...she wasn't nice. And I still want to be friends with you Naruto, I don't care what my parents say.”

Gaara and Haku watched the blonde boy carefully. For once his face appeared grim. What was going on?

“So, are we still friends?” Sakura asked uncertainly.

The blonde's frown melted away, “I think we can be.”

“You...you aren't mad?” The pink haired girl was relieved.

“No way! Friends stick together!” Naruto declared, brandishing his usual foxy grin, “Now, I want you two to meet my other friends I met outside Konoha!”

He grabbed Sakura and Hinata by the wrists and pulled them over to the two boys behind him. Haku immediately liked the girls. He could sense they were agreeable, “Hello, I'm Haku.”

Hinata nodded quietly while Sakura answered, “Nice to meet you!”

They turned to the red haired boy. He simply said, “Gaara.”

“Don't worry, he doesn't talk much anyway,” Naruto assured them, “And guys, this is Sakura-chan and Hinata-chan!”

Hinata wore a small smile and a huge blush, while Sakura was more open with them.

“So, where did you all meet?” The pink haired girl asked curiously.

“We all met each other in Kuro Town,” Haku explained, “It was more of an accident really, but we all want to become ninja.”

Gaara kept looking at Sakura's hair.

“Hinata and I are going to be ninja too!” Sakura announced, “We'll be the best kunoichi in the entire village!”
Hinata was silently praying that was true, since her father expected much from her.

Naruto looked curiously at Sakura, “So, Sakura-chan, where’s Ino?”

“Oh, she...” She lowered her voice, “...I decided that we can’t be friends anymore if she was going to be so mean to you.”

“You didn’t have to-”

“I know, but I wanted to,” Sakura smiled, “And Hinata-chan is the best! We spent all day yesterday pressing flowers.”

Hinata smiled, “Yes, it was nice.”

A voice came from behind them, “Hinata-sama?”

The children looked back at a tall, dark haired man and a young boy. They both had the same eyes as Hinata. Gaara recognized them from before and he frowned, sensing something strange about them.

“Hinata-sama,” The boy spoke again, “We should be going now.”

She nodded quickly, “Oh...yes, Neji-niisan.”

Hinata turned to her friends, “I...I should go home now.”

Sakura and Naruto appeared the most disappointed that she couldn’t stay.

“Can we see you tomorrow, Hinata-chan?” Naruto asked hopefully.

The girl took another look at Neji and his father, and the solemn expression on Hizashi’s face made it clear she would be confined to the Hyuga compound for a while.

“I...I don’t think so. I’m sorry.” She said softly, and she then turned to Haku and Gaara, “It was n-nice meeting y-you.”

Haku smiled, “It was nice to meet you too, Hinata-chan.” Gaara nodded in agreement, and watched as she went up to her uncle.

Naruto and Sakura appeared perplexed as to what was going on and why the tall man looked so upset. Neji looked at Gaara and Haku curiously, immediately recognizing, as his father had, that they were not natives of Hidden Leaf.

Before Neji could talk to the red haired boy he had seen before, Hizashi ushered them on, “Let’s go you two.”

Hinata waved goodbye to her friends as she fell in step with her uncle.

Naruto looked confused, “Neji-niisan? She never told me she had a brother!”

Sakura sighed, “She only has a little sister, Naruto. That was Neji, her cousin. She sort of considers him like a brother she can look up to.”

Still, he didn’t get it but nodded anyway.

“I saw them before.” Gaara said and Haku looked at him.
“You mean when we left Hokage-sama's tower?” He asked.

Gaara nodded.

Naruto folded his arms behind his head, “I wonder what has them all so freaked out.”

A sad look came over Sakura's face, “Didn't she tell you?”

The blonde looked at her oddly, “Tell me what?”

“Neji, Hinata's cousin,” Sakura continued, drawing Gaara and Haku's attention, “She told me something about a seal that he'll be getting tomorrow. She said it isn't good, and that they haven't told him about it yet.”

Haku didn't like the sound of it, “What kind of seal, Sakura-chan?”

“I don't know, she didn't say anything else after that.”

“Well that's dumb,” Naruto sniffed, still upset that Hinata had to go home so soon, “Why wouldn't they just tell him? Is it that bad?”

Gaara only frowned.

“He's a Branch Family member,” Sakura added, “They all get it I, guess, so the Main Family stays stronger.”

“Hinata-chan must be from the Main House of her clan then?” Haku realized.

“She is,” The pink haired girl sat down on the swing, “But she's really worried. She told me that she doesn't want Neji to have this seal put on him.”

“So don't let him get it!” Naruto resolved, “What's the big deal?”

There was a silence. Naruto's lack of understanding could be a pain at times.

“The point is its bad and we can't do anything about it.” Gaara said shortly. Family matters didn't have to be publicized in his opinion.

“Who says?” Naruto smirked, “We'll go find Hinata-chan tomorrow and see if we can help her, uh, her cousin.”

“You're crazy Naruto!” Sakura snapped, “Have you seen her house? It's huge! We'll never be able to get in.”

“We can get in,” Haku said, finding he liked Naruto's idea, “Jiraiya-sama has taught us how to climb trees using our chakra.”

“Yeah!” Naruto recalled, “We'll just climb up the side of her house if they won't let us in!”

Again, the pink haired girl was flustered, “What will you do about guards? You can't just sneak into someone's house whenever you feel like it!”

“We'll be careful!” The blonde insisted.

“You'll get caught! And then what?”

“I can handle the guards if we have to.” Gaara volunteered.
“You can't fight grown-ups!”

“Yes he can!” Naruto declared confidently and slapped Gaara's back, “Gaara’s sand-power is awesome!”

Sakura couldn't believe how arrogant they were being. She turned to Haku and Gaara.

“Naruto's being silly! We can see Hinata-chan another day! Are you really going to listen to him?”

Haku nodded.

Unbelievable.

“Boys are so stupid...” Sakura grumbled. Was she the only one that realized that the Hyuga compound was nearly impenetrable and off limits to unwelcome outsiders?

Gaara took a long look at Sakura. She was smart, he liked that about her. But still, Haku had sided with Naruto's idea. Haku was also smart.

Was this really a bright idea?

“I'm going too.” Gaara confirmed, not taking his gaze away from Sakura.

She couldn't have made it any clearer how they were being foolish. Yet, she still felt they should do something to help Hinata and her cousin.

“Well, if you really have to go, fine, but...” Sakura sighed, fearing she would regret it, “I'm coming with you!”
The Caged Bird Seal

Chapter Soundtrack: “Furaito” (Flight) by CHABA

The morning sun filtered down through an open window, illuminating Haku's angelic face. He rolled over under his blanket and after a moment rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

“Hmm...” Haku sat up with a well-rested stretch, welcoming the sunlight.

Yesterday, he had recalled, was the beginning of his life in Konoha. It wasn't all ninja training that he expected it would be but rather learning to live peacefully again.

It was something he could get used to.

He also found it a pleasant change to sleep under a roof for once after traveling with Hiroshi for so long...sleeping out in the cold. Haku sighed at the thought. How was Hiroshi doing?

‘I promised to make him proud...’ Haku smiled to himself. After seeing he had managed to impress Jiraiya as well as his friends, he felt he was well on his way in doing so.

The dark haired boy peered over from his spot on the couch. Not too far away was Naruto, snoring loudly in his bed while wearing a penguin nightcap. It was a comforting sight.

On the opposite side of the room was Gaara. He was sitting propped up against the wall with dark circles under his eyes. Haku was concerned.

“Did you get any sleep, Gaara?” Haku asked as he stood and folded his blanket.

The red haired boy shook his head, “...the voice keeps me up all night.”

Haku looked at him with worry, “What voice?”

Every night they had stopped on their journey to Hidden Leaf with Jiraiya, Gaara had the same excuse over and over again as he stayed up. Haku feared if he didn't eventually get some sleep he might go crazy.

But Naruto was a living testament that proved one didn't have to be deprived of sleep to be crazy.

Gaara noticed Haku's troubled face. It touched him that he and Naruto cared so much.

“It's alright. I'm okay so long as I get a chance to rest.”

“You still have to get some sleep eventually.” Haku replied softly.

Gaara turned his gaze back to the open window. He had watched his friends sleep all night with a mix of jealousy and fascination.

It was strange to have to watch Naruto and Haku sleep soundly while he just sat there; afraid to let the Shukaku possess him again.

A sparrow fluttered to the window sill and perched there, observing the apartment’s occupants curiously. Gaara couldn't help but smile. He liked Konoha. That was one thing he was sure of.

Haku quietly passed by the slumbering blonde and entered the kitchen. He had taken it upon himself to feed everyone that morning, and he investigated all of the cabinets and the refrigerator
to see if anything edible was present.

His luck wasn't very good. One sniff of a milk carton told Haku that he would have to be cautious as to not accidentally poison his friends.

“Gah...what smells so good?” Naruto's nose distinguished the wonderful aroma of food even during his sleep. He sprang out of his bed and paused when he saw Gaara seated on the floor, looking exhausted.

“Gaara, are you okay?” The blonde boy asked, “Come on, I smell chow!”

Gaara slowly got to his feet and followed Naruto to the source of the pleasant smell. Spread out on the table were three bowls containing rice and eggs with a side of miso soup.

Naruto grinned, “Haku! Where did you learn how to cook?”

He dove into his breakfast with an excited 'Itadakimasu!' while Gaara just observed Haku's handiwork. Apparently his talents extended beyond perfect chakra control and cleaning.

The black haired boy smiled at them, pleased that he had done well.

“My mother taught me many things.” He answered, “I would make things for her sometimes. Gaara, aren't you hungry?”

Gaara nodded and took a seat beside Naruto. His stomach growled. He felt as if he hadn't eaten in ages. Gaara eyed the rice in front of him warily.

“Itadakimasu...” He said softly before quickly bringing his chopsticks to his lips.

Haku was in an extremely pleasant mood that morning, and just couldn't extinguish the sweet smile on his face. In only a matter of minutes, Naruto had devoured every last morsel in front of him.

Haku sighed in slight annoyance. His energetic friend's eating habit was something he would never get used to.

“Oh, Naruto, I suppose later we'll have to go get some more food,” Haku announced, “There isn't much here.”

Naruto blinked at Haku and then chuckled sheepishly, “Heh heh, you're right. I can't cook well and I mostly just eat ramen all the time...”

“We've realized.” Gaara smirked.

Naruto huffed. Over time, Gaara's at first quiet/timid personality had become cooler as he got to know Haku and Naruto better. Yet, Naruto was able to see he was still being friendly.

“Right,” Haku nodded, “We can go later after we-”

“Go see Hinata-chan!”

The blonde's responses were becoming easier to predict. Haku smiled and nodded again before taking a bite of egg.

“Hey, check this out!” Naruto flashed a shuriken in front of Haku and Gaara's faces, “I found it
lying on the side of the road yesterday! I'm gonna start practicing how to throw it!"

“That's great Naruto.” Haku wondered how an expensive weapon such as a shuriken had been cast aside but it was Naruto's good fortune.

Haku had once heard the saying: 'finders-keepers' and believed it applied to any abandoned item. Suddenly Gaara spoke up, “What is he doing?”

Naruto turned to him, “Who's doing what?”

The three of them looked up, and saw none other than the Legendary Toad Sage balanced on a high tree branch next to a building while scribbling notes.

“Research maybe?” Haku suggested.

Naruto of course frowned, “What a weirdo...”

He leapt up into the tree to go insult the old ninja, and Haku and Gaara followed out of curiosity.

Before Naruto could bark at the sennin, his eyes strayed in the same direction the toad hermit's had. Jiraiya was peeping into a window, observing a...

“What the heck are you doing old man!” The blonde hollered.

Startled, Jiraiya seized Naruto and clapped his hand over the child's big mouth.

“Shut up ya little runt!” He hissed, “You want me to get caught?”

There was a muffled 'yes', and Haku and Gaara had also noticed the subject of Jiraiya's attention. Gaara scowled and Haku wore a look of utter repugnance.

“Jiraiya-sama!” Haku gasped, “It's not right to spy on ladies when...when they don't have their clothes on!”

“Ahh what do you know?” The sennin growled, “Hm, we better get down before she catches us.”

They leapt down from the cover of the tree and Naruto was released from Jiraiya's hold before he could gnaw his hand off.

“Old man you should be locked up for that!” Naruto barked in disgust, pointing an accusing finger at the sage.

Haku was also mortified and Gaara was gripped in a state of silent abhorrence.

Jiraiya snorted, “Its important research! Squirts like you are too young to understand. Now why don't you run along and go play with your little friends?”

Glad to be rid of the offended nuisances, Jiraiya resumed his post to continue his notes.

Haku stood blushing. He felt his respect for the legendary ninja wilting.

Naruto was still appalled and felt that no amount of insults could affect the perverted sennin after what they had witnessed. He turned to Gaara and mumbled something quickly into his ear.

He only shrugged.
With a 'pop', the cork sprang out of the top of Gaara's gourd, and with his arms folded, the red head let sand leak out surrounding Jiraiya's hiding place.

Haku and Naruto watched (Naruto especially pleased) as Gaara effortlessly flung the sage back out of the tree with his levitating sand.

“-the hell?”

Jiraiya was face-down on the ground and covered in sand before he could blink.

“You little shit!” Jiraiya growled at Gaara, “That's the second damn time!”

Gaara wore a small smirk, wondering if he should have done worse to the sennin. Naruto was rolling on the ground laughing, holding his sides.

“Ha ha! Ero-sennin! You had that coming!”

“Naruto, we should hurry and go find Sakura-chan now.” Haku reminded his friend.

“In a second, Haku,” Naruto was grinning, “I asked Gaara to do a bit more than that...”

Gaara stood with sand whirling in wait around his feet.

“But if we don't hurry to the Hyuga compound, then that boy will get the seal put on him-” Naruto muffled Haku before he could continue.

“Shh! We don't want Ero-sennin finding out!” The blonde hissed. Haku nodded in confirmation.

The words 'Hyuga compound' and 'seal' attracted the sennin's once undivided attention.

‘Now how would these three squirts know about the Hyuga Clan and their Branch Family's Caged Bird seal? They just got here!’ He frowned at Haku, wanting an explanation.

“What was that, farm boy?” Jiraiya inquired.

Naruto waved him off of the subject, “It's nothing old man! I thought you wanted us to go play with our little friends!”

Gaara's sand returned to his gourd. He saw there was no point in continuing to torture the sennin.

“Why don't you just go ahead with your nasty 'research’?” Naruto had successfully managed to divert the sennin's interest.

Jiraiya looked smug, “That's not a bad idea...”

In a flash, he had gone back to his hiding place, taking the blonde's advice.

Haku sighed, “Maybe later we should tell Hokage-sama what Jiraiya-sama has been doing?”

Naruto looked down at the shuriken he had discovered, “Yeah, maybe Hokage-sama will let me use him for target practice!”

Gaara smirked, “I don't think you need permission for that sort of thing, Naruto.”

As Jiraiya was about to persist in his research, he hadn't expected that his inspiration would be fully clothed and waiting for him.
But then again, what had he expected with all the raucous they had made?

There was an angry shout from inside the apartment; the kunoichi was not pleased.

“Shadow Snakes!”

Multiple, black snakes were launched at the sennin and wrapped themselves tightly around his face.

“Waah!” Jiraiya had no hope of escape after that point.

‘I swear, I’m gonna make those kids pay when I get out of this!’

Sakura was waiting for them in front of the Ninja Academy.

Once again, as if due to a magnetic force, Gaara couldn't peel his eyes away from her pink hair which had been done up in a ribbon.

“Naruto-kun! We better hurry!” Once they had arrived Sakura immediately set out in a run, “I don't know how much time we have, so we have to be quick!”

He grinned, “We're fine! Who's up this early anyway? I usually sleep until noon!”

“Not everyone is like you, Naruto.” Gaara pointed out, a bit touchy on the subject of sleep.

Naruto only laughed sheepishly, feeling optimistic since Gaara had given Jiraiya a piece of his mind earlier. It was going to be a good day.

He could tell.

“Now what?” Gaara folded his arms as they stood outside of the Hyuga compound.

Sakura had been correct; the place was huge. Haku had mentioned on the way there that they wouldn't be admitted in the front gates if someone wasn’t expecting them.

So they reverted to Naruto's crooked plan of inconspicuously scaling the wall surrounding the estate. The idea was so ludicrously simple there was a chance it could work.

“Okay, so once we're on the other side we sneak around until we find Hinata-chan, got it?” Naruto explained the remainder of his plan to his companions while they remained out of sight.

Sakura hung her head in doubt, “I don't think this is going to work…”

“It will if we're careful! We’ve got to try!”

Haku rested his hand on the loud blonde's shoulder, “Um, Naruto, try to be a bit quieter. They'll find us more quickly if you keep shouting like that…”

“I'll go first.” Gaara volunteered himself again.

Before Naruto could protest the red haired boy had jumped the wall and disappeared to the other side.

“I'm the leader, so I should've went first!” He pouted.
The pink haired girl gave him a sarcastic look, “Who made you the leader anyway?”
“I just am, okay!”
“I think its best that Gaara went ahead; he is the quietest after all.” Haku said softly.
The three of them ducked behind a nearby bush as a few people walked past, probably going into the compound.
After a few tense moments, a hiss from the other side was heard, “It's clear.”
Naruto shot like a bullet over the wall, nearly giving Sakura a heart attack. His energy was frightening at times.
“Climb on my back Sakura-chan, I'll help you get you over.” Haku offered.
She gave him a grateful look, “Are you sure I'm not too heavy, um...Haku-kun?”
He smiled, “Really, it's fine.”
Sakura did as she was instructed and watched in amazement as Haku scrambled up the wall, regulating his chakra to withstand the weight of two people. She suppressed a frightened shriek as they fell ten feet back down to the ground.
Haku landed with cat-like grace and Sakura quickly hopped off of him.
Naruto nodded to them once they had arrived.
“Good, you made it!” He said in a low voice, “Now we just need to get around those two guys over there.”
Naruto indicated two guards stationed in front. It didn't appear as if they would be leaving anytime soon.
Without a word, Gaara uncorked the gourd and let his sand slip unnoticed along the ground. Again, Sakura was surprised; she hadn't witnessed his power before.
The guards did not see the sand until it had surrounded them in a thick cloud. Naruto and Haku grinned as the guards scrambled around in confusion, unable to avoid the irritating dust.
“Go.” Gaara hissed, “I'll distract them.”
“Thank you, Gaara!” Haku said quietly as he took Sakura by the hand and dashed after Naruto across the lawn.
Gaara smirked to himself as he watched the fumbling guards in amusement.
Maybe it wasn't as difficult to get in as Sakura had made it seem.

After bolting across the Hyuga estate’s grounds, they found cover in a garden. Sakura was bothered that they had left Gaara behind in order to continue on.
“Will he be alright by himself?” She wasn't needlessly worried.
“Nah, Gaara can handle himself fine,” Naruto assured her, “He had no problem dealing with Ero-sennin before!”
Haku watched carefully from the bush they had concealed themselves behind. The area appeared to be empty.

“I don't think anyone is over here,” He determined, “We can cut through this garden and keep looking.”

They nodded in agreement before moving on.

The three of them darted through the flowers and foliage, following Naruto's lead. Sakura was still troubled over leaving Gaara behind as they covered more distance, completely lost and unaware of their surroundings.

Just as they thought they could move on without being seen...

“Naruto, wait!” Haku hissed.

He was too late, and the blonde boy rushed headlong into a bewildered member of the Hyuga family.

‘That's it! Now we're in trouble’! Naruto was prepared to be seized by the collar and hurled out of the front gate.

Instead he only heard a soft voice recognize him, “N-Naruto-kun?”

He looked over to the girl he had knocked over, “Hey Hinata-chan!”

“Naruto be quiet!” Sakura warned as she and Haku came up from behind him.

Naruto helped the Hyuga heiress to her feet and she only stared at her friends, stunned.

“W-what are you all d-doing here?”

The Kyuubi container grinned at her, “We came to see you and help your cousin!”

She was shocked, “What? W-why?”

“Because you've been really worried about him,” Sakura explained, “And we want to help.”

Color flooded the shy girl's cheeks, “Thank you...it's so very k-kind of you all.”

Haku turned to Hinata, “Hinata-chan, do you know where we can find your cousin?”

She nodded shyly, “Yes, he should be on the other s-side of the grounds...”

Naruto was beaming, “Then let's go! We can bust him out of here before anything happens to him!”

As they followed the blonde boy Sakura had her doubts, “I don't know...we left Gaara-kun alone and now we have to take some boy we don't know from his own house, Naruto? I think this is getting a bit too complicated.”

He didn't seem at all swayed, “Well, it's important to Hinata-chan, so we can't give up!”

They snuck around the back of the house, and Hinata led them on at the front, keeping watch for anyone who came too close.
“This way!” The nervous girl showed them into the back of another garden, not sure what Naruto intended to do once they found Neji.

Many people stood outside of the house there and the children immediately ducked behind a cluster of azaleas. While Sakura kept constantly reminding Naruto to be quiet, Haku had another question for the Hyuga girl.

“Hinata-chan, why is this seal so bad exactly?”

Her eyes dropped to the ground, the mere idea of it bothered her tremendously.

“My f-father says that since Neji-niisan is p-part of the Branch Family, he must have it p-put on him. We call it the ‘Caged Bird Seal’...” Her voice faltered as Sakura and Naruto began to listen as well, “When a Branch Family member shows d-disrespect or d-does something inappropriate, Main Family members can use it to...to hurt them.”

“Why would you want to hurt someone in your own family like that?” Sakura wondered.

“I don't want anyone to b-be hurt!” Hinata declared rather loudly, “The seal...it...it could k-kill Neji-niisan if someone uses it...”

Naruto's mind was quickly made up, “Then we can't let that happen to him!”

“B-But, what can we do, Naruto-kun?” Hinata asked.

He wore an expression of pure determination, “We find him and get him out of here...even if we have to fight!”

Sakura shook her head, “This is too much! We're going to get into so much trouble!”

“Well, maybe we can't fight but, we have snuck around without being seen for a while,” Haku said quietly, “Maybe we can escape without being noticed.”

“I don't know...there’s probably a way.” Sakura was also trying to come up with a plan.

Hinata surveyed the courtyard, looking for any sign of her cousin, “I d-don't see him and if w-we don't f-find him soon...”

“I think we should split up! We've all seen what he looks like, right? We can find your cousin a lot faster if we all look!” Naruto decided, “In a few minutes, we'll all meet back here, alright?”

It was the only idea they had.

“Okay,” Haku nodded with a smile, “I'll cause a distraction while you all look.”

Naruto continued to slink along the side of the house through a line of hedges, while Hinata was able to search out in the open, ducking through a crowd of her relatives.

Before Sakura went her own way, she turned to Haku, “Haku-kun, please see if you can find Gaara-kun. I hope he's alright.”

“Of course, Sakura-chan.” He agreed. She departed with a grateful look and Haku quickly darted around the back of the congregation, silently praying that Naruto wouldn't blow their cover.

Hinata desperately tried to sort through the small crowd of people in the courtyard. All at once she was glad that her friends had come to help her and yet terrified of what would become of her older
‘And Naruto-kun is so brave...he wants to help me even if it means he'd get into trouble...’ The prospect of the blonde boy selflessly aiding her only added to her adoration for him. ‘No! I can't let Neji-niisan get the seal! Not after so many people came to help!’

As she darted around searching, fierce determination flooded her veins, ‘I'll be like Naruto-kun...I won't give up!’

Suddenly many of the adults rushed over to the garden and watched in astonishment as the contents of a bucket of water inexplicably began to levitate in the air.

While the water swirled about, Hinata noted that it was Haku's aforementioned distraction. She seized the moment to continue her search.

Without warning, something clicked in her head.

Hinata was startled when she was suddenly fully aware of her surroundings. Her once-straining eyes saw perfectly in all directions and even inside of her own house...through a solid wall.

It was a shock that also felt natural somehow.

‘Is this what father sees when he uses the Byakugan?’

She now understood her father's description of the Hyuga Family's blood limit. She didn't waste time doting over her accomplishment, although it was the first time she had ever used her Kekkei Genkai.

Hinata stopped in front of the Branch House and giggled to herself when she noticed Sakura and Naruto slinking along unseen through the hedges.

Without the Byakugan, she wouldn't have noticed them at all, which reminded her of a daunting realization.

‘If someone else uses their Byakugan and sees them...’

They didn't have much time. Haku's power had also aroused suspicion that something other than the absence of gravity was responsible for the hovering sphere of water.

Hinata swung her head from side to side to get a full view of the area, and gasped suddenly when she spotted the one person she had been looking for.

“Oh, Neji-niisan!”

The boy looked at her in confusion, “Hinata-sama?”

He stepped outside of the Branch House and walked over to her, seeing the apprehensive look on her face. Neji also noticed how many people were gathered around the garden for some strange reason.

“Hinata-sama is something wrong-?” The boy fell quiet as he observed the veins surrounding her eyes.

“Hinata-sama...when did you begin using the Byakugan?” He had only just managed it himself a few weeks before, and was surprised to see shy Hinata brandishing the prestigious blood limit.

“Um, j-just now actually,” She said quickly while deactivating it with a small twinge behind her
eyes, “But Neji-nee-san, we must hurry! P-Please come with me!”

Hinata hastily grabbed his hand and pulled him along towards Naruto and Sakura's hiding place.

“What’s going on?” Neji asked.

Instead of a response, Neji was surprised to hear a voice from the hedges, “Hey, did you get him Hinata-chan?”

“Yes!”

A blonde boy who Neji had briefly seen the day before dove out of his cover and grabbed the both of them. He pulled them back behind the bushes hurriedly.

Neji looked at the blonde boy and Hinata's pink haired friend who he had seen the previous day, “Hinata-sama, what are we doing, and what are they doing here?”

“Shh!” Sakura was quick to warn him, “You have to be quiet!”

He looked at her, not understanding at all.

“You s-see, Neji-nee-san, we don't want you to get the Caged Bird Seal...” Hinata clarified.

“Yeah!” Naruto agreed in a low voice, “They were gonna put that seal-thingy on you so we came to rescue you!”

Neji was dumbfounded, “You mean it will happen today, Hinata-sama?”

“I think s-so...” She said softly.

“But don't worry Neji!” Naruto wore a reassuring grin, “We're gonna get you out of here before they can find you!”

A look of betrayal and horror was present on the boy's face. He had no idea that he was so close to receiving the Caged Bird seal, ‘No one said anything to me...’

It made sense to him then why his father had been so upset recently, and he felt a combination of anger and fear rise inside of him. He had seen his father at the mercy of the Caged Bird seal before, and had come to dread the time when he would be branded with it.

“Come on, let's go!” Naruto commanded before turning away to retrace their steps. Sakura followed close behind him, but Neji was hesitant to go anywhere.

“Please, Neji-nee-san,” Hinata gave him a worried look, “We can't s-stay here.”

She had a point; the sharp ends of the tangled branches were painful.

He said nothing, but followed Hinata and her friends, wondering where his father was.

The gardens had emptied out after the water had ended its supernatural dance. Haku had easily caught up to his companions who made a bee-line for the front gate.

“Haku-kun,” Sakura was glad he had re-joined them, “Did you find Gaara-kun yet?”

The black haired boy shook his head, “No Sakura-chan I haven't, but I think he's alright.”
Haku then noticed that they had successfully retrieved Hinata's cousin, “Oh, hello Neji-san! I hope you're alright.”

Neji couldn't believe how popular he had become in such a short amount of time.

“Okay, it's just a bit farther now!” Naruto was grinning at them, “I can't believe how well this worked!”

Honestly, it was a miracle his plan had worked at all.

Sakura was still edgy as they neared the perimeter wall, “Naruto-kun, we can't just leave without Gaara-kun! What if he needs our help?”

Naruto halted and they ducked down as a few Hyuga clan members entered the compound.

“Hm, you're right Sakura-chan. Where did Gaara go anyway?” The blonde pondered. They hadn't seen hide or hair of him anywhere.

Neji quickly took stock that everyone he had seen yesterday was now present with the exception of one person. He recalled the boy with the red hair, and assumed he was the one Sakura was worried over.

Silently, Hinata had activated her Byakugan for the second time, and scanned the area. She noticed a small, lone figure well-hidden in a tree top.

“Naruto-kun, I see him!” Hinata pointed to Gaara's perch, “He's up there waiting!”

Haku clapped his hand over Naruto's mouth as Jiraiya had, silencing him before he could call out to their lofty friend.

“Remember Naruto, we still have to be quiet,” Haku said in a soft voice, “We haven't escaped just yet.”

The Kyuubi container nodded and Haku let go after seeing he would restrain himself.

“How are we going to get his attention without being seen?” Sakura asked.

Haku frowned. Sakura had another point.

Without warning, Naruto hurled his shuriken up at the tree, causing Hinata to 'Eeep!' in surprise. With a thunk, the shuriken was embedded in the side of the tree, and after a moment, Gaara extracted it and hopped down from the branch.

Naruto was grinning at himself. It was the first time he had ever thrown a real shuriken and he actually hit his target!

Sakura knocked him on top of his head, “Naruto! Are you nuts! What if you hit Gaara-kun?”

“He didn't.” Gaara had quickly re-joined them, “Here.” He handed the weapon back to Naruto who was nursing the new lump on his head.

“Aw! Come on Sakura-chan, he's fine!” Naruto whined, “And why did you have to hit me?”

“Because what you did was reckless and I don't ever want you to do that again!” She scolded.

Neji watched with slight amusement.
Although Hinata did feel bad that Naruto had been disciplined so roughly, she agreed with Sakura's reasoning. Naruto had once again nearly given her a heart attack.

“We should g-go now,” Hinata said softly while she observed the front gate, “No one's coming.”

Naruto nodded to her, “Alright, let's go!”

To attract less attention they ran out in pairs of two, as suggested by Haku. If there were less of them to be seen at once it was more likely they would go unnoticed.

Gaara headed up the front for defense, alongside Naruto who was still exhaustingly fast. Hinata kept her eyes open warily as she and Sakura followed. Once on the other side they ducked down by the wall, preparing to jump it again.

Just as Haku and Neji were about to make the mad dash to the gate, a voice sounded.

“Neji? Where have you been?”

Haku felt his heart drop into his stomach and he froze where he stood. An error on his part: he should have had Neji leave first. It made the most sense since it was their mission to rescue him after all.

The plan quickly went down the proverbial tubes.

“Father...” Neji said softly, standing protectively in front of his frightened companion.

From a distance, Hinata gasped and immediately ordered that they turn back. Even though it was a hopeless objective at the time, she ran back to her cousin, still determined to prevent the inevitable.

Hizashi and Hiashi stood in front of Neji, both wearing inquiring looks.

“Neji,” Hizashi looked down at his son, “Who is this with you?”

He didn't sound angry, only confused. But still, Haku was terrified and had no idea how he would be able to think his way out of his current situation.

Neji recalled Sakura saying his name, and hesitantly answered, “Haku.”

Hiashi looked down at Haku with piercing lunar eyes.

“How did you manage to enter Hyuga grounds, Haku?" He asked.

Before Haku could summon his courage to answer the head of the Hyuga Clan, four more children appeared out of nowhere to stand beside him and Neji.

Hiashi was bewildered to say the least.

“How did all of you children get in here?” Hizashi asked, seeing that the Uzumaki boy was among the group.

“We wanted to help Neji!” Naruto couldn't keep his mouth shut.

Hiashi only gave him a guarded look, wondering how the Kyuubi boy had come to know Neji.
“F-Father,” Hinata spoke up, “These are my friends. The r-reason they are here is that we d-didn't want to let Neji-niisan receive the Caged Bird seal...and so we tried to...”

She didn't have to keep explaining for her father to know what was going on, “Hinata, you know better than to let anyone interfere with Hyuga tradition.”

The girl looked down guiltily.

“Even if it's tradition or whatever, you can't just put that seal on him when he didn't do anything wrong!” Naruto protested, “Neji! He's nice I can tell! I won't let you put that seal on him!”

Hiashi felt his temper flare as the Uzumaki child showed such unwitting disrespect. Gaara and Sakura watched quietly as Hizashi looked down at Naruto with an appreciative look.

“Excuse me sir,” Haku hoped being polite would soften Hiashi's mood, “But Neji-san and Hinata-chan are cousins; they're family members. So why would people who care about each other have such harsh traditions?”

Apparently, Haku had a brief understanding of how a normal family would function. Yet his knowledge did not reach to the complexity of clans and the balance of power that was involved in living in one.

Hinata couldn't believe their boldness, especially Naruto's. Even she was terrified of speaking to her father like that!

“You children have no concept of what you're doing,” Hiashi gave each of them a bothered look, “Neji's fate has been decided.”

“Hiashi-sama...”

Hiashi turned to his brother and noted the pained expression on his face. Neji stood by him, trembling terribly.

He winced inwardly, but swallowed the momentary guilt he felt on his nephew's behalf.

“Hiashi, these children speak with a wisdom that is beyond the capacity of our clan,” Hizashi said slowly, his eyes resting on Neji, “The only thing I would ask of you, my brother, before my parting...is the freedom of my son.”

Recent events made Hiashi understand his twin brother's meaning, but he still couldn’t defer from generations of rites for the sake of one boy; it was something the clan elders demanded. Hiashi himself would prefer to halt the proceedings if it were possible.

“Father, p-please...” Hinata pleaded.

Hiashi finally turned his gaze to his daughter and was astounded. She looked to him with the tearful eyes of the Byakugan, hoping that in some way she could make him listen.

“Hinata,” Hiashi's voice was low, “When did you accomplish this?”

“When we were looking for Neji-niisan,” She squeaked, “I did it s-somehow...”

Even Hizashi was amazed. He hadn't expected his brother's timid daughter to discover her blood limit so quickly.

Naruto also looked over to Hinata and got a closer look at her eyes. The way they seemed to
intake light and their sheer depth unnerved him.

“Hey Sakura-chan,” He whispered to the pink haired girl beside him, “I didn't know Hinata-chan could do that with her eyes!”

“I don't think that anyone knew she could, Naruto-kun.” She replied quietly.

Hiashi examined his daughter's eyes for a long moment before saying, “I understand that you care for your cousin, Hinata. But you must realize that if I exempt him from receiving the Branch Family seal he will be eligible to become the next Head of the Hyuga clan. You will both be heirs, and thus, be forced to compete.”

Hinata wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her lavender kimono, “I...I know, father...”

He frowned at her, “Do you understand, Hinata? You may be the heiress to our clan, but that title won't mean anything if your cousin is free to surpass you.”

“I-I understand,” Her voice was meek, “But it d-doesn't seem right to hold him b-back in such a horrible way...”

“It is tradition.”

“It isn't fair!” Naruto spoke up again, “If you're so scared of everyone being stronger than you, then maybe you should put that seal on everybody!”

There was only silence.

Neji stood shaking by Hizashi, who braced his shoulder comfortably.

No one had ever seen Hinata stand up to her father before. It even left Haku, Gaara, as well as Sakura stunned.

And Naruto didn't seem intent on backing down either, even if he displayed his opinion through his volume.

“Father,” Hinata said steadily, “It's what I wish.”

Naruto stood next to her and nodded vigorously.

Hizashi turned expectantly to his brother, having no idea what Hiashi would say next.

“I see...” Hiashi then sighed, “I will speak to the elders if that is your true decision, but you are young yet, and may come to regret your actions later, Hinata. Bear this in mind.”

She shook her head, “I p-promise, I won't regret it.”

Her father wore a contemplative expression, “Very well. I expect you to begin more rigorous training then, Hinata, since you have finally activated your blood limit.”

“Yes F-Father...” She bowed her head respectfully in thanks, and watched with quivering lips as he returned to the Main House without another word.

She felt like crying she was so happy.

And yet, she was also frightened at what she had agreed to. Her father had made it very clear to her that her decision may radically affect her future, but she felt it was a necessary consequence.
Naruto’s face once again exploded into a grin, “Woo hoo! We did it Hinata-chan! Neji won’t be getting the Caged Bird seal!”

He began giving high-fives to all of his friends (nearly tearing Gaara's arm off), and even gave one to a rather startled Hizashi. He watched the small children hop around cheering. A tear welled at the corner of his eye, still unable to believe such a thing was possible. Could the kindness of children change the future of the Hyuga?

“Hinata-sama...” Neji was still trembling, completely overwhelmed of how she had stood up for him so selflessly.

A smile cracked on Hizashi’s face as he watched his son hug the Hyuga heiress in deep gratitude. Never in his life had he expected such a blessing and he, just like Hinata, decided he would live with no regrets.

“There you are you little brats!” Jiraiya had suddenly appeared on the Hyuga grounds, and was absolutely fuming. After what he had overhead earlier, he figured that they may have snuck off to the Hyuga compound.

He had a black eye and a few unexplainable bite marks on his face and hands, suggesting he had been in a great struggle.

Naruto was actually pleased to see him, “Hey Ero-sennin!”

“Stop calling me that you little twerp!” The sennin hoisted Naruto up by the collar of his black shirt and prepared to strangle him. Hizashi gave him an incredulous look.

“Gama-sennin,” He asked, “To what honor do we owe this visit?”

The Legendary Toad Sage was always a welcome guest around the Hyuga compound, even if his reasons for stopping by were unclear. He practically stormed right through the front gate, cussing and rambling about some loathsome children.

Jiraiya turned to Hizashi and then chuckled sheepishly, “Oh, uh, just looking for the kids. They keep running off...”

“Yeah right Ero-sennin! You keep ditching us!” Naruto laughed, not at all bothered that the man was ready to crush his windpipe so he wouldn't speak.

“I told you to stop calling me that you punk!” Jiraiya roughly dropped Naruto back to the ground and he landed on his butt.

“Jiraiya-sama, are you alright?” Haku was bothered by his bruised and bloodied face, “What happened to you?”

“You two and that red headed imp cause me far too much grief.” The sennin growled, glaring daggers at Gaara.

Gaara smirked back at him. He, like Naruto, had less respect for the perverted old man.

“Father, who is this man?” Neji asked curiously.

“This is the Great Toad Sage, Jiraiya. He was the sensei of the Fourth Hokage.” Hizashi answered.
At the mention of his noble title, Jiraiya once again inflated, but then recognized the man next to him, “Oh, Hizashi-san! I hope you’re well.”

“Very well indeed, Gama-sennin.” Hizashi nodded, smiling.

Any day his only son was spared of the Caged Bird seal was a very good day.

A dark look came over Jiraiya's face for a moment and he asked in a low voice, “So...when are you scheduled to go to Cloud?”

Hizashi’s expression saddened a bit, “You've heard?”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Jiraiya apologized on bringing up such a personal subject, “I was talking with Hokage-sama yesterday...”

“It's alright,” Hizashi assured him, “I have less than two weeks.”

Jiraiya nodded, he held a great respect for the branch family member after what he had been told. Hopefully, his son hadn't been informed about his father's not-too-distant fate.

Clearly Neji had no idea. He and the other children only watched the exchange between the two men, puzzled.

“Right...” Jiraiya cleared his throat loudly, “Well, these three here can be a real pain,” He gestured to Naruto, Haku, and Gaara, “But they're good kids for the most part.”

Hizashi nodded, “...I know.”

Neji had stepped up to them, “Thank you, all of you. I don't think you can ever know how much you've helped me.”

Naruto grinned at him, glad they had succeeded, “It was no problem! You can count on us!”

Hinata smiled as well and then remembered they hadn't been introduced, “Oh, Neji-niisan, you haven't r-really met them all have you?”

He had caught some of their names...

“This is Naruto-kun, Haku-kun, and Gaara-kun,” Hinata then turned to her last companion, “And Sakura-chan.”

Neji bowed his head, “It is good to meet you all.”

“Likewise, Neji-san.” Haku was equally friendly. Gaara was quiet but appeared to be glad as well.

Naruto was surprised when he felt a pair of arms embrace him in a warm hug. Hinata's face was beet red but she was very grateful for everything he had done.

“Naruto-kun, thank you f-for helping us...”

He hugged her back, ‘Wow! It is good to have friends!’

“Anytime, Hinata-chan!” He then looked over to his other companions, “Now I am starving! I can really go for some ramen!”

Haku turned a pale shade of green.
“Time to get going you three,” Jiraiya interrupted, “We need to talk...”

Naruto frowned, “No way Ero-sennin! I want to stay with Hinata-chan today, like I promised. Don't you have any 'research' to do?”

“I'll be dead the next time I try thanks to you!” Jiraiya scowled, “I swear, Konoha isn't a good place for research...so let's get going.”

They ignored him.

Neji found Jiraiya's annoyed face quite amusing, as did his father.

“Haku, Gaara, grab the blonde squirt and let's go.” Jiraiya tried his luck with the other two.

“We're going to stay here, Jiraiya-sama. Maybe later.” Haku's politeness was beginning to irk him.

Time for a different approach.

“Fine, stay if you like...” Jiraiya smirked, “If you want to miss out on a new ninja skill...”

All three of them lined up in front of him.

“When do we start?” Gaara asked.

The offer had even attracted Hinata, Neji and Sakura's attention.

“As soon as we leave.” The sennin sighed.

They were easy to please.

“Um, Jiraiya-sama?” Sakura spoke up, “Can Hinata-chan and I come too?

“Why not?” He then smirked to Naruto, “Popular with the girls already squirt? I must be rubbing off on you!”

The Kyuubi container gagged, “Buh! No way Ero-sennin! I'm not like you!”

“Father, can I go with them?” Neji asked.

Hizashi had no problem with it, “Yes. Make sure you bring back Hinata-sama in the evening for her training.”

His son nodded, “I will!”

They had ended up outside of the Hokage's tower. The Third had requested that Jiraiya bring Haku along with his friends in hopes that Haku may demonstrate his Kekkei Genkai abilities.

The sennin felt it wouldn't be difficult.

All he had to do was tempt the children with the promise of a ninja skill that they most likely wouldn't be able to perform and they flocked to him like moths to a candle.

However, Jiraiya had been slightly annoyed that Naruto had made so many friends. The crowd of children following him made him feel something like a mother duck.

He disliked that sensation.
Yet the newcomers had proved to be polite, obedient and didn't give him a hard time.

Unlike a certain three stooges he had come to know.

“Hey, Ero-sennin! What are you gonna teach us to do?” Naruto was growing impatient.

“Ugh...” The sage decided to pick another basic skill, “We'll start with Henge no Jutsu: the Transformation Technique.”

Sakura's face brightened, “Wow! You'll teach us a real jutsu, Gama-sennin?”

The sennin smirked, “Oh, I'll teach you all right, but that doesn’t mean any of you squirts will be able to do it! I mean you guys are what? Three, four?”

“Six!” Naruto barked, “And we can do it old man! You just show us how!”

Hinata felt her heart flutter. Naruto's confidence helped boost her own, and maybe if she was able to perform the jutsu she may demonstrate it to her father later.

“Alright, sheesh...” Jiraiya cleared his throat and then proceeded with a lesson, “As most of you are aware all jutsu require chakra. The amount of chakra needed depends on the jutsu that is being used.” He looked down at the row of children in front of him, “Any of you squirts by some chance have any chakra control yet?”

Haku, Gaara and Neji raised their hands and even though Naruto couldn't prove it, he too raised his hand.

Hinata wore a disheartened look, but Sakura quickly dusted the subject over for her, “How much chakra does this jutsu need anyway, sensei?”

Jiraiya smirked, “Good question, missy. The Transformation jutsu don’t require much chakra at all, but focusing your chakra is the key. It's easiest to begin by transforming into another person.”

Haku smiled to himself. He knew he could focus.

“Alright so...any of you know any hand seals?” The sennin asked, not expecting them to.

At first no one answered and Jiraiya felt he would have his work cut out for him. He then noticed the shy girl of the group slowly raise her hand.

“Um, there is the d-dog, horse, b-boar and hare...” Hinata said softly, surprising her companions with her knowledge.

Jiraiya raised his eyebrows at her, “Yep, that's right, princess. Anyone else?”

Neji continued the list easily, “There is also the rat, ox, tiger, dragon, serpent, ram, monkey, and bird.”

The sennin's eyebrows went up even further, “Wow. You Hyuga kids sure know your stuff! Anyway, of those twelve signs the only one you will need to know for this jutsu is the Ram Seal.”

Jiraiya demonstrated the seal for them, “Make sure you get this right, or it will fail. It's important to have full concentration while executing a jutsu.”

They quickly memorized the hand sign, although it took Naruto a few moments (with Hinata's help) to position his fingers correctly.
“So Jiraiya-sama, we focus our chakra and concentrate on what we want to transform into?” Haku confirmed, always one step ahead.

“I swear kid; the way you work things out deserves an award...” The sennin commended him, “As usual, you're right Haku. Give it a try when you're ready.”

“Who exactly should we turn into, sensei?” Sakura asked, wondering if he had anyone specific in mind.

“Whoever you squirts can think of...” He didn't really care.

Gaara frowned. He didn't want Haku to surpass him yet again, although it was something he was getting used to. He formed the ram seal and focused his chakra.

There was a poof of smoke, and where Gaara once stood was the spitting image of Jiraiya.

Naruto felt his jaw drop.

It was still glaringly obvious that it was Gaara, because of the uncharacteristic scowl the false Jiraiya wore.

The sennin sighed, “Next time, kid, try to look a bit happier...”

His companions looked on in surprise, not expecting Gaara to have such luck on his first try.

Gaara released the jutsu and smirked at Jiraiya, “I'll try.”

“One of these days I'll give that sand kid a piece of my mind...’

“Hey Gaara, that was great!” Naruto praised him.

Haku immediately tried it next, having no problem focusing his chakra and flawlessly imitated the image of Jiraiya as Gaara had. The sennin was grateful for the less angry expression on Haku's henge.

“Well done, Haku.” Jiraiya nodded to the farm boy after he had released his jutsu, wearing a very pleased smile.

“How do you keep doing that Haku?” Naruto spoke up again, “It's like you know everything!”

The dark haired boy shook his head, “I really don't...”

Hinata looked at both Gaara and Haku in amazement. Had they ever used a jutsu before? They made it look so easy.

Neji wore a small frown while he too made the hand seal. Once the smoke from his henge had cleared, a false Haku stood there, startling the real farm boy.

Neji then smiled in a similar way that Haku had, scaring his companions with his accuracy. Sakura was hopping up and down, excited that there had been three successful henge in a row.

Naruto however was uncommonly hesitant, not sure who to imitate.

“Eh, that was kind of creepy...” The sennin admitted to Neji, “Again, great job but maybe you should lay off the smiling, kid.”
Of course, Neji took it as an open invitation to smile more to startle his foes.

Naruto laughed at Haku's astonished face, “Heh heh! Haku, that was pretty cool huh? Poof! He looked just like you!”

A small smile spread over Gaara's face. He too found Haku's astounded expression funny.

“Okay! My turn!” Sakura announced, and she quickly made the hand seal.

Her’s was one of the most shocking (and oddly successful) transformations yet...

She had taken the appearance of Gaara.

The Kazekage's youngest son felt his smile turn into a look of shock. He understood how Haku had felt upon looking at a copy of himself.

“Whoa! Sakura-chan!” The blonde boy was pleasantly surprised yet again.

The pink haired girl grinned in accomplishment after undoing the jutsu, “How was that Gama-sennin?”

“Not half-bad, missy...” Jiraiya answered, appreciating that someone had eliminated Gaara's smug expression.

Neji turned to his cousin, “Do you think you can do it, Hinata-sama?”

A nervous blush crept over her cheeks, “I...I'll try...”

“I know you can do it Hinata-chan!” Naruto grinned at her.

Haku nodded with a friendly smile, “Yes Hinata-chan. Its simple.”

She felt her hands slip into the ram seal, and concentrated her chakra. Her henge choice had been clear in her mind for quite a while. Hinata trembled slightly before she was enveloped in smoke, still slightly anxious.

Thankfully, she had succeeded.

A nervous-looking Naruto stood in front of her companions.

Sakura cheered with Haku and a low chuckle resonated from her cousin.

Naruto stood bewildered for a split-second and then peeled into a fit of laughter.

He couldn't have been more flattered.

After undoing the henge, Hinata's face was completely crimson. Jiraiya nodded his head with a small smile, “Good girl! Make sure you show that to your dad!”

“I w-will.”

“Why did you pick Naruto?” Gaara asked her curiously.

Hinata gulped before answering, “I-I, um...well, he hadn't b-been chosen so I thought...”

Naruto gave her a thumb up, “Hey! Hinata-chan! That was so awesome! You even had me fooled for a second!”
Jiraiya sighed, “You're the only person who'd admit that, squirt...”

The blonde boy glared indignantly at Jiraiya.

“Naruto, aren't you going to try?” Haku asked.

The Kyuubi container nodded excitedly, “Yup! I just thought of what I'll do!”

Dramatically, Naruto went to the front of the line and cleared his throat loudly. He carefully made his hand seal, and focused as best he could on the flow of his chakra. Poof!

There hadn't been much of a transformation.

Instead, Naruto stood there wearing a huge grin…

In full Hokage attire.

There was delighted chatter and laughter from his friends, but Jiraiya's eyes nearly bugged out of his head.

“NO WAY IN HELL!” Jiraiya snapped, “I'll be dead before I see you become Hokage!”

“That's true,” Naruto laughed while tipping his hat to the sennin, “You are really old!”

That was the last straw for the toad sage.

The Sandaime had been watching Jiraiya's escapade from his office.

He hadn't expected all of the children to pick up on the jutsu so quickly, but had been pleased to see Naruto's creativity.

“He looks so much like his father...” Hiruzen muttered to himself.

The Hokage watched in entertainment while Jiraiya began to draw Haku into his plan.

“I have to say,” Jiraiya said after knocking Naruto over the head a few times, “You all did surprisingly well!”

Hinata and Sakura smiled excitedly at each other, and Naruto began to rant about how the sennin was a big jerk.

“But really, out of all of you, Haku truly is the most impressive...” Jiraiya continued, “His chakra control is far superior and for a five-year-old he's uniquely intelligent-”

“Six!” Naruto shouted, “And what are you talking about Ero-sennin? I thought we were all awesome!”

“I agree, but his talent far exceeds any of you,” The sennin paused, “Except maybe young Neji here…”

“I don't buy that!” The blonde snapped back, “Haku may be good at some things, but I think that we're all equal for the most part!”

He just didn't get it.
Even so, Haku stoutly agreed with his friend, “Jiraiya-sama, Naruto is right. I'm no better than anyone here."

It seemed they were all in agreement on the matter.

‘Kids are such a pain...’

“Can you prove that squirt?” Jiraiya smirked at Naruto, “Are you just as strong as your buddy here?”

“I sure am!” Naruto barked and then turned to Haku, “Hey Haku, why don't we have a rematch? You know, from that day in the woods?”

How could he forget?

“Alright,” He nodded, and glanced over at a nearby fountain, “I think I've gotten faster, Naruto...”

“We'll see!”

Seeing that some sort of contest of strength was about to take place (thanks to a bit of prodding on his part) Jiraiya relocated himself and the rest of the group to a nearby bench to watch.

“Haku will win.” Gaara said simply.

Neji nodded and even Sakura agreed, but Hinata protested, “A-Are you sure? Maybe Naruto-kun is r-right...maybe they're the s-same...”

Her friends took the thought into consideration, although it didn't seem likely.

On a silent command, they began.

Naruto charged, ready to barrel into the frail Haku although he was not aiming to hurt him in any way.

Haku held his ground.

‘I'll wait for him to get closer...’

“Hyah!” Naruto leapt at the farm boy who side-stepped the move gracefully.

The clumsy blonde tumbled to the ground but quickly regained his footing. By that time Haku was running in the opposite direction.

Naruto laughed in response, “What? Are you scared or something Haku!”

The Kyuubi container unwittingly followed, not even realizing Haku was once again leading him into a trap.

Curious, Neji turned to Jiraiya, “Why is he running away, Gama-sennin?”

“Oh, you'll see...” Jiraiya anticipated the farm boy's next move.

Naruto was making a round of strange battle cries while he raced to catch up to Haku.

With a knowing smile, Haku jumped up to the large circular fountain and stepped out onto the water. He kept running along the surface, preparing for his attack.
The onlookers (with the exception of Gaara) gasped in surprise as Haku walked on top of the fountain water.

“How can he do that?” Sakura blurted out, not believing what her eyes were seeing.

“Like I said,” The sennin sighed, “That kid has superior chakra control. It’s a skill that takes most graduated genin a while to develop. Haku is not a genin yet.”

“You can’t get away this time!” Naruto laughed as he hopped up on the rim of the fountain.

He realized too late that his opponent had been waiting for him.

Haku raised his arms, and thrust them purposefully towards Naruto. Two jets of cold water fired themselves at the blonde boy’s face, his usual target.

“Eyaah!” Naruto, blinded, stumbled and fell face-first into the shallow water.

It wasn’t wise to fight Haku in his own element.

“This kid is gold...” Jiraiya chuckled to himself, noting that the Hokage was seeing what he was seeing.

Free manipulation of water was a skill unheard of to nearly all ninja...unless one was a descendant from a Water Country clan. Haku's assault on Naruto had confirmed what both Jiraiya and the Hokage had assumed about him.

Sakura immediately asked the question that was on everyone's mind, “Gama-sennin, how can Haku-kun move water like that?”

He was glad to answer, “It is a unique ability of his missy...a Kekkei Genkai. Our young Hyugas here also have a unique blood limit.”

“The Byakugan.” Neji stated, while Hinata nodded.

“So, it's a power only he has?” The pink haired girl asked.

“Fortunately and unfortunately, yes.” The sage told them, “The bright side of that fact is that only Haku will develop this unique skill of his in Konoha, granting the Hokage invaluable information. The sad part is, this means that he has no family and no clan to protect him.”

A sympathetic look appeared on both Hinata and Neji's faces. They could imagine what it would be like to have no clan members to depend on.

Suddenly, a hand shot up from beneath the water and seized Haku's ankle. Before he could give a startled shout, Haku was dragged under the water as well.

Surprised, Jiraiya hopped to his feet, “Whoa, I might have to step in...I didn't think this would get ugly!”

Within seconds, a large blast of water catapulted Naruto out of the fountain and painfully back down to the pavement. The group watched as he sailed through the air like a screaming rocket, and then landed full on his rump.

The sennin sat back down, “Never mind.”

Haku stood up and inhaled a breath of fresh air. He shook his shoulder-length ebony hair out, scattering droplets of water everywhere. He quickly ran to Naruto who was on the ground,
soaking wet and rubbing his sore butt.

“Are you alright Naruto? I'm sorry if I—”

The Kyuubi container forced a grin, “Nah! I'm fine Haku! I didn't think you'd blow me out of the water like that...”

Gaara smirked as he stood by Naruto, “I almost thought you had him, Naruto.”

“Almost!” The blonde chuckled.

Neji and Sakura didn’t waste a moment going over to Haku and asking him how he had managed such a victory.

Hinata, on the other hand had promptly gone to Naruto as Gaara had.

“Naruto-kun, that was amazing. Y-You and Haku-kun were very closely m-matched.” She said softly to the boy.

He appreciated her consoling words even though he wasn’t a sore loser.

“Thanks Hinata-chan!” He gave her a genuine smile of gratitude. She blushed furiously in response.

Gaara rolled his eyes.

“Well squirt, I can’t say you didn't have that coming to you.” The sennin was pleased that Naruto had suffered a defeat at the hands of his gentle friend.

“Yeah, yeah, Ero-sennin, but I still think that if there wasn’t any water we’d be the same!” Naruto still hadn't been convinced otherwise.

Gaara suddenly had an unusual look about him and he appeared peculiarly anxious. He turned to Haku who was explaining the functions of water-walking.

“Haku, why don't you fight me?”

The farm boy’s head snapped around and he looked at Gaara in surprise. Haku was still dripping-wet from the last fracas and now Gaara was ready to have a piece of him?

Haku felt hesitant. Gaara had proved in the Hyuga compound how crafty his sand could be.

He didn't feel he'd be much of a match for him, “I don't know, Gaara...”

Jiraiya noted that the Hokage was still observing, and believed that another match to test Haku's abilities would be something worth seeing.

“Go ahead Haku,” Jiraiya encouraged airily, “You won't hurt him too much.”

Haku didn't find that much incentive. He hadn't even hurt Naruto that badly and it still had bothered him immensely. The thought of physically harming Gaara was vexing.

Gaara, however, just looked antsy to test himself rather than to beat fragile Haku to a bloody pulp.

Haku nodded after a moment, “Okay.”

In seconds, sand began to leak out of Gaara's gourd, and both Haku and the observing Hokage
wondered what he had just gotten himself into.

Haku smiled to himself.

It was only a bit of sparring between friends...

What could happen?
The Uchiha Massacre

Chapter Soundtrack: “Solitude” by Ryuichi Sakamoto

Gaara narrowed his pale green eyes.

Haku was a very worthy opponent.

Not caring that his friends and possibly other villagers were watching him display the terrible power that struck fear into the hearts of the people of Suna, Gaara unleashed a very mild projectile of sand at the Water Country boy.

Haku made a sound that resembled a startled gasp before stumbling back towards the water fountain he had utilized during his bout with Naruto.

‘Gaara's sand moves fast like my water!' 

Haku waved his arms, raising a defensive wall of water to deflect his opponent's strike. He watched Gaara regroup, his sharp eyes studying his every move.

Every fleeting moment was a chance for Gaara to observe Haku and dissect his strategy. He wanted to turn his own method against him, and avoid that amazing water ability that had so easily throttled Naruto.

The sand pulled away lightly, and the wall of water that had been protecting the dark haired boy splashed uselessly down to the pavement.

It was a sign that he was weakening.

Jiraiya frowned to himself as he watched. Even though Haku had dispatched Naruto quickly the overzealous blonde had clearly tired him out.

Gaara had a fine opportunity to finish what Naruto had started.

Still, Haku had superb chakra control, and a few direct hits would be more than enough to overpower Gaara.

‘But the farm boy's chakra is limited, that's for sure...' The sennin noted while watching him retreat to the fountain for cover.

Jiraiya had taken notice that Haku was panting heavily. He wouldn't be able to hold out very long if Gaara decided to get serious.

Apparently that was the case.

“Come on Haku! Whack him! You did it to me!” Naruto cheered his fatigued friend on.

Neji and Hinata looked on apprehensively, while Sakura seemed in awe of Gaara's unique power.

Haku took a deep breath and raised a hand slowly over his head. Gaara vigilantly observed as a stream of water raised itself from the small pool behind the dark haired boy and it lashed out at him suddenly; whip-like almost.

Automatically, Gaara's sand shield surrounded him, nullifying Haku's attack. The red head wasn't
entirely expecting it either; his sand sometimes acted on its own accord.

Naruto fell quiet as he watched the next move, unsure of who would come out victorious.

With a soft grunt of effort, Haku raised a number of strands. Three, four, five...Gaara quickly lost count. He could feel a slight jolt as Haku summoned the reserves of his chakra. The red haired boy aimed for patience, understanding Haku was pressing his limits.

Multiple jets of water were fired at Gaara, only to be countered with his wisps of sand. Haku suddenly felt frustrated, this was very different from fighting Naruto.

Very different indeed.

'Just a bit more...' Haku thought to himself while pummeling Gaara's defenses.

The large amount of water he had used had lowered the surface of the fountain slightly, which in turn began to dampen Gaara's sand.

It was Gaara's turn to frown. Haku had again used that sharp wit of his.

His sand steadily became more slow and clumsy; heavy with the weight of the saturated grains.

Like that was going to stop him.

Haku did not stray from the fountain, intending to keep the battle in his preferred element. Gaara wouldn't have it.

Gaara let his sand soar in a wave towards Haku, but his slothful weapon had failed when speed was needed, and reached the fountain after Haku had aptly dodged.

'Well, well...the tables are about to turn, you little sand squirt...' Jiraiya thought, quite entertained.

Hinata and Sakura gasped as Gaara's sand shot forward relentlessly, delivering a swift, vicious blow.

Reaching into his chakra reserves again, Haku managed another water shield, more spherical; similar to what Gaara had defended himself with.

“He's been watching me too...” Gaara said softly to himself.

Haku was a true challenge and he had quickly earned Gaara's undying respect.

Neji had turned to the toad sennin, “Haku is straining himself.”

Jiraiya nodded, “Yep, and it's actually a good example of what really goes on in the field.”

He momentarily drew the children's attention away from the fight.

“You all want to be ninja right? So understand this: when you're on a mission or get ambushed, you won't always be in the best of health,” The sage said matter-of-factly, “Your enemies will seek to wear you down until you are reduced to your last breath; that I can guarantee you.”

Hinata gulped, “It is so d-dangerous...if you get s-sick or injured...”

Jiraiya shrugged, “Well, that's what medic-nin are for, and sheesh, it's not like every mission has life or death situations, princess.”
The Hyuga girl lowered her eyes, “I know…”

“Don't listen to Ero-sennin, Hinata-chan! He's just trying to scare you!” Naruto stood by her and frowned at the sennin.

She lifted her head and smiled gratefully at the blonde boy.

“Whatever, just hush up and watch.” The sage snapped, restoring the group's attention to the proper place.

'I wonder what Hokage-sama thinks about this match up...' Jiraiya thought.

Haku realized that he had to end the fight or Gaara would end it for him.

'I have to use the last of my chakra...there's no other way I can fight him...' He resolved while watching sand creep around the circumference of the fountain.

Haku dug deep within himself, scraping up the last of his chakra and forcing the water around him to obey. The strain was so immense; his companions could sense the surge of his chakra.

Even the dense blonde could feel it, so he made it known, “What was that? I feel strange all of the sudden.”

“You're feeling Haku's chakra.” Sakura answered simply, unable to withdraw her eyes from the sparring match.

“We all are.” Neji confirmed.

Gaara watched as a vortex of the remainder of the water fountain's contents raised itself like a looming serpent into the air. He grinned to himself.

Now Haku was desperate.

The funnel motion Haku had developed Gaara mimicked with his sand and he launched his counterstrike to meet Haku's. Jiraiya was greatly entertained by how Haku proved valiant in his struggles and how the red head could be nearing victory.

Sand and water collided with a huge force, and the recoil was just as bad for the two combatants. Both boys were forced back a number of feet while deflecting the other's blow. It appeared to be a stalemate.

What Haku hadn't counted on was Gaara's improvisation.

Upon analyzing Haku's fight with Naruto, Gaara was certain that Haku had no proficiency in hand to hand combat. The red haired boy ducked away from the clashing beams of water and sand and ran at Haku. The onlookers were surprised by the full-out assault.

Haku was not at all prepared. He had been preoccupied with his water barrage. Without thinking he exhaled, freezing a puddle on the ground into ice. Gaara slipped on it, but caught himself, and carried on towards Haku.

Gaara's hand balled into a fist and connected solidly with Haku's chest.

Again, the dark haired boy made a startled sound, acknowledging he had been defeated.

Or that's how it looked at first.
“Whoa!” Naruto was in hysterics as Haku stumbled back and collapsed into the fountain, “Gaara just hit Haku!”

Sakura thrust her fist in the air triumphantly, “Yeah! I knew Gaara-kun would win!”

Neji and Hinata were too surprised to form an opinion about the outcome.

Jiraiya, however, had seen it coming from a mile away, 'Damn sand kid...'

Gaara stood on the lip of the fountain, looking down at Haku who struggled to regain his composure. His chakra was nearly depleted and he had no hope of contending physically with the larger, bolder Gaara.

'He out-smartered me...' Haku considered his friend’s strategy, 'He knew that I can't fight without water.'

As painful as it was for him to admit, Gaara had found his weakness. But Haku decided to accept his loss with a smile.

Gaara wasn’t smiling.

He hadn't hit Haku hard, but he wanted to.

It had frightened him how he had wanted to hurt Haku. The adrenalin coursing through his veins when he had moved in for his unwarranted punch still left him itching to fight; to attack.

But Haku was down and he didn't look like he could continue.

It was time to stop. He had won. Well done.

Gaara's eyes snapped wide open, 'No! Not you again!'

You wanted to use more chakra. You wanted to hurt him. It pleased me to watch.

'No! I won't hurt Haku! I can't hurt anyone anymore!'

Liar.

Gaara abruptly screamed.

He fell back from the fountain, covering his ears as if he were listening to some terrifying sound that only he could hear. It instantly frightened his companions.

“Gaara-kun?” Sakura was alarmed at the sight.

Jiraiya felt his stomach leap into his throat, 'Has the Tanuki decided to resurface?'

They looked on in confusion as Gaara stumbled to the ground as if stricken. He was thrashing wildly and crying out like he was being attacked.

“Sand kid...” The sennin muttered while he hurried over to the flailing child.

“No! No!” Gaara was rolling around, raking his hands through his hair.

Don't push me away, it's useless.

'No! You're evil!'
I am not evil. I simply want what I want.

Haku wobbled to his feet and watched Gaara sob his eyes out on the sidewalk. He felt a little guilty for some reason, although he wasn't exactly sure why Gaara was in a panic in the first place. 'Gaara didn't hit me that hard...I'm alright.' He confirmed.

Jiraiya bent down to the red haired boy, “Hold still squirt, you'll be alright.”

Gaara was inconsolable. His sand thrashed about as well, giving the sage a few painful blows to the face.

“No more fighting for a while, kid.” Jiraiya grabbed hold of his arm, “This seal of yours isn’t stable like the blonde squirt's is.”

Haku ran over to Jiraiya who was busy performing a four-point sealing technique to restrain Gaara's weakened seal. Due to the boy’s screaming Haku couldn't tell if it was Jiraiya who may have been hurting him.

“Gaara!” Naruto rushed to him with Sakura in tow, not understanding what had happened.

Neji made Hinata keep her distance and she protested.

“It isn't safe, Hinata-sama,” He said gently, “We'll wait for things to calm down before we get closer.”

Not as if he wasn't concerned for Gaara's well-being, but primarily he felt that it would be worse if he failed to insure the safety of his cousin. Gaara had already given Jiraiya a mouthful of sand at that point.

The sealing was done quickly and before Gaara had another moment to scream the exertion left him unconscious.

Haku, Naruto and Sakura had no idea what had taken place.

“What's wrong with Gaara-kun?” Sakura demanded.

Haku's voice shook, “Did I...hurt him?”

“No, it wasn't you Haku,” Jiraiya assured him, lifting Gaara up, “I can't explain it right now-”

“You better explain it, Ero-sennin!” Naruto hollered in the old ninja's face, “Gaara was screaming like...I don't know! If you know something then tell us!”

Jiraiya sighed, “All I can tell you squirts is that the sand kid needs, er- 'medical' attention. You all wait here. I'm taking him to see the Hokage.”

In a cloud of smoke, Jiraiya had disappeared with Gaara, leaving five very puzzled children behind. Neji and Hinata joined their companions.

“W-What happened t-to Gaara-kun?” The Hyuga heiress asked.

Naruto grimaced, “We don't know. Ero-sennin wouldn't tell us.”

Haku was quiet, still believing that he had somehow caused Gaara's fit.

“Something was wrong with his chakra,” Neji pointed out, “Didn't you feel it? It grew and he
Sakura nodded in agreement, “Yeah, I noticed it too. I...I just hope he's okay...”

“Hokage-sama and Gama-sennin w-will look after him, Sakura-chan.” Hinata said softly.

Naruto grinned, “Yeah, we've seen Gaara worse! This one time he fell out of this cloud-thingy and when Haku and I found him he looked horrible. I think he'll be okay though!”

Although it had only been about two hours since Naruto and his company prevented him from getting the Caged Bird seal, Neji decided that they had seen enough excitement for the day.

“I hope that Gaara-san feels better soon,” Neji said honestly, “Hinata-sama and I should probably be going home now.”

Hinata gave her cousin a bothered look, but then nodded to him.

“Thank you for all of your h-help,” Hinata smiled, “I w-would like it if we could see each other again sometime s-soon.”

Naruto gave her his foxy grin, “Sure thing Hinata-chan! How does tomorrow sound?”

She nodded, “That s-sounds perfect.”

“Goodbye.” Neji bade their friends farewell before leading his cousin along for her training.

Hinata smiled to herself as she thought, 'Neji-niisan didn't get the Caged Bird seal...and I can show father the jutsu Gama-sennin showed us! I hope Gaara-kun will be alright...'

It looked like it was going to be a good day.

After their Hyuga friends had departed, Sakura turned to a crestfallen Haku.

“Haku-kun, are you alright?” She asked.

Haku sat down on the rim of the currently empty fountain and sighed. He was exhausted, bruised and out of chakra. Of course he was alright.

“I just...I don't know if I hurt Gaara somehow.” He confessed his guilt.

Naruto folded his arms, “Gaara has been like this before, remember? When we first met Ero-sennin?”

Haku looked up at him, “Oh yes! He was acting strangely then too...”

Sakura was baffled, “What happened when you first met him?”

“See Gaara was really sick or something when he first showed up,” Naruto summed up the events, “So we had to take care of him.”

“And he doesn't sleep.” Haku added.

Again, she was perplexed, “What do you mean he doesn't sleep? How can someone not sleep?”

Naruto shrugged, “Gaara’s weird like that. He just doesn't.”
“I don’t think he *can* sleep Naruto, at least recently,” Haku corrected, “He's afraid to.”

The blonde scratched his head, “Oh yeah...he said that he hears voices, didn't he?”

Sakura frowned. She was growing more and more concerned for the red haired boy. Besides having to put up with Naruto's denseness and Haku's brilliance, she knew little of any other obstacles he may have faced.

“I don't think that you hurt Gaara that bad anyway...” Naruto continued, “I mean, it looked like he was the one beating you up Haku!”

Haku brushed a spot of wet sand from his forearm, “I suppose so.”

“If you weren't tired, you would've beaten Gaara-kun I think,” Sakura added, “Naruto just happens to be really good at messing things up.”

The blonde huffed at the pink haired girl, “What's that supposed to mean?”

“If you hadn't made Haku-kun run around like crazy before, Gaara-kun wouldn't have hurt him so badly!” Sakura retorted.

“So what if Gaara is super strong?” Naruto looked at Haku's bruised face, “Haku looks fine to me!”

Haku couldn't help but smile, which only added to Sakura's annoyance.

“Boys...” She muttered to herself, not understanding how they could be so ignorant.

Naruto seemed to be on his own level of brainlessness at times.

“Is anyone else hungry?” Haku asked, hoping to lighten the mood.

“Yeah!” The Kyuubi container had only one thing in mind, “Why don't we go to Ichiraku Ramen and eat? That place is supposed to be great!”

“Um, Naruto-kun, we don't have any money...” The pink haired girl sighed.

Disappointment washed over his face. The cruelty of the material world hath no mercy on even children.

“But I guess we can go to my house and eat!” Sakura quickly added, not wanting to dampen her friends' spirits.

Haku nodded, but Naruto looked hesitant.

“I thought your parents didn't like me, Sakura-chan.” Naruto reminded her.

She frowned and then resolved, “Oh, well, we can just eat outside then...I don't care what they say!”

Naruto's grin reassured Haku and Sakura that he held no grudge against the less hospitable people of Konoha.

Haku followed behind Naruto and Sakura. They led him around, showing him their places of interest, which included numerous ramen stands and even the Ninja Academy.

While excitedly explaining to Haku that in a few days they would attend the Ninja Academy
together, Naruto noticed a familiar face quietly traveling down the opposite side of the street.

Sakura looked at the distracted blonde, “What is it now, Naruto-kun?”

She and Haku looked curiously towards the distraction. It was a boy with raven black hair, and equally dark eyes. He was walking by himself.

Naruto’s mouth acted on its own, “Hey! Sasuke!”

“Do you know him?” Haku asked, impressed that Naruto knew so many people.

Sasuke looked up, nearly startled, and watched Naruto jog across the street and fall in step with him. A girl with pink hair and another young boy followed him.

The young Uchiha recognized the loud blonde after a moment, “Oh...hello Naruto.”

Naruto was grinning again, “Hey Sasuke, I didn't get to thank you for calling off those Chunin from a while ago!”

The other boy nodded, remembering how Naruto had been attacked for no apparent reason. Sakura and Haku, however, had no idea what their loud friend was talking about.

“It was no trouble,” Sasuke answered simply, “Uh...how have you been?”

He could only guess what had happened to Naruto during the time he had disappeared with no explanation for over a week.

“Great! I went to train by myself for a while!” Naruto answered, “Oh, and here are my friends: Haku,” He gestured to the dark haired boy, “And Sakura-chan!” The girl with the pink hair nodded to him.

Sasuke had seen Sakura around town once or twice, but he had never seen the likes of Haku before, “Are you from around here, Haku?”

The dark haired boy shook his head, “No, my homeland is in the Water Country. I came here for ninja training.”

The Uchiha boy wondered to himself why he had come to Konoha rather than train in the Hidden Mist Village he had been told about. He chose not to say anything about it.

Frail-looking Haku didn't at first appear to be ninja material in Sasuke's opinion, “You want to be a ninja?”

He nodded and Naruto added, “Yeah, we're all gonna be ninja!”

“That's right.” Sakura agreed.

A small glimmer of pride flickered across Sasuke's face, “I'm going to be a shinobi too.”

It seemed to be a recurring goal around Konoha, Haku figured.

The raven haired boy turned around and displayed the fan emblem on his back. Sakura was the only one who remotely recognized it.

“I've mastered a fire jutsu that my father taught me,” Sasuke announced proudly, “So he has allowed me to wear the Uchiha clan crest.”
“A fire jutsu?” Haku was interested. How many types of jutsu were there?

“Hey! We can use the Transformation jutsu!” Naruto was beaming, “And Haku can do this cool thing with water...”

“Why don't we show each other our jutsu then?” Sasuke asked, “I was going back home, would you like to come with me?”

Sakura was excited, “You'll let us go with you to the Uchiha estate?”

He smiled at her, “Sure, it'll be fun.”

Haku was very interested in seeing a fire jutsu as well as making another friend, “I'd like to see your home, Sasuke.”

Naruto nodded, “Yeah! And, uh...could we maybe get something to eat?”

Sasuke gave him a puzzled look, “...alright.”

The sun had set, the street lamps buzzed on.

On the way to the Uchiha compound, Naruto and Haku described their meeting (as well as an absent Gaara) to Sasuke and Sakura. The story entailed the kindness of Hiroshi and the perverted ways of the toad sennin Jiraiya.

“Naked ladies?” Sasuke was befuddled by the stories of the old sage.

Naruto disliked recalling Jiraiya's vulgar hobby, “Yeah, the guy's totally gross! Gaara knocked him out of the tree then so he'd stop looking at-”

“He did it twice?” Sakura asked, “I didn't know Gaara-kun tried to beat up Gama-sennin more than once.”

“Gaara isn't afraid of Jiraiya-sama at all.” Haku explained, wondering why that was.

“Yeah! He's great like that!” Naruto laughed, remembering how Gaara had so easily made a fool of the sage.

Sasuke would make it a point to meet this 'Gaara' they were talking about one day.

After turning onto a street that led into the Uchiha district, Sasuke noticed the uncanny silence. It was very out of place.

Naruto kept on talking, oblivious to the worried look on the other boy's face.

He paused. A foreboding feeling sunk into the pit of his stomach. Usually, at that point in the day, Sasuke was used to returning home and hearing the chatter of his kinsmen. He hadn't been expecting the stillness of the place.

“Is everything alright Sasuke?” Sakura looked at him quizzically, as did Haku.

Sasuke frowned to himself, “It's just that...”

He couldn't put his finger on it. He took a few hesitant steps onward. Maybe he was imagining things?

He had just gained his father's approval and met Naruto and his friends. It was possible this feeling
of uneasiness was temporary, caused by the new changes in his life. That was what he was thinking until a metallic smell caught his attention.

You can feel a change but you can't smell it. Can you?

Suddenly he felt nervous, and somewhat embarrassed that he broke out into a paranoid run in front of his companions, who only shouted after him in confusion as he tore down the street.

'It's alright. I had a long day...Maybe I'm just-'

Sasuke finally stopped at the end of the ally and rounded the corner.

The smell, the smell...

You can smell change.

“Sasuke-san, are you okay?” Haku asked after he, Sakura and Naruto had caught up to him.

He said nothing.

Haku almost took it as a rude gesture. After all, he and his friends were worried and didn't find running around a way to be welcomed into someone's home. He could at least nod his head if he didn't feel like talking.

Naruto was about to speak up about finding a snack when he had turned to look at the street before them. He didn't want to believe his eyes.

They were all lying on the ground.

A hush fell upon the four children, and for a solid minute they stood, surveying the countless corpses lining the entire street. There were so many, old and young alike, dead and still and laying as if some cruel artist had painted them into such graceful positions.

Dark hair hid many of their faces from view, but those less fortunate had eyes open wide and glassy like red and beautiful marbles. Crimson covered the clothing of every individual, their throats and sides torn open.

The sight and smell made Sakura nearly gag.

Haku felt his stomach heave and he was sick on the side of the road for a moment. Naruto stood by him, a dark look on his face, not caring that the farm boy had almost vomited on his shoes.

“What happened?” The blonde's voice was barely above a whisper.

What had happened?

Sasuke felt compelled to casually ask his auntie Shizu who was only a few meters away that very question. He came to the hasty conclusion she would be unable to answer; she was slumped over on the ground just past her doorway, surrounded by a ruby pool.

He was suffering from a complete mental shutdown. How had this happened? Were they all dead?

They couldn't all be dead. There were so many people in the Uchiha clan; some may have been on missions...

Sasuke was trying to fool himself and failing miserably. Many of his immediate family: grandmother, uncle, cousin...they were present and unmoving.
Dead.

The word stung his thoughts. He had never had to think about death before.

*'What if mother and father...?' His heart was hammering, 'What if...Itachi! Is he alright? I've got to find them!*

Sasuke bolted down the road, completely forgetting his companions.

It was true, he loved his parents, but he would be unable to bear the death of his beloved older brother. His image gave speed to his feet.

‘Wait! It isn't safe!’ Sakura cried and followed him without a moment’s hesitation.

‘Eh? Where are you going?’ Naruto was just about ready to run after the two, before realizing that Haku was bent double at his feet, ‘Haku?’

The dark haired boy was shaking uncontrollably, and his dark eyes were wide and misty.

Blood.

The smell and the sight of it…it made him remember so vividly, so perfectly the death of his parents. He had no way to remind himself that this was another person's family, or that they were possibly in a lot of danger themselves staying there.

He was drowning in the inescapable and gruesome memories of his parents and their final moments. Haku lurched forward, bawling at the top of his lungs and giving Naruto a terrible headache.

‘Whoa! Haku! What's the matter?’ Naruto took the trembling farm boy by the shoulders and gently shook him, desperate to snap him out of his sudden fit.

His mother: stabbed to death. His father: skewered on a shaft of ice.

Haku could see them so plainly, as if they were standing in front of him, and he could even hear his father's distant, accusing voice.

It was all his fault.

Monster.

‘NO!’ Haku sobbed helplessly onto Naruto's shoulder.

The blonde began to realize that they would be unable to follow after Sasuke and Sakura, and even worse, they wouldn't be able to leave the scene of the tragedy until Haku overcame his haphazard nervous breakdown.

‘Sasuke!’ Sakura had lost sight of the Uchiha boy after he made a sudden right turn down another street, ‘Where are you?’

They had left the streets, and had ventured towards the main house of the Uchiha clan. There were fewer bodies out in the open, but the smell of blood hung thick in the air.

She was scared. Losing track of Sasuke could mean his death. Her head was spinning. What would become of Haku and Naruto? Were they safe?
And Sasuke had run off without saying anything.

'I hope they're alright...' Sakura tried to keep her thoughts ordered while she ran around the outside of the houses of the complex, 'Haku and Naruto can look after each other, but Sasuke is all alone and...I have to find him!'

Sasuke flew down the paths of the Uchiha homestead, sweat pouring down the sides of his face.

“Mother? Father?” He found himself calling out into the silence of the place, disturbed by every dead body so carelessly abandoned in the rooms he passed by.

They really were dead.

And not just dead: someone had killed them. Weapons were strewn about; there were signs of a struggle.

Someone powerful, who could kill dozens of ninja quickly and easily had done this for a reason he couldn't even fathom.

Cold-hearted murder; the murder of his clan.

The desperation he felt made him scream, “Itachi! Please be alright! Itachi!”

Only silence.

His feet thudded hard against pavement as he raced down another alleyway.

“Aniki! Please!”

Suddenly, fear made him wise. He had made himself a perfect target if the killer was still present, by calling out to his family members.

Sasuke didn't make a sound as he entered the courtyard of his home.

'Please be alright...Please be alright...'

The front porch was bare. In silence he moved towards the house, racing to find his loved ones.

He thought he could hear his own heart beating in his head like a sledgehammer as he stood outside the door of his parents’ room. It was closed and it was quiet.

“Mother?” He whispered, wondering if his parents were even in their room at a time like this.

Sasuke was shaking badly as he slowly pulled open the door. He only took a half-step forward before freezing where he stood.

It was dark and they were there.

The silence burned his ears.

His eyes darted to the two figures ahead of him on the floor. They were piled one on top of another, and there was the metallic smell again.

But oh, sweet relief found him for the briefest of moments as he saw his brother with them, standing up and he seemed perfectly fine.
“Itachi?” He murmured.

After a moment, he could see better in the dim light. Itachi stood there, wearing a blank expression, with his swirling red eyes aglow in the darkness. He was wearing his Black-Ops armor.

His sword was drawn and bloody and it was then Sasuke understood.

His parents and everyone of his clan...they were all dead.

Itachi had killed them.

“No...” Sasuke said softly, shaking his head, “H-How...?”

He could only stare at his older brother's emotionless face as he stood mere feet away from him. Itachi slowly sheathed his sword without a word, and Sasuke watched, fixated with his parents' bodies.

He wanted comfort and justification; to beg Itachi to tell him why he could ever do such a terrible thing to his own family.

But this was not Itachi.

Before him stood an evil, heartless creature that had crawled into his beloved brother's skin and slain so many people for no reason.

Itachi was the caring older brother who acknowledged him and spent time with him. Itachi was a genius and his role model and his friend.

Itachi was not a murderer.

Something in his older brother's eyes told him that Itachi already knew what he was thinking. Sasuke also understood in an instant that his brother could not justify what he had done, for whatever reason.

“Why...why did you do this?” The boy cried.

“To measure my own capacity.” His brother’s voice was calm.

“You mean...you would kill everyone just for that purpose?”

“It’s essential.”

Sasuke felt that his death would be nothing more than a favor on his brother's part. The least Itachi could do would be to kill him quickly and reunite him with his parents and end his heartbreak.

“How could you do this!” Sasuke screamed, holding the sides of his head as he wept.

In response, a shuriken shot past him, and Sasuke felt a cut open on his arm.

“Foolish little brother.”

The words made his heart stop. Itachi's stoic face was tearing him to pieces. Did he feel nothing? Not even an ounce of regret for killing his clan?

Sasuke couldn't bring himself to look away from the red, swirling pools and soon knew why it had been a huge mistake.
“Tsukuyomi.”

Sasuke felt himself being surrounded by a world of shadows and he could feel the seething aura of his older brother all around him. He couldn't move or speak.

He had found himself trapped inside a world that was completely controlled and projected by his older brother. It was a world that perfectly resembled the Uchiha compound. An illusion.

'...what?'

His family members were near, all of them standing up and alive. Everyone just stood there, not doing much of anything.

And then there was Itachi, in full ANBU attire, standing in the middle of the street.

Without any sort of warning, Itachi began to kill them, one by one, letting Sasuke witness the piercing screams of agony as they were cleaved and gutted.

Their blood flecked the ground like scarlet rain drops.

And Sasuke watched in terror as Itachi effortlessly ended the lives of his family members.

He looked on in dread as his parents attempted to plead with their eldest son, but to no avail.

His parents were cut down. He had to view every last lurid detail of the annihilation of the Uchiha clan.

They all died terrible, painful deaths.

And he was next.

In a matter of seconds Sasuke was released from Tsukuyomi, and he stumbled down to the floor in a state of mental collapse.

“P-Please...don't kill me!” Sasuke was sobbing, fearing for his life and grieving for his family.

Itachi did not move and said nothing to his younger brother.

Sasuke's legs felt as limp and useless as wet paper, but he felt such an instinctual drive come over him that he was almost shocked when he was able to stand up.

He was shuddering like a leaf in the autumn wind.

“Don't kill me!”

When he saw that his brother still had made no motion to harm him, he didn't give it a second thought.

Sasuke fled.

He ran until his legs failed him and he tripped and fell to the dusty ground outside, sobbing and screaming, and begged any higher powers to allow him to wake from such a disastrous nightmare.

When he looked down the alley ahead of him Itachi had caught up to him. Sasuke froze.

“You have potential sleeping inside of you...to become an opponent that can truly test my limits.
You’ve been filled with jealousy and hatred in the hope of surpassing me…that’s why I’m letting you live.”

Sasuke listened with tears streaming down his cheeks.

“Foolish little brother, if you truly wish to kill me: Hate me. Detest me. Live a wretched, miserable existence and run. Run and cling to life…” Itachi told him, “And when you finally obtain the same ‘eyes’ as me, come before me once more!”

His older brother fell silent again and Sasuke’s tears ended. What choice would he have but to take Itachi up on the proposition? His knees quaked but he made himself stand upright and stare at the terrifying man in front of him. He felt motivation and energy surging inside his chest.

And after a moment his surroundings were illuminated with perfect clarity. Though Sasuke was unaware of it, his irises dyed red and a single tomoe swirled in each eye. He watched his brother suddenly leap away, finally trying to make his escape.

If he was going to be allowed to live then what did he have to lose? He gave chase.

“Get back here!” The boy shouted.

Sasuke sprang, pulling stray kunai knives from the wooden fence beside him, and bounded over the complex wall after his brother. With precision he had never known before, Sasuke hurled the weapons at his brother’s head.

Itachi was taken aback. He handily blocked two of the kunai with his sword. The third brushed the back of his head, cutting the tie of his headband and a few strands of black hair. Itachi’s hitai-ate fell to the ground and he kneeled down to retrieve it.

The burst of energy faded and Sasuke collapsed again, holding his injured arm as he watched his brother retie his headband. He sat panting on the walkway and Itachi turned to him.

His face was distraught. A tear trailed down his cheek.

Sasuke swooned and felt the world go black.

Sakura tripped over a garbage can ungracefully when she heard a yell outdoors. She stood up and brushed her knees off, looking over her shoulder towards the origin of the sound.

‘What in the world is going on here?’ She slipped down an alleyway as quietly as she could manage, 'Is anyone alive? Who was shouting? Oh...I have to find Sasuke!'

There had never been a time in her life in which she had wanted her parents near her so badly. All the death and gore was making her feel violently ill, and the only way she could bring herself to ignore the bloody chaos was the thought that her friends could be in mortal danger.

For a moment she questioned herself, weighing her chances of survival in a possible death trap, and felt stupid that she hadn't sent for help or looked for any signs of life or...anything rational that she could have done.

Nope. Irrationality went hand in hand with the actions of a frightened little girl.

At the time she had seen Sasuke take off like a bullet, she hadn't thought of the consequences of following him...or getting lost in a huge clan estate full of dead people.
Sakura considered herself at the moment, and rightfully so, more foolish than brave, but resolved that it would be better to find Sasuke and escape rather than to not find Sasuke and escape.

The makings of a kunoichi: guts and blind devotion.

Sakura hopped up stairs to a new part of the district. It was empty. She didn't see any more bodies...or Sasuke. Knowing that calling out to him could warrant her death, or possibly her friends' deaths, she mentally kicked herself for not having a backup plan.

'Think Sakura! Think! What would Haku-kun do?'

Haku's brilliant mind would have made her search a lot easier if she hadn't left him behind (or had he not had a nervous breakdown). But no, she had to focus on the task at hand. There was a good chance she could find her mark, and leave the Uchiha compound unscathed, that was, if she found him at all.

'Okay...what would Sasuke do? If I came home to...to this...what would I do?' Sakura took a moment to organize her thoughts, 'I...well...I'd look for my mom and dad...wait! He must have-!'

From behind the barrel she had been using for cover, she surveyed the other side of the street and laid eyes on a small figure on the ground. Sakura leapt from her hiding place and dashed across a small pebble garden to where Sasuke had fallen.

“Sasuke!”

Darn, and she thought Naruto was dense. At that moment, she felt like she understood the blonde and his big mouth a little better. Sakura just couldn't help herself at the time.

She kneeled down next to him placed a hand on his shoulder. He drew a breath and she exhaled in relief, glad that he was alive. He was sweating and unconscious. His upper left arm was bleeding.

“Sasuke-kun?” Her voice was soft, “Wake up! What happened?”

He leaned into her arms as his eyes peaked open. He had a far-off expression and did not seem to be completely aware of where he was.

“Did he...leave?”

“Did who leave?”

“Am I dead?”

“No! You’re okay.” Sakura consoled him, “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“...h-he killed them.” His voice cracked. Exhausted, his head dropped and he lost consciousness again.

He was definitely in bad shape, Sakura determined. She wrapped him in a tight, sympathetic hug before hooking his arms in her own. She pulled him away from the center of the road and over to a low porch. Sakura laid him flat, supposing that she would not be able to get him away from the estate by herself. To leave and find help may also be dangerous.

‘This is terrible. He just wanted to be friends with us and exchange jutsu...show us his home...’ Sakura thought sadly, ‘Why did the day he met us turn out to be his worst day?’
In spite of the horrible massacre that had taken place, Sasuke had at least made one friend. In the brief moments he had woken to inquire about his safety, Sakura’s face was immediately engraved in his mind and associated with care and protection. While he had forgotten a detail or two about his brother; Sakura, at least, remained.

Sakura deliberated on how to act next. She willed herself not to cry, although she knew how she would feel if she had come home to find her family murdered. Keeping her composure was no easy task. She needed help, but she was unsure of how she was going to get it. It was still unclear if the danger had passed, ‘Sasuke is hurt but he’s alive…did the killer leave like he said?’

They had only just met and it felt like a piece of her had been forcibly ripped away, and all she wanted to do was sit there and hold the Uchiha boy, and pray that somehow they could leave the compound alive.

“She, I'm sorry that this happened to you.” Her words were quiet, “I’m sure you and your family didn’t deserve it. I hope whoever did it pays…and I am sorry that I may not be able to get you away from here.”

She felt the soft raven spikes of his hair brush against her hand while she attempted to fortify her nerves. His breaths were quiet. Sakura surveyed the area thoughtfully before she stood up.

“I’ll go as fast I can and get you some help!” She was determined, “Hang in there! I’ll be back.”

“Oh Haku! Wake up!” Naruto shook Haku by the shoulders, attempting to revive him.

The farm boy had passed out after he had seen the dead bodies lining the street, and Naruto had sat there, frantically trying to wake him up.

It wasn't working.

“This is bad.” Naruto looked around and shuddered, “All of these people…”

Haku was deathly pale, and the way he had freaked at the macabre scene hadn't made Naruto feel any more at ease.

‘Haku may be smart and strong, but...’ The blonde shook his head, ‘Jeez, he just totally flipped out!’

He was about ready to ‘flip out’ as well. Naruto had never been acquainted with death before, and he wasn’t sure how he should handle it. He could throw up in an effort to relieve his anxiety like Haku had, or he could run around like Sasuke and Sakura and hope that this was all a bad dream.

Neither option seemed very appealing to him.

“Where did Sakura-chan and Sasuke go anyway?” Naruto frowned.

The thought had crossed his mind that they could be in danger or something worse. He could not do much about it with Haku out of commission.

He propped Haku up in a sitting position against a wall and sat down next to him, trying to avoid the sight of all the lifeless people down the road. Naruto felt bile rise in his throat, maybe he was going to be sick like Haku.

His nausea immediately passed when he saw Sakura sprint down the street towards him. Naruto grinned in relief and jumped to his feet.
“Hey! Where did you go?” He raised his eyebrows, “Sasuke isn’t with you?”

Sakura gave him an update, “Sasuke needs help. He’s alright but he’s unconscious and I can’t move him…”

Naruto glanced over to Haku, who was still out cold, “I know that feeling. Haku’s been out too but I don’t know if we can just leave him here…man this is annoying.”

Sakura crossed her arms and tapped her foot while she thought. How terribly inconvenient that only two people were awake and functioning! Only one solution came to mind.

“Naruto-kun, I need you to do something very important okay?” Sakura spoke up in a strange take-charge sort of voice.

He looked at her, responding to her confidence.

“I’ll stay here. I’m going to keep trying to wake Haku up and maybe he can help me get Sasuke out of here. If not…we can just wait for help.” She explained, “But I need you to go find Hokage-sama as fast as you can and tell him what happened here!” Sakura’s command was straightforward enough and he understood.

“You’ve got to be careful, okay Sakura-chan? We don’t know if it’s safe yet.” Naruto replied, “But I will! I’ll hurry, you can count on it!”

And he was off at top speed. Thank goodness for that boundless energy of his…

She kneeled down beside Haku and began tapping his cheeks with wake-up slaps.

‘Hurry back, Naruto. I’m not sure what happened…but this could be bad for the entire village…’
Sheesh, this kid is a load of trouble...” Jiraiya sighed while rubbing the back of his head, “Maybe he should be sent back to Suna, you know, so that way we can–”

“This child will stay here until I decide otherwise, Jiraiya...” The Hokage said sternly. He took a drag on his pipe and closed his eyes for a moment.

The red haired boy was passed out on a maroon armchair, curled in a ball and twitching from time to time.

Jiraiya hadn't anticipated the instability of the boy's seal to actually hurt the boy.

It just looked like he was able to hurt others.

But the Sandaime was adamant in keeping Gaara's presence in Konoha quiet, even if it would be extremely difficult.

“The boy's seal can't be fully repaired,” Hiruzen continued, “However I will be able to restrict a majority of the biju's chakra. He will need a great amount of training in chakra control.”

Jiraiya smirked, “I saw to that myself and he's not doing that bad either.”

The Hokage turned to face his former pupil, “Even so, was it wise to pit him against the Water Country child? They may be young Jiraiya, but that makes them no less...destructive.”

“No one cared about that sissy fountain anyway.” The sennin muttered, recalling how Haku had ravaged it for its water.

The Hokage frowned, “They've barely spent one day here, and already there are property damages...”

Gaara rolled over on the cushions and made a small sleepy sound.

“Heh, I can see why Naruto gets along with those two so well.” Jiraiya chuckled, “Hopefully, they'll have enough sense to avoid becoming pranksters like him.”

The Sandaime nodded absently while examining Gaara's arm. With a heavy sigh he set the boy's arm back down and took a seat behind his desk.

“It is in a moment like this that I am truly in awe of the Yondaime's work.” Hiruzen said softly, “This boy won't be near as fortunate as Naruto. His seal will still be considerably weaker.”

Jiraiya had faith, “The sand squirt can tough it out.”

In the same moment the Sandaime made a motion to adjust his hat, the door to his office flew open with a resonating thud, and a flustered-looking child barreled in, unable to catch his breath. Black-
Ops guards outside were still shouting at the disobedient boy as he hurriedly entered the Hokage’s office.

For a long moment, Naruto stared at Jiraiya, nearly at a loss for words.

He couldn't quite explain what was on his mind, or how he could make anyone understand what had happened.

“I...uh...” Naruto was still panting. His face was scrunched up in recognizable fear and what looked like a hint of anger.

The sage looked at the blonde boy oddly, 'Oh right...I haven’t been gone for that long. What could've happened?'

Jiraiya as well as the Third regarded Naruto silently for another long moment.

'Uh oh, maybe Haku found another water source to demolish...' The sennin thought, hoping he wouldn't be the one to pay for any more damages.

His cerulean eyes locked onto the Sandaime, “Hokage-sama! So many people! All of them!”

The Hokage looked at Naruto puzzled, while waiting for him to inhale more air. Apparently the matter was very urgent.

Naruto began again, more clearly, “Hokage-sama, the people in Sasuke's clan! All of them are dead! There were bodies lying in the street, we couldn't do anything—”

“What the hell are you talking about kid?” Jiraiya had never seen Naruto act in such a manner.

The blonde boy was livid, “Don't you hear what I'm telling you old man? Hurry up! Someone killed them all and we have to go back because Haku and everyone could be in trouble!”

The sage was confounded. Poor Naruto had to be the bearer of bad news.

The Hokage looked highly disturbed. Even though he had been making great efforts in the past months to protect the Uchiha clan and avoid an uprising, the unthinkable had occurred. Even Jiraiya could not know of this failure. The implications could be disastrous.

“Is this true, Naruto? What you saw?” Hiruzen asked for confirmation.

Naruto didn't even notice Gaara fast asleep in the armchair beside him; now wasn't the time for the adults to be acting stupid.

“At the Uchiha place!” Naruto screamed, upset that he wasn't being understood, “The people that live there: they're dead! Whoever killed them might still be there!”

The statement made things a bit clearer for the Hokage. There had been other recent Uchiha deaths but at staggered intervals. The final blow had arrived. Hiruzen was particularly troubled that young children had come across the massacre.

The Hokage nodded, “I see, Naruto. You will lead Jiraiya to wherever your friends are and insure their safety. I will send an ANBU squadron as well to investigate.”

Jiraiya gave the Sandaime a dubious look, “Do you really think—?”

“Go.” The Hokage had a great amount of trust in the young boy, “I need to contact the squadron leader. You will be faster.”
The toad sennin looked to the blonde boy and observed the shattered expression on his face. Where most children so young are oblivious to death and murder, Naruto's face made it apparent that what he had seen was no figment of his imagination.

Jiraiya lowered his voice, “...alright. Lead the way, kid.”

His frustration ended and Naruto nodded fervently, with a new respect for the sage. Jiraiya followed the anxious boy out of the office quickly and Hiruzen took another long drag on his pipe.

A Black-Ops guard poked his masked face into the office, wondering what had happened, “Sir?”

The Hokage gazed absently at Gaara for a moment and sighed.

The Third gave his attention to the puzzled ANBU, “Listen carefully, I doubt I can stress the seriousness of this situation...”

“Sakura-chan! Haku!”

The children looked gratefully at Naruto as he bounded back with Jiraiya. Sakura was relieved Naruto had done it so quickly. She had managed to wake Haku up, and although he had been horrified by their surroundings, assisted her in carrying Sasuke to the entrance of the estate. He was still unconscious.

Naruto kneeled down beside his careworn friends, “Hey guys, was everything alright while I was gone?”

“I guess,” Sakura answered softly, “We have to leave this place. It's so quiet and it just...it's scary.”

“Do you mind explaining to me what happened?” Jiraiya folded his arms across his chest and looked down at the children.

Haku and Naruto sat side by side, unable to completely describe the situation.

Sakura sat with Sasuke’s head in her lap. Her expression was somber.

“Well, Gama-sennin...” She looked up meekly at Jiraiya, “Sasuke invited us to go home with him so we could show each other our jutsu...”

“So we did.” Naruto added.

“And when we got here just down there,” Sakura pointed to a street down further, “There are bodies all over the place...Sasuke's family.”

“Hm, I figured...” The sennin’s voice was grim.

“Someone killed them!” Naruto growled, “Whoever did it, I'll...I'll make them pay!”

Jiraiya looked Naruto square in the eye, “Oh really? Use your heads! Whoever is responsible could make short work of all of you. Staying here is the last thing you should've considered.”

“But we couldn't leave without Haku-kun and Sasuke-kun!” Sakura retorted, “And someone had to go tell the Hokage!”
Naruto nodded in full agreement, “Yeah!”

“So while Shorty here came to find me, the rest of you squirts could be turned into chopped liver or worse, am I right?” Jiraiya snorted, “But whatever, the point is you're alive...but you can’t make a habit of risking yourselves that way.”

Even if Jiraiya didn't do a good job of showing it, he did care for the safety of his misfit kids.

“Hey Sakura-chan, is Sasuke alright?” Naruto noticed the sleeping Uchiha survivor in her care.

She glanced at the raven haired boy before answering, “I think he is. I guess he just couldn't take it anymore.”

Naruto’s startled gasp interrupted her when he noted a number of lithe, dark figures in masks darting across the rooftops. After a moment he relaxed, recognizing them from when he had barged uninvited into the Hokage's office.

The blonde boy turned to the sennin and observed the grave expression on his face.

“What are they going to do?” Naruto asked the sage.

“ANBU Black-Ops teams are the first to appear at a crime scene this horrific. The Hokage relies on these elite ninja to get to the bottom of matters quickly and guarantee the safety of the village, Naruto.” The sennin elaborated, “Sadly they will only be trying to solve this murder, considering that they arrived too late. I don’t expect someone your age to really understand the role of Black-Ops in our village.”

Even if Naruto took every opportunity to reprimand Jiraiya’s perverted antics, he was still comforted to know that the man was looking out for them.

He felt more nervous than ever, seeing ANBU forces descend on the scene swiftly and silently to examine the bodies of the Uchiha clan and locate their killer. Naruto did his best to stay calm and ignore the presence of the ghost-like shinobi nearby.

Jiraiya noticed the new boy with the pink haired girl, noting the dark hair and family crest that were associated with the Uchiha clan.

“This boy is Uchiha Sasuke, right? He’s the only one that survived?” The man asked.

Naruto nodded.

Exhaling, Jiraiya bent down and scooped the unconscious boy into his arms. He looked from Sakura to Haku to Naruto and then nodded.

“Let’s get out of here, kids. This is way more than you needed to see.”

The time it took for them to leave the Uchiha compound and return to the Hokage's tower seemed little more than a depressed blur, and they each took a seat in a waiting area, rattled into silence.

After what seemed like an eternity, the Third came out to them, closing the door quietly behind him. He looked at the toad sennin expectantly.

“It doesn't look good Hokage-sama,” Jiraiya sighed, “There weren't any reports of survivors except for this little squirt.” He gestured to Sasuke who was laid on a bench.
The Sandaime nodded solemnly and then turned to Sasuke, “He’ll be taken care of. He appears to have a small injury.”

Sakura’s eyes darted over to the unconscious boy. She had ripped a piece of her shirt and tied it around his arm. The bleeding had stopped but his mental trauma was not likely to go away.

A Black-Ops guard beside Hiruzen moved and lifted Sasuke, ordered to escort him to the hospital for observation.

Naruto sat cross-legged in his chair, wearing an uncharacteristic frown on his face, “This was supposed to be a good day.”

Sakura and Haku were sitting quietly. It was likely the same thought had crossed their minds.

First the unorthodox attempt to rescue Hyuga Neji, and then Haku and Gaara's dismal fight, and lastly the macabre scene they came upon after venturing into the Uchiha compound.

It wasn't exactly what Naruto had in mind after returning home.

Jiraiya exchanged a few words with the Hokage regarding Naruto and his friends.

“I think it may be best if Naruto, Haku and Gaara live together. They’ll be good support for each other and you’ll have an easier time keeping an eye on them that way.” He suggested, “Maybe you should give them a bigger place?”

“I’ve already arranged it, Jiraiya. They’ll have a stipend as well and they’ve been enrolled at the Academy.”

Jiraiya was pleased the boys would be provided for. They had a fighting chance of becoming shinobi after all, he believed. He was also remorseful that he couldn’t shield them from the Uchiha Massacre; if he had only kept the children occupied for a short while longer, they could’ve avoided the gruesome scene altogether. They were all in a poor state and had been exposed to the true horror of death, in his opinion, far too soon.

The sage sighed to himself and sat down next to the oddball children. A cloud of smoke surrounded the Hokage's head as he stood motionlessly by the door.

“...what happened to all of those people?” Haku asked in a low voice.

Sakura furrowed her brow. She herself didn't know for sure, but decided to share her opinion anyway, “I heard Sasuke keep talking about someone while he was out. Someone named...Itachi. I think they're related.”

Naruto watched Sakura intently, his insides writhing.

“Maybe... he did it...” She said barely above a whisper.

The idea was sickening. 'Related' Sakura had said? Few things could drive family members to eradicating their entire clan, and the thought of it made them feel ill once again.

'Just the way those poor people died...' Naruto thought to himself, 'But how could it have happened? Sasuke...he didn't seem to look like he had expected it...like he and his family members were close.'

The last idea filled the blonde boy with bitterness for a moment. He had never had a family to love or to be close with or to be sad with…or in this case...be violently unhappy with. Naruto just
couldn't picture a normal family tearing each other to pieces.

He had seen many families. He had always been the outsider. While wistfully observing parents and siblings interact during their daily activities Naruto had never seen any of them express such terrible aggression.

Naruto suddenly felt unsafe. What was the world coming to? He had endured beatings from strangers on the street, but he couldn't imagine what would happen if his own family was stolen away.

He believed that Konoha had been a safe place. He shivered at the thought of fellow villagers, people of the same clan even, destroying each other.

Naruto bowed his head and silently grieved for Sasuke's enormous loss.

Haku looked at the Sandaime with a completely innocent expression, "Hokage-sama, if they're related how could he have just..." He trailed off, unable to understand it, and not really wanting to. His father had chosen a similar course of action regarding him.

"Itachi is your friend's older brother," Hiruzen answered honestly, "If he truly is responsible as you suspect him to be...then he will be dealt with severely."

It pained him that he could not explain to the youngsters that tragedies often had catalysts.

The three children cringed at the word 'brother' and then blocked the rest of the sentence out.

After a moment, the Hokage looked down at the pink haired girl, "Miss Haruno, I've been informed that you are 'missing,' or rather, your parents have been looking for you since early this morning. I suggest you return home and end their worries."

Sakura blushed a furious shade of pink and leapt to her feet, "Oh no! I forgot!"

She walked in a small circle before stopping in front of Naruto and Haku, "I guess I better go home huh? I hope they aren't too mad..."

Jiraiya chuckled. Someone was in for a scolding.

"I'll see you guys tomorrow!" Sakura shouted and ran out of the waiting room; then poked her head back in, "Oh, will you tell Gaara-kun that I hope he feels better?"

Naruto nodded with a small smile, "Sure thing, Sakura-chan."

She grinned at the both of them and after a hurried farewell to the Hokage and toad sennin, she departed in a flash of pastel pink.

As casually as possible, Jiraiya posed a question on his former teacher, "So...how's the sand kid doing anyway?"

Hiruzen took a short drag before answering, "The young one's seal has been strengthened, though I recommend he catch up on any sleep he may have been deprived of."

The sennin looked smug. Maybe this would mark the end of Gaara's unfair disturbances to his precious 'research.'

Haku coughed softly before leaning over in his seat to listen to a joke Naruto had been saving. The Third glanced at the children curiously.
“Naruto, I will be increasing your allowance in order to support Haku and Gaara as well. They will be living with you.” He announced, “I also expect you three to take your studies at the Academy seriously.”

“Thanks Hokage-sama!” Naruto was genuinely touched, “Though…sometimes villagers can be mean to me and I…don’t want them being mean to Haku and Gaara too.”

“You leave that to me.”

Naruto grinned gratefully at the Hokage. The blonde was most uplifted by the prospect of being able to live with his friends from then on.

The door to the Hokage's office had opened without them noticing.

Haku and Naruto looked up to see Gaara swaying in the doorway. He looked peaky and a bit disheveled, but was clearly in a good mood judging by the small smile in his face.

The red haired boy turned to Haku, “…good fight, Haku.”

Clearly he was behind on a few things.

Jiraiya and Hiruzen watched with mild amusement as Haku and Naruto leapt from their respective chairs and bounded over to Gaara, grinning in relief.

“Gaara!” Naruto patted his back, “How are you doing? That was a pretty crazy fight you had with Haku!”

“He should be fine from now on.” The Hokage assured them; Gaara still swaying in a dreamy state in the doorway.

“Oh Gaara, Sakura-chan says she hopes you're feeling better,” Haku recalled, “Are you feeling better?”

Gaara absently scratched his arm and yawned, “Yes, better than I've felt in a while.”

The Hokage gave a reproachful look to the sage and Jiraiya sighed, “Ugh...well squirts, I'm sorry that you had to see all that nasty stuff back there. I'll take you guys out to dinner tonight, what do you say? I know you haven’t eaten.”

“All right!” Naruto cheered, “This means you're paying?”

“Yeah.”

Hiruzen looked very pleased.

Gaara still wore the eerie, blithe expression he had on since he had woken up, and Haku suddenly felt a rush of normalcy return to them. Maybe a noisy dinner later on would help them forget what had happened at the Uchiha compound.

“Gah...I should've known.” Jiraiya grumbled.

When evening came Naruto had insisted that they go to Ichiraku Ramen. The sennin protested but was immediately overruled by three, small, hungry faces.

They sat in a line at the bar: Naruto, Gaara, Haku and Jiraiya, each having a unique perspective of the ramen shop. The owner was very pleased to have a group of customers and was friendly to
Naruto.

Gaara and Naruto were halfway through their first bowls of miso within fifty seconds, although Naruto was clearly in the lead. Haku did his best not to watch while slowly slurping his beef ramen with a green face.

Jiraiya smirked. They were annoying, yes, but they were growing on him.

Still, the sage feared that Naruto's alarming eating habit was beginning to rub off on Gaara, *The way he eats...I'll have nightmares about it.*

Gaara seemed to be enjoying himself immensely as he and Naruto asked for a second bowl. He felt so refreshed it was almost alien; yet he also felt a huge desire to sleep, not at all threatened by the thought of the inner voice that may haunt his dreams.

“Try not to overdo it you two,” Jiraiya feared they may decide to move onto a fourth bowl and was concerned for Haku who was looking greener every moment, “I knew this wasn’t a good idea...”

“Hey Gaara, I was wondering...” Naruto said after a slurp of noodles, “When you and Haku were sparring, when you went nuts, could you hear the, uh...that voice?”

Gaara looked at him bewildered for a moment, “How did you know?”

“I guessed,” The blonde shrugged, “You were acting like that when we first met you, right Haku?”

Haku nodded, “Yes, that's right.”

Jiraiya cut in, “Don't worry about voices anymore. The Hokage and I took care of that problem for you.”

Gaara smiled at the sennin before he continued eating.

After a frightening amount of noodles it was much too late for young children to be awake. Jiraiya followed the three boys as they darted beneath lampposts, recalling the day’s events (some more fondly than others).

“Remind me again why you had to butt into the Hyuga clan’s affairs?” The sage asked Naruto, “You could’ve gotten your assess kicked if it had gone badly.”

“Hinata-chan and Neji needed our help, Ero-sennin!” Naruto bit back, standing outside the door of his apartment.

“Just so you know Hokage-sama is sending someone here tomorrow to help you pack up. You’ll be moving to a new place that fits the three of you.” Jiraiya reminded him.

“Yeah, yeah.” Naruto acknowledged as he opened the door.

Gaara looked slightly excited, “I can't wait to sleep...”

Haku laughed at the red haired boy's enthusiasm for such a trivial thing as they ventured inside Naruto's place, but he could understand how appealing a peaceful night's sleep sounded to him.

Jiraiya looked back, noting that the loud blonde had not gone inside.

“Naruto?” He looked around and then sighed, “Sheesh, he was just here...”
The sennin poked his head into the apartment, surprised by how clean it was.

“Er, you two get some sleep. I’m gonna have a talk with the loud mouth.” Jiraiya announced to Haku and Gaara who was already passed out on the couch.

Haku frowned disapprovingly, “You mean Naruto?”

“Uh...yeah...” Jiraiya rubbed the back of his head, “We’ll be back later.” Without another word, the sage closed the door, wondering how and why Naruto had managed to slip away so quickly without being noticed.

“Pain in my ass...”

Naruto sat silently on a stone face of the Hokage Monument, gazing at the ethereal stars dotting the black sky. He felt frustrated with the perverted toad hermit for always doubting him and poking fun.

He huffed to himself. Maybe he shouldn’t have just taken off like that. Haku and Gaara might worry and that was the last thing he wanted.

Naruto appreciated that he had a spot to go to by himself now that he finally had friends. He never suspected that he would ever want to be alone again after meeting Gaara and Haku, but he just needed to clear his head.

“Hey kid.”

Alas, he spoke too soon. Naruto looked up at Jiraiya and sighed, “How’d you find me old man?”

“I’m the Legendary Toad Sage for cripes sake, give me some credit!” Jiraiya’s voice then softened, “What are you doing up here?”

“I come here to think.”

The sennin smirked, “Well that’s a swell habit to get into!”

Naruto ignored his sarcasm and kept his focus on the stars. With a defeated sigh, Jiraiya sat down next to the small boy. ‘What a weird kid...’

The sage had never witnessed Naruto sulking before, even in his short while of knowing him. He wouldn’t have dreamed that the cheerful boy was capable of sulking.

“Why do you look so down, squirt?”

“I’m not down, Ero-sennin.” Naruto sighed, trying to dodge the question.

Jiraiya made a doubtful face and then gazed out from their high vantage point at the city of Konoha. He smiled nostalgically at the lights and buildings below.

“I don’t come here too often nowadays; being a hermit.” Jiraiya began, “Though sometimes I do get a bit homesick...it’s hard to forget how beautiful it is here.”

Naruto lowered his eyes, “But it’s really a lot different than it looks.”

“I know they don't treat you that well kid. Don't let it get to you.” Jiraiya said quietly, “Just try to remember the important things and ignore the assholes around here. You do have people who care
“If I become a strong ninja, then they’ll stop hating me.” Naruto surmised, “They’ll respect me when I’m Hokage.”

“You know you don’t have to be Hokage just to impress people. There are other ways to be strong.” The sennin chuckled, “People who are precious to you give you reasons to be strong: to protect them and not give up. You know, like the farm boy and sand kid.”

“I do care about Haku and Gaara,” Naruto admitted, “But...I just...how can I protect them when they’re stronger than me? It’s like...they have powers and I’m just me.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

Naruto frowned, “They’ll end up protecting me! And I didn’t realize when we met that they were so-”

“What? Are you complaining?” Jiraiya sniggered, “Just because they were born with their abilities doesn’t make them 'stronger' than anyone, even, dare I say it? You.”

The blonde boy blinked.

“Sheesh, I mean, you think I didn’t see you throw that shuriken towards the sand kid at the Hyuga compound?” The sennin smirked cleverly, “Do you honestly believe that Haku or Gaara could do that?”

“Well maybe if-”

“My point is don’t underestimate yourself kid!” Jiraiya barked, “You’ll only be as strong as you let yourself be, so don’t hold back! Strength isn’t measured by cool powers last I checked...”

Naruto felt a small smile tug at his lips.

“You know, way back...I had a student like you.”

“You did?”

“Oh yeah...” Jiraiya went on, “Scrawny, weird kid like you...blonde, athletic...had a good idea from time to time...he wasn’t sure what the future held for him either.”

Although Naruto was offended by the hermit's remark on having good ideas from 'time to time', he was still interested in what he had to say.

“What happened to him?”

“Well he did his best, and it landed him in the right position I’d say. He ended up creating a powerful technique of his own; he could summon toads without blinking, trained his own Genin team and helped us win the war against the Hidden Rock. He was a great ninja, really brave...” Jiraiya paused, “Oh, and...uh...we're kind of sitting on his head...”

Naruto jumped ten feet in the air in shock.

“You trained the Fourth Hokage? NO WAY!”

Jiraiya yanked the stunned boy back down to sit, “Sheesh! Calm down kid! But yeah, I did, he was my best student...and a good friend.”
Naruto suddenly felt a great swell of regret for insulting the toad hermit so often, when he really was responsible for training one of the greatest ninja Konoha had ever seen.

“Yeah, he was smart too. Excellent with seals...he valued the village and his friends above all else...” Jiraiya continued, “That's what made him strong.”

A very inspired Naruto clung to Jiraiya's every word, forgetting what a pervert he was.

“Though...he did have help.”

Jiraiya reached behind him and removed the large scroll he had kept on his back. He placed it proudly in front of Naruto.

“Do you know what this is kid?”

Obviously a scroll...but there was nothing more he could decipher, “Not really...”

Jiraiya went on, “It's a summoning contract, Naruto.”

“A what?”

“Tell me kid, in the battle against the Kyuubi, what did the Fourth ride to battle on?” The sennin asked.

Naruto had only caught bits and pieces of that story, but was able to answer, “A huge toad! Uh...Gamabunta, right?”

Jiraiya grinned, “Okay, so you've got some history in that head of yours...yep. He used this summoning contract as I have to summon toads, and at times, Gamabunta.”

Naruto's ocean eyes were as wide as saucers, “Can I do it too?”

Jiraiya had actually considered this for a short while earlier. Why not teach the kid? It could give him an edge against Haku and Gaara, if he did it correctly.

“Sure, but it'll be hard, I can promise that,” Jiraiya replied, opening the scroll, “Look here! This is my name and the Fourth's see? Signing this contract enables you to summon toads, which basically needs a sacrifice of blood along with the right seals.”

“So you'll teach me?” His volume was rising again in excitement.

“Er...yeah. What? Am I talking for my health?” The sage said, “You need to sign in blood though and then put your hand print next to it...”

Naruto, in a state of astonished excitement, signed his name next to the Yondaime's without a moment's hesitation. His name gleamed in red on the scroll. There was no way he could get the huge grin off of his face.

“So can you show me now?”

“Jeez, you're impatient! Pay attention squirt...” Jiraiya guided Naruto through the steps of a small blood sacrifice and the proper seals. The blonde boy memorized every last step.

“Got it?” Jiraiya watched Naruto nod his head like a bobble-head doll, “Well? Give it a shot.”

“Right!” Naruto was shaking with excitement, determined to get it right. While focusing his chakra, he bit his thumb and quickly drew blood, and went through the seals: boar, dog, bird,
monkey, ram...

His heart almost stopped when there was a puff of smoke and Jiraiya raised an eyebrow at his success.

A tadpole.

Jiraiya screamed with laughter and Naruto stood next to him, stricken and shocked. The blonde boy looked at the sennin, slightly frustrated that he hadn't even summoned a fully-grown toad.

After getting over his little joke Jiraiya exhaled, and Naruto sat back down, wondering if he could have done better.

“I'll do it again!” He was determined.

“You can't expect Gamabunta on your first try kid! You start small and work your way up, that's the nature of things...” Jiraiya explained while grinning, “Keep trying, Naruto, you've got plenty of time!”
Six Years Later

Chapter Soundtrack: “Winter Dance” By Uttara-Kuru

Konoha didn't know what hit it.

It was quite possible that six years had made the hidden village a bit keener to the types of shinobi it had been producing. A select few had been more noticeable than others, and rumors had been spread that the Hokage had abducted young children from foreign countries just for the sake of training purposes.

Still there was nothing that confirmed or denied that children had been brought to the Leaf Village, and the Hokage said nothing more on the matter. So people stopped caring and assumed that rumors of foreign invaders were only slander that had been circulated by the attention-seeking Jounin of Konoha.

Nothing seemed out of place, especially on a street corner in the dim light of the morning, where a silent apartment building stood innocently in the center of the shady town.

On the third level, a window was left ajar, letting sweet, fresh sunshine spill inside and illuminate the room that had welcomed it in.

A room, that in fact, was piled high with a number of mounds of dirty laundry, which curiously resembled haystacks in a freakish sort of way...And beyond the tangle of dirtied clothing were shelves of strange plants, Ninjutsu scrolls and the occasional weapon.

The wall on which the shelves had been mounted on was a peculiar shade of green with a few evident dents and chips in it, which was almost completely obscured by random pinups and calendars, all carefully arranged around a single framed photo of three young boys.

The tallest, with long dark hair stood pleasantly in the middle, while a frustrated-looking red haired boy looked as if he had been dragged into the shot at the last second. Beside them was a grinning blonde boy with exuberant blue eyes, brandishing an enthusiastic thumb up to no one in particular.

Beneath the wooden frame some distance below was said blonde boy, snoring gently in his messy bed. His penguin cap flopped childishly to the side and he was lying in what looked to be an uncomfortable position.

Beneath his mop of wild, golden hair his fine, whiskered face was well pronounced in the bright morning light. A wide smile adorned his mouth as he had carefree dreams of delicious ramen.

“Wake up.”

A redhead with fierce, glacial eyes stood by the window wearing an impassive expression. A large gourd was tied to his back and he had his arms folded across his chest as he came to wake his snoozing roommate.

Gaara had suspected that he wouldn't get very far by talking the slumbering Naruto back to consciousness. He roughly shook the blonde by the shoulder. Naruto’s head lolled to the side with no response.

He did so for a few moments before stopping himself.
And as if he couldn't be any more irritable, Naruto gave a loud snore and rolled over, proving how futile Gaara's attempts had been.

The red haired boy frowned: his patience was wearing thin.

*Snore*

Again, Gaara doubted that there was any way that this morning could have started without use of excessive force.

Sand leaked from the gourd on his back and made its way expertly towards an unsuspecting blonde.

With a shudder, the entire mattress was overturned, and the red haired boy watched in great satisfaction as Naruto sailed across the room with a strangled yelp. There was also an uncalled-for smash as somewhere a china pot that had belonged to Haku shattered into a thousand cobalt pieces.

*Naruto can pay for it...*

A groan of pain came from beneath the blanket that had draped itself over the rudely-awoken boy, and the penguin cap that had once been on Naruto's head was caught on the ceiling fan.

The sleepy blonde looked at Gaara bleary-eyed, and as if it were routine asked, “Morning already?”

Gaara was still frowning, “Haku-kun left an hour ago, Naruto-kun.”

After replacing his once-airborne mattress, Naruto scratched his head and stifled a yawn, seemingly unfazed, “Haku-kun always leaves early...”

The red head's eye twitched slightly.

“You have five minutes.”

“Huh? Five minutes to what Gaara-kun?”

“To get to the Academy on time. I’m leaving.”

“What?” Naruto tripped over a haystack of laundry and looked to Gaara who was walking casually out of his bedroom.

Naruto began to dress himself in record time, and as Gaara left without a care in the world, the blonde called after him with a small hint of contempt, “Hey, thanks for waking me bastard!”

Konoha's number one hyperactive ninja pelted down the sidewalk at top speed, grinning as he caught up with his red haired friend who had been walking leisurely with his arms still folded.

“So you thought you could ditch me eh, Gaara?”

Gaara looked sidelong at the blonde next to him; did he even stop to brush his teeth?

Maybe it'd be better if he didn't ask.

“No. However I did assume that you'd at least try to make an attempt not to be late today, but it appears I expect too much from you...”
Naruto smirked and faked a punch at Gaara's face, then grabbed his upper arm suddenly.

“Well come on Gaara-kun! We don't wanna be late!” The redhead sighed as Naruto proceeded to drag him the rest of the way to the Ninja Academy, leaving a trail of dust in his wake.

Sometimes Gaara wondered how this had become their routine every morning. Overhead, dark clouds rolled in front of the sun.

With only seconds to spare, both Naruto and Gaara collapsed into their seats next to a good-looking boy with long, ebony hair. A group of his fangirls were dawdling nearby, chatting excitedly to each other.

Haku smiled knowingly as his best friends once again arrived barely on time, “So tell me, what did you break today?”

“China pot.” Gaara dead panned.

“The blue one...?”

The red haired boy nodded, not feeling very remorseful over what he had so carelessly destroyed. Still, Haku appeared distressed and sighed to himself.

When would the vicious cycle end?

Naruto had his head bowed onto his desk, gearing up for a nap. Even Gaara's morning beatings weren't proving as effective as they had been for keeping him awake these days. He found himself increasingly tired, or at least, bored with the lectures at the Academy.

“Settle down please!” Iruka called out above the chatter of the class, “Role call!”

Naruto had his eyes closed but listened for his name to be called, just so he could have a reason to raise his voice. Gaara sat quietly while Haku scanned over a scroll while names were announced.

“Haku!” The dark haired boy raised his hand, and across the room his admirers twittered enthusiastically.

“Gaara!” Gaara only blinked, his typical response, but was still accounted for.

It went on. Naruto waited to be called, though his head did dart up after hearing Hinata and Sakura being called, upset he had come in late and was unable to talk to them.

“Naruto...”

“Oh yeah! I'm here Iruka-sensei!”

“Yes, I can see that...” The chunin instructor sighed.

Once Iruka had gone through the entire roster, he went on as it fell quiet, “Today as you all are aware is the Genin Examination-”

Naruto's head shot up again in excitement. Today was the day he became a real ninja!

Or died trying...

Haku leaned over towards Naruto and whispered, “You have been practicing your clones like you said, right Naruto-kun?”
Naruto waved him off, “Yeah, yeah...”

It wasn't very convincing. Haku cringed. Clones were Naruto's worst jutsu, this he and Gaara knew, and if he hadn't at least been trying to form one correctly, there was little hope of him graduating.

'Maybe I'm overreacting, he'll be fine...Naruto-kun always comes through in the end.' Haku tried to reaffirm the fact.

After finishing his speech which Naruto had only caught a few scant words of, Iruka added, “In a few moments we will begin with the first part of the exam.”

Gaara appeared as unperturbed as ever, but Haku gulped, hoping Naruto would do well.

They began with the Henge no Jutsu.

Students were required to transform into their teacher, namely Umino Iruka. There were mixed results with the first few students, some did poorly, while others like Haruno Sakura and Uchiha Sasuke, copied Iruka's appearance perfectly.

Sakura waved to Naruto after she had succeeded and he was confident he would do well. It was, after all, a skill he had perfected nearly six years ago...

Grinning, Naruto formed the ram seal and transformed into the spitting image of his chunin instructor...with the absence of the scar across his nose and Iruka clarified the blunder.

Cursing himself for missing a feature so obvious, Naruto chuckled, “Hey, I'll try again!”

“No, your Henge was sufficient so you don't-”

The blonde transformed again, not into Iruka, but into a voluptuous, naked babe with pigtails that immediately gave Iruka the worst nosebleed he had ever had in his life. He undid the jutsu and had a good laugh at his teacher's reaction.

“CUT THE STUPID TRICKS!” Iruka snarled, trying to subdue the flow of blood, “THIS IS YOUR LAST WARNING!”

Naruto was still laughing as he passed by Gaara and Haku, who only sighed at their friend's predictable, yet strangely effective prank which he had dubbed the ‘Sexy Jutsu.’

Haku and Gaara followed after Naruto, both of them transforming into Iruka faultlessly, and when they joined Naruto to watch the rest of the procession, he mumbled to them, “Show offs...”

Haku sniffed in response, “Naruto-kun this is no time for fooling around, this is the Genin Exam. If you don't pass then you can't graduate.”

“I know, Haku-kun, I know! Don't worry about it!” Again, Naruto waved off the dark haired boy's concerns.

The blonde observed the shy Hyuga girl stepping up to the front, and when she looked his way he gave her a reassuring thumbs-up. She blushed a deep shade of scarlet and then proceeded to transform into Iruka.

Gaara noted Hinata's timid tendencies towards Naruto, 'Does he really not notice?’

He found it such a waste that a girl as smart as Hinata (and not a worshiper of either Sasuke or
Haku for that matter) would dote on a sadly-oblivious person like Naruto. Frowning, Gaara looked at Naruto who was congratulating the shy girl on a job well-done.

'Maybe there is hope yet...'

The first stage was followed by target practice.

The target range was a real deathtrap with Naruto around, who volunteered to go first.

Iruka feared for the safety of the other students, “Alright, just take it easy Naruto...”

“I got it Iruka-sensei!” Naruto looked smug as he launched his shuriken at targets attached to trees on the other side of the courtyard. Incredibly, he made four bull's-eyes and the last weapon, which he threw with a bit too much zeal, tore directly through the center of the final target. It was split clean in half.

There were a few startled gasps as well as impressed shouts from namely Sakura and Haku.

Iruka sighed to the other examiners, “Good lord...”

‘That was an unbelievable display, though. I don’t know if any of the other students can do what Naruto just did...’ Iruka considered, smiling a bit to himself.

Hinata was beaming all the while, not in the least frightened by the odd display of strength Naruto had shown on his last throw.

Naruto gave Gaara a slap on the back (as he often did) as he went ahead next, looking just as confident. Even more impressive than Naruto, all five of the red haired boy's projectiles broke every target in half down the center.

Students actually clapped, hoping that with no more targets left functioning, they would be exempt from that part of the exam.

“We don't have a big enough budget to keep up with the damages they cause...” Mizuki, a fellow examiner, muttered to Iruka who nodded solemnly in agreement.

Much to the disappointment of the remaining students, more targets were brought out while Naruto raved about Gaara's 'mad skills.' Gaara didn't seem much affected that he had once again destroyed school property.

A few other students took their turns, and Sasuke who also hit all five marks ignored the cheering squad of fangirls who barely knew how to throw a shuriken, let alone cared about graduating.

Haku looked paler than usual when he was evaluated. Naruto had his fingers crossed and Gaara glared at the targets, threatening them to jump in front of Haku's shuriken or suffer another untimely fate.

They knew as well as Haku that his coordination came and went. He was a regular klutz when it came to projectiles and he wasn't looking very confident.

It wasn't so much of the disaster it could have been.

The first shuriken just barely fell short of the target, while the second sailed far off to the right. Iruka held his head in his hands in disappointment as the third soared clean over the target.

Panicked at his predictably poor performance, he hurled his last two shuriken together which
narrowly missed Naruto's head.

“Wah! Haku-kun, take it easy!”

There was nervous chatter among the students and Haku's fangirls whined in great dismay over his abysmal aim. After making sure Naruto was in one piece, the dark haired boy hung his head in humiliation.

He had to admit, he had anticipated much worse. At least no one had been injured. But over the years, Haku had come to understand that he lacked the skill in hurling kunai and shuriken at enemies that Gaara and Naruto had.

'It's just so barbaric, lodging a kunai in someone's head...' He thought to himself, 'I don't think I'll ever get the hang of it.'

“Good try Haku-kun,” Gaara said quietly, “I'm disappointed that you missed Naruto-kun. I'm certain Iruka-sensei would've given you full marks for that.”

Haku laughed. Naruto glared at Gaara and growled, “I think he could've gotten more credit for hitting you, Gaara!”

The red haired boy smirked, “You're right. That would've been impressive.”

From across the yard, a young kunoichi watched Haku with great interest, despite his pathetic display. She narrowed her chocolate eyes in thought as he returned reluctantly to the cluster of students.

'Hm, clearly he isn't comfortable with those weapons...I can fix that!'

All in due time, Gaara and Naruto also ran into their problem areas. As Naruto had told Haku, he had indeed been practicing his Bunshin, but didn't necessarily say that he had actually done well. After producing only one replication, and a sickly one at that, Iruka firmly announced that Naruto had not done well enough to graduate, much to his disagreement.

Gaara had also done poorly while performing the replacement technique, for reasons he didn't really care to explain, “Mizuki-sensei said that I wasn't fluid with my substitution...” Clearly he didn't have many nice things to say about the examiners that had failed him for something so ridiculous.

Haku tried to comfort them by explaining that they always had next year to improve their techniques, but Naruto seemed to be taking it extremely hard. He had set his hopes high on graduating that day, which had proven very foolish.

The three of them assembled by the swing outside the Academy, watching with envy as the passing graduates gathered outside with their new forehead protectors. “Let's get some lunch,” Haku didn't want them to drown in their frustration, “It's just after noon-”

“No thanks,” Naruto stood to leave, “I just wanna think right now...”

Haku nodded to him as the blonde left to brood by himself. He and Gaara had noticed how Naruto made himself scarce when he was feeling less than joyous, as to not upset his friends. It was another quirky habit of his.

“Do you think he's going to the Hokage monument again?” Gaara inquired.

Haku nodded, “Most likely...”
Mizuki had easily found the Naruto after the exam had terminated. It wasn't difficult at all to convince him once he had discovered him alone on a rooftop. He'd be the perfect scapegoat: the village prankster up to his old tricks again...

“Don't be upset with Iruka for being so hard on you, he's only looking after you.” Mizuki explained to Naruto, trying to act like he cared, “It just wouldn’t be right to send you on missions when you aren’t fully prepared.”

The blonde boy had a difficult time believing it, “It was just one slip up.”

“Really Naruto, it won't do you much good now,” Mizuki restrained himself from smirking, “But I can help you. There are other ways to pass...”

“Excuse me, you're Haku aren't you?”

Haku turned from Gaara and looked at the girl who had addressed him; thankfully it wasn’t one of the rabid girls who were incessantly asking him out on dates (to which he would politely decline.) Her brown hair was done up in two buns on top of her head, and judging by her hitai-ate, she was clearly a seasoned ninja.

Haku smiled at her, “I am.”

His friendliness caught her off-guard, but she went on, “I'm Tenten. I graduated last year. I've heard that you're one of the best in your class.”

From Gaara's point of view, it was just another girl looking for a date.

The dark haired boy was modest as always, “Not really, seeing that I failed the Genin Exam...”

As if the sky began to weep over such a tragedy on Haku's part, the dark clouds that were overhead gave way.

She placed her hands on her hips and studied him for a moment while rain drops fell one by one, “I saw you had some major problems with your weaponry.”

Grudgingly, he nodded.

Gaara took note that this was not going the way he had anticipated, and felt that he should no longer intrude on the discussion. By some miracle, Sakura was standing at the front of the Academy and was waving him over.

He looked to Haku, “I'll see you later.”

Once Gaara had departed, both Tenten and Haku decided to continue their discussion out of the rain. They darted beneath the overhang of a clothing shop as the drizzle turned into a downpour.

“Whew, that was close. It's been looking like rain all day!” Tenten was smiling at their good fortune and Haku found her to be very pleasant company.

“But anyway, I need to know if there are any weapons you're comfortable with Haku-san,” She went on, “I'd like to help you if I can.”

“Please excuse my curiosity Miss Tenten-”
“It's just Tenten if you don't mind.”

Haku paused, “Tenten then...how can you help me? I do find myself to be a lost cause with my atrocious aim...”

What he lacked in confidence he made up for in his eloquent speech.

The kunoichi gave him a skeptical look, “You're not a lost cause, Haku! Besides, I specialize in weaponry. If there's anyone who can help you, it's me!”

Boy was he was lucky. It wasn't everyday a pretty girl offered to help him learn how to throw knives.

“So what’s your fighting style?” Tenten asked, “Once I know I can determine what weapons you may be better suited for.”

A simple yet profound question.

'How do I fight?'

There was a simple solution to that: he relied heavily on his Kekkei Genkai, and he didn't see how that would help her decide on a weapon he could actually throw without flinching. Or maybe...that was exactly what she was looking for.

“I manipulate water.” He said simply, earning a quizzical look from Tenten.

'Maybe a demonstration is in order...'

And water there was in abundance, nearly flooding the street it was raining so hard. If only he had been so lucky during his exam...

She watched in awe as Haku flicked his wrist and threads of water rose from the street and streaked through the air. He suddenly looked at peace and focused.

After a minute of watching raindrops being cast aside in all directions, Tenten seemed to have had an epiphany. His technique was more graceful and he didn't seem to be the type wanting a messy fight.

“I get your style...” Tenten nodded to him, “I know just what you need!”

“I'm sorry that you didn't pass Gaara-kun,” Sakura said supportively, “You, Haku-kun and Naruto-kun...”

He shrugged in response as they stood in the entryway of the Academy along with a few other students waiting out the rain. Gaara could honestly say that he hadn't expected things to go well after seeing calm and collected Haku tossing shuriken at Naruto (which had mildly amused him.)

“I did poorly, so I'm not fit to graduate.” Gaara said simply, not wanting to press the matter that was already burning him up.

Sakura scowled, “And it's that kind of attitude that won't get you anywhere! Those stupid examiners, you're more worthy to be a genin than I am...”

“I doubt that.”

Again, she frowned, “Why's that?”
“Because you passed.”

“Ugh...Gaara-kun, could you be any more apathetic?”

Gaara smirked, “Would you like to see me try?”

“No thanks, you already have me depressed.”

Ever since their childhood, Sakura had remained a loyal friend to Hinata, Naruto, Haku and Gaara. It was tearing her up that the three of her closest friends (whom she had nicknamed The Trio) would not proceed into Genin training with her.

She was about ready to pick a fight with Iruka-sensei for failing them all, but that docile nature that she had shielded herself would not permit it.

“What a crappy day...” Sakura muttered. She was in a worse mood than even Gaara.

“I'll walk you home Sakura-chan.”

Sakura gave him a bothered look, “Don't. It's pointless for both of us to get wet...”

“Do you remember who you're talking to?”

She hadn't noticed the sand shield that had been surrounding them for the past minute and she mentally slapped herself.

“Oh...well, I guess I'm just so used to you by now that I don't notice these things.” She chuckled sheepishly.

He said nothing and stepped out into the rain, but couldn't help but notice the look of wonder on her face. The only other person they knew who could walk out in the rain without being soaked was Haku, for obvious reasons.

Gaara listened patiently while she began another one-sided conversation during their walk. Something about Naruto's perverted jutsu and it somehow reflected his cleverness in a sick sort of way.

By the time they had reached her house, the rain had stopped, and Gaara's sand returned to his gourd. His hands were buried in his pockets, and he suddenly felt awkward around the pink haired girl.

“Maybe I'll see you tomorrow.” It was the 'maybe' that irked Sakura. Things were uncertain now that he could not leave the Academy.

She frowned and then hugged him, giving him flashbacks of when they were young children when he had first come to Konoha with Naruto and Haku.

Sakura smiled, “You will see me tomorrow.”

And she went inside leaving him with an odd feeling in the pit of his stomach. He stood outside her door for a long moment, inhaling the moist air that smelled like rain, forest, and Sakura.

Gaara's spirit was lightened somewhat, and then seemed to do a nosedive after noticing Naruto in a flash of orange leaping over a number of nearby rooftops. He had a large scroll that he was certain his friend was not the owner of.
“That’s conspicuous.” Reluctantly, Gaara followed his blonde friend, hoping this wouldn’t lead to any further complications.

In a short while, Tenten had easily solved Haku’s coordination problem.

“Senbon are perfect for you!” She was proud that he had picked up on throwing the needles so quickly, “Do you really believe you’re a lost cause now, Haku?”

They stood on the side of the empty, damp street, where he had been using a wooden telephone pole as a makeshift target. He embedded senbon into the want ads and posters that were stapled to the pole.

Haku fiddled with the three needles he had gripped in his hand, “Well, maybe not, but I can’t say that I would’ve thought of this myself.”

“You just practice, and you’ll graduate in no time...” Tenten said while tossing a few needles herself, lodging them in the bearded face of a man on a poster, “You’ll need a good knowledge of the human body too if you want to study Shinjutsu.”

The dark haired boy regarded her for a moment while she casually flicked senbon at the pole, and a small smile appeared on his face, “I’m very glad you found me Tenten. I’m not quite sure what I would’ve done if-”

She blushed, “It was nothing! Really! Just do me a favor and pass will you?”

Haku then had a thought, “I wonder; how did you come to find me anyway?”

Tenten extracted the needles from the wooden beam and turned to him, “Oh, well, my team mate had mentioned you, actually. He said that when you were young that-”

“Haku!”

The dark haired boy looked across the street and saw Gaara standing there. He was scowling and Haku could tell that it probably had something to do with Naruto.

“I think I should be going now,” He sighed, “I’ll come find you tomorrow so we can continue training.”

“Tomorrow?” Tenten mulled it over in her head, “Okay then...I really should go too. I kind of ditched my team to come find you.”

Haku gave her a grateful smile when she handed him a fistful of senbon, “Here, they’re on me! I have plenty more for myself...it was nice meeting you Haku!” He watched her jog off down the street and he then turned to Gaara again who didn't look pleased.

“Naruto-kun, what are you doing?”

Gaara had described to Haku how he had seen their friend making off with a large scroll that he had never seen before. They both tracked him down in a forested area and Naruto seemed ecstatic to see them.

“Haku-kun! Gaara-kun! Check it out!” He displayed the large scroll he found, “This Forbidden Scroll is full of awesome jutsu!”
“Did you ever think that it was 'forbidden' for a reason?” Gaara said pointedly.

Haku however wasn't as hostile, “Maybe we should hear him out...”

The red haired boy gave him an incredulous look as Naruto went on, “But there's more! You see if we master a jutsu from this scroll, then we can pass the exam and graduate!”

“Where did you hear that?” Haku asked. He hoped it was true.

Gaara remained skeptical.

Naruto was gently slipping the rope off the scroll, “Mizuki-sensei told me.”

Gaara exchanged a confused glance with Haku.

“He did?”

“Oh yeah!” Naruto nodded while opening the scroll in front of his friends to give them a better view of its contents, “He said any jutsu would work. I say we give it a shot!”

Haku nodded, “If that's what Mizuki-sensei said then I have no objection!”

Gaara watched with his arms folded as the blonde boy and Haku examined the first few techniques. Nothing about this seemed to make sense. Why hadn't they heard of this scroll before? And how did Naruto come by it?

Then again, graduating to become a genin sounded just too good for him to resist, and discarding his better judgment, Gaara settled down beside them and took a peek, “Let me have a look...”

Early evening came, adding to the darkness of the cloudy sky.

“It's all over...” The three boys looked up to see none other than Umino Iruka glowering at them, who seemed disappointed at discovering Naruto along with his fellow juvenile delinquents.

Naruto leapt to his feet, closing the scroll and grinned at Iruka as he stepped in front of Haku and Gaara. Naruto was well aware that even though Haku and Gaara were known to be his closest friends, their records weren't nearly as tarnished as Naruto’s yet.

Simply put, Haku was a polite, well-behaved boy and Gaara's hobby was sleeping rather than using his free time to vandalize the Hokage monument and such. So Iruka gave props to the three for being good friends in spite of their diversity.

Of course, he wouldn't put it past either Gaara or Haku to be enticed when Naruto managed to get his hands on a Forbidden Scroll. Iruka noted that Haku, genius though he was, wouldn't pass up the opportunity to learn a few jounin-level jutsu, and Gaara, well...

In his first years at the Academy, he had received complaints that strange, threatening messages were being spelled out in sand across the desks of some students who, coincidentally, Gaara and Naruto weren't particularly fond of.

Yet he never could prove Gaara was the one responsible for that, or any other unexplainable phenomena for that matter; like the chairs that were often found snapped in half: the pieces scattered around the classroom in the morning (due to some unseen fits of rage), or the missing window panes (the glass was discovered shattered in piles outside the Yamanaka flower shop), or that freak accident when the roof went missing last year.
In other words, Gaara had a clean slate as well.

Naruto on the other hand, drew attention to himself through pranks just for the sake of getting attention. And although he had plenty of intervention from his friends, who often made sure he avoided catastrophic consequences, Iruka could tell that the blonde boy had some help from time to time spreading graffiti on the Ninja Academy's walls.

So here were all three of them: caught red-handed.

It was disappointing and slightly expected all at once for the young chunin teacher. Iruka knew they had always been outcasts at their time in the Academy. Haku was placed on a high pedestal for being so brilliant, while Naruto was ostracized for being himself, and Gaara was shunned for simply being...’outlandish’ as Jiraiya had once put it.

Still, they'd have to learn eventually that they had to stand above the abuse, and not resort to such childish pranks.

Naruto chuckled at his teacher's serious face, “You found us already, sensei? We only learned a few jutsu so far...”

It was then Iruka understood. All of them, sweaty and tired, they had been working hard, that much was clear. Gaara gave a reserved glance to Iruka, sensing that something was not right; but Haku was just as chipper as Naruto.

“Iruka-sensei,” Haku spoke up tiredly, “We'll show you the techniques we've learned and then we can pass the exam as genin. Anyone who learns at least one jutsu from this scroll passes, yes?”

“What?” The chunin was baffled, “Who told you that?”

Haku looked taken aback, and Gaara frowned, knowing it was all too good to be true.

Naruto however was still hopeful, “Mizuki-sensei told me! He told me where to find the scroll and this place...”

A look of horror and realization came over Iruka's face as Naruto trailed off, looking just as lost as Haku and Gaara. The only thing they all noted was the swift sound of kunai coursing through the air.

Gaara's sand shield surrounded him as the knives rained down, while Iruka knocked Haku and Naruto out of the way of the deadly hail. Iruka was forced against the wall of the cabin nearby; a few of the kunai had met their mark. Hastily, he removed the knives that had been deeply imbedded above his right knee.

From the tree tops, a recognizable voice called out, “It seems you've found our hideaway, Iruka-sensei...”

“Mizuki!” Iruka snarled, ignoring the dumbfounded looks on Naruto, Gaara and Haku's faces, “So you're the one after the scroll?”

Mizuki sneered down at him, “I see you've caught on. I wasn't expecting so many to turn out, but no matter...”

“What are you talking about?” Naruto barked, “What do we have to do with the scroll?”

“Get out of here! All three of you!” Iruka ordered, “Go! Take the scroll with you!”
Mizuki grinned as the three young trainees stood without a clue about what was going on.

“Well it's obvious isn't it Naruto-kun?” The silver haired traitor went on, “You were perfect for fetching the scroll for me. It doesn't seem like something you wouldn't do, so why don't you save yourself the trouble and hand it over to me now?”

“No.” Gaara spat and then turned to his companions, “Don't play his game. We out number him four to one. He's a coward for using Naruto just to get the scroll.”

“Get out of here! He's a chunin and he has us right where he wants us!” Iruka was glad that Gaara also didn't trust Mizuki, but upset they weren't trying to escape, “Don't let him get that scroll!”

Mizuki glared at Iruka, “Doubting their abilities again, Iruka-sensei? Typical. Why would they bother listening to the one who failed them? You see...they're stronger than they know...”

“That's enough Mizuki!”

Naruto's grip on the scroll tightened. He was going to make sure that he didn't hand it over, although he wasn't sure who to trust.

Mizuki scowled down at Haku, Gaara and Naruto, “Ha! You still don't know, do you? What monsters you all are?”

Haku had heard this before, and he readied the senbon Tenten had given him, “What are you playing at...?”

“Didn't you ever stop to think, Naruto-kun? Why everyone hates you?” Mizuki smirked at the boy as he continued, “Many years ago the Fourth Hokage sealed the vicious beast that attacked our village, The Nine-Tailed Fox, into a young child...”

Gaara and Haku looked towards Naruto, wondering what the traitor's words could mean.

“That's enough Mizuki!” Iruka bellowed, throwing his own kunai back at him. Mizuki easily dodged them and landed nimbly back on his tree branch.

“And that baby, Naruto-kun...it was you!” He spat, “You are the Kyuubi!”

Naruto's blue eyes were wide in shock, but in a way, it made sense to him. People always had avoided him and hated him...Now he knew the reason why. So did Haku and Gaara. What did they think of him now?

Haku and Gaara only stared at Naruto, at a loss for words.

“And you!” Mizuki suddenly rounded on Gaara, “You're from Sunagakure! You're not even worthy to be a shinobi of the Leaf Village! I can't say why the Hokage would want to keep a disgusting monster like the One Tailed Tanuki around!”

Gaara was floored. True, he was already aware of his situation, but he certainly didn't want anyone to know about it. The red haired boy shot a look of loathing at Mizuki, wanting to let his sand crush him into tiny bits.

“Shut your mouth, Mizuki!” Iruka shouted, not believing that Mizuki had disobeyed a direct order from the Hokage to never tell the youngsters of their painful pasts; the pasts they kept hidden from each other.

While Naruto and Gaara shook with righteous fury, as two jinchuriki exposed, Haku knew that he
wouldn't be spared.

“And you, perfect little Haku-kun of the Water Country...you're a real mystery,” Mizuki looked smug, “No one would suspect a genius like you to be a murderer, now would they?”

There was a silence. Haku knew that what he had tried to hide from his friends for so many years was about to be publicized.

“It's been kept confidential of course, but it's hard not to notice on your record that you're held accountable for the murder of your own parents-!”

“Shut up!” Haku threw the senbon needles he had prepared, which caught Mizuki off guard. Three of which connected painfully with the traitor's shoulder and forearm.

'But how–?' Mizuki couldn't believe it, *This kid can't aim for his life...when did he–?*

More senbon rained into the tree tops. Haku was inconsolable and charged ahead after Mizuki, completely forgetting that he was a chunin instructor.

“Haku!” Gaara followed after him, his sand awaiting his any whim. Naruto, however, stood rooted to the spot clinging to the Forbidden Scroll.

“Naruto! Listen to me, you have to take the scroll and get out of here!” Iruka tried one last time talking sense into him, “I have to make sure that those two don't get killed!”

At first it seemed as if Naruto hadn't heard him at all. But Iruka watched with relief as Naruto nodded slowly, and then rushed away with the scroll through the forest canopy. Iruka then proceeded to follow after his other two students, cursing their foolishness for being drawn into a trap.

The entire forest was too quiet and Iruka feared he had lost track of Gaara and Haku. He could only hope that they would be able to fend off Mizuki until he found them.

He was surprised when he stepped right into the crossfire between Gaara and Mizuki. Haku was nowhere to be found; he too must have been separated. Unfortunately, Iruka was unable to react in time after Mizuki had hurled his largest shuriken at Gaara, who made no move to dodge it.

“Get out of the way!” Iruka felt his voice had failed him as the enormous weapon collided with the redhead's chest. That was until the ‘Gaara’ he saw began to leak sand instead of blood, and then completely reformed into a mold of sand.

No doubt Mizuki was frustrated.

'A sand substitute!' Iruka was impressed and relieved at the same time, *'But where is the real one?'*

“I don't have time for this!” Mizuki hissed as he evaded the wave of sand that toppled over the tree he had been using for cover. The traitor rushed ahead, with Gaara at his heels, using his sand to barrel over the trees that his foe lingered in.

*He's still after the scroll! I have to get Haku and Gaara before he finds Naruto!’* Iruka bounded after them, diving through the swath of green leaves that surrounded him like an endless ocean.

Mizuki grinned to himself while watching a flash of orange dart past him through the tree tops, and then stop, exhausted. It had been easy to lose the dratted sand kid with a simple genjutsu.
'He's been running for a while, the fool...this makes it all too simple...' Mizuki crouched expertly on the branch, making sure the Uzumaki brat had not seen him, and then let a dozen shuriken fly at the boy's head.

All in a split second, Naruto turned, looking straight at Mizuki with eyes of deep anger: eyes that didn't really seem to belong to Naruto...

The chunin's breath hitched when he realized that he had been discovered, and worse, that it was not his true target that was nearby. Oh no, this was made plainly clear as senbon met the projectiles halfway, pinning each to a tree by its center.

The image of Naruto disappeared in a cloud of smoke, and where the blonde once was stood Haku, his stormy eyes darker than ever. Unable to believe he had been so easily fooled, Mizuki created a clone to distract the boy and continue his search for the scroll.

'Where the hell is that kid?' He hadn't expected Naruto to cause him so much trouble, or that his juvenile friends would show up to stall his plans. But they didn't matter, Iruka was weak and the rest of them were failures barely worth his time.

Mizuki picked his way through the woods with ease, nearing his starting point, and watched as the real Naruto stumbled while he ran, and then collapsed at the base of a tree with the scroll, trying to catch his breath.

He raised a kunai, 'There you are Naruto-kun...'

Mizuki aimed for the boy's chest this time, and felt his insides boil when a shield of sand unexpectedly surrounded him.

His target looked up, smirking, “Naruto isn't here.”

Gaara undid the jutsu and let his sand surround his traitorous teacher, or at least, the substitute he had left behind to fool him. The red haired boy cursed under his breath as the tree he attacked spilt in half and crashed to the ground in a splintered heap. He was wasting time, and he still hadn't found Haku or Naruto.

Iruka leapt down from his vantage point on an oak tree after he had spotted one of his students crouched behind a thornbush.

“Haku!” The chunin barked, and the dark haired boy turned to him in surprise.

“Iruka-sensei!”

Haku hurried over to his instructor and asked, “Where's Naruto-kun? Is he alright?”

Iruka frowned, “For now, I believe. What were you thinking? Mizuki is dangerous! You and Gaara could've been killed!”

“I'm sorry sensei...”

“Fine, for now we have to find Gaara and then return that Forbidden scroll to the Hokage before-”

Iruka was interrupted as Haku plunged a kunai into his teacher's left shoulder and gave him a relentless kick in the gut, sending him tumbling to the hard ground in utter shock.

Haku smiled sweetly, “Idiot.”
“Where are they Mizuki?” Iruka’s voice was hoarse and he watched as Haku vanished and his fellow chunin appeared.

“It's not like you care do you? After all, they're monsters and abominations, they have no place in the world as shinobi,” Mizuki shrugged and watched as Iruka struggled to stand, “They deserved every bit of pain I inflicted on them. Why don’t you say ‘hi’ to them when you're dead Iruka?”

A few meters away and out of sight, Naruto had hidden himself behind a tree, still guarding the scroll he had stolen. He did his best to breathe quietly while he listened to the exchange between the two men.

Iruka shook his head, “No, I don't believe you. I trained those kids and they're strong...not even you could hope to defeat the three of them.”

Mizuki purred while wondering if he should put a kunai in his opponent's eye or throat, “You sound so sure. They didn't put up much of a fight...”

Naruto felt his eyes burn. Were Haku and Gaara really dead?

Panting, Iruka extracted the knife from his shoulder and let it fall to the tall grass, “It's clear that they're alive, after all, you haven't found the scroll yet.”

Mizuki looked irked and his voice rose a margin, “Why do their lives matter to you so much? All of them are monsters, causing pain and leaving suffering in their wake! Or have you forgotten that your parents are dead because of the Kyuubi?”

“You're right, that is how monsters act...”

Naruto cringed, 'So...sensei really does think we're monsters.'

Iruka continued fiercely, despite his injuries, “But those three aren't monsters! They're good kids; the best I've ever had the pleasure of teaching! The only thing that I see here causing pain and suffering is you Mizuki! You'll never get your hands on that scroll and they'll make sure of it!”

“We will.”

Gaara and Haku leapt down on either side of Iruka, startling both chunin. From his hideout, Naruto was relieved to hear his friends’ voices.

“You just don't know when to quit do you?” Mizuki was seething, “Then I guess you'll just have to learn the hard way!”

As the traitor reached for his second fuuma shuriken, Gaara and Haku tensed, preparing for another fight. Iruka wasn't in good condition and Naruto's whereabouts were still unknown.

Or were they?

The energetic blonde barreled out from the canopy and leapt at Mizuki, planting his knee solidly in the latter's face. Mizuki crumpled backwards, while Naruto landed in front of his companions, his expression determined.

'We haven't worked this hard for nothing...'

“If you ever touch my friends or my sensei again...” Naruto's voice was a snarl, “I'll kill you!”

A deranged laugh escaped Mizuki, “Is that so Kyuubi?”
Before there was a single word of protest from Haku, Gaara or Iruka, Naruto’s eyes had narrowed dangerously. He formed the hand seals he had memorized earlier, and cried, “Tajuu Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!”

A thousand copies of Naruto filled the entire forest, earning a look of terror from Mizuki. The shadow clones nearest to Iruka and his friends seemed more protective than the rest of them.

Iruka was in awe, “They’re not just illusions; they’re solid clones!”

Gaara and Haku both looked smug.

“He wasn’t able to make this many before...” Haku muttered, “I suppose this is a special occasion.”

“Hey bastard!” The original Naruto spoke up, “What were you saying about knowing when to quit?”

Every Naruto in the clearing grinned triumphantly as they each got a turn to beat Mizuki’s head into the ground.

Literally.

“Here sensei,” After Mizuki had been knocked out, Naruto returned the scroll to Iruka, “I didn’t mean to cause so much trouble.”

Iruka sighed and looked at the three of his students. They had really pulled through and worked together, and Mizuki’s treachery had been exposed and dealt with.

They were all silent, still trying to absorb what had transpired.

“I have to say you all did very well,” The chunin confessed, “In fact...”

His words incurred hopeful looks from the three and the most prominent was the pleading expression on Naruto’s face.

“Substitution, coordination, and shadow clones...” Iruka went on, “After the way you all fought today, I say you’re all more than qualified to graduate! Congratulations, you pass!”

Of course they were pleased.

“Yeah! Alright Iruka-sensei!” Naruto nearly tackled their teacher to the ground when he hugged him. Haku only bowed respectfully with a word of deep gratitude, and Gaara’s smirk seemed more good-natured than usual.

“I’m pretty sure we have a few hitai-ate leftover for the three of you...we can stop by the Academy later,” Iruka added with a smile, “Why don’t we get something to eat first?”

‘Funny how we reap rewards after such an excursion...’ Gaara thought to himself.

“Woo hoo! Sensei you’re the best!” Naruto had labeled this the best day ever.

Oh yes, Konoha didn't know what hit it.
New Sensei

Chapter Soundtrack: “Windspeaks” by Nujabes feat Uyama Hiroto

Gaara's dreams were seldom pleasant.

For the past few nights he was constantly plagued with dark images and faces of his youth, and he made damn sure he didn't speak a word about it to either Naruto or Haku.

There were whispered undercurrents of rage in his thoughts and even with the Shukaku being under his control for nearly six years, he would wake with the terrified faces of Temari and Kankuro still in his mind, just as he had this morning.

“Hey Gaara,” The red haired boy felt a large pillow impact his face with peculiar force, “You know usually you're the one waking me up, but I guess there's a first time for everything!”

“...you dunce...” Gaara sat up and threw the cushion back at the blonde, clipping him in the side of the head.

He'd have liked to have remained asleep to revel in the sight of his elder siblings memories (despite their wild fear at the time), but he chose not dwell on it. He forced himself back into the uncomfortable plain of consciousness.

Naruto grinned and threw the pillow into the open door of Haku's bedroom (from where it was stolen) and watched as Gaara let out a string of grumbling noises.

“Sheesh, put a shirt on will you?” The blonde snorted at the sight of his roommate's bare torso, “You look like some kinda ghost you're so freaking pale!”

Gaara frowned. True, he was seriously lacking some skin pigment, but he'd rather not have his bothersome friend annoy him and invade his privacy so early.

“Get out of my room, Naruto.”

“Sure thing, Cranky,” The Kyuubi container backed out of the doorway but poked his head back in, “Haku-kun just wants to know why the hell you slept in again. I mean, since we're Genin now he thinks that you'd probably-”

The door slammed in his face with a loud bang.

Naruto grinned to himself, 'Yep, he's fine!'

Naruto wisely decided to leave Gaara alone for a while and returned to the kitchen where Haku had finished preparing the usual morning meal. The dark haired boy sat down and nibbled at a bite of egg while he concentrated on reading a scroll.

“Is he awake yet, Naruto-kun?” He asked without looking up.

“Yeah,” The blonde sat down across from Haku and helped himself to some breakfast, “I had to use that shirt-excuse again though.”

Haku paused and smirked to himself, “He really hates that you know...he’s a bit self-conscious.”

“Why else would I use it?” Naruto said before slurping his miso.
It was enough to earn a good-hearted laugh from Haku and he continued on reading, very amused with his friend's antics.

Naruto caught a brief glimpse of the scroll that Haku had been ferociously reviewing and was fairly curious about it. Haku rarely, if ever, read basic Ninjutsu scrolls. Naruto and Gaara had noticed that Haku had developed an insatiable appetite for 'higher-level' techniques...or so he called them.

When of course, all it really meant was that he always had a keen, open eye for B-level jutsu and higher.

And for some strange reason, Haku had a knack for 'picking-up' certain scrolls and such in that ever-unobtrusive manner of his. All the more sense for the Chunin teachers in the Academy to label him 'naturally brilliant'...which was partly true.

Anything he did absorb into that clever head of his he didn't flaunt often. Haku wasn't foolish enough to alert any high-ranking officials that he enjoyed stealing scrolls and picking apart their contents.

But what could he say? It was one of his and Naruto's favorite pastimes, and until recently (with the involvement of the traitorous Mizuki) this fetish was gradually being passed along to Gaara as well.

So Naruto didn't hesitate to ask, “What do you have there, Haku-kun?”

Haku looked up, “Oh, it's just a Shinjutsu scroll. It has detailed descriptions of the human body. It's also more complicated than I thought.”

“A what?” Naruto was disappointed, “You mean that acupuncture crap? What's so great about poking people?”

Haku clarified for him, “I want to use it in combination with my senbon that Tenten gave to me.”

The blonde nodded thoughtfully, “Right, right...so is she cute?”

“Who? Tenten?”

“Well yeah! Gaara didn't tell me what happened while I was gone yesterday and you keep talking about this Tenten girl, so...” Naruto grinned mischievously, “What's she like?”

“She's...fun company. And fairly pretty, I admit...” Haku added, “Though I'm sure you understand I'm more focused on training than-”

“Having any sort of social life?” Naruto finished for him, smirking.

“Well...yes.” A faint blush appeared on his cheeks.

The blonde's smirk widened after he finished his miso soup, “You're worse than Gaara sometimes, Haku.”

“You are entitled to your own opinion.” Haku went on to change the subject, “But as I was saying, shinjutsu is a very precise art and can disable enemies completely if done correctly.”

“Sounds right up your alley.” Naruto acknowledged, “I still don't see how sticking needles in someone actually counts as ‘art' though.”
Certainly Naruto was not foolish enough to bait Haku, was he?

“I can give you a small demonstration...” The dark haired boy suggested, standing and walked over to Naruto who didn't seem very much bothered as he ate.

“Make note, Naruto-kun, this is a very basic strike,” Haku warned while tapping a particular point on the blonde's upper left arm.

“Wha-?” Naruto jerked as if he had been slapped, and dropped his chopsticks much to Haku's delight.

Gaara entered the room just in time to witness the uncontrollable twitching that came over the right side of Naruto's face. He stopped just next to Haku to watch the effects of the shinjutsu strike that left Naruto confused and unable to eat.

“You have to do this more often.” Gaara said quietly, and Haku nodded while Naruto struggled to regain control over his facial muscles.

One tap on the side of the neck ended the Kyuubi container's convulsions. Gaara silently wondered how long Naruto's predicament would've lasted had Haku not done anything about it.

“What the hell did you do to me?” Naruto had a new respect for acupuncture and related skills.

“A simple maneuver,” Haku closed his scroll with a pleased smirk, “That pressure point sent messages to your brain to contract your jaw muscles.”

“That's pretty freaky...” Naruto mumbled, rubbing his face.

Gaara had sat down and began to eat, glad that Naruto had some sense knocked (poked) into him that morning. Haku was elated to get his point across to his blonde friend so vividly.

“We should leave soon,” Haku announced, finishing his bowl of rice, “Today they announce the Genin squads...we shouldn't miss it.”

Gaara and Naruto grinned at the dark haired boy.

Their arrival at the Ninja Academy wasn't at all expected.

The few who noticed the three of them enter the classroom were either bothered or disinterested. In Haku's case, many of his loyal groupies flocked to him like a herd of dazed sheep and smothered him in sweet words and declarations of love.

It wasn't anything out of the norm.

In the mid-row, a young, pink haired kunoichi sat slumped over, with her head bowed onto her desk in despondency. Without a word to his companions, Gaara stalked over to her, leaving a troubled Haku behind.

Next to her, a thin, sickly-looking boy with light hair turned to the despairing kunoichi.

“Are you feeling alright, Sakura-chan?” He asked quietly, “You look terrible.”

She lifted her face to give him a small smile, “Me? I'm fine Tadashi... just tired.”

With a shrug, he stood up to talk to one of his nearby friends, and she sighed heavily to herself. Tired? Her excuses were getting lamer and lamer. Why not admit she was miserable because three
of her closest friends were missing out on a crucial stepping-stone of their shinobi careers?

“Sakura-chan, you should have more faith in your words.”

“See, I have this issue with lying through my teeth when I'm sad-” She prattled, before looking up at her visitor, “Gaara-kun, you did make it!”

Sakura struggled to suppress the urge to glomp him.

“You said I would.”

She frowned, “Oh, I did, didn’t I? Well, maybe it'll also work for other things like...” She paused in thought, “Ino-pig will disappear!”

Inanely excited, Sakura looked across the room to where the blonde kunoichi was fawning over a raven haired boy. She didn't dematerialize or anything of the sort, much to her dismay.

“Darn...” Sakura muttered, but then smiled at Gaara, “How are Naruto-kun and Haku-kun?”

“They passed too.”

She leapt from her seat, “Wow! Really? How did you guys do it?”

“It's...a very long story.”

“And I want to hear all of it at lunch,” Sakura smiled, sitting down, “Hey, maybe we'll be put on the same team! At least, that's what I hope...”

“I'd much rather be on your team than anyone else's.” Gaara ground out, shooting a venomous glare at a nearby eavesdropper.

“Except maybe Haku and Naruto's team right?” She laughed, relieved that they had all made it.

“Not really.”

She blushed and nodded, wondering if he really meant it.

“Why don't you just go out with one of them already?” Naruto mumbled to Haku, “That way, you'd only have one of them bothering you and the rest of them would give up and leave you alone!”

“I'm not so sure it works that way, Naruto-kun,” Haku sighed resignedly, “And that wouldn't be proper to use someone like that. It's cruel.”

“You've got to stop being such a gentleman all the time,” Naruto frowned at his stilted friend, “I mean, look, Sasuke's got the right idea!”

The blonde indicated the Uchiha boy near the back row who paid no mind to the lovesick girls surrounding him. Haku only frowned at Sasuke's rude method but was slightly tempted to attempt it himself. But then that would only tarnish his reputation as one of the few, courteous, well-mannered ninja of Konoha...so he brushed the idea aside.

“N-Naruto-kun? Haku-kun?” A quiet voice came from behind them.

Haku took this opportunity to focus his attention on Hinata rather than turning down date and marriage proposals. Naruto faced her with a large grin that made her heart flutter.
“Hey Hinata-chan!” Of course he was always glad to see the shy Hyuga girl, “Looks like we're all ninja now, doesn't it?”

“Good morning, Hinata-chan.” Haku smiled at her, sending his groupies into an agitated frenzy.

“I wanted to congratulate the both of you and Gaara-kun on g-graduating,” Hinata continued softly, “Since I didn't get to see any of you yesterday...”

“Thanks Hinata,” Naruto was still grinning and Haku pondered at how his face could stay like that for so long, “Yesterday was pretty crazy!”

“I hope you enjoyed my target practice from the genin exam, Hinata-chan,” Haku joked mildly and she laughed when she recalled his performance. It was a soft, melodious sound that only she could make.

“Take your seats!” Iruka's voice drifted over the noise, and after a moment, successfully managed to order them to plant their butts. Haku and Naruto took a seat on either side of Hinata, but Naruto hadn't noticed Gaara was missing until he realized the redhead wasn't next to him.

'That's the problem with quiet people...’ Naruto figured, 'They sneak off and then I can't find them.'

“He's with Sakura-chan.” Haku said quietly, pointing to the relocated Gaara who was currently settled in the center row by said kunoichi.

Iruka began to call out names in groups of three for genin cells, and the room fell silent as they waited for their names to be called.

Sakura looked over to Tadashi who was the first of the genin to be called, along with two others whose names she didn't catch. The second cell, however, turned a few heads...

Iruka smirked to himself, “Squad 2: Uzumaki Naruto, Haku and Gaara.”

Sakura glanced at Gaara next to her who gave no indication whatsoever that he was pleased with this development, while somewhere in the back, Naruto whooped loudly. Haku merely wore the serene expression as he usually did, but was apparently glad that Iruka had a hand in forming the teams.

There was confused murmuring while other squads were called.

Sakura began to shake slightly in anticipation for her name to be called, her mind spinning with the possibilities of where she would be placed, 'Please! Not with Ino-pig!'

The circumstances were a bit limiting, she realized, since three of her primary choices had been eliminated, the rest was up to fate.

“Squad 7: Haruno Sakura, Uchiha Sasuke and Inuzuka Kiba.”

'There...that wasn't so bad was it?’ She let out a shaky breath and Gaara gave her a quizzical look.

Genuinely curious, Sakura stole a peek at Sasuke who was quietly brooding on the opposite end of the room. For a split-second, their eyes met, black and green, and her head snapped back to the front as if it were on a hinge.

’Sasuke?’ Sakura let it boil in her head, 'He's alright...I guess we haven't talked in a while...and Kiba? Well...’ She glanced at the Inuzuka boy who was having an animated conversation with the puppy perched on top of his head, 'He'll take some getting used to...’
“Whew! Not that bad,” Sakura whispered to the red haired boy beside her, “I'm just glad I'm not stuck with Ino-pig!”

“...likewise.”

“Squad 8: Aburame Shino, Hyuga Hinata and Hatake Sato.”

Hinata made a small squeak that was only audible to Naruto, who in turn, gave her an enthusiastic nudge. The last of the teams were called in a short time.

“Squad 10: Nara Shikamaru, Yamanaka Ino and Akimichi Chouji.”

After the more important instructions were announced, the volume of the class immediately began to increase. Naruto thumped Haku hard on the back, unable to contain his excitement, “Alright! I just knew we'd be on the same team! This is gonna be awesome!”

Haku nodded while the blonde boy rambled on.

Disheartened she wasn't placed with any of her friends, Hinata attempted to shrink away to contemplate her fate with her newly assigned team. Of course, Haku stopped her before she could sulk off.

“Come and have lunch with us, Hinata.” Haku offered.

Naruto nodded, “Yeah, we haven't told you or Sakura-chan how we passed the genin exam yet!”

Glad that she wasn't so easily forgotten she nodded with a small smile and followed after them, hoping that even if they were on different teams that nothing between them would change.

Sakura and Hinata could not stay for very long. They ate lunch together outside near the swing, while Naruto explained how they had read the forbidden scroll and how they had also outwitted Mizuki.

“I never realized Mizuki-sensei was like that...” Hinata said quietly.

“None of us did,” Haku admitted, “That's why it was difficult to fight him. We couldn't fully view him as an enemy until...”

He trailed off, not wanting to describe to them how Naruto had learned that he was the vessel for the Kyuubi and other sad discoveries.

“The point is that we proved ourselves as shinobi and graduated!” Naruto cut in, much to Haku's relief, “And that we kicked Mizuki's ass!”

“I still can't believe you stole that scroll Naruto...” Sakura snickered, “I mean...couldn't you have shown it to me and Hinata-chan too, at least?”

Gaara gave her an incredulous look, “Have you no shame?”

She smirked, “Well, since the three of you just browsed through it, I don't see why you couldn't have shown it to us! Didn't you think we'd be interested?” Hinata gave a small nod and Gaara sighed, hoping that this would've taught a valuable lesson to them.

But apparently he was wrong.
“There wasn't much time to think at all Sakura-chan,” Haku answered, “We were desperate.”

“I'm glad you took the scroll, Naruto-kun...” Hinata said softly, silencing her companions in surprise. Naruto who was halfway through a bite of his rice ball nearly choked.

Hinata wasn't the trouble-seeking type.

“If you didn't take it, then maybe Mizuki-sensei would still be teaching here,” She went on, “That...that wouldn't have been good...”

Sakura nodded thoughtfully in agreement, “Yeah, she's right. No one knows how it could've turned out if Naruto didn't steal it.”

Naruto nodded, pleased that they agreed with his actions.

“But he still fell into a trap.” Gaara deadpanned. It snapped them back to the reality that if Iruka hadn't arrived, things could've gone very badly indeed.

“We should go and meet with our teams now,” Sakura sighed, as she and Hinata got to their feet, “We'll come find you later if that's alright.”

“Well it is!” Naruto barked, looking almost offended. He then turned to his teammates, “Maybe we should find out who our sensei is too, huh?”

The girls departed after a short farewell, leaving the boys as they returned to the Academy.

“There were a lot of graduates.” Haku began to speculate, “I didn't think that there would be enough jounin to attend to every team.”

“Yeah, that was weird.” Naruto scratched his chin, “I guess we just lucked out, getting placed on the same team huh?”

Gaara frowned, “Or maybe we were placed on the same team deliberately.”

Haku grimaced. Who would want to mentor the three of them? After learning that the elder ninja of the village knew of their identities, few jounin would actually volunteer to train such a group.

Not that they needed supervision: they had been left unattended for six years and had done very well in perfecting their techniques on their own or with each other. Still, now that they had graduated to genin rank, they were probably going to need formal guidance from a personal instructor.

Who was up to the task?

Ten minutes of waiting at the front of the Academy left the three boys particularly anxious. And it wasn't until a distantly familiar grunt caught their attention did they realize that their instructor had snuck up behind them.

“Holy shit. You all got tall.”

Jiraiya reveled in the marvelous sound of dropping jaws as Naruto, Gaara and Haku instantly recognized his scratchy voice.

Naruto, ever the opponent, rounded on the toad hermit, “Ero-sennin, where the hell have you been?” Jiraiya was shocked to see him smiling, “I thought you were too busy doing that nasty 'research' of yours!”
“Well, it has been a while and I am still pretty busy...”

Naruto went on, “It's good that you're here! You see we're waiting for our instructor.”

Jiraiya was affronted, ‘Does he really think so little of me?’

Haku chuckled sheepishly, “Uh, Naruto-kun...it's quite possible that Gama-sennin will be teaching us.”

Gaara frowned at the dark haired boy, “Don't joke like that, Haku.”

Jiraiya hadn't expected the 'welcome wagon' but this was more criticism than he had anticipated. And of course the sand kid just had to be a peach as usual.

“Oh ho, sand kid! Don't think I've forgotten you!” The super pervert glared daggers at Gaara, “We have a score to settle, you and I!”

“If you say so.” It was a bland, snippy retort.

Belatedly, Naruto came to the frightening conclusion that Jiraiya had reared his fuzzy white head back in Konoha for only one reason other than peeping.

“NOOO!” Naruto stared wide-eyed at Jiraiya, “Not the pervert! There's no way you're teaching us!” He gave horrified looks to both Haku and Gaara who couldn't give him an exact answer themselves, “Right?”

“What? Is this really such a tragedy?” The sage was insulted, “Look, I've already had my share of Genin and you're lucky to have me as your sensei as it is!”

Haku nodded politely, while Naruto fretted over Jiraiya's naughty hobbies and Gaara pondered if he could continue throttling the hermit now that he would be teaching them.

With a sigh, the Legendary Toad Sage recalled how he ended up in such a position...

“I'm sure...” The Sandaime sighed, “Jiraiya, please understand that I have called you here on strict business and I will have nothing but your full attention.”

Jiraiya leaned against the chair placed in front of the Hokage's desk, “I'm listening, Hokage-sama.”

“Uzumaki Naruto and his companions have achieved Genin rank.”

“That's...” Jiraiya wanted to say 'alarming', “Er...great.”

“You will be their mentor.”

“What?”
The Hokage’s expression was serious, “Surely you had expected this position when you brought them here six years ago, am I wrong? If I recall, you did begin their training but you haven’t yet completed it.”

“Wait a minute!” The hermit barked, “Why does that obligate me to train the runts? I made no promises and I didn’t sign any paperwork! So why me?”

“The other jounin do not believe they are up to the task.” Hiruzen answered simply.

“So you want me to do it, tearing myself away from my hard work to train up another bunch of snot-nosed brats?” Jiraiya put on a childish pout, “I’m getting old, Hokage-sama!”

The Hokage looked at him for a long moment, “Jiraiya, I myself am getting old, but have I been any less active as a result?”

“...no.”

“Exactly.” The Third nodded, “Furthermore, these three young shinobi have special abilities that you have first-hand experience with. That makes you the perfect choice as their squad leader.”

It wasn’t very flattering, “So?”

“You also have past experience with training genin...”

“So?” Jiraiya was certainly pushing his luck, “You could always order someone else to do it.”

“They are familiar with you,” The Sandaime added, “And it also may please you to hear that young Naruto has become skilled in summoning toads.”

This caught the sennin’s attention.

“Er...well, that is good,” Jiraiya admitted, grateful that Naruto didn't make light of the summoning contract he had been given, “What about the other two squirts?”

“Recently the three of them went on another fantastic escapade: stealing a forbidden scroll and reading its contents. I suspect they learned some high-level techniques.” The Hokage went on airily, “Why don’t you ask them yourself?”

‘Darn, I'm being swindled...’ Jiraiya thought to himself, ‘Clearly there's no way out of this one.’

“So what if I do train the kids Hokage-sama?” The sennin shrugged, “What's in it for me? I mean, I am coming out of retirement just to train the brats. I need some kind of incentive.”

“I assure you, Jiraiya, you will be compensated,” Hiruzen told him, “Though I must warn you...they have become quite a handful.”

“Let me put it to you this way,” Jiraiya sighed, “I was appointed to train you by the Hokage, and if you've got a problem with that you can march your little butts up to him and tell him about it.”

They didn't budge and the sennin inwardly sighed in relief, ‘Whew! I really thought that had em!’

“Hokage-sama made you our instructor because you're acquainted with our abilities,” Gaara surmised, “I can't argue with that.”

Even Naruto came up with an excuse, “You may be a super pervert, but you know what you're
“doing...” He admitted, “And I have to show you this awesome jutsu I learned!”

“Save it for later.” Jiraiya smirked as the blonde's face fell.

And of course, predictable Haku was always respectful, “I'm honored to have one of the Legendary Sannin as our mentor.” After giving a small bow he had Jiraiya pegged.

He wasn't about to admit it, but he couldn't believe how much he had actually missed the 'annoying brats.' When the Sandaime had ordered him to lead their genin squad, he was somewhere between annoyed and excited to be reunited with them.

And a bitter feeling also sank into the hermit's stomach, 'Yeesh, they grew like weeds...I'm kind of sorry I had to miss it.' A large amount of guilt also hit Jiraiya when he looked at Naruto, who even in his absence, continued to summon toads as he had been told to.

It wasn't the most happy of reunions, but it was still worthwhile, Jiraiya figured.

“That's settled then. Now that there are no more complaints,” Jiraiya smiled at them, “From here out you will refer to me as your sensei and I expect you to meet me at the fourth training area tomorrow at 9 AM sharp...got it?”

“Yes, sensei.”

“Sure!”

“...”

The sennin frowned at Naruto and Gaara's faulty responses, “What was that?”

They spoke in unison, some more enthusiastic than others, “Yes, sensei.”

“Good!” Jiraiya was grinning, “Now I'm off to continue my sequel. I have a deadline to meet!”

And he left the three new genin of Squad 2 with a very awkward feeling.

Hinata took a deep, steadying breath as she approached one of her newly assigned teammates.

“Hello Shino,” She gave him a small smile, “I understand we are to be teammates?”

He nodded silently behind his dark glasses.

The Hyuga girl was honestly relieved to have the quiet boy on her team. She could relax knowing that he wouldn't be an arrogant, insult-throwing ninja as many of the boys in her graduating class had been.

As for what he thought about her...she couldn't tell. He seemed indifferent about her presence, but instead of that annoying her it actually helped her relax around him.

Hinata stood quietly next to him, supposing that since she was a girl, he would expect her to initiate a conversation.

“So, um, has Sato or our s-sensei arrived yet?”

“They haven't.”

“Oh...” Hinata cursed herself. Wasn't that rather obvious? If they weren't present then most likely
they hadn’t arrived. Shino still seemed indifferent so she relaxed again.

Fifteen minutes of silence later...

“I w-wonder if they know w-where to meet us-?”

“Yo!”

Startled, Hinata turned to see another genin walking over to them, apparently not at all bothered by his tardiness. Even Shino raised his eyebrows over his sunglasses in acknowledgment.

The boy was just a few inches shorter than the tall Aburame boy, with a mop of silver hair and midnight blue eyes. Unlike Shino, the boy's emotions were easy to read judging from the placid smile on his face.

Hinata blushed in spite of herself.

“Hey there Hinata, Shino,” He nodded to both of them, “Sorry about me being late, but I see that our sensei hasn't gotten here just yet either...”

“I'm afraid s-so.” Hinata said softly.

“Heh heh, I don’t mind!” Sato leaned back against a tree trunk and began to fiddle with a small camera slung around his neck, “I just hope we get someone good.”

Moments passed and then a formidable woman appeared near the end of the alley. She gave the three genin grouped together a short stare. It sent shivers up Hinata's spine, and she was certain that their instructor had arrived after she began to walk towards them. She looked irritable.

She stopped in front of them, settling her fierce, ruby eyes on them, “I'll have you know that I will not abide by lateness from any of you,” And to prevent herself from becoming a hypocrite, added, “For now I will beg your pardon because I have just violated that simple request. I was detained and thankfully it will not happen again...”

Yuuhi Kurenai tried to shake off her dizzying encounter with the perverted toad hermit from only minutes before. His request was truly obscene and she would've made short work of him had it not been for the genin team she had kept waiting.

The three young ninja looked at her, at a loss for words.

There was an abrupt camera flash and Kurenai fixed her glare at the culprit, “You.”

“Yes ma'am?” Sato looked at her innocently.

“I forbid you from taking pictures of me without my permission, understood?” She was a bit paranoid of any media that could be passed along to the vulgar toad hermit, “I will excuse you just this once.”

He nodded, “Understood ma'am!”

She cleared her throat and went on, “I am Yuuhi Kurenai and I will be your Jounin instructor. And I would like to hear something about each of you as well.”

Kurenai paused and glanced back at the silver haired boy, “You...you look familiar.”

He smiled, “Hatake Sato. You probably know my uncle Kakashi.” He pulled his hitai-ate down over his left eye, imitating the Copy Ninja surprisingly well.
She frowned, “I didn't know that Kakashi had a nephew. Though you do look like him.”

Sato shrugged, “I get that a lot but...he and I don't get along too well. He's a closet pervert.”

“I know...” Kurenai muttered, then went on, “Tell us about yourself.”

“Well I take pictures of my opponent’s techniques and...things that I'd like to preserve,” He grinned at Kurenai and she gave him a dangerous frown, “You'll never find anyone who's better than me at setting traps...” He added confidently and Shino raised his eyebrows again, “And...I love coffee. That's it.”

That was all Kurenai had to hear.

“You?” She turned to Hinata.

“I am Hyuga Hinata,” She said quietly, “I am proficient in the Hyuga clan’s Gentle Fist style and can utilize the prestigious abilities of the Byakugan...” It sounded as if she had rehearsed this information many times, “And I...I like to spend my time with my friends and pressing flowers...” Certainly she had added that in herself.

“Good,” Kurenai turned from Hinata to Shino, “And you?”

“...Aburame Shino,” He wasn't thrilled to have to speak up, “I monitor the growth of my colony of Kikaichu insects. I also collect different species of insects.”

He didn't elaborate further.

Kurenai nodded. This team...it could work. Still she was going to push them to their limits and make sure they reached their full potential.

“Hey sensei!” Sato was grinning again, “How about a group shot?”

She frowned at him, 'But this one is...a bit eccentric.'

“Well...this is a drag.”

Shikamaru spread himself out on a picnic bench. He folded his arms beneath his head and gazed blankly at the flocks of cumulus drifting up above.

Nodding in agreement, Chouji settled down on the table next to him munching on a bag of potato chips.

“What are you two doing?” Ino snapped, upset with their attitudes, “Like, we're a team now! Shouldn't we be training or...doing something constructive?”

Sarutobi Asuma took a drag on his cigarette when Ino gave him a pleading look. He didn't really feel like stepping in at the moment. It was true they had just officially become Team 10, but not much training was needed in his opinion. The Ino-Shika-Cho formation worked well enough, and there was little the three young genin could do at the moment to improve it. Missions and experience first; refining technique later.

“It's the first day Ino, let up a little.” Chouji protested, while offering her a chip.

She gave him a frustrated look, “Let up? Why don't you let up on the snacks, Chouji!” Ino turned to a cloud-watching Shikamaru, “And you! Get up off your lazy ass and do something!”
He frowned at her for a long moment and then sighed, “Fine, but only if you stop being so troublesome.”

Ino smiled smugly to herself. Finally a bit of cooperation!

Shikamaru raised himself into a sitting position on the bench, and with no change of inflection asked Asuma, “Sensei, are you up for a game of Shogi?”

“Sure.”

“Hey!” Ino glowered at her lazy teammate, “I didn't mean go play a board game! How is that constructive?”

Shikamaru raised his chin up a fraction, “It is a game of strategy that requires patience and planning...not like you'd know anything about that.”

She wore an expression equivalent to a wrathful harpy.

Chouji paused in his munching, “Alright Ino, I'll train with you.” It seemed his offer came out of the desire to end her nagging rather than the out of goodness of his heart.

Ino also noticed this.

“Oh...fine,” She gave another annoyed look to Shikamaru and his opponent, “We'll leave the old men to their little game!”

“What the hell is taking so long?” Kiba groaned, leaning impatiently against his desk.

He and his fellow members of Squad 7 had been waiting inside the Academy for nearly an hour, and the passing time was gnawing away at their patience.

Next to him, Akamaru barked in agreement. The dog was in a more pleasant mood since Sakura had been patting his head for the majority of their wait.

“Maybe our sensei is just busy,” Sakura sighed, exasperation weaving its way into her voice, “Jounin get called onto a lot of strenuous missions right?”

Kiba made a bland grunt in response, doubting the notion.

A short distance away from them, Sasuke sat with his fingers laced beneath his chin, just as uncommunicative as he had been for the past 45 minutes. The only evidence they had that he was actually capable of speech was his short greeting to Sakura earlier.

Without warning, Akamaru's floppy ears swiveled towards the direction of the door, and he moved his small head away from Sakura's ministrations. Kiba took a brief glance at his dog before understanding, and a satisfied smirk appeared on his face, “It's about time...”

Relieved and annoyed, Sakura and Sasuke also looked on as the door slid open, and a tall, wiry-looking ninja strolled inside, deeply absorbed in a book he was reading.

It was so anticlimactic it made their eyes sting.

“Hey teach!” Kiba barked at the silver haired jounin, “What took you?”

Reluctantly, Hatake Kakashi peeled his eye away from his favorite volume of Icha Icha Paradise,
and settled it on his three would-be pupils.

“Oh, you know, I just got lost on the road of life...” He didn't bother making a good excuse.

The Inuzuka boy restrained himself from shouting out a very improper comment, and barely managed to give a highly critical look at the tardy jounin.

Kakashi swept his right-sided gaze over the freshly graduated genin, “Hm. This is an...interesting bunch. Why don't we go outside to get to know each other?”

Once outdoors, things didn't improve much for the newly-formed cell.

“So, tell me a bit about yourselves,” Kakashi still had his dark eye glued to his naughty book, “Your names, hobbies, dreams; things you like and dislike...”

“Why don't you go first sensei? Just so we can have an idea.” Sakura suggested.

He considered it briefly, “My name? Hatake Kakashi...hobbies...hm. I don't really have any. Dreams? I keep that to myself. Likes and dislikes? Hmm...never thought about that either...”

The genin sighed. So the only information he did give out was his name.

Kakashi glanced towards Kiba, “Why don't you start?”

“I'm Inuzuka Kiba,” He said while scratching Akamaru's ears, “And this here is Akamaru. I like to train with Akamaru and hate things I can't chew...” He paused in thought, “My dreams? I'm going to be the strongest ninja in my clan!” His ninen barked fiercely at the proclamation.

Kakashi nodded, and then looked to Sakura, who seemed to be going over a mental checklist.

“My name is Haruno Sakura,” She began, perking up considerably, “I like to hang out with my friends and study...and I hate Ino-pig...” Her voice lowered dangerously, “And...I will be one of the best kunoichi in the entire village!”

'She's...spirited...' Kakashi mused while turning his gaze to the last of Squad 7.

Sasuke narrowed his eyes before speaking, “Uchiha Sasuke. My sole focus is training. There aren't many things I like...and one day I will destroy a certain someone.”

“Hn, I figured...” Kakashi muttered, “Fair enough.”

His students looked up at him as he slowly raised himself off of the railing he had been leaning on.

“Tomorrow morning, you'll be participating in a survival exercise,” Kakashi explained while turning a page in his novel, “We meet at training ground three at 6AM, oh and, you might not want to eat breakfast...because you'll throw up.”

The genin were unnerved by such a menacing statement.

Unabashed, Kakashi turned on his heel with a wave, “See you tomorrow!”

Sakura exchanged a disbelieving glance with Kiba after their sensei departed. The Inuzuka boy quickly shook off the awkwardness.

“He's probably bluffing, that retard,” Kiba snorted inelegantly, “I'm still eating breakfast anyway! I'll see you guys tomorrow.”
The pink haired kunoichi watched as Kiba walked away as well, with a yappering Akamaru at his side. She felt slightly ill.

_Things seemed alright when we were picked as a team, but...'_ Sakura evaluated how different the experience was from her initial expectations, _'Kakashi-sensei...he really keeps to himself...'_

“He's weird.”

Sakura turned; surprised that Sasuke hadn't left yet. He had spoken voluntarily. He wore a contemplative expression, and his onyx eyes were less fierce than they had been during the introduction.

“He is.” She agreed after a moment, “I was kind of hoping we'd actually get someone at least...a little ordinary.”

“There are no normal jounin in this village.” Sasuke replied bluntly and she took it into consideration.

He had a point. Many of the elite ninja of Konoha were...quirky. After many perilous missions and other painful strides to achieve the rank of ‘high ninja’, many shinobi had lost some of their more sociable characteristics. Kakashi, she judged, was no different.

As the young Uchiha began to walk away, Sakura turned back to him, “Sasuke-kun?”

He halted. It had been a while since she had called him that.

She frowned in thought, “Should we eat breakfast tomorrow?”

Sasuke gave her a reserved glance, “If he's serious we'll throw up either way.”

Sakura closed her eyes and grumbled, “Right.”

The next morning was a bright, cloudless day. Naruto, Haku and Gaara arrived at the fourth training area at their designated time. They were antsy.

It had sunk in overnight that Jiraiya, the pervert who had brought them to Konoha as young children, had at last returned after six years as their sensei. It was difficult to wrap their heads around. It was also a monumental development, they had agreed over a dinner of beef ramen, seeing that they would be trained by one of the Legendary Three. Few could boast the same.

Haku was still a tad more enthusiastic than his teammates about Jiraiya being their mentor. Not because he approved of the hermit’s lecherous ways, _oh no_. It was merely because he believed there was no use in complaining about Jiraiya’s flaws when they were lucky to have a familiar face supporting them.

Had he returned to Konoha for any other reason, Haku probably would've chewed him out as his friends had, being older and more aware of the world.

Jiraiya abruptly ended his scribbling of notes, and looked excitedly at his genin students, “Fwo ho! Five minutes early eh? That's better than what I had expected!”

Naruto yawned, “Can it, old man.”

Apparently, not much had changed between them after all.
“What kind of training do you have planned for us, Ero-sennin?” Naruto went on while stretching his arms over his head.

Haku jabbed him lightly in the side, “Call him Sensei, Naruto-kun. Have a bit more respect.”

“Okay...” The blonde grumbled. Gaara was also slightly disappointed that they would have to cut back on their casual behavior with the sennin.

Jiraiya nodded to Haku before answering slyly, “This isn’t exactly training...”

There was an eerie quiet before the sennin continued, “Listen up. This is a test of skill and if you fail to meet expectations you will be sent back to the Academy.” He smirked, “That way I can continue my research in peace.”

“No way we're going back there, old man!” Naruto declared ardently.

Honestly none of them could say they hadn't suspected Jiraiya to plan something along those lines. The three boys radiated determination, not wanting to return to a place that they had proven their abilities were far beyond.

“What does this test entail, Jiraiya-sensei?” Haku asked.

“You have to get your hands on one of these bells,” He said simply, holding up two small tinkling objects, “Anyone who doesn't will be tied to one of the poles behind me,” Jiraiya gestured to the three wooden stumps in a line, “Your time will be limited. I'm giving you five hours to get a bell, no exceptions.” A kitchen timer was seated on top of one of the poles.

Gaara frowned, “There are only two bells...meaning one of us will undoubtedly be sent back to the Academy once this is through.”

Jiraiya scratched his cheek disinterestedly, “Yup.”

A look of horror came over Naruto and Haku, while Gaara hid his outrage.

“Forget it!” The blonde hollered, “You can't do that when we've all worked so hard to graduate!”

“Oh, yes I can!” The sage barked, “You've heard the conditions so you may begin...” He paused and watched each of them tense, “Now!

The three genin scattered, disappearing instantly into the surrounding forest.

'This sucks!' Naruto was thoroughly appalled that the super pervert had managed to turn him against his best friends all for the sake of passing a ridiculous test, 'But I can't go back to that place! Still...I can't just forget about Haku-kun or Gaara-kun either.'

He waited silently at the base of a fat tree, desperately trying to calm down, 'Relax. Get a bell and see what happens...maybe Ero-sennin has a third one hidden somewhere'

But would he risk it? Risk sending Haku or Gaara back to the Academy if there wasn't an imaginary 'third' bell?

Naruto clenched his fists, 'No I...I can't do this. Not if it means...' Memories of the years he had spent growing up alongside his friends resurfaced in his mind; of how they shed sweat, blood, and tears to get to where they had, 'No. I guess I'll just tell Ero-sennin I quit, there's always next year...but Haku-kun and Gaara-kun, I wouldn't do that to them!'
Just as he was about to leave his cover and return to the open field, Gaara appeared in front of him, motioning for him to be silent. Puzzled, Naruto followed after the sand manipulator farther into the brush and up into the high tops of an oak tree.

Balanced like a cat on the top-most branch was Haku, waiting for them.

“There's no way any of this makes any sense...” Haku said in a low voice as Gaara and Naruto perched beside him, “What's the point of a three man cell if one of us will be sent back to the Academy anyway? It discourages teamwork outright!”

Gaara nodded, “He wants us to compete with each other.”

“No way in hell!” Naruto hissed, “Even Ero-sennin's gotta know that we wouldn't turn against each other!”

“Maybe his intent was to test our team effort in the face of dire consequences.” Haku hypothesized, “If we turn against each other, he will have a much easier time stopping us. I think there’s still a chance we can make this go our way…”

Gaara and Naruto looked at him expectantly.

“We attack him head-on, all at once,” Haku resolved, “Do whatever it takes to get a bell...I'll sort out the rest…”

Jiraiya sat comfortably in the clearing while putting the finishing touches on his novel. He looked up when three copies of Naruto came careening out of the tree line, each wielding a kunai.

With a sigh, Jiraiya stood up, “There's really no rush kid, you still have...” He stole a glance at the kitchen timer, “Hm...four hours and forty-six minutes it looks like…”

“I'm getting a bell now old man!” Naruto snarled. He and his clones leapt and dove for the sennin, who wasn't at all impressed.

“Have it your way...” Jiraiya sighed, side-stepping the first Naruto and grabbing the wrists of his counterparts, “You could've put more planning into this you know!”

With a shove, he redirected the clones to simultaneously stab each other and disappear. Or at least, that's what the sage envisioned would happen. The clones didn't erupt into a cloud of smoke...they only leaked sand.

“Wah-?” Jiraiya leapt back, startled as Gaara appeared to his right, remolding his sand copies of Naruto to attack again. Naruto was already diving at the off-balance hermit.

The blonde nin dodged the sennin's counterstrike and reached for the two, shining bells tied to his belt. Naruto grinned broadly as his fingertips made contact with the cool metal surface of a bell and...

“Hands off!” Jiraiya quickly swatted him away, knocking him down into the dust with a grunt.

While Naruto staggered to his feet, the sennin smirked as he evaded Gaara's sand clones, impressed that they had made a combined effort, ‘What about the farm boy though? He's around here somewhere-'
position of 'sniper' and would only intervene if necessary.

Gaara and Naruto eyed the two, tiny flecks of light that dropped helplessly to the ground by Jiraiya's feet. They charged like beasts. All the while Jiraiya made note of how different this bell test was compared to his own as a genin, 'Sheesh, it's always a team effort with these three! I figured it would be. Unlike most other teams I suppose cooperation won't be an issue here!'

“Shadow Clone Jutsu!”

The sage had no time to prepare himself as ten clones of Naruto materialized, surrounding him in a ring of orange jumpsuits.

“Shadow Clones, eh?” Jiraiya grinned as he knocked his assailants back with little effort, “That's new, but not good enough!” The real Naruto dove for Jiraiya again with a cry, aiming towards the glinting objects at his feet.

The overzealous nin suffered a painful knee in the side of the head, followed by an exasperated sigh from the toad hermit. Gaara wasn't pleased with the bloody nose Naruto was now sporting. If Jiraiya wanted to get rough, he wasn't going to hold back.

Gaara formed seals as Jiraiya made a grab for the bells himself, “Sand Dragon Bullet!”

“Eh?” The sand around the sennin's feet twisted into the form of a large, grainy, angry-looking dragon, “Not again-!”

Pressurized sand hurtled into Jiraiya's chest, knocking him into Naruto and sent them both tumbling to the opposite side of the clearing.

Haku sprang like a blue blur from his vantage point and snatched the bells off of the ground while the tangled, sandy mess that was Naruto and Jiraiya recovered from Gaara's powerful and as always...reckless assault.

“Get off me, Ero-sensei!” Naruto wriggled away from the super pervert and stood, brushing sand off of him, “Hey Gaara! Next time aim!”

“I was aiming.”

The blonde huffed in aggravation as he returned to his teammates, but his annoyance vanished upon seeing Haku holding up two, small bells victoriously. Gaara smirked as the sage also stood, muttering curses under his breath.

Once the toad hermit had recuperated and regained his genins’ attention, he glared down at Gaara, “That...that was pretty good, save for hitting Naruto. But...lay off the thrashing will you? I'm getting too old for that crap!”

Gaara said nothing, not making any promises.

“Jiraiya-sensei,” Haku looked smug, “It appears we've finished a few hours early.”

The sennin snorted, “Yep. Thanks to your strategy. To be quite frank, I didn't really think it would take long for you all to grab a bell,” A maniacal look came over his face, “I only wanted to see who actually did get one...the outcome was...interesting.”

Naruto frowned, “What's that supposed to mean? We worked together, but Haku got both of the bells!”
“I noticed,” Jiraiya said dryly, “So we'll solve this diplomatically...you will decide amongst yourselves who'll be going back to the Academy. Two bells...two genin.”

“THAT’S BULL!” Naruto bellowed, “None of us are going back there!”

The sennin gave him a detached look, “Life isn't always fair kid. Get over it.”

Silence fell over the three genin of Squad 2. They had hoped, even been almost certain, that if they worked as a unit they would all pass...according to Haku's suspicions. The exercise was to pit them against each other, but overcoming that obstacle and working as a team should've enabled them all to remain a squad.

Apparently not.

Naruto was sweating. Diplomatically? The obvious choice would be to send him back. He hadn't been the most serious of students, he admitted, but that didn't mean he didn't learn. He wanted to stay on the team. He couldn't leave.

“I'll go back.”

Jiraiya, Naruto and Haku looked at Gaara in shock.

Gaara didn't seem very perturbed at all, much to their surprise...although an ounce of regret was visible on his face after he volunteered. And unfortunately he had astonished Haku and Naruto so badly they were beyond the point of protesting.

Jiraiya showed no sympathy, “Well? Get going! Don't stick around here and waste my time!”

Haku looked close to having a nervous breakdown.

Naruto's fists clenched and he gritted his teeth, “Don't talk to him like that! He...he doesn't have to...” He turned to the red haired boy, “You don't have to do it, Gaara! This is stupid! Ero-sennin is a complete jerk so...why don't we all go back?”

Haku looked up. Naruto was right: Jiraiya was being unusually harsh.

“Yeah!” The blonde gave a fierce look to the man, “If you have a problem with one of us; you have a problem with all of us! We'll all go back to the Academy and get a teacher who's not a big asshole! We'll always be a team!”

Haku nodded in solemn agreement and a look of mangled relief came over Gaara. It was disappointing, but they would stick together no matter what the difficulty was, even failing a hopeless test.

The grave expression on Jiraiya's face began to crack and he chuckled to himself, “You three really are inseparable, aren't you?”

They looked at each other, confused.

“Well, there's no denying you couldn't give a rat's ass about the rules of any mission when it comes down to the fate of your teammates, even if it is a bit extreme, so...” The sennin grinned, “You've passed!”

Stunned faces.

Jiraiya nodded, “Right...well? Quit standing there like idiots and let me see how you’ve improved!”
You didn't actually think I'd send one of you squirts back to the Academy did you?"

Haku looked floored, “B-But, why did you push us so hard to get a bell if it was all an empty threat, sensei?”

He flipped open his naughty novel, “Oh...well, Hokage-sama said you three recently stole a Forbidden Scroll and learned some jounin-level techniques...I was just curious to see if it was true...”

Naruto was grinning, “Well why didn't you just say so? We could've showed you from the start!”

“Where would the fun be in that?” Jiraiya snorted, “You think I can't pull your legs once in a while?” He smirked, “You should've seen your faces when the sand kid volunteered! It was priceless!”

Gaara wasn't in a laughing mood. His self-sacrifice was no laughing matter.

At least they would remain Team 2. At most, they had made complete fools of themselves by chasing bells early in the morning...and Jiraiya cherished the thought.

By noon, Naruto, Gaara and Haku were seated contentedly at Ichiraku Ramen, and their sensei would've joined them if not for the fact that he was on a strict deadline and didn't have time for noodles.

“Naruto-kun,” Haku began, setting down his chopsticks, “I'm just curious, but I was wondering if maybe you could demonstrate to me and Gaara how to produce shadow clones?”

Naruto stopped mid-slurp, “Huh? Why would you want to know?”

“We can only create replications out of sand and water,” Gaara cut in, “Your clones are solid. They can fight for much longer.”

The blonde grinned, “Well you should've looked at that jutsu yourselves when we had the scroll if you're so interested! It's not like I give stuff like that away, even if you guys are my best pals!”

Haku and Gaara sighed in resignation. It was worth a shot, but they hadn't expected him to agree.

Naruto smirked impishly, “Maybe, if you guys get some cool jutsu to exchange...”

That was a good point. It wasn't as if Naruto could manipulate water or sand, which was where his strength differed from theirs. Without the elements they influenced, they wouldn't be of much use in a fight. It was only natural that they would fall back on Naruto's aid for melee combat.

Haku picked up his chopsticks again, “That sounds fair.”

Gaara caught the attention of Ayame who was wiping the counter clean, and she smiled at him, “More miso, Gaara-kun?”

“Please.”

Haku and Naruto restrained a smirk as she hurried off.

“Heh heh,” The blonde looked at his red haired friend, “I think she likes you.”

“...”
“She does seem to favor you over us, Gaara-kun,” Haku nodded in agreement.

Gaara didn’t care. He never really thought much about the girl who had worked in the ramen shop. He wasn't exactly keen to notice girls, especially while he was eating for god's sake...

Haku and Naruto just liked to push his buttons.

“Good afternoon Naruto-kun, Haku-kun, Gaara-kun,” A gentle voice sounded from behind them.

With his mouth full of noodles, Naruto turned to see Hinata standing behind them, smiling shyly.

He quickly swallowed and Haku was surprised he didn't asphyxiate from all the food he inhaled, “Hey Hinata-chan! How have you been?”

She smiled, “I'm fine. So I see you are all an official t-team now. That's wonderful! Some others didn't make it...”

Gaara quietly thanked Ayame after she returned with his miso.

“Gama-sennin is also our mentor,” Haku added, and her eyes widened, “He returned to train us specifically on Hokage-sama's orders.”

“W-What an honor...”

“Not really,” Naruto sighed, “He's still a pervert as usual.”

Gaara noticed two other young ninja behind Hinata, “Your teammates are with you?”

The Hyuga girl quickly turned to them, “Sorry, these are my teammates: Shino-kun,” A tall boy with dark glasses nodded to them, “And Sato-kun.”

The silver haired boy smirked, “They know me already, Sunshine.”

Naruto gave Sato an enraged look, “Eh? Hinata doesn't need a pet name!”

“Ah, but she positively radiates light wherever she goes!” Sato declared, grinning, and she blushed terribly, “Besides, I'm glad I caught up with you three. I'm not surprised you're all on the same squad!”

Shino turned to Sato, giving him an inquiring look, “You know each other?”

Haku wore a somewhat humiliated look and Gaara turned away, busying his mouth with ramen. Naruto on the other hand was grinning just as broadly as Sato had been.

“Oh yeah! Half the pranks Gaara, Haku and me pulled were all his idea!” Naruto announced, and both Hinata and Shino looked at their teammate, not very surprised, “Now that I think about it, it has been a while...maybe we should plan another one soon...”

Haku looked mortified, “If you are planning another one, I'd prefer to sit it out this time.”

Hinata giggled. So even Haku had been forced into backing up toilets around the Academy at least once.

Sato, ever resourceful, produced a picture from his back pocket and handed it to Naruto, “Maybe you remember this one, Naruto-kun?”

All of the present genin leaned in for a look. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. It was a simple
picture of the Ninja Academy...with the roof completely missing, perhaps by other-worldly means.

Gaara couldn't help but smirk at the sight of it.

Shino's eyebrows appeared above his sunglasses, “That was you?”

“That was the best!” Naruto laughed, nearly spilling his bowl over, “We never got caught. I couldn't believe it!” He flashed an appreciative glance at Gaara for reasons one could only guess.

The silver haired boy sighed, “Yes, that was absolute perfection. It'll never be duplicated...good thing it's all on film!”

Hinata turned to her rambunctious teammate, “So, is that one of the things that you like to, um, 'preserve' Sato-kun?”

“That's right, Sunshine.” He nodded, “Haku is a bit lax at times, so it's usually Gaara, Naruto, and I doing all the hard work.”

“Pranks hardly count as work...” Haku said pointedly and Hinata was giggling again.

Shino, however, didn't see much humor in their adventures. He glanced sideways at Sato, “Your frivolous habits: do not let them interfere with our team's training.”

After making sure his warning was heard, the bug tamer stalked off. Sato called after him, “I promise they won’t, Shino-kun! Jeez! I'm a serious ninja! You have to lighten up a little!”

Naruto found Shino's behavior slightly vexing, “What's his problem?”

“Shino-kun is...quite serious,” Hinata offered, sensing that her teammate's words had partially discouraged Sato, “He isn't very fond of p-practical jokes, I suppose.”

‘He and I could get along well...’ Haku thought to himself.

“He'll unwind eventually.” Sato yawned, putting away his cherished photograph, “He's probably just beat because Kurenai-sensei ran us all ragged today...”

“Maybe we can train together sometime?” Hinata asked her old friends hopefully.

Naruto liked the sound of it, “Sure! I don't think Ero-sensei will mind if you stop by, as long as you don't interrupt his 'research'.

Hinata nodded, “Alright...um, I suppose I should be going home now...”

“We'll come see you tomorrow!” The blonde announced, “Just to hang out if you like.”

“O-Okay...”

Sato watched in amusement as she turned several shades of red, something Gaara was also aware of.

Team 2 bade the remaining members of Team 8 farewell:

“See you guys tomorrow!”

“It was nice seeing you two again.”

“Goodbye Hinata-chan...Sato.”
Naruto squinted in the bright light of the afternoon as the Hyuga girl and Hatake boy traipsed away, grinning, and then turned back to his ramen.

“So, want to go see if Sakura-chan is around later?” Naruto piped up again.

Gaara nodded, but Haku seemed deep in thought.

“I have plans later, actually,” Haku said quietly, a smile creeping across his lips, “Do tell her I said hello, will you?”

The blonde nodded, “You got it! Uh...what 'plans' are you talking about?”

After visiting Sakura and listening to the astonishing tale of how she too had a haphazard bell test (but longer and more painful than theirs had been) with her sensei, and telling her that Haku says, "Hello," Naruto and Gaara temporarily parted ways.

Once again, Naruto lingered atop the stone face of the Fourth Hokage, gazing at the blazing summer sky that looked like blue fire. Shortly after he had arrived, Jiraiya also popped up, as he had expected him to.

“How often do you come here kid?” The sennin half-yawned, sitting down next to him.

“All of the time.”

“Ah.” Jiraiya appeared to nearly say something important, but changed his mind, “... believe me it's a good habit to get into.”

Naruto grinned, “Yeah, you told me already.”

“I've heard that you've kept up with your toad summoning,” The sage added unobtrusively, “What do Gaara and Haku think of it?”

“They tell me all the time how jealous they are,” The blonde joked, “But, I mostly just do it to annoy them, it isn't like I've been in any big fights or something like that.”

“Annoy them, eh?” Jiraiya smirked, “How about you give me a demonstration of how far you've gotten? Past a tadpole I hope?”

“Shut up old man! I was just a kid!” Naruto bit back good-naturedly, and stood up, “Yeah, I've gotten better!”

In a well-practiced motion, Naruto bit his thumb, flew through the seals and called a toad. Jiraiya raised an eyebrow as the smoke cleared, and a toad not much taller than Naruto's knees appeared.

The small creature looked up at Naruto with familiarity, “Hi! Anything I can do for you, Boss?”

Jiraiya grunted, “Huh. You could've done better. Gamakichi’s a little twerp. Is this as far as you have gotten, kid?”

“Nah, sorry I bothered you.” Naruto said to the small toad, which departed just as quickly as he came. He then turned to Jiraiya, “I could do better if I wanted, but I call him most often if that's what you mean,” He paused thoughtfully, “I'm still 'starting small and working my way up,' Ero-sensei!”

He sat back down beside his mentor and Jiraiya nodded, “Yeah, I suppose that'll do for
now...there's no use rushing it.”

The sennin stole a glance at Naruto, slightly upset that he was hiding his full potential. For all he knew, Naruto probably could have been summoning Gamabunta for a while now.

'I'll have to remember to ask him...' Jiraiya mentally noted for the next time he saw the toad boss.

“So...what have I missed since I've been gone?” Jiraiya then added, “Besides you and the other squirts growing a few feet taller, I mean?”

There was a quiet moment of thought before Naruto answered, grinning again, “You haven't missed that much...maybe some really awesome pranks, but that won't be much of a problem...”

The sage couldn't help himself, “Er...why?”

Naruto shrugged, “Sato's got it all on film. I can show you tomorrow if he lends me the pictures.”

It was silent again, but Jiraiya was smirking.

“Rising Twin Dragons!”

Tenten leapt high into the air inside the flying double-helix her scrolls created, and launched her summoned weapons at Hyuga Neji who waited on the ground for the assault.

Nearby, ever-enthusiastic Rock Lee was busy mastering a new taijutsu technique with their equally, if not more enthusiastic sensei, Maito Gai.

As countless, razor-sharp implements of death descended back down to the earth towards her 'presumably doomed' teammate, Neji effortlessly countered with a rotation, releasing chakra from all of his tenketsu, and formed a 360 degree shield of chakra. He deflected all of her projectiles.

Haku watched all of this occur in a sheer matter of seconds from the side of the training field, unable to suppress his awe of the older, more advanced genin team. Most especially the energy that Lee possessed, fearing that if he ever tried to break a tree in half with only one kick as the latter had, he would most likely shatter his leg.

As Tenten ended her attack and drifted back down to the earth, her eyes didn't pass up the tall, dark haired boy clad in a blue gi that stood nearby. He was watching her squad train with his gentle, discerning eyes.

Once both of her feet were planted firmly back on the ground (moments before Neji ended his Kaiten) Tenten almost immediately abandoned her opponent without a word, jogging over to Haku.

There was a moment of confusion when the young Hyuga prodigy realized that his training partner was no longer training at all.

He frowned when he saw her running giddily in the opposite direction, “Tenten...”

“Haku!” Maybe she was a little too happy to see him, and she quickly calmed herself down, “What...what are you doing here?”

He smiled at her, “I came looking for you, and it seems my luck has prevailed.”

Lee and Gai had also noticed the lack of battle cries from the opposite side of the training ground
and were curious to investigate who or what had so easily distracted the young kunoichi of their team.

Neji had gotten there first.

Tenten paused for a moment, wondering if she should introduce him to Haku, but then recalled that it had in fact been Neji himself who had mentioned him by name two days earlier.

This registered as Neji was about to violently 'shoo' away the uninvited intruder before he saw that the 'uninvited intruder' had been none other than Haku.

“Hello Neji!” He was just as friendly as he had been when they were younger, “It's good to see you are well!”

The Hyuga prodigy merely clammed up, unable to think of any 'friendly' responses at the time. He substituted a verbal reply with a slight nod of his head, surprising Tenten. Neji did not want to be insensitive to a person who had helped save him from the Caged Bird seal.

Before Tenten could speak another word, Lee and Gai had arrived, both excited over the 'uninvited intruder.'

“Hello there youthful, young man!” Gai's teeth glinted in the sunlight and Tenten sighed to herself as the 'introduction of fiery youth' commenced, “I am Maito Gai!” His shorter, physical double then added jubilantly, “And I am Rock Lee!”

Haku's smile was plastered onto his face in semi-shock, 'I can understand Neji being Tenten's teammate, but...I have to say I'm slightly frightened now…'

“It would please us to no end if we could know the name of the youthful ninja who has befriended the fiery young flower of our team!” Gai added, posing in front of Haku.

Taking a deep breath, he managed to reply as if he were speaking to another sane person, “I am Haku.”

He even managed to keep that convincing smile on. Haku always had possessed ‘social nerves of steel.’

Tenten stepped in front of her overzealous sensei and teammate, “So, uh, Haku; did you want to get more practice with senbon?”

“Yes, but not right now,” Haku said smoothly, “Actually, I was hoping you'd join me for some tea this afternoon if you're not busy.”

“T'm not busy!” Tenten blurted it out, but hastily added, “I mean, if you can skip out on some training today, Neji?”

The Hyuga prodigy frowned. Why was she asking permission? What for? She wasn’t actually going to go drink tea with that pretty boy, was she? Her work ethic was boundless and here she was pouncing on the first opportunity she could get to escape training with her team for the afternoon. Then again…

'I can't really blame her...' Neji thought to himself, seeing that half the team was bursting with so much energy it was classified borderline insanity. After putting up with the speeches of 'Fiery Passion!' and the 'Springtime of Youth!' for over a year straight, Tenten deserved a small break, that much was clear.
But only a small one.

“I’ll survive.” He replied blandly and she smiled.

Haku bowed politely to the rest of her team, “Forgive me for borrowing Tenten for today.”

Unsummoning her weapons and wiping the sweat off of her brow, Tenten followed Haku out of the training area while asking him what sort of tea he liked, delighted to learn that they both enjoyed jasmine tea.

She had forgotten to say goodbye to her teammates.

Not that it mattered, since Lee was beginning another impassioned monologue for his remaining teammates.

A tear of joy escaped Lee's eye, “Yes! Tenten has finally accepted her youthful wishes and bloomed into a burning blossom of love! Oh! Haku certainly is the type I would expect her to take interest in!” He paused for a moment, “Gai-sensei, shall we invite Haku to return tomorrow to train with us?”

Gai placed a hand on his hard working student's shoulder, “No Lee, I'm certain he has much training that needs to be done with his own team...”

Neji snorted. He hoped what Gai had figured was true. He couldn't stand training with anyone other than Tenten on his team...for obvious reasons.

Without warning, Gai continued excitedly, “If it is what the young blossom of our team wishes, then she herself will bring young Haku along to train with us!”

And of course, Lee turned to the Hyuga prodigy, “Neji, my eternal rival! Let us train twice as hard until Tenten returns with a song in her step and love in her heart!”

Neji's eye twitched in deep irritation.

Lee was about to get a serious beating...

And it was all Haku's fault.
Mission to the Land of Waves

Chapter Soundtrack: “Climbed Mountain” by Uyama Hiroto

The small tea house that Haku had selected was a place completely and utterly alien to Tenten. It was a popular ‘date-destination’ and she had never been taken anywhere before.

'I like tea, so why haven't I ever set foot in a place as mundane as a tea house?' It wasn’t as if she needed an escort to take her to local hubs.

Haku looked to her while she thought and she gave him her most convincing smile, 'Well, being uncultured isn’t as bad as smelling of body odor...and I definitely do right now.' Her afterthought made her flinch; she couldn’t do anything about it.

Tenten was not the sort of person to be pointedly self-conscious, but Haku had put her totally on the spot after training with Hyuga Neji, of all times, and taken her to a nice café while she was still bruised and sweaty and out of breath.

And yet, somehow, she hadn't bothered to voice this distressing matter to Haku at all because she was to say the least...so very astounded that he had even brought her anywhere for purposes other than training.

Tenten couldn't quite bring herself to complain either.

It was Haku.

Who, despite her disheveled state, still wanted to get to know her; which was a true first on all accounts, 'Lee doesn't really count and Neji...Neji doesn't care to know anyone really, so I should relax and have fun! Or...enjoy myself, yes, that sounds about right...'

Tenten didn't deny that he had flair, as Haku sat across from her at a smaller, more secluded table, still smiling. Not that he appeared to be a complete flirt...because it was hard for her to accept that anyone would want to flirt with her.

“Your sensei and um, Lee; they're very passionate,” Haku was considerably polite so she refrained from laughing at the use of the word 'passionate,' “All the energy on your team...how do you and Neji-san keep up with them?”

A very relevant question indeed.

“That's the funny thing,” Tenten said while inspecting a lovely patch of bruising skin above her elbow, “We don't exactly 'keep up' at least...we're at a different pace than they're at.”

Haku gave her a mild look so she continued, “Well, I can't say for sure that we're even on the same planet, though we may be on the same team.”

It was odd how seriously Tenten had meant it.

Haku's smooth chuckle pierced the air right on time, and it was then she knew why he was desired by nearly every girl in the Ninja Academy...or the majority of Konoha most likely.

He wasn't perfect but he was somewhere dangerously close to it.

She then acknowledged on the most minimal, harmless level that existed that she was attracted to
A waitress came by for their orders, unanimously jasmine tea, and then left quickly. She was unable to stop herself from blushing.

Tenten felt a subject change would get the ball rolling.

“I take it that you passed the graduation exam?” They were both grinning when he nodded, “I knew you would! There are few shinobi who I’ve seen handle senbon as well as you did, and in such a short time for that matter.”

“Again, I must thank you for the recommendation,” Haku eyed a purplish bruise near her shoulder while adding, “Though I don’t think I’ll ever compare to you in terms of Shinjutsu, Tenten.”

“Uh...why don’t you tell me about your team?” She soldiered on, miffed that she was having slight difficulty focusing, “Have you gotten any missions yet?”

“No missions just yet, since it was just today we’ve been validated.” He briefly wondered where his companions were at that precise moment, “My teammates are Uzumaki Naruto and Gaara, my life-long friends.”

“Lucky...” She congratulated him, resting her chin on her hands and leaned on the table's edge. “Our mentor is one of the Legendary Three-”

Tenten jumped up without warning and slammed her hands down on the table, “You're being trained by Tsunade-sama?” She almost screamed it.

All universal irony must have made it so the boy she handed a fistful of senbon a short time ago would be trained by her idol!

He smiled, and gently corrected her, “No, Jiraiya, the Toad Hermit, actually.”

She relaxed and settled back into her seat, ignoring the strange looks directed at them, “Oh, well, that's still impressive! What's he like?”

A pause.

“Um,” Haku decided to be truthful, “Frighteningly perverted, but undoubtedly powerful.” Tenten raised an eyebrow in concern, “He also has a fondness for making complete fools out of my friends and me.”

The kunoichi sighed, “I'd trade Gai-sensei for him any day...”

The waitress returned with their beverages and set them down before hurrying off to another table, still beet-red after laying eyes on Haku.

Haku took a small sip of tea, “I know we both are on separate teams, but I was hoping that if an opportunity presents itself we could spend more time together.”

Somewhere in the back of her head, she heard alarm bells going off, “For...for training?”

“In our free time, only if you’d like,” He answered and her stomach constricted nervously, “But it also would be a good idea to train more with senbon, I think. You really are talented.”

Tenten nodded slowly, and lifted her cup, gulping rather than sipping, ‘Oh no...I was hoping he just wanted to talk about senbon, or training or...but he's...he's actually coming onto me...like
Just wanted to talk about senbon, or training or... but he's... he's actually coming onto me... like he likes me or something?

Clearly he wasn't aware of how inadequate she was feeling at the moment. She put on another smile and tried to clear her head, *Maybe I'm overreacting. He's constantly being chased by girls so he'd probably only be interested in friends."

"Tenten, are you alright?"

The kunoichi looked up, "Hm? Oh yeah, I'm fine!"

Haku didn't look fully convinced, but thankfully the waitress came to her rescue, asking him if he'd like anything else.

'Friends?' She scoffed inwardly, 'What friends drink tea together?'

The waitress ended her distraction and Haku returned his attention to Tenten, "I hope you like dango-"

"I do." She was stymied, 'How does he know this stuff?'

Tenten didn't want to come across as rude, but she was not quite ready for Haku and the romantic-vibe he was giving off. Training was familiar and something she enjoyed, and she was nearly ashamed that she wasn't handling the situation better.

'Is this a date? I guess it is...it isn't what I had envisioned.' She paused, 'Well, what I envisioned had more...a lot more weapons involved, so maybe I really am socially lacking in this department.'

He smiled at her patiently; respecting her while he noted that she was busy with her own thoughts.

'I don't think I've ever met a person so attractive that it's staggering to be around them.' Tenten smiled to herself, 'Maybe it's because I'm spending too much time with Lee.'

Haku was inspecting the tea leaves at the bottom of his empty cup with curiosity not dissimilar from a kitten's.

He really is patient. Fancy that.

'I do like Haku, just in the 'friendly' sort of way...involving pointy objects,' Tenten took another long moment to see if that had made any sense, 'Maybe now is a good time to bring this up...'

"Haku?"

He gave her a knowing look.

"Is this a date?"

Haku had only seen Gaara deadpan so elegantly.

"I believe so." He answered with as much aplomb as he could muster.

She couldn't help the smile that peaked onto her lips, *That's a first: taking a badly-beaten, sweat-rag of a girl on a date, how very entertaining. Haku you are a rarity...'

The dango arrived and they both helped themselves as Tenten went on, "Sorry that I spaced out before, I'm back with you now. And thank you."
“For what?”

“For your semi-unnatural patience and the tea and snacks,” She nearly patted herself on the back for such an honest reply, “Even though this has been slightly-”

“Awkward?”

She nodded, savoring the sweet bean paste, “Yes, the awkwardness was my fault. I'm not used to this sort of thing, but hey, I'm really enjoying myself so it's balancing out.”

“You seemed to be thinking very hard after I mentioned us spending more time with each other,” He added carefully. Curse him and his powers of observation!

“Um, yeah, about that...” Tenten took one last sip of tea, “I do want to spend time with you, believe me I do. I just want that time to be spent...training, if that's alright.”

Haku smiled, admiring her work ethic, “It is alright, in fact, probably time better spent than drinking tea.”

'Among other things...' She thought while trying to ignore how his storm-colored eyes caught the light very nicely.

Tenten gave him a confused look after he stood up.

“I know you were just training with Neji-san, but perhaps we could improve our shinjutsu now, if you have the energy?” Haku suggested, “This place is a bit stuffy.”

She took the last skewer of dango and also stood, “Energy? You fed me. There's little to debate.”

Haku smiled to himself as he left the tab money on the table and then followed her outside, noting how he also preferred training over the dim lighting of the tea house.

“We'll go back to my team's training area,” Tenten finished the last of the dango, “I have targets set up there and if you're really good you can start throwing senbon at Neji for practice.”

Haku gave her a quizzical look, “On the off chance that I hit him-?”

“You most likely won't be able to. His Kaiten is impenetrable,” She then smirked, “Though, who knows? You're also a genius; you might figure something out...”

The following day, Naruto and Gaara had an uncharacteristic interest in how Haku's attempted date had gone as they painted a fence for their first D-rank mission. They were very amused with how it turned out.

“It was awkward, but still enjoyable I think,” Haku paused mid-stroke, “But then, we decided to train with senbon and it was...”

“What? Did you poke her eye out or something?” Naruto had a healthy fear of needles after Haku's demonstration on him the day before.

“No, her teammates, they...”

“What about them?” Gaara prompted.

“It seemed that Neji had been training with Lee while we were gone...quite thoroughly,” Haku frowned to himself, not sure if he could call the crumpled mess that was Lee an object of actual
training, “Tenten was upset about it.”

Naruto squinted his eyes, “Well, maybe he was jealous.”

The dark haired boy looked to him, completely puzzled, “Jealous? Why?”

“From how you described Lee he seems to be too lively,” Gaara suggested, siding with Naruto, “You removed Tenten from their squad, which caused a...” He searched for a description, “Violent imbalance.”

“So he probably just went off on the poor guy,” Naruto nodded to himself, “You know, just to vent some steam.”

“I wouldn't take Neji to really be the jealous-type,” Haku admitted, continuing his painting, “He didn't seem bothered when I came looking for Tenten.”

Gaara seemed to be deep in thought, “I wonder how much he has improved...”

Naruto looked lost, “Who?”

“Neji,” Haku clarified, still up to speed, “Yes, maybe we should train together someday, to test our skills.”

“Even after what he did to Lee?” Naruto had somehow become the voice of reason during the conversation.

There was a silence between Gaara and Haku, before Haku spoke quietly, “Maybe it would be better if we just stayed friends. I don't want to cause any problems for Tenten’s team.”

“It seems to be a little late for that.” Gaara pointed out.

“Are you done over there yet?” Jiraiya’s voice rang out from the top of a nearby brick wall, where he was beginning work on another one of his novels, “The guy in that yard keeps yapping at you three and it's disturbing my work!”

Naruto threw his paintbrush at the sennin's head, missing him by inches, “It wouldn't take so damn long if you were down here helping us Ero-sennin!”

“I'm busy.”

Haku observed an old, toothless man on the opposite side of the fence that they had been painting a bright white for the past fifteen minutes. He seemed inordinately distressed, but his incessant chatter made no sense at all.

The water manipulator paused and watched as Naruto scrambled angrily over to Jiraiya's spot to retrieve his brush. Gaara continued his work while glaring impassively at the fence.

It occurred to him that something was indeed amiss. He quickly realized what the problem was but feared to speak about it.

“What's wrong?” Gaara's voice was monotone against the arguing going on between Naruto and their lazy mentor.

“Well it seems that there's been a mistake...” Haku sighed, though Gaara wasn't much deferred in his work.

“Get up off your ass, old man!” Naruto was tired of trying to motivate the pervert, “You should be
helping too! This place is freaking huge!”

“Jiraiya-sensei!”

The toad hermit responded to Haku's partially urgent voice and looked down to him, “What now, Haku?”

Naruto huffed, not pleased that he was so easily ignored.

“Sensei, the man who lives here, I do believe he's been trying to tell us that there's been a mix up,” Haku indicated the old man that they had been ignoring.

“Like what?” Jiraiya still didn't seem very interested.

“That we are painting the wrong fence,” Gaara answered gruffly, nodding his head in the direction of another fence across the street that looked to be in desperate need of a new coat of paint.

The blonde hurled his brush again in frustration, “Great! Our first mission and we screwed up! Maybe if you were paying attention, Ero-sennin, we wouldn't have wasted our time!”

Still, the sage didn't seem bothered, “It's not my fault you guys got the address wrong.”

Naruto and Gaara looked murderous, while Haku seemed more mildly upset that their laboring had all been a waste.

The drab fence was actually starting to look good, apart from some spots that Naruto had missed during his enthusiastic strokes.

The sennin smirked at them, “What's the problem? You've done that ancient buzzard down there a favor. Just paint both fences if your panties are in such a knot.”

“We don't wear panties you sick bastard!” Naruto was deeply offended, but his friends were once again more level-headed.

Gaara and Haku had moved along to the opposite side of the empty road, preparing for another round of delightful, menial labor.

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“She's dead” Naruto leapt down from the wall while quickly forming seals, “Shadow Clone Jutsu!”

Twenty clones attacked the correct unpainted fence with replicated paint brushes, again reminding Gaara and Haku what a surprisingly helpful talent it was. Jiraiya merely flipped a page and sighed, wondering how he had survived all those years ago after training his first genin team.

Two weeks and 26 D-rank missions later for Squad 2, it was another ordinary, sunny day in Konoha.

“Where the hell is Ero-sensei?” Naruto sat on a stump in the field that they had begun using for their training.

Gaara stood quietly with his arms crossed. A deep frown graced his face.

“She was supposed to be here nearly an hour ago,” Haku also found it unusual for the sage to be late, simply because he never had been until that point, “Maybe we should speak to Hokage-sama
“We don't really need Jiraiya-sensei's help when walking dogs.” Gaara agreed irritably.

“Maybe he's just peeping again,” Naruto yawned, “He's so in love with his new book, he hasn't even bothered to show us a new jutsu yet!”

It was another fact that bothered them all deeply.

After a short trip to the Hokage's office the three genin waited for The Third to acknowledge their presence.

“Is there any trouble?” The Hokage asked, noting their peeved looks as he took a drag on his pipe.

“Not unless you count the fact that Ero-sensei's gone missing,” Naruto answered shortly, “We even checked around the girl's locker rooms! Where the heck did he go?”

The Sandaime sighed, already aware of the situation, “That’s right. I apologize for not giving you an earlier notification. I'm afraid you'll be without your instructor for a short while...”

Haku was alarmed, “You know where he is Hokage-sama? Is he alright?”

"Maybe he was useful for once and offered to go on a high-ranked mission..." Gaara speculated, giving him far more credit than he should have.

“He's...alive and well,” The Hokage answered, and Naruto looked somewhat annoyed at the news, “Your sensei was arrested late last night actually, for...” He rifled through a pile of papers and read aloud the charges, “One count of trespassing and two counts of harassment.” The blonde snorted again, knowing what that meant, “No one has posted bail as of yet. I believe he'll be performing community service once he is released.”

“Typical.” Gaara was to say, rightfully humiliated that the sennin couldn't pull himself together for his students when it came to his 'research.' Apparently it did get him into trouble once in a while.

“Will we still have missions?” Haku wore a pained look equivalent to being punched in the face.

To their relief, the Hokage nodded, “Yes. Although you will need a substitute for the time being.”

As if on cue, the aforementioned substitute arrived.

“You asked for me, Hokage-sama?” A young woman with fierce brown eyes and clad in an overcoat entered the office without knocking, and bumped into Haku on her way in.

“Come in, Anko.” The Sandaime turned back to the members of Squad 2, “As I was saying, you are required to have a stand-in instructor until Jiraiya is...fit to return. Since Anko here is the only available jounin at this time she will oversee your missions with you.”

The three boys observed the kunoichi who was assigned as their instructor, each with their own unique perspective. Naruto frowned, 'We don't need some weird lady to tell us what to do!'

Anko gave each of the boys a once-over glance, “So I've gotta babysit these maggots huh, Hokage-sama?” She looked amused at Naruto and Haku's offended faces, “How long do you think this will take?”

Hiruzen took another drag, “I can't honestly tell you how long this position will be yours, Anko. At least until Jiraiya is processed, sentenced and then approved to return to work.”
She shrugged and Gaara gave her a questioning look, ’Maggots?’

“Why do we have to have some ugly hag to tell us what to do?” Naruto complained and Anko didn't seem very bothered by his description of her at all, “Ero-sennin never helped out anyway, so what's the big deal?”

“Hey, I'm not gonna sit around and watch you three newbies shovel horse shit and scrub walls...” Anko was just as disdainful as Naruto at the moment, “Tell me we can at least have a C-rank mission Hokage-sama! Something interesting? Aren't they about ready for one?”

’She whines more than Jiraiya-sensei...’ Haku shuddered.

There was a moment of thought as the Hokage considered the request, again riffling irritably through the scrolls on his crowded desk, “Hm, Squad 2 has completed 26 D-rank missions so far...”

Naruto and Haku were on edge; a long-awaited C-rank mission? It was something they had constantly been asking Jiraiya about during their first week, which he had forcibly argued as: “Too dangerous for you genin brats! Now shut up! You’re distracting me!”

Anko frowned, “Psh! 26? That's good! So what do you say, Hokage-sama? I mean, they're with me for crips sake!”

’Her method of persuasion is...straightforward...’ Haku thought to himself, finding that he was slightly intimidated by her forceful personality.

“Yeah!” Naruto decided to lend his voice, “We're ready Hokage-sama!”

“Very well,” Hiruzen felt Anko had a point, “A simple C-level mission is still open. I suppose you can have it if you insist on the matter.”

Gaara smirked at their good fortune. Jiraiya was too lazy to even consider taking them on a higher rank mission so early on.

Naruto's opinion of Anko had done a complete 180, ’She got us a C-rank mission! This lady is awesome!’

Anko looked pleased with herself and the expressions on the genins' faces.

“You will be guarding a man named Tazuna, a master bridge builder, as you escort him back to the Land of Waves,” the Hokage said simply, “This trip should only take a few days at the most,” He eyed the boys, “So I expect you'll all put your best effort in for this mission.”

“You got it Hokage-sama!” Naruto then turned to his teammates, “This is great! Our first C-rank!”

Anko nodded, understanding the details of the mission.

“Tazuna, I expect, is waiting outside,” The Third finished, “Go meet him and leave immediately.”

They followed Anko over to a bearded man seated on a bench, sipping sake leisurely. He looked up expectantly as they approached.

“Tazuna-san,” Anko showed a bit more respect than what the genin had expected, “I am Mitarashi Anko. Are you about ready to get going now?”
“Yeah,” He then looked at Naruto, Haku and Gaara, “What the hell is this? Trusting my life to a bunch of kids?”

Gaara gave him an annoyed scowl.

“You’ve got a problem with that?” Naruto snapped, unable to control himself, “We're ninja! If you want to give us a hard time, then go back to the Land of Waves by yourself!”

Tazuna sniffed, “Gladly.”

“Please forgive Naruto, Tazuna-san,” Haku didn't want to create unrest with their client, “But we are ninja, and you can be assured you'll be perfectly safe with us as your guards.”

“I doubt it.”

Haku sweat-dropped, 'Well, I did my best. I suppose we'll just have to deal with his attitude until we get him back to the Land of Waves...'

Anko smirked, proud of how Haku tried to be welcoming and how he gracefully accepted Tazuna’s criticism. Naruto, on the other hand, clearly wasn't fond of the old windbag at all.

“Let's get going then.” The kunoichi was growing impatient, “Don’t knock it before you try it.”

“What do you think Ero-sensei got up to last night?” Naruto wondered out loud.

Haku and Gaara weren't very inclined to think about it. Whatever his inappropriate behavior had warranted the night before, it was enough to land him in jail and most likely related to his perverted habits.

“I believe the issue began after he thought he could get away with his antics in Konoha again,” Haku answered thoughtfully, “Sensei is normally careful when he sets out on his...research. He typically goes outside of the village to do it, where there is less enforcement. Though in Konoha...he is taking a chance.”

'Although maybe this will finally teach him a lesson.' Haku hoped in the back of his mind.

“We'll have to break his habit,” Gaara decided, “By whatever means...he'll thank us for it later.”

Naruto nodded in agreement, “Yeah, we do owe him a kick in the head don't we?” He avoided a large puddle in the dirt path as they marched on.

Tazuna wasn't fond of their chatter, “Will you three can it? All your girlish gossip or whatever, you should be paying more attention.”

“I don't think thugs are keen on a quiet attack, Tazuna-san. We'll know if there's danger.” Gaara said matter-of-factly and Naruto snickered as the old man huffed in annoyance.

Anko seemed relaxed. “In the event of an attack, noise isn't always a bad thing,” She pointed out, “It's a good thing they're able to communicate with each other. It gives us an advantage in a fight.”

Haku was about to rethink her words of wisdom before she sighed irritably, “But jeez, I wish someone would show up...it gets really boring when nothing happens...”

Gaara said nothing, but in his own mind agreed with her. Where was the action? Apparently C-rank missions weren't what they had pictured in their heads.
Haku fiddled with the strap of the back pack he wore. Its weight was doubled, carrying both rations for himself and Gaara. This was the arrangement that had been agreed upon so that Gaara could bring his larger, self-fashioned sand gourd with him.

Haku’s mind wandered as they walked. He remembered the kindness of Hiroshi; the man that had fostered him until he was brought to the Leaf Village. Memories of his birthplace, his parents and the anguish of being orphaned briefly surfaced. Haku tried to put them out of his mind, realizing how inappropriate a time it was to reminisce.

His train of thought was interrupted when a sudden shout of warning came from Anko. All of his senses were again at full alert. Haku watched as a short distance ahead, as if it were in slow motion, a dark, cloaked shinobi left the shadows and lunged at Tazuna, with metal claws outstretched for the kill.

The dark haired boy called for the old man to move, to run, or to defend himself in some way, but his terrified cry never escaped his throat.

Gaara appeared beside the bridge builder.

'Wasn't... wasn't he behind me? ' Haku watched in amazement as his friend stood beside Tazuna with his arms folded, ready to clash with an opponent.

The enemy's weapon met a wall of sand and Gaara merely glared at the dark figure, raring to fight back. He was also aware that their client was scared speechless behind him and unwilling to run for it.

The dark ninja leapt back when his attack failed, and sized up Gaara's unique defensive ability to decide how to avoid it to reach his target.

Haku's eyes were wide but he didn't see Naruto or Anko anywhere. He did see, however, a second dark ninja leap from his cover in a tree on the side of the road, 'What do I-?'

His rational thought ceased as the second unknown shinobi moved toward him; deadly iron claws catching the sunlight as they appeared from under another tattered cloak. Haku felt his knees lock and he wondered why he was standing his ground when he had absolutely no intention of attacking. Instinct, overpowering his mind, the instinct to run... but his body simply wouldn't comply.

“Haku-kun!”

He felt a hand close like a vice around his upper arm and shove him off balance towards the ground. He fell gracefully. He didn't realize that the unidentified enemy had come as close as he had until he watched the claws rake down Naruto's face and continue to his navel, ripping him open like a paper bag of flesh.

'Naruto!' 

Haku felt his head hit the ground and the impact made his eyes lose focus for a few seconds, 'Naruto-kun! This... this can't be happening! Why didn't I do anything?'

Eyes blurred, Haku squinted and saw the Shadow Clone that had saved his life revert to a puff of smoke. Immediately his brain was back up to speed and Haku felt his hand quickly grab three senbon. He slid his feet back beneath him and stood.

His nerve returned to him after Naruto (his clone rather) had demonstrated such bravery. The enemy ninja cursed under his breath that he had missed, but before he could round on Haku again...
with his gauntlet, a mass of black snakes enveloped him from behind.

Anko smirked, “Hm, two of you huh? Let's have some fun!”

With unexpected strength she pulled back on the shadow snakes ensnaring her opponent and sent him hurtling back and down to the ground. Haku watched on shaky, anticipatory legs, wondering how she'd finish him.

“Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!” A dozen replications of Naruto materialized and dove recklessly at the startled nin, knocking him senseless with many painful kicks to the head and gut as he struggled to free himself from Anko's snare.

Across the way, there was an agonized scream and Haku looked over to Gaara, who was methodically crushing sections of the first attacker's body with a cloud of concentrated, merciless sand.

Tazuna stood near him, looking away from the ordeal. Knowing that it was over nearly as soon as it had begun Haku put away his senbon, ashamed that he had been nothing but a burden to his companions.

After beating the enemy ninja into total submission, Anko's shadow snakes bound the pair to a nearby tree. After a short moment of eyeing their hitai-ate, she sneered at them, “Well, well...if it isn't Gozu and Meizu, the Demon Brothers of the Hidden Mist Village. Earlier I noticed that we were being followed but I didn't think it'd be the two of you.”

Naruto, Haku and Gaara looked on silently next to Tazuna as the two Mist nin slowly regained consciousness.

Gozu, the elder brother, spoke up, “When did you begin to suspect us?”

Anko snorted, “Any moron would've seen that stupid puddle on the path! It's the middle of the freaking summer and it hasn't rained in days! Seriously, you could have been more thoughtful! Fire Country summers are much dryer than in Mist.”

Naruto looked startled; he had nearly stepped in that 'stupid puddle' it was so convincing. But it seemed that both Gaara and Haku had been just as oblivious on the matter as he had been, ‘...how the hell were they hiding in a puddle?’

After sending a message to Leaf and they abandoned the Demon Brothers they continued on, still rattled that they had been ambushed so early. After a quarter of a mile, Anko stopped walking.

“Tazuna-san,” She said solemnly, “Let's get one thing straight here. I'm not an idiot. I did indeed notice those two morons earlier, but I still chose to let them attack us...because I had to see what or who they were after.”

The genin halted, understanding her meaning.

“When we accepted this mission, it was C-rank: standard protection from robbers and highway men and whathaveyous...” Anko continued matter-of-factly, “But those Mist nin sure came a heck of a long way up to the Fire Country and not without a reason,” She frowned, “You never said you had ninja after you...that's different from having some jackass try to rob you, wouldn't you say?”

“Why would ninja be after you old man?” Naruto was genuinely curious.
Gaara and Haku listened intently for his answer.

“You're right,” Tazuna's scratchy voice lowered, “Those ninja intended to kill me.”

“Why?” Haku had a hard time not sounding alarmed.

“They were sent by Gato, a shipping magnate who's been smuggling drugs and illegal goods in and out of the Land of Waves for many years now, holding a tight grip on the lives of the people who live there...” Tazuna explained, “I'm constructing a bridge though, one that will connect our village to the mainland and increase trade and commerce.”

“Bet the greedy bastard wouldn't like you freeing your town and messing with his crime ring, huh?” Anko quickly understood, “So he kills you and this bridge of yours doesn't get built? Fabulous. We're in deep over our heads this time. It was selfish of you to ask for cheap, low-level protection when these genin have so little experience.”

“But why didn't you just say you had ninja after you in the first place?” Naruto asked.

“My village doesn't have the money to pay for high-level protection,” Tazuna admitted, “The people there are suffering from sickness and poverty. I can’t afford to hire shinobi who are above trainee level.”

“We're beyond the scope of our mission if you have other shinobi after you.” Gaara said simply, making the old man glare at the ground.

“So, I suppose you'll quit on me because I don't have the money for you, eh?” Tazuna inquired darkly, not looking at his temporary guards.

“Are you kidding?” Anko grinned, “Money or no money, this is gonna be great! It's been a while since I've had a mission as unpredictable and meaningful as this! And it'll be good training for the maggots! They need to learn to adapt to dire-straits missions!”

The three genin gave Anko nonplused looks. Tazuna hadn't counted on her to still be willing to protect him. The idea of it excited the genin after a few moments and Anko’s confidence made them bold.

“Yeah old man! We'll get you home!” Naruto grinned at him, “We've got you covered!”

“We've already set out and it would be pointless to turn back,” Haku figured, “It'd be a good experience to help you return to your village and build your bridge Tazuna-san.”

Haku felt the need to be as objective as possible while on a mission.

“Hn.” It was Gaara's way of agreeing while maintaining his detachment.

The details of the mission had changed and Anko was more thrilled by the prospective danger than repelled by it. Team 2 continued on, hoping the real-world experience would be payment enough for their efforts.

Later as they crowded into a less-than-roomy motorboat to cross a bay enveloped in mist, Haku was again lost in his thoughts. Occasionally he looked up to survey their surroundings.

'When those ninja attacked I...I just froze up,' Haku was still unable to forgive himself, 'I just stood there like an idiot! I'd definitely be dead if it hadn't been for Naruto.'
He looked out onto the water which was surprisingly calm, *'I can't be a burden anymore. This is real. I'm a ninja now and I have to get serious!'*

Haku was frustrated that Gaara and Naruto handled the situation so remarkably well. Weren't they even slightly frightened? *'Well, Naruto might have been...but Gaara fears few things in life...and I can't say that it's a good thing.'*

He paused, wondering what good berating himself to be a coward would do, *'No, I won't feel sorry for myself. It's pointless. I have to focus on the mission and protect Tazuna and everyone else, for that matter. I can put my team at risk if I don't focus.'*

*Hey Haku, are you feeling okay?′* Naruto turned to him, remembering the ambush from earlier,  
*′You're not hurt or anything, are you?′*

*′I'm fine, Naruto-kun.′*

The blonde nodded and leaned back in his spot and turned to Gaara, who also looked tense,  
*′What about you Gaara?′*

*′This water makes me nervous,′* The red haired boy admitted,  
*′I don't swim well.′*

Naruto laughed but quickly muffled himself after he recalled that they were still in enemy territory. Haku looked at Gaara, understanding that he did know how to swim, but that he wouldn't be able to with a cumbersome gourd attached to his back. It was now completely comprised of sand and the weight would be unmanageable in water.

*′We're all mortal,′* Haku firmed his resolve after talking to his friends,  
*′This mission can only succeed unless we all work together. The next ninja we meet...I'll be ready.′*

Once back on land, the Leaf ninja and their client continued their trek through a dense forest, through which would be the quickest way to their destination. Anko was clearly more guarded than she had been in the Fire Country, *′Those last two were chunin. Next time it will be a jounin...′*

*′How does someone become a 'bridge builder' anyway?′* Naruto wanted to get to know their client,  
*′The same way a person becomes a lumberjack or street-paver?′*

Anko snorted in laughter with Naruto while Tazuna bit back, *′It's a necessary occupation in the Land of Waves you stupid kid! With all the water-ways around here bridges are pretty common wouldn't you say? I worked hard to become a top engineer.′*

Naruto got over his little joke, *′Yeah, sorry old man. It's just building bridges seems pretty lame. How do you do it?′*

*′It takes a large amount of engineering, money and labor to get done. A combined effort produces great things.′* He answered,  
*′But I won't get technical with you. That tiny brain of yours already seems stretched to capacity.′*

Anko snorted again and Haku and Gaara couldn't help but smirk.

*′Shut the hell up!′* Naruto didn't like insults to his intelligence. It was just another way people underestimated him, which often proved foolish.

Out of the corner of his eye, Naruto watched a nettle of ferns quiver in a manner that didn't appear to be caused by a breeze. After drawing a kunai from his holster he threw the knife with startling precision directly into the offending undergrowth.
There was a *thud* as the knife made contact with a solid object, followed by a small squeak of terror. His companions didn't appreciate the gesture that much either.

“What are you doing?” Gaara gave him a sideways glance of annoyance.

“Naruto-kun, you shouldn't be throwing kunai at random!” Haku scolded, “What if you hit an innocent bystander?”

“Relax, would you?” Naruto moved the foliage aside and revealed the area where his kunai had sunk deep into the bark of an ash tree, a few inches above a rabbit's head, “See? The little bunny's okay!”

Naruto lifted up the terrified animal and stroked its ears soothingly.

“Put that stinking thing down, Naruto.” Anko sighed.

He looked at her with an expression of protest.

Haku observed the rabbit and commented, “That rabbit is white.”

Naruto continued to calm the small creature, “So?”

“That means that it has most likely been bred in captivity,” Haku went on, “To be a distraction.”

“A...distraction?” Naruto put the rabbit down and it bounded away. Its white fur contrasted with the surrounding verdant undergrowth.

Anko was on edge, also noting Haku's observation, even before the sound of rushing metal through the air came to her ears, “Move!”

Haku pulled Tazuna down into the undergrowth near Naruto, and Gaara and Anko ducked out of the path of a huge sword that was sent spiraling towards them with a great force. The zanbato that they evaded collided with the top of a tree, biting deep into the wood.

They looked up and beheld another ninja standing on the blade that had imbedded itself into the tree. Quickly regaining their feet, they formed a protective ring around Tazuna, silent and anxious. The gentle sound of Gaara’s sand was reassuring to Haku and Naruto.

Anko narrowed her eyes, ‘*Damnit! I thought we'd at least get a bit farther before another one showed up! Looks like this is it...’*

Haku, for a brief moment, held his breath as he observed their assailant, ‘*But that's–!*’ There was no mistaking it. Haku recognized the shinobi to be the same man with the bandaged face he had seen long ago.

His eyes were wide in disbelief and he felt his hands close around the senbon he had tucked away in his gi, ‘*This man...I've seen him before! He must be another hit man from the Mist Village after Tazuna! But he's jounin...*’ His grip on the needles tightened considerably.

The Mist ninja glared down at them, “...Mitarashi Anko,” A deep baritone pierced the air like a knife, “Special jounin of the Leaf Village; it seems you've had no trouble with the Demon Brothers...”

“I know you: Momochi Zabuza, one of the Seven Shinobi Swordsman of the Mist,” Anko's knowledge was also well-rounded, “You are a missing nin and are one of those responsible for the attempted coup d'état in Mist a few years ago...”
Haku didn't like the sound of that, *He tried to overthrow the Mizukage?*

Zabuza smirked, “Impressive, but that's enough with the pleasantries...” Naruto, Haku and Gaara tensed as the nukenin formed seals, “Hidden Mist jutsu...”

A thick haze enveloped the young Leaf shinobi and the Mist ninja disappeared from their sight. As visibility quickly diminished, Anko gritted her teeth, *This is bad...* She turned to her genin, “Stay in formation and guard Tazuna!”

Naruto nodded grimly, “Yeah, Anko-sensei!”

“...There is no escape. With the Silent Assassination Technique I can kill an opponent with one fatal blow...” The boys of Squad 2 were unnerved even further as Zabuza's voice rang out through the Mist, seemingly from all directions.

“I can't tell where it's coming from!” Naruto turned his head frantically left and right to see if he could decipher where the enemy was truly hidden.

“Calm down!” Anko warned, not wanting them to begin to panic, “He's using the Utsusemi no Jutsu! He uses it to project his voice from all directions, so don't move!”

Haku wondered if maybe senbon would be of any practical use at a moment where he may need to counterattack, seeing both Naruto and Gaara wielding kunai as they stood in a ring around their apprehensive client. But there was no time for thinking now, only time to react.

Gaara estimated it to be about four seconds until the nukenin reappeared. Unfortunately it was where they least expected him to. Naruto felt his heart leap into his mouth as the ghost-like Mist nin had penetrated their defensive formation and had his horse-slaying sword raised, preparing to cleave Tazuna into two.

Again, wild fear gripped the genin, disabling them from countering. Anko, who was still a few yards away also couldn't respond in time.

With a bestial snarl, Zabuza brought his big blade down; his eyes fixed on the old man at the center...but instead connected with a barrier of sand that had automatically formed to shield Gaara, which coincidentally saved Tazuna's life as well.

This instance somewhat increased the red haired boy's nerve, and his hands unconsciously formed a familiar seal, “Sand Coffin!”

Sand enveloped the Mist nin that had been temporarily delayed from his failed attack, and Haku and Naruto watched in grim excitement as Gaara finished his deadly counter, “Sand Burial!”

The tomb of sand that had enveloped the nukenin and his zanbato imploded with such speed and force that it crushed him instantly, earning a gasp from Anko and Tazuna. Haku and Naruto remained silent, having witnessed it before on inanimate objects.

It didn't go as planned.

The target that Gaara was certain he'd killed splashed into nothing more than water and once again put everyone on edge.

*He substituted with a water clone!* Haku's brain was reeling, *So where's the real one?*

The four of them turned after hearing a cry of great effort as Zabuza reappeared by Anko, who
was just barely able to dodge his enormous sword.

“You leave them out of this you eyebrow-less bastard!” She spat furiously, still able to creatively insult while under a great amount of stress, “I'll finish you myself!”

Zabuza smirked beneath his mask, “We'll see.”

Anko began with a diversion of shuriken and kunai, which as she had expected, were deflected with ease by the Mist nin's huge sword. While gradually edging the fight farther away from the genin and closer to a lake's edge, she attacked more fiercely, “Shadow Snakes!”

The ruthless attack momentarily caught him by surprise as he leapt back, raising his sword and watching with sharp, calculating eyes as the snakes coiled around the blade, biting futilely at the gleaming metal. The snakes were surprisingly resistant and held fast as the blade’s edge cut into flesh.

There was a pause and Anko had no time to brace herself as, with an inhuman amount of strength Zabuza swung his sword, snakes and Anko attached, and hurled them. She righted herself as she soared through the hazy air and landed on bent knee on the water's surface.

“She's awesome!” Naruto crowed, impressed with her athleticism, but still appropriately fearful of the current state of things. Haku, Gaara and their client silently agreed.

Zabuza casually walked out onto the water towards Anko, seemingly unfazed by her valiant efforts. After a few milliseconds of watching a bead of sweat travel down the side of the kunoichi’s face, he began to form seals and rushed at her.

Anticipating his movements, Anko drew a kunai and steadied her chakra-glued feet to the calm water's surface, preparing to counter. As he was barely three feet ahead of her, he vanished, and she staggered suddenly in spite of herself. She caught herself with an outstretched hand, pushing off the water’s surface with chakra, and crushed another water clone with a roundhouse kick. She continued to spin and a large serpent darted from her coat and sunk its fangs into another clone, dispersing it.

Just as she had felt she had the upper hand in close-quarters he reappeared next to her, completing his jutsu, “Water Prison Technique!”

Her cry of surprise was cut off as she was surrounded by a swirling sphere of water, much to the horror of the genin who were still guarding Tazuna. Anko ended her struggle and gave a brash look at Naruto and his companions as they stood motionlessly, almost like she expected them to free her.

After a long, painful moment of deliberation they realized that was their best option.

Haku made up a strategy on the spot, and although he was certain that it was doomed to fail, he decided that with some improvisation it may help them survive against the jounin at least for a short while.

“Gaara-kun, you need stay with Tazuna-san,” Haku said quietly, “Naruto-kun and I can take him.”

Naruto couldn't help but grin at Gaara's alarmed face, “Yeah, stay with the old man, Gaara-kun!” On cue, he turned to the dark haired boy, “So, uh, what's the plan?”

It was rather simple, “…shadow clones...lots of them.”
The blonde nodded, “Roger!”

Gaara scowled as his foolish (suicidal) friends ran ahead towards the lake, leaving him to ensure Tazuna’s safety, and hearing the distant shout of “Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!” along the way.

“Do they do this often?” Tazuna inquired, stunned by their actions.

Gaara wore a resigned expression, “Always.”

The old man smiled slightly.

Zabuza’s water clone waited on shore while he held the Water Prison Jutsu containing Anko firmly with his right arm. He glared at the approaching genin, ‘What are those idiots up to?’

The kid in the orange jumpsuit created a dozen shadow clones, all of which dove at the Mist nin’s clone, with Haku in toe, senbon at the ready. As Naruto and his clones tackled the nukenin, Haku pulled back, as if to wait for something.

With one swipe of his sword, Zabuza destroyed half of the shadow clones crowding him, and continued onward, much to the terror of the real Naruto, and Gaara who stood watching from afar. Haku stumbled backwards, not expecting the jounin to switch targets so abruptly.

“Haku!” Naruto’s voice reached a shockingly high pitch.

The zanbato hacked through Haku’s mid-section and Anko was about ready to scream a string of profanities at her captor until she witnessed what she had believed to be Haku splash into a puddle of water.

“A water clone,” Zabuza grunted, and then smirked as if he were entertained, “I thought so.”

He turned back, raising the blade, and cleaved through the remainder of the shadow clones. Naruto and Haku (who had transformed himself into his blonde friend) immediately leapt away. Noting that it was senseless to stay in disguise, Haku released his jutsu and continued on, preparing to attack the real Zabuza.

The Mist nin avoided Naruto who had intended to plunge his kunai into his opponent’s arm, and planted a solid kick to the young genin’s back, sending him crashing painfully to the ground.

Although his mind screamed in protest, Gaara did not leave Tazuna’s side, aware that it might mean the man’s death if he did so to help Haku, who was now on his own.

Haku could feel the separate chakra of the water clone that chased after him. Even if he had been able to ignore his growing fear and attempt to save his substitute jounin instructor, he knew there was little chance he could escape his pursuer.

‘I’ve got to destroy that water clone...my senbon can only do that if I hit the clone's weak points...’ And he was aware he was asking much of himself while running as fast as he could at the enemy ninja holding Anko prisoner.

‘I’ve got to try!’ Haku leapt up, gluing his feet to the side of a tree and twisting himself around to get a clear view of the water clone. His eyes went straight to the zanbato that was raised, and he did his best to aim for the neck and chest regions of the replication.

The dark haired boy abandoned the tree shortly after and cursed himself after Zabuza's water
clone easily deflected the projectiles without slowing down, 'If he gets any closer I'm done for!'

He kept moving, twisting and diving through the lofty tree branches with great speed. He listened to the nearing crashes that echoed behind him as the water clone devastated the spots he had lingered in only seconds before.

What was worse, he realized, was that his purser had efficiently prevented him from getting any closer to Anko, who wore a horrified look as she watched him weave through the tree tops with a huge zanbato at his heels.

'I can't do this; he's wearing me out...' Haku could indistinctly hear Naruto calling to him, not far behind, 'I have to get rid of this clone and I can only do it if...

He paused, and tumbled away as the horse-slaying sword came hurtling down next to him, showering him in splinters and leaves. Haku felt his sandals connect with the ground and he pelted back into the open, closer to Anko now, but he had allowed the clone to get too close, 'I have no choice...'

The dark haired boy made eye contact with the Kyuubi container, who was a short distance off, creating another batch of shadow clones.

He pivoted and faced the clone, feeling his stomach turn over, and raced through a good number of seals as the false Mist nin closed in on him, ready to finish him off.

“Gaara! Can you give me a hand maybe?” Naruto hollered, sending his kamikaze shadow clones barreling into the water clone, mere steps away from Haku.

The blonde grinned as a cloud of sand joined the fray, attempting to encase the water clone, but the young genin were still overwhelmed as Naruto's shadow clones were sliced apart and Gaara was just too far away to pose a notable threat.

Their distraction, which had granted a few precious seconds, allowed Haku to finish his sealing, “Suiton: Water Dragon Blast!”

Anko and her captor glanced behind them as a large current of water rose up into the air, spiraling and coiling, dragon-like in shape. It dove downward and circled once around Haku as Zabuza's water clone leapt back to avoid it. Anko grinned openly as the current shot forward again and completely blew away the once-perilous water clone and the remainder of Naruto's shadow clones.

The kunoichi was totally flummoxed as Haku raised his hand, not forming any kind of seals at all, and redirected the current back at the real Zabuza. Naruto staggered to his feet and watched wide-eyed as the Mist nukenin pulled his arm out of the sphere containing Anko and avoided the attack that would have surely ended the battle.

Anko spat out a mouthful of water in disdain after being released from the jutsu and watched guardedly as Zabuza settled himself on dry land near Haku, zanbato in hand.

Haku stood close to the pond's edge, ready to use water jutsu if the Mist shinobi decided to attack again. Curiously enough, he didn’t. Zabuza merely stood wearing a thoughtful yet mocking sort of expression.

His growl-like voice shook Haku to the core, “So...it is you. I thought so.”

Naruto stood frozen, not understanding at all what the nukenin was talking about, and quickly glanced back at Gaara who still had his sand shield surrounding Tazuna, also listening.
The dark haired boy clenched his fists tightly around his senbon, “What are you talking about?”

The swordsman's amused chuckle was dark, “You think I don't remember you? The beggar kid from the Water Country, all those years ago? Hn...I'm impressed you're still alive.”

Haku gritted his teeth, 'How does he remember me? One look at me and after all the time that's passed...'

“You're wasting your time in Leaf, kid. You’re from 'that' clan; it's obvious from your abilities...”
Zabuza smirked as Haku suddenly became all ears, “You possess the Hyoton, a Kekkei Genkai which controls water and wind to create ice...it's not something I haven't seen before.”

The Hyoton? There are others like me? Haku felt compelled to ask these questions aloud but knew it was foolish enough to let his guard down, let alone listen to the (possibly deceptive) words of an enemy nukenin, 'But he can't be lying...he knows about my Kekkei Genkai.'

“There's no way you'll fully master your ability in the Fire Country, kid,” Zabuza snorted, resting his zanbato leisurely on his shoulder, “Real training for people like you resides in Kirigakure, there's no way two ways about it.”

“What are you saying?” Naruto barked, “Haku's a Leaf ninja! Now way he'd go to the Mist Village for something as stupid as that!”

“Oh really?” Zabuza glared at Naruto, who was about ready to pounce in a mix of confusion and anger.

Without even looking over his shoulder for confirmation, Zabuza side-stepped the shadow snakes that Anko had aimed at the back of his head, and gave a lasting stare to Haku, “This isn't over.”

Anko cursed loudly as the Mist nin disappeared, presumably to regroup. Gaara and Tazuna were cautiously crossing the field to where Naruto stood and considered Haku, who appeared to have taken Zabuza's words very seriously.

“You okay, kid?” Anko rested her hand on Haku's shoulder while he absently put away his senbon.

“Oh.” He looked startled, “There's not a scratch on me sensei, but I should be asking you that question.”

Naruto nodded, “Yeah, we were pretty freaked out when he got you stuck in that weird bubble Anko-sensei!”

She waved them off, not much bothered by what had transpired, “We got off easy. It could have gone much, much worse. Can you imagine what would've happened to Tazuna-san if Haku hadn't distracted that brute?”

“I would've had a rough time...” Gaara answered and Tazuna smirked, more appreciative of his body guards after encountering the powerful Mist jounin.

“You would've.” Anko murmured, “We should get going. He may be gone for now, but he'll be back for Tazuna later, I'm sure.”

“I live close by,” Tazuna seemed truly relieved to be alive, “If we're lucky enough to avoid any more ninja, it should be less than an hour’s walk.”
“Yes! And when we get there can we find something to eat? I'm starving!” Naruto inquired, upset that they had skipped breakfast that morning after Jiraiya had not shown up.

“That's a good idea.” Anko agreed, also appearing to be a bit peckish, “Maybe they'll have some dango in town...”

They set out again, exhausted, hungry and kunai within reach. More than ever Gaara seemed irritable due to the fact that he had seen the least action of any of them, granted he was the best suited to defend Tazuna should Zabuza reappear.

And the knowledge that Haku actually knew a missing nin from the Mist Village was also unsettling. Gaara knew that as much as he could've put up a fight against the nukenin, he would've been undeniably critically wounded or worse if Haku had not distracted Zabuza.

’He knows about Haku's Kekkei Genkai as well...' Gaara frowned inwardly, keeping a wary eye on their client, That puts us at a disadvantage, no matter how strong Haku-kun may be.’

Naruto patted Haku on the back, grinning as they walked, “That was awesome Haku-kun! You blew bandage-face away with that jutsu!”

Haku sighed, rubbing his arm humbly, “I'm not much of a fighter at all without water...I was just lucky I suppose.”

“But still! Luck or whatever it was, you chased off a jounin!” Naruto emphasized 'jounin' by waving his arms about, “Of course Gaara-kun and I helped!”

“Of course.” Gaara agreed tersely, not wanting to give all the credit to the tall, frail-looking boy.

“Will you three shut up?” Their client looked irked once again, “Whenever you start talking, we get ambushed. Do you notice a recurring pattern?”

“Coincidence,” Naruto insisted, “Besides everyone's still in one piece so it isn't really a problem!”

Anko smirked, “You'll get used to it eventually, Tazuna.”

“This is where you live?” Haku asked Tazuna as they entered a desolate-looking village. It showed clear signs of poverty and hunger. The dirt streets weren't very crowded and buildings appeared to be vandalized and even uninhabitable. Roadside food stands had little to offer, with only a few items sitting on the dusty shelves, untouched.

“It isn't really what you'd call living.” Tazuna replied grimly.

“I don't suppose they have any real medical facilities or such in this area then?” Anko asked, noting a sickly homeless person seated on the side of the street, shivering with cold.

“There are a few...” Tazuna answered slowly, “The real problem is affording anything around here. Gato has taxes on nearly every necessity there is in this town, and not many people are as financially stable as my family.” He paused, “But even so...everyone has lost something precious to Gato and it has to end...the people cannot go on living like this.”

Gaara looked down as he felt a small hand tug on the sash tied around his waist. A small child, maybe four or five, with tousled hair and a round, dirty face looked up at him in silence. At first he didn't understand until he watched the pleading brown eyes begin to water and tear.

Begging.
Not noticing that he had fallen behind, his companions continued on, discussing the village’s hardships and Gaara stood in the center of the street, watching the starving little girl tug desperately on his sash.

*I know suffering.* Gaara’s eyes softened considerably and he kneeled down, removing the girl’s hand from his sash.

“You’re hungry.” He said quietly and he watched the child struggle to give an answer.

Gaara fished through his back pouch, not bothering to count how much money he had retrieved and handed it to her, “Here.”

“Eh?” She looked confused. It was probably been the first time anyone had given her anything.

“Go on, you can keep it.” He patted her head gently and she grinned, deeply grateful to the kind stranger with a large gourd.

Gaara stood and watched as she tottered away towards a shabby-looking young woman who he guessed was the girl’s mother, apparently bartering with a shop-keeper. After having one glance at what her daughter held up to her, the woman looked up frantically, making eye contact with the red haired boy.

She seemed to understand.

So he left, not wanting to think about how many people were in serious need of help. He would give up the shoes on his feet if it would do them any good. The only way to break the shackles of oppression chaining the people down in the village was to end Gato’s tyranny, *And I will.*

“Tsunami, I'm back,” Tazuna grunted as he shuffled into his house, which was noticeably larger and more stylish than many of the homes they had passed by on the way.

A young woman with dark indigo hair and black eyes poked her head out of the kitchen while drying a dish, smiling, “Dad, I'm glad you're back! Did you have a safe trip?”

“Yes,” He then gestured to the four people standing quietly behind him, “These ninja from Konoha have saved my life at least twice today. I've invited them to stay with us until they are prepared for their journey home.”

Tsunami smiled at Anko’s group, “Welcome! I hope you'll stay for dinner tonight! We'd be happy to have you.”

Naruto grinned, “Sure we'll stay! I'm starving-” Anko smiled while she pinched the boy’s lips shut.

“Try to be more respectful, Naruto. These people have invited us into their home without even knowing us.” Anko went on, removing her hand from his face, and he nodded, somewhat annoyed.

Gaara untied his gourd and set it down carefully before taking a seat between Naruto and Haku, who had just been served tea by Tsunami. She looked up as a small figure slipped into the room, “Inari, there you are! Come and meet the nice ninja who've been looking after Grandpa!”

A small, eight-year-old boy trudged inside to stand by Tazuna, his shifty gaze examining the shinobi one at a time from beneath his hat, “Ninja?”
“That's right!” Naruto confirmed with a grin, “We've fought off dangerous enemy ninja to bring your grandpa home safe and sound!”

Inari frowned, “You don't look that tough.”

Gaara regarded Tazuna’s grandson while he and Haku sipped their ginseng. Naruto gave a reserved glance to Inari, “Is that so? Well you'll be impressed to hear that we've saved his life more than once during the course of the day.”

“So what?” The boy snapped, “You save people or whatever, but it doesn't matter because in the end everyone dies eventually! So what's the point?” Without warning, Inari turned on his heel and fled, leaving his mother calling after him as his footsteps thundered up the stairs, leaving Naruto deeply insulted.

“Man! What's his problem?” Naruto wondered, slurping his tea in irritation.

The same question occurred to Anko, Haku and Gaara.

“You'll have to forgive Inari. He's a bit sensitive about things like that…” Tsunami said with a sigh, “Would anyone like more tea?”

“What do you mean he isn't dead yet?” Gato sat behind his desk, glaring at Zabuza, “I didn't hire you to play around with them Zabuza. Stop wasting my time.”

The Mist nin's voice was dangerously low, “There's been a change of plans.”

“What?” The statement had the conniving shipping magnate worried.

“There's a boy, a very interesting prospect…” Zabuza went on cryptically, “It's very rare to come across such a valuable find.”

Gathering his nerve, Gato went on, “You've already been paid half. You hold up your end of the bargain and kill the bridge builder as we agreed, and after that, you can do whatever the hell you want.”

Zabuza's eyes narrowed, “You have no place to describe to me the things I can and can't do, you brainless parasite…” He paused, smirking again as he thought, ‘The Hyoton boy. Before this is over, I'll have a fine tool to finish what I've started.’

“If that's all you've got to say then get out of here and get back to work,” Gato replied curtly, fearing the zanbato slung on the nukenin’s back, “I told you I don't care what you do so long as you kill the old man, got it?”

Zabuza ignored him, walking out of the office deep in thought and closed the door behind him with a resounding bang.

Two body guards on either side of Gato's desk gave him incredulous looks after the unstable jounin departed, both concerned that their lives could end suddenly should the Mist nin become angered.

“I don't trust that bastard, not as far as I can throw him.” Gato ground out, his fists clenching, “If he's sidetracked, there's sure to be a double-cross. That bastard won't get the job done on time…”

“What do we do about him then?” A gaunt-looking guard asked, his hand resting on the sword tied at his side.
“We finish off the old man without him,” The shipping magnate decided, “Once he finds this 'interesting prospect' of his we kill him and the kid, just to make things fun.”
Chapter Soundtrack: “Ribbon in the Sea” by Uyama Hiroto

‘You're wasting your time in Leaf, kid. You're from 'that' clan, it's obvious from your abilities.’

‘You little monster, hold still!’

‘Haku's a Leaf ninja! No way he'd go to the Mist Village for something as stupid as that!’

‘This isn't over.’

‘Monster!’

Haku rolled over. Sunlight that had been flooding through the window had tattooed crimson on his eyelids. His hair was splayed messily over his face, tickling his nose. Without a sound, he blinked his eyes open and sat up slowly.

'Even in my dreams I'm restless.'

Haku had dreamed of his father, for the first time in a long time, who he recalled few fond memories of. He used to think he had resented his father for being so cruel and unforgiving to him and his mother (as well as trying to kill them) until he remembered that he had been the one to end his father's life, 'I didn't mean to...he was not himself.'

He didn't like death, or the fact that he was fully capable of killing so easily thanks to his Kekkei Genkai. It seemed like he couldn't escape it. The guilt he felt for killing his own father out of pure desperation still stung after all this time. Haku had vowed that it would never happen again.

Haku absently groped around next to him for a hair tie, finding one, and proceeded to pull his silky black tresses into a ponytail. His dark eyes were glued to the blank wall ahead of him while he swam through the last of his mottled dreams.

'Why do I have to have the Hyoton? Why can't I just be normal like everyone else? I hate this. I hate that my parents are gone and I'm the reason for it.'

He turned when he heard Naruto mumble something indecipherable in his sleep. It was something joyful, 'Ramen maybe?' Haku smiled. The blonde's face was obscured by the blanket draped over him but he was sure the boy was grinning.

Next to Naruto, Gaara was also fast asleep, snoring gently. It didn’t look comfortable, sleeping straight on his back like that, but Gaara still appeared peaceful. His fear of the Shukaku had diminished since Jiraiya and the Third’s intervention, but there were still some nights Gaara had restless sleep. The day’s excitement had tired him out and allowed him to sleep deeply.

Only recently had Haku been told that his best friends were both jinchuriki and he still hadn't thought about it much. This was because nothing had really changed after he had found out. They were still Naruto and Gaara, his friends who had become closer than brothers, and he was sure they always would be. After Haku had left his homeland they were the only family he knew.

Haku also felt a swell of pride rather than fear knowing that they were demon containers, Their sacrifice for holding the Kyuubi and the Ichibi keeps people safe every day from a demon's unrestrained wrath, not just in Konoha but in any village.'
He couldn't see why people were so fearful of Naruto and Gaara back in Leaf. It hardly seemed rational. They had never done a thing to warrant ill-will from anyone. If anything, they should have been treated like heroes for devoting their lives to their village. That was his opinion, at least.

Haku pushed aside his blanket and let himself stretch, listening to his shoulders crack, 'It doesn't matter to me if they jail demons or not, we're friends and nothing can change that.'

Just as Haku was about to further observe the depths of his loyalty to Naruto and Gaara, the blonde boy sat up, still asleep, but looked as if he were reaching for something. As abruptly as he had shifted, Naruto was horizontal again, snoring and mumbling, "Nmm are you gonna...?" Haku kept watching, amused that Naruto's dreams could even touch the physical world, “...eat that...mnf...fishcake...?"

'He's already hungry and he's not even conscious.' Haku noted, flinching when Naruto rolled over again, a flimsy hand striking Gaara right in the face, who miraculously slept right through the sleepy assault, 'Maybe I should go fix breakfast before he eats Gaara-kun's gourd...'

Gracefully rising to his feet, Haku stepped lightly over to the pile of travel gear in the corner of the guest room. He unceremoniously dove into a larger bag and rifled around in search of clothing. He had slept in his pants, so he pulled on the plain, white gi he had extracted and then quietly exited the room.

Naruto and Gaara's snores followed after him as he closed the door.

The rest of the house was silent compared to the room Haku had slept the night in. He continued to blink the sleep out of his eyes as he went down the flight of stairs and turned right to where he had recalled the kitchen to be.

Not to his surprise Tsunami was already there, setting a frying pan on the stove. Haku cleared his throat innocently and she turned to him, smiling, “Oh, good morning Haku-kun. Did you sleep well?”

He nodded, “Yes, I did. Thank you for letting us stay here, Tsunami-san.”

“Not at all, it’s my pleasure,” She waved him off, cracking an egg expertly and opening it over the pan with a sizzle, “Have your friends woken up yet?”

“Not yet,” Haku answered, “Would you mind if I helped you?”

Tsunami smiled, “No, over in that cabinet there are some bowls, if you can set them on the table please.” He moved to the shelf she had pointed to and discovered a good number of ceramic bowls stacked on top of one another.

Haku vaguely felt nostalgia for the morning routine of his childhood which was spent with his mother preparing meals and cleaning. He knew that his mother was long dead but the memory made his heart a bit lighter.

After aiding Tsunami in preparing the morning meal, Haku returned to the guest room where, predictably, Naruto and Gaara were still sleeping. With a sigh Haku pulled the blanket away from Naruto who shifted in his sleep but did not wake.

“Gaara-kun...” His red haired friend wasn't as difficult to revive as Naruto was. Upon hearing his name his eyes snapped open and he sat up groggily. He flashed a look of slight annoyance at Haku.
While Gaara fought his way back to consciousness, Haku called to Naruto several times and even shook him roughly by the shoulders. He had to admit, Naruto could probably sleep through a train wreck soundly if left undisturbed; he was just so deeply asleep. 'But,' Haku thought to himself, 'His mind does have more developed areas of interest.'

“Naruto-kun, the ramen will get cold if you don't hurry.”

“Ah!” The blonde leapt up, clear over Haku's head, “Wait for me!” He ran out of the room, partly-awake at the most, and the dark haired boy listened in slight amusement to the thundering sounds as Naruto half ran, half fell down the stairs, following the delicious aroma that hung in the air.

Haku didn't bother to hide his wide smirk as Gaara continued to laze about and yawn. Naruto was unique in the sense that whatever he deemed to be important, whether it be friends or food, would be something he would give his best effort to, 'Well maybe friends more than noodles.'

“Don't rile him up,” Gaara stood, scratching his neck, “He'll scare the people who live here.” He moved to lift his gourd with only one arm (He's getting stronger...Haku noted in wonderment), and then turned to leave the room without a second glance.

“Only with his appetite.” Haku replied and promptly followed after Gaara.

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Downstairs Gaara and Haku joined Naruto at the table, the latter looked suspiciously bruised. He grinned at Haku, “Thanks for waking me, Haku-kun! I got down here just in time!”

“Don't mention it.” The dark haired boy sat down across from him, 'I wasn't really serious before...' Even though he had only made up an excuse to rouse the Kyuubi container, Naruto was still grateful to wake up to a bowl of miso, as was Gaara, but with less enthusiasm. Tsunami was busy scrubbing down the frying pan she had been cooking with earlier, humming merrily to herself.

Gaara kept his eyes half-lidded and poured himself some tea. Haku noticed this sulky behavior, 'Gaara-kun seems a bit off this morning...' After setting the kettle down the redhead lifted his cup and took a slow sip. Naruto's cheerful slurping of noodles was disgustingly audible all the while.

Haku frowned to himself, still watching as Gaara drank with his dark-rimmed eyes closed. He looked sallow and kind of clammy; was he sick? The red haired boy looked up and couldn't help but notice Haku's oddly perceptive stare aimed at his head.

“What?”

Haku's frown deepened thoughtfully, 'What's with everyone today?'

“Eat something Haku-kun!” Naruto said between two very loud slurps, it came out almost like an order. Haku poured himself some tea, not looking at Gaara who was once again irritable and uncommunicative.

Haku glanced at Naruto instead. Was he telling him to eat because he just happened to be underweight for someone his age and height? Or was he giving fair warning before he plowed through the remaining dishes set on the table? He guessed it was a bit of both.

Tsunami was still humming.
The tuneless noise was beginning to annoy Haku.

Gaara finally raised his chopsticks to his mouth, muttering, “Itadakimasu...” and still kept his gaze down.

‘Seriously...I can't understand what's with them today.’ Haku was still frustrated.

“Hey, where did Anko-sensei go off to?” Naruto asked only because his bowl was empty, “Did she eat breakfast already?”

Tsunami turned to him, “Your sensei left with my father early this morning to help him buy supplies...and something about finding dango. They'll be back later. She really is a very nice lady!”

Gaara scoffed at the word 'nice.' Anko didn't seem so nice as much as she did clinically insane. She was more inclined to forge onward into dangerous territory than most instructors. Oh yes, and they would have to fix Jiraiya's peeping problem, because he wasn't sure how much longer they could last under Anko's guidance.

Naruto took a bite of egg and Haku watched as the white, pointy incisors came down in full efficiency, ‘Since when do I watch people eat? Since when do I watch Naruto eat? Do I want to make myself sick?’

Gaara gave a half-hearted glance of concern to Haku, who seemed to be silently retching across the table from him, 'I'm not even going to ask.'

Naruto however was a bit concerned, “Whoa, Haku-kun, are you alright? You need something to drink?” Haku's struggle seemed to slow a bit, “Are you choking?” Naruto pointed a finger at Gaara next to him, “Gaara-kun can use CPR so I know you'll be okay!”

Gaara gave a heated glare to Naruto.

Curiously enough he had learned how to perform CPR, but he wasn't keen to use it right now!

“You shouldn't assume such things.” Gaara said curtly, taking a slurp of ramen and making Naruto feel slightly flustered. After a moment Haku stilled and seemed to be breathing regularly.

'You never know...' Naruto thought to himself.

The dark haired boy's shoulders were slumped; his knuckles were white as he gripped his tea cup fiercely. Naruto and Gaara kept eating, warily. 'Haku-kun looks like he's gonna explode.'

Tsunami was still humming.

“How can you be so normal about it?” Haku finally snapped, quite loudly. His friends paused in their munching and looked at him quizzically. Abruptly, Tsunami's humming stopped.

Finally.

“Normal about what?” Gaara said coolly, thinking if Haku was troubled that the shit was about to hit the fan.

“About that nukenin! Zabuza!” Haku hissed, lowering his voice so Tsunami wouldn't be subjected to their petty ninja affairs, “How can you be so relaxed? He's still out there! Looking for-” He paused, noticing Tsunami's wandering ear.
“You need to chill out Haku-kun,” Naruto said quietly, “The no-eyebrow clown, yeah, we know he's around here somewhere. But you can't freak out in front of his family. I mean, we're still on a mission!”

“But-!”

“No.” Gaara interrupted, “You're only nervous because he has a thorough knowledge of your abilities, which is understandable.” He paused, “But you must stay in control of your emotions. We can't afford to have you distracted if things take a bad turn.”

Tsunami's gaze was suspiciously focused on the window above the sink where she was still washing cooking utensils.

“We can't talk about this here,” Naruto finished the rice ball he had been eating with one swift chomp, “Hey, why don't we go out and train for a while? Just to calm our nerves?”

Haku nodded and was starting to visibly relax, “I agree.”

Haku and Naruto rose from their seats but Gaara didn't move, “Not yet.”

“Why?” Haku didn't want to sound indignant but it was difficult. Even Naruto was clearly abashed that Gaara could somehow stomp and spit on his good ideas.

The redhead gave an almost imperceptible shrug, “You haven't eaten anything Haku-kun.”

Naruto's offence evaporated, 'He has a point!'

Haku took his seat again, a grateful smile on his face, “Alright.”

They left shortly after collecting their weapons. It was warm outside and the three genin seemed slightly nervous thanks to Haku's earlier rant, but it was too beautiful a day not to relax.

They settled for an empty beach beyond one of the docks nearby the house. There was a breeze coming off of the bay. It was high tide, Haku also noticed.

“This is great!” Naruto fell back onto the sand and gazed at the sky above. It was the same color as his eyes. Gaara dropped his gourd which fell to the ground with no perceptible sound and he kneeled down beside the blonde, running his hand over the beach sand.

It was different than the grains native to Suna and he noted that he would be one of the few people who could tell them apart at all. It was cooler, by far. Water washing in and out over it constantly gave it a different texture, less smooth than the fine, wind-blown sand of his homeland. Even the smell was unique: here it was the ocean, and it was nice, but in Suna it was the open sky and that was best smell there was. To him at least.

Gaara sat silently, creating amorphous shapes with the grains while Naruto rambled on about something to Haku, who was watching the calm water rush off and onto shore.

“Hey Haku-kun, how does that crazy Mist guy know you anyway?” Naruto couldn't help but wonder. This question was also on Gaara's mind.

Haku half turned to them, still standing near the water's edge, “Well I...I guess there's a story I have to tell you then.”

Naruto sat up, listening as intently as Gaara was.
“When I was young I lived with my parents on a farm. We were happy, I guess. Things were simple,” He looked away from them, “It was early spring. There was still snow on the ground when I discovered the Hyoton.”

“How?” Naruto prompted, “You were like five, right? How could you use it if you were so little?”

“I don't know. It just happened. One day I could do these things,” Haku said quietly, “My mother knew because she had it as well. She was once part of a clan. When my father found out he thought we were monsters...” The dark haired boy glanced back at them, “He killed her first. I watched him do it, and I...couldn't stop him. When he came after me I just...”

Gaara and Naruto were silent.

“I don't know how I did it really, but once they were dead I knew I couldn't stay.”

“Where did you go?” Gaara asked. His voice was low, somewhat angry.

“Nowhere,” He said simply, “It was freezing, I remember. There was a bridge outside of town and that's where I saw him.”

“And the guy saw you but he didn't do anything?” Naruto prompted, up to speed.

“No. He left. I'm not surprised, it wouldn't be in his character to care about another human being,” Haku's voice was particularly icy, “But after that I met Hiroshi and then-”

“Us!” Naruto finished and nodded to himself as if that explained everything. Sadly it did.

“Odd how he can still recall you if you really held no interest to him...” Gaara speculated.

“Yes, I'm not so sure about that myself,” Haku mumbled, turning back to stare at the water, “I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. It was just painful to talk about.”

“No sweat, we're even now!” Naruto soothed, “You know how me and Gaara-kun are super-cool jinchuriki,” Gaara rolled his eyes, “And we know about...well, your mom and dad.”

Haku nodded, not quite sure what to say. So he said nothing, following his better judgment, and walked out onto the water, focusing his chakra to his feet without really thinking about it.

“He's sad,” Naruto said quietly, “I wish there was something we could do to, you know, get his mind off of it.”

“There's nothing we can do now.” Gaara answered, sand drifting dreamily around him in circles.

“Feh!” Naruto stood, brushing himself off. He was aggravated that Haku, one of the most emotionally stable people he knew, was still unable to come to terms with his past. Not that he blamed him. It wasn't everyday a missing nin shows up and tells you that there are others like you somewhere out there.

Something occurred to Naruto as he watched sand drift around the redhead in slow, calculating coils and he frowned, “Let's train! I'm bored.”

Gaara looked up at him impassively, not very interested. Haku most often tested his defenses, and when it came to sparring against Naruto, the boy usually made such a raucous Gaara would purposely end the fight just to not have to listen to his jabbering.
He also knew that wasn’t very fair, but it bothered his conscience little.

The blonde couldn't help but be spiteful. There was sand everywhere! It was an open invitation and apparently Gaara wasn't taking him seriously.

“Get up off your ass you bastard, we should really work on your taijutsu,” Naruto smirked, seeing the redhead scowl, “I mean all you do is stand around and let your sand protect you. But I'm pretty sure one day you'll run into someone who can get past that shield of yours...”

“unlikely.”

“Well, it'd still be useful,” Naruto went on, “What? You’re too lazy to improve your speed and stamina? Now that I think about it you are kind of clumsy.”

“Have you looked in a mirror recently?”

“Hey! At least I can throw a punch!” Naruto barked, flexing a muscle, “Which is more than you can say!”

The sand hovering around Gaara dropped down; that was the last straw. He didn't have to prove anything to anyone, most especially Naruto. Gaara stood, almost mechanically and gave Naruto his attention.

The blonde was pleased, 'I guess that got him!'

In truth, Naruto had never actually seen Gaara fight in close-quarters combat. Ever. So it was an understatement to say he was completely shocked as the red haired boy shifted into a textbook-perfect offensive stance and beckoned him to come at him with a flat-palmed hand.

The nerve.

The absolute nerve.

Naruto balled his fists and leaped, not sure how to attack Gaara because it was astounding to see that sand didn’t race up to shield him once Gaara caught Naruto’s punch, and forced him back with a flick of his wrist. Still, the sun-bleached grains quivered beneath Gaara’s feet as he restrained it with chakra, yearning to come to his aid.

“Okay! Good! You're not totally pathetic,” Naruto had only said it to provoke him, and was successful, “No cheating with sand, got it?”

Gaara said nothing and only lunged forward. Naruto was taken aback by his burst of speed. Leaning back, he avoided a jab that was quickly followed by an uppercut, grazing his left shoulder. Naruto let Gaara drive him back; his feet skidding in the sand, grit and shells were sent flying.

It was odd but surprisingly well-matched. Dodge a swipe at the face, 'That would've hurt you bastard!' Throw a few punches, block a few, Naruto wasn’t trying hard and it was a mistake. Wham. Gaara smirked, picture-perfect hit on the solar plexus and Naruto stumbled backwards, grinning maniacally, 'When did Gaara get this quick?'

His stomach nerves were screaming but Naruto moved faster, forcing chakra into his feet for speed as Haku had once suggested. Naruto’s first two blows connected with Gaara’s shoulder and rib cage, the third he blocked, 'Darn! Improvise!' Naruto smirked as he followed through with his punch and predictably Gaara caught it. He cursed himself as he was nailed by a brutal roundhouse kick in the side.
He tumbled down, sand around him writhing and swept Naruto's legs out from under him. The blonde made a yelping noise and righted himself on outstretched hands. Gaara regained his footing and continued with another volley of punches.

'He isn't as fast as Haku-kun, but he's way stronger...’ Naruto could already feel himself begin to bruise, 'Maybe Ero-sensei can give us some formal training or something. This is awesome!' Two hours later they were seated on the beach, sweaty and bruised and out of breath. Naruto sported a black eye that made him resemble his sparring partner somewhat. Gaara wouldn't admit it, but Naruto had the upper hand. He was more experienced, better with improvisation and hit hard consistently. He was sure he had beaten the blonde well enough to get his point across.

He could throw a punch. He just chose not to.

Was that a problem?

Haku all the while had been absently utilizing his Kekkei Genkai while his friends fought. Water had been sent streaking through the air, creating dozens of shapes and a number of different variations of clones. For a half hour he had been fiddling with one shape in particular.

He had formed a simple rectangular sheet of ice with a very generous amount of chakra. He had been compressing the surface, making it smoother, flatter, and thinner as his teammates' battle cries rang out over the beach. He was surprised no one had stopped by to investigate them yet, but appreciated the privacy all the same.

'I'll give it a bit more chakra.' He estimated, forcing it into his basic ice-sculpture and began to refine it; purifying it of sand, salt and minerals. It couldn't have been more than a quarter of an inch thick when the once bluish, translucent ice became glass-like and reflected the sun's light brilliantly.

'A mirror.'

It was perfect: a sheet of ice in the summer. Maybe he'd use a bit less chakra next time...

Haku observed himself in his creation. It was magnificent. He felt it too, as if his chakra control was truly balanced as he gazed into it, wondering what the resonance could mean, 'It would be useful for distracting enemies and quite possibly a good-

“What are you doing, Haku-kun!”

Haku leapt in surprise. He felt his stomach fly up into where he thought his brain should be and his chakra fluctuated drastically. He was startled and he felt some part of him being compressed as he fell forward, expecting to slam into the mirror but he seemed to...melt into it.

Naruto watched as Haku dove into the mirror and disappeared.

“Eh?” Naruto, horrified, fell backwards, abandoning any chakra control that his feet had on the water's surface and crashed into the salty waves. Seagulls screamed in laughter overhead.

The blonde forced his head above water, gulping air, “W-what the hell just happened?” He stared at the mirror hanging suspended in the air. Haku had been there a second ago and just vanished from sight.

Naruto gaped as Haku's image shown perfectly clear in the mirror, as if he were still standing in
front of it, *This is one retarded jutsu or a magic trick...*

“Naruto-kun?” Haku was speaking, or was it the mirror?

Naruto’s brain was beginning to hurt as he treaded the deep water. Even more puzzling was that Haku emerged from the ice mirror, stepping out of it casually and back onto the surface of the water where Naruto stared at him in wonderment.

“How’d you do that?”

Haku was mystified. He hadn't exactly tried to walk into a mirror before: that sounded like some ridiculous carnival trick. But this was real. When he felt it, it wasn't like ice to him at all. It was water, allowing him passage and once he was inside, it was a wide plain, where he had a large view of his surroundings from a separate dimension. Even if it appeared outwardly thin and impenetrable it was almost like walking into a room. *How* he did it was another matter.

“I don’t know...”

Confused, wet and annoyed, Naruto regained his chakra control and trudged back to shore with his clothes sopping wet. Gaara watched from the beach as Naruto returned and Haku moved into the mirror again inquisitively, wanting to investigate, “Well that's new.”

Naruto was grumbling to himself as his feet reached the sand again, and he wasted no time in tugging his saturated, orange jacket over his head and tossing it at Gaara, who snickered at him when he missed by a few feet, 'Damn...the wind's blowing the opposite way.'

His tee stuck to his chest with a smacking noise as he clawed at it, still muttering ill-naturedly.

Next time he'd make sure he’d warn Haku that he was visiting when he wanted to investigate his progress, *Jeez, he's paranoid. I wish I wasn't always on the receiving end of his panic-attacks.*

“Haku-kun's new ability looks interesting.” Gaara mused, not hiding his smirk.

“Yeah? Well, you wouldn't think that if you were the one who went out there to check on him.” Naruto snapped, reduced to his dark-green boxers, “Haku-kun is way too jumpy.” The blonde sprawled out on the warm sand, ignoring Gaara's mirth at his lack of clothing.

After watching Haku experiment with his new Kekkei Genkai ability for nearly an hour, Naruto and Gaara were beginning to bore. The redhead had suggested that they continue to pass time sparring, but Naruto loudly objected due to his partial nudity and the wounding of what was left of his fragile pride.

So they sat and gazed out onto the water. The thin strips of cloud above that were far too emaciated to provide any real sun cover, *Heh, maybe Gaara-kun will finally get a tan...'*

For a good while Haku had been darting between now two ice mirrors, which Gaara supposed had consumed a good amount of chakra to create. Every moment he increased his speed until he was an indistinct flash.

“Haku-kun's ice doohickeys are pretty cool, but they don't look very useful.” Naruto commented dryly and Gaara grunted. Maybe it was a noise of agreement but it came out indifferent.

The Kyuubi container had been building a blob that was first intended to be a sand castle on top of his stomach, covering the majority of his seal. Small splinters of driftwood acted as tiny flagpoles and gates, with pearly fragments of seashell placed haphazardly for windows, *The color kinda reminds me of Hinata-chan's eyes...'*
“Hey, Gaara-kun?”

“...hm?”

“What do ya suppose Hinata-chan is doing right now?”

Gaara blinked. He knew his friend to often have sporadic thoughts, but this was unusual even for Naruto, “Can't say...”

“Really?”

The redhead gave Naruto a look of slight incredulity, ”Well, like any upstanding kunoichi such as herself she'd be with her team actively participating in missions in service to Konoha...” Naruto stared dreamily at his sand-blob, “Use your imagination.”

“By upstanding kunoichi do you mean Sakura-chan as well?”

“Drop it.” His voice was snippish.

“Ha! Okay.”

They hadn't noticed Haku had finished with his Hyoton creations until he stood in front of them looking very relaxed. His smile was a good sign; maybe he had improved his mood?

“Done, Haku-kun?” Naruto was destructing his doomed castle, but saved a few of the nicer shells.

“Nearly.”

The dark haired boy glanced at Naruto's clothes, still a bit wet even after laying in the bright sun for forty-five minutes straight. They were placed in an ordered line: jacket, shirt, holsters, pants, but he was still wearing his forehead protector out of habit.

With little effort Haku raised his hand and with a short dose of chakra and extracted the last of the saltwater for his friend. Just to show off he compiled it into a hovering, transparent sphere.

“You could've done that earlier,” Gaara pointed out blandly, “I'd rather he keep his shirt on.”

It was his first opportunity to throw one of Naruto’s comments back at him.

Haku nodded, grinning openly as Naruto scowled at the redhead for pitting his own joke against him.

Around noon they returned to their lodging. As expected Anko and Tazuna had also come back from their early-morning shopping trip and were seated at the kitchen table which was decorated with a fair selection of seafood.

“Back so soon huh, boys?” Anko smirked. It appeared as though she and their client had already begun eating, “I figured you would've taken longer, so we started lunch without you.”

“How kind.” Haku said softly. Tazuna raised an eyebrow while Naruto and Gaara snickered.

“Come in and sit down boys,” Tsunami appeared to be preparing dinner already, “There's plenty left!”

“Where is Inari?” Gaara asked, supposing the boy was sulking.
“He and I already ate,” Tsunami answered, “I think he's upstairs playing.”

The genin sat down and Naruto was first to help himself, “Thanks! This looks great!”

Haku's eyes wandered to a framed picture on the wall. In it he saw a younger Inari with his mother and grandfather beside him smiling, and above them a piece of the photograph had been torn away, leaving the top right corner frayed.

“Excuse me,” Haku couldn't help his curiosity, “That picture there, it seems that a part of it has been torn out.”

Tazuna paused in his chewing and furrowed his brow, drawing attention to himself.

After a short silence he spoke nostalgically, “The person taken from the picture is Kaiza, Inari's father.”

Tsunami also paused in her supper preparations, “My husband...” Haku looked slightly alarmed that he had touched such a delicate subject.

“It's alright,” Tazuna rasped, and took a sip of tea, “That man was once a hero here.”

“A hero?” Naruto's eyes widened in interest.

The old man nodded, preparing to narrate a story, “Yes. He brought the meaning of courage back to our village a few years ago, before he died.”

“Hey, I see you're awake,” A cheerful voice helped Inari get a grip on consciousness, “How are you feeling?”

“Hm?”

The young boy sat up and rubbed his eyes. There was a man in front of him. Earlier, he felt his heart tear out of his chest after those rotten boys had taken his young puppy and thrown it into the lagoon to drown. But he was certain he was dead too as he, an eight-year-old with no swimming experience, was pushed in after the puppy.

Somehow Pochi figured out how to swim in a mere thirty seconds and paddled along to shore. After a few minutes of flailing, Inari was still about to drown as the guilty kids ran off to let him die, his terrified screams unheard.

Or so he thought.

“You saved me?” Inari asked, needing to confirm it.

“Yeah,” The tall man smiled, “But first eat,” He gestured to two skewered fish cooking over an open fire, “Then we can talk about it.”

The fish were tasty.

“I had a talk with those boys,” Kaiza assured him, “They won't be causing you trouble anymore.”

“I just wish I knew where Pochi went...” Inari mumbled solemnly.

Kaiza scratched his chin, “Hmm, in the country where I come from dogs are very loyal to their
masters…” He paused, “Though you did kind of abandon him first you know.”

“I wanted to save Pochi, really,” The boy protested weakly, “But I…I couldn’t do it.”

“Hey! You have to be strong! If you care about something, protect it! With both arms!” Kaiza displayed his own scarred arms, “You should never hesitate to put your life on the line for the things dear to you.”

“Well, I guess so…” Inari agreed, a small smile dawning on his round face.

Kaiza ruffled the boy's hair, “Now that's the spirit!”

“Aafter that, the two were inseparable,” Tazuna stared down at his sushi, “Inari never knew his real father so Kaiza became a father figure for him...and a part of our family.”

“Why was he a hero?” Naruto prompted.

“If we don’t get this gate closed the entire lower district will be flooded!” A man cried despondently to his companions as their ponchos flapped wildly in the wind.

A fierce storm had rained down on the village for days on end, overwhelming the levees and flooding many of the waterways. A group of people were huddled together in a tight group, staring down the embankment as the rising water level threatened the survival of their village.

“If we can get this rope secured around one of the gate posts, we can pull it closed from here!” One suggested, voice straining against the screaming wind and rain.

“You're crazy! Someone would have to swim out there to do it!”

There was a silence among them as they stood in the howling wind. It was a fool's errand.

“I'll do it!” Kaiza volunteered. All heads turned back to face him as he removed his hat, appearing surprisingly calm.

Kaiza was a well-respected man in the community, known for his solid beliefs and courageous heart. A man handed him a rope without a word, unwilling to protest his generous offer. Kaiza took it and moved ahead, preparing himself for the shock of cold water that he was about to leap into.

“Dad don't go!” Inari yowled, knocking people aside and clinging to his father's soaked shirt.

Kaiza smiled down at him, “It's alright Inari. This village is important! It's our home. Remember, if you care about something you must protect it, right?”

He sniffled pathetically for a moment, but then raised his eyes, “…w-with both arms…”

“That's my boy!” Kaiza was elated by his reply and patted his head affectionately, “I'll be right back! No worries!”

Before Inari could protest again his father dove into the water.

“He saved the village that day,” Tazuna said quietly, “He was a hero.”

“Brave.” Anko offered a word before sipping her tea.
“What happened to him?” Haku asked. Behind them Tsunami began to chop onions more ferociously.

“Gato arrived a short time later and took control of our village,” The old man continued, “Kaiza resisted him even after several warnings and threats from his thugs. One day Gato took it too far...”

The genin wore questioning looks. They hadn't touched their food.

“He was murdered: killed in front of the entire village as a warning to not interfere,” Tazuna's voice was a low growl and Tsunami restrained a sob, “He was beaten and tied up for believing in freedom and killed for Gato's own selfish gain...killed in front of Inari.”

“Coward.” Anko supplied another word, this time describing the shipping magnate.

“The village's courage died with him and Inari has never been the same since,” Tazuna finished, “The only way I can truly avenge Kaiza is to build this bridge and restore hope to the Land of Waves.”

It was quiet for a while.

“We'll make sure you finish that bridge, old man.” Naruto vowed.

For the remainder of the day Haku insisted that they train. He worked in quiet solitude out on the water and refined his new ability while Gaara and Naruto continued their clumsy rounds of close-quarters combat.

They each contemplated the death of Kaiza. It was painful to think that a family suffered nearly as much as they had, and it was difficult to admit that the outcome of their mission looked bleak with Momochi Zabuza looming in the future.

Dinner was more cheerful, mostly revolving around a series of jokes both Naruto and Anko had been telling. Inari, as always, was silent and moody, and they made it a point not to touch on the subject as to why.

As he often did, Gaara retired to sleep first, followed shortly by a yawning Haku. Naruto, though battered from Gaara's fierce strikes due to their training, was not as tired as he should've been and lingered.

It was a clear night.

The air was thin and the breeze carried a salty smell. Naruto preferred the familiar rustic, leafy scent of Konoha. He slipped outside barefoot. Naruto stood on the cool hardwood deck and stared with unblinking eyes at the ocean of stars dotting the black sky.

He turned after sensing a faint presence nearby. Inari sat silently with his hat tipped over his bowed head and his short legs dangling off the side of the porch. Without much thought, Naruto padded over to the young boy and took a seat next to him.

Inari refused to look up, too stubborn to acknowledge his presence. He didn't like being ignored. With a light-hearted seriousness, Naruto removed the younger boy's hat in one swift motion, which left him amusingly startled, and replaced it on his own head.

‘Aw, it's too small...’ The Kyuubi container mused to himself. Inari snatched his hat back with an
air of annoyance and tugged it back on, “Quit it, will ya? This is my favorite hat.”

“It's kinda ugly,” Naruto droned disinterestedly, still staring upwards and Inari scowled at him, “Go inside. You'll catch a cold of you stay out here you know.”

“I don't care.”

“Your gramps will care,” Inari didn't respond, “And your mom too.”

“Just shut up okay? I don't need some weirdo who thinks he's a ninja to tell me what to do!” Apparently it hadn't been very hard for Naruto to get his attention.

With the thick silence that ensued, Naruto lowered his eyes to the lazy waves crashing in slow-motion ahead of them. The young boy was tense and angry and it was radiating off of him. Naruto could feel it. How could someone that small give off so much resentment? One might think he would’ve spontaneously combusted by now.

“I heard about what happened to your dad.” Naruto said without looking at Inari.

The young boy's back stiffened and he didn't answer.

“You have it rough here and you're unhappy,” Naruto went on when Inari didn't protest, “But that doesn't mean you give up and let things stay like this.”

“You don't know what you're talking about.”

“Yeah, I think I do!” The blonde bit back mildly, “So you think you're miserable? Then would you know what it's like to not even have a father to look up to? Or have your fellow villagers look at you like you're some kind of monster? I don't think so.”

There was a long silence before he began again.

“When I was little I had nothing. No family, no friends, and people turned their backs on me wherever I went,” Naruto's voice was low, “I met Haku-kun and Gaara-kun and they...they knew what it was like to have nothing; to have no one to depend on. We grew up together wanting to become ninja because the only way we could be respected is if we proved ourselves first...and life shouldn't have to be that way.”

Inari was finally looking at him.

“No matter how bad it gets that doesn't mean you surrender. You have to try harder every time you fall down,” He continued to watch the waves, “I'll be the strongest shinobi in my village, the Hokage, and then everyone will see me. And you...” He gave a serious look to the young boy, “You've got to stand up for yourself and for your village, because we can't fight Gato for you. Even if you die, you'll die fighting for what you believe in. That's the only way I'll ever let myself die.”

“But it won't make a difference. We'll all still be stuck here until he kills us all,” Inari's voice shook, “He has us trapped here...”

“Stop being such a baby about it! What would your dad say?” Naruto snapped, “Sometimes you've gotta fight for your freedom. As long as you don't let him, that's the one thing that Gato guy can never take away from you!”

“My freedom?”
“Yeah! Believe it!” The blonde nodded, “It's okay to be scared, but that doesn't mean you run away from your problems. I bet your dad never did that did he?"

“No, but...I just don't see what good I'll do. I'm just a kid and Gato's got a whole army!”

Inari looked taken aback when Naruto pulled out a kunai and held it out to him, wearing a convincing grin. With a quivering hand Inari reached out and took it from him, gingerly grasping the cool, metal ring.

“Haku-kun once told me that it's not the weapon, but the force and spirit behind it that does the most damage,” Naruto recalled a small bit of philosophy, “Of course, that was after I kicked his butt during training...” He smirked to himself.

Inari nodded, taking the words to heart and then stared at the knife in his hand for a long moment, “Right! Um...” He wore a quizzical look, “W-what do I do with this?”

Naruto shrugged then yawned, “Just practice with it. Try throwing it at Gaara-kun and see what happens.” Inari looked floored as the blonde grinned mischievously, “Now come on, let's get some sleep! It's freakin freezing out here!”

“Sir, we're a few days behind schedule but we can still finish laying the support beams by the end of tomorrow if the weather keeps up,” A man wearing a blue helmet gave his report to Tazuna, who scratched his beard in thought.

“Good. Keep the pace up and we'll take a break for lunch in a few hours.”

“Yes. Um, sir?”

“What now”

“Er, well it's just a rumor but...is there really a ninja trying to sabotage this bridge?”

Tazuna looked away from the paper he had been reading and gave a stern look to the young worker, “You can go home now if you want. I won't stop you,” Tazuna looked back down at his paper, “But I'm not leaving. Come hell, high-water, or assassin, I'll die here if I must.”

The worker gave him a shaky nod before stumbling back to his duty. Tazuna heaved a sigh. He didn't blame his staff for being nervous. Ninja were all-around bad news if they weren't on your side, but he couldn't afford to have his laborers abandon their posts now.

Besides, he still had his faithful body guards nearby.

They seemed more inclined to chat rather than act as surveillance apparently.

“So then Haku-kun just jumps right into his mirror thingy and disappears!” Naruto was retelling the tale of how Haku uncovered his new Kekkei Genkai ability the day before, “Can you believe it, Anko-sensei?”

She nodded, “Um, yeah. Naruto, are you sure you didn't hit your head or something last night?”

“Positive! I wasn't dreaming, really! Haku did get into that mirror. I saw him do it!”

Anko nodded again while Naruto did his best to convince her it was not a figment of his imagination. Haku said nothing, not really wanting to expose his new ability so early on, ‘I thought I could at least keep it a secret until we got back home...Why must Naruto-kun always talk
“I’m just curious about something...” Anko had to ask, “Does Gaara sleep in often?”

They had left the redhead behind after he had failed to wake up at the designated time. Naruto wisely suggested that they let him get his sleep because waking him too early could result in loss of one’s life and or limb.

“He’ll catch up when he’s ready.” Haku said simply.

Anko shrugged.

“Idiots.”

Gaara disliked being left behind. He slung his gourd onto his back and burst out the bedroom door with an audible bang. His heavy footfalls alerted Tsunami to his presence before his scowling face appeared in the doorway.

“Good morning, Gaara-kun. How did you sleep?” She was awfully cheerful and it made him even more irritable.

“There’s a missing nin after Tazuna and they leave me behind? What logic possessed them? Fools...’ Gaara glared at the clock hanging on the wall above Tsunami’s head and she was clearly unnerved by his icy stare.

“Where are they?” He deadpanned. He didn’t mean to frighten her, but he was too grumpy to be polite at that point.

“Um, your teammates and my father left for the bridge nearly a half-hour ago,” She answered, desperately trying to compose herself, “Would you like some breakfast-?”

He was already out the door.

Mist rolled in over the bay, gradually enveloping the bridge from bottom to top. The poor visibility discouraged a good number of the workers who had hoped for clear skies. It didn't take very long before Anko and the two present genin grew suspicious. It had been a perfectly clear day and the newly formed haze was sure to make their mission to protect the bridge builder more difficult.

Haku reacted the most strongly of the three waiting shinobi, sensing the unnatural, minuscule elements of chakra interwoven with the water vapor more quickly than even Anko had. He was more attuned to this development, and his voice held a tangible edge of controlled terror, “He's here.”

There were sudden cries from a few unfortunate workers who had disappeared into the fog and beyond their sight. Unseen, a ninja killed them slowly, letting Tazuna’s guards relish the pained screams, just to make his job interesting.

The hair on the back of Naruto’s neck was on end, and he felt his hand grasp a kunai from his leg holster, wondering why they had left Gaara behind.

Gaara hadn’t gotten very far. He was passing through a wooded area not far from Tazuna’s home when he noticed something out of place. He detached his chakra-glued feet from the tree branch he had been balanced on, and leapt back to the ground.
The forest floor was littered with countless types of colorful plants that Gaara was certain Haku could name with ease and an explanation if he were there; but between a nettle of glossy ferns was a curious object roughly the size of a dog.

It was the smell too, he noticed. It was dead. It had been for a short while.

Bracken-colored and toppled over onto its side was a small wild pig. It was bloodied around the throat and gut.

Now Gaara was certainly no tracker, but from the looks of the bent foliage and the tracks that seemed oddly bipedal all around, the boar appeared to be the victim of a human rather than a natural predator.

Sand scooped the dead animal up a bit and he gave it a closer look, holding his breath because of the unbearable smell. Flies lined up along the gashes, clearly from a blade of sorts.

They were deep lacerations. He stepped away and set it down again, glancing over the two-footed trail that led away from the carcass and in the opposite direction that he had been heading in.

'Sword wounds.' He surmised, 'Someone was bored and felt like killing a pig on the way out here. Pathetic.' If it were him, he would've chosen something more impressive, like a bear or a wolf or something that may have attacked him first and could defend itself.

The question was a person, possibly two or three, wielding a sword was heading South, but to what point and purpose? Immediately his brain supplied an answer: other hit men. They weren’t Zabuza, but they were still armed. If they weren’t looking for Tazuna, then they were looking for the next best thing.

Gaara had vanished in a whirlwind of sand after drawing his conclusion.

“Inari!”

Tsunami poked her head out of the side door. Her son had said he would be busy that morning, of course he’d still have to have breakfast first, she reasoned. Frowning when no answer came, she stepped outside, taking in the fresh air as she made her way down to a nearby dock.

“Inari!” Tsunami called again and he looked up.

He had been fiddling with the kunai that Naruto had bestowed upon him the night before. He put it out of sight as he watched his mother come up to him. He was considerate enough to understand she wouldn't appreciate him playing with knives.

The walk wasn't long but she took her time, savoring the breeze. Tsunami paused a few feet away from her son who looked to be lost in thought, “Inari, come inside and get some breakfast.” She watched as he stared at the waves and then nodded to her.

Inari stood up and paused, again drawing her attention, “Um, mom?”

“Yes?”

“Those ninja who went with grandpa, they're...” He searched for a description, “...not so bad.”

“No, in fact they're quite honorable,” She smiled down at him, “I told you they were nice people.” He nodded again, more enthusiastically.
The smile vanished from his face when someone came up from behind his mother and seized her roughly. She restrained herself from yelping because the last thing she wanted was to alarm her son. Her hands flew up to the blade that was level with her throat and she stared at Inari, her eyes screaming at him to flee.

“So this is the bridge builder's family, eh? Not very impressive if you ask me...” Another thug spoke from behind his counterpart. Tsunami struggled, a low, feral growl rising from her throat as the second thug closed in on Inari.

“Let her go!” Inari howled, immediately brandishing his knife, and his mother's eyes widened. She looked slightly grateful for the gesture.

His mother's captor chuckled at him, “You little runt! Put that away before you hurt yourself.”

“I'm warning you! Let my mom go!”

“No Inari! Go find your grandpa and tell him what's happening! I'll be alright, just run!” The metal nipped at the exposed skin of her neck and she fell silent; indignation was clear on her face.

Inari felt his knees shake as he took a few short steps and was intercepted by the second smirking hit man, “Where are you going kiddo? Your mommy's in a spot of trouble right now, you know.”

He didn't think when he hurled the kunai, missing his mother by inches and felt his breath hitch in surprise when it sunk into the thigh of her captor. Tsunami took advantage of the distraction to bite his forearm, and plunged her elbow into his gut, leaping away when he loosened his grip.

She threw her arms around her son protectively, glaring like a wildcat. The two thugs were clearly taken aback. Inari watched them; shaking, suddenly wishing he had another kunai so he could continue to fight.

The man with the sword extracted the kunai and tossed it aside with a clatter, “You'll pay for that kid!” Now they both had swords drawn and he briefly wondered how their luck could be so bad so early in the day.

The fluid movement of the sand impacted the hit men, knocking their heads together and creating a stylish, simultaneous knockout. Gaara appeared shortly after, looming over the two unconscious figures, wearing a bored sort of expression.

There was hope for breakfast yet.

“Are you alright?” It was partially rhetorical, but the red haired boy did his best to put some compassion into the words. It worked. Just a teeny bit. He was getting better at it.

Tsunami nodded, not hiding her relieved grin, “Yes! Thank you Gaara-kun! But you should hurry and see if my father and your friends are alright.”

He nodded blankly and then looked down at Inari, “You did well. Though I don't think Naruto should've given you a kunai without showing you how to use it first.” Inari saw his point; he had no idea what to do with the darn thing, so he figured throwing it could be a place to start when there was danger.

“Well, he said I could practice throwing it at you.” The boy admitted, and his mother looked appalled.

“Did he?” Gaara's expression was somewhere between annoyed and amused.
His sand quickly went to work, crushing the two men’s' arms with a sickening crack that made Inari and his mother visibly squeamish. It procured a few pained moans from the thugs but they didn't stir.

“They shouldn't bother you now.”

Inari nodded dumbly as Gaara left and Tsunami, still deeply perturbed, kicked the discarded swords off the edge of the dock and into the churning water. Inari slowly bent down, picking up the kunai that he had used, silently thanking Naruto and his friends.

“This looks bad.” Tazuna's voice was gruff as Naruto, Haku and Anko formed a circle around him, tense and wielding either kunai or senbon.

“Hey, Haku-kun, could you get rid of some of this mist maybe?” Naruto suggested quietly, noting his full control over all kinds of water.

Haku said nothing and with a small blast of chakra, the water molecules that had formed a thick haze all around them bent to his will and flew apart. The air was clear once again and Naruto would've sighed in relief if there hadn't been six water clones of the nukenin surrounding them with swords raised.

Two of the water clones each received a flawlessly aimed senbon to the eyes, destroying them instantly. Tazuna looked around wildly, wondering how it could happen so fast. Haku stood in front of him and Naruto leapt out at the water clones seconds after Anko had.

It was more chaotic without Gaara, Naruto realized while dodging a deadly sword swipe. The redhead could have destroyed all of the water clones at once with his sand. It also put more pressure on Haku, who was currently defending the bridge builder, a duty clearly not well suited for someone without a sand shield.

There was a shout and Naruto’s head whipped around as Haku was propelled backwards by the dull edge of Zabuza's blade. He watched as the black haired boy crumpled to the ground, trying to regain his breath. This left quite the dilemma, as Anko was too busy tangling with another water clone ensnared by her shadow snakes.

“Back off, bastard!” The words left the blonde's mouth before he could stop himself, and the Mist shinobi turned, abandoning Haku and targeting the bridge builder.

Naruto quickly formed two shadow clones and leapt. Tazuna stood motionless, helpless without Haku. The clones reached him first, each grabbing one of Zabuza's arms in an effort to restrain him, “Weaklings.” The clones howled as they were thrown off and destroyed and the nukenin turned again to the old man, eyes crazed.

Tazuna looked on in shock as the blade stopped short of him and Zabuza's eyes narrowed, glowering down at the short ninja who had gotten in his way.

Naruto wore a triumphant grin. His considerably smaller kunai fending off against the looming zanbato, which had made a clean, shallow slice from his left shoulder and proceeded down his chest until the kunai prohibited any more leverage.

“Hey, old man...just go already.” Naruto ground out through clenched teeth while glaring at Zabuza, “Haku-kun won't let anything happen to you.”

Remarkably, the bridge builder stumbled back towards the other young genin nearby, still staring as Naruto's shoulders shook from the strain of deflecting the huge sword. Zabuza didn't seem
impressed with the boy's strength.

“Naruto! Get over here-!” Anko's order was cut off as the water clone she was preoccupied with nearly landed a fatal blow.

Blood dripped slowly off of his orange jacket. “That old man, he has...a lot of important things to do,” Naruto spat as the nukenin withdrew his stained blade, “I'm not gonna let you kill him because I'm going to be Hokage! And that means I can't let assholes like you run around and do whatever you want!”

“Naruto-kun!” Haku stood in front of Tazuna, throwing senbon which bounced pathetically off of the missing nin's zanbato.

“You can't be Hokage if you're dead.” Zabuza said simply, raising his sword over his head and swung downward again.

Gaara's sand swarmed around the blade before moving on to crush Zabuza, who promptly leapt back to avoid it. Naruto grinned as his red haired friend appeared next to him, arms crossed, with his usual scowl plastered on his face. It was safe enough, so the blonde kneeled down to rest, his arm putting pressure on his gaping wound.

“Gaara, you've gotta stop sleeping in.”

“Shut up.”

His sand collected around Naruto and Tazuna in wait, and somewhere behind them there was a pleased whoop as Anko finished off the last of the pesky water clones. The real Zabuza didn't give any indication that Gaara's arrival made a difference.

“How bad is it?”

Naruto looked up at Gaara, frowning, “How should I know, bastard? It's bleeding a lot so I'd say it can't be good huh?”

“I would've liked to have cut you in two, boy,” Zabuza sneered, “This won't take much longer.”

Haku had somehow gotten behind him, senbon out, and had hit a few of the nukenin's pressure points before he rounded on the genin with a snarl.

Anko was beside Tazuna, and before she could protest, Haku continued to drive the Mist ninja back, “Suiton: Water Dragon Blast!”

A current rose up from the side of the bridge and plunged down, just barely missing Zabuza as he avoided the strike. Haku couldn't exactly pinpoint where his aggression was coming from, but he didn't have much time to think about it.

'This person cares for no one but himself.' He threw many more senbon, missing any and all vital points and it seemed Zabuza was entertained, dancing around Haku's frenzied attacks as if he were playing a child's game.

'Now is my chance!' Haku did his best to clear his head and quickly formed hand seals he had memorized the day before. The water that had drenched half of the bridge was at Zabuza's feet. It didn't take much chakra to mold the once amorphous water into sheets of ice.

Haku, being the Academy-proclaimed genius that he was, wouldn't have dreamed of using such
an underdeveloped ability without a plan. His chakra permitted the creation of eight mirrors, seven encircling the Mist shinobi and one positioned above the rest.

He quickly re-examined the strategy he had developed in his head from the night before (more like thinking feverishly instead of sleeping to devise some feasible plan) while he ran at Zabuza, who still stood at the center of the ring of mirrors, not in the least threatened.

Anko stared, mouth agape, but caught herself after a moment and smirked, 'I guess Naruto really didn't hit his head...'

Naruto and Gaara were impressed by the memorable feat; however it was uncertain whether Haku's new technique would work.

Haku dove into the nearest mirror, and Zabuza’s reaction was almost quizzical. A calculating glare quickly returned to his face.

Haku was admittedly frustrated as he prepared to throw a flurry of senbon at the missing nin once he began to laugh. Even an enemy should be cautious of such a unique skill, but Zabuza was clearly the exception.

“You're not like those other Hyoton ninja,” The nukenin said after ending his deranged chortling, “It seems you have discovered something they haven't, although you may never see their techniques for yourself either,” He paused, “You’re going to need to do better than this.”

“Kick his ass Haku!” Naruto barked, fed up with the arrogant Mist ninja.

He didn't need to be told twice.

Haku dove in and out of the mirrors, just shy of light-speed, while launching round after round of senbon. Zabuza could clearly not evade all of the projectiles, and there were grunts of pain as a number of the needles lined the back of his neck as Haku aimed for critical points.

Though the speed of his movements was downright near impossible to follow, Haku felt his chakra wane just to keep the mirrors levitating, let alone to stay in shape. And it seemed that Zabuza had noticed an error in Haku's assaults after only a short time.

Haku was moving so quickly that he had no way to avoid the zanbato that had inexplicably been raised to interfere with his projected path. He dodged away to his right, hoping to enter another mirror when he was stopped with a jolt that jarred his bones.

Zabuza had effortlessly caught Haku by the scruff of his gi, similar in appearance to a helpless kitten. Still wild with adrenalin, the dark haired boy twisted around and plunged the remainder of his senbon into the nukenin's arm, striking a few weak points.

He expected to be thrown aside, or maybe even beheaded, but Haku couldn't force down the rising apprehension in his stomach as the zanbato came around in full swing, smashing each mirror he had created as if they were made from the most flimsy of glass.

The young ninja began to struggle as the rough hand closed around the back of his neck, poised to snap it with the least bit of effort. Although the thought did cross his mind where that strange chakra he was sensing was coming from...

Haku's peripheral vision detected the flash of visible, red chakra that collided with the back of Zabuza's head and sent him and the nukenin crashing to the ground. Haku regained his feet, wondering how Naruto had gotten so strong, or why he wasn't resting when he was suffering from such a large wound.
Except...there was no wound, he noticed upon further inspection. Blood was indeed splattered all over his orange jumpsuit, but the gash that was once hemorrhaging a few minutes before was completely gone.

And then it occurred to him, *This is...the Kyuubi’s chakra isn’t it?* It was odd, he thought, how he hadn't noticed Naruto's feral appearance sooner. Haku was suddenly wondering what the outcome of the battle would be as Naruto continued on ahead and Zabuza found his footing again, and could only fend off the blonde's enormous strength with his zanbato.

Anko felt a chill drip down her spine; she hadn't expected Naruto to be able to tap into the demon's chakra, *Was his seal broken somehow? And what about—?*

She glanced over at Gaara, who looked appropriately enraged, but nothing in the way relating to the Shukaku's chakra exploding out of him. Somehow she was able to relax a bit.

Anko stood close to Tazuna, wielding two kunai. Naruto landed another Kyuubi-powered punch at Zabuza, clipping the nukenin's head again and sending him back a considerable distance.

Haku was dizzy, apparently suffering from a major loss of chakra. He still had his senbon out, although from the look of it he only had a few more to spare. What was for certain was that he was no longer in fighting condition. Surely Gaara and Naruto would pull up the slack.

It looked like Naruto was coming back to his senses (human ones at least), as he stumbled around the nukenin who continued to swing his zanbato ruthlessly. He had made another water clone too, which Haku spotted in dread as it came up from behind Naruto but was promptly crushed by Gaara's sand.

Naruto finally leapt back after another dozen of his shadow clones were demolished, letting Gaara try his luck against the missing nin. The redhead and his sand paused abruptly as Zabuza turned with a snarl, directing his attention to the opposite end of the unfinished bridge.

*’Short attention span maybe?’* Naruto pondered before realizing that Zabuza had lost all incentive to fight, just because there was someone watching them a short distance away, *’Wait a minute...’*

There was a balding, short man on the far side of the bridge, smirking as he watched the young Leaf genin try to overpower Zabuza. Behind him stood a large crowd of hired thugs and bandits that were also amused by the ninja battle. They had only just arrived and the Mist shinobi wasn't pleased by their presence in the slightest.

“I told you no distractions,” Zabuza said gruffly, near authoritatively, “I'm working.”

“That may be so,” Gato sneered, less fearful of the nukenin when he had a mob of thugs behind him, “But you've exhausted my patience, Zabuza. You aren't reliable. Your services are no longer required.”

Naruto stood beside Haku, wearing a dumbfounded look, “That little wind bag is Gato? You've gotta be kidding me!”

Gato's smirk widened as Zabuza lowered his zanbato, eyes again calculating, “I see you've found your interesting prospect, but I'm afraid we'll have to cut this short. To be fair before we kill you we'll peel the kid's face off and let you keep it as a...” He snorted, “...token of my appreciation!”

Zabuza wasn't affected by the shipping magnate's double-cross. In fact, he had been counting on it. His eyes shifted to Haku who was nearest and then to Gaara and Naruto a short distance away.
“Kid,” He was speaking at Haku, “Looks like the old man's off the hook, since I'm not getting paid...”

Naruto's eyes narrowed, 'Greedy bastard!'

“Here’s a chance to prove yourself,” Haku looked alarmed and it only made Zabuza smirk beneath the bandages concealing his face, “A true possessor of the Hyoton can easily eliminate twice this many men.” His full glare rested on Haku and the boy felt even more jumpy, “Now show me.”

“Zabuza, you really are pitiful,” Gato declared and there were numerous shouts of agreement from behind him, “This child, kill us? It seems I was right about you.” He then looked to Anko, “I didn't plan for other shinobi to interfere, but no matter...this land belongs to me now!”

Naruto shifted nervously, wondering how the nukenin could so suddenly become cooperative when he had been trying to kill them all minutes before. Haku stared ahead and thought, 'Should I do it?'

He weighed the circumstances quickly in his head. It wasn't as if he had anything to prove to the treacherous Mist nin, but maybe he should at least try to measure up to his clan's...standards. 'What clan?' His mind supplied dryly, 'But I...I could do it. These people serve Gato, the one person who is responsible for this village's suffering. I can kill them. I should. But I've never...'

While Haku was still deliberating whether he was emotionally ready to kill, no matter how noble the cause, Naruto's panicked shout snapped him back to the physical realm.

“Gaara don't!” The blonde warned, in a futile attempt as sand encircled the crowd at the end of the bridge with astonishing speed. Haku saw the red haired boy's face contorted in an expression of pure hatred, animal-like and his eyes were completely blank.

He ignored Naruto, raising his arms and listening intently as the thugs tensed, raised weapons, and did their best not to become unnerved by such a strange ability. It was odd, Haku thought, that Gaara had nothing to prove, but also nothing to keep him from taking lives. He had done it before.

It was impossible to say what Zabuza was thinking as he watched sand envelope half of the group and implode all at once, leaving the remainder of the thugs to scramble in an effort to avoid the billowing, bloody cloud of death swirling around them. Anko didn't move. Their client had shut his eyes, sickened.

Haku and Naruto shielded their faces as blood rained with the pitter-patter sound that authentic rain would make. His friends stopped calling out to him. If someone had planned to end Gato’s tyranny, at least he would get the job done quickly.

Tazuna turned and saw a crowd of familiar faces behind them.

“Grandpa! We're here to help!” Inari crowed, oblivious to the bloody massacre Gaara was initiating at the moment. There were enthused cries behind the boy from their fellow villagers, and Tazuna felt his heart leap into his throat, witnessing a revolution.

It took a long moment for Naruto's brain to register how quickly Gaara had crushed the second half of the crowd (seeing that there wasn't enough sand to kill them all at once). Ruby drops dotted his face like freckles when it was over and he looked to Haku who had dropped his senbon.

Unfortunately it wasn't over. There was a single survivor that hadn't met his end quite yet. Gato tripped over his own feet, falling to the damp concrete of the bridge, whimpering like a cornered dog. Gaara's face was expressionless and that relieved Haku to a degree.
The villagers, including Inari, looked on with little understanding of what was happening. Sand slowly coiled around the last criminal, who was sobbing uncontrollably and Haku wondered why he suddenly felt pity for someone as despicable as him. Maybe it was because Gaara didn’t mind killing.

“This land belongs to no one,” Gaara’s voice was not his own, “Anyone who tries to conquer others and control them should always expect to fail!” Enlightenment flickered in Gato’s eyes for less than a second, “Sand Burial!”

Zabuza slung his zanbato on his back with a satisfied look.

Who knew there was such a capable killer among them? And one that slept in late that morning too...

Naruto wondered how he prevented himself from vomiting. He didn’t want Gaara to take offense. Or possibly because his body simply had no energy left for such a trivial function. The Mist ninja turned, not bothered.

His glare rested on Haku expectantly, who refused to raise his eyes from the ground.

“You will prove yourself to me...Haku.” The dark haired boy felt his name equivalent to a curse when Zabuza spoke it, “You already know where to find me.”

He disappeared and Haku exhaled a breath he didn’t realize he had been holding.

It was over.

There were crazed cheers from the villagers and Naruto fell to his butt in exhaustion, muttering something about ramen and a nice, long nap. Gaara’s sand slipped back into his gourd, soaked in the blood of his enemies. His face belied some alarm over his actions.

Anko clapped Tazuna on the back cheerfully, before seeing to Gaara, approaching him with the utmost caution. Haku dragged his feet over to Naruto, plopping down beside him and immediately setting to work on examining the blonde.

“Naruto-kun you were injured...weren’t you?” It felt odd that Haku had to confirm it.

The blonde shrugged and then grinned, “I guess it’s that old fox! I saw the no-eyebrow clown grab you and I, well...” He scratched his head, “It gets kinda fuzzy after that...but I felt like a million bucks! All healed up and energized!”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Haku sighed, wiping sweat out of his eyes.

Naruto’s grin widened, sheepishly, “Heh heh, the fox demon may scare the hell out of people...but it sure has its perks!”

Haku managed his first genuine smile of the day.

'Oh, if only Ero-sensei were here!’ Naruto mused.

Inari raced up to his grandfather with a small crossbow he had borrowed from a neighbor, “Hey grandpa! Are you okay?”

The old man looked down at him and nodded, still trying to recover from all that had transpired. He was alive and in one piece thanks to the Leaf ninja. There was finally hope for his village now that they were free of Gato. The bridge’s construction would continue.
“You brought most of the village with you I see,” Tazuna chuckled, patting his head, “Good thinking.”

“We were worried about you guys,” Inari smiled at Naruto nearby who was wobbling to his feet, “I guess you could handle things without us though...”

“I can’t say I’m surprised that Zabuza ran off like that, he’s still a wanted criminal,” Anko pointed out to the bridge builder, “I think you can relax though. Clearly that freak has no interest in you anymore.”

“I’m glad,” Tazuna sighed heavily before turning to Gaara, who seemed unsociable at the present time, “I must thank you and your friends. You’re responsible for avenging Kaiza and restoring hope to our village,” Haku and Naruto grinned at the praise and Gaara remained quiet, “Is there any way we can repay you?”

'Not in the way of money...' Anko thought blandly.

Naruto beamed, “Well, you see we are a bit hungry...”

The bridge was completed in roughly two days and Team 2 were the first to cross it back to the mainland. Tazuna, Tsunami, Inari and a good portion of the village had come to see them off.

“Take care on your journey back.” Tazuna said, looking much happier than he had a few days earlier.

“Quit worrying about us you old coot. You just make sure you get a ton of business through these parts and fix this place up, alright?” Anko grinned, finding that the mission was a total success and that the genin were responsible for it.

“We will, thanks to you.” Tsunami was smiling widely, like her son who stood in front of her.

Gaara and Haku were eager to return home, but Naruto still had one last question on his mind, “Uh, hey...what are you guys gonna call this bridge?”

Inari looked at him for a moment and then laughed, “Well, I thought we’d call it the Great Naruto Bridge!”

Haku looked a bit flustered, “What about Gaara-kun and I? Don't we receive credit for all our toils?” Gaara didn't seem very much bothered about it.

The boy shrugged, “You get credit, but we can't give it too many names! I'm sure you understand.”

“Yeah, my name sounds cooler anyway!” Naruto nodded, pleased with Inari's decision.

The next day the team had arrived back in Konoha: dirty, hungry and downright exhausted. Anko congratulated them and was ready to turn in the mission report.

“You maggots did well for your first C-rank. Actually, you pretty much crushed it considering you’re still amateurs,” She found it difficult to call Gaara an amateur after witnessing his capabilities on the battlefield, “But I'm sure you understand that I'd rather not wait around for your master, on behalf of my sanity.”

“Yeah, we do,” Naruto agreed, scratching the side of his head, “You were way better than him
anyway if you ask me...”

“The Legendary Three are not to be underestimated Naruto and eventually...” A dark look came over her face, “You'll learn why.”

“Is there anything we can do for you before you go, Anko-sensei?” Haku would be polite until the very end.

Anko looked thoughtful, “Well, I'd have you buy me all the dango you could afford, but sadly, I have a mission debriefing to give the Hokage. Later boys!”

She stalked down the street, her overcoat swaying slowly in the light breeze. Naruto slipped the bag off of his shoulders and stretched his arms over his head, with a yawn loud enough to wake the dead.

Gaara stood next to them silently. He had scarcely said a word on the return journey, not that he usually had much to say at all. The mission had altered his behavior and hopefully it was only a temporary side-effect.

“Let’s ditch this crap back at home and then get something to EAT!” Naruto decided loudly, grabbing his bag and taking off without an answer. Haku scurried after him, begging him to slow down before his feet were eroded away to nothing. Gaara followed a fair distance behind them with only half a mind.

At noon, Team 2 was bathed and redressed, settling down at Ichiraku Ramen for lunch, when a familiar, aged face trudged up the sidewalk looking utterly defeated.

“Ah, Ero-sensei! They let you out of jail already? Anko-sensei was way cooler!” Naruto smirked, and watched as the toad hermit dejectedly took a seat between Gaara and Haku.

“I was never in jail, I got booked at headquarters.” Jiraiya muttered, “But it would've been preferable...”

Naruto chuckled maniacally, “Ooh, someone's moody!”

The statement captured Gaara's attention, “Preferable?”

Jiraiya nodded and Ayame came by with Naruto, Haku and Gaara's orders. She looked at the sennin curiously, “Would you like something Gama-sennin?”

“I'll take whatever you got, I don't care.” He mumbled.

She nodded and returned to the back of the kitchen. Haku felt a small amount of worry for the sennin, wondering what had made him so miserable, “What's wrong sensei?”

“What's wrong? What's wrong? It's terrible I tell you! Hokage-sama was too harsh on me this time! Oh! The complete humiliation...” The sennin wailed, burying his face in his hands.

Gaara frowned, “Now you're being dramatic.”

Naruto nodded while slurping his beef ramen, “Yeah, Gaara-kun's right. Pull yourself together you pansy!” Haku chuckled but muffled himself with a sip of ginseng tea.

Jiraiya frowned, “It was one tiny slip up and now my life is in total disarray! Jail is more merciful than these conditions!”
“You stay out of prison on what conditions? What did you get?” Haku prompted, knowing they were quickly losing interest.

“Just probation really...but it's horrible! My publisher postponed my book! Four months!” His students cringed, wondering how he would cope, “Community service is also gonna eat up all my time! It's cruel...”

“Maybe if you weren't such a lecher you wouldn't have these problems.” Gaara pointed out, and his friends nodded solemnly.

Ayame returned with a bowl of noodles and Jiraiya selected a pair of chopsticks from a dispenser half-heartedly after thanking her.

“Yeah, well, enough of your problems! We had to fight a friggin jounin for the past three days!” Naruto barked, finishing his ramen.

Jiraiya raised his eyebrows, “What are you talking about?”

“While you were gone, Anko-sensei believed we were ready for a C-rank mission, so Hokage-sama obliged us,” Haku clarified, “But it proved to be much more dangerous than that. Our client was targeted by Mist shinobi and-”

“Yeah, yeah, so what about this jounin?” The sage went straight to the point.

Haku explained the story from start to finish; from the Demon Brothers, to the Hyoton, to the climactic battle on the bridge with Momochi Zabuza.

Naruto would occasionally add in a detail or two while Gaara listened as he ate. Jiraiya listened quietly and narrowed his eyes during some of the more dangerous parts. When Haku had finished narrating, the sennin spoke.

“I don't think I should have to tell you this Haku, but make sure you watch your back from here on out,” Jiraiya advised after a big slurp of noodles, “That nukenin Zabuza is one of Seven Shinobi Swordsmen of Mist, in other words, bad news for anyone associated with them. It seems he's only interested in you because of your Hyoton.”

“But why Haku-kun? I mean, he knew about other people from his clan, so why just Haku?” Naruto wondered.

The sennin thought about it, “I can't say for sure, there could be many reasons. Possibly because Haku is young and, no offense kid, can still be easily manipulated,” Haku didn't mind, “Or because this clan, er, Haku's clan, is not very sociable in the ways of a shinobi these days. The war had a heavy toll on the great clans of the Water Country so they aren't exactly what you'd call ninja-friendly.”

“I'm glad for that,” Haku said quietly, “They...well, I don't want what's left of my family to be involved in these things, even if I'll never get to meet them.”

Naruto patted his back soothingly and Gaara offered him a sympathetic look.

Jiraiya sighed, feeling the boy's pain and then turned to the blonde, “Oh and Naruto, it's upsetting to hear that not once have you summoned anything during that mission. What were you waiting for? An invitation?”

Naruto had begun work on his fourth bowl, “Oh...well, not really,” He chuckled, “I guess it never really crossed my mind. Next mission, I promise! I'll call a few toads...but they aren't very good
fighters anyway...”

“Oh yeah?” Jiraiya was defensive, “Well maybe if you practiced more often you'd actually do something worthwhile with your summoning! Honor that contract I gave you!”

“Why do you care so much old man?” Naruto snorted, just to test his patience, but was also curious.

Jiraiya was about to snap out an answer, but thought better of it, "Just...practice, will you?"

Naruto nodded, “Sure, just chill out Ero-sensei. You make it sound like I've never gotten around to summoning Gamabunta or something...”

Gaara and Haku smirked at Jiraiya's stunned face.

After composing himself, the sennin managed to ask with some aplomb, “So...you have summoned the toad boss after all! How did he take to you the first time?"

Naruto shrugged, “Eh...he only tried to kill me. It wasn't so bad.”

“What was the outcome of your mission today?”

Hinata looked up with an expression similar to a deer being caught in the headlights. She sat quietly next to her sister and across from her father at a small, mahogany table, sipping tea with her head bowed. The shy girl had been desperately hoping her father wouldn't pay her any attention at all, but how could he not after the Hyuga clan heir had returned from her first C-rank mission?

She swallowed, “It was a success, father.”

Hanabi raised an eyebrow imperceptibly, trying to disguise her astonishment as interest. Her elder sister was well known for her absurdly gentle ways and many of her D-rank missions had poor results that only, 'tarnished the Hyuga name.'

Hiashi said nothing else and Hinata had trouble telling if he actually cared what had transpired during her mission, so long as it was a success. It was a fact that stung her deeply.

She had been training extensively ever since she had achieved genin rank, hoping that in some insane way her father would be proud of her. However it slowly began to dawn on her, over the years, that she had made herself a hopeless rival: none other than her cousin, Hyuga Neji. He was beyond compare in skill and she had no hope of diverting her father's attention away from the prodigy unless she somehow became Hokage (highly unlikely, but not impossible, Naruto-kun could give her some pointers), or if she died an honorable death while completing her mission.

If the mission failed, well, her death wouldn't count as much.

But whatever the case, she felt stunted, almost harassed by all of these expectations coming from her father, sister, her clan, and how could one forget? The entire village, who would lose any and all respect for the most powerful clan in Konoha if, heaven forbid, she became the leader of the family.

And somehow she managed to live her life without expressing these hardships to anyone, not even to her friends. It was bottled up, or rather, locked up inside of the deepest confines of her soul because the last thing a respectful member of the Hyuga family would do is complain.
She never complained because she rarely found her voice. When she did, it was quiet and polite. It made her want to scream, but that would be contradictory. Maybe Gaara-kun could help her learn how to be sarcastic and mean. Naruto-kun was also very vocal so he could help.

Though the outlook for that didn't look good.

'I'll find my own way to make my life worthwhile. I can still be strong...somehow...'

"Onee-san," Hinata snapped out of her thoughts, "You haven't said anything about your teammates. They say they're both young men from our fellow clans. What are they like?"

Hiashi didn't appear interested and sipped his tea, while Hanabi watched her sister expectantly, wanting the dirt on any up-and-coming talent among the shinobi clans of Konoha. Hinata swallowed again, collecting her thoughts.

"My teammates they...they are both quite strong," Her father took another sip of jasmine tea, listening with some eerie sort of detachment, "Shino-kun is of the Aburame clan..."

"You mean those people who use insects to do their bidding?" Hanabi looked slightly disgusted, "A real ninja wouldn't need such tiny creatures to fight for them! Real ninja stand on their own two feet."

"But Shino-kun does fight on his own," She protested weakly, "He uses his Kikaichu insects most often for collecting information and for disabling his opponents." Hinata raised her eyes, "I think it is very impressive."

Hanabi ignored the retort, "What about the other? The Hatake?"

Hiashi paused briefly while pouring himself some more tea.

Hinata tried to grasp the words to form a description of him, "He is...unique. Sato-kun has a remarkable talent for traps and Genjutsu. I have seen his chakra circulatory system with my Byakugan a few times during training and his chakra is...quite different than anything I've ever seen."

"It is the white chakra of the Hatake clan," Hiashi clarified simply and she bowed her head sheepishly at her lack of knowledge, "He, I assume, is the Copy Ninja's nephew. They possess an unusual white chakra that can be channeled through certain weapons."

Hanabi looked intrigued, but Hinata wasn't very keen on exposing the secrets of her teammates' families. Looking into her empty tea cup for a brief moment she wished she could escape somehow but then sat up straighter, brushing her thoughts aside.

"Father, may I be excused?"

He inclined his head slightly in what she took as an affirmative, before standing up, and silently exited the tea room. It was amazing how restless her own family made her feel, and there were times she yearned for another family that would only expect her best rather than perfection during her career as a shinobi...or even in general.

She stepped lightly in the hall, passing by a few of her indirect relatives; some cousins a few times removed, and gave them a small, shy word of greeting before moving on. Hinata glanced outside an open door and saw the sun was sinking beneath the horizon in an explosion of orange and pink.

It made her smile unconsciously and she kept walking, wondering when Naruto, Gaara and Haku
would return from their mission. A small chirping noise caught her attention once she turned a corner and she looked around to see if a bird had strayed inside the compound again.

Hinata saw nothing but the soft chirping persisted, and she was grateful the hall was empty because she looked like a damn fool turning in all directions searching for the sound's origin. Absently she looked down at the hardwood floor beneath her bare feet and her eyes widened when a tiny string of color lined up beside the wall, red and yellow.

She knelt down, perplexed and awed all at once. Tiny, colorful toads had somehow infiltrated the Hyuga compound, chirping blithely with those cute, beady eyes. Immediately fearing for their lives if they stayed any longer out in the open, she followed the trail down the hall, gently lifting each minute creature and cradling them in the palm of her hand while they sang carelessly.

The final toad, a bright, lemon yellow was scooped into her palm and she sighed in relief that she hadn't been caught by any other residents. Much to her surprise, she had reached her destination. In fact, it was suspicious that the little critters had lined up and lead her down the path straight to the door of her own bedroom.

Hinata opened the door quickly and went inside, shutting it behind her while her whole hand was chirping. Her room was quiet. She had activated the Byakugan just to make sure no more of the darn little things had strayed into her room and could quite possibly become victims of her own foot.

“Hey, Hinata-chan, what took you so long?”

Startled, she looked up, making sure not to drop any of her precious cargo. On her windowsill sat Naruto, looking very pleased with himself. 'I didn't leave that window open.' Hinata thought to herself before acknowledging that he was a ninja and that infiltration was a common ability.

“I...j-just came back from a mission, Naruto-kun.” She answered quietly, setting the small, autumn-colored toads down and watched them hop across her bed like splashes of magic paint.

For a long moment he balanced on the pane outside her window, looking thoughtful. She feared, irrationally however, that he could possibly fall and break his neck, “Please come in, Naruto-kun.”

“Don't mind if I do!” He bounced inside, grinning.

It wasn't the first time he had snuck into the Hyuga estate. He actually had been doing it regularly for several years, but this was the first time he had ever laid bait for someone who lived there...namely Hyuga Hinata. She sat cautiously on the side of her bed and admired the red and yellow dots scampering across it.

Naruto raised an eyebrow at her, “Er, I'm just curious Hinata-chan, but why did you bring all those little guys with you?”

She blushed, answering honestly, “Well, I think they're sweet and I didn't want anyone to step on them...”

He laughed loudly and she feared he'd alert someone of the main house, or even worse, her father to his presence. There was no reaction so she relaxed. The blonde took a seat on the floor, carpeted, because she disliked cold floors and fiddled with a medical scroll that had been forgotten there. She frowned. She'd have to clean her room even though it was already anal-retentively well-kept.

“Hinata-chan they can't get hurt, they're summoned!” His grin widened, “You worry too much!”
And just like that, Naruto had the tiny, chirping, spots of color disappear in many small puffs of smoke. Her heart fluttered, wondering if he intentionally wanted to make it feel romantic or if she was being ridiculous once again because of his close proximity. She'd analyze it later.

“Yes, I was being silly I suppose...” She admitted, wishing he had left them, “But, um...your mission!” Her voice squeaked and he chuckled at her, “How did you and Gaara-kun and Haku-kun do? Was it successful?” Hinata paused, not liking how she sounded like her father, “I mean, what happened?”

He stood up, ”See, that's why I came here. Let's get some ramen and I'll tell you how awesome it was!”

In a few hours her father would be expecting her at dinner and she still hadn't finished reading a scroll pertaining to advanced forms of healing jutsu that Haku had given her for her birthday. But that smile and those eyes...

“I'd like that Naruto-kun.” She smiled back, also standing and followed him out the window, asking him how he had gotten those adorable toads into the mansion.

Maybe her father wouldn't notice she was missing.
Dysfunctional

Chapter Soundtrack: “81 Summer” by Uyama Hiroto

“You three will be training without me this morning,” Jiraiya muttered, lighting his pipe, “And most likely the morning after that...and the one after that and so on.”

“How long does your probation last, sensei?” Haku was the only one of the genin present to offer sympathy to their instructor that morning, and he shot an irritated look to both Naruto and Gaara who stood next to him, looking half-asleep.

“I already told you, four months...quit rubbing it in...” The toad hermit took a drag, depression written all over his face.

“Yeah, well, you have fun Ero-sensei, we'll be seeing you.” Naruto turned and wandered away down the sidewalk. Gaara followed suit.

Jiraiya snorted as his less enthusiastic students walked off, yawning and grumbling. He looked down at Haku who stood silently in front of him waiting to be properly dismissed.

“Get going Haku, and make sure they actually do something productive today.” The sennin sighed as the dark haired boy nodded obediently.

“Is there anything I can do for you sensei?”

Haku's unfailing politeness was beginning to get on his nerves, but Jiraiya decided it was better than listening to Naruto whine, or Gaara not say anything.

“Not unless you can convince Hokage-sama to get me off the hook,” Haku looked sheepish and Jiraiya smiled, “Just go kid. I'll tough it out.”

Haku nodded again looking a bit torn and followed after the rest of Team 2.

With a heartfelt sigh, Jiraiya turned on his heal and walked in the opposite direction, wishing he had something a bit stronger to smoke.

Something in his gut told him this day would be odd.

The first piece of evidence supporting Jiraiya's prediction appeared when Naruto, Haku and Gaara arrived at the fourth training ground, only to find that it was already occupied. Apparently another team had gotten there first.

He wondered what Haku and Gaara's reactions had been to the intrusion, so he glanced over to them to check. Haku was smiling beside him, predictably. It seemed as if he already knew who had taken over their field and he didn't look the least bit upset. Gaara was silent and folded his arms mechanically. Unlike Haku, he seemed slightly more irritated; but then again, Gaara was always irritated by something.

“Hey!” Still, Naruto was dismayed by the intrusion, “We were early today! Who got here before us?!”

A black haired woman turned to him, frowning, “We did. These training areas are for all Leaf shinobi to use, I am sure you are aware.”
He was intimidated enough to fail to come up with one of his smart-ass retorts. Thankfully, he didn't have to, because two familiar faces appeared from behind the formidable young woman.

“N-Naruto-kun?”

The blonde brightened considerably. The shy Hyuga girl gave him a questioning look and beside her stood Shino, who was gently holding a small Kikai insect up to his face, murmuring orders to it.

“Hinata-chan, what are you doing here? I thought you and your team would practice somewhere...” Naruto looked around at the beaten, sparsely grass-covered ground and battered training posts that screamed abuse, “Somewhere...nicer.”

Gaara snorted from behind his blonde friend. He'd be impressed if there was any place nice to train in Konoha. Shinobi tended to be destructive, at least, from his point of view.

“Our usual location is under construction,” Kurenai said matter-of-factly, “Homes are being built there for citizens of Konoha. I'm sure you'll forgive us for imposing on your space.”

“Certainly.” Haku fell silent as his teammates gave him warning looks. Not as if sharing a spot of land with Hinata and her team would be a terribly bad thing, but they'd rather not expose their techniques to other ninja. Furthermore, this vulnerability would be exploited by Shino and Sato beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Hinata was trustworthy enough for them to relax.

'Then again,’ Naruto viewed it from a different perspective, 'We'd be watching them fight too! So I guess this is a good thing for both of us...unless that red-eyed lady kicks us off our own field!'

It was quiet for a long moment. Kurenai's ruby stare was fixed on Naruto who tolerated it. Both teams stood facing each other, getting absolutely nothing done.

'Did they come here just to stand around?’ Haku pondered as Shino had finished briefing his insect servants and looked up at them impassively.

“What exactly are you doing here?” Gaara's question was directed at Shino, though it was meant for the entirety of Team 8.

“Waiting.” Shino's response was terse and disapproving, which reminded Gaara much of his own voice, he noted in wonderment.

Kurenai frowned again. Her eyes narrowed, but her gaze was still inconspicuously set on Naruto, who was still oblivious to his being watched. Haku was the first to speak up about the missing individual.

“Does Sato-kun usually keep you waiting this long?” The dark haired boy asked and watched curiously as both Shino and Kurenai's brows furrowed in annoyance.

“Oh right! He's on your team now!” Naruto remembered, quite vocally.

“This is about the average amount of time,” The jounin muttered darkly, “Every minute he is late adds to the amount of discipline he will be rewarded with.”

“Rewarded?” Gaara pressed the subject further.

“Hinata and I attack him and he is restricted from defending himself.” Shino explained. Hinata
cringed a little. It wasn't a punishment she liked engaging in.

“Harsh...” Naruto folded his arms behind his head casually, “But he probably deserves it, wherever he is...”

Hinata and Haku gave him a look of slight disapproval before silently agreeing with his reasoning.

“The only issue is that Sato does not learn from his mistakes,” Kurenai’s tone was icy, “He does not understand that his lateness only grants him pain. It is his most flawed characteristic as a shinobi.”

Shino nodded in agreement.

“I think Sato-kun is a wonderful shinobi.” Hinata's protest was soft, “Even if he d-does need some improvement...”

“Sure he is,” Naruto shrugged, “He's kinda like us I guess,” He gestured to his teammates who didn't bother to disagree, “We're not perfect, but we still kick ass!”

Kurenai raised a fine eyebrow at him.

Haku began to feel the pressure of Jiraiya's request of 'actually doing something productive,' and noted how not much was getting done so far.

“We can go find another place to train then, it's the least we can do,” Haku offered, looking to his teammates who once again, didn't care either way, “Consider this your new training ground.”

“Thank you, Haku,” Kurenai brandished a small smile, “You certainly do have more manners than your sensei.” Her students gave her confused looks, but Haku and his teammates understood.

“We try.” Gaara muttered, nodding to them before walking away. Haku gave the other team a short farewell before also moving to leave.

He turned back to the Kyuubi container, “Naruto-kun, aren't you coming?”

The blonde shook his head, “Not yet. I'll catch up with you guys later.”

Haku nodded before turning to find another suitable training area with Gaara. Naruto was seemingly still hung up on their previous subject.

“So uh, where does he go every morning anyway?”

“We're not quite sure,” Hinata admitted, “Sato-kun is...difficult to track. If we knew where he was, we'd go find him ourselves.”

“It's not right for him to just keep you all waiting. I mean, even Gaara-kun sleeps in, but not this late...” Haku's gentlemanly-ways were beginning to rub off on him, Naruto suspected, “I'll go find him for you and then you can beat the snot out of him!”

“If you find him.” Shino pointed out.

“Naruto, it isn't as if we're asking you to take time out of your training with your team.” Kurenai added, wondering if he'd be swayed from his offer.

“Hey, if I'm going to be Hokage I can't let bums like him hold people up all the time,” Naruto smiled, “No sweat! I'll get him for you!”
“Where the hell is he?”

At first it hadn't seemed like such a difficult task: locating a strange, slothful, pocky-loving ninja and dragging him back to his team for a well-deserved beating. In his days at the Academy, Naruto had only known Sato as that type of person.

Now he wasn't so sure. Was he being evasive deliberately? Or was he simply that difficult to track? It was only a quarter past eight in the morning and Naruto was sure that Sato's interests didn't extend far beyond sweets, photo-worthy events and causing mischief.

Therefore he had searched many of the sweet shops around town, places that were related to media and photography, the Ninja Academy, hell...he had even checked around the girl's locker rooms, only to be chased off the premises violently.

After so many failures in such a short span of time he had deemed this errand ridiculous and even considered giving up.

But he had so nobly volunteered to find the bastard and even brought his vow of becoming Hokage into the matter...and what would Hinata-chan say if he let her down?

'She'd probably just say I did my best and that she doesn't mind.' His mind supplied wryly, 'But the point is I won't be doing my best! That's inexcusable! How can I become Hokage if I can't track some stupid guy down?' He frowned to himself, 'But if I keep looking, I'll be at this all day...'

He took a moment to consider his options from his perch on top of a high flagpole in the center of the village. After a few minutes of thought, he decided to continue on, but from a different approach.

'So...he's not at any of the places where he's supposed to be...' Naruto felt like Haku on a scavenger-hunt (i.e. unstoppable), 'If I was slacking off where would I be?'

His brain instantly supplied an answer.

The correct answer.

“‘This should be the place...’” Naruto passed by an old weaponry forge and looked up at the small apartment building to the left of it. The place was fairly new, he supposed, but smaller than the building he, Gaara and Haku lived in.

The blonde decided to scale the building, rather than marching inside and promptly being thrown out by its residents. He moved quietly, watchfully, not wanting to overlook his target. 'Doesn't he live on the third floor? Second maybe?'

Cautiously, he peeked inside windows, looking for anything that resembled a ninja's abode. He did see one with a number of kunai strewn all over the floor, and went inside through the unlocked window.

“Is this it?” He asked himself uncertainly. Something was out of place. After a quick look around he realized that no one was home, and more importantly, it was a kunoichi's apartment. He noticed the feminine clothes lying around.

He left in a hurry, trying not to leave any evidence of his presence.

A few windows down he was finally successful. Grinning, he positioned himself on the ledge
outside said window, trying to get a better look inside of the place, “Well, that took long enough!”

In the apartment his assumption had been proven correct as a bleary-eyed, barely-conscious ninja in red boxers stumbled around yawning, trying to prepare himself for the day. The silver hair was unmistakable.

*What a lazy ass! He's been sleeping all this time!*

Sato slowly entered a cramped bathroom and brushed his teeth, totally unaware of his being watched. Naruto rolled his eyes in boredom from his vantage point as the door closed and he heard the sound of a shower being turned on, as well as the loud, out of tune whistling that followed thereafter.

*This is gonna take forever...*

Approximately three minutes and forty-eight seconds later the water stopped running and the door opened abruptly. *That was fast...awah-* Naruto wasn't quite prepared for the nudity that met his eyes and he fell back from his perch, falling several feet and landed painfully on another rooftop on his back, *Ugh my eyes! That guy is such a retard!*

After recovering from his fall Naruto stood up and brushed himself off, reasserting his sanity. He waited a minute or two before returning to his roost. By that time, thankfully, Sato was redressed and Naruto relaxed, but was still irked at the fact that he had been so caught off-guard. The silver haired nin strolled a few paces out of what appeared to be his bedroom and into a tiny kitchen, still whistling a preposterous tune.

It took Naruto a moment to realize he was making coffee, being that Sato's actions were so sporadic and unpredictable that he could have just as easily been playing hopscotch.

*Now I see why he annoys Hinata-chan's team so much...*

Almost normally, Sato poured coffee into a mug waiting on the counter and he didn't bother to fetch anything to fix it with. What caught Naruto off-guard again was when the silver haired ninja seemed to instantly forget about the cup he had poured himself and took a sip from the pot. Shortly afterwards he remembered the mug and finished it off.

*...weirdo...*

Afterwards he stretched his arms high over his head. Sato turned around for the next part of his morning, once again his usual perky old self. Naruto briefly wondered if the reason for his liveliness was his consumption of caffeine.

The silver haired boy bounced over to a cabinet and opened it, revealing organized, stacked boxes of... *Pocky? Is that all he eats?*

Whistling a slightly more bearable tune, Sato placed the box of strawberry flavored pocky into a pouch without shuriken and moved on to a small desk obscured by papers, scrolls, numerous photographs and rolls of film.

Five minutes of arduous deliberation later, Sato selected two rolls of film and also placed them in a pouch reserved for 'not pointy’ things.

“Alright!” He exclaimed and then nodded to himself.

He walked around in a small circle before ending his whistling and moved on, beyond Naruto's line of sight.
What's he doing now? Sheesh, if he was on my team I definitely would have killed him by now...'  

“Naruto?”

The blonde's head snapped left and right and saw only an endless sea of buildings. He was fairly certain he heard someone nearby call his name but one could never be too sure.

“Down here.”

Naruto did look down and on a tiled rooftop adjacent to the building he had been peeking into was another lazy shinobi.

“Oh, it's just you Shikamaru.” He commented pleasantly and then continued his spying.

“Naruto, what are you doing?”

Again, the blonde looked down at the Nara, a frown of concentration plastered to his face.

“I'm trying to figure out what the hell that lazy ass has been doing, so quit distracting me,” He paused, “Uh...what are you doing?”

“Resting.”

Obviously that's what it looked like; laying back leisurely and staring at the passing clouds. Naruto knew better by now.

“Pft, sure...you and Sato, both of you are good-for-nothing bums who lay around and don't bother helping their teams! I can't believe you're a shinobi!”

“...likewise.”

Naruto gave him a well-measured glare before turning back to the window.

“Who'd you say you were looking for?”

“That other lazy idiot, Sato.”

“You mean that guy down there?”

Naruto jumped and looked down at the street below where his target was turning a corner, once again whistling another absurd song, 'How'd he get passed me without me not noticing that heinous noise he's making?'

“Ah! I gotta go!” Naruto leapt onto a clothes line and raced along to another roof, knocking a few helpless garments into the air. Shikamaru only sighed and went back to his vigilant cloud watching.

Sato, en route to joining his team, decided to stop and get some breakfast first. He stepped off an empty street and into a small, dimly lit diner which only had three people inside including the waitress and chef.

As he had done countless times before he settled down at a booth where someone was already seated eating eggs while reading.

“You come in here this early just so no one will see you eat? You're not that ugly you know.”
Sato sat down across from his temporarily de-masked uncle, who didn't bother to look up at him.

“It's not really my insecurities that reduce me to this, Sato-kun,” Kakashi sighed, “I do have to find a place where I can waste three hours reading before going to meet my genin.”

“I see your point. No one else would come into this dump, the food is terrible,” The waitress who was wiping down a nearby table huffed at him and he grinned innocently back at her, “So um, maybe you'll buy some breakfast for your beloved nephew today?”

“No. Last I heard you make your own living as a full shinobi now, am I right?” Kakashi chuckled and then took another bite of egg.

“You of all people should know how little genin make on missions around here!” Sato replied sourly, helping himself to an untouched rice ball on Kakashi's plate and he didn't protest.

Sato finished it in three famished bites and then looked up at a clock above the doorway, “Hm, time-check is...whoa, you've only got twenty minutes left before your precious three-hours-of-doing-nothing is up...better make em' count!”

The young silver haired ninja stood and before leaving turned back to his uncle, “I've gotta go drop off my film now. Oh and...thanks for breakfast.”

“...don't mention it.”

After dropping off his most recent film to be developed and walking out of the pharmacy, Sato paused and glanced over to a livid-looking ninja in orange.

“Hey, Naruto-kun! You're up early!” A fist closed around the collar of the silver haired boy’s shirt.

“Yes, to you, I guess you'd call this early,” Naruto muttered, while dragging him along, “But after all the trouble you put me through this morning I hope Shino kicks the crap out of you...”

“Hey, why are you so mad? Since when do you care how late I am? And what's this about Shino...oh no,” He tried to pull back from Naruto's iron grip and failed fantastically, “Um, you know...Shino's really uptight about me not showing up on time for training and uh...oh look! A monkey!”

The angry blonde didn't bother looking up.

Sato sighed in defeat and walked alongside Naruto casually, which was preferable to being dragged. “Yeah...I guess monkeys don't really live around here do they? Oh well, you caught me...time for my morning beating.”

“Hi everyone! Sorry I slept in late this morning and then Naruto found me and there was this monkey too, so...” Sato ended his excuse, “Um, that's why I'm...late...?”

“I'm sure,” Kurenai sighed, watching as Naruto marched past her straight up to Hinata to earn his praise, “Today you will only be sparring with Hinata.”

“Why just Sunshine?” Sato looked genuinely baffled, “Don't you want Shino to strangle me too, sensei?”

“I have judged from that black eye you are sporting,” Sato pointed questioningly at his left eye where Naruto had promptly punched him after telling a rude joke on the way over, and Kurenai
nodded, “That Naruto has given you enough discipline of that sort for the day. Hinata's Jyukken will be just as effective for taming your morning habits.”

He smiled, “Yes, I agree!”

Shino looked thoroughly disappointed, a feature which Kurenai did not overlook.

She turned to Naruto, who was retelling his capture of the young Hatake, “Naruto, thank you for retrieving our lost lamb. It is no simple task. Why don't you stay and train with us for the day?”

Naruto looked to her thoughtfully, “Hm, I don't know...Gaara-kun and Haku-kun won't survive long without me.”

“Maybe j-just for a little while then?” Hinata's hopeful squeak was nearly inaudible.

After a short moment, he grinned, “Well...okay!”

“I will be your opponent then.” Shino stepped forward and Naruto took a step back.

“Eh...no thank you. I'm kind of only here because-”

“Your reasons are of no concern of mine,” Shino cut him off, “Hinata and Sato have already begun their training.” Naruto glanced over to where Hinata had taken an offensive position and activated her Byakugan, “You will fight me or Kurenai-sensei.”

“Alright, alright! Sheesh. Sato was right...” Naruto pulled a kunai out of his holster and rolled his eyes, “You really are wound up tight, aren't you?”

Kurenai frowned, wondering if Naruto was fully prepared to be the outlet for the young Aburame's impatience. Her concern faded after seeing Naruto spring away from a cloud of Kikai insects and counterattack. Nearby Sato evaded a near-perfect Gentle Fist strike and planted a counter-kick to Hinata's stomach, sending her crashing to the ground.

Kurenai was not the only one who noticed.

“You bastard!”

Sato's right eye also fell victim to Naruto's fist and with a wail of confusion and pain, the silver haired boy fell backwards. He didn't bother to get up for fear of being hit again, “Ugh...what did I do now, Naruto?” He was again genuinely curious, ‘Why does he hate me today?’

“You can't hit Hinata-chan!” Naruto snarled as Sato watched small, shiny orange stars orbit his head. Kurenai only sighed to herself.

Hinata had regained her feet and restrained the flailing 'fist of justice' that was about to reconnect with her dazed teammate, “Naruto-kun, please! It's alright! We were only sparring!”

He looked at her for a long moment, “You were...? Oh.” Naruto then looked at the boy flat on his back at his feet, “Er, sorry about that. I kind of overreacted.”

“Yeah I get it...but just stop hitting me will you? You're freakishly strong.” Sato stood, rubbing his newly-swollen eye.

Hinata offered Naruto the most understanding look she could muster before saying, “I'll let Sato-kun rest and then maybe...you two can train together when he's ready. I will go spar with Shino-kun now, if that's alright?”
Naruto snuck a glance at Shino who was as impatient as ever, but couldn't help but feel somewhat left out. He had noticed that for the last six years he had been Hinata's first choice in most activities, 'I guess it's something I'll have to stop taking for granted now. She's got a new team and new friends...maybe she'll replace me?'

"It's fine." He forced a smile. With a tiny nod she walked over to Shino and Sato chuckled loudly, suddenly aware of what was happening.

Naruto gave him another scowl, "What are you laughing at?"

The silver haired boy smirked, "Oh nothing! It's just that I don't think it's very fair of you to just butt in like that, Naruto-kun. Sunshine is my favorite sparring partner after all..." And as an afterthought, 'Why wouldn't she be? Shino hates my ever-loving guts.'

"Stop calling her that! Her name is Hinata! Hi-na-ta! Got it?" Naruto snapped, trying his best not to hit him again, "Why are you always so familiar with her anyway?"

"We're just close friends. But you know what?" Sato lowered his voice and smiled devilishly, "I think she likes me!"

Naruto gagged at the idea before regaining his composure. He asked with a fairly large amount of hostility, "Who in their right mind would like a person like you?"

"Hmm..." He smirked again, "I would!"

"Team 13?" Gaara asked as he followed Haku down a trail leading to what Haku had claimed to be 'a welcome place for them to train.'

"Yes. You remember, Tenten's team." Haku clarified, smiling to himself.

Gaara frowned. He wasn't in the mood for sharing a training area this morning at all, and where the hell was Naruto? Maybe if his blonde friend was around he'd be able to talk Haku out of this folly and find an unoccupied place.

But no, Haku always had to choose the social route. It bothered Gaara to no end.

And before Gaara could think of another complaint they had stepped out into a clearing that looked as if a violent bomb had gone off: pulverized trees and posts, discarded weaponry and craters everywhere one looked. Initially, Gaara only saw one person; a tall, long-haired boy who at first he failed to recognize, until he turned around to face them with piercing white eyes.

Two other ninja appeared as well; one from the air and the other from a vertical yet, battered-looking log that was a receiving a thorough beating.

"I hope you don't mind if we train with you today," Haku called as they approached, "We've been deprived of our training area."

"Not at all, Haku-kun!" Gaara's ears hurt from a cry that was equal to Naruto's in volume, "Oh! Who is this with you?"

Haku stepped aside to give Lee, Tenten and Neji a better look at the newcomer.

"This is my teammate Gaara and Naruto-kun is not with us at the moment. He may show up eventually..." Haku introduced, "And this is Lee, Tenten, and you already know Neji."
Gaara gave a short nod but was no longer frowning.

“It is a true pleasure to meet one of Haku-kun's dear friends!” Lee had somehow gotten a hold of one of Gaara's hands and shook it enthusiastically, “It would be an honor if I could test myself against one of the geniuses of Konoha!”

Gaara gave him a confused look, “I wouldn't call myself a genius.”

“Ha! So modest!”

Haku sighed as Gaara gave him a fierce glare before being led away to a place where he and Lee could compare their skills. Obviously Lee's first impression of Gaara had been a good one.

And Tenten’s impression, well, she had seen Gaara once before, she had even heard him shout. But that was about it. Her opinion of him so far was somewhat accurate, 'Well, if fierce, artic eyes and crimson hair don't scream badass nothing will…'

Neji's current thoughts were indecipherable and maybe it was for the best.

Haku hadn't mentioned it to Gaara on their way over, that he hadn't exactly chosen Team Gai's training area for its mere convenience. He procured two ninja-tool scrolls from his gi, which he had recently acquired and turned back to Tenten, who was scurrying around the field retrieving her fallen kunai.

“Tenten, I have something for you.” She looked over to Haku incredulously but quickly hid her surprise with a bright smile.

“Really?” Tenten trotted over to him. Her excitement was not well hidden. It had been a while since she had been given a gift of any kind.

He handed her both scrolls and she gave him a look of deep gratitude, “Thanks a lot! I'm pretty sure I know what these are, or I'll find out soon enough...” He smiled at her when she asked, “Where did you get these? These aren't like any weapons scrolls I've seen.”

'I'm glad for that too. If she were wielding weapons this powerful on a regular basis her sensei would have a fit...' Haku didn't feel like admitting he had a talent for stealing high-level scrolls at the moment, “I don't think you should worry about where they're from. You just make sure you use them well.”

Neji, a few feet away, raised an eyebrow at him, guessing that he had obtained them by less-than-legal means. Still he felt no reason to object. If Tenten began utilizing more dangerous weapons during training she'd be more of a challenge to him.

Tenten shrugged and tucked the scrolls away. Nearby there was a shout and they looked over to see Lee running around Gaara in circles, trying to evade the cloud of sand hovering in the air.

Haku chuckled to himself, “I don't know what good taijutsu will do against Gaara-kun. His defense is nearly perfect.”

Neji looked intrigued, “If his defense isn't perfect then that means it can be penetrated,” He wore a small smirk, “Lee's taijutsu may not be able to break through that sand, but mine will.”

Haku took a moment to consider Neji's outstanding abilities and how he would try to defeat Gaara if they ever met in battle. The image in his head was a bit unnerving and he decided that it would be better to not explore the depths of that deadly match.
To Haku's slight dismay, Tenten nodded in agreement, “Neji’s right. Lee focuses his attacks on the exterior, but I don’t think that Gaara will last long after a few blasts of Jyukken, even with all that sand he’s got.”

True, Haku knew well enough that Gentle Fist was one of the worst pains there was in taijutsu. A few strikes to the stomach or heart could easily and painfully end a fight. ‘And closing tenketsu off to manipulate an opponent's chakra seems almost unfair, but then again, I aim for weak points all the time.’

The dark haired boy watched in amusement as Lee leapt off of the sand shield surrounding Gaara in frustration, trying to find a way around his defense. It was then he was reminded of something he had recently developed that pertained to Team 13.

After quickly forming a few short hand seals and murmuring, “Water Gathering Jutsu...” Haku had extracted a fairly large amount of water from the surrounding air, leaving it dry and thin. Both Neji and Tenten who had seen Haku's Kekkei Genkai before watched as the water drifted around him slowly, being held up by only his will and chakra.

“Tenten, there's one more thing I need to show you,” He said, as if preparing for an attack, “You're been an inspiration.”

The kunoichi raised her eyebrows when he crouched down, water circling around him more rapidly. Neji didn't miss the surge of chakra that Haku gave off and even Lee and Gaara had paused in their squabble to have a look at the water manipulator.

“Rising Water Dragons!”

He moved almost too quickly to be seen, as two threads of water, dragon-like in shape twisted to a ridiculous height into the air, past the length Tenten's summoning scrolls could reach. Haku leapt up to the center of the twisting currents. He knew that it would be much easier if there had been a body of water there, rather than him wasting chakra to condense water.

Once he had reached the zenith of the helix, Haku quickly froze the top of the currents into ice, and smirked to himself as vicious shards of ice rained down, of course, away from his audience.

Neji estimated it was an assault he could easily deflect with the Kaiten. Tenten gazed upward wide-eyed, and then frowned to herself, “Now why didn't I think of that? Water is such a better medium!”

Neji gave her a disapproving look to which she quickly added, “I know I don't have some incredibly obnoxious bloodline limit like that, but still...it's cool…”

He shook his head in exasperation, wondering why she would even look beyond her perfectly lethal use of weaponry, especially if a jutsu she favored required a unique Kekkei Genkai.

Not far off Lee was clapping and wooting as Haku had reached the ground again, and the water he had used had all been spent as icicle spears. Gaara merely gave him a favorable look, which Haku equated with the phrase, 'Interesting.'

Of course, Haku wasn't about to get away with his unexpected arrival and his flaunting of abilities; it was something called karma.

“Haku,” The dark haired boy turned as he caught his breath and saw Neji frowning, “Let us see how your skills compare to mine.”

'This can't be good.' Gaara looked on, wondering if Haku would even consider fighting Neji.
Even Lee looked upset, most likely because he had never been much of a challenge to the Hyuga prodigy. Their momentary pause ended and Lee immediately went back to evading Gaara's sand.

Haku took a moment to observe Neji. He wondered what it must have been like for him growing up, after Naruto had lead them on that courageous mission to prevent Neji from being endowed with the seal of the Branch Family. Although Naruto had assured them many times over the years that they had done the right thing and that Neji was grateful to them, Haku couldn't help but suspect that things had not gone as well for him as they had believed.

Tenten frowned, “Neji, I don't think that—”

“It's alright,” Haku interrupted her and then nodded to his opponent, “Let's see how much we have improved.”

“Why not just use Ninjutsu?” Gaara asked, bored as Lee continued to run around him in circles, slicing through wisps of sand with a kunai.

Lee's answer was slightly pained, “I can't!”

For a long, agonizing moment, Gaara continued to watch the green clad ninja run remarkably fast, but not enough to completely break through his sand shield. The redhead folded his arms and huffed, not understanding why his opponent was so stubborn.

“You cannot defeat me with only Taijutsu,” Gaara warned finally, raising a hand to fight back, “I will make you change your strategy.”

The sand that had been lazily drifting around Gaara deflecting blows suddenly came to life, lashing out at Lee. It made no sense; how he refused to fight back without substitution, clones or any type of ninjutsu for that matter. It was enough to make Gaara lose his temper, 'He isn't taking me seriously. He thinks I'm just standing around.'

Lee was barely able to evade the wall of sand that came crashing down, but even with this new prospective danger, it was a thrill. Neji often refused to train with him being that he thought himself to be a superior shinobi. It had taken many assurances from his sensei and Tenten for him to realize that Lee was not at all inferior. It was just that Neji was very selective of his opponents and didn't really see Lee as one.

So day after day, he resorted to battling a badly beaten tree stump or his sensei, sometimes even Tenten would stay late just to offer him a sympathy sparring partner.

'But this is different!' Lee couldn't help but grin to himself as he moved faster, evading Gaara's attacks and frustrating him more, 'I am not fighting Gai-sensei or Tenten. I am fighting a very worthy opponent, someone without prejudice towards me! This fight shall determine if I am truly a splendid ninja!'

It was only in a split-second Lee saw his chance and ducked under an oncoming wave of sand before barreling into the red haired shinobi, startling him. Gaara caught his punch, which to his astonishment, was so incredibly strong that it forced him back a number of feet, bruising his shoulder, 'He wasn't even trying to hit me that hard...'

Gaara recovered from his shock and put a wall of sand between himself and Lee to regroup, wondering why Lee wore a grin similar to Naruto's as he waved back, also preparing another assault.

Finally fed up with this preposterous match, Gaara made his furious sand halt and gave Lee a bothered look, “Why are you only using taijutsu? Tell me now.”
Lee also paused and his smile faded, “Ah, I see...my fighting style discourages you?”

“You aren't...doing anything.”

Lee gave Gaara a nearly offended look before grinning again, “Believe me, I am capable of much more! However my abilities, I am afraid, do not extend beyond taijutsu.”

Suddenly, Gaara understood. As absurd as it sounded at first he realized that Lee was indeed taking him seriously, “You mean you can't use Ninjutsu or Genjutsu...at all?” His voice carried with it an air of disbelief.

Lee sighed, “It is true, comrade, I hold no capability for either. Still I am a fierce contender with my taijutsu and youthful spirit, am I not? After all, I am a genius of hard work!”

Gaara was somewhere between annoyed and sympathetic towards Lee. He couldn't imagine what it would feel like to be a ninja incapable of ninjutsu or genjutsu, it just seemed...so utterly hopeless in his opinion.

'What kind of dreams must he have,' Gaara pondered as Lee went on proclaiming his redeeming qualities, That make him this strong, despite his weaknesses? It is no easy feat to come this far with sheer will power...

“Shall we continue our match Gaara-kun?” Lee inquired, still enthused even after admitting his weakness to an opponent.

Gaara nodded to him and smirked, 'A genius of hard work? He may be right.'

“Thanks for treating us to lunch, Naruto-kun!” Sato was beaming as he sat next to Shino and Hinata at Ichiraku Ramen, waiting on their meal.

Naruto gave him a look of contempt, “I'm only treating Hinata-chan, not you!”

Sato gave him a heartbroken look before shrugging, and then turned to Shino, prompting him with a knock-knock joke. Shino gave no response.

“I'm glad you stayed to train with us this morning, Naruto-kun,” Hinata's smile was shy but cheerful, “But d-don't you think you should be going soon to find Gaara-kun and Haku-kun?”

A thoughtful look came over his face before he answered her, “Well, I want to eat lunch first, then I'll go find them. I'm getting kind of tired of finding people today...”

She giggled softly and Ayame came by with their food, not overlooking the Hyuga girl next to the number one customer of Ichiraku Ramen. Truthfully Naruto had a great time training with Hinata's team. He was so used to Haku's by-the-book suggestions and Gaara just standing still deflecting blows that fighting against new people (although he found Sato and Shino insufferably annoying) was very refreshing.

Hinata herself had even trained with him but refused to use Jyukken. She merely tapped him gently when he had been hit, and he would chuckle at her humbleness when she was obviously 'kicking his butt.' Oddly enough, he had found himself to be less rough around her as well. Naruto was used to slugging Gaara and Haku painfully in the face on a regular basis, but with Hinata it was different.

He was more careful and attentive when fighting her, not hitting her nearly as hard as he would
one of his teammates. Then again, he assumed it was only natural. She was a girl, smaller and less sturdy than many of the male shinobi he had gotten into fights with, and if he was foolish enough to injure her, his head would be presented to Hiashi on a golden platter.

’Now I see why the lazy idiot likes to train with her so much,’ Naruto thought to himself as he slurped down a mouthful of pork ramen, ’Hinata-chan is way strong but she didn’t beat the shit out me. I kinda wish...well...I kinda wish that if it couldn’t be Haku-kun or Gaara-kun, that maybe she'd be on my team.’

Naruto snuck a fond glance at Hinata as he continued his slurping. She was staring down at her bowl with a nostalgic look, slowly nibbling at noodles held with a pristine delicateness by her chopsticks. ’She's treated like a princess by her clan but...she looks so sad all the time. I wish I knew what I could do about it...’

“Naruto!”

The four genin turned to see Jiraiya approaching, wearing one of his more serious expressions.

Naruto didn't look very pleased to see him, but finished his slurping and gave his attention to his perverted teacher anyway.

“Back already, Ero-sensei?” Naruto asked as the sennin stopped in front of him.

“I had to pull some strings to do it,” He replied tiredly, exhausted from his many of hours of backbreaking community service, “I figured I'd find you here, Naruto. Er, where are your teammates?”

Jiraiya gave a puzzled look to Sato when there was a camera flash. The silver haired boy grinned at him innocently and said nothing.

“Gaara-kun and Haku-kun are...they're somewhere training I guess.” Naruto admitted, he himself wondering what sort of place could occupy them for so long.

The sennin nodded, “Good! There's something I actually needed to talk to you about anyway. We can find those other two knuckleheads later.”

“...we need to talk now, Ero-sennin?”

“Yes, now. And stop calling me that,” Jiraiya hissed, not wanting to be insulted in front of genin that were not his students, “Finish up now.”

Naruto gave him a frustrated look, “Alright, fine, but I don’t see what the rush is...” He turned to Team 8, “We definitely have to train together again sometime, and I'll bring Haku-kun and Gaara-kun with me,” Naruto hopped off of his stool and left tab money for himself and Hinata while he gave a foxy grin to the Hyuga heiress, “I'll see you later, Hinata-chan!”

“Goodbye, Naruto-kun...” Her squeak of a response was just barely within his hearing as he turned to follow his instructor, wondering what all the fuss was about.

“What are we doing here, Ero-sensei?” Naruto wasn't very pleased to be lead back to the training area he had spent his entire morning at with Team 8, “Look I just ate sensei, and I'm not really ready for any sparring or stuff like that-”

“I know,” Jiraiya's voice was gruff, “That isn't exactly what I brought you here for kid.”
“Oh?” Naruto raised an eyebrow at his teacher, “Then what are we doing here?”

“Naruto, by now you are aware of the Nine Tailed Fox’s chakra within you, are you not?”

“Well...yeah, I know about it. So do Gaara-kun and Haku-kun.”

The sage nodded with a smile, “Of course they would. But Naruto, now I need you to swear that you will not breathe a word of what I am about to tell you to either Haku or Gaara, understood?”

“Why?”

“Just swear it already so I can get on with this!”

Naruto scowled. “What is so important that I can’t tell Haku-kun or Gaara-kun? I won’t hide anything from them!”

“This technique I’m trying to pass onto you is meant for you and only you,” Jiraiya sighed, “I can’t have them jumping on the bandwagon-of-techniques, if you know what I mean!”

“...a new...technique?”

“You heard me! Now swear!”

“I swear.”

The sennin nodded, “Good, now we can begin... As I was saying before, for someone in your position, that is, a vessel of a powerful biju,” Naruto snorted at him in acknowledgment, “Your chakra control is not nearly as bad as it could be...since I happened across you all those years ago.”

“You shouldn’t take all the credit for that old man! Haku-kun, Gaara-kun and me, we’ve been training since long after you left.” Naruto almost wore a hurt expression, but it seemed more annoyed rather than upset. “Now tell me what the heck you brought me here for!”

Jiraiya shrugged, not hiding his smirk, “Well, fine. If you’re so eager perhaps it would be much easier if I just showed you.”

Naruto gave him a quizzical look as the sennin marched up to one of Haku’s target poles, still lined with senbon that he hadn’t extracted from it. He couldn’t help but stare in wonder as his mentor raised his hand, revealing a swirling blue light.

‘What is that? Chakra? Yeah...but how is he...?’

The blue, spiraling sphere that had materialized in Jiraiya's hand swirled within its self-contained shell, and the legendary ninja smirked to himself before calling back to his student, “Now pay attention, Naruto!”

The blonde nodded absently as he watched, trying to understand what he was witnessing.

“Rasengan!” The sage thrust the sphere of chakra forward, into the pole and shattered it into countless splinters of pathetic wood. Chips of cedar rained down on the field and Naruto felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on end with anticipation.

‘I am so gonna figure out how to do that!’

“Well, what do you think, Naruto? You want Haku and Gaara to learn that as well?” Jiraiya
turned around, brushing dust from his hands victoriously.

“...not really.”

“I thought so.”

“What did you do? You've got to teach me how to do that sensei!” Naruto was grinning, with his fists clenched in excitement.

“That was the Rasengan: a spiraling sphere of chakra,” Jiraiya stated proudly, “By now, with your ability to walk on water and climb trees with only your chakra, I feel you are ready to begin learning this technique.”

Naruto took a moment to examine the toad hermit's new faith in him, *The last time I walked on water was at that beach when Haku-kun freaked out...and tree climbing? Psh! This'll be a piece of cake!*

The blonde didn't fail to wonder why his mentor would suddenly entrust him with such a powerful attack. He decided to think on it later.

“So what exactly is the Rasengan?”

“Hm, that's a good question.” Jiraiya scratched his chin thoughtfully, “To sum it up, it is a concentration of chakra which the user spins in many directions, making it self-contained and might I say...” He glanced over to Haku's demolished target, “Very destructive.”

“You're gonna get Haku-kun a replacement target right?”

“Eh? No! He can use trees! His aim isn't half bad anyway...” Jiraiya muttered, “But I digress...the entire function of this technique does not rely on hand seals of any sort. The key is chakra control. Without control, there is no way a shinobi can master this technique.”

“Is that why you had me, Gaara-kun and Haku-kun running up trees when we were little?”

“Nah. It was just funny to watch...” Naruto gave him an irked look, “Sheesh, Naruto! I was joking! To answer your question; no. I had you three working early because, well let's face it: the Kyuubi and the Ichibi aren't what I'd call a picnic chakra-wise. You and Gaara were major concerns in general as to whether or not you had control over yourselves period. Haku...he sort of always has been perfect when it comes to molding chakra, so he doesn't count.”

“So you just taught us that stuff so we'd have better chakra control later...I mean now.” Naruto frowned, “I thought you actually had plans for us! Like you'd look after us or something...”

“Naruto, I'm one of the Legendary Sannin and a very successful novelist. I didn't exactly have time for raising kids,” Jiraiya sighed, “I was old then so try imagining what I feel like now!”

Naruto wondered why he felt so dejected, “...whatever.”

“Look, I'm sorry you three suffered, okay? If it were up to me, I'd string up all the assholes around here by their ankles and let you whack them like piñatas...but unfortunately that isn't the way the world works,” Jiraiya then smirked, “And besides, I did have my reasons for teaching you.”

“I know I'm secretly your favorite student!” Naruto grinned, humor returning to him, “Admit it!”

“Er...yeah. Now shut up so we can move on!” He didn't seem very sincere.
“Right! So it's a spiraling sphere...but...how can you spin chakra like that?” Naruto reverted back to their original subject, much to the toad hermit's relief.

“With practice,” Jiraiya riffled around in his pocket for something other than his research materials and obtained a small bag of deflated, rubber balloons, “You'll focus your chakra into the palm of your hand and spin it.” He procured one balloon and tossed the bag aside without a second thought.

After filling the orange balloon using a water-gathering jutsu, Jiraiya tied a knot and handed it to his baffled pupil, “This will act as an instrument of measure on your progress. The faster your chakra spins, the flatter the balloon gets. Try it out.”

“Spin my chakra... How long do you think this will take sensei?”

“As long as it needs to,” The sennin answered absently, taking a seat on a nearby stump and retrieving his novel-notes, “Don't expect to get it on your first try, kid. The only way you actually learn something is through practice and hard work. Remember: there's no shortcut to power!”

Naruto nodded, taking the words to heart. He stared at the water balloon in his hand for a long moment as an idea crossed his mind.

Jiraiya looked up as Naruto created 20 Shadow Clones of himself, each of which fetched their own balloon, and scrambled over to a Haku-made pond on the side of the field to fill them with water.

“Uh, Naruto? What are you doing?”

One of the blondes crowded around the small water source turned to Jiraiya (presumably the original) to answer, “If I have more balloons to try this out on, then it'll get done faster, right sensei?”

Jiraiya shrugged, “Maybe...maybe not. The point of this is to actually get it right, so I don't see any use in rushing it.”

“I want to master this technique soon! Then I'll have one up on Haku-kun and Gaara-kun!”

“Hey! Doesn't your toad summoning count?” The sage was again miffed, “I'm quite certain those two goofs are incapable of summoning.”

“They can't,” Naruto confirmed, as his clones lined up, focusing their chakra into each, individual balloon, “But I can't help but get competitive with them, sensei, even if they are my brothers.”

The sennin paused in his scribbling of notes to look up at Naruto, “...your brothers?”

“Yeah, that's right!” The blonde grinned at the notion, “That's what I've decided we are. I mean we're much closer than friends, and we are already sort of a family so...that's what we are.”

Jiraiya shrugged, smiling, ‘What a unique family he must have...’

The following twenty-five minutes saw each of Naruto's clones, as well as himself, desperately try to flatten their water balloons by spinning their chakra. The fifth clone from the left nearly had it, as well as the real Naruto, who were beginning to feel that success was near. However, there was an abrupt pop, followed by a splash and a clone on the far right looked up bewildered for a moment before crying victoriously, “Yeah!”

All 18 other replications and the original turned to said clone, each inquiring how the feat was
accomplished.

Within five minutes each balloon was popped.

Jiraiya nodded pleasantly while lighting his pipe, “Damn! Not bad! Now for the next step. Same idea, but this time your chakra will be focused on a rubber ball.”

“A rubber ball?”

His master pointed to a cardboard box settled inconspicuously next to a training post which was, as expected, filled with rubber balls borrowed from the Academy.

Naruto gave his instructor a questioning look, “Ero-sensei, what's with all this stuff? Do I really need this many?”

“No. I just figured you would get frustrated at one point and start breaking or throw things at me,” Jiraiya paused and regretted his words, “Uh, not to give you any ideas that is!”

His student shook his head, “Why would I waste a perfectly good water balloon on you?”

Jiraiya frowned at his smart-mouthed student while taking a long drag.

The second stage of his training was by far shorter and more productive. As Naruto and his Shadow Clones proceeded to spin chakra into rubber balls, their chakra began to dwindle. Eventually, clones that had spent all of their chakra poofed out of existence, letting their once chakra-filled items drop to the dusty ground.

Nearly fifteen minutes after beginning the second stage of his Rasengan training, Naruto noticed that each of his clones had spent all of their chakra leaving only him with beads of sweat rolling down the side of his face, 'I don't know if I can...keep this up...'”

He really knew better, but he was simply too stubborn to give in and rest. In his heart, Naruto had always felt that Gaara and Haku had somehow been stronger than him, even when they were young. It had been difficult to accept their natural gifts. It wasn't that he wanted to be superior, but he wished to be on the same physical level as them, 'I want to be a match for Haku-kun and Gaara-kun, not just with knowledge but in ability! I may not have powers like they do, but I will be Hokage! I will!'

It hit him like a ton of bricks and he hadn't even realized what had happened.

Naruto, for a moment, wondered why Jiraiya had attacked him. The throbbing pain in the back of his head wouldn't subside. It took the blonde a moment to realize that he had not been physically injured at all. The pain was strictly from his lack of chakra, 'I used it all up? That quick? Well, I have been training all day...'

He had been warned many times in the Ninja Academy that using up all of one's chakra had catastrophic repercussions. Although he himself had never been pushed to such limits, he had always had a healthy fear of going over the edge. After all, chakra being directly linked to a shinobi's stamina could result in the death or crippling of the ninja. Naruto and Gaara never paid the thought much mind, seeing that they had never had a problem with their stamina once in their entire lives. Unlike them, Haku held a better understanding of the concept, due to his limited (if not pathetic) reserves of chakra. His warnings and advice however, did not fall on deaf ears.

'Does this mean I'm...dead?'

His vision returned to him surprisingly quick, 'Maybe I'm not dead just yet!'
Naruto looked ahead, seeing a strange light. He was in a dim, echoing place. He frowned to himself, 'I thought it was daytime. Why is everything so dark all of a sudden?'

Rising to his feet and brushing off his pants, Naruto went ahead, curiously observing the faint, glowing beams ahead of him, 'I guess I hit my head pretty hard.'

The blonde haired boy paused and looked up, regarding a strange sign mounted halfway up on one of the beams. It was plain, save for an old, elegant character painted onto it, which from his line of sight was unreadable in the darkness. Naruto scratched his head, wondering how he had ended up in such an eerie place after he had been trying to master the Rasengan.

He wanted to have a look around the dusky expanse of the place until he heard something. It started low, but grew in volume; a thundering, rolling purr, which shook the ground beneath his feet. The hair on the back of Naruto's neck was on end as the growl abruptly ended, and he jumped several feet back as something emerged from behind one of the ghastly beams.

An enormous set of claws thudded down with tremendous force, directly where he had been standing moments before. The boy was sure he could hear his palpitating heart in his mouth as he stood, watching as the great paw dragged back slowly into its place of origin, followed by another resonating growl.

A few moments helped him assure himself that he was beyond the creature's reach. The beams he had seen before were in fact bars, This is a cage...

Naruto strained his eyes to see in the cloudy dark, but saw no movement, 'How am I going to get out of this place? This must be where...

His thoughts were interrupted as a deep, amused-sounding voice sliced the air like a knife, You've made contact. You certainly took your time.

A huge face appeared ahead of him inside of the cage; grinning fangs and eyes the color of blood. "You're-!"

There was another thunderous purr of amusement ahead of him, Oh yes. I am your exalted prisoner, the greatest of the tailed beasts, I am the Nine Tails.

Naruto watched in grim silence, wondering how he should handle this situation. It wasn't everyday he was able to speak face to face with the demon fox sealed within him, 'Was this how Gaara-kun felt when he was little? Some giant thing growling in his head whenever he closed his eyes?'

Do you know why you're here, Naruto?

The blonde boy looked up at the fox, startled, "Huh? Why I'm...here?"

You're as good as dead, boy. You have utterly spent your chakra. You are only alive because I provide you with my chakra.

"You...you're keeping me alive?" Naruto gave a disbelieving look to the biju, "Why would you want to help me?"

The once flashing grin set into a thin line of annoyance, I don't have a choice in the matter. If it were up to me, I would tear your scrawny limbs off one by one.
There was a sudden shudder from within the cage and Naruto strained his eyes to see the huge fox disappear again, as if he were interrupted. There came a string of frenzied growls for a long moment before it quieted down. The blonde haired boy cringed as the fox reappeared, smirking at him.

**You'll have to forgive that disturbance. Unfortunately I am not alone in here.**

Naruto frowned again, warily edging closer, but keeping out of Kyuubi's reach, “What do you mean you're not alone?”

_Spare me your pathetic questions!_ The fox seemed touchy about the subject, _The truth of the matter is that if you die, then I shall die with you. We have been bound together in such a way that I cannot break free from this seal. As a result you and I coexist, keeping one another alive. Though I wouldn't really call this living...if I had been in a host with a seal just the slightest bit less complex...I would have torn free by now. Count yourself very fortunate._

To emphasize his point, the fox gave a fierce head-butt to the bars, only rattling them.

“So if I die, you die with me?” Naruto looked intrigued, “I didn't know that.”

_I'm sure we'd enjoy life more without each other,_ Kyuubi growled bitterly, _In exchange for you being my vessel, preserving my spirit, you receive my chakra...all of it if necessary. He smirked, You should let me out more often. I enjoy the fresh air._

“So...sorry, no can do.” Naruto replied, “The way I see it, I'm the one who's calling the shots here, Fluffy.”

_INSOLENT LEECH!_ Naruto stumbled backwards, knocked off his feet by the demon's roar, _You will show the proper respect! Do not think you are the only one who is in control..._ The fox's eyes narrowed, _I can make your life contemptible, boy, I have nothing better to do with my time._

Naruto felt some of his sass return to him, despite the looming beast in front of him, “I bet you could, Fluffy, but you see you're stuck in my body, so you have to do what I tell you! If you make my life miserable...who's to say I wouldn't choose to end it?”

...surely you are not a fool enough to threaten me, whelp? You're too much of a coward.

Again there was stirring from deep within the Kyuubi's cage and he roared in annoyance to end it.

“You're gonna give me some chakra right now,” Naruto folded his arms and smirked, “It's not like you have anything better to do, right?”

The Kyuubi glared at him, _It's quite possible that I do._

“Look, I can't stay and chat. I've gotta get back to my training so I can learn the Rasengan!” Naruto snapped, fed up with the fox, “Give me chakra now and I'll...I'll leave you alone for a while.”

_I doubt that._

“No, seriously! I mean, well...if I pass out again I guess we'll see each other soon...” The blonde scratched his head, “I got it! The next time I see you, I won't ask stupid questions and I'll even be
The fox gave him a bored look.

“So what do you say?”

Deal.

Naruto watched a surge of red chakra escape the bars and meet him; fiery and exhilarating. He smirked to himself, glad that he could get the fox's cooperation through bribery. The blonde stretched his arms over his head as he felt energy return to him, grinning, “Thanks a lot! Now I can get back to work!”

The Kyuubi sniffed, *See that you master this technique and...* The fox's smirk was broad, *Don't embarrass me.*

“WHOA!” Naruto sat bolt upright.

He had ended up on the ground and next to him was the rubber ball he had dropped. Naruto rubbed his head before he leapt to his feet, 'Wow, I...I feel great! Who knew that old fox could be so useful!'

Jiraiya looked over to him, just noticing his collapse, “You okay kid?”

It must have all happened in a very short amount of time if Jiraiya didn’t notice his predicament. Naruto grinned at him, “Oh I'm better than okay, Ero-sensei!” He picked up the rubber ball, “Well, better get back to work!”

The toad sage nodded slowly, smiling. He had actually been counting on Naruto to run out of chakra, figuring that if he tapped into Kyuubi's chakra he'd be able to learn the Rasengan more quickly, *'I wonder what went on in the squirt's head just now...'*

Smirking to himself in amusement, Jiraiya put away his research and stood, watching as Naruto easily blasted apart the rubber ball with his newly-acquired, rapidly spinning chakra. The blonde boy laughed in triumph, feeling like he could jump over the moon he was so full of energy.

“Well done, Naruto! I'm very impressed,” The sage raised an eyebrow at him, “I don't think I've ever seen anyone complete stage two so quickly...”

“It's not like you'd teach something like this to just anyone, right sensei?” Naruto pointed out, practically bouncing.

Jiraiya nodded, “True...but what I mean to say is you've exceeded my expectations. So...I suppose you're ready to begin stage three?”

“You bet I am!”

“Okay, this combines what you have learned in both steps one and two; spinning and shaping your chakra,” Jiraiya explained, “This time, you create the shell yourself, that way it is self-sustained. Once you do that...well,” He grinned, “I'd say you've just about got it.”

Naruto nodded and it was then Jiraiya noticed the change in his features. The thin whiskers on the boy's cheeks had broadened, as well as his eyes, which were more red than blue, “I'll get right on it sensei!”
"There's no rush Naruto, really...you've already come remarkably far."

Jiraiya stood by to watch as his enthusiastic student began to spin chakra in his hand, wondering how much longer it would take before he would have created a full, spiraling sphere, 'I'd give him four days...tops.'

The sun was low in the sky by the time Naruto returned to his apartment; sweaty, tired, and grinning. He couldn't wait to have something to eat and then collapse onto his bed and sleep, 'Maybe Haku-kun made dinner already...'

Once inside he stripped off his jacket and ventured into the kitchen, helping himself to a pitcher of water that had specifically been for Haku, 'He's always so picky about his water...'. He drank it all, savoring every last drop.

He plopped down into a chair at the table and exhaled deeply, helping himself to an apple.

It was only a few moments later that a bewildered-looking Haku appeared and gave an incredulous look to his blonde friend, “Naruto-kun, what are you doing? Where have you been?”

“Hm? Oh, hey Haku-kun! I've been training with Ero-sensei. What about you?” He took a bite of the apple contentedly.

“Gaara-kun and I spent the day training with Tenten’s team,” Haku nervously rubbed the bruises on his arms where Neji had easily sealed his tenketsu earlier, “But that doesn't matter...you should hurry up and get ready!”

“What for?” Naruto gave him a quizzical look, “Haku-kun...why are you all dressed up?”

Gaara entered the room, surprisingly enough, also in formal attire; black unlike Haku's choice of blue yukata. He wore a disapproving look, “Naruto, get dressed. It's the Tanabata Festival. We’re going.”

Naruto took another bite of apple thoughtfully, “It's already that late in the year? Heh, I guess I forgot it was coming up!” He stood up, “Why don't we just skip out on it tonight? I'm pretty tired and I don't exactly have any wishes to make...”

“That's not exactly why we're going,” Haku said while pulling his ebony hair into a sweeping ponytail, “There will be many shinobi there from Konoha as well as the neighboring villages. I feel it would be a good idea to get a look at some of the other genin candidates before the Chunin Exam arrives.”

A pause.

“THE CHUNIN EXAM?”

Gaara sighed, “Not yet, Naruto. It's still weeks away.”

Naruto relaxed a little and finished his apple once he had calmed himself, “I didn't know that was coming up either! Sheesh! I've gotta check the calendar once in a while!”

Haku chuckled, “I think that's a good idea, Naruto-kun. We'll be leaving soon, so I suggest you get cleaned up.” He walked out of the room, leaving only Gaara, who wore a suspicious look.

“Where were you today?”
Naruto shrugged and also stepped out of the kitchen, “Oh, places…”

Irritated, Gaara followed him, “Like where may I ask?”

The blonde scrambled for the bathroom, hoping to avoid the subject, “I spent the day training with Hinata-chan's team…”

“They go home in the afternoon.”

“Yeah, they do,” Naruto conceded, filling the tub and beginning to strip himself of his odorous clothing, “But uh...I well...I was training with Ero-sensei after that, otherwise I would've met up with you guys.”

Gaara leaned against the doorway, frowning in thought, “You haven't been this devoted to your training in quite a while. What have you been doing?”

Naruto frowned at the red haired boy, “I'll tell you later...now will you get out? I'm trying to wash up here!”

Losing interest, Gaara left, closing the door behind him. With a sigh Naruto turned the hot water off, glad that Gaara hadn't suspected him of anything just yet. He sat naked by the tub, thoroughly scrubbing his skin of dirt and filth he had accumulated from the day's training. The blonde haired boy frowned to himself, wondering why Jiraiya had sworn him to secrecy about the Rasengan.

'I want to tell Haku-kun and Gaara-kun about it but...what if they want in on it? They'd feel left out. Well, they'll feel left out no matter what. It's better if they don't know about it...' The idea of it irked him, 'But still it's just me and Ero-sensei and I still want to tell someone!'

Furrowing his brow, Naruto discarded his bathing utensils and rinsed himself, still deep in thought, 'I guess I can wait a while, maybe after I have the Rasengan perfect...maybe I can tell someone who won't care what I'm learning, at least, not want to know it themselves... But who?'

He decided not to stress over the matter, 'Whatever...I guess I should get dressed...' He frowned to himself, recalling how well Haku and Gaara brushed up, 'Uh...what the heck am I supposed to wear?'

“I'm starving!” Upon their arrival to the festival, Naruto was already insisting upon food, “Let's get something to eat! They’ve got great stuff at these festivals!”

The blonde boy led his friends along through the crowd, following his nose, and they sat down at the nearest ramen stand. Predictably, Naruto had chosen a bright, orange yukata in his possession to wear to the festival. Since it looked fairly appropriate, Haku had agreed that it was a wise choice and hurried his teammates along to the fair.

While Gaara and Naruto ordered their ramen, Haku passed out tanzaku strips to each of them. He also urged Naruto to make a wish on one of the paper strips, “Naruto-kun, seriously, I suggest you do make a wish for better penmanship.”

“What? Are you saying I write sloppy?”

“Well, yes. Otherwise I wouldn't have given you one.”

Naruto looked over to Gaara, who only shrugged, and took a slip of paper from Haku anyway.

While enjoying his food, Naruto looked to Haku who sat beside him and noticed he had delicately
folded a turquoise paper crane, “Hey, aren't you going to eat anything Haku-kun? I'll buy you something.”

The dark haired boy shook his head, “No thank you, Naruto-kun. I'll eat later.”

“What do you have there?”

Haku held up the paper bird, “An Orizuru. It will keep us safe and healthy for the rest of the year.”

“Hopefully through the Chunin Exam as well.” Gaara added darkly.

“That's what I'm hoping...” Haku admitted.

“We'll ace that exam for sure!” Naruto said confidently after a slurp of noodles, “We've got to be one of the strongest teams in the whole village, right?”

“Second strongest to our team, Naruto.”

Surprised, the genin of Team 2 turned around to see Sasuke with Sakura and Kiba beside him. Gaara gave the Uchiha an annoyed look, not liking the notion.

Naruto however was not upset at all, “Hey Sasuke! It's been a while!”

Haku nodded politely to Team 7, “Good evening! I hope you are all enjoying yourselves.”

“We are Haku-kun,” Sakura smiled, “It's nice to see you three! I figured we'd find you here.”

Gaara felt it was odd to see Sakura, their childhood friend, on another team. It didn't look as if she were complaining about it either. Unlike her teammates dressed in dark gray and black she was a vibrant pink, with a floral pattern to match her name. And that hypnotizing hair of hers...was done up elaborately with two sticks.

This was going to be a difficult night.

“I hear that you three are now under the instruction of Jiraiya-sama,” Kakashi approached as well, not even glancing up from his book, “I'm sure you must be training very hard.”

“No really,” Naruto replied pithily, “Our sensei's a perverted old man who writes trash novels all the time!”

Kakashi smiled, “I'm afraid I have to disagree with that statement, Naruto.”

The blonde gave the masked ninja a bothered look before Kiba clarified, “Kakashi-sensei likes trash novels, apparently.” He frowned at Naruto, “It's as if all the teachers around here are pervs...”

Kakashi said nothing to deny it either.

Sakura chuckled in embarrassment and attempted to change the subject, “Anyway...have you guys had any interesting missions recently? We just got back from a trade dispute nearby the Hidden Grass Village!”

Haku nodded, “We also returned from a mission a few days ago from the Land of Waves,” He paused, concluding that he should skip over the majority of mayhem that occurred, “It was...relatively uneventful.”
Gaara and Naruto gave him incredulous looks as they slurped their ramen.

Sasuke didn't fail to notice these exchanged glances, and assumed there may have been some sort of drama, as there usually was on missions. His own team had plenty of drama: with Sakura's wit, Kiba's arrogance, and Kakashi's obsession with Icha Icha Paradise.

Sasuke smirked to himself as his eyes flickered red momentarily. Their most recent C-rank mission had helped him acquire a favorable trait passed down through his clan.

Nearby, a short round of applause caught Kiba's attention, “Whoa! Who's the babe?” Akamaru yapped in agreement from atop his head.

Sakura scowled as all the present males, with the exception of a reading Kakashi, looked off to the far right to where a fairly large crowd of people was gathered. Barely within sight was a girl moving in rhythm with the tune of a shamisen and drums. Even Haku had to admit she was incredibly attractive; with dark doe eyes, a bewitching smile, and long, black hair even more beautiful than his own.

Funnily enough no one recognized her.

Kiba only grinned mischievously, forming ideas.

Kakashi turned a page of his naughty book, “She's off limits, boys. Don't get your hopes up.”

Naruto, Gaara and Sasuke didn't seem very much bothered by the news. Even if the mystery girl was a piece of eye-candy they had much better things to do than give chase…and they already preferred other girls. Kiba, on the other hand, was visibly indignant.

“What's that supposed to mean, sensei?” He growled, peeved, “How would you know that anyway?”

There was a sudden, crashing noise as Naruto and Gaara's ramen bowls were spilled over and a very excited, green-clad jounin landed in front of them as if he had dropped out of the sky. Haku had to close his eyes for the shinobi's grin was just too bright

“Why is that marvelously youthful, young flower dancing over yonder out-of-bounds for all of you impure-minded young ninja?” Gai laughed jovially, “She is Maito Tama! My darling niece!”

Haku sighed, hoping that he would’ve been able to stall for his friends before the day came that they too met the enthusiastic ninja who adored all things 'youthful and fiery.'

Sasuke wore a stoic expression, while Kiba and Sakura seemed to be somewhere between shocked and intrigued. Gaara and Naruto were too busy ordering more ramen to pay attention to Gai.

“Hm? Oh, hello Gai.” Kakashi hadn't noticed his presence at all.

“What?” Gai scowled, shaking his fist angrily, “Kakashi, my eternal rival! Your hip-modern attitude is pissing me off! At least acknowledge me in a contest of will if you insist on acting cool!”

Kiba didn't care if he came across as rude, “How the hell can such a beautiful girl like that be related to a freak?”

“Gai's philosophy doesn't run in the family, it seems.” The masked ninja flipped another page.
Still Kiba felt like challenging the idea, “Why can't I go without her then? I'm not impure-minded!”

Sakura scoffed at his words, as well as Akamaru, whose bark sounded more like a sarcastic laugh. Even Sasuke looked doubtful.

“She is forbidden to any man in this village,” Gai announced, grinning, “Because she is engaged to my eternal rival's beloved nephew!”

Naruto dropped his chopsticks, ‘...WHAT?’

All heads turned to a nearby stand where Sato stood, laughing blithely alongside his teammates as he participated in a dart-throwing game. Teams 2 and 7 watched in astonishment as the young silver haired ninja won his prizes. He handed a stuffed purple bear to a very annoyed Shino and a pink frog to Hinata who gazed at the plush lovingly.

Sato grinned triumphantly at the Aburame boy and the Hyuga girl, “There you go! For my best pals!”

“Lucky...” Sakura muttered, still unable to believe it.

“That doesn’t make sense.” Gaara said pointedly, and Naruto and Haku nodded fervently, still shocked.

Sasuke gave a strange look to his teacher, wondering how drunk he must have been to have agreed to such a preposterous idea. Kakashi only shrugged at his students, not peeling his eye away from his dirty novel.

“Wait a minute!” Naruto wasn't at all convinced, having being acquainted already with the younger Hatake, “What the hell are you talking about? Sato's an idiot! How can he be engaged at such a young age?”

“They have been betrothed since birth, Naruto,” Gai sighed dreamily in response, “Isn't youth such a wondrous thing?”

Kiba gagged.

The genin turned to the masked ninja, seeking confirmation.

“I believe it was a noodle-eating contest years ago that Gai challenged me to...” Kakashi recalled, “I waged my nephew and Gai waged his spandex...it didn't turn out well.”

Moaning with discomfort, Kakashi's head impacted the restaurant counter and the attendants looked on in alarm. Beside him were stacks of bowls, 25 of them to be exact, and one in front of him just emptied. He dropped his chopsticks with a clatter.

'...eat...through...the...pain...'

A seat away from him sat his opponent. Gai laughed, sputtering, as he slurped noodles out of his 28th bowl. He grinned down at his defeated rival, and the attendants of the restaurant gasped in unrestrained horror.

“Ha! Youth has prevailed!”

And not a moment later, also past his limits, Gai toppled off of his stool; crashing down to the
ground with a loud thud. It was another typical yet pointless contest between Kakashi and his self-proclaimed 'rival.'

A few seats away from them sat Akimichi Chouza, who merely shook his head disapprovingly at the spectacle, “Amateurs...”

After listening to the absurd story, Sasuke was nonplused, “And you weren't affected by your...loss?”

“My nephew had it coming.”

Naruto nodded sagely, eyes closed, “Yeah, he sure is a weird kid. I can see why he got involved.”

“Didn't his parents have a say in the matter?” Haku wondered how such a ridiculous bet could physically affect two families.

“His mother didn't object,” Kakashi flipped a page in his book disinterestedly, “Marriages between ninja families are honorable and usually beneficial.”

Gai looked offended, “Who could refuse my charming niece?”

An awkward silence followed.

Deciding shortly afterwards to escape Gai and his many youthful stories about himself and his 'eternal rival,' Teams 2 and 7 decided to join Team 8 who resided nearby a stand selling sweets.

Before Naruto could even open his mouth to greet Hinata and her teammates, there was a break in the crowd nearby and Tama herself, dressed in a flashy yellow and green yukata, came racing out while ducking her lovesick fans.

She scurried over to Hinata, clearly looking flustered, but smiled at her, “Hi Hinata-chan!” She noticed the Aburame boy next to her, “Oh and you too Shino-kun, have you happened to see-?”

Sato had his back turned, as he tried to pay for all the pocky he had bought in bulk, “Look lady, I'm short on money, but I have this nice purple bear you can have in exchange for-”

“Sato-kun!”

He turned around, and the saleswoman retrieved all of the cookies he had attempted to barter from her, “Oh...Tama.”

Kiba looked heartbroken as she grabbed the silver haired boy's hand, and proceeded to drag him along, “It's a good thing I found you! I could use some help right about now...”

“Oh, Tama-”

“Hurry up! If we keep them waiting they'll start throwing stuff again...”

“Tama-”

The tall girl looked down at her shorter fiancé, “What's wrong?” She wasn't oblivious to his distress.

Sato wore a contemplative expression and he turned back to see his teammates, as well as Naruto and Sakura's teams staring at him, confusion written all over their faces.
“Nothing really…”

“Good. I can get you some pocky later, but I need your help now.” Tama interrupted him and continued to tug him by the wrist back to the throng of impatient people.

He gulped fearfully.

Sato dug his heels into the ground, stopping just short of the ring of Tama's fans. His face was beginning to resemble Hinata's as his embarrassment grew, “Tama, wait a sec!” He nervously looked left and right, hoping to find an escape route, “Do we have to do this now?”

She frowned at him, upset, “What? Are you waiting for Christmas or something?”

“Well, now that you mention it-”

“Oh come on! I know you can do this!” Another forcible tug had him moving again, and they penetrated the thick of the crowd, where her groupies began to holler in excitement. The soft plucking melody of the shamisen drifted through the air like a cloud and Sato's companions saw no more of him after that.

“What...just happened?” Sakura inquired, genuinely curious.

Hinata seemed to have a fair understanding of what was going on, but then suggested, “Why don't we see where Sato-kun and Tama-chan went?”

Not having much else to do at the time, Teams 2 and 7 followed after the remainder of Sato's team. Naruto fell into step with the Hyuga girl, “Hey, Hinata-chan, how do you know that Tama-girl anyway?”

Although she was dismayed that his question may have risen from his interest in Tama, Hinata decided to be truthful anyway, “She comes to see Sato-kun quite often, Naruto-kun. She even comes to visit him while he trains with Shino-kun and I. She is...very devoted.”

“More than he deserves...” Naruto muttered, “I'm just glad he's just not trying to put the moves on you or anything, I mean...you're too good for that guy.”

Hinata felt her insecurities evaporate and she smiled at the whiskered boy, grateful for his concern.

It was difficult to get a view of anything that was going on, the crowd was so condensed. The genin settled on the fringe of people, hearing music faintly against the shouts and chatter. Gaara disliked having so many people around and he put on an annoyed expression as Haku stood beside him, looking very entertained.

“I don't see what all the fuss is about,” Naruto turned to Haku and Gaara, “Can't we go somewhere else?”

“Oh joyous youth! It is about to begin!”

Naruto leapt back as Lee appeared beside him, looking very excited. Haku and Gaara acknowledged the ‘youthful’ ninja's presence.

“Hello Lee,” Haku smiled pleasantly, “You came here with your teammates as well?”

“Oh yes, Haku-kun! Many shinobi have gathered here tonight. I am here to see the wonderful performance of Miss Tama! My sensei's darling niece!”
“We've heard that before...” Gaara sighed, seeing a recurring pattern.

Naruto looked at Lee oddly, “What are you talking about Bushy-brows?”

“You must be Naruto-kun! Gaara-kun and Haku-kun have told me so much about you!” He shook the bewildered blonde’s hand, “But haven’t you heard, Naruto? Both Tama-chan and Sato-kun are accomplished dancers!”

“Sato can...dance?” Sakura glanced over to Shino and Hinata who looked just as perplexed, “Hm...I wonder if Kakashi-sensei can dance?”

“God, I hope not...” Kiba remarked and Akamaru barked in agreement.

Sato peeked over his shoulder as his companions came into sight, and he frowned, wishing that this aspect of his life wouldn't have become so public.

“Tama, really, I haven't practiced or anything! I'll suck and ruin your reputation,” He tried to deter her while she lead him along to an open space, smiling carelessly, “You don't really need me! You can just ask some other guy to-”

“Oh stop being such a baby! You are very talented and we always do great together.” Tama admonished him quietly, “You'll do fine as always...that is, if you still want pocky!”

“Okay!”

Shino and Hinata watched in utter disbelief as their once rigid, ungainly teammate shed his nervousness (although they were uncertain how), and took up his fiancé's hand, grinning wolfishly, and stepped lightly to the music.

“Oh my...” Hinata couldn't suppress her awe of the sight.

Tama certainly was the more experienced of the pair and by far more graceful, however the Hyuga girl found it somewhat inspiring to see her teammate lead her around in intricate tangles of footwork. It almost looked as if he were fighting...not with Tama, but his movements were swift and timed like a shinobi’s.

The shy girl's heart fluttered.

“Hinata,” She turned to see Shino, observant as ever, looking at her, “His movements...they reflect in his taijutsu, do they not?”

Hinata turned back to see for herself. Once again, the Aburame boy had a point. Sato had never been a ninja who used full-out taijutsu. His movements were sporadic and evasive, and made him downright impossible to hit if he moved quickly enough. She should know; she was his primary sparring partner.

“It's...amazing,” She answered softly, “Do you suppose his taijutsu style comes from his training with Tama-chan?”

“It's possible.” His gaze turned back to the silver haired boy, not very surprised by the fact.

Naruto was also impressed, having only known Sato as an incompetent shinobi and little else, “Wow, he's not that bad...but I still say he's a blockhead.”

Lee, on the other hand, was inspired. He turned away from the crowd while shouting, “Tenten! Beautiful flower of my team! I would be truly honored if you would share a dance with me!”
Naruto and his teammates grinned as they watched the excited ninja rejoin his teammates nearby at an astrology stand where Tenten had insisted that they had their fortunes read. Neji had decided earlier that she would be better company than Lee so he had joined her.

“What did you say, Lee?” She looked over as he approached, still distracted with her horoscope.

“It will be wonderful Tenten! Just one dance!” He was bouncing with joy.

Tenten, dressed in an intense, crimson yukata, took a few steps back from the green-clad boy, “W-What? Lee, I really don’t think that’s a good idea...”

Neji made no comment as he watched the rest of the scene play out.

Lee wouldn't have no for an answer.

“Oh, but I insist Tenten! You look ravishing and there is no other girl I would prefer more!” Before she could give another objection Lee had grabbed her by the sleeves and yanked her along.

Her yelps were audible even over the festival’s raucous. Neji stood, perplexed, wondering if maybe he could've been more help to her.

He didn't feel like taking a bullet at the moment so he moved along, trying to discover the source of Lee's excitement.

Beside Sato and Tama, another pair appeared, moving much faster and by far more recklessly.

“Lee-!” Tenten was writhing, trying to escape a grip that was equivalent to the 'Jaws of Life.' It was a hopeless endeavor, and Lee wasn't likely to hear anything she said over his excited ranting.

The crowd found Lee and his absolutely livid partner's twirling in circles to be very humorous, compared to the fluid, elegant footwork of the first pair.

Eventually Tenten gave in and ended her struggling, letting her teammate tug her along in circles. Once or twice he had even gotten her to laugh, admiring her sportsmanship, even though she wasn't doing much of anything.

Neji appeared beside Gaara. They said nothing to each other, both being equally annoyed. Much to Naruto’s terror, Gai popped up beside him, in hysterical tears, “Oh, Lee! Tenten! My beautiful students are burning with such passionate youth!”

Naruto edged away from him, bumping into Haku and muttered to him, “This is beyond freaky Haku-kun. Pretty soon everyone will be out there doing the cha-cha or something...”

“...uh huh...”

“Haku-kun are you even listening to me?” The blonde turned only to see his conniving friend taking up Hinata's hand and offering a wary smile to Neji who was only a few paces away, glaring daggers at him.

Hinata made a small squeaking noise as Haku went out to join Lee, gently guiding her along.

The sight struck a chord in Naruto that triggered a very protective reaction. What had possibly possessed Haku to steal away innocent Hinata? He wasn’t going to stand for it.

“Get back here!” Naruto dashed out after the sneaky Hyoton boy, feeling murderous.
Sakura laughed alongside Kiba, suddenly having much more fun. As ridiculous as Lee looked out there, it still looked like fun hopping around with a friend. She tried to picture herself in Tenten's place; even Hinata's place and Tama's.

“There's no way Kiba-kun will go out there, but maybe I can-? Oh…”

She frowned to herself, 'Come on Sakura! Get your act together!'

“Um...Sasuke-kun?”

The raven haired boy turned to her; he didn't look like he was having fun at all.

“Sasuke-kun, maybe you'd like to, um...well, I just thought that maybe you'd like t-to...”

“I don't dance.”

Her heart sloshed mushily inside her stomach. She found it remarkable how his answer had just killed the moment for her, but what had she expected? It was his forte after all.

The bored-looking Uchiha turned and walked off, no longer interested in the festivities they had been watching. Sakura, though slightly discouraged, looked over to Gaara wistfully who had not seen her and then followed after Sasuke.

“I'm sorry if I caught you off your guard, Hinata-chan,” Haku smiled down at the shy Hyuga girl, “It just looked as if you wanted to dance.”

“I d-did...”

He gave her a knowing look, “Would you like me to ask Naruto-kun if he'd-?”

“Oh n-no! That's alright!”

“Really, Hinata-chan, it wouldn't be any trouble...” Haku slowed and checked over his shoulder to see if he could spot his blonde friend.

Not seeing him anywhere Haku returned his gaze to his partner, only to see Naruto in Hinata's place.

“Hey Haku-kun!”

“What? Where's-?”

Haku noticed Naruto grinning maniacally from the sidelines as he stole Hinata back, guiding her back though the crowd and shouting over his shoulder, “I hope you have fun with that Shadow Clone, Haku-kun!”

Hinata giggled out loud as she disappeared with the clever blonde. Haku easily destroyed the clone Naruto had substituted Hinata for and smirked, astonished by Naruto's skill.

After a short while the music ended and Sato took it as his cue to escape. However, he brought Tama along with him, “You'll get me pocky now, right? You said you would if I did well!”

“I know,” She laughed as they proceeded through the stands, “But I want to go play that knife-throwing game first!”

Sato gave her a curious look before shrugging, “Whatever floats your boat! I'm just glad I didn't
make a complete fool of myself…or you.”

“Not to worry! You were excellent,” Tama glanced back at Lee who was still spinning around with Tenten, “I'm not so sure about Lee though…”

The silver haired boy laughed, glad that he had decided to dance with her since it had made the night very interesting.

The following morning Naruto and Haku had awoken to find Gaara missing. It was unusual. Gaara had the habit of sleeping in late now that they had become genin and no longer had to race to the Academy every morning.

Naruto, however, was confident he could locate his redheaded friend and set off to find him while Haku went ahead to their training area.

‘If I were Gaara-kun, I'd go somewhere quiet where I could sleep...’ Recalling a few places around town like that, Naruto decided to go with his gut instinct and search downtown, the area where he had found Sato. ‘I bet all slackers gather there...’

Sure enough, on the roof of a launderette, Gaara sat quietly next to his sand gourd, watching clouds pass. A roof over from him Shikamaru also lazed about, leaned against a chimney. Naruto frowned as he landed next to his teammate.

“I figured since you and Shikamaru have the same hobbies that I might find you here, Gaara,” Naruto smirked, “You can't just ditch training to do nothing!”

“We don't have any hobbies, Naruto.” Shikamaru informed him from a few feet away, still lying on his back and staring at the sky.

The blonde scowled, “Exactly! That's what you two have in common!”

“You're very troublesome, Naruto...”

Gaara said nothing in response, but stood up and tied his gourd to his back. Naruto smiled to himself, ‘Well, at least he's cooperating...’

The teammates moved on, leaving Shikamaru to his cloud-watching. Even though Gaara had never been very talkative to begin with, Naruto found him curiously quiet, ‘Maybe something's bothering him?’

“You can't keep hanging out with that lazy-ass, Gaara-kun.” Naruto tried to create a conversation.

Gaara gave a monosyllabic grunt in response.

“Why weren't you home this morning? You usually sleep in. Oh and you missed breakfast...” Naruto went on airily, hoping not to get on Gaara's nerves.

“I couldn't sleep last night.”

“You couldn't-?” The blonde frowned as he jumped over a gap, “Was it the-?”

“No. I just couldn't sleep.”

“Oh.”

Gaara gave him another suspicious look, “You never got around to telling me where you were
yesterday.”

“I told you already. I was training with Ero-sensei.”

“I'm aware,” He retorted, “What were you training for exactly?”

“Uh, I can't tell you that...” Naruto put his hand over his heart, “Ero-sensei made me swear!”

Gaara frowned and lost interest.

Still, Naruto didn't want to lose the conversation so he scrounged around for another subject.

“Did you see how pretty Sakura-chan was last night?” Naruto smiled at his friend, “She's always pretty of course but last night she and Hinata-chan looked pretty good!”

Gaara’s expression did not change, leaving Naruto puzzled, but he continued.

“And the way she kept hanging around Sasuke you'd think they're having a fling or something.” Naruto mused, trying to push his buttons.

Something in Gaara's face snapped and his expression which had once been stoic turned into a full-blown glare. He sped up the pace, “I don't want to talk about her.”

“Huh?” Naruto was caught off guard by his anger, “Why not? Is something wrong?” He didn't understand. Sakura has always been so close to him, “Didn't you talk to her last night?”

“...I did.” His eyes narrowed.

Naruto looked a bit nervous, “W-what did she say?”

“Many things.” Gaara ground out through gritted teeth, and then stopped on top of a shingled roof. Naruto paused as well, waiting for an explanation and fearing it at the same time.

“She succumbed to her teammate’s questions and told them about our abilities.”

The blonde boy wore a horrified look, “What? How much did she tell them?”

There was a long, painful silence.

“...everything.” Gaara's face was dark.

Naruto scratched his head, not certain what to do, “Well, I mean...she is on another team now so I guess she-”

“She has betrayed us.”

“No!” Naruto shouted, shaking his head aggressively, “Don't say that! What else could she have done? It isn't her fault...” Naruto felt his insides twisting into knots at the news. He supposed that Gaara was taking it very hard, simply because he had always felt very attached to her.

“She did try to apologize by giving us information about her team.” Gaara went on, looking disgusted.

“She did?”

“The only thing of consequence she gave away was Sasuke's recently gained Sharingan,” The red haired boy spat, “Yet still her loyalties are so torn she will even stoop as low as to giving away her
own teammate's secrets...pathetic.”

Naruto felt something sting at his eyes and he rubbed at them frantically, “No...you're wrong. Sakura-chan would never do that.” He looked up at Gaara, who had his face turned away from him, “Gaara please...don't be mad at her! She...I know that she likes you! She likes you a whole lot! Really! And I know that you...you care about her too!”

“Shut up, Naruto.”

“No!” The blonde boy glared at him, “Is that why you're so mad? Because she made a mistake? People make mistakes, Gaara, and you have to forgive them. You can't be mad at her! You like her, I know you do!”

“You have no idea what you're talking about,” Gaara hissed venomously, turning his back to Naruto, “You don't know anything about that. You can't even see it for yourself, not even when Hinata looks at you, you see nothing. You are a blind fool!”

The blonde boy stumbled back in shock, unable to believe what Gaara had told him.

After a brief silence Gaara turned to face Naruto again, his voice full of rage, “The Chunin Exams are near, Naruto. People will turn against us. It is the way of things. Sakura is our enemy now, even Hinata and Lee's teams will be nothing more than our competition,” His sand enveloped him and he disappeared in a whirlwind after adding, “You'll do well to understand that.”

Naruto stood there shaking from head to foot, desperately rubbing at his eyes.

’But I don't understand, Gaara-kun...I can't.’

Around noon, Sato arrived as his team's training area looking very pleased with himself.

“You're early.” Kurenai said sarcastically, by now knowing that he would always be late no matter how he was disciplined.

“Good morning to you too, sensei!” He grinned, and then turned to Shino, “Hey! Shino-kun! Let's spar!”

Shino didn't look very interested, “Where were you?”

“Well I can actually tell you the truth this time!” Sato smiled and even Hinata looked confused.

“You see, my uncle was giving me a hard time this morning...but I finally convinced him to teach me how to use his most powerful technique! It's totally awesome!” Sato gave them a thumbs up, still grinning.

A look of alarm descended on Kurenai's face, 'But...he can't mean...'

“His most...p-powerful technique, Sato-kun?” Hinata asked, confused, “What could it be?”

Rather than explaining it, Sato decided to demonstrate. Completely shocked and unsure of what to expect, Shino formed a clone of himself with his Kikai insects as a ball of electricity crackled to life noisily in Sato's hand.

The silver haired boy laughed, “I told you it's awesome!”
The Chunin Exam

Chapter Soundtrack: “Cute ninjas don’t cry” by Otso

The following morning it was a cold, cloudless day. With it there was a hushed air of anxiety as Haruno Sakura climbed the stairs of a quiet apartment building at a quarter past nine. She walked slowly with a silent guilt. She reviewed the script that she had been practicing in her head for nearly a day.

'What if they just slam the door in my face? Do they hate me now? Gaara-kun...he was so mad... I guess I deserve it really. What kind of friend am I? Kiba-kun and Sasuke-kun just kept asking...I can't believe I caved in like that!'

Ever since the night of the Tanabata festival, Sakura had regretted every last one of her words. In her mind, she was sure she had never meant to say anything at all to her teammates, but her mouth had subconsciously run away with her one day during training and gotten her into serious trouble.

Her feet, which had traveled the walkway many times, knew where to go on their own, letting her mind wander freely.

'I can't let them put pressure on me anymore, my friends are just too important to me. I...I don't want to lose them like this...'

After a minute or so, she looked up. There ahead of her gleamed the black number 4 on a door to her right. Sakura stopped and wrung her hands together nervously. The script that she had been continuously rehearsing suddenly evaporated from her head, leaving her helpless and shivery.

'What do I do now?' She wondered, feeling something fluttering in her stomach, 'Wow...I've never been afraid to talk to them about anything before. What's wrong with me?'

She brought her hand up and let her knuckles rest soundlessly against the wood of the door, 'Why can't I do this?'

All it took was the memory of the red haired boy scowling at her as she confessed her crime, the way he seemed to get farther and farther away from her as he stood perfectly still until he was a mere dot on the horizon.

'And what do Naruto-kun and Haku-kun think?'

She could imagine their expressions quite vividly as well, and for a moment she had even considered turning on her heel and running back home as fast as her legs could carry her.

But that stubborn attitude Naruto had filled her head with after more than a thousand speeches of morality and justice and becoming the Hokage made it impossible for her to turn away.

'Sakura...you've brought this upon yourself.'

She timidly knocked. It was a small, soft sound aimed at the center of the dark green door. Sakura waited there for a few seconds, hearing no commotion from within as she rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet.

With a shuddering sigh, she knocked three more times, louder, but more tentatively.

The hair on the back of her neck stood on end as she heard the sound of a chair being pushed
back against the floor as a person stood. The footsteps that followed were inaudible, and she
waited, thinking feverishly for something to say, 'What if it's-?'

“Sakura-chan?” In an instant the door was wide open and she saw Haku.

She relaxed a fraction.

“H-Hi...Haku-kun.” Her voice was quaking and she mentally scolded herself for being so
cowardly.

He looked as if he understood, if only a little, her reasons for coming. For a half a second there
was a pause and Sakura examined his facial features. He certainly looked more surprised than
angry, that much was clear. He also looked as if she had broken his concentration and he seemed
to be in a good mood. She was in luck.

She smirked inwardly as she looked up at him, 'He's standing about a foot above me! When did he
get so darn tall?'

“Good morning, Sakura-chan,” Oddly, he wasn't smiling, but he wasn't frowning either, “Would
you like to come in?”

“Yes, thanks.”

She stepped inside and he closed the door. After that, the formalities began.

“Would you like something to drink? Milk? Tea?” Haku was walking ahead of her and she
followed after him silently into the kitchen.

“No, I'm fine.”

He nodded, eyes closed, and went to the table and cleared it of the scrolls he had been comparing.
Sakura stood awkwardly in the doorway, trying to recover scraps of her evaporated script.

Haku gave her a measured look and a ghost of a smile appeared on his face, “Please sit down,
Sakura-chan.”

She nodded dumbly and took a seat at the table. Her throat felt tight and dusty, 'All of a sudden I
feel like I'm going to cry. Why is he always so nice?'

His hair was down, she noticed. It fell just past his shoulder blades and she recalled how Naruto
and Gaara would constantly dog him to cut it…and how he always refused, saying that it was a
symbol of how well he maintained himself.

'His hair's prettier than mine...' Sakura reexamined the thought, 'Hmm...maybe his hair is prettier
than everyone's hair...'

She then wondered why she was having trouble focusing.

“I'm sorry that I barged in on you so early, Haku-kun.” Sakura said quietly, not meeting his eyes.

The ebony haired boy stood over the sink, scrubbing dirty dishes that were neglected from the
night before with a little help from his Kekkei Genkai, “No, it's quite alright Sakura-chan. You are
always welcome here at any time.”

His kind words stung her just a little bit.

Sakura's eyes dropped down into her lap and she gave up trying to salvage her script.
“Sakura-chan, is there something you would like to talk about?” His voice was edged with worry and she could tell.

“Are...um...Naruto-kun or Gaara-kun here, by any chance?” Her nerve returned, “I need to talk to you all about something.”

Haku tilted his head back in thought and then smiled genuinely. “Well, I do believe Naruto-kun left early, he said there was something important he had to do. And Gaara-kun is still sleeping, I think.”

“Oh.” The part when he said, ‘I think’ had her partially nervous. Her heart rate escalated.

“If you’d like, I could go wake him for you,” Haku offered, then added, “Although, I have been trying to wake him for twenty minutes now...”

“No, that's...that's alright...let him sleep.”

The dark haired boy sighed and stacked a few of the cleaned dishes, “It would do him some good. He needs to break that habit of his. He's been a bit slow lately...”

She was silent, staring anxiously at the wall across from her, on which a calendar had been hung with a picture of a dog carrying a kunai in its mouth, tail wagging wildly.

“Sakura-chan,” He spoke again, his smile faded into a more serious look, “Naruto and Gaara told me what happened.”

This time she made eye contact and her panicked look unnerved him. She was still unable to form words easily.

“It's alright, Sakura. I understand.” His voice was warm and comforting; everything that Gaara's had not been that night, “There was nothing else you could've done. They're your teammates and I don't hold that against you.”

“But I shouldn't have done it in the first place!” She answered, angry at herself, “Haku-kun, you and Naruto and Gaara; you're my friends! I can't live knowing that I'll screw up and end our friendship...”

He ceased drying the dishes and turned to face her fully, “You've already been forgiven Sakura-chan, don't punish yourself. Besides, I'm sure that Sasuke and Kiba are your friends now as well, aren’t they?”

“Well I...I guess so.”

“Then you must have faith that we will always be friends, no matter the obstacle,” Haku went on, then smiled again, “You worry too much. What's done is done and now we must move forward. It isn't the end of the world.”

“It's just...” She sighed and then stood up, a small smile finding her lips, “Well, you're right Haku-kun. This definitely isn't the end of the world...”

He chuckled good-naturedly in response, trying to lessen the tension.

“I'm just...I'm sorry for everything. I messed up and I promise it won't happen again.” Sakura said, her voice stronger, “I'll come back later if that's alright. Naruto-kun and Gaara-kun deserve an apology too.”
“I’ll be glad to have you back.” He answered and she smiled in relief.

Sakura left, feeling better walking out than she had walking in. Still, somewhere in her gut she knew things were going to change between them.

Whether for better or worse it was still unclear.

Naruto walked down the sidewalk with his arms folded behind his head, deep in thought. The day before had left Gaara, Haku and himself in a right state after getting the news about Sakura's slip up.

However at the present time his mind was set on something else; something Gaara had said.

‘You have no idea what you’re talking about. You don’t know anything about that. You can’t even see it for yourself, not even when Hinata looks at you, you see nothing. You are a blind fool!’

Naruto frowned, not sure if Gaara had seriously meant anything he had said, ‘He was upset. He was rambling. But what if...what if some of the stuff he had said was true? Could Hinata-chan maybe...?’

Naruto shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts, 'No, I can't just jump to conclusions! Maybe I'm just over thinking this...' He then smiled to himself, 'But what if she...?'

Again he shook his head fiercely and other pedestrians gave him odd looks.

“I'll just go ask her myself,” Naruto said and nodded as he walked, “Then: problem solved! I'm sure Hinata-chan can set things straight if I go see her!”

The blonde haired boy marched on, more confident, and certainly more oblivious of what he was about to do.

Upon his arrival to the Hyuga compound, Naruto was unable to keep his mind off of the thought.

'Why would she like someone like me? Gaara-kun's crazy.'

Well, that had always been apparent.

Rather than jumping the wall as he normally did, Naruto strolled leisurely right in through the front gate. The standing guards merely ignored him, knowing that if they refused him entry he'd still find a way in anyway, as he always had.

He was a familiar face at the estate.

The lawn was ridiculously well-kept, with trees and hedges trimmed to perfection. Gardens lined the outside of the mansion with blooms of every color imaginable. It was hard to believe, Naruto felt, that such a cheerful landscape could be a home for one of the crankiest clans in Konoha.

Darting about were a few servants carrying baskets and other items with heads bowed submissively as they passed a Main Branch member. These people are just so friggin stuck up all the time! I can't believe Hinata-chan's related to them...

There it was again. That pesky little notion about Hinata. Naruto himself could scarcely imagine why he couldn’t stop thinking about her after hearing Gaara's tirade. ‘He was just mad...maybe he was making stuff up.'
It felt weird that he was compelled to deny it, as if it would be a bad thing if she possibly did like him. ‘Well, maybe it wouldn’t be bad,’ He smiled to himself again, ‘Hinata-chan, she’s...’

He then recalled how her father, Hiashi, seemed stilted, if not deeply bothered by his presence whenever they met. ‘Er...her dad would probably kill me if he found out.’

His jumbled thoughts were interrupted by a familiar face. Naruto stopped and looked far across to the opposite side of the yard to see a young shinobi exiting one of the buildings.

It had been a while since he had seen Neji, he noted. ‘Wow, he doesn't look as pissed as he normally does right about now.’

Indeed, the young Hyuga seemed less moody than usual, though his face betrayed no visible trace of emotion. He walked ghost-like in the morning light across the lawn. ‘Sometimes I even forget he lives here...’

It then occurred to Naruto that he might be leaving to join his team for a day of training. ‘Maybe I should take a leaf out of his book!’

Before Naruto took his gaze off of Hinata's older cousin he noticed Neji stop abruptly, and that once relaxed air that he emanated seemed to die instantly. A few feet away from him stood an older man, perhaps a shinobi, Naruto assumed.

At first glance he appeared to be extremely hostile towards the younger Hyuga.

Neji was aware of it as well.

It was silent for a long while and when the elder Hyuga spoke Naruto was too far away to hear it.

A fierce, white glare settled on Neji, “Why...why should you be free? How can you matter so much?”

There was a flicker of sympathy in Neji's eyes for a moment: real humanity. It vanished instantly as the elder Hyuga seemed to radiate some terrible killing intent which Naruto was able to sense, ‘What was that?’

Before Naruto could make out any more words or an exchange of sorts they were at each other, snarling like dogs. The blonde watched in bafflement as the elder Hyuga leapt at Neji, palms flat, a wild thing of rage.

Neji didn't seem genuinely angry as he prepared to defend himself, but he certainly wasn't pleased with the development. Naruto watched, floored for the first few seconds as they slapped at each other with bursts of chakra, fast and savage. Apparently he was the only current witness.

A moment later it became more aggressive, slaps turned into full stabs of Jyukken, blue and painful. The killing intent was then overwhelming and Naruto couldn't understand how Neji was able to stand his ground after feeling it, ‘What should I-?’

The blonde stood still and watched as Neji took a solid blow in the side, which he returned to his opponent, cringing. The elder Hyuga was then hissing, a thing possessed, wanting to flay Neji, crush him, make him feel bloody and broken and stepped on and screaming and...

It was over.

Neji leapt back, shaking.
His foe was on the ground, sobbing, clawing at his forehead. That was when Naruto had noticed Hiashi had appeared out of nowhere. He looked grim and ended his torture of the insubordinate Branch member nearly as quickly as it had begun.

Neji's opponent lay there pathetically at the clan leader's feet, shoulders shaking and tearful.

Neji knew.

He had always known. This humility, this cage; it could've been his fate. Hiashi was silent, still furious that his nephew had been attacked.

Neji stared down at the crumpled mess of a human being that wanted to end him...or himself.

There was no seal on his forehead, but still, Neji suffered the pains of the Branch family. They made sure they shared their suffering with him. Their cage was his own and he had always known what it felt like.

Neji's stare turned to Hiashi, icy and resentful.

Naruto watched from afar, not comprehending what he had seen at all.

The anger he had felt when he had been defending himself was redirected at Hiashi, the person he thought was responsible for this pain. The one who inflicted it. The one who embraced it. His pain and the others’ as well.

Hiashi's gaze rested briefly on his nephew, he spoke in a low voice, “Run along now, Neji.”

Neji, who had the present sense to not act on anger unlike his unfortunate relative, held his tongue and continued walking, stiff-backed and visibly reproachful. What he had seen he had never wanted to see again.

Naruto watched as Neji left swiftly through the front gate, ignoring the staring sentries, and proceeded to find his team with, yet again, a ruined mood.

Shocked and slightly disturbed by what he had witnessed, Naruto continued on quietly, wanting to find solace in the one person he knew who could always give it to him.

Hinata's favorite garden was on the west side of the compound. It was a discreet place that was often overlooked, full of young sapling trees and lilies: white, pink, and orange everywhere one looked.

Naruto knew he would find her there.

She sat humming to herself beside a koi pond, scattering feed on the surface of the water and watching as the orange and white fish flapped about eating to their hearts’ content. The blonde stepped clumsily on a twig and alerted her to his presence.

The white eyed girl turned to him and put down the small bucket she had been holding, “Oh! Naruto-kun! It's so nice to see you!”

Hinata quickly got to her feet and dusted her pants off. Her bright smile made him feel a bit livelier.

“Hey Hinata-chan!” He tried to give her a foxy grin, but it seemed pained, “I hope you don't mind that I stopped by!”
She looked slightly alarmed and raised her hands up, “N-No! I like it when you come to visit!”

He nodded but his smile faded.

It was his lack of a smile that had her worried, “Naruto-kun, are you feeling alright?”

“I'm not really sure.”

Hinata decided to cover the basics of formality first, “I see. Have you...had anything to eat yet? It is still quite early.”

Right on time, his stomach answered her in a low growl. He frowned to himself, wondering where her precognitive powers had come from. When the noise subsided, they laughed together heartily. Naruto, as usual, was a bit louder.

“Well I...I guess if you have any leftovers lying around, I'd really appreciate it...” He chuckled, rubbing the back of his head.

She nodded shyly, “Yes, it is about time for breakfast I think. Let's go inside. I'd be glad if you joined me.”

She stepped up on the porch, already barefoot, upon which he hastily removed his shoes. He followed her inside and down a short corridor, “Your dad, he...won't get mad if I hang around for a bit?”

Hinata gave him a puzzled look, “No, I don't think he will, Naruto-kun.”

He nodded as she opened a sliding door and they ventured into the dining room. There was a long, low table in the center of the room with a traditional tatami mat floor. A window was left wide open for fresh air.

Hinata took a seat next to the only girl at the table, and motioned for Naruto to sit at the free place beside her. The blonde plopped down next to her ungracefully and scratched his head. He smiled at the younger girl.

The girl who was already present gave him an incredulous look before going back to her tea. A moment later a servant scurried in, head lowered, with a tray of dishes. He quickly laid them out in front of the girls, bowed, and then left.

Naruto blinked at how fast he had come and gone.


“Sure!” Naruto reached over to a plate, secured himself a pair of chopsticks, and after a grateful, “Itadakimasu!” he was off.

The younger girl gave Hinata an odd look, which Hinata interpreted as confusion.

“Oh yes...Naruto-kun, this is my sister, Hanabi.” She turned to Hanabi, “Hanabi, this is my good friend Naruto.”

“Huh.” She didn't seem very interested. Hinata sighed, expecting such a reaction.

Naruto, after swallowing, grinned at Hanabi, “It's nice to meet you!”

Hanabi sniffed at him and then turned to Hinata, “Remember Onee-san, you will be training with
father later on...you shouldn't get yourself distracted.”

Hinata's cheeks became beet red remarkably quick.

Naruto didn't like Hanabi's attitude, “I'm not a distraction! Sheesh! Can't I guy hang out with his friends once in a while?”

Hanabi smirked, wondering how such a loudmouth had befriended her quiet, older sister.

Hinata proceeded to serve herself something to eat, then asked, “So um, Naruto-kun...what brings you here this early?”

Naturally, he had wanted to blurt out the first thing on his mind: 'Do you happen to secretly adore me? According to Gaara this may be true, and I just wanted to get my facts straight...'

Naruto busied his mouth with some egg to buy himself a moment of thought. With Hanabi around it was much more difficult to touch on the already-difficult subject.

'What am I supposed to say to her anyway?'

For once he didn't know.

He swallowed and then replied carefully, “I just wanted to...come over and...train with you. Yeah! You're an awesome sparring partner Hinata-chan!”

It took him a moment to believe his own bluff.

Hanabi raised an eyebrow as she sipped her tea, wondering what all his stalling was about.

Hinata, for a moment, looked like she had been expecting a different answer. She was quiet as she thought on it, and then nodded, honored, “I...I'm glad that you think so, Naruto-kun, but...wouldn't you prefer to train with Haku-kun or Gaara-kun?”

“I train with them all the time. They're pushovers!” He smiled at her, trying to be convincing, “You're different. I like training with you, Hinata-chan, really!”

In his head, he was upset with his evasion of his primary subject, 'Wow...I really didn't think it'd be this hard to talk about...'

Her face was bright red again and her sister rolled her eyes.

“Well then...I suppose it would be alright.” A small smile crept up onto her face, “I like t-training with you too, Naruto-kun...”

After finishing breakfast and retrieving their shoes, Hinata lead the way to an empty courtyard behind the Main house. All the while, Naruto searched for any signs or actions given off by Hinata that may prove Gaara's theory true.

Strangely, he saw nothing unusual: just the same old, soft-spoken Hinata.

It was clear that she had been befuddled by his random appearance that morning. She had still seemed happy to see him, which was normal for her.

Naruto, unfortunately, had no talent picking out the subtle hints like his red haired friend had. So much of the girl's blushing and stuttering went overlooked, which was also normal.

“Shall we begin with taijutsu first?” Hinata asked, noticing him stretching off on the side of the
yard.

“You bet!”

She giggled at his perky answer and then slipped into a perfect Gentle Fist stance. Nearby, a lark called out into the cool morning air. Naruto did his best to recall the last time he had fought her, '*She whacked the crap out of me! Better try to dodge more this time...'*

He gave no warning when he ran at her. Not that it mattered, she was ready, and he saw the veins surrounding her eyes appear as he leapt, beginning with a heel kick that he often used to off-balance Gaara.

She countered with a small cry, pushing him back with a flat-palmed hand. He couldn't restrain his laugh at her utterly adorable counterstrike, but managed to evade another palm that came swiping for his head.

Suddenly he had forgotten why he had come in the first place and began to believe his own bluff.

After a tangle of shuffling feet and a number of resounding slaps, “Oh Naruto! Your head! Are you alright?”

“I'm fine!”

Naruto had realized just how grateful he was that she wasn't using real Jyukken blows against him. With a strained leap, he landed behind her and she evaded his sweep kick thanks to her Byakugan. Then the rounds of punching and dodging began again.

Ten minutes turned into twenty, twenty became a half hour, and after a long while of laughing and dodging, Naruto finally thought to ask, “Say Hinata-chan, why aren't you with your team right now?”

She paused in their scuffle and admitted sheepishly, “Today is my team's day off.”

Naruto felt his brain turn mushy, “What? But...if today was your break and I've been making you...”

“No, it's alright!” She assured him, “I train on my days off as it is, Naruto-kun, sometimes with my father, but...you are much more fun.”

The blonde still felt guilty, “I'm sorry Hinata-chan, if I had known you were resting I wouldn't have-”

She shook her head again, “Please! It is quite alright!”

He nodded, grateful that she was so easygoing, and then an idea popped into his head from a completely unrelated topic.

'Didn't Ero-sensei make me swear not to tell Haku-kun or Gaara-kun about the Rasengan?’ He smirked to himself, 'He never said anything about Hinata-chan though...'

It was truly the perfect opportunity. The Rasengan, which he had nearly mastered fully, was something he desperately wanted to get off his chest. Every time he was near his teammates, his mouth burned to talk about it, 'Argh! But Ero-sennin made me swear!'

Here was Hinata. She was shy, innocent and certainly not the type of person to spread gossip, *I can totally trust Hinata-chan!*
“Hey Hinata-chan,” He had regained his foxy grin and her heart fluttered at the sight of it, “How about I show you this super cool new jutsu I’ve been working on?”

Hinata gave him an odd look, “A...new jutsu?” Instantly her mind went to Sato and his coincidental revealing of the new jutsu he had pestered his uncle to teach him. She knew better though. Naruto wasn’t exactly on the best of terms with either Sato or his uncle, so he was probably unaware of it at the time.

The blonde nodded sagely, “Yeah, if you promise not to tell anyone, I can show it to you...”

She nodded fervently, “Of course!”

He grinned at her predictable cooperation before her curiosity got the better of her, “So um...what sort of jutsu is it?”

“It's this move called the Rasengan!” He shouted, feeling the weight lift off of his shoulders like magic, “My sensei taught it to me, but he won't let me tell Haku-kun or Gaara-kun about it.”

“I see,” She murmured, “It sounds so exciting...can you teach me, maybe?”

He scratched his head, “Eh...I don't know...it uses a lot of chakra. How about I just show you?”

Hinata stood a short distance away from him and observed as he formed a spiraling sphere of chakra in his right hand. Intrigued by such a strange technique, she decided to view it with her Byakugan as well and noticed something curious.

’Naruto-kun is right. He is using a large amount of chakra...’ She frowned to herself, concerned, ‘Where is all that chakra...coming from?’

She noticed the small specks of red chakra filtering through his circulatory system, where they channeled together through his arm and down into his hand, chakra spinning wildly in many directions, ‘He can spin his chakra so quickly!’

Naruto smirked to himself, glad he had caught her attention, 'Good...now, what's around here that no one is going to miss? She won't see how strong this is just by looking at it...'

Thinking quickly once he had it fully formed, he stole a peek around the yard and spotted a beaten-looking log on its side a few paces behind him, “Okay Hinata-chan! Check this out!”

He turned around and ran at his defenseless target, grinning maniacally. Hinata watched in silent astonishment as he barreled into the log, thrusting his hand into it, and the blue sphere of chakra easily blew the dead tree into thousands of pathetic splinters, ‘...oh my...’

Dust rose up into the air in a thin cloud as he returned to his sparring partner, smirking broadly, “Pretty neat, huh?” Even he was impressed with himself, That was the first time I had it right actually...

“I've...never seen anything like it before...” She said quietly, wondering when he had become so strong.

“Ero-sensei told me that the Fourth Hokage used that move a lot,” Naruto brushed his hands off casually, “Just another reason I know I'll be Hokage someday!”

Her awe was tangible as she stood gawking, “I...I know you will. But you don't need some powerful jutsu to prove that to me, Naruto-kun.”
Naruto gave her an appreciative look and took a moment to take in her encouraging words. Hinata was quiet after that, and the blonde haired boy pondered that maybe he had intimidated her just a bit too much.

“Yeah well...I've got other great jutsu too.” His eyes lit up with an idea, “I know this one I can definitely teach you! If you like...”

“Really?” Her face brightened hopefully.

“Of course! I think I know one you'd like...” Naruto smirked to himself and quickly formed seals, “Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!”

Beside him stood an exact replica of himself. She herself could tell it was no ordinary clone. Naruto watched warily as she activated the Byakugan again, to observe his creation.

The clone gave her a goofy grin and her cheeks tinted a pale pink. The blonde boy glared at the clone, hissing threateningly under his breath, “No fooling around, got it?”

Naruto's replication only chuckled.

“You think that I...might be able to do this?” She inquired softly, less confident after witnessing the Rasengan.

He gave her a disapproving look, “What? Of course! It's pretty simple actually, and making one or two clones doesn't take a lot of chakra...” As an afterthought, *Though I can make hundreds of em!*

“So long as you’re careful and stay within your limits you can definitely use this technique!” Naruto informed her.

Hinata brightened again, “You really think so?”

“Yeah! Believe it!” Naruto nodded fiercely, “Your chakra control is fine so it should be a piece of cake for you.” He showed her the seal required for the jutsu, “Give it a try.”

She nodded slowly and formed the seal he had showed her. Her voice was faint, “Kage Bunshin no Jutsu.”

Naruto knew his faith would be well invested in her. On her first try, Hinata had formed a shadow clone of herself. It stood nearby quietly, blushing. His grin was wide, “See? What did I tell you?”

She grinned back, her cheeks tinted, “Thank you, Naruto-kun. I promise I'll work very hard to make this jutsu worthwhile.”

“I know you will, but for now,” He smirked, “Let's keep this a secret between you and me. Gaara-kun and Haku-kun don't know that jutsu either.”

She nodded and then let her clone dissolve. Hinata sighed, tired out from their training, “Maybe we should take a short break?”

Naruto, still enormously proud of her, stretched his arms over his head, “That sounds like a good idea...”

The two of them went off to the side of the courtyard and seated themselves on the back porch of the Main house. Naruto leaned against a support beam and relaxed, his head making a soft thud with the impact. Hinata timidly removed her jacket, finding herself a bit overheated.
Naruto's thoughts began to wander again, *Maybe Hinata-chan can explain what was going on when I first got here...*

“Hinata-chan” She looked up when he spoke, “When I came here this morning I saw your cousin.”

“Neji-niisan?”

“Yeah,” He nodded, “Something happened though. Some guy just jumped him, maybe even wanted to kill him, it felt like. They were fighting like crazy and then...your dad showed up and stopped it.”

Her eyes lowered, clearly saddened, “I hoped you would never have to see something like that...”

“What was it about anyway?”

“Do you remember the day you and Gaara-kun and Haku-kun helped me prevent Neji-niisan from getting the Caged Bird seal?” She asked, not delighting in the memory.

He frowned, “Sure I do.”

“Neji-niisan is still considered by most of my clan to be part of the Branch family, as his father was,” Hinata explained, voice shaking, “My father made a plea to the elders so that he would not be given the seal, well...” She sighed, “It was m-my plea really. My father he...he wanted so badly for me to be strong, stronger than Neji-niisan...”

“But you are strong Hinata-chan!” Naruto was indignant, “How can you say you're not?”

“My father wanted me to succeed him as the Clan Head, but I was never talented enough...not like Neji-niisan is,” She said quietly, almost ashamed, “Without the Caged Bird seal, Neji-niisan is a rival candidate for being clan heir...my rival.”

Naruto folded his arms, growling, “So your dad says he's stronger than you...”

“But he is!” Hinata admitted, dropping her gaze, “Neji-niisan is very skilled and unlike the other members of the Branch family, he is free. Because of that many of them are bitter...”

“I get it...” He nodded, “So that guy who attacked him...he was angry?”

“Yes.” She replied solemnly, “Some are happy for him though. They feel that he may be able to break the cycle of the Caged Bird seal and heal our clan...” She paused in thought, “That is what I want. That is my goal as well. I feel that it is a tradition that should be thrown away...”

“Me too!” Naruto agreed, “It's just so stupid, how they keep a clan separated like that.”

“But my father, he...” Her voice trembled, “He is ashamed of me. I am not strong like Neji-niisan is. I am...weak and afraid and an embarrassment to my clan...” Her white eyes grew teary, “And he knew that once Neji-niisan d-did not receive the Caged Bird seal, that I w-would lose any chance of becoming the leader of my clan...”

Naruto looked horrified as tears slipped silently down her cheeks, and her head was bowed in total disgrace after she finished speaking. His expression quickly turned to one of anger.

“No!” He stood, shaking his head aggressively, “You can't believe that load of crap! It's all a lie and you know it!”
Hinata looked up at him questioningly, wiping the drops from her face.

“It’s not true. You aren’t weak and afraid,” Naruto protested, “You’re strong, I mean, you can beat the shit out of me if you wanted to!” She giggled, still wiping her cheeks, “And you're brave! Believe it! When we helped Neji, it was all your idea to do it! You're the reason your cousin is free and that makes all the difference! You're not an embarrassment at all; you're someone that your clan to be proud of!”

He nodded in finality and added, “Yeah! So...I think that you should be the leader of your clan, not Neji! Because you...you don't think with your fists, you use your heart and that's why you're a shinobi! A strong one!”

Her eyes were teary again, “Oh N-Naruto...” A small smile appeared on her face, “Thank you, but...I'm afraid that my father just doesn't see that yet.”

Naruto grinned, “So what? You can make him see it if you just do your best! Then he'll see picking Neji over you is a big mistake!”

“You...think I can do it?”

“Of course! Just don't worry!” The blonde boy’s eyes were intense, “I'll help you! I promise.”

When Tenten had received two unknown weapons scrolls from Haku, she had been itching to test them out.

Later on that day, before attending the festival, she had decided to investigate what she had been given. The first scroll, upon inspection, had been a chain-scythe. Not much of a challenge, after all, she already owned one and could wield it with deadly expertise. However, much to her astonishment, he had given her another weapon that never in her life had she even imagined wielding.

It was labeled as a discontinued Leaf arsenal weapon and had probably not been used in ages. She had never seen one before, but she knew from past research exactly what it was. A zanbato.

Tenten suspected it had been taken from the arsenal without permission because even she was aware it was illegal for Leaf shinobi of trainee level to wield such a weapon. She wasn’t about to rat Haku out for taking it, knowing it could get them both into trouble. Horse-slaying swords like these she knew were outlawed for many reasons.

One reason being that they often endangered the user with their massive recoil and lack of maneuverability, making them clumsy in battle. A second reason being that attacking an enemy and successfully landing a blow was nearly always a guaranteed kill.

“What goes on in his head that makes him think I can actually...use this?’ She pondered, fearing where the notion came from.

She had to admit she loved it.

The blade itself was nearly as tall as she, not counting the length of the leather-bound hilt. It was new, or as far as Tenten could tell, unused. Perfectly balanced and unmarked, the blade shined in the morning sun and the tip curved upward at its end, reminiscent of the claw of some terrible predator.

It was art, pure and simple, and her most treasured sword so far.
The primary issue however was rather simple.

“Ugh!” Tenten tugged furiously at the hilt of the sword. It didn't budge the slightest, “Why do they- argh! Always have to- grr! Make them so huge?” She collapsed beside it, panting heavily.

Tenten had arrived at her training field first in order to try out her new favorite weapon. Unfortunately she found herself completely incapable of lifting it. It was ridiculous that a shinobi could be expected to lift one in the first place, let alone fight with something as preposterously heavy.

“I'm not giving up yet!” Rising to her feet again, Tenten took hold of the sword, stubborn determination written all over her face.

Focusing her chakra into her arms she heaved with a new, chakra-assisted strength. Her arms shook as the blade snuck a few inches from the ground...and a few more...until she held it nearly to waist-height. Her mouth was set in a firm line and she glared at her quaking, struggling limbs. Just lifting it was not chakra-economical. Mastering this weapon was going to take a very long time.

'I've never realized how...physically weak I am...’ Tenten marveled, disgusted with her lack of strength, 'There's no way I can use this. I might as well hand it over to-

“Hello Tenten!”

Startled, she lost control of her chakra, and once again bound by gravity the sword plummeted an agonizing three feet down, the dull side landing squarely on Lee's foot. He was still happy to see her and Tenten watched guiltily as his eyes began to water from the crushing agony that was her sword.

Frantic, Tenten used her full weight to pull back on the blasted weapon and managed to free Lee's wounded appendage. Howling, his foot came up, cradled like a wounded babe and he hopped around in a small circle to shake off the pain. He felt better in seconds.

Lee faced her, intrigued, “Tenten! My merciful teammate,” She gave him an apologetic look, “What do you have there?”

She furrowed her brow as she looked to her frustrating yet delightful new addition to her arsenal, “This is it Lee. This right here,” She patted the smooth face of the steel blade, “Is my limit. Oh! I'm really sorry about your foot Lee! This thing is stupidly heavy. It's not broken is it-?”

“I am perfectly fine!” He grinned at her, then turned his attention to the zanbato, “My! What a fantastic weapon, Tenten! Did Haku-kun give that to you?”

Tenten sighed in exasperation, “He sure did...”

Lee reached out and took the hilt of the sword from her inquisitively, to which she made no move to object. To her immense dissatisfaction, he lifted the damn thing with relative ease.

“So you are having difficulty wielding this sword?” Lee asked, wearing a thoughtful expression.

She nodded, completely miffed, “It's no good. I've got muscles alright, but I'm not Gai-sensei...” With a wail, she added, “Finally, when I get my hands on something truly amazing I can't even lift it!”

He gave her a quizzical look, “But you were holding it up before if I am not mistaken.”
“No Lee. That was pure chakra and chakra alone doing that, and even then I was about to lose my grip!” Tenten's frustration was evident, “Sure I can swing that thing around for a while...but I'll deplete my chakra nearly three times as fast at any given rate.”

Nodding, he took her problems into consideration, and then declared, “Then we must train your body to withstand such strain! With hard work and perseverance, I can help you build up your muscles until you can lift things many times heavier than this!”

Eyes wide, Tenten accepted the generous offer, “That...that would be great, Lee.” She glanced down at the zanbato, “When should we get started?”

“There is no better time than the present!” Lee announced jubilantly and lowered the sword, “Here Tenten, try to lift it again.”

She reached out and took the hilt from him. She tugged with a force all the way from the tips of her toes and had no success. Picking apart the problem in his head, Lee took hold of the hilt as well, assisting her. Incredibly, it was up.

She frowned, disliking the gap in their abilities.

“You said you could lift it with your chakra, yes?” Lee asked, forming ideas, “I think we should begin with that.”

With a huff, Tenten forced more chakra into her arms, and felt some strain lessen from that and Lee's help. He nodded, smiling at the small progress.

“Good! Very good! Now we shall have a few warm-up swings, to accustom your arms to the stress,” Lee was surprisingly helpful.

“Yeah...yeah I get where you're going with this,” Tenten answered, bending her arms as Lee had and pulled back on the blade, “When did you become so knowledgeable about this sort of stuff, Lee?”

“When training in taijutsu, it is very important to be mindful of the limitations of one's body,” Lee quoted Gai, “Physical strain like this, I believe, falls under the same category.”

Tenten nodded, swinging the blade, and hoping that their grip on the hilt wouldn't fail and send the blade crashing back down to the ground again. It lasted for over ten minutes, Lee explaining the functions of the warm up, and Tenten feeling like her arms were on fire.

After a short while, Lee paused in their practice, leaving Tenten's chakra-high arms quivering.

“Now I feel you should slowly reduce the amount of chakra in your arms, so your muscles will-” He tried to put it as mildly as he could, “Adapt. Weaning yourself off of the use of chakra gradually should help I think.”

“Adapt?” Tenten huffed, amused, “You mean let them get torn to pieces so they grow bigger.”

“Yes.”

She sighed, “Well...whatever works...”

Almost fearfully, Tenten focused on how much chakra she had built up, and with a reasonable hesitation, lessened it a tiny margin. The blade drooped and she felt her brain splash down into her stomach.
Lee looked expectant.

Her arms were shaking more violently, as they struggled to deal with the weight. Cringing, Tenten took a breath, “Okay Lee, I'm good now.”

He nodded, not wanting to rush her.

Arms bent, the blade was pulled back, and Tenten felt the fire in her arms escalate. They swung the blade forward together, but Lee's strength alone was no longer enough to compensate her reduction of chakra.

She felt something in her forearms pop and she yelped in response, “Lee, I think that did it...”

“That is enough for now,” He helped her lower the sword, “We'll give you a few minutes to rest and then we can begin training you in taijutsu!”

Tenten gave him a puzzled look, “How will that help me lift this thing? It's like trying to lift a cow...”

“Ah, but wielding a sword uses not just the strength of your upper body does it?” Gai's protégée pointed out, “You must be able to block and move while you fight, and taijutsu is the perfect conditioning for that!”

Tenten smiled, rubbing her arms at the idea, “Lee, I'm really impressed. I think I may be able to use that thing after all...”

“Your youthful spirit will make sure of it!” Lee laughed jovially, “I know you will be the finest of all weapons specialists in the Fire Country, Tenten! I have no doubts!”

She chuckled in response, still rubbing her agonized arms.

From the side of the field, Neji then came into view and was certainly not in the highest of spirits. Lee, however, was in the exact opposite state.

“Neji! My eternal rival! Today will be the day I shall defeat you!” Lee announced, predictably.

Without a word, Neji stalked past him and up to Tenten. Neither Lee or Tenten mentioned it, but the Hyuga prodigy looked like he had already been training for a while then, or rather, like he had been in some sort of fight. His arms were bruised and his face was contorted in something worse than his normal level of anger.

And with no change in inflection, “Tenten, are you ready?”

'Oh, I forgot...' She realized after a moment, 'I really should be training with Neji now. Maybe without this over-sized butcher's knife of mine...'

She turned to Lee who gave her an understanding look. Tenten frowned at that look. It was puzzling how they so easily surrendered to Neji's whim whenever it was expressed. He tended to have that effect on people.

“Actually Neji...I'm training with Lee today,” Lee gave her an alarmed look, fearing they may incur the prodigy's wrath with such an idea, “He's helping me out with this thing,” She gestured to the zanbato beside her, “I'll train with you in a little while if you like.”

He was still processing the sentence that included 'training' and 'Lee' in it.
Oh no. She wounded his precious pride.

Losing interest, if there was any, he turned without saying anything and ventured to the side of the field for some hard-core meditation.

Tenten gulped, feeling that this foul mood they had witnessed was not by any means produced by them. Lee still appeared flabbergasted that she had the guts to turn her sparring partner down for a second time and without much protest from him either.

Shaking off the awkwardness, Tenten faced Lee again, “Well? Come on! I want to get started.”

Right on schedule, Gai arrived in a spectacular display of swirling leaves and blossoms, distracting Lee, who immediately ran to him for the morning rant.

“Gai-sensei!”

“Lee!”

“Gai-sensei!”

“Lee!”

With a sigh, Tenten went over to them, wondering how she coped.

“Hello my youthful students!” Lately he had been favoring Tenten and Lee after their dance at the festival, “I see that you two are working together this morning?”

“Yes, Gai-sensei!” Lee was radiant.

“Splendid!”

Gai seemed to overlook the giant sword Tenten had summoned after seeing Neji quietly meditating a long ways off.

“Please, return to your hard work and cooperation!” Gai grinned down at them, earning a salute from Lee in response. Tenten nodded, trying to cling to whatever normalcy was left over.

Deep breaths and full concentration were not softening Neji’s mood in the least. He didn't very much care that Tenten had arranged other plans; he would've only used her as an outlet for his frustrations, as usual.

Seeing a distant cousin attack him out of pure envy, and then to see him writhe on the ground helplessly at the mercy of the Caged Bird seal was not something he delighted in. He had watched its effects for too long, even with his own father before his death, and for an instant of blind rage, he may have even considered challenging Hiashi, but to what end?

He had reopened the tenketsu that his foolish relative had sealed, but the marks remained. Neji felt more humility from what he witnessed rather than how he was attacked.

“Neji, my prodigy, I see that you have decided not to train with your youthful teammates this morning?” Gai had quietly snuck up beside him, something he had noticed much earlier.

Neji kept his eyes closed and said nothing in reply.

Taking a stretch, Gai pressed the subject further, “Those injuries…I do not believe they were inflicted by either Lee or Tenten.” Which was relatively obvious.
“I’d prefer not to discuss the matters of my clan.” Neji pointed out dryly, ending the conversation. Hell would freeze over before he confided in Gai.

With a nod Gai left the Hyuga prodigy to meditate, and went ahead to investigate how Tenten had acquired such a massive zanbato.

One Week Later

“I will not debate this with you any longer. You have heard my conditions,” Kurenai was fed up with her most argumentative student, “I have spoken to your uncle and he has been reprimanded by Hokage-sama himself for teaching you such a technique.”

“But I’m telling you sensei, I can use the Chidori!” Sato was still protesting, even after days of disagreement.

“That is precisely why you have been forbidden from performing it,” She pointed out, “It will get you killed. You have no means of defending yourself from a counterattack, not like your uncle.”

“But I can still subdue my enemies! I can show you—”

“No. Whatever you feel may make your use of the Chidori effective is not worth the risk.” Kurenai gave him a steady glare, “You are only a genin, Sato, and your skill is questionable. As your instructor I must ensure your safety.”

“You act just like Kakashi! Dance around the truth of it, say it's too dangerous, but you don’t acknowledge anything that I can do!” Sato snarled, “All you really mean is that I'm stupid! That I can't protect myself! I don't have anyone who believes in me... and now I think I don't need anyone who does! I don't care what you have to say sensei! I can do this on my own! You're just like the rest of them.”

Abruptly, before she could retort, the silver haired boy stormed out of the new training area that they had been using. Hinata watched him leave, hands folded, worry weaving its way into her delicate features.

She was unsure of what to think. Both Sato and Kurenai had brought up great points, but in terms of safety and ability, Kurenai had the upper hand. Hinata could only hope that Sato would not do anything rash before the arrival of the Chunin Exam.

Shino, it was clear, agreed fully with Kurenai. He stood next to Hinata, hands hidden in his pockets.

“It is for his own good,” Kurenai said finally, to her remaining students, “I'm sure I can trust you two to prevent him from endangering himself?”

They nodded silently.

Back in town, Sato was fuming.

He had a difficult time recovering from the endless argument he had with his jounin instructor. Even his own teammates seemed uncertain of him using the Chidori after seeing it themselves.

The young Hatake made his way hastily down a busy street, frowning and thinking the situation over, 'What do they know anyway? They're not really concerned about my safety! They're just pissed off some juvenile delinquent like me is raising the bar for the other genin around here! Always selling me short...'}
He stopped outside of a bakery and peaked in through the window thoughtfully, *Maybe I can hang out here for a while.*

Sato strolled inside, running into the back end of a long line, *Whoa, it's busy in here today.*

He took a seat as people scurried around, picking out pastries and bread, shouting orders, arguing who was first in line...things he was used to hearing. Patiently, Sato waited for the customers to leave one by one, and snapped a picture of the last to exit, who happened to be a balding, obese man who had purchased a fritter.

Sato smirked to himself, amused.

“How did you come out for lunch?”

He looked across the now empty shop to see Tama leaning on the counter next to the register. She gave him a welcoming smile and he grinned back, feeling less upset.

“How, I'm not hungry. Hey, guess who’s fifteenth birthday is in...” Sato took a moment to think, “Two months and six days?”

Tama sighed, smiling, “Mine? Maybe?”

He pulled up a chair to the counter and sat down cross-legged, grinning, “I think you're right, clever girl.”

His odd behavior did not catch her unaware and she rested her chin on her hand, considering the false expression on his face, “You seem upset about something. Is everything alright?”

The grin he had conjured crumbled away, “No, nothing’s alright anymore,” He admitted, “I got my team pissed off at me again...”

“What happened this time?” She asked, curious, turning around and rearranging the bread on the shelves behind her as she listened.

“See, I finally got my cyclopic uncle to teach me the Chidori, right?”

Tama giggled, “Right.”

“Then I show my teammates because I think that they might give me just a bit more respect, right?”

She nodded, “Right.”

“Then Kurenai-sensei just flips out and tells the Hokage! Now I'm forbidden from using it ever!” He hollered, standing up and waving his arms about.

After a moment of thought, Tama answered, “I understand. That wasn't very fair of them to do after all of your hard work,” He smirked at her favorable response, “However, I think for now you should be patient and trust their judgment, so you don't get into any more trouble, alright?”

“But it's so stupid! No one has faith in me! They all think I'm just some kid with a bunch of tricks, but I'm—”

“Shh! Keep it down, you'll scare away my customers,” She admonished lightly, “You've got to calm down. You are a great shinobi; don't let them convince you otherwise. If it were up to me, I'd let you use the Chidori whenever you felt it necessary. But I think just because they're looking out
for you doesn't mean that they don't trust you.”

“I know you believe in me, but that's kind of your job, isn't it?” Sato chuckled, feeling buttered up by her confidence.

Tama shrugged, “Yes, I suppose it is my job,” She then added, “Although, this is my job too...” She patted the counter smirking, “It's hard to believe I earn more money in a day's work than a genin does!”

He sighed, “Not that hard to believe, actually...”

Her dark eyes lit up with an idea, “Oh! I just remembered! Could you do me a favor and find Lee for me?”

Sato grinned, “What? You want to ask him on a date or something?”

“No smartass,” Tama snapped, “I'm kind of not allowed to do that.”

He laughed playfully, “I bet you would if you could, right?”

She wore a small smile, “Maybe I would, now will you quit it? I need you to find him and tell him to come out here in his free time.”

Sato's voice became slightly defensive, “...why?”

“Unlike you he helps out around the shop and is polite and courteous!” Tama explained, folding her arms, “All of his help has earned him a free muffin. So can you tell him to stop by and pick it up?”

He relaxed a margin, “Oh, sure. I thought you had a thing for him or something.”

“Will you knock it off?” She warned, “You have no reason to mistrust me!”

“Hey, it's okay...Lee's a cool guy.” Sato chuckled, “I'll go find him for you then. I'm not busy.”

With a sigh she nodded, glad that she had his cooperation, “Thank you.”

Sato exited the bakery with a new spring in his step.

Visiting Tama always cheered him up. Although he was aware that his idiot uncle was the reason for his engagement to her, it had not bothered him when he was young. Sure she was nearly three years older than he was and quite a handful, but she was one of his closest life-long friends.

There were times he wondered if it was wrong that he didn't want to marry her, like he would be breaking some sort of contract that was signed for him. After all their relationship was forged when they were infants. He prized her friendship and support, but the older he got the more doubts he began to have.

She also seemed aware that he was reluctant of the entire marriage idea. But they never complained, because good friends shouldn't fret over sharing a life together, she had once said.

Still, he remembered trying to interest her in others on a few occasions, hoping she would choose a different path. It never worked. Then again, the dates he had set up for her hadn't gone very well and she let him know it too.

So whether they liked it or not, they were stuck together, thanks to their ridiculous uncles.
'One day, karma will come back to bite Kakashi in the ass...' He thought to himself pleasantly as he traversed down the sidewalk, 'Er...what was I supposed to do? Oh yeah! Find Lee. Hm...where is Lee?'

Sato had no idea where Lee lived or hung out yet he did, fortunately, know someone who might.

He ended up near his own apartment building. The weapons forge next door looked open and occupied so he decided to drop by for a minute.

The front door was left wide open and upon entering Sato's eyes met the display of a countless number of swords, kunai, shuriken, chains and every other pain-inflicting devices that shinobi adored. They had all been hand made.

'It's a bit warm in here...'

Venturing casually to the back, Sato discovered Tenten, hard at work like the blade-smith she was. He watched curiously for a moment as she folded the steel of the blade she was making over a glowing fire, hammering away. Judging that she was drenched in sweat and looked a mess, and that the blade looked like it was coming into its final stage of lamination, he guessed she had been hard at work for a while.

Sato cleared his throat loudly to catch her attention.

She paused and looked up in mid-swing. Tenten gave him a weary smile, and pulled the blade out of the hearth, setting it in a basin of cold water.

The silver haired boy raised a hand in greeting, “Hello there, neighbor!”

True, her apartment was only a few doors down from his.

“Hi,” Tenten removed her gloves, and rubbed the sweat out of her eyes with the back of her hand, “What can I do for you, Sato?”

“I've been sent to find Lee,” He reported, “I don't suppose you know where he is?”

“He should still be training with Gai-sensei, I think. Our team uses training area six, uptown.” Tenten answered, leading them to the front of the forge, “Can you believe that Lee's training has actually made my folding better?” She displayed a well-muscled arm, now capable of swinging things many times the weight of a cow.

'She's way fitter than I am...'

“I believe it all right...” Sato mumbled, “Maybe I should stop by sometime if the results are that good...”

Tenten smirked, noting his annoyance, “I'm sure he wouldn't mind! He'll run you ragged though.”

“If I can survive Kurenai-sensei's training, I can survive just about anything,” He replied, heading out the door, “Thanks Tenten, and oh! Good luck on your C-rank mission tomorrow!”

She frowned to herself after he had gone, 'Now how did he know about that?'

The following day, Team 2 had been training rigorously under the watchful eye of their mentor.
“Move your feet, Haku.” Jiraiya advised, looking up briefly from his book.

The dark haired boy leapt, hurling a few dozen senbon at Gaara who met them with his sand shield. Round after round of needles, Haku's attacks were utterly useless against his teammate.

'I can't keep up long range attacks...I have to get closer.' Haku landed lightly, moving fast and low as Gaara's sand reformed and floated around him. In a bold move, Haku met Gaara's first onslaught of sand with a running kick, breaking through, which the red haired boy promptly blocked.

Senbon were thrown again, only two connected with Gaara's arm and not in critical spots either. Haku cursed his inaccuracy as Gaara hit him with a solid punch that he had no ability to block. Off-balanced and frustrated, Haku was knocked down with another blast of sand and Jiraiya sniffed at his poor performance. 'Jeez, looks like my genius student needs to dust up on his taijutsu. Naruto has hit harder than him since he was six.'

“Where is Naruto-kun?” Haku asked curiously, winded, being that his defense was not nearly as difficult to crack as Gaara's was. He would much rather have the blonde boy as his opponent at the moment.

Gaara extracted the needles from his arm and answered, “When he isn't here it usually means he is training with Hinata-chan's team.”

Haku frowned and stood, brushing himself off, “You shouldn't put ideas into his head...he might get into trouble.”

“I doubt it.”

Gaara had earlier informed him that since he had dropped a subtle hint to their blonde friend about Hinata’s crush, Naruto had been investigating it thoroughly. Haku feared that if Naruto did not handle the situation properly that Hinata’s feelings could end up getting squashed.

Though he often never meant to be, Naruto could be quite destructive when it came to delicate circumstances like that, and Haku was very worried that he may even unintentionally discourage Hinata from her pursuit. He found it amazing that Naruto already had such a faithful admirer, although it could be anyone's guess how long it would be before he recognized it.

Gaara just liked to shake things up...in his own lazy sort of way.

Jiraiya had put away his notes and turned his gaze to Haku from his seat atop a summoned toad’s head, “Haku, I’m going to be honest with you. Your taijutsu needs major improvement, and I mean major, before the Chunin Exams begin, got it? It could end up saving your butt if you get yourself into a difficult fight. I've already recommended you guys for the exam and I won't have any of you making a fool out of me!”

“You do that perfectly well on your own.” Gaara pointed out and the sage ground his teeth at him.

Haku had already learned that the hard way. Unlike his teammates, Haku was frail and terribly low on stamina. Where Naruto could easily recover from a hit, Haku often suffered a knock out. The Hyoton boy had to admit, it was difficult to keep up with the abilities of his teammates in terms of chakra, endurance, hand-to-hand combat and general ability.

There were moments when he wished he could trade his agility and strategy for better physical qualities, 'Some are just lucky I guess...’

Jiraiya had once told them that they were a fairly balanced team. Haku and Naruto were fast on
their feet while Gaara was the stationary, defensive sort. Haku contributed brains to the team and Naruto contributed brute strength and Gaara was a bit of both worlds for stability.

But it was becoming more and more evident that Haku was starting to fall behind, *Things just seem to come more easily to them these days. Perhaps it is in the nature of jinchuriki to adapt rapidly?*

“Since you're so close with Team 13, I suggest you go train with either Neji or Lee in your free time.” Gaara commented, noting Haku's troubled expression, “They will help you improve more quickly.” Haku nodded, since he had even thought of it himself.

“I did speak with Tenten earlier about it. I will seek them out when they return from their mission.” He resolved, glancing over at Jiraiya who had dismissed his toad, “Until then, I think we should see where Naruto-kun has been.”

Near the border of the Fire Country Team Gai advanced swiftly towards their location.

It was a standard C-rank mission and was not scheduled to last more than two days. The task was to simply retrieve a scroll that a wealthy lord did not rightfully own, though he claimed it being a 'divine heirloom' of his clan. It was unclear if he was even originally from a clan to start and there were no reports of encountering any opposing shinobi, so it was deemed another taking-candy-from-a-baby sort of mission.

Once they had passed through a rocky outcrop of forest, they stopped for a moment of rest on a rock ledge overlooking the palace below. A scrub-covered plain was between them and their destination.

“The estate further ahead is small and should have relatively weak defenses,” Gai announced, grinning in the hazy afternoon light, “They will not be expecting ninja to be seeking this scroll.”

“What is our plan, Gai-sensei?” Lee was already trembling with excitement.

“Neji, Tenten; you two will scout ahead near the west side of the estate,” Their jounin instructor became more serious, “If there is no guard stationed there you will proceed to infiltrate the palace and retrieve the scroll. The records said it is kept separate from other documents on the grounds and should be relatively easy to locate.”

Tenten nodded, memorizing their instructions.

“If your approach on the east side of the palace is unguarded, we can expect to rejoin you once we are inside?” Neji pointed out keenly and Gai nodded.

“Yes. Lee and I will follow behind and keep a lookout for sentries. Keep your radios on and we will meet back here before dark.”

Tenten gingerly adjusted the device secured around her neck.

“Move out!”

The Hyuga prodigy and his partner darted down the stone slope while Gai and Lee retreated back into the brush forest. Already, Tenten could hear Lee's enthusiastic rambling over the radio and she smirked in amusement when she saw Neji sigh to himself, also hearing his proclamations.

“It's definitely clear now. That guy near the shrine just turned the corner...” Tenten reported in a
low voice, and turned to see Neji beside her, still fiercely examining the inside of the nearby building with his Byakugan.

“We'll move in now.”

She nodded and followed him along a tiled wall they had taken cover under. They were lithe shadows as they slipped through a dying garden, with gray sunlight filtering down through the thick clouds overhead.

Tenten found it perplexing how Neji simply slid open a door without an ounce of hesitation once they had gotten close enough, although it was all accredited to the fact that he could see through walls and most other solid objects. She was still amazed at how calm he could be at a time where she could barely handle the adrenalin coursing through her limbs.

The smell of burning, bitter incense hung in the air. Tenten, out of habit, drew a kunai as they rounded a corner and flanked down a deserted corridor. It felt almost too quiet as they paused near a wide open window, which she peeked out of, only to see shadows in an empty courtyard.

Neji eyed solid walls keenly, until finally he turned to her, motioning for her to be silent.

They passed down another atrociously long hallway and Tenten could already tell that it had occupants, judging by the recently waxed floor. She delighted in how her feet made no sound as they padded further into the interior of the palace.

'Not very decorative, are they?’ She wondered, noting how only a few paintings adorned the walls. It was simple and creepy and she wanted to find the scroll and get out as fast as possible.

Neji, it seemed, was in no rush.

They stopped again before the turn of a corner. His voice was low, warning, “There are two ahead of us. The room they are stationed in front of has the scroll.”

“You can see it? From over here?”

He gave her a look of incredulity before she shrugged, then asked, “Right. So can I have first dibs?”

Neji grinned, knowing exactly what she meant, “If you're quick enough.”

There it was: another competitive challenge during a simple mission. She frowned, knowing he wouldn't deliberately endanger a plan, but still, she wanted to put him in his place.

Tenten was down the hallway in less than a second, too fast for them to even realize she was not a resident. The first one managed to draw a kunai in defense but he was no shinobi. It was a motion she had practiced hundreds of times before: knock the knife away, jab at the gut, blow to the head and he was down. She didn't even have to use her blade.

Tenten turned in time to see the second guard tumbling down unconscious after a vicious, unrestrained dose of Jyukken. Neji slid open the door again, not missing a beat. She couldn't help but smile, 'That was what? Five seconds?’

She followed him in and found that the incense had in fact been burning in that room next to a rack that contained a single, crimson colored scroll.

'Some useful tips for the future: follow your nose...it's surprisingly helpful.'
“Tenten,” Neji’s voice had snapped her out of her thoughts, “Let’s go. We-”

There was a faint crackling over both of their radios, and the distant shout of, “Leaf Hurricane!” that grabbed their attention. Tenten gave her partner a pained look, knowing they were both thinking the same thing after what they had heard.

“The report said no shinobi encounters. You don’t think-?”

“It didn’t say we were the only shinobi searching for this scroll,” Neji answered and her face darkened, “We have competitors.”

“Let’s go now.” Tenten had enough of waiting and she darted out first with Neji close behind her. They retraced the path they had used to infiltrate the palace to find means of an escape.

They flew down the last corridor in less than a minute, meeting no resistance, although uproar could be heard from the eastern portion of the estate. Tenten watched their surroundings as they raced by; the door, garden and wall swirling past them as they moved, boundless energy supplied to her legs as she tagged beside Neji.

’Lee...Gai-sensei...what’s going on?’ Her thoughts were frantic as well. Thankfully, their quick escape had granted them a moment to recuperate, so they paused beside an out-of-commission fountain in front of the palace. Guards were scrambling around a ways off, too busy to even notice them.

“Here.” Neji handed her the scroll, which she took with a shaking hand, and watched as he tried to establish communications with the missing half of their team. After a minute of tampering around with the device, the radio was still silent.

Tenten sighed, trying to cling to optimism, but it was difficult.

He looked thoughtful for a moment before he stood, “We should keep moving. It’s possible they’ve already retreated.”

She nodded, taking a deep breath, and followed after him as they abandoned their hiding spot and raced out onto the scrub plain ahead.

The sky darkened and light seemed to shrink away nervously as the two ran in silence through the field, skipping over boulders from time to time. Tenten gave an inquisitive look at the scroll she had been trusted with. Her eyes widened in thought.

“Neji...Neji, I think I know what this is,” Tenten paused, glancing over it again to be sure and he gave her an odd look.

His head snapped around however, after hearing another approaching them fast.

“Neji! Tenten!” Lee stopped in front of them and tried to regain his breath.

Tenten was alarmed, “Lee! Where’s Gai-sensei?”

He shook his head, a grim expression on his face, “He told me to go ahead and rejoin you two. It seems that there are other shinobi who arrived shortly after we did looking for the same scroll. Gai-sensei is fighting one of the Rock ninja...I think they are jounin.”

Neji’s eyes widened, not expecting such high-level threats.

“Jounin? From Iwagakure?” Tenten found it astounding, “What could they possibly want this
Lee’s fists were clenched, “I do not know, but Gai-sensei is outnumbered! He may need our help!”

Tenten turned to Neji, at a loss. It was unthinkable for them to take on a single jounin without their mentor, but if there were more, and from the Hidden Rock village no less, the mission could become chaotic very quickly.

Lee shook silently, standing across from them. He, like Tenten, could think of no course of action that would lead them to success. The silence was long and Neji broke it.

“We're going back.”

His teammates looked at him, shocked. Neji wore a defiant expression as he went on, “The outcome of this mission is likely to be a failure as it is. It's pointless to leave him behind.” He smirked, “Unless you...have doubts?”

Their stunned expressions seemed to melt away into something close to awe. Neji rarely ever displayed such bravery and leadership, and they felt inspired by his proposition.

Tenten grinned, tucking the scroll away, “No way. I'm not leaving Gai-sensei behind.”

“Me neither!” Lee hollered, fire burning in his eyes.

“It's settled then,” Neji looked pleased with their decisions, “We should hurry.”

They ran fully out in the open with Lee at the front. It seemed absurd for them to return to the estate with it already in turmoil, but they had little else to lose if they chose to take more risks. Tenten's gaze followed Neji as he moved like a breeze over the shrubbery, and she wondered what had suddenly made him decide to turn back.

Their return trip was cut short when Lee skidded to a startled halt, his teammates doing the same shortly after.

Ahead, some two dozen yards, was one of the Rock ninja garbed in dark clothing and a thick vest. He looked surprised to see them heading back in the direction of the tumult, but his expression soon turned to satisfaction to see they were only genin.

'Great...Lee was right. This guy really is a jounin...' Tenten grumbled mentally, trying to form some sort of strategy.

“Hand it over kids and I promise you can run home safe and sound,” His voice was a low baritone, “It's a wonder you got involved at all.”

'Involved in what? A theft?’ Tenten's mind was running away with her again.

“We are not leaving until Gai-sensei comes with us!” Lee yowled, giving a shifty look to Neji beside him, who remained motionless. Tenten felt her hand close around a number of shuriken.

Just as the Rock ninja's eyes fell upon her, Tenten felt her heart jump into her mouth as her teammates charged together, 'Wait! What are they thinking?'

It was an impressive sight as for the first few seconds, the Rock ninja was too surprised to block, but as seconds ticked by, Lee was given a run for his money. Neji had already activated his Byakugan.
Tenten wasn't very inclined to just sit back and watch.

Whipping out two of her best scrolls and setting them down, she smirked as she cried out something of a warning to her teammates, “Soshouryu!”

She was in the air a moment later, hurling scythes, swords, kunai and other delightful instruments of pain. Lee ducked out of the way of the assault and Neji blocked out of pure reflex as he continued to jab at the jounin with spikes of Jyukken.

The Rock shinobi managed to evade most of the projectiles, although one or two knives protruded from the front of his vest. Their hearts sank as he formed seals and aimed a rock jutsu for Tenten, who was still helpless in the air.

Instinctively she raised her arms up in front of her as she fell, trying to lessen the blow, but the sheer force of the boulder knocked the wind out of her even before she had touched the ground. Tenten tumbled down, still fighting fit, trying to regain her breath, 'Ow...I think he cracked something...'

Lee, somewhere off to her right, had opened a gate and began to circle around the Rock ninja in preparation for an attack at a speed untraceable to the human eye. Neji was already beginning an assault of his own, “Hakke Rokujuyon Sho!”

The Rock nin had some difficulty blocking while Neji attempted to seal off his tenketsu. Lee was still circling, waiting for Neji to end his attack.

'That's not going to finish him...gah! I need to do something!' Tenten rifled around for any scroll in her possession and her hand closed around one which she quickly inspected, 'Oh. But this is just the one we stole. Still, I thought it was...well, it could be a-

Out of hurried curiosity, she opened it. What she saw made her shudder in excitement.

A summoning scroll.

'It's a weapon too! I can't believe my luck!' Her eyes scrambled around, looking for a place to sign it, 'Mission or no mission, I don't care, I'm not passing this up!'

Only one name had been signed in the space before hers and it looked very outdated, 'Hm, I wonder why this hasn't been in use?' Using the stolen time from Lee and Neji's distraction she hastily bit her thumb and signed her name hurriedly in blood, unable to suppress her grin.

As she stood and darted further away to put more distance between herself and the fracas, her eyes passed over a small, faded kanji near the top of the scroll, 'It looks old...but it's in good shape. Great! I can work with that!'

Tenten leapt up to the top of a rock outcrop, overhearing Lee trying to perform Primary Lotus. Without wasting a moment she summoned the weapon, and in a flash of smoke her excited grin turned into a frown of the utmost bafflement.

It was a golden yumi (long bow), tall enough so that it reminded her of her new zanbato, which she had lovingly nicknamed 'Cow-Killer.' The bow was among the most magnificent of bamboo yumi she had ever laid eyes on, with small, red seals lining it down the side.

After the momentary euphoria of her success, the horror kicked in, 'Wait a minute! It's just the yumi...but no arrows!'

Anyone well-practiced in the art of Kyudo would first condition their bodies and relax, but Tenten
was beside herself over not having thought of bringing arrows with her. Her brain was scrambling, and the sight of Lee getting knocked back a few dozen feet by an earth jutsu was not helping her relax.

'No arrows! No haya or otoya? I'm screwed! How am I supposed to use this?' Her eyes darted frantically up and down the beautiful yumi, 'Now I get why no one used this thing! It's completely!' Tenten's breath hitched when her dark eyes noticed an odd kanji at the center of the bow which could be distinguished clearly, '...molded chakra...what the heck is that supposed to mean?'

She figured any shinobi could be discouraged by such a puzzling weapon, even the ones from Iwagakure, 'Pft...as if they'll figure out how to...'

Chakra.

She understood.

'Does this mean...use chakra as an arrow?'

Tenten figured that was her only option. Focusing chakra into her right hand, she laid it over the seal as she held the yumi steady with her left hand. Her excitement returned as she pulled back, and a blue shaft of light formed. Now that was progress.

She strung her chakra ya to the bow, her heart hammering so loud she was sure she could hear it, and pulled back, eyeing her teammates as they relentlessly attacked the jounin. Tenten's aim was on the spot; the trouble was that Lee and Neji were still in the way.

"Move!" She must've screamed it at the top of her lungs as she launched.

The three shinobi below her looked up, startled, only seeing a flash of blue soaring towards them. As expected, Lee did not have to be told twice as he raced out of the way, not certain what was going on. Neji, on the contrary, was a bit preoccupied as the Rock nin continued to fight, this time drawing a sword.

Halfway in its trajectory, in less than a second, the chakra arrow did something rather peculiar.

It lit on fire spontaneously and there was the briefest of panicked moments as it landed squarely, unaffected by wind or resistance at the jounin's feet, setting off and exploding like some sort of grenade. Neji deflected the blast at the last second with Kaiten. The Rock ninja was less lucky.

Further beyond the fresh crater lay their opponent, unconscious, and then sporting some nasty third-degree burns. 'All that from this thing?' Tenten eyed the yumi, smiling, 'I'll be sorry when I have to hand it over to Hokage-sama...'

Down the slope of the outcrop, Lee looked up at Tenten, whooping and hollering, "Tenten! That was amazing! I have never seen such destruction with a single shot!"

"Me neither..." She muttered, beginning to stow it away.

Neji, who recovered the fastest from Tenten's frightening attack, made certain their opponent was knocked out before calling over to them, "We should keep moving!"

Lee nodded, still excited from the battle.

Tenten didn't want to rush the care of her new favorite weapon, "You guys go ahead without me! I'll catch up in a minute."
They left a moment later and she continued to store away the yumi, regarding it with admiring eyes.

“We were chased out here after they discovered us,” Lee explained as he led Neji past the tree line into the surrounding forest of the estate, “This is where I last saw Gai-sensei…”

Neji had activated the Byakugan and was already examining the area.

Lee paused, hesitant to go any farther, “Shouldn’t we wait for Tenten?”

“She’ll be right behind us,” Neji dismissed the thought as he searched for signs of their mentor.

All at once, the two Leaf ninja leapt back to avoid the shuriken that rained down where they had been standing. They looked up to see another Rock shinobi, perched on top of a nearby rock ledge. He looked a bit older than them.

Both Lee and Neji were confident at that point after having defeated a jounin. The chunin before them did not seem at all threatening.

“Feh!” Clearly he was displeased with his aim, as he made a reach for more shuriken.

“If you mean that crazy guy with the stupid haircut,” The Rock nin smirked, “My squad leader is handling him right now…”

Lee glared at him but knew better than to be provoked. Neji, even without using the Byakugan, noticed the earth clone of the Rock ninja that had crept up behind them and he turned, signaling for Lee to move.

After avoiding its surprise attack and reducing it to a pile of dirt with a blast of Jyukken, Neji was about to destroy the other two clones closing in. Lee had found one of them and was already attempting to dispatch it, not prepared for when the original Rock chunin attacked from underground, “Doton: Inner Decapitation Jutsu!”

Taken by surprise, Lee was suddenly dragged underground, leaving only his head exposed above the surface. He wore a baffled look as the earth clones approached.

Neji easily destroyed them with two well-placed jabs, and after seeing that Lee was stuck he continued on to get rid of the young Rock nin. In his rush, he evaded the rest of the shuriken the Rock chunin hurled at him with ease.

Unfortunately, after he sealed only two tenketsu, the Rock ninja managed one last panicked jutsu. Neji failed to avoid the rock slide that came crashing down beside him, obscuring him from Lee's view.

Lee spat out a mouthful of dust, “Bleh! Neji!”

It was quiet for a long moment. Out of the rubble, brushing dust from his arms the Rock ninja appeared, coughing and sputtering after his reckless move.

Lee fell silent and watched as the Rock shinobi descended the slope, pleased with his handiwork, 'Did he... really get Neji?'

It seemed so.
Not a moment later, Tenten came diving through the trees, throwing round after round of kunai. One of which, with an exploding tag attached, landed nearby Lee as he began to wriggle out of his prison, “Tenten—!” He was cut off as the tag detonated and thankfully gave him enough leverage from the debris to free himself.

The Rock chunin blocked her hail of knives and ducked back, not expecting another to show up.

She landed in front of Lee with a kunai raised in front of her. He sighed in relief.

“Where's Neji?” Tenten gave him a sideways glance.

“He was injured and I think—”

“Then take him and go ahead and find Gai-sensei,” Tenten answered, eyes set on the Iwa nin, “There's no use waiting around here.”

Lee gave her an incredulous look, “But Tenten, what about you?”

“I can handle it.” She said curtly, watching as the Rock ninja began to form seals.

With a compliant nod, Lee darted over to the rock pile as Tenten leapt at the opposing shinobi. After leaning the unconscious Hyuga prodigy on his shoulder he bolted, hoping she would end this battle as decisively as she had ended the last.

Again, the chunin used a Rock jutsu which she easily avoided by taking cover in a tree. The shuriken he threw as a follow up she deflected and threw back at him. Tenten was still fresh with energy and she could tell her opponent was wearing down.

‘If I stay up here, I can avoid his earth jutsu no problem!’ She decided, jumping up higher and higher into the canopy of old oaks.

Without warning he appeared behind her and stabbed her full in the back. He only destroyed a substitute. Again he was frustrated, “Why don't you come out of hiding little girl? Your teammates aren't here to save you!”

Tenten already had a summoning scroll out, moving fast. In her mind, she thanked Lee for all of his training as her beloved zanbato appeared and she took hold of its hilt with calloused, practiced hands.

The chunin settled on a lower branch, still searching for her with a kunai in hand.

Suddenly she was falling with the weight of the blade, and she seemed to fly downward, in a silent free fall though the treetops, crashing down next to his position. Tenten watched as his eyes widened in shock, probably due to never seeing such a weapon before.

And it happened with her mind elsewhere. The blade swung nearly on its own accord and bisected him right through his middle.

The Rock nin gave a startled, choked gasp before he fell back off of the branch in two halves.

She rested on bent knee and leaned on the stained blade. She panted heavily.

Tenten could tell she had won even before she had summoned the sword.

With only half a mind and a conscience that seemed to be frozen over, she unsummoned her blade without cleaning it, her arms trembling from the effort.
Tenten hadn't wanted to kill him but he had gotten in the way. If she hadn't stopped him he would have surely gone after her friends.

The next thought that did cross her foggy mind happened to be something less important, *I'm definitely not calling it Cow-Killer anymore.*

“Remind me again why we're not out training?” Naruto yawned, preparing ramen for his breakfast.

It was the day before the Chunin Exam and the three boys of Team 2 lazed about at home early that morning.

“Jiraiya-sensei feels we should rest our bodies and minds for the day so we can be fresh for tomorrow,” Haku answered, busy sweeping, “Today we relax.”

The blonde boy smirked at him, “You don't seem very relaxed to me, Haku-kun.”

Haku frowned at him, “If I don't do the housework it'll never get done.”

Naruto nodded, knowing that neither he nor Gaara were keen on chores, at least not the way Haku was. Somehow during their years spent living together Haku had assumed the role of housekeeper.

On the couch Gaara was spread out, dozing lightly.

Though they didn't admit it, the boys all had the 'pre-exam jitters,' or so Jiraiya had labeled it. They didn't know what to expect from the exam besides the participation of shinobi from distant countries. It was anyone's guess what would happen after they took the plunge into the fierce contest of becoming chunin.

Gaara was confident enough to sleep on the idea.

Naruto and Haku, on the other hand, were a different story.

Finished with his cleaning, Haku sat across from Naruto at the table and helped himself to some instant ramen. Naruto slurped his noodles slowly, staring down into his cup.

“So, tell me about your training with Hinata-chan,” Haku said after a moment, looking sly, “Gaara says you've been going to see her often now.”

The blonde boy's face lit up at the subject, “Yeah, Hinata-chan is awesome to spar with! Her taijutsu totally rules out yours and Gaara's!”

“I can imagine...” Haku sighed.

“She's great, but...” Naruto's smile faded, “Her clan has issues. I've never seen people more stuck up! And they make her out to be some kind of joke. It's completely unfair, Haku-kun.”

“The Hyuga's strict traditions make them quite narrow-minded,” The dark haired boy agreed, taking a nip at his ramen, “But what do they have against Hinata-chan?”

“Her dad thinks she's worthless and that Neji's some kind of saint!” Naruto had stopped eating, and his raised voice caught Haku by surprise, “I'm telling you, it's unbelievable that she's even related to them at all!”
Gaara smirked from his place on the sofa.

“And Hinata-chan…she keeps trying so hard. When I'm Hokage, I'm gonna set that clan straight, just wait and see!” Naruto gestured with his chopsticks.

Haku smiled and with an earnest voice answered, “Naruto, you really will be the most virtuous of leaders this village has ever had. I will cherish the day your face joins those on the Hokage monument.”

Naruto wore an astounded look upon hearing his friend's sincere words, and then nodded quietly, unsure of what to say.

In his own mind, Gaara agreed with Haku's declaration.

“I spoke with Sakura-chan yesterday after I ran into her uptown,” Haku changed the subject with flawless timing.

Naruto wore a surprised expression, “Really? I haven't seen her in a while.”

Gaara's smirk vanished.

“Yes. She and her teammates have been thoroughly preparing for the exam, although she seemed a bit nervous,” Haku added thoughtfully, “Not unlike us.”

“Feh! We'll do fine! I still think we're the best team in this entire village!” Naruto grinned confidently, having faith in his team's abilities.

Without any kind of warning, Gaara rose from the couch and left the apartment. His friends blinked in confusion.

The door closed behind Gaara gently and Naruto stared after him inquisitively, “Where does he think he's going?”

“Gaara-kun can handle himself,” Haku said simply, “Let him go where he likes.”

Sakura walked down the side of the street carrying a bag of groceries. Even the day before the Chunin Exam her pushy mother still had her running errands.

Unable to help herself after seeing the beautiful display of chrysanthemum, Sakura stole a peak in both directions before stopping for a moment in front of the Yamanaka flower shop. She took an indulgent sniff of the bright blossoms, trying to calm her jumbled nerves.

Ino had stepped out at that precise moment to add another mum to the display.

At first sight, Ino had actually been glad to see her. Even though she had been Sakura's top competitor during their time at the Academy, and then after, she couldn't help but have a soft spot for the pink haired girl.

Like she'd ever show it.

“Well, well, forehead girl! Fancy seeing you here,” Ino gave her a sassy look, “How's Sasuke-kun doing?”

Sakura turned slowly to face her, refusing to take the bait, “Hello there, Ino-pig,” She smiled back, “He's fine.”
Ino still wanted to strike a nerve and get a rise out of her, “Good. I'm looking forward to a date with him one of these days! It isn't as if I have any competition.”

Sakura was surprised at how boring the conversation was, “Yup.”

Ino, flustered, couldn't help but become aggrivated at Sakura's submissive attitude, “Why did you come over here anyway? Is something bothering you? Other than the fact that you're going to fail the exam tomorrow?”

“My team and I will do just fine tomorrow, Ino,” Sakura answered, turning away from the flower display, “You should save your concerns for your own team.”

In her mind, inner Sakura was raving, 'Cha! Toss that one right back at her!'

Before coming up with a snappy retort, Ino's eyes happened over a lone figure across the street that immediately gave her the creeps, “I don't see him come around here often...”

Sakura followed the blonde haired girl's gaze to the opposite side of the road where Gaara stood in the shadow of a tall building, watching her impassively.

The pink haired girl felt her brain slosh around in her stomach. Ino didn't overlook Sakura's bewilderment.

Steeling herself, Sakura took a deep breath and straightened the paper bag in her arms, “I'll see you later, Ino.”

With wary steps Sakura crossed the street to him, hoping this meeting would be on peaceful terms.

Ino set down the flower pot in her arms and smiled, finding the scene intriguing, 'Maybe I'm wrong about Sakura. It looks like she's got different goals than I thought she did.'

The pink haired girl tried to avoid eye contact as she approached, but it was an arduous task. She gulped, trying to gather her wits, 'It's just Gaara-kun. Everything is going to be okay.'

“Hi.” Her mouth had acted on its own. It was then she realized time had not slowed down, and that she was standing only a few feet away from him. 'He looked so far away...'

He did not answer in words but instead gave a slight tilt of his head, gesturing for her to follow.

Sakura ambled after him as he entered the alleyway behind them and leapt with ease up onto a fire escape. Readjusting her parcel, Sakura made the jump as well, and then proceeded to follow him up onto the aluminum roof of a tattered building.

They stood for a moment, facing each other awkwardly. 'He doesn't look mad...' She thought.

Sakura forced herself to smile, trying to calm herself down, “I...haven't seen you in a while. How are you and the others doing?”

Gaara shrugged.

The simple action helped her relax fully and she was glad to see he wasn't in one of his wrathful moods. Sakura found she was able to form words easily again.

“Well I can't tell you how excited I am about the exam tomorrow! I just know we're going to do great!” Sakura was in one of her rambling states of mind, “Kakashi-sensei says that we should expect to be competing with ninja from other villages, and we should be as healthy as possible when the exam starts,” She paused, seeing that he was once again listening intently, “‘Things are going to get really crazy come tomorrow...”
The silence that followed made her more alert to the fluttering creature in her stomach.

“I don’t blame you.” He spoke at long last.

Sakura gave him a quizzical look, “B-Blame me? For what?”

“For you telling your teammates about us,” He ignored her terrified look, “It was...the right thing to do. Teammates should not keep secrets from each other.”

She shook her head, “They weren’t my secrets to share.”

Gaara's face gave no trace of emotion, “You don’t have to worry about that anymore.”

“Yeah...” She mumbled, a small smile finding its way to her face.

With no change in inflection, he added, “I’m disappointed in you.”

Her face froze up in response; not comprehending, 'I don't get it! He tells me that it's alright and now he's sending me on another guilt trip?'

“I was disappointed that you didn’t believe I would forgive you.” Gaara said quietly, as if she couldn’t have figured it out for herself, “Something you should keep in mind, Sakura, is that I am your friend. I could never hate you, but I will warn you to be cautious of your actions from here on out. My temper gets the best of me at times.”

She was surprised by his sage piece of advice. Sakura then understood why he had sought her out, 'I suppose he wanted to be honest about his feelings with me…without using Naruto or Haku as a go-between.'

“I...I will.” She answered softly, finding it hard to look at him, “Good luck for tomorrow.”

The following day was cloudy and a sharp tension filled the air. Naruto, Gaara and Haku had only caught a brief glimpse of Jiraiya before heading off to the Academy. He was not thrilled that he had to contribute a few hours of community service before going to check up on them. His parting words had been: “Knock ‘em dead!”

At the present time, Naruto and his teammates were making their way through the busy corridor of the second floor, listening as Haku quizzed them on questions they may be confronted with. It was, after all, a formal exam. Mental preparation would be helpful.

“There's no way you can kill someone like that Haku-kun,” Naruto retorted, as they passed by a group of lost-looking Rain ninja, “Senbon don't kill people.”

“They can.” Gaara said simply, “It's just that Haku doesn't kill people.”

“You're not qualified to talk about this subject,” Naruto grumbled, disliking his lack of knowledge, “Except for maybe the...uh...killing part.”

The red haired boy only sighed.

“On to the next question...” Haku pressed on as they passed by a crowd of desperate, young ninja gathered around a blocked door, “Hm, I hope they realize that this is the second floor and that is only a genjutsu...”

“They’ll figure it out for themselves eventually,” The blonde smirked, “Now, next question, and
Alright.” Haku took a moment to think, “Three shinobi are guarding a scroll. Shinobi A is directly behind Shinobi B and directly left of Shinobi C. If Shinobi A and Shinobi B are 15 feet apart, and Shinobi B and Shinobi C are 17 feet apart, what is the distance between Shinobi A and Shinobi C?”

“I said easier, Haku-kun! Not crazy math stuff!”

Gaara had already worked it out, “8 feet.”

“That’s right.” Haku nodded happily.

Naruto gave Gaara an annoyed look before shrugging, “Ah, well. You always were good at math.”

They reached the third floor, which was relatively clear of ninja, with the exception of shouts coming from down the hall. The genin of Team 2 exchanged short glances before moving on, wondering what the fuss was about.

The boys passed over a balcony and below it they discovered Lee challenging another ninja.

“You! The one with the bad attitude!”

“Oh no.” Haku was alarmed by the sight.

On the floor below them was Team 7 and Lee, who was glaring at Sasuke. The Uchiha seemed relatively unfazed by Lee’s presence. Naruto chuckled, not expecting confrontations before the exam. Then again, he had to consider how Lee adored camaraderie and punished disrespect. Sasuke was bound to strike a nerve if they crossed paths.

“I, Rock Lee, challenge you to a fight!” Lee was clearly over-excited and without his teammates. Still, Sasuke wasn’t looking very much bothered. Kiba and Sakura could only observe in exasperation, fearing that Lee was too riled up to think rationally.

Gaara decided to save him the trouble, “You shouldn't waste your time here, Lee.”

Lee was surprised by the comment and looked up, as did the other Leaf genin. Lee immediately lost interest in his challenge of the Uchiha survivor, and leapt up onto the balcony to join Team 2, “Ah! It is good to see you comrades! This indeed is a momentous day, is it not?”

Below, Sasuke looked nonplused. Lee’s attention span didn't linger on sneering opponents; he seemed to naturally gravitate to friendlier people.

“How are you Lee?” Haku gave him a small smile, “It looks like Neji and Tenten aren't with you.”

“Yes. They went on ahead while I stayed behind to...” Lee glanced back down at Sasuke, frowning, “Test myself against one of the geniuses of Konoha!” He then turned his attention back to Haku, “Of course, there may be a better time and place for it. Are you and your teammates ready for the exam?”

“Of course we are Fuzzy-brows!” Naruto replied enthusiastically, “Haku's been giving us drills all morning!” Haku wore a troubled look, but Gaara seemed just as confident as Naruto did.

“Hey! I don't mean to interrupt your shouting match up there, but if you guys don't quit it you'll be
late for the first part of the exam.” Kiba pointed out, sick of delays. Akamaru yapped in agreement from atop his head. Kiba turned to Sakura, “Let's get going.”

She nodded to him and looked up to Lee and Team 2, giving them a parting smile. Sakura followed after her teammates in silence, hoping that she was hiding her nerves well.

“He is right.” Lee nodded sagely, taking the Inuzuka boy's advice, “I shall now go and return to my team!” In a flash of bright, green youth he departed down the hallway, radiating confidence.

“I wonder what that was all about?” Naruto said, stretching his arms over his head as he, Haku and Gaara continued on, “I know Sasuke's not exactly what you'd call friendly, but Lee looked ticked off.”

Haku stared ahead at Gaara's gourd as they walked, frowning inwardly, “I can't say that I know.”

Gaara didn’t bother sharing his opinion, but he didn't have to; his teammates were already aware of his opinion of Sasuke.

When they were younger, Gaara had missed out on the fateful day Sasuke’s family had been annihilated. While Naruto and Haku assured him that it was a good thing he had, and that no one should have to witness something as macabre as the sight of that bloody mansion, they themselves wondered if that was one of the reasons Gaara seemed to detach himself from the very thought of the Uchiha survivor, harboring no sympathy for him whatsoever.

Naruto often called it 'Gaara's pet peeve'. The mere mentioning of Sasuke seemed to plaster a scowl on the red haired boy's face for hours on end. Haku had tried to discover the roots for his extreme detestation but there seemed to be no motive.

That was, until recently, they had gained a rather ominous clue.

Things began to go downhill with Gaara's mood swings as Sakura had been placed on the same cell as the young Uchiha. Sakura and Sasuke seemed to share an unidentifiable bond, as subtle and obscure as it was. Gaara noticed it better than anyone, and he spat on and shunned the idea of the two actually being friends...through glares and silent protest.

In short, both Haku and Naruto had concluded that Gaara felt at least slightly threatened by Sasuke, with regards to Sakura.

‘Though I guess it's got to be more complicated than that...’ Naruto assumed, ‘Gaara-kun won't say a word about it. When he was ranting about Sakura a while back...he didn't say anything that proved he likes her. He can be such a prick sometimes. I guess I'm used to it by now.’

Gaara kept walking silently, sensing his teammates' anxiety. He chose to ignore it.

Naruto slid open the door on the far end of the hallway and his expression turned to one of astonishment. The same could be said for both Haku and Gaara as well.

The auditorium was packed. Teams of shinobi from many different villages were seated at desks or standing along the walls, huddled together talking, scheming, praying and other such activities to pass the time. The cacophony of the room was deafening.

“Wow, a lot of ninja turned out...” Naruto muttered, still visibly amazed so many people could fit in one place. He and his teammates ventured inside, keeping a wary eye on the foreign shinobi hanging about.

The blonde boy's shock turned into fascination at all of the different headbands he was seeing,
“Grass, Cloud, Sand, Sound, Rain...” He grinned at Haku, “Hey! Maybe some Mist ninja showed up too, Haku-kun!”

Gloomily, Haku shook his head, “I wish. The Hidden Mist Village has had its own Chunin Selection Exam for quite some time, Naruto-kun. I don’t think they're fond of interacting with other countries.”

Naruto sighed in defeat at the news. There just seemed to be no way to cheer Haku up with the idea of being reunited with his kindred.

They lingered near the back of the room, where thankfully, a cluster of Konoha genin resided. Naruto didn't overlook Hinata seated between Shino and Sato at a desk in the far right corner. He shouted and waved, “Hey! Hinata-chan!”

Her cheeks tinged pink as he approached, followed by a smirking Gaara and Haku.

“Hello Naruto-kun,” She said softly, smiling, “Hello Gaara-kun, Haku-kun...”

Shino nodded to them as well, which was something uncommon on his part. The blonde boy turned to see Sato next to Hinata, his head buried in his folded arms on top of the desk. He frowned to himself in puzzlement, having never seen him in such a state.

“Is Sato-kun feeling well?” Haku asked, not wanting to disturb him.

Hinata glanced over at her silver haired teammate, “He's been sleeping since we arrived. I'm not sure what is troubling him, but Sato-kun hasn't been very anxious at all over the exam.”

“His unusual lack of energy may be attributed to matters that we are not permitted to discuss.” Shino added cryptically, which was little help. Hinata, however, only nodded in agreement, giving a worried glance to their less-than-perky teammate.

“That's gotta suck, being sick on the day of the Chunin Exam...” Naruto assumed he was ill, “Hopefully he won't hold you guys back!”

“I'm sure he'll catch a second wind...” Hinata said softly, hoping that was the case.

Gaara had his arms folded and he gave a thoughtful glance to the young Hatake. He too found his lack of liveliness to be disconcerting.

Haku looked to his left to see Kiba and his teammates approaching, along with the members of Team 10. Sakura and Ino appeared to be having a heated argument already. 'So many are participating...it seems that a majority are actually Leaf shinobi as well...' Haku was trying to get a head count on their competition.

“Hmm, it looks like you're all a bunch of newbies this year...” A voice came from behind them, and they turned around to see another Konoha genin, straightening out his glasses, “You better watch your step! This is one tough crowd.”

Naruto gave him an odd look, “Eh? Who are you supposed to be?”

The boy smiled back at Naruto, “Me? My name is Yakushi Kabuto,” He then chuckled, “And you are Uzumaki Naruto.”

The blonde boy was startled, “How’d you know that?”

Kabuto smirked, “I know all there is to know about the genin participating in this year's exam,”
He paused, glancing over to Haku and then Gaara, “That is to say...I'm an old pro. I've failed this exam seven times.”

“Seven times?” Haku and Naruto spoke in unified disbelief.

He nodded gravely, “Yes. This isn't a game. The Chunin Selection Exams are the dividing line between Academy students and true ninja, and it's no easy line to cross. It's a test that many rookies take lightly and well...” Kabuto sighed, “They come to regret it.”

Shikamaru, with Chouji munching a bag of pretzels beside him, gave a suspicious glance to the strange Konoha genin, finding his words to be a bit theatrical. He reflected on how the difficulty of the exam could prevent him from advancing, especially when he lacked the full incentive to actually pass it to begin with.

Ino and Sakura had ended their loud discussion and took a moment to heed the seasoned genin's advice.

“All my time spent taking the exams hasn't been wasted,” Kabuto smirked to himself, pushing his glasses further up the bridge of his nose, “From my experiences I've compiled these Ninfo cards,”

He displayed a deck of cards, whose faces appeared blank, “They contain information on every genin here.”

Sakura's eyebrows knitted into a frown, “But those cards are blank.”

He nodded, “They are now. But once I pump a bit of chakra into them they become more useful...” Kabuto demonstrated by squatting down and placing a single card on the floor. He tapped it with his index finger, injecting a small amount of chakra.

After a moment an image appeared on the once-blank card. Haku took a mental note of the trick, finding it interesting.

Again, Kabuto smirked, very full of himself, “These cards are the fruit of all my toils. There's not one ninja around who I don't have details on.”

His audience at that point had no doubt about it, having never witnessed something like it before. Still, proof would help the skeptics rest easy.

Sasuke frowned. He had his hands stuffed in his pockets, “Then you have information on the rookie genin as well?”

“Of course,” Kabuto again readjusted his glasses, “Name anyone. I have them.”

Sasuke was thoughtful for a moment and Kiba and Sakura both gave him contemplative looks. “Rock Lee,” Sasuke suggested, thinking of his most recent encounter. A moment later a small smirk appeared on his face, “And Gaara.”

Naruto felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on end before he turned to his redheaded friend. Both he and Haku stole a glimpse of their teammate. He seemed outwardly relaxed, almost as if he hadn't heard Sasuke's request. Yet beneath the façade Naruto could tell he was barely leashing the killing intent that often radiated off of him in waves.

After a short search through the deck, Kabuto retrieved a blank card and fed it chakra to make the information visible, “Here we are: Rock Lee. It looks like he graduated a year before you did. He is the student of Maito Gai and his teammates are Hyuga Neji and Tenten,” He blinked and then continued, “Hm...it says here that he's improved greatly in taijutsu, but has no talent for either genjutsu or ninjutsu. His team has completed 30 D-rank missions and 12 C-rank missions.”
Sakura held her breath as Gaara's card was also found and she stole a glance at Haku and Naruto. They also looked a bit nervous. The red haired boy was silent as he watched, wondering what his own stats were.

“This is it: Gaara. Wow, looks like he and his teammates are being trained by one of the Legendary Three, Jiraiya,” Kabuto was impressed, “His teammates are Uzumaki Naruto and Haku. He well-rounded in taijutsu and has potential for genjutsu. His ninjutsu far exceeds genin skill…”

Naruto and his teammates relaxed, seeing that there was no critical information listed on the card.

“His team has completed 33 D-rank missions, 4 C-rank missions and...whoa! Get this: one A-rank mission lead by Mitarashi Anko!” Kabuto read the last of the information with an air of incredulity.

Stunned, the rest of the rookie genin turned to give a hearty stare to Team 2, unsure if what Kabuto had listed was even accurate. Sasuke and his teammates were clearly baffled.

Naruto, Haku and Gaara only snickered, not expecting their mission to the Land of Waves to be recorded. The Hokage must have posted the results immediately upon their return.

“Well, it looks like Konoha has some of the toughest competition this year…” Kabuto concluded, stowing away his prized Ninfo cards, “Some other ninja to watch out for come from Sand and Rain, but I wouldn’t worry too much about any Grass or Sound shinobi; they’re pushovers. Cloud ninja are a force to be reckoned with; however there are few participants this year.”

A short distance away a team of Sound ninja listened in, not liking Kabuto's viewpoint on their village's strength.

“It's surprising though, I didn’t think Cloud would participate with us at all,” Kabuto went on, gesturing towards a team on the far side of the room that seemed to be chatting idly with each other, “And the Sound village is relatively new and not very large,” He added, smirking, “I feel those ninja won't be much of a threat.”

Naruto was about to ask him why that was before one of the eavesdropping Sound ninja nearby rushed over to Kabuto with an incredible speed. He was nearly unable to block the incoming punch that forced him back a few feet. Hinata gave a small chirp of alarm while other Leaf genin flared up their senses for a fight.

The bandaged Sound nin stood warily in front of Kabuto, unwilling to back off. Kabuto tried not to appear intimidated. Haku, with the exception of Shikamaru, was the least inclined to start a riot over the assault, ‘We can be disqualified before the exam even begins if we cause trouble now…’

Other ninja seated nearby looked on curiously, wondering if things would get ugly.

The Sound ninja’s voice was a low growl, “You'd do well to not underestimate the shinobi from my village, cur.”

Kabuto readjusted his glasses, smiling at him, “Perhaps I will, but this doesn't prove much to me you know...I simply-” He stopped speaking and fell to his knees retching. The lenses in his glasses had cracked and it was evident there were signs of a silent attack.

“Kabuto?” Naruto reacted the most sympathetically, as was his nature, “Are you alright?”

A few other Leaf genin helped him stand as the Sound ninja stalked off, fuming. Kabuto wiped
his mouth with the back of his hand, muttering, “I see...so it was that kind of jutsu. I should’ve been more cautious.”

Gaara merely blinked at Haku, feeling that the know-it-all genin had brought it upon himself. Haku sighed. He was grateful they had avoided an all-out brawl. As the noise level in that part of the room began to steadily increase once again, it seemed as if the incident had been forgotten.

“Quiet!” There was a shout that could be heard over the raucous and the assembled genin quickly hushed. Their attention rested on a man at the front of the room. He was clad in a dark overcoat and a fierce expression resided on his scarred face.

He continued speaking, “Before the first part of the Chunin Selection Exam commences you all will be randomly seated by number. Do not expect to be placed by your teammates in this part of the exam.”

After a moment or so names were called and categorized into different rows. Of the rookie Leaf genin Haku was the first to be called. Giving a cheerful expression to his teammates he went ahead to one of the rows nearest to the front, leaving the other genin to contemplate their positions.

It took a long while to seat all of the genin, but once the process was finished, Naruto relaxed a margin. He had been lucky enough to be seated next to the shy Hyuga girl. He grinned at her, whispering, “Hey Hinata-chan! You see our teammates anywhere? I can’t spot em.”

With a blink, she nodded, “I saw Gaara-kun near the back before I was seated and...Sato-kun is just a few seats right of you...”

The blonde boy turned to have a look and saw the silver haired boy nearby. His head was still resting on his folded arms, “Wow, he looks like crap. Are you sure he’s going to be alright?”

She sighed, “I...really don't know.”

“Listen up!” All heads faced front, “For many of you this is your first time taking the exam. Pay attention because I will not repeat myself,” He cleared his throat, “My name is Morino Ibiki and I will be your proctor for the first part of the Chunin Selection Exam.”

The room was very still after that and Naruto noticed Hinata shifting uncomfortably in her seat.

“The first portion of the exam will be the written test,” Ibiki went on, “There are nine questions on the written exam. Each of you will start with ten points each. Every time you are caught cheating, two points will be deducted from your score. Anyone who is caught cheating more than five times will fail and any team whose combined scores are fifteen points or less fail. After the 45 minute period you are given to answer the test questions, a tenth question will be administered.”

Naruto leaned his chin on his hand, absorbing the information, and then turned to Hinata, “Jeez! So many rules! They really put you through the ropes with all this stuff...”

The shy girl nodded silently.

“The sentries stationed about the room are there to make sure you do not cheat,” The proctor informed a few puzzled genin, who were startled by the hawk-like guards nearby, “There will be no talking after the tests are handed out,” Ibiki smirked, “Good luck.”

The scratching of pencils was absent as the tests were distributed, but Naruto's attention was focused on Haku who was only a few rows ahead of him. The moment the dark haired boy had been handed the test he had just started scribbling. The blonde boy frowned to himself, “I didn't know Haku-kun was left handed.”
“I believe he is ambidextrous, Naruto-kun.” Hinata said softly, smiling as she signed her name on the top of her own paper.

He nodded to her, but was still confused, ‘I can't believe I never noticed that...’ Without further preamble Naruto glanced over his own test after signing his name.

‘Okay, question number one: Three shinobi are guarding a scroll. Shinobi A is directly behind Shinobi B and directly left of Shinobi C. If Shinobi A and Shinobi B are 15 feet apart, and Shinobi B and Shinobi C are 17 feet apart, what is the...wait a minute! I know this question!’ Naruto scratched his head, wondering what the odds were that Haku had actually given them the first question to the written exam, ‘Whoa that's creepy...huh. What did Gaara-kun say the answer was? 8 feet?’ He scribbled that down before he could forget it.

He smiled inwardly, 'Alright! No sweat on the first one! Now to number two...' Maybe Haku had inadvertently given him the answers to the other questions as well?

Unfortunately, he found the question asked for the elemental weakness of Earth element jutsu, 'Hmm...okay, skip that one!'

The third question was even worse, 'How am I supposed to know how that jutsu works? Next one...' Again he moved ahead, only to find he could not answer any of the following questions, ‘Ugh! Every one of these is harder than the one before!’

Sweat began to form on his brow and he kept his eyes firmly glued to his own paper, even though he could not make heads or tails of any of it, 'Oh no! Oh no no no no no! Haku-kun and Gaara-kun, they're gonna kill me!' He pictured the looming figures of his best friends at the idea of him failing, and in short, failing all of them, There's no way I can answer any of these! I...I've gotta cheat! There's no other way...'

Ibiki's words of warning on cheating replayed in his head, 'Gah! But if I do then I might get caught and fail anyway! How am I supposed to-”

“Naruto-kun...” A faint whispered sounded from beside him.

The panicked blonde glanced over to Hinata, “Oh...uh, what is it Hinata-chan?”

Her face heated up, “Well...I just thought that if you were having trouble...I could share my answers with you, if you like.”

He raised his eyebrows, “You'd really do that, Hinata-chan?”

“Of course!” Her soft voice trembled, “You have been such a help to me...I wouldn't mind at all.”

He grinned at her and gave a tiny nod as her fully-filled out paper slipped from beneath her left arm almost imperceptibly, and his cerulean eyes began to scan over the answer of the second question, 'Heh heh...she must've gotten the answers with her Byakugan, I bet...'

Not a second afterward, a pencil met a clipboard, scratching fiercely. Naruto glanced over to the sentry who had jotted his name down, smirking at him.

'No...I guess...I guess this just won't work.'

“Hinata-chan, I can't.” He turned his face away from her and she looked dismayed, “I don't want you to get into trouble and besides...” Naruto looked back and gave her a foxy grin, “I'll make it! I have to if I'm gonna be Hokage!”
With a blush, she nodded, pulling her paper away quietly.

A moment later, Naruto was busy panicking again, *Who am I kidding? I'm screwed!*

Elsewhere in the room, Gaara had finished copying his answers with a technique he had developed during the last few months of his training with Jiraiya.

He had called it simply, 'Daisan no Me,' forming a third eye out of sand which was connected to his optic nerves and required very little chakra. Naruto, upon seeing it for the first time, called it the 'Creepy Sand Eye,' and asked him not to do it again because he found it gross. Gaara told him it was an irrational fear since it was an object comprised of only sand and chakra, but the blonde boy had different opinions.

Near the front of the classroom Haku had answered all of his questions within the first ten minutes. With a sigh of relief, he put his pencil down and closed his eyes, thinking the situation over. *Gaara-kun won't need much help, but I doubt Naruto will be able to answer anything beyond the first question...I'm sure he won't mind if I assist him.*

As Naruto sat leaned over his test, fidgeting nervously in his seat and he almost missed his one and only salvation as it formed next to his paper. His shifty eyes strayed downward to where a small, icy mirror had appeared out of thin air. In it there was the unmistakable reflection of a paper, completely filled out, *HA! Haku-kun, you're the best!*

Quickly, he picked up his pencil and filled out the remaining questions on his test, grinning all the while. Hinata merely gave him a confused look but then smiled to herself, glad he had found a less risky way to obtain information.

For good measure, Haku had sent an ice mirror over to Gaara as well.

Naruto finished copying down the answers Haku had so easily supplied him with and sat back, chuckling maniacally to himself. *I never would've thought Haku-kun's ice-doohickeys could be so useful! Now we'll definitely ace this exam!*

The blonde boy gave a small smirk to Hinata who only blushed in response. He let his eyes wander about the room, averting test sheets, and saw how the rest of the genin were doing.

To his left, Sato had woken from his depressed slumber. He wore a dark frown as he scratched answers down onto his paper, unknown to Naruto; he was guided by the movements of a tiny beetle. The blonde boy only raised his eyebrows, wondering what had him in such a funk.

A short distance off he spotted Sakura, who looked as if she too had finished with her exam as well. She had turned over her paper. Chouji was seated further ahead to the right and looked as if he were finishing his test as well, *Wow. These people are either really smart or really good cheaters...'*

And not a moment after Naruto had thought that to himself, a sentry on the side of the room hurled a pen at someone on the far left, startling the genin as the pen stuck up from the center of his paper. He looked up, horrified, as the sentry smirked at him, "You're done. I've been watching you: your five chances have been spent. You and your teammates fail."

"But I wasn't cheating! I swear! I don't know what you're talking about-"

"I said you're done," The sentry repeated, with no trace of sympathy, "You and your teammates are to leave immediately."

The genin's teammates stood, faces grim, and shuffled down their respective rows in utter
humiliation. Still mortified, the guilty genin stood also, muttering in shame, “I...I'm sorry guys.”

His teammates said nothing as they left and the door closed behind them with a click. All other cheaters in the room abruptly paused, fearing the same fate.

Naruto shuddered at the sight. He had to steel his nerves after the incident. The time that slowly ticked by afterwards was only a blueprint for disaster as numerous other teams were eliminated. Their numbers were shouted aloud and they made the terrible trek to the door, their heads hung in embarrassment.

Forty five anguishing minutes passed.

“Times up!” Ibiki's voice rang out over the thick silence, “Now, I will explain the rules of the final question...”

Groans of annoyance sounded as tired brains were reawakened.

Naruto faced front, eyes wide, *This is it! Number ten!*

“Some things you should be aware of before we proceed are the following: if you answer this last question incorrectly your entire team will fail automatically,” Ibiki's voice was mechanical, “Furthermore, neither you or your teammates may participate in any future Chunin Selection Exams if you miss this question!”

Groans of annoyance transformed into gasps of shock.

“What are you saying?” Sakura's shout was distinguishable, “Our entire performance so far is judged on a single question? That makes no sense!”

Naruto stood up, howling in outraged agreement, “Yeah! That's totally stupid! Just what kind of question is it anyway?”

“Silence!”

The two rowdy Leaf genin sat down and shut up.

“You have been given an option,” The heartless proctor went on with no change in inflection, “If you feel that you are unable to answer the tenth question under these conditions you may choose to drop out now and be free to take next year's exam. Otherwise, this will be your only chance to pass the first portion of the test.”

The room was eerily quiet as hands began to appear in the air, and numbers were called as nervous genin and their teammates stood and prepared to leave, believing in the phrase 'better safe than sorry.'

A few minutes passed as more and more genin abandoned their endeavors. Naruto sat, shaking in a fit of rage, unable to believe that an entire test could depend on one question. He glanced back at Gaara who sat unperturbed in his seat, staring ahead. Haku, who was at the front, also looked peculiarly calm.

*I just can't accept this. Not even if Haku-kun gives me the answer...if he knows it...this is complete bullshit.*

A quivering hand rose into the air and from the back of the room, Gaara narrowed his eyes, not expecting his stubborn friend to succumb to such pressures. Even without looking back Haku could tell Naruto had raised his hand.
And just as quickly as he had lifted it, Naruto slammed his fist down onto his desk, standing and glowering at the scarred proctor. All eyes were set on him, even those who were about to give up, as the blonde boy glared blue fire at Ibiki, “This whole test is complete bullshit and I couldn't care less if I flunk this question or not!”

Haku sighed to himself, smiling.

“I don’t care if I'm stuck as a genin for the rest of my life! I'm going to be Hokage someday and that means I can never back down!” Naruto declared, wearing a sadistic grin, “So whatever this question is, bring it on!”

He sat back down with a thump and folded his arms. Inside his head, however, his resolve was shaken, 'Oh crap! I better get this right!'

Hinata stared at him with pearly, awe-struck eyes. Her thoughts were a jumbled mess of inspiration, 'Naruto-kun is so brave…'

From the right the blonde boy was surprised to hear the first peep to come from Sato, who was muffling his laughter. Somewhere in the back, although he couldn't tell from where, Lee was congratulating Naruto's 'Youthful Spirit!'

Ibiki himself was impressed that after the speech no more genin had decided to quit, 'Well, looks like that kid did it! No one else appears to be backing down,' He frowned to himself, 'Hm...there's a lot more left than I had anticipated. This is going to be very interesting.'

The proctor spoke up a moment later, “Very well, we will then move on,” He smirked inwardly, “Pay close attention.”

The room was quiet again, with the exception of Sato's stifled chuckles.

“You all...pass.”

Somewhere in the back of the room a person had collapsed from their seat. The sound of thudding jaws impacting desks was also predictably audible. Ibiki only sighed as the volume of the room grew in hysterical confusion.

Gaara's eyes were set on Naruto as the blonde boy struggled to grasp what had happened.

“Wait a minute!” Sakura still wasn't buying it, “What's the tenth question?”

“There isn't one,” Ibiki said simply, “It was merely a ploy to determine which ninja would stand up to the challenge, no matter how hopeless it appeared.”

“Just what are you trying to say exactly?” Naruto inquired, eyes squinted.

“In the world of a shinobi there will be missions that seem hopeless,” Ibiki explained, “Many ninja would abandon their duty if they were given the choice to do so, as seen here. But a ninja must be able to fight against the odds, regardless of how difficult the mission is.” He looked directly at Naruto, “Anyone left here now has proven they are willing to face such adversity, a characteristic necessary in order to become a chunin. That is why you've passed.”

Naruto's bafflement melted away in seconds and a huge grin covered his entire face, “Ha ha! I knew it all along! There's no way we could fail a test like this!” He turned to the shy girl beside him, “Isn't that right Hinata-chan?”

“R-Right.” He was delighted by her squeak of agreement.
Other genin added to the cheering, though none as loudly as Lee or Naruto.

The rejoicing had barely lasted five minutes or so before an explosion of smoke filled the front left corner of the classroom, and a ninja tumbled inside, hurling kunai into the walls in order to secure a drape that obscured Ibiki from sight.

The kunoichi righted herself and glared at the surprised genin, “Alright, listen up maggots! We will now move on to the second part of the Chunin Exam!”

Haku stared wide-eyed, “Anko-sensei?”

The dark haired woman looked over to him, “Oh, hey Haku. I knew you’d be here. How about the weird ones?”

“Um...they're here too.”

She grinned, “Perfect.”

“You're early again, Anko,” Ibiki walked out from behind the drape, “We were just finishing up.”

“Ah, I can see that,” She frowned, “Ibiki...there are way too many left over. What were you thinking? You better not be getting soft with your tests...”

“I can assure you, I'm not. We have a large number of strong candidates this year, it seems.” He answered, looking very pleased.

Haku blinked, never guessing that Anko would be involved in the upkeep of the Chunin Exam.

Anko nodded and then returned her attention back to the genin, “Listen good maggots! I'm Mitarashi Anko, your proctor for the second part of the Chunin Selection Exam! You are all to report to training area 44 within a half hour! Any questions?”

There was a stunned silence as her response.

She didn't bother waiting for any enquiries, “Good! I'll see you there!”

Anko was gone a moment later, leaving Haku to share a long-sided glance with his teammates.

Naruto stood after a moment, stretching his arms over his head, “Whew! That wasn't so bad!” Other genin also began to stand, murmuring to each other.

“Leave your test papers at your desks. They are to be collected.” Ibiki gave his final announcement, “You better move along. You will not be registered for the second part of the exam if you're late.”

Naruto had appeared beside Gaara and they waited as Haku left his seat, his head still reeling from the puzzling written test.

The blonde boy gave his friend a nudge in the ribs, “See? I told you we'd pass no problem!”

Gaara was not so easily fooled, “Haku-kun put a mirror on your desk too, didn't he?”

“Yeah, he did...”

“Let's go.” Was Gaara's reply once a fatigued-looking Haku had joined them, and they proceeded to join the exiting crowd, already pondering what the next portion of the exam held in store.
Part Two: The Forest of Death

Chapter Soundtrack: “Otoranbu-Jongarayosakoi” by Agatsuma

“What a charming place...” Haku muttered as his dark eyes settled on the prodigious trees caged by a wire fence. He flipped a stray strand of hair away from his face as Gaara gave a short grunt, warning him that now was not the appropriate time for sarcasm.

“This is area 44, huh? How come we’ve never been to this place before?” Naruto wondered aloud, walking beside Haku and ahead of their silent redheaded friend.

“It's off-limits to genin,” Haku answered the obvious, “It is now clear why.”

The three of them had finished the first part of the exam and moved along to the site of the second stage as Anko had earlier instructed. Naruto was still a glowing light bulb of self-confidence after passing the first test with such ease, albeit it had greatly frayed their nerves at first. The blonde bounced along with his arms folded behind his head, not in the least bit fearful.

Haku, as usual, was the most apprehensive of his team. He supposed this was the part when the real danger started, when ninja began to vie for the chance of being promoted to Chunin rank. Like Naruto he too was confident of his team's strength, but dared not underestimate the shady characters that had arrived from other villages.

Gaara had decided early on to not form any sort of strategy without first being informed of the second stage's regulations, and didn't let himself get anxious over it.

They were not the first group to arrive. Other genin teams were already pacing the open lawn in front of the fenced-in training area, eagerly awaiting the exam to continue. Deciding to keep a space cushion between themselves and their rival shinobi, Team 2 settled next to a maple tree, all the while watching the other teams circling about.

The tension was suffocating.

“What do you suppose we'll be doing next? Racing through that jungle maybe?” Naruto asked finally, unable to leash his ever-mounting curiosity.

“It's likely.” Gaara replied, folding his arms across his chest.

Haku frowned, “It seems like all the genin will have to go in there and that means...there will be confrontation.”

“We can handle it. Those other ninja don’t look so tough!” Naruto yawned, still undeterred.

Other genin arrived in the passing time; many teams were from Grass, Sound and Rain. There were also the familiar faces of the other Leaf rookies who had passed. Off in the distance, the blonde haired boy caught sight of Sakura as she walked beside her teammates. Akamaru was nestled comfortably in her arms. He waved to her but she did not see him.

“Times up! I will now announce the rules of the second stage of the Chunin Exam, so listen good maggots!” Anko's voice reverberated through the air once she had appeared near the front gate of area 44.

All of the present genin crowded around to hear the announcement, each team huddled close together. Naruto, as expected, lead his team straight to the front, not wanting to miss anything.
“The area behind me is known as training area 44, and better known as the Forest of Death,” Anko began, with no trace of sympathy in her eyes, “The goal of the exam's second stage is simple: navigate through the forest and reach the tower at its center.”

Many genin relaxed at the news, that was, until she had continued.

“You will have five days to do this. The tower is located 10 kilometers from every entrance gate. In addition, each genin team will be given one scroll before entering. Upon reaching the tower every team must have both an Earth and Heaven scroll. You acquire scrolls that you have not been given by defeating your competition, if you haven't already guessed,” She smirked maniacally, “This will reduce the number of ninja who will proceed into the next stage of the exam.”

Haku sighed to himself, drawing an annoyed look from Gaara.

“Keep in mind that there are many more dangers than just ninja in the forest. There are also many edible plants and suchlike in area 44 to hold you over for the next few days, so keep a sharp eye. One last thing...”

She paused and her glare seemed to even out over the crowd, “You may not under any circumstances open your scrolls until you have entered the tower! Anyone who does so before that time, well...the consequences will come swiftly.”

“What the heck is that supposed to mean, Anko-sensei?” Naruto didn't fully understand, “If you give us those scrolls then I think we should be allowed to look at them!”

Anko hurled a brace of kunai at him for his interruption.

Naruto caught the first knife and dodged the second, grinning. After his mission to the Land of Waves with her, he could more easily anticipate her random attacks.

That was what he thought until she was behind him a moment later, and Naruto found his fuzzy yellow head in an inescapable headlock. He scowled, accepting the fact that she was a jounin.

“Will you can it you loudmouth? Rules are rules, and if you don't follow them in this exam then you'll ruin your chances of becoming a chunin...” she paused thoughtfully, “Or your chances for survival, rather.”

“Okay, Anko-sensei! I get it!” Naruto grumbled through his flailing and she promptly released him.

“Now that that's out of the way, my advice to you all is: just don't die!” Anko concluded with a cheery smile, “Registration is over that way. Sign your name away so that we won't be held responsible if things go unfortunately for any of you. Turn in your consent forms for a scroll and then proceed to your assigned gates. Good luck maggots!”

She trotted off, leaving the confident genin to move on to register.

Naruto followed after his teammates as they moved on, rubbing his neck tenderly where he had been grappled, “Jeez, she's just as crazy as ever...”

Haku chuckled at him, hoping that some humor would lighten the mood, but it didn't really. It was inevitable at this point that they would be facing other shinobi in the forest. It was not clear yet who they would encounter and if they could procure the scroll they needed.
After receiving their forms, reading over them (although Naruto skimmed through his hurriedly) and signing their names away into presumed oblivion, Team 2 was given a Heaven Scroll. For safe keeping, it was given to Gaara to hold, who was the least likely to lose it.

Naruto's excited chatter was the only thing that seemed to ease the ten edgy minutes that followed as they lined up in front of gate 19, waiting for their chance to burst through the fence and make the mad dash to the tower deep inside the Forest of Death.

“I feel it would be wise to travel at a steady pace today and tonight,” Haku suggested, the cogs in his brilliant mind turning once again, “If we cover a lot of ground in the first 48 hours, we can ambush another team as they approach later. Once we obtain an Earth scroll we should be able to take some time to rest before reaching the tower.”

Naruto frowned, still processing the dark haired boy's plan, “You want to travel during the night, Haku-kun? Can't we get just a bit of sleep?”

“We can rest after we secure the second scroll,” Gaara sided with Haku, “The sooner we get an Earth scroll, the better our chances of succeeding will be.”

“Uh...yeah.”

A resounding siren pierced the tense morning air and each gate opened with a sudden jolt. The blonde boy's eyes widened to the size of saucers for a split second, before a grin spread over his face.

“Let's go!”

Without even glancing at his teammates to check if they were prepared, Naruto raced in, determined to succeed as they had in the first portion of the exam.

Neji immediately took to the treetops, his dark hair flapping wildly behind him as he and his teammates ascended. They moved predatorily, ready to take a scroll from the first unwary team to cross their path.

As usual Lee was the most cordial at the moment, despite their objectives.

Team 13 had begun to take the net of safety that the Byakugan provided for granted, because there was never a moment on any mission in which Neji could not be fully trusted to scope out their surroundings.

The Hyuga prodigy took up the lead, sweeping his all-seeing eyes through the dense wood, searching for any signs of other ninja. Once again, he didn't seem apprehensive at all. He approached the goal of the exam as if it were his mission.

'He treats everything like a mission...' Tenten thought with her gaze glued to the back of his head.

Lee was on her right flank, moving slightly faster. His round, piercing eyes were focused on the bramble ahead. She smirked, knowing how much the exam meant to her teammates. It had never been one of the major 'milestones' in her shinobi life. She had known she would eventually advance when she was ready to advance.

'If I move up to Chunin rank, I'll be one step closer to becoming a legendary ninja like Tsunade-sama...' That was her basic reasoning, so she had fervently agreed to participate when Gai-sensei had questioned them about the exam months earlier.
Tenten was startled when Lee dropped out of her peripheral, and for a moment she believed that they had come under attack, ‘But that's impossible! Neji would've-

Her surprise turned into relieved exasperation as she saw that Lee had only lost his footing, and tripped over an oddly-angled branch. He fell for a number of feet, before catching hold of a lower branch and agilely swung himself upward, again level with Tenten in the canopy. He laughed at himself and she sighed, wondering what triggered his clumsiness, ‘He better watch his step!’

They kept moving, increasing their speed to catch up with Neji, who hadn't slowed very much for them.

Neji.

Tenten's mind was a jumbled mess these days, but the one constant had always been Neji. It was difficult to say exactly how it had started, but for the past year of training with Gai-sensei she couldn't help but feel drawn to him.

It hadn't been as early as their days at the Academy; that much was for certain. Unlike other kunoichi from her class that year Tenten disliked gossip and raving about cute boys. She most often was seated at the back of the room next to Lee (coincidentally), displaying the new knives she had forged with the utmost pride, “Look! Look! This edge is nearly 36 microns! It can cut though human bone in one stroke!"

Her tomboyish habits did tend to frighten her teachers a little, but many of the boys in her class thought she was an engaging rarity among female ninja. 'Many' meaning, excluding Neji, who sat by himself. Sometimes he spared a moment to glance over at her new, pointy creations.

Once Tenten was placed on Team 13 she had known she would be the Hyuga prodigy's sparring partner. She had nearly insisted on it so that she wouldn't have to watch Lee be thrown down time and time again.

Training with Neji was difficult, frustrating and more often than not, left her exhausted and completely bent on improving herself. There were times she nearly forgot she had a life beyond training with him. Everything about him seemed so calculated and perfect that it was hard for her to believe that she could actually put up a decent fight…until she ran out of weapons.

In turn, it spawned a second goal for her, one even direr than her dream of rivaling Tsunade. Tenten wanted to be as strong as Hyuga Neji. It was indeed a very ambitious goal.

Her admiration for his skills and ability, with time, seemed to warp and reshape itself into a flickering, fragile affection as she pieced together his fragmented family history and life. Not only did she want to be like him, but she wanted to help change his life and get him back in control of his destiny.

There were moments she subconsciously admitted that she would have more luck striving to be like Tsunade. But she always argued that Tsunade was not on her team, not relying on her and most certainly not struggling with her clan life.

So it happened automatically, with her helpless to prevent it. Tenten had unwittingly devoted herself to the aims of the young Hyuga prodigy.

Lee, upon private discussion of the subject, (and even declaring himself as her best and most trustworthy friend) had told her how sad it was that such a smart, caring person like herself would sacrifice her future for someone as detached as Neji.

She had yelled at him after that but secretly knew he was right.
Things were just far beyond her emotional control right now.

Lately, however, her constantly evolving psyche had suffered through something nearly as painful as the truth of her problem. Team 13’s mission to retrieve the scroll of the 'Infallible Fire Bow', or so was its title according to Gai-sensei, had opened her eyes to many things.

Her first kill had been quite gory, much to her distaste. She knew it was an unavoidable event with her being a weapons specialist. She had accepted it with silent yet horrified grace, then acknowledging what her beloved weapons were truly for.

Even worse was that upon rejoining Gai-sensei and returning to Konoha (Neji with only a minor concussion), was that Gai-sensei had discovered the body of the slain Iwa nin, which Tenten had been too frantic at the time to dispose of. He had spoken to her about it in a surprisingly conciliatory manner, not holding her actions against her. He said he would not tell either Neji or Lee about it, and left the subject's optional discussion with her teammates up to her.

Moreover, she had even impressed the Hokage once Gai-sensei had turned in their mission report, and as conciliation for her trouble she had been given custody of the Infallible Hiyumi. Being that she had handled it with such expertise, it would be a shame to stow away such a magnificent weapon into the archives when she had the full ability to wield it.

She accepted it with great humility from the Hokage that day, bade her teammates goodnight, went directly home and cried herself to sleep, wondering why she was being rewarded for killing.

Her parents had been viciously killed on one of their ANBU Black-Ops missions before she had graduated from the Academy. It seemed to her that because she was engaging in such an ugly deed she was becoming the very thing she sought to destroy.

Then again, being a shinobi was an art of the utmost ambiguity.

Tenten wouldn't call herself a hypocrite, but she did feel the guilt whenever she gazed at the scroll of her new yumi, 'All ninja will have to kill at one point in their careers...I just got an early start.'

Tenten had decided to not tell her teammates about her slaughter of the Rock chunin.

Most especially not Neji.

Neji and Lee had stopped moving. Her thoughts scattered and she halted abruptly, just in time to perch next to the Hyuga, who was staring down at the forest floor with the Byakugan in full intensity.

Below there was nothing visible, to her at least. Nothing always meant something.

'Genjutsu.' Tenten suspected, hence Neji’s fierce examination of the trap.

Before he leapt down, he gave a silent motion for Lee and Tenten to wait, and Neji plummeted down. They watched as he made contact with the muddy earth, raced to the center of a clearing and with a stab of Jyukken he unearthed a hidden Rain ninja. The shinobi's pained cry was cut short when another slap of Jyukken connected with his abdomen, immediately rousing the attention of his teammates who had hidden themselves on the opposite side of the clearing.

With their trap so unexpectedly sprung, their attack was slow and confused as they abandoned their hiding place to ambush Neji, only to be ambushed themselves.

“Take this! Leaf Hurricane!” Lee was a vibrant green flash as he knocked the two Rain nin from
the air with a round of relentless kicks. Their heads hit the ground first when they fell, and Tenten raised a fine eyebrow to see that it had taken them less than a half hour to get their second scroll.

She jumped down next to Lee and watched smugly as Neji took the defeated Team's Heaven scroll. He replaced it in his hip pouch.

Lee was jubilant, “Yes! Our strategy and teamwork succeeds once again!” He raised a hand to high-five Neji and the prodigy only stared at his hand, as if he didn't comprehend.

Neji's stare turned to Tenten and she gave him a weak smile, trying to show her approval of his quick thinking. He blinked slowly, something she found inanely adorable and un-Neji-like.

Tenten quickly put the pattering feeling in her chest in line.

He seemed satisfied with her reaction and completely misinterpreted Lee's.

“We should keep moving,” Neji decided, his voice raised over Lee's chatter, “We can gain some ground before nightfall.”

Lee nodded in excited agreement. Tenten's nod was slower and more thoughtful.

Somehow she could tell their luck far exceeded that of some other teams presently.

Elsewhere in the forest, Team 8 was having trouble locating another genin team to steal from.

Hinata had immediately activated her Byakugan once she and her teammates had entered the forest, intending to find the safest path through and at the same time, find an opposing team more quickly. It was not working the way they had anticipated.

Team 8 was making good time, but there were no signs of other shinobi, not even after an hour of searching. Unknown to her teammates, something else was troubling Hinata.

Her eyes had begun to bother her over the past few weeks, although there was nothing wrong with her Byakugan, much to her relief. It was a dull, persisting ache near the chakra pathways that lead to her eyes. It simply would not end.

She had determined that this may be a sign of illness, much to her terror, or worse: her Byakugan was beginning to deteriorate. Hinata had no idea what may have triggered such a reaction, being that she had done nothing to injure herself at all recently. She was terribly fearful of admitting her problem to anyone, most especially her father, who would take it as a sign of weakness if her blood limit were somehow malfunctioning.

So no one knew and she raced on through the dark woods with her teammates close behind her.

Hinata rubbed absently at her shoulder only to discover a small Kikaichu insect there. She let it be, knowing Shino often planted his 'little helpers' on herself and Sato to keep track of them if they were ever separated. Without turning her head, she looked at Shino, seeing him as focused and calm as ever. The sight helped her relax and ignore her aching eyes.

Sato, as far as she could see, was still unwilling to talk to them. This upset her greatly.

After she and Shino had agreed to prevent him from ever using the Chidori, Sato had become cold and distant towards them. Even during the first part of the exam when Shino had sent one of his insects to give answers to Sato, it was a bit disturbing for her to see him squash the helpful bug merclessly after it had presented him with all of the test paper's answers.
He had proved his point quite vividly to Shino, who was absolutely enraged after Sato’s outburst. Sato never hurt insects, not even accidentally, one thing Shino respected Sato for. Apparently things were changing now.

'*If Sato-kun does not begin to communicate with us soon we may fail this part of the exam...* Hinata was fearful of the consequences of her moody teammate's actions, *'I wish there was something I could do...'*

She decided to stop and halted on a thick tree branch. Shino and Sato did the same. Relieving her eyes of the Byakugan, Hinata sat down and caught her breath, accepting the canteen of water Shino passed to her, “Thank you, Shino-kun.”

“If you wanted to have a rest earlier, all you had to do was ask.” Shino pointed out and she blushed in embarrassment, hoping her fatigue wasn't that visible. He sat next to her and also had a drink of water.

Hinata watched in reserved fascination as the Aburame boy tipped some water into his palm and let his Kikaichu insects have a drink as well. She found that she no longer feared bugs after spending so much time watching Shino interact with them.

Sato, who stood sullenly nearby, turned on his heel and began to descend down to the forest floor. Hinata couldn’t help but overreact, “Sato-kun? Where are you going?”

“Bathroom.” His response was terse. He vanished into the undergrowth a moment later, leaving her slightly troubled.

Shino's eyes were invisible behind his dark glasses, but Hinata could tell they were narrowed.

“Please don’t be angry with Sato-kun.” She said softly, dropping her gaze, “He is very upset. He didn't mean to kill that-”

“He had full intentions of doing so after he gained information from it,” Shino responded coolly, “Regardless of how he feels; he had no place taking the life of a comrade that was merely giving him assistance. He is childish and irrational. I will not sympathize with him.”

Hinata closed her eyes and whimpered quietly, exhausted from all the animosity between her teammates. There was just no reasoning with them, she had concluded, for they knew all too well how to get on each other’s nerves.

Sato heartlessly squashes Shino’s bugs and Shino berates Sato for his puerile behavior.

It was a vicious cycle that even she could not end. And what made matters worse, in her opinion at least, was that they were just actually becoming friends. Shino had 'lightened up' around Sato after the Tanabata Festival, if only a little. And Sato was beginning to act more wisely and respectfully, kudos to Shino.

Now it seemed things could never be that good between them again.

'*Oh Naruto-kun, what am I supposed to do? They will barely look at each other...so how can we ever make it through this exam as a team?* Hinata was hoping some of his grinning, sunshiny advice would light the way for her, but she could think of nothing.

Ten minutes had passed and Hinata was certain that Sato had not gone to the bathroom as he said he had. Shino shared her thoughts.

“No, you think Sato-kun is alright?” She asked, standing up at last.
He stood as well, “There is always a small chance he may need our assistance.”

Hinata followed Shino down to the forest floor, her heart hammering in her chest. What were the odds that Sato ran into another shinobi team when they had no luck finding one earlier?

Probably very good.

They had only gone a few meters before they spotted him, trekking through a nettle of ferns and scratching his itchy cheek. His midnight blue eyes flew open as he saw his teammates rush at him, kunai out, ‘Aw crap! They're gonna kill me aren't they?’

Sato’s arms flew up in front of his face and he cringed when they stopped in front of him, looking equally bewildered. There was a tense moment between them. He wondered why he had suspected his own teammates to attack him, ‘Psh. Like that'd ever happen. What was I thinking?’

“What were you doing?” Shino was fed up with him. He tucked his kunai away, seeing they had nothing to fear.

“What do you care, bug-boy? You're the one with the scroll!” Sato snorted, very loudly.

There was a pause as Hinata exchanged a confused glance with Shino. The Hyuga girl frowned inwardly, ‘I thought I had been given the scroll...’

Things became clearer as three ninja dropped from the dusky treetops and surrounded Shino. Sato and Hinata scattered in response. Sato smirked; glad they had taken the false bait.

The Cloud ninja each plunged a kunai into the Aburame boy, only to recoil in surprise when it dispersed as a clone made of insects. Humiliated by their mistake they turned around, hurling kunai at the Leaf genin in unison.

Shino had reappeared behind Hinata after they deflected the projectiles and Sato, it seemed, had planned this much earlier than they had thought he had.

The first Cloud ninja to jump forward seemed to hang suspended in the air for a suspiciously long moment, a moment his teammates overlooked as they too lunged in a craze at Team 8, only to get tangled in the trap that the first ninja had been snagged in.

Hinata had not seen Sato set a trap so cruel before.

With pained cries, the three struggling Kumo nin only entangled themselves more thoroughly in the barbed wire Sato had laid over a spike pit in the ground. The wire, though excruciating, was the only thing preventing them from falling into another, more deadly trap.

Sato watched with dark eyes as they slashed at the wiring, unable to cut it, and only tightening their snares. Hinata turned away, trying to forget how skilled Sato was with traps, especially when he was angry.

Shino seemed less bothered, if not approving of Sato’s hard work, and took the scroll from the indignant, struggling kunoichi who was then dripping with blood from head to toe, “Wait! You can have our scroll! But get us out of this!” Her voice was reaching a shockingly high pitch, “Come on!”

Her teammates were howling in agonized agreement, still clueless as to how to escape.

“Get yourselves out,” Sato spat, his glare was tangible, “We have what we want and we could've
just as easily taken your scroll without you falling into my trap.”

The Hatake jammed his hands into his jacket pockets and stalked away, Shino following close behind. Hinata knew they were not setting a very good example by showing no mercy, but she would be unable to free the helpless team without Sato's instruction. He was unwilling to free them.

She gave a short apology to them before following after her teammates, trying not to listen to the pained cries of the stranded Cloud ninja.

“Hey can we stop for a minute?” Naruto asked, stopping in his tracks. Ahead of him Gaara and Haku also stopped, each of them offering the blonde a questioning look.

“Naruto-kun, I thought we'd agreed to travel for the first 48 hours without stopping.” Haku recalled, he himself not trying to show any fatigue.

“Yeah I know,” Naruto answered, a small frown on his face, “I have to pee.”

“Then hurry,” Gaara folded his arms and sighed, expecting something as trivial from Naruto, “We can't afford delays.”

“Wait,” Haku didn't let him leave right away, “To prevent any ambushes we'll all speak a common password.”

“A password?” Naruto didn't understand his reasoning.

“Yes, when you come back we'll ask…” Haku quickly thought up a question only Naruto could answer, “What is the name of the village we first met in, alright?”

“Whatever you say, Haku-kun.” The blonde gave him a sheepish grin before turning to search the undergrowth for a good spot to relieve himself. Glad for a moment of rest, Haku leaned against the nearest tree, wondering how Gaara kept up so well with Naruto even with the extra weight of his gourd.

'It is merely a testament to how much stronger he has become,' Haku thought, taking a deep breath, 'Neither he or Naruto seem to be tired yet. When did I become such a burden?'

Again, he was left to ponder how he had begun to lag behind the progress of his teammates. Taking Jiraiya and Gaara's advice before the start of the exam a week earlier, Haku had gone to train with Lee's team in hopes of improving his taijutsu.

Neji seemed a bit too preoccupied training with Tenten to offer him any training that didn't involve getting all of his tenketsu sealed. Lee and Gai, on the other hand, had taught him some basics in the short time they could.

He was still sore from their rigorous training, Haku was surprised to admit. He had a low tolerance for pain and very little muscle mass, so Gai didn't hesitate to tell him he was appalled of how frail 'young Haku-kun' was, and then proceeded to toughen him up by having Lee spar with him.

Haku was glad when it was over.

Lee, as a sparring partner, put both Gaara and Naruto to shame. And although Haku did improve drastically from his previous skill level, he couldn't quite compare his physical strength to either that of his teammates.'
The dark haired boy sighed aloud, drawing a curious look from his red haired friend.

Gaara could tell without even having to ask that Haku was under a lot of stress. It wasn’t necessarily a bad thing either. He knew that Haku tended to work better under pressure.

After a minute Naruto had returned, wearing a goofy look of relief, “Ah! That's better!”

Gaara snorted and Haku frowned at him, not understanding his pithy behavior.

“Password?” Haku asked it on reflex and was surprised by Naruto's answer.

“Hn? Oh. Konoha!”

In the next instant, the imposter found himself trapped in a coffin of sand, which then hurled him through the air and slammed him full-force into a tree. The pop of his dislocating jaw was audible as his head hit, and Haku shook his head as the henge fell and revealed an injured and cross-eyed Grass ninja.

He fell to the ground unconscious and Gaara, with no guilt of any kind, searched him for a scroll. Haku was even further astonished when Gaara found one.

“When he was listening in he should've been more cautious,” The dark haired boy pointed out as Gaara handed him the Earth scroll that the Grass nin had with him, “What luck!”

Naruto arrived a moment later, looking flustered, “Uh...some guy jumped me when I was going! Then he ran off when he found out I didn't have the scroll,” He frowned at the knocked out ninja at the base of a nearby tree, “Oh, never mind, you got him.”

His teammates could only chuckle in amusement, not expecting it to be so easy.

The sun began to lower in the sky and the last trickling beams of light filtered through the canopy of the dense forest. Team 2 had decided to scrap their plan after Haku began showing signs of slowing and they found a place to rest beside a small stream.

“We've got a Heaven and an Earth scroll now, and it's only day one!” Naruto was thrilled with their good fortune, “We'll have no problem with this exam, for sure!”

“We can't start getting overconfident now, Naruto-kun. We still have to reach the tower in four days,” Haku pointed out, “Hm...some food would be nice too...”

“Then we go fishing!” Naruto resolved, referring to the bubbling stream behind them, “Come on! The sooner we eat the better!”

The blonde moved to the water's edge, trying to catch sight of any prey. Eventually he was assisted in his endeavor by an equally hungry Gaara. Haku also decided to help a few minutes later, catching the most fish due to his Kekkei Genkai. He merely levitated the sections of water that the fish generally swam in and let his teammates pick them off.

A short while later, the three boys sat contentedly around a fire, finished eating.

“I still like ramen better...” Naruto decided, stretching, “But now I think that fish isn't that bad.”

Gaara smothered the dying flames of the cooking fire with sand, not wanting to create smoke that could attract other ninja. Haku sat next to him, feeling better with a full stomach.

“We should collect rations for the next few days while we can,” Haku suggested, trying to form a
new plan, “That way we can stop less for food.”

“That's a good idea, Haku-kun,” Naruto agreed after a lazy burp, then dropped to his back, “Hm...I'm gonna take a nap now.”

Rather than sitting idly, Gaara stood and collected the canteens each of his teammates had with them, “I'm getting water. You should go now if you want to find more things we can eat.”

Haku nodded and then departed to search for other edible wildlife.

Naruto, predictably, hadn't moved an inch. He was too full from all the food he ate. If their luck persisted he could probably sleep it off with sweet dreams of ramen.

Haku, being the most familiar with plant life, was the wisest choice to be sent looking for food. There weren't that many things to find, he was troubled to see. There were nearly as many dangerous plants as there were safe.

Even after ten minutes of picking his way through the undergrowth, he had only gathered a small number of mushrooms and a few leafy plants. They weren't very nourishing but would provide some stamina, if he had read correctly.

Things that they didn't really need he also came across: herbs that were good for burns and cuts he found growing beneath a boulder, and a few budding flowers also had some properties that could help an upset stomach, ‘I may have to save this for Naruto-kun later...’

Haku looked ahead in the patch of holly fern he had been picking through, and saw a ninja standing out in the open. A quick glance at the nin's forehead protector notified him it was another Grass nin. This one was also alone.

'It's possible this shinobi is the teammate of the one that Gaara knocked out, possibly trying to retrieve their lost scroll.' Haku's thoughts were sent reeling off into nonsensical babble as he was stuck with a blast of killing intent that left him utterly paralyzed.

He dropped everything that he had gathered for his teammates, and found he was unable to draw his horrified, dark eyes away from the stare of the Grass nin. The stranger stood perfectly still in the same field of ferns.

'I can't move-!'

“Hm, you're a pretty one aren't you?” The ninja's voice was amused and oddly outgoing, “Is it wise to be out here all by yourself?”

'I need to get to Naruto-kun and Gaara-kun.'

“Run. I won't stop you. Run away right now back to your little teammates,” The Grass nin smirked, “Can't you run, pretty little boy? What's the matter?”

'This...killing intent. It's so powerful that I just can't-'

“I see. You will not run then. That's alright,” The Grass ninja drew out a kunai, “I suppose you want to make this easy for me; I should thank you.”

Haku's shuddering hand managed to close around a few senbon, but when he raised his arm back up, he was unable to throw them, 'I can't fight! Not like this!'

“Are you sure you don't want to run before I kill you? Pretty little boy?”
'Move.'

“Ah, I understand.” The Grass nin's smirk broadened, “You've given up.”

'Move.'

“Goodbye Leaf ninja. You've made this very easy.” The Grass nin launched his kunai.

'Move!'

Haku's shuddering hand jerked, sinking a needle into his right arm. The pain was enough of a distraction to rid him of his paralysis, and Haku dodged less than a moment before the kunai landed in the spot he had occupied before.

The dark haired boy made a leap for the treetops, wanting to gain the high ground.

The Grass shinobi did not follow immediately.

'I'm too far off to rejoin Naruto-kun and Gaara-kun, I have to get them to come to me...' Haku searched around through his holster and retrieved a kunai with an exploding tag attached. Naruto had given it to him the day before, saying it may come in handy even if he didn't like knives.

With as much strength as he could muster, he hurled the kunai skyward, reaching above the treetops by only a meter or two, and with a flicker of chakra he detonated it. The explosion was not as visible as it was loud, and Haku wondered why Naruto felt the need to possess such powerful explosives.

“I'm over here little boy,” The Grass nin was resettled on a nearby tree branch, “If you want to fight I don't mind!”

Haku subconsciously reached for more senbon before the Grass ninja leapt. Much to Haku's dismay the shinobi utilized taijutsu. He came at Haku with a volley of punches followed up by a powerful kick which he was just barely able to avoid.

The dark haired boy aimed for critical points on his foe's body, and was glad to see that after throwing nearly two dozen senbon, more than half had hit since they had been in close quarters. The Kusa nin had slowed considerably, and was visibly in pain from Haku's senbon strikes.

“Shinjutsu. I see. It is not a common practice,” The Grass nin watched Haku with calculating eyes, “But it will not be enough to stop me, little boy.”

Before the ninja could make another move, sand rose in a grainy cloud, swarming the branch and forcing the Grass nin to relocate. He frowned at the newcomers.

Naruto and Gaara landed on either side of Haku, both startled.

“We heard the tag go off,” Naruto explained, giving Haku a quizzical look, “What the heck's going on here?”

“A Grass ninja, but he's strong,” The dark haired boy rubbed the bloody spot on his arm, “Be careful. The killing intent he gives off is like nothing I've ever felt before.”

“There is only one of him,” Gaara was ready to fight, “We will end this quickly.”

More sand leaked from his gourd and proceeded to swarm through the branches, driving the Kusa shinobi further and further back.
“I did not think we would meet so soon,” The Grass nin purred, eyeing Gaara, “You remind me of my plans.”

To Naruto and as well as Haku's horror, the Grass nin used a summoning jutsu. At first, they could not see the creature he called until it reared its huge, ugly head from below, attempting to seize Gaara.

The red haired boy leapt back, surprised, sand everywhere.

“So he summons a snake! Big deal! I've got something way better!” Naruto grinned broadly before biting his thumb and rushing through a number of seals.

Haku leapt up to a higher branch, watching as the smoke cleared, and beside Naruto were three enormous red toads. Each had a sword slung on its back. The blonde hopped readily on the head of the center toad, which gave a confident croak.

“You mess with Haku-kun, you mess with me!” Naruto barked, his battle toads itching to fight.

The Grass nin was impressed, “Interesting! One as young as you can already summon such powerful toads. It will be all the more sweet when I crush you.”

The giant snake refused to end its pursuit of Gaara, who simply did not have enough sand to crush something so monstrously large. He was on the ground, fending off the creature's head with blasts of sand.

“Let's go!” Naruto and his amphibious comrades rushed straight at the Grass ninja who still was still not intimidated. Haku, from higher up, hurled rounds of senbon with the intention of slowing their opponent down even more.

The Grass shinobi quickly summoned a second snake, slightly larger than the last, which immediately clamped down onto one of the toads with powerful fangs. In response it stabbed the snake's neck with its sword, trying to free itself. A moment later, the trapped toad was bitten in half.

Naruto's remaining toads lunged forward, livid, skewering the serpent through its open mouth. It reared back in agony before crashing down to the forest floor. Haku and Naruto continued on, not letting the Grass nin out of their sight.

‘I guess it's now or never!' Naruto was closing in on the Grass nin, who had summoned a third snake to eliminate the last of his toads. A blue, spiraling sphere of chakra formed in his right hand as he raced along a branch towards the enemy with no intentions of slowing.

Haku stopped throwing senbon at the Kusa shinobi. Naruto had gotten too close and he didn't want to hit him by mistake. He watched his blonde teammate continue forward, and couldn't recognize the blue sphere he saw Naruto begin to form.

“Take this! Rasengan!” Naruto leapt at the cornered ninja who was backed against the trunk of a tree. To his disgust, the ninja's tongue reached out a number of yards, snake-like, and wrapped itself around his middle, stopping Naruto just short of his target.

The Rasengan missed, but nicked the Grass nin's cheek.

“Oh! That is very impressive!” The Grass nin was delighted, “You're not half bad...”

Naruto was held at a distance as he tried to wiggle free of the Grass nin's grip, “Gah! Let me down you sick bastard! This thing is a tongue? Ugh!”
Senbon rained down, striking the enemy ninja in the face. He recoiled and dropped Naruto.

The angered Grass nin turned his gaze to Haku, who stood on a high branch of an ancient oak. Senbon were steadied between his knuckles, “Don't think I've forgotten you, pretty little boy!”

The new snake finished the last two of Naruto's toads and proceeded to attack him. The blonde leapt up, higher into the canopy, beginning to draw on the Kyuubi's chakra, *Come on you old fox! I need some help here!*

Naruto felt his chakra reserves instantly replenish and he grinned, knowing what forces were at work. He twisted around, catching a glimpse of Haku who was still tailing the Grass ninja.

The blonde formed a second Rasengan and this time he did not miss. He slammed the sphere into the hideous, scaled face of the oncoming snake, knocking it back as it toppled over a number of huge trees.

Haku had never seen Naruto display such a powerful technique before and could only assume Jiraiya had something to do with it.

Down below, Gaara had been cornered in his own sand shield, trapped in the coils of the snake. Feeling triumphant over the small ninja, the serpent opened its lethal jaws wide and swallowed him and his sand shield whole. The snake relaxed afterwards, preparing to process its meal.

A moment later, the snake was blow apart from the inside out with spikes of sand. Gaara landed, flustered and covered in digestive fluids, with his sand circling around him in wait. He wore a disgusted expression as he began wipe saliva off of his arms.

Before Naruto could meet up with Haku higher in the canopy, the Grass nin's wicked tongue had caught him by surprise again, reaching to an even longer length.

“You've caused a bit too much trouble, boy!” The Grass nin glared at the struggling, Kyuubi-powered ninja, “I've grown tired of you.”

Haku had thrown his senbon a moment too late.

“Five-Pronged Seal!” The Grass ninja jabbed at Naruto's stomach, placing an odd-numbered seal over the seal of the demon fox. A moment later the boy went limp and was tossed aside carelessly, hitting a few branches on his way down to the forest floor.

“Naruto!” Haku leapt downward, not understanding what had happened to his teammate. He was intercepted by the Kusa nin.

He narrowed his eyes while the Grass nin extracted a needle from his cheek casually, smirking at Haku, “It's better if that little brat stays out of our way.”

“What did you do to him?” Haku leapt at the rogue ninja in a rage, throwing the last of his senbon.

The Grass shinobi had another kunai out and blocked the final round of needles with little effort. Haku landed behind his opponent on a higher branch, trying to find another means of attack.

“Don't worry about your little friend,” The Kusa nin grinned up at Haku, “You shall soon share his fate.”

Haku formed hand seals, no longer stalling, “Demonic Crystal Ice Mirrors!”
It wasn’t as difficult as he expected it to be, using the water in the air to create sheets of ice. The dome of mirrors encompassed the branch the Grass nin was standing on, trapping him. Haku failed to note that he had created many more mirrors than he had ever been able to form before, once he had dove head first into the mirror nearest to him.

He was too busy trying to think up a strategy, ‘I can only use ice from here on out. I have to make this quick!’

Where was Gaara? Haku certainly hoped he would arrive soon; he didn’t have much chakra left in him.

The Grass ninja stood, perplexed, having never witnessed mirrors used in battle before. He smiled and watched, waiting for Haku to strike first.

Haku formed half of a seal he normally would to form to manipulate water, something he had experimented with on his mission to the Land of Waves, “A Thousand Flying Water Needles of Death!”

Ice from his mirrors contributed in the attack, sending thousands of shards of needle-like projectiles at the enemy, who made no move to dodge.

“How creative.” The Grass nin liked to hear himself talk, even in the midst of an assault, “You are not a shinobi originally from Konoha, are you?”

Haku’s target had disappeared, only a moment before his needles had struck, ‘What? He moved so quickly I couldn’t even see him! Where did he go?’

He had no time to react when in the reflection of an adjacent mirror, the Kusa ninja had returned, wielding a strange sword. Haku shuddered, knowing there was no time to escape, ‘What can I-?’

The shinobi’s sword hacked through the ice mirrors, though it seemed the Grass ninja was making a tremendous effort to do so. Haku watched as the fragments shimmered in the burning afternoon light, and as the sword came crashing towards his current mirror, ‘I can’t stay here!’

He fled, letting the last of his ice sheets be destroyed and he tumbled down a few levels through the thick of the canopy. He hit hard on his back, unable to breathe and out of chakra.

Haku had never been in more desperate need of his teammates, ‘I can’t do this without them! I need Naruto and Gaara! This ninja is going to-’

“Had enough?”

The dark haired boy struggled to sit up, choking on the air rushing into his lungs. His enemy, still fighting-fit, stood pleasantly on the same branch a few meters away. The sword he had with him was gone, but Haku could see slight evidence of the wounds he and Naruto had inflicted on him.

‘Gaara-kun, you have to-’

“Very good! You’re perfect! A truly rare find...” The Kusa nin was rambling again, and Haku could not find the strength to stand, “You certainly have made my visit here much more fun...”

“What are you talking about?” Haku watched in bewilderment as his foe’s neck had stretched to an inhuman length, reaching far enough to be inches away from him. Grinning sinisterly, the bizarre ninja revealed a pair of fangs and sunk them down into the right side of Haku’s neck.

The shock barely registered on his face as the dark haired boy tried to jerk away, but simply had
no energy to do so. Searing pain shot through him like fire, blurring his vision, and he was surprised there was enough air in his lungs for him to cry out like he had.

Fangs dripping, the Kusa nin drew away to observe his achievement, licking his lips, “Hm...and it's still so early in the day.”

Shuddering, Haku looked on with eyes wide in confusion as the ninja proceeded to peel his face away, revealing a grayer, more menacing face beneath. He felt his stomach turn over and he hoped that there was a chance for his death to come quickly.

“I feel we have not been properly introduced. Haku, was it?” The ninja's smirk only defined his snake-like features, “My name is Orochimaru, and we will meet again.”

The bite mark on Haku's neck began to darken and in a short moment three black marks appeared. He had not seen the seal form but he had felt it. Haku could barely see as Orochimaru departed, no longer interested, very pleased with his torture of the young Leaf genin.

Panting, Haku put pressure on the marks at the nape of his neck, unable to subdue the increasing pain. He hadn't the faintest idea who Orochimaru was or what he had wanted, but their next meeting would be too soon.

Gaara hadn't removed much of the snake's bodily fluids from his clothing before a blonde blur came hurtling down through a storm of leaves. He could tell immediately Naruto was unconscious and took it as a very bad sign. Naruto was not the kind of person to allow himself to be defeated.

With a strained leap Gaara caught the latter by his jacket as he fell. His jump was ungraceful and they fell in a heap. He landed on an upraised tree root with a crack which Gaara assumed was the sound of the vertebrae in his neck realigning.

After a long, dizzying moment the red haired boy rose slowly to his knees, rolling the blonde onto his back with a short tug.

“Naruto.” He spoke his teammate's name automatically in a weak effort to revive him. Naruto lay silently, unmoving. He did not respond in any fashion. Not even a snore. His breathing was shallow, but there appeared to be no wounds on him from what Gaara could decipher.

Before he could further examine the Kyuubi container's state, a chilling wail shook through the canopy above him, scattering birds more quickly than when the exploding tag had gone off earlier.

Haku.

It was Haku's cry and Gaara was moving fast, trusting that Naruto wasn’t going anywhere. Haku was not well. He was aware of it long before he discovered his other teammate hunched over on the limb of an old oak, screaming so loud Gaara believed it would attract the attention of all the genin in the forest.

He landed behind the dark haired boy, placing a steadying hand on his shuddering shoulder. At the touch Haku fell quiet and motionless, as if Gaara had turned him into some sort of statue.

It had a similar effect.

Haku swooned and fell back into Gaara's arms, knocking him over. There was blood on Haku's neck and Gaara hastily wiped it away, trying to discern the area where he had been injured. It was difficult to tell.
“Haku, sit up,” Haku was completely out. His full weight was pressed on the redhead, who wriggled out from beneath him in aggravation and tried to right the boy with little success. Gaara gave up on speaking to his dark haired teammate.

There was no wound, which frustrated him even more. How had the Grass ninja (whose whereabouts were currently unknown to him) rendered both Haku and Naruto incapacitated without even injuring them?

It was then, upon dragging the limp form of his second teammate upward, that Gaara did notice a peculiar blot on Haku’s neck. He made note of it but was truthfully grateful that no one on his team had been critically wounded.

Was this the price they paid for obtaining both of their scrolls so quickly? Giant serpents? Killing intent? Utter mayhem?

Gaara muttered something unintelligible, yet clearly infuriated as he returned to Naruto’s resting place with Haku draped over his shoulder. It was a moment when Gaara would’ve appreciated the absence of his gourd, despite the protection it offered. Haku was not heavy, but he was precariously tall.

‘I need more arms,’ Was his first thought as he grabbed Naruto, as gently as possible, by the scruff of his fluorescent orange jacket. When had he suddenly become the pack-mule for wounded ninja? It was humiliating for someone of his talent and he was unsure of what to do after managing to tug along his unconscious teammates.

‘I need to find a place where they can recover with no further interruption.’ Gaara thought, his head throbbing, trying not to become frantic. By his very nature he was calm and collected, but neither Haku or Naruto were showing any signs of good health, wounded or not. It was that fact that had him moving surprisingly quick down on the gloomy forest floor, while carrying the full weight of his companions.

The next time he saw that Grass ninja Gaara would make certain that his face was the last thing the fool would ever see.

He picked the wrong one to leave conscious.

Anko sat atop the registration tent while munching on her favorite snack. She hummed to herself pleasantly, savoring the sweat flavor of the bean paste as she devoured skewer after skewer of dango.

Once she had finished the last bite of her lunch, Anko tossed the skewer to her right, where it joined countless other sticks that impaled the side of a cedar tree. She approved of the shape she had created with them, “There! A perfect Leaf Village symbol!”

“Anko-san.” A voice came from down below, and she glanced down to the three chunin waiting below the registration tent.

“What? I'm on my lunch break you know.” Anko responded sourly, being that she would have much preferred to enjoy another snack before going back to tending the second stage of the exam.

“Do excuse us,” A second of the ninja spoke up, more urgently, “But there is something we believe you should see.”

The alarmed look on the chunin’s face sold her and she hopped down, her long coat flapping behind her, “Let's see it then, if it's that bad.”
Anko followed them a short ways off to a memorial in silence, curious about what was troubling them. Once there, they gestured to the three bodies at the foot of the stone, laying askew and overlapping each other.

She walked over to get a closer look as one of the chunin filled in a few details, “These three are Grass ninja. It looks like they were killed after they had registered. Watch out though, it's pretty nasty...”

Anko flinched away after seeing what had been so revolting about the genins' death, “Their faces are...completely gone.”

A young chunin with a scarred face spoke up, “Yeah, it's really bad. We're not sure how it was done. There doesn't seem to be any motive for their murder either and no signs of struggle. It looks like an ambush.”

‘The last time I saw something like this was...' Anko's eyes were wide when the truth dawned on her, horrifyingly, ‘There's no mistaking it! This is his work alright...but what is he doing here of all places? And why now?’

“Go notify Hokage-sama of this immediately,” Anko barked, startling her subordinates, “Go now! I have to get to area 44.”

The chunin gave her a questioning look before submitting and taking off together to the Hokage’s tower, uncertain about her cause for panic. Anko quickly abandoned the murder scene, rushing in terror back to the Forest of Death, 'What are you doing here, Orochimaru? What can you gain from this exam?'

Thus began her agonizing search through area 44 for the one she once called her mentor.

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Gaara sat quietly between Haku and Naruto. They were both unconscious. It had been a long while since he had ever been so stressed. Gaara couldn't recall a time when circumstances had been so bad.

He had found shelter in a small alcove which, at the time of its discovery, had been inhabited by a truck-sized millipede. He promptly squashed it with his sand and claimed its home for himself.

After laying his teammates down he holed up the entrance of the cave with a wall of sand, not wanting any unwelcome visitors to drop by. It was then he realized the magnitude of his conundrum.

They would not be able to proceed through the forest unless fully awake, and the time until which both Haku and Naruto achieved that state could range from hours to possibly days, for all Gaara knew.

The only option that was left for Gaara, in the meantime, was to wait.

He hated waiting.

With his stolen time, he resolved to be thankful for how fortunate they had been during their haphazard battle with the lone Kusa nin. They hadn't lost any scrolls and no one had been injured. It was really quite miraculous.

Even so, Naruto had still given no indication of waking and neither had Haku. It was then, brushing his hand against the dark haired boy's pale arm, did Gaara discover something deeply
alarmingly.

Haku was blistering with fever.

This was indeed very puzzling to him. Gaara was certain that Haku had not been in any way ill upon entering the Forest of Death. He could only assume that he had contracted it after fighting the strange Grass ninja, although how was still a mystery.

He was forced to cope even though he didn't nearly have as much experience as Haku when it came to giving someone medical attention.

Gaara rummaged around through the few supplies his team had with them. Finding that Naruto's items would be of the most use, he took all of them. At least they had some water, thanks to him, tipping some from Haku's canteen and wetting a cloth. He removed his teammate's forehead protector and replaced the damp cloth there instead, hoping it would help.

Finding nothing else to do, Gaara ventured outside, set a trap, and then returned, anxious and irritated. If this exam had any parallels to the true toils in a chunin's life, his suggestion would be to teach more medical techniques to genin while in the Academy, because a kunai would not bring a fever down, unfortunately.

Gaara sat beside them watching. Waiting.

He hated waiting.

They were so still there were times he leaned over just to make sure they were breathing. An hour passed. As did a second, and over the course of that agonizing time, Gaara had frequently made Naruto and Haku sit up and take a drink of water.

It was when he depleted their water sources Gaara discovered something even worse: Haku had stopped sweating. Though Naruto had no such problem, the red haired boy was aware that it was a sign of dehydration, a common symptom of someone running a fever.

Haku. Dehydrated.

Gaara didn't think something like that was possible but apparently he had been wrong.

Therefore that made the top priority to fetch more water, and prevent anymore hardships for his team. He took all of their canteens and left, bringing his gourd with him. After exiting the hideout Gaara resealed the entrance with a wall of sand as he had before, knowing it would be more than enough protection for them.

Fortunately, the stream he and the rest of his team had stumbled upon earlier that day branched off in two directions; the eastbound brook, as he could see, ran very close by. Gaara knelt down by the trickling rivulet, filling their containers while wearing a frown that threatened the longevity of his face.

Never before had he been forced to keep such a thorough guard of Naruto and Haku. It was unsettling for him to admit just how nervous he had been after the bout with the Grass ninja, hoping that their lives had been spared. It was unclear what the goal of the enemy ninja had been because Gaara had not witnessed the fight.

He finished filling the canteens and set them aside, cupping his hand and splashed his face with the icy water. Gaara blinked, feeling a bit more alert.

That was about the time he heard a commotion nearby and he scowled. 'Other ninja,' His mind
supplied, and he didn't recognize any of the rowdy shouts to be of Leaf genin. Gaara felt ninja affairs should involve communications of less volume.

Of course, the thought also crossed his mind that another squad of ninja and a healthy, loud one to boot, could pose as a major threat for his severely weakened team.

Gaara decided to investigate the raucous.

He left the canteens by the water's edge, intending to return for them in but a few short moments. Gaara was nearly as talented as Haku when it came to stealth. Naruto, he noted, also had talent, but lacked the capacity to keep his mouth shut sometimes.

As usual, he was the 'intermediary of his team', or so Jiraiya had called him. Gaara had disagreed, saying that there was much more to a balanced team than at least one possessing mid-ranged talents.

The red haired boy approached by ground, his keen eyes piercing ahead into a scrub-filled clearing, where, by the look of it, a trap had been set off and evaded.

He was slightly baffled to see that only one ninja was making all the racket: some short, mouse-haired ninja garbed in buckles and layer after layer of leather. Gaara snorted to himself, he'd seen this type before. Antagonist.

It was foolish for the ninja to provoke another team so openly, but since he was here, Gaara thought a bit of eavesdropping wouldn't hurt.

“And they said Cloud shinobi were dangerous! Pft! You're just a bunch of stuck up pricks! What are you so afraid of? Scared you'll lose your scroll to us?” The mousy antagonist was grinning a yellow-toothed smile, and Gaara frowned, not understanding his aim.

The trio of Kumo ninja stood close in formation. However it was a shock to see that they weren't wise enough to ignore the loudmouth's bait...or simply wanted to indulge him.

The tallest of the Cloud spoke, his eyes narrowed, “Our merit is well deserved. It would be best for you not to make any more foolish choices in this forest.” His teammates stood close, both boys less inclined to speak, but equally annoyed.

“Cut it out Miosuke,” A groan of impatience sounded from behind the short trouble-maker, “We already have both of our scrolls. Save the attitude for later fights will you?”

Miosuke gave an irritated look to his teammate who came up from behind him, carrying a bandaged puppet on his back.

“Kankuro’s right,” A blonde haired girl came to stand beside him, one hand rested on her hip, “No need to further dishonor Suna with your antics.”

“Stuff it, Temari.” The mousy ninja yanked on the strap of a huge boomerang slung on his back in agitation, “They came after us, remember?”

Gaara froze.

The Cloud ninja watched, agitated, as Miosuke tried to justify his thirst for a fight to his teammates. They were in no hurry.

Gaara's brain scrambled, trying to compute the reality of the situation.
Surely the mousy boy hadn't been speaking to his Kankuro and Temari.

His brother and sister.

Odd how possessive a moment it was for him, how Gaara couldn't understand the long-lost and yet recently reawakened yearning to be near his siblings.

He had never counted on them being in this year's Chunin Exam. Gaara, as a matter of fact, hadn't believed them to even be alive at this point in time, and had they been, he pictured them to be jounin by now.

Yet there they stood. Plain as the day was long.

'My brother and sister.' Instantly he hated Miosuke. The mousy antagonist. The loudmouth.

His replacement.

'That could've been me standing there.'

Haku and Naruto were going to have to wait.

“Let's go, this is getting ridiculous,” Temari turned her nose up at the Cloud ninja. Clearly she was as impatient as her brother. “We're wasting time you dolt.” Miosuke turned from her, not even considering her advice.

“Tell me something,” Miosuke smirked at the tall ninja, “Does it ever bother you that the sign on your forehead protector looks like a pile of shit?”

That did it. Kankuro and Temari scowled, fed up with their teammate.

The Cloud nin were also fed up with him.

The two quiet members of the Kumo team charged, their mouths both drawn into a feral snarl. Kunai were whipped out, thrown with such speed and force that there was no way Miosuke could dodge.

Gaara was still in too much of a shock to see that the fighting had started, much to his siblings' disdain.

The squat antagonist gripped the tie of his enormous boomerang, flashing his teeth, glad he finally had gotten a rise out of them, “Futon: Jet Stream Slash!”

The huge weapon was hurled forward with surprising strength, and the red and ivory arc screamed past the unprepared Cloud shinobi, knocking both them and their kunai back to the complete other side of the clearing. The boomerang rebounded, slicing tree branches in its path, and returned obediently back to its master's waiting hand.

“You idiot!” Temari descended upon him, furious, “Was that at all necessary? We could be on our way to the tower by now and you pull this?”

The Cloud ninja attacked again, this time in a different formation. Kankuro ran ahead, preparing for the worst as the Kumo nin scattered a huge net of wire over the scrub field, entangling trees and the Sand team.

Miosuke hadn't been expecting it, and tugged frantically upon realizing his boomerang had been snagged in the worst of the copper-wire knot, “Shit! Kankuro! A little help here please!”
“This is your doing you moron!” His puppet was out, slicing at wires, but Kankuro paused in his work, noting that severing the wrong wires would only tighten the trap's grip on them. The Cloud nin circled in wait, eyes hungry for a slaughter.

Temari had the more direct approach. Her iron fan opened, revealing three moons, and she slashed with a frustrated cry, freeing herself from the tangle, astounding the offended Kumo team. Two of them were at her a moment later, one wielding a short sword and the other a scythe. She was more than a match for them, but the male portion of her team was still stuck.

Gaara could only watch, numbed and unable to move.

The last of the waiting Cloud nin turned his attention to the struggling of Miosuke and Kankuro, still caught up in the snare they had laid out. “Hey,” His eyes were set on Miosuke, “Tell me something…”

The mousy antagonist glared indignantly, and hating karma.

“How does a piece of bread feel after it's put in a toaster?”

“Crap…” Kankuro muttered under his breath, withdrawing Karasu only moments before an electrical jutsu ran through the copper wires, giving him and Miosuke a powerful shock that singed the tips of their hair.

Temari was wide-eyed and overwhelmed. If half of her team was finished, then she wasn’t far behind. She gave a fierce wallop to the head of the nin swiping at her with the sword: an instant knockout. The other, unfortunately, was faster than she and landing more blows.

Something in Gaara's head clicked then: some sort of subliminal signal to take action, even though he had no business being there to begin with. He was still obligated by a resounding memory forever imprinted in his blood.

He could finally move.

Kunai shot forward, connecting with the two remaining Kumo nin. They ducked back in a panicked shock, removing the knives, as a red haired ninja appeared on the side of the field with crazed eyes. Temari stood very still, unsure of what was going on, and whether the newcomer was singularly after the Cloud team.

A wave of sand crashed down, knocking back the Cloud ninja with thunderous force. They reasserted their wits and countered together, one leaping over Gaara and the other going for a low, finishing blow to the gut.

The knives rained down in unison, slashing Gaara to pieces, or rather, the sand clone he had substituted himself with. They skidded to a halt and turned back, running to their fallen teammate as sand closed in from all around them: the air, ground and clone that they had shredded.

Gaara stood at the center of the clearing, his shaking hand raised in anticipation as he levitated the individuals trapped in their respective sand coffins. They were crying in fear. Kankuro and Miosuke had come to, and watched in confusion as the unknown shinobi closed his fist, crushing the Cloud ninja into nothing more than a short drizzle of blood.

Temari shielded her face from the red rain, horrified.

Maybe she and her teammates were next?

Kankuro and Miosuke scrambled to free themselves as the mysterious red haired shinobi stood in
silence. Temari didn't make a move to help them, fearing to provoke the sand manipulator.

Sand.

'*He can control...sand?*' Her heart missed a beat as her fan folded over. Temari took a hesitant step, wondering if there was even the faintest most minuscule of possibilities that the boy she was looking at could be her...

“I missed you.” Gaara's confession was the lowest of whispers. It coaxed Temari closer after hearing it. Somehow she knew, and she was sure that, as he tripped over the ruined wires in shock, that Kankuro knew as well.

He was aware that staying and speaking to them would only lead to disaster, 'Not here. Not now.'

But he would. Gaara would mend his broken past; mend the wound in his heart that was the absence of his flesh and blood.

The Sand team stood motionless and would've missed Gaara's escape via whirlwind had they blinked.

Gaara returned to the stream and washed the blood from his face, reciting the names of his brother and sister until the words were well-practiced on his lips. He would've felt ecstatically happy to see them had they not been on an enemy team.

The shock was wearing off by the time he had collected the water rations he had left there and returned to his teammates, who he suddenly had a new urgency to protect.

Night had fallen and Sakura sat in a dazed stupor beside her teammates.

They had been preparing to settle down for the evening, late that afternoon, wanting to celebrate their defeat of a team of Rain ninja who they had successfully ambushed for their Heaven Scroll.

When they had stopped to rest was when the Grass nin appeared.

She shivered at the memory, remembering how close of a battle it had been. In fact, it had been no contest really. The Kusa nin had been alone but he had nearly killed them all.

'*He called himself Orochimaru...*' Sakura rested her chin on her knees, hugging them to her chest, 'What did he want with Sasuke-kun?'

She hadn't a clue. And to make matters even worse, was that they had handed over their Heaven Scroll, believing that at the time to be what he was after. He burned it on the spot, to their horror, and then attacked again. Sakura considered it to be a miracle that they were still alive.

Sasuke lay beside her, completely drained from the fight and sported an odd mark on his neck where he had been bitten by the rogue ninja. Kiba slept uncomfortably on her opposite side, also low on chakra reserves, and with a wounded arm after he had been ambushed by a terrifyingly large snake.

Akamaru sat whimpering next to him, licking his face. With a sigh, Sakura pulled the small dog into her arms, “Not now Akamaru, he needs to rest. They'll be okay. I'll look after them.” The dog whined in response.

The pink haired girl closed her eyes briefly, but they snapped open a moment later. She knew that she had to keep alert. Falling asleep would leave them open to an ambush, although she believed
she had done a good job of hiding her team in a gap of roots below a large tree. Their discovery would lead to trouble and she was in no condition to fight.

Sakura watched vigilantly with Akamaru, praying for the morning to come.

“Nyah...” Naruto rolled over, blinking the sleep from his blue eyes. He bumped into someone.

Gaara looked down at him, expressionless. The dark circles beneath his eyes were more pronounced, as if he had been up for an excruciatingly long time.

The blonde sat up and stretched, feeling his mouth automatically curve into a well-rested smile.

“Hey, what's up?” Naruto's speech was slurred through his yawn.

“You and Haku-kun were nearly killed when you fought that Grass ninja, remember?” Gaara sighed, hoping he would at least recall that much of what had transpired.

The boy's cerulean eyes lit up with the memory, “Oh yeah that's right! Er...how long was I out?”

“Two days.”

“TWO DAYS?” Naruto was flabbergasted and wished that it was all a joke. Gaara, he knew, seldom joked about anything, especially serious matters like these.

After a moment of horrified rambling, the blonde doubled over in pain, clawing at his stomach. Gaara's eyes narrowed at the sight, wondering if maybe his teammates had been injured after all, 'It isn't as if I can detect internal injuries.'

The Kyuubi container's stomach whined loudly and he frowned at Gaara, “Ugh...I'm starving. I can't believe it's been that long since the fight!”

The red haired boy dismissed his theory on Naruto having any internal injuries, “We barely have any food left and we're saving it for Haku-kun.”

“Oh fine, but you could've-” Naruto’s eyes flickered curiously to the still-sleeping form of Haku beside him and guilt washed over his face, “Is he alright?”

“No.” Gaara glanced over to the dark haired boy as well, “He had a high fever for over a day, but it seems he's overcome it. Though he hasn't woken once.”

The blonde boy gulped, staring down at Haku whose face was somehow not peaceful. He certainly was paler than usual and it was plain to see he had been very ill. Naruto petted his unconscious teammate's head worriedly, forgetting his hunger.

“When do you think he'll wake up?” He felt the need to ask.

Gaara shrugged, “I have no idea. Soon, maybe, once he's had enough rest.”

Naruto nodded glumly, not understanding how Haku's health could fail him in the middle of the Chunin Exam. He thought of Sato briefly, wondering if there was a virus going around, 'If that idiot turns out to be the germ-bag behind this I'm gonna-!'

“I'm going outside.” Gaara spoke abruptly, his voice hinting that Naruto should join him.

The blonde stood up reflexively, trying to overcome his growing concerns for Haku's state of health. He followed quietly after the red haired boy, only realizing that they had been resting in a
cave once they had gotten out of it. Gaara didn't even bother to hole up the entrance behind them.

“Don't set off any traps-” Gaara's warning came a bit too late, as he watched Naruto dodge a hail of kunai that had sprung from a nettle of leaves, where he had unwittingly stepped on a trip wire. He sighed at his friend, expecting as much.

“Yeesh! You could give a bit more warning than that Gaara!” The blonde boy followed after his teammate, peeved, “What? Were you trying to scare off any army or something while we were out?”

“It's a possibility.” Gaara said blandly, finding he was unable to smirk as he normally would at a moment like this. He absently wandered back to the stream as Naruto followed him, wary for traps.

Gaara sat down by the water and splashed a handful of it over his tired face. Naruto plopped down beside him and immersed his entire head into the cool water. His teammate sighed in exasperation. The blonde resurfaced, grinning and refreshed.

It was then Gaara considered telling Naruto about his encounter with his long-lost siblings. Though he was aware it would probably come as a shock, since he had never spoken about them before in his time with Naruto and Haku. He felt torn. It was horrible and never before had he been so hopelessly confused in his life.

Gaara decided against it. Naruto had a lot to deal with at the moment and forcing his problems onto the blonde would only complicate things further.

He'd find out eventually anyway.

“Maybe we should just...wake Haku-kun up,” Naruto suggested thoughtfully as they stood, “You know, give him a little nudge. I bet he's got enough energy to at least have us get to the tower...”

For once, Gaara couldn't argue with him. Haku would have to get going any way; they simply didn't have any more time to allow him to recover. The red haired boy nodded solemnly in response and Naruto raised his eyebrows at him for a moment, but then shrugged, glad Gaara didn't deem his idea foolish.

They returned to their temporary hideout where Haku remained in a deep sleep. It felt like a crime to wake him, being that Gaara had spoken of how terribly ill he had been, but it needed to be done.

Naruto kneeled down next to the dark haired boy and gently shook his shoulder, “Haku-kun, it's time for us to get going...”

Haku's eyes opened slowly and his pain was visible. It took a moment for them to adjust to the light before the image of Naruto's whiskered face came into view. Gaara sighed inwardly, hoping he had enough energy for the continuation of their journey.

The blonde boy helped Haku sit up and let him have a sip of water from his canteen, 'I don't know about this...he's still as weak as a kitten and he can barely see straight...' Haku was cross-eyed at the moment.

“How are you feeling?” Gaara couldn't help but notice the dark haired boy shaking slightly. It wasn't comforting.

“I feel like I was hit by a train...” Haku's voice was hoarse, but humorous. Naruto grinned, glad that he wasn't the zombie-version of himself he had been expecting.
“We kind of lost two days after the fight with the crazy guy,” Naruto announced sheepishly, “So we better haul ass in the next few days or we'll be late and...yeah.” He didn't want to upset Haku, but he was a bit late on the uptake.

Haku's storm colored eyes lowered in shame, “I'm sorry.”

“For what?” Naruto barked, indignant, “You've got no reason to apologize, Haku-kun!”

“I've been a burden,” He said softly, “I've slowed us down.”

“Technically you've both been burdens,” Gaara pointed out and his teammates looked hurt, “It's not something to be remorseful about. We're here and have both scrolls. If we go now there's little chance that we'll be disqualified at all.”

Their expressions brightened considerably.

“Well? You think you're up to it, Haku-kun?” Naruto's mood was as sunny as usual.

He nodded, sliding his legs beneath him and stood awkwardly. He looked terrible, but if he believed that he was able to continue his teammates weren't about to stop him.

“I have a question though.” Haku's eyebrows knitted together in a frown, “While we were knocked out, what happened? Were there any other shinobi that you encountered, Gaara-kun?”

“A team of Cloud,” He answered succinctly, walking ahead of them into the sun-lit brush of the forest, “I crushed them before they could get too close.” It was only half of the truth, but the truth nonetheless.

“Ah.” Haku nodded in understanding and had no further comment on the matter. Naruto walked beside him, guardedly, keeping watch for any other ninja, as improbable as another encounter would be.

Haku felt his chakra slowly begin to return to him, but it was painfully low. His limbs ached as he followed his teammates up into the treetops, and he hoped that he would never again slow them down.

At that time Kabuto arrived at the tower. He bade farewell to Team 7, whom he had escorted there after stumbling upon them in the forest.

The silver haired boy pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose as he pulled open one of the double doors and went inside silently, as if expected.

He was.

“Ah, so you've brought the information, Kabuto-kun?” Orochimaru's voice hung slippery in the air as he leaned against a wall, his arms folded across his chest.

Kabuto smirked darkly, holding up one of his cards, “Yes, Orochimaru-sama. It's all here: the information on Uchiha Sasuke.”

Orochimaru accepted the card offered to him, before he asked “And what of the other? Young Haku-kun?”

Kabuto frowned, “I'm afraid I was only able to track down Sasuke. Haku and his teammates have remained elusive,” His smirk returned, wider than ever, “Though I should have no problem
collecting information on him. He seems to be one of the favorites of this village...”

“No matter,” Orochimaru waved the subject away, not caring very much. He had seen what he wanted from both boys, “I will be watching both of them with interest. It’s quite surprising that they have both survived...”

Kabuto remained quiet; his eyes were unblinking behind his glasses.

“The Hokage knows that I’m here,” Orochimaru’s smiled sadistically to himself, recalling how Anko had confronted him the night before, “He isn’t foolish enough to stop the exams...not when I'm having so much fun.”

“What are your orders?” Kabuto asked.

“Do not let the third stage of the exam be interrupted;” Orochimaru said simply, vanishing into the shadows, “I’m looking forward to it...”

The silver haired boy nodded and then moved on, unable to suppress his gleeful smirk of how easily things had gone according to plan.

On their way to the tower, with Naruto heading up the front with an unprecedented speed, they had run into a team of Rain nin. Haku had been, and unknowingly so to the other team, unable to fight. So naturally his teammates were a tad overprotective of him.

Gaara and Naruto trampled the fools trying to confuse them with genjutsu, leaving them to their misery and woe, but with their scrolls intact.

“That was bullying you know,” Haku was highly disapproving of their actions, “We could've just left. There was no need for a standoff.”

“Yeah well, bullying or whatever it was, they attacked us first!” Naruto protested, “They had it coming!”

Gaara silently agreed with him, leaving Haku to follow behind them, troubled, wondering if they were planning on demolishing every team they encountered on their way to the tower.

The tower, which had appeared absurdly far away during the day time, was much closer than they had anticipated, to their relief. The moon was high in the sky once they had gotten there and they had not been intercepted by any other shinobi since their battering of the Rain nin.

They entered cautiously, unsure of what to expect.

The double doors closed with a rusted creak behind them. It was a wide, vacant room. Moonlight filtered into the dark, echoing room from beneath the door and small windows placed high on the walls. It was not what they had expected and quite underwhelming.

“This place is empty,” Naruto went ahead to state the obvious, “What do you suppose we do now?”

“Look up there.” Haku pointed to a large sign hung on the opposite wall, which, after reading it, left them even more baffled.

Gaara remained silent; fighting the urge to let his eyes slip shut and fall asleep on his feet.

“There’s a word missing on that sign. It doesn’t make any sense!” Naruto declared, annoyed.
It wasn't as if his teammates hadn't noticed. By now they were exhausted and there was little energy left in them to think up any conclusions. Haku, as he often was, was the exception to that rule.

“I suggest we open our scrolls now,” Haku decided, fighting a yawn, “We'll open them at the same time…”

Naruto wasn't sure about the idea, “But Anko-sensei said we couldn't open them until-”

“Until we reached the tower.” Gaara finished for him, “We're here now.”

Haku nodded, “Yes. We've followed the rules, so we have to take it up until the last step.” He riffled through his blue gi and retrieved the Earth scroll, and Naruto watched apprehensively as Gaara displayed their Heaven scroll, wondering what the outcome would be.

“Together…” Haku's gulp was audible. Even he was just a bit nervous.

He and the red haired boy opened the scrolls in unison, finding the writing on each to be perplexing. After a moment, Naruto slapped the scrolls from their hands knowingly, letting them fall to the floor with a flutter. His teammates frowned at him.

“What?” Naruto folded his arms, “You want whoever you're summoning to land on you?”

“They're summoning-?” Haku realized that he was in fact correct. He would have eventually noticed what they were, but Naruto had more experience with summoning and recognized it first.

A cloud of smoke billowed from the scrolls on the floor and after a few seconds of observation a figure became visible.

The three of them gawked in shock.

Jiraiya blinked down at them in silence. He then broke into a fit of hysterical laughter at the sight of his bewildered students' faces. Naruto, Haku and Gaara stood, nonplused, even as the sennin fell to the floor, tears welling in his eyes as he chortled like a madman.

“Ero-sensei!” Naruto was the fastest to recover and vocalize, “What the hell are you doing here?”

Jiraiya stood, wiping at his eyes, “Eh? Oh. Well, as it turns out, I would've shown up here to watch you in the next round anyway. But I managed to strike a deal with Hokage-sama a week ago in which if I were to meet you here I'd be free of my community service!”

“Oh joy.” Gaara droned. He was honestly glad to see a familiar face, but just too tired to express it. He fell to the floor abruptly, grateful he no longer needed to defy gravity. Haku and Naruto followed suit, falling to their butts and longing for rest.

Jiraiya smirked at his pupils, “Hm? Pooped out already? How difficult was it in there?”

Naruto and Haku exchanged a long glance with each other, before Naruto proceeded to recap their struggle. He outlined their original plan, getting their scrolls, fishing, and the Grass ninja who ultimately defeated them but left them alive.

“Right…” Jiraiya was livid after hearing the story, although they weren't sure why, “Tell me, did you find out this Grass ninja's name?”

Haku vaguely recalled his introduction to the ninja, which had also been his farewell. Gingerly, he touched the seal on his neck, but decided not to bring attention to it, for he himself was unsure of
what it was for.

“He said that his name was...Orochimaru, I believe.” Haku confirmed and recoiled in shock as Jiraiya reeled away from them in an infuriated frenzy of derogatory comments and babble including phrases like, “They're my students!” and “I'll tear him right of his filthy snake skin!”

Gaara gave him an inquiring look a few minutes later, after he had calmed down, “You know him?”

Jiraiya's eyes narrowed, “More than I'd like to, believe me. Now tell me, did anything happen when you fought him? Anything at all?” His voice was dangerously serious and it was frightening.

Haku still didn't bring up the mark on his neck, being that another question was on his mind, “Yes actually,” Jiraiya's gaze was fixed on him after that, “Naruto-kun used a technique against him called the...Rasengan,” Naruto's cheeks tinted; he had forgotten about it, “When did he start using such a powerful move?”

Gaara's glare connected fully with the back of Naruto's blonde head now that he knew what he had been doing during the past few weeks.

Jiraiya's anger warped into a surprised face, “Uh...he did?” He looked down at his blue-eyed student, “You did?”

“Yeah I did!” Naruto's nostrils flared in annoyance, “You think I wouldn't be able to?”

“Truthfully, yes...” The toad sage sighed, further agitating his hard-working pupil.

“Yeah, well...I had to use the Kyuubi's chakra to do it twice...” Jiraiya's eyes widened after the word 'twice,' and Naruto didn't miss it either, to his delight, “But now...it's funny. I can't feel my chakra at all. It's like the fox just vanished or something.” He added in puzzlement.

Jiraiya raised one white eyebrow, “Oh? That is something. I better take a look...”

Haku and Gaara watched in clinical curiosity as Naruto removed his jacket, and with a small dose of chakra, made the seal on his stomach appear. The toad hermit kneeled down, observing it carefully. He knew what the problem was immediately.

“That bastard...” He muttered, focusing chakra into his fingers, “I was afraid he might use something like this on you. Good thing I can take care of it now.”

Naruto gave him a look of bafflement, “You mean he did something to the seal?”

Jiraiya nodded, “Yes, but it isn't permanently damaging. It's preventing the Kyuubi's chakra from mixing with yours at a stable rate. Easily fixable. Now I want you to look over at your teammates.”

“Why?”

“Just shut up and do it, squirt.”

“Alright! Fine!” Naruto's irritated gaze traveled over to Haku and Gaara, who appeared equally as puzzled as he.

“Good,” Jiraiya smirked to himself, drawing his right hand back, “Next, count back from 100.”
“This is so stupid. How is this gonna fix-?”

“Get on with it!”

“Sheesh! Fine!” Naruto blinked at Gaara, who looked amused, “100, 99, 98…”

“Five-Pronged Unsealing!” Naruto felt something slam into his abdomen. Perhaps he should have expected it, knowing his sneaky mentor well enough by then. Jiraiya’s hand was lit with radiant chakra and it burned off the restraint that had been applied to Naruto’s stomach.

Jiraiya promptly stepped back to observe a winded Naruto. He had fallen on his rear to the floor. The five inhibitors surrounding the seal of the demon fox vanished and Jiraiya nodded, quite pleased with himself, “Well that about does it! You don’t need to count anymore.”

“I wasn’t gonna keep going anyway you jerk!” Naruto yowled, trying to recover, “What the heck was that for?”

“You can use the Kyuubi’s chakra again, that’s what it was for,” The sage smirked, turning to his other two visibly amazed students, “Now that you're all here and well, my advice would be for you to rest and prepare for battle-”

“Ero-sensei...”

“What now, Naruto?”

“Can you get us some ramen, maybe?” Naruto’s face was pathetic but cute, “We're all starving!”

Gaara frowned, not understanding when Naruto and Haku had picked up that ‘cute pout’ that could sway others to their whim. Gaara was totally immune to the tactic but also incapable of using it.

Jiraiya frowned down at them as they sat huddled on the cement floor in the dark of the night, begging for food.

“Ah...alright, but quit it with the face.”

Naruto’s pout was replaced with an expression of delight. So far, he felt that the Chunin Exam were the coolest thing that he had ever participated in while in Konoha.

And the best part was that his friends were beside him.
“You look a bit nervous Haku-kun. Are you gonna be okay?”

The dark haired boy turned to Naruto. He leaned against the wall of the gymnasium beside Gaara. Haku rubbed his neck in reflex, trying to relieve his obvious anxiety.

Haku sighed in response, “I'm fine...really.”

Naruto nodded, believing him full-heartedly. He pulled a kunai from his holster and began to sharpen it on a whetting stone.

Gaara's glacier eyes opened a margin as he spoke, “Have you restocked on weapons like Jiraiya-sensei said?”

The blonde boy frowned at him, “Do you see me holding this kunai?”

“I wasn't talking to you.”

“Oh.”

A withered smile appeared on Haku's face, “I have. Relax.”

Like it could be so easy.

The redhead settled his eyes shut again and attempted to calm himself, but his mind was buzzing like a hive of bees at the moment. At any time the next part of the Chunin Exam would commence, and Jiraiya had only left them with a goofy grin behind his pipe earlier that morning. He had not provided them with much information on what was to come.

'Veve been waiting in this tower for a while now...what's gonna happen next?' Naruto stowed his kunai away after it was sharpened to his satisfaction, 'Things can only get rougher from here out, I bet.'

The other teams that had managed to arrive in one piece were also hovering in silent apprehension about the place. It was when a group of recognizable jounin appeared on the opposite side of the room did the genin snap out of their stupor and congregate in that general direction.

Haku and Naruto stood, stretched, and then followed after Gaara. They had been grateful for the day of rest they had once they had reached the tower. Jiraiya had even smuggled food and weapons in for them, then asking if they had spotted any cute kunoichi during their escapade in the Forest of Death.

Now they were ill at ease, knowing what horrific power some of the other ninja attending the exam possessed.

The Hokage stood in front of a huge statue of the ram seal on the opposite end of the gymnasium. He and the present jounin observed the curious number of trainees who had passed.

The genin teams lined up in adjacent formations, chattering amongst themselves with a new-found energy. Haku suspected that the sight of the Hokage himself may have reinstalled some vigor into the other ninja.
“This is it! This is it! This is it!” Naruto's excitement could only be contained in a small whisper to Haku, who stood with trembling shoulders in front of him, “We are gonna kick so much ass! I just know it!”

Gaara stared at the back of Naruto's head, trying to keep his emotions in check. It was surprisingly difficult.

Not far off was the team of the Sand Village. Miosuke, stubborn as ever, kept his cold eyes glued to his sensei up front while he mulled over their mission objectives. His anger at his teammates was not well hidden; for there was just no talking to them, not since they had realized that all the years of their father assuring them that their baby brother was dead were totally inaccurate.

Miosuke had insistently reminded them that it didn't matter, and that Gaara had been a vessel of a terrible demon, and that there was absolutely no point in stressing over it.

Their brother was dead. The ninja they had met in the forest was just another worthless Leaf genin.

Still, both Temari and Kankuro remained watchful over the red haired boy, unable to think of how he could have possibly survived so many years in another village without their father knowing.

Closer to Team 2 stood an exhausted-looking Team 10. Shikamaru, sporting dark circles beneath his eyes, accepted a potato chip Chouji had offered him. Ino, slightly more dapper, gazed in fangirlish awe at Sasuke, whose team they had assisted in the Forest of Death. Although, they hadn't provided so much assistance as they had a distraction.

Team 7 stood quietly, completely worn, with only Sakura muttering in concern to Sasuke, who disregarded her troubles.

Outwardly, Team 13 appeared as healthy as ever; Lee already congratulating Tenten on her historic, single-handed defeat of an ambush by Kabuto's team. She tried to quiet him, but to no avail.

Hinata's soft eyes were weary as they settled on Naruto, her beloved, grateful he and his teammates were well. She was utterly spent in spirit after enduring all of her teammates' animosity. Shino and Sato refused to speak unless it was to her, and even then she could feel their discontent towards each other.

Haku glanced back at her by chance and surprised her. He offered her an amiable smile, which she returned as best she could. Noting her fatigue, his eyes scanned briefly over the remainder of her team, in which he noticed a pair of kodachi adorning Sato's belt.

His gray eyes widened and he nudged Naruto gently in the ribs in order for him to redirect his attention to the unexpected sight. Gaara, ever observant, stole a glance as well.

Naruto swallowed his gasp and then turned to Haku, hissing in confusion, “What does he think he's doing with a pair of swords? Is he crazy?”

“They're too small to be swords, Naruto-kun,” Haku answered in a low voice, trying to explain, “Too small to even be short swords really. They are called kodachi, but how he obtained them is a mystery to me...”

Gaara snorted, “It's unlikely he's even able to fully wield them.”

Naruto shrugged, the shock wearing off, “You never know. He's a weird kid.”
They returned their attention to the front where a ninja had appeared, stifling a fit of coughs. Once
he had regained his breath he turned his eyes to the genin, “Mn... Welcome. I am Gekko Hayate
and I am your examiner for the next portion of the Chunin Exam.”

He was interrupted by a sudden cough, after which he continued, “There will now be a word from
Hokage-sama before the Third portion begins.”

Hayate stepped to the side, allowing Hiruzen to speak.

The Sandaime's eyes were uncommonly rough once they settled on his audience, “I congratulate
all of you for making it this far, for it is proof that you possess the minds and skills of true
shinobi...”

Naruto folded his arms in a manner similar to his equally impatient red haired friend, buckling
down for another boring speech from the leader of his village.

“They are participating in the next part of the Chunin Selection Exam, you will be battling your peers to
the death, representing the friendship that unites our villages together.”

There was a soundless pause in which the genin took a moment to consider his words, shortly
after they concluded that they had no understanding whatsoever what he was talking about.

Sakura, tired yet willful, spoke up with a few others, “Friendship? How can our fighting each
other represent good will towards other villages?”

Kakashi gave her a measured look from afar and she fell quiet again, knowing better than to get
too worked up.

“Decades ago, when the great ninja villages were still young, endless bloody wars persisted for
years on end. As shinobi, it is one's will to do battle and to defend their respective homes. In times
such as these, long after those battles, the Chunin Exam stands as a reminder of the true nature of a
ninja even in times of peace,” Sarutobi watched as comprehension crept up onto the faces of a few
of the listening nin, “You are all part of an invaluable tradition that upholds the bond between the
shinobi villages. As such, it is your duty to preserve the bond and honor the ninja before you who
gave their lives for your homes.”

The subject seemed to clear up after that.

Haku took the words to heart, approving of the goal of the exam, as brutal as it sounded. He was
disappointed to see that his teammates didn't share his enthusiasm. Naruto watched his mentor
from across the room, surprised that he didn't have any of his notes out.

Instead, the toad sage stood silently beside Kakashi with his eyes trained on the wall farthest from
Orochimaru.

Had he chosen to neglect all self-control the entire exam could have gone to hell in a hand-basket
right there. Jiraiya could barely stomach the snake traitor's return, let alone his attack on his pupils.

‘When this is over, Orochimaru, I swear, there will be hell to pay,’ He inhaled deeply as he tried to
remain cool, ‘Once Hokage-sama allows me, I will take your freshly severed head to him myself.
The people you've killed and the harm you've done...you'll regret the day you went near my
students!’

The snake sennin had chosen a new disguise as a jounin-sensei garbed in dark clothing. He kept a
watchful eye over the two genin he had branded. He had no trouble at all being so near to his old
teammate, contrary to how Jiraiya was feeling.
The Sandaime finished, allowing Hayate to continue.

“The upcoming matches will be one-on-one and randomized. Any ninja who feel that they will not be able to compete should withdraw now.” Hayate glanced over to some of the more battered-looking shinobi.

Without hesitation, Kabuto and his teammates raised their hands, by an earlier order from Orochimaru. The other Leaf genin could understand their plight, for many of their wounds (inflicted by a certain weapons specialist) had gone untreated and could possibly prove fatal.

“We're out,” Kabuto groaned, adjusting his glasses, “We won't be able to continue.”

Hayate nodded to them and the other genin watched as they departed, looking very relieved. Although it looked tempting, the remaining ninja knew they had come too far to quit. No other shinobi asked to be dismissed.

“No one else then?” The proctor made one last call and the enduring squads stayed quiet.

Hayate nodded, “Very well. As of now, the third stage has begun. The board will display two random names of those remaining to fight.” He gestured to a huge score board high on the left side of the far wall.

Everyone present looked up expectantly as names flashed rapidly on the black screen and finally settled on two of them.

Hayate restrained a loud cough, “Er-hem! The first match will be between...” He consulted the board’s readout, “Aburame Shino and Rock Lee. All other ninja must proceed up to the balcony now.”

Sato and Hinata, stunned, did not at first move. Shino appeared totally relaxed, but they, on the other hand, could not help but fear for him as he was the first to fight.

The silver haired boy frowned inwardly and then padded up to the balcony to rejoin his sensei. Hinata suppressed her anxiety, frightened by how quickly it had started, “Um...good luck, Shino-kun.”

“Thank you.” His calm attitude upset her as she departed.

Neither Neji or Tenten could have gotten a word in edgewise to Lee due to Gai’s last minute pep-talk, “Now listen Lee, do nothing but your best! The fires of Youth burn brightly within you!”

“I will Gai-sensei!”

“Good luck my student!”

“Gai-sensei!”

“Lee!”

“Gai-sensei!”

“Lee!”

Gai promptly punched him in the face to get him moving, tears of joy rolling down his cheeks. Lee recovered immediately, saluting his teacher and teammates, who could only sigh at the sight of him as they ventured up to the higher level.
It was a scene that had bewildered all who had not been witness to it before. So, naturally, Team 2 weathered it quite well, as did Teams 7 and 8.

‘It wasn’t nearly as bad as it was the Tanabata Festival...’ Haku recalled with a shudder.

Without further interruption the two Leaf genin faced off, neither intimidated in the least, as Hayate ended yet another coughing fit.

“Ready? You may begin.” Hayate backed away, letting the battle commence.

Shino, calm and smooth, drew a kunai. His eyes scanned Lee from behind his dark glasses, who had taken a ready pose. He predicted that Lee was going to come into close-quarters to fight. This would complicate things because Shino knew he fought best at a distance. He had to maintain the space between them.

“It will be an honor to fight against another talented shinobi from my village!” Lee proclaimed, leaping forward with surprising speed.

The Aburame boy threw the kunai with precise timing, but thanks to his training with Tenten, Lee dodged it effortlessly and continued on. Lee turned, preparing for a roundhouse kick, and was dismayed when it was easily countered.

The watching shinobi were silent as Lee cast a flurry of expert punches which Shino blocked with great effort. Kurenai admitted to herself while observing that Shino was, in her opinion, her most gifted student. He was able to adapt to most opponents. He kept up well with Lee, but Kurenai knew that soon he would use his cunning to disable his opponent's taijutsu.

Lee, while weaving away from what could have been a brutal hit, saw an opening in Shino's defense and went for it. With a cry, Lee planted a terrible uppercut squarely on Shino's lower jaw. Hinata squeaked in spite of herself.

Shino, a moment later, dispersed into a swarm of Kikaichu insects, much to Lee's shock. The bugs of Shino's doppelganger took hold of the enemy, slowing his movements as he struggled to get them off.

Shino appeared behind Lee, his insects scuttling away from their host in increasing numbers as they joined together to attack Lee.

“My insects will drain you of your chakra,” The Aburame boy warned, as Lee swiped them off frantically, still trying to get nearer to his opponent, “You may avoid injury if you give in now.”

Naruto, leaned excitedly on the railing between his teammates, impressed, “Oh man...Bushy-brows is in trouble! He better do something soon...”

Haku nodded in agreement, still nervous over his future fight. Gaara, unlike his friends, knew that Lee was much more capable than most gave him credit for.

Hinata shifted her eyes to Sato. Much to her surprise he was wearing an anxious expression. His midnight blue eyes were focused on the match below and held no trace of anger as they had before.

‘Maybe Sato-kun is worried now...’ Hinata pondered, noticing his change in behavior, This match was a shock to him. Is it possible that he wanted to fight Shino-kun himself?’

It seemed likely. Sato had trouble letting go of his anger, even if it was sparked through his
teammates looking out for his safety. Now Shino was in a fight that Sato had never imagined could have taken place, and he was unsure of how he was supposed to feel at all.

Kurenai turned her crimson eyes to Gai, who had his signature grin plastered to his face as he observed the match. She knew by now that there were definite parallels in skill between the student and teacher, if that were any more indication of her fears.

Lee ended his struggle against the insects clambering onto him by the hundreds, and instead looked up to his mentor questioningly, waiting for a signal. Tenten frowned, hoping he wasn't planning anything too drastic. Once Gai had given him a thumbs-up and a huge, dazzling smile, Lee's expression changed.

Shino wondered why it was taking Lee so long to surrender, but he decided to stay cautious, sensing a change in strategy fast approaching.

Many people watching had blinked and missed it, as the Kikaichu insects attempting to drain Lee's chakra were blown off of him all at once, and the boy in green vanished. Kakashi, observant as ever, gave a look of disapproval to Gai, wondering when he had taught the boy to open chakra gates.

The sudden surge of energy had stunned the bugs, leaving them belly-up on the floor and unable to move. Shino had no time to react once Lee had reappeared, moving extraordinarily fast, and hit him with a vicious, high-speed flying kick.

Sato flinched.

The Aburame boy flew across the room, to the horror of many in the audience, and crashed into the opposite wall with a small yet noticeable shockwave. The impact knocked the wind out of him, but he was still able to function. Shino took a moment to regroup.

’How was he unaffected by my insects? That was no normal amount of chakra...’ Shino righted himself, ready to fight again, but unable to understand what had just happened.

“How can Bushy-brows move that fast?” Naruto muttered in astonishment.

“It is a result of his training with Gai-sensei, I believe,” Haku answered, also in awe, “He is much stronger than I had originally thought...”

Lee stood patiently, wearing a confident expression as he anticipated Shino's thoughts, “You see now that your insects were not able to drain my chakra and will not be able to in the future!”

Slowly, the Kikaichu insects on the floor began to regain mobility and returned to Shino, hissing to him their dislike of his opponent. In his own mind he agreed with them. Lee was a bit too energetic for his taste.

Shino threw a round of shuriken as he rushed at Lee, who was also approaching, and prepared to create another clone from his insect allies. Again with an invisible speed, Lee disappeared before the projectiles could reach their mark. Frustrated, Shino skidded to a halt and formed seals: a costly mistake.

Lee reappeared again, low to the floor, and kicked Shino into the air before he could complete his jutsu. Lee’s teammates watched expectantly, having seen it before as Shino struggled, only to get hit repetitively, preventing him from returning to the ground. His insects could not move fast enough to catch up to them.

Sato was horrified, having never seen Shino take so many ruthless hits. It was at that moment he
had given up his resentment. He could accept that his teammates only promised to prevent him from using the Chidori in order to protect him. It had been a poor excuse to squander their friendship.

“Shino! Come on! You've got to fight back!” The young Hatake threw his fists in the air, hollering, “It isn't over yet!”

Kurenai didn’t fight the small smile that bloomed on her lips.

Hinata, though surprised, was grateful that Sato had finally broken out of his funk, even if it had taken a long while. Nearby, Team 2 was also startled, for it had been the first time in over five days they had heard a peep out of Sato.

Shino was shocked to hear his teammate cheer for him and countered a number of Lee's strikes in response, buying enough time for his insects to reach him and begin their assault on Lee.

Lee, though inspired by the cheering, was ready to end the battle, “Shadow of the Dancing Leaf!”

Lee's arm bindings came loose and coiled around Shino, restricting his movement, and Sato watched, stupefied, as Lee began pulling Shino down with him towards the ground, head first.

“Front Lotus!” The rapidly spinning combatants crashed down, leaving a cloud of dust in the aftermath of the attack.

An uproar followed, many shinobi were unsure of the end result. Naruto was left speechless, finding it difficult to say anything after witnessing the sheer force of the attack. Jiraiya only smirked, finding it interesting that one so young was incredibly skilled in taijutsu.

When visibility down below returned, Lee was the first to be seen, standing on shaky legs. He looked pleased with his work, despite a few Kikaichu insects still trying to feast on his chakra.

A short ways off, Shino could be seen in a small crater, weakly struggling to stand and failing at it. Lee's Front Lotus could have maimed him had his insects not broken the worst of his fall. It was quiet for a long moment as Shino used up the last of his strength before collapsing, spent.

Hayate approached, fighting back a few threatening coughs, “The winner of the match is Rock Lee.”

Sato, unable to stop himself, leapt over the railing and went to his fallen teammate, hoping his injuries weren't too extensive. Hinata stayed close to Kurenai as tears welled in her pale, white eyes. She was glad that her teammates had gotten over their hostilities.

Shino was conscious yet mortified over his loss. He looked up at Sato who helped him stand, not minding the insects that climbed onto him. It didn't take long before a goofy grin found its way onto Sato's face, as it often did, “You did great buddy! That's got to be one of the best fights I've seen in a while...” He paused guiltily, “I'm...sorry I was a jerk.”

Shino said nothing, but offered a nod.

Kurenai folded her arms, approving, and spoke quietly to Hinata, “When will they ever learn?”

The Hyuga girl smiled slightly, even if Shino's loss was disappointing.

Lee, predictably, was a gracious winner, “That was a splendid match! Your youth is commendable beyond a doubt, Shino-kun!” Sato snorted in laughter as he and the annoyed Aburame returned up to the balcony, friends once again.
The jounin could tell that the first match had inspired the watching genin.

Gai had decided it was an ideal moment to speak with his eternal rival who was nearby, “So Kakashi, what do you make of my hard-working student?”

There was a long, awkward silence.

A few moments later, Kakashi looked up from his naughty book and turned to an expectant-looking Gai, “Hm? Did you say something Gai?”

Gai clenched his teeth in aggravation, ’Ack! That Kakashi thinks he’s so cool! I’ll show him one of these days!’

“Lee! Great job!” Tenten finally mustered the strength to smile when Lee had returned, “Of course I knew you had it in the bag from the get-go, but still, you looked good out there.”

“Thank you my beautiful teammate!” She sighed, expecting such a flowery response.

Tenten turned her gaze to Neji who gave her a sour look. He did not feel like congratulating Lee at the moment. Her eyes narrowed in impatience as she waited, when finally, he spoke, but not approvingly, “You were slower than usual.”

Tenten sighed, wishing he could try to be a tad friendlier.

Lee grinned in response, finding it more favorable than what Neji often criticized him for. A few paces away stood Gai, challenging Kakashi to a round of rock-paper-scissors.

Jiraiya scratched his chin, finding the outcome of the match interesting. In turn, it made him curious as to how his own students would fare in their own approaching matches, “Hey squirts, there’s something you should probably be aware of…”

Naruto gave him an alarmed look, “And you’re telling us now?”

“Yep,” He nodded, “Try to understand the fact that this is the first preliminary of the Third stage of the Chunin Exam has had in over several years,” His students gave him questioning looks, “Meaning that it is extremely unusual so many genin made it this far. Not more than ten on average pass, but here now there are over twenty ninja competing…”

“It is quite strange there are so many strong shinobi all competing at the same time,” Haku agreed, seeing the break in the normal pattern in the exam, “How can there suddenly be so many more passing genin, sensei?” His teammates also found it curious.

“I have a few theories…” Jiraiya answered slowly, lighting his pipe as his eyes narrowed at Orochimaru, “For now, the only thing you three can do is tough it out. If any weird crap starts going down we’ll know.”

The new readout appeared on the board.

“The second match will be between Tsuchi Kin and Nara Shikamaru.” Hayate announced, glancing up towards the balcony.

“Aw man...why does my match have to be next? And against a girl too?” Shikamaru muttered irritably, and his jounin instructor gave him an expectant look.

“Good luck out there.” Chouji smiled, assuming that Shikamaru may decide to give in quickly, but still hoped to motivate him.
“Alright Shikamaru! Get down there and knock her block off!” Ino was enthusiastic.

Shikamaru complied, taking his time as he left the balcony, his hands jammed in his pockets. It wouldn't have been so much of an issue, he figured, if his team hadn't faced down the Sound nin kunoichi earlier in the Forest of Death.

'Sakura's team gets ambushed and Ino has a mental breakdown while we watch her take on three enemy ninja. Sounds like any other mission we're on actually...' He sighed inwardly when he reached the main floor.

'I really don't want to fight this chick...' Shikamaru stood at the rooms' center, staring down his opponent. 'And what's worse is that she's seen my jutsu and I haven't seen her's.'

It would be a problem, undoubtedly, facing a foe who had already seen his strategy in action. Especially topping off the fact that he had very little incentive to fight anyway.

“The lazy bum's up now...I've never seen him fight before!” Naruto folded his arms behind his head, immensely bored. Truthfully, Naruto didn't expect Shikamaru would make it so far, considering that he was such a slothful ninja. But the exam, he had found, held many surprises.

Haku stood beside him, still tense, while Gaara leaned against the wall behind them in silence.

Kin smirked maniacally at Shikamaru, feeling confident. She had not forgotten his team’s interference with their plan to kill Uchiha Sasuke and she was ready to put him in his place.

“Begin.” Hayate stepped back, waiting for the next combatants to start.

“I'm going to finish you quickly and painfully.” Kin announced, jumping back and putting distance between herself and Shikamaru. The Leaf nin hadn't expected her sudden onslaught of senbon, but he managed to dodge seconds before they were able to hit him.

“Senbon, eh?” Shikamaru wasn't happy and dodged another round of needles. His attention was diverted when a small, ringing sound came from behind him, startling him.

His dark eyes scanned over two senbon that had missed him and had been imbedded into the wall. Attached to them were bells, tinkling an eerie sort of sound. Shikamaru then noticed the Sound kunoichi controlling the bells herself from across the way with string, while also throwing more senbon at him.

'I've played into her trap!' He dodged in response but was still struck by three of the needles, thankfully in no critical areas.

Kin smirked again, seeing how easily manipulated he had proven to be, “Ask not for who the bell tolls. It tolls for thee!”

Shikamaru muttered in annoyance as he extracted the painful needles from his arm and shoulder, trying to come up with a plan. Kin rang her bells again and this time, Shikamaru found, they had a strange effect on him.

Kin appeared to multiply from where she stood. A blurry line of six kunoichi appeared as his eyes grew fuzzy with the ringing bells, disorienting him, ‘Yup, this is definitely genjutsu...I guess I'm going to have to stake out the real one...what a drag!'

“I only threw three needles the last time, but the next time I'll throw five...” She warned, bringing mathematics into her favor, “You'll be a big pincushion once I'm through with you.”
Before she could launch more senbon, she frowned, puzzled. Her confusion turned into alarm when she saw Shikamaru stand, smirking triumphantly. “Looks like my Shadow Possession Technique was a success...”

Kin’s eyes widened in alarm, finding that she was completely frozen and under her opponent’s power. She was certain she had remained watchful of his shadows. She couldn’t believe she had overlooked something.

Bored again, Shikamaru decided to point out her error, “You should have realized that the thread you had attached to those bells wouldn’t have cast a shadow at such a height,” She glanced in horror to the thin shadow cast on the floor, “All I had to do was stretch out my shadow and bingo! I’ve got you now...”

Asuma, above with his other two students, gave a grunt of approval from behind his cigarette. Ino was ecstatic, “Awesome Shikamaru! Now finish her off!”

Reaching into his holster, Shikamaru drew out a kunai, prepared to end the fight. Kin watched as she too drew out a kunai, mirroring his actions, *There’s no way he’s crazy enough to-!*

Without a second thought, Shikamaru threw his kunai, with Kin echoing him helplessly. He leaned back to avoid the knife she had thrown at him. Relieved, she did the same, dodging the kunai…and hitting her head with a powerful *thud* on the wall behind her.

Kin fell to the floor unconscious and was then released from Shikamaru’s control. He stood up again, adding, “It would’ve also helped if she had been paying attention to her surroundings.”

Hayate found the victor obvious, “The winner is Nara Shikamaru.”

Chouji munched furiously on a bag of chips, unable to believe that Shikamaru of all people had won his match. Ino stood beside him raving, pleased with the outcome.

“Who knew that lazy guy could actually pull it off.” Naruto muttered, completely baffled.

Haku nodded in agreement, also not expecting it, “His strategy was impressive! Maybe he has more skill than he lets on.”

“Feh! Yeah right!” The blonde snorted in reply, doubtful.

Shikamaru returned up to the balcony, not very proud of his victory.

Without further preamble, the score board selected the next pair of combatants, whose names Hayate read aloud as he resisted a loud cough, “Hm...the next match will be between Yamanaka Ino and Temari.”

Shikamaru, who had just reunited with his team, gave her a troubled look as she patted his shoulder. She grinned and then proceeded down to her own match. Ino was to say, quite confident after seeing her lazy teammate come out victorious in his battle and had few worries.

The Nara glanced over at the kunoichi of the Sand village who also went down to the main level, having a dark, merciless look in her eyes. He didn't like that look.

Gaara stared unblinking as his sister descended, unsure of what to think.

“Gaara-kun has been acting strangely ever since we reached the tower, haven't you noticed?” Haku asked in a nearly inaudible voice to Naruto.
The blonde nodded, “Yeah. I can’t say I know why.”

Haku and Naruto found Gaara's lack of communication more irksome than usual. It was still a mystery to them what had been bothering their red haired friend for so long. Gaara, when asked about it, denied there ever being a problem.

Temari, at first sight of Ino, concluded that she wouldn't be much of a threat, 'I'll finish her fast, there's no point in dragging the fight out...' She looked up at Gaara and jumped when their eyes met, 'Just don't take this personal baby brother...I didn't ask to fight another Leaf ninja.'

Hayate began the fight, but Temari hadn't been paying much attention.

“If you're not going to start then I will!” Ino declared, beginning by hurling a hail of kunai and shuriken.

Not much bothered; Temari reluctantly took her eyes away from Gaara and replaced them on Ino. Her fan, almost reflexively, deflected the projectiles with ease. Ino, greatly dismayed, came closer while throwing more weapons, only for them to be blocked time and again.

As seconds evolved into minutes, Ino's apprehension grew, 'I can't get close with her using that big fan of her's...' She frowned to herself, 'I'm just going to have to try something else then!'

Ino, reasserting her confidence, formed hand seals, “Here's something you can't block with a fan!”

Sakura observed the fight from above and held her breath, hoping Ino could pull it off, 'She better win this match so I can face her in the next round!'

Temari narrowed her eyes at Ino, not understanding her aim, 'What's she babbling on about? There are few jutsu she can use that will harm me...'

Ino was glad to see that Temari had no knowledge of how to avoid her attack and didn't bother to try to dodge it, “Mind Body Switch Technique!”

Temari had only thought to move too late, but she froze an instant later.

Ino's team watched anxiously as she fell to the floor limp, leaving them to hope that she hadn't missed her target.

“Did it work?” Chouji asked lowly. He and his teammates were unable to tell.

Kakashi glanced down at his pink haired pupil, seeing how she was more attuned to the current battle than she had been to the first. He smiled beneath his mask, knowing a healthy rivalry would do her good.

Temari's eyes opened and she smiled, “Gotcha!”

“What's going on?” Kankuro muttered, noting the change in his sister's behavior, “Something definitely just happened here...”

“I think that goofy Leaf girl got her.” Miosuke mumbled, finding it difficult to believe, “It's not like she saw it coming, the fool.”

Kankuro flashed his teeth angrily at his pessimistic teammate, not wanting to hear any of his derogatory comments.

Ino, once inside Temari's mind, set straight to work, 'Alright! I'll just end this match and head
back to my body! This was a total cake-walk!

To her surprise she detected a very ominous presence that she had not anticipated to find. This mind, unlike others she had seen, was deep, dim, and pained; swirling with thoughts and dark memories as she tried to establish an influence in the foggy realm, 'Wow...it's pretty creepy in here.'

'That do you think you're doing?' Temari's voice came clear as a bell from behind her, and Ino lost focus once she spun around, horrified.

'You! But how? I thought I suppressed you completely! You shouldn't be able to-!'

Scowling, Temari glared at the invading Leaf kunoichi, 'It isn't very polite to intrude in other people's minds and you...' She paused, livid, 'You dare enter my mind? It's private and it's strong. It isn't something that a half-baked ninja like you could overpower...'

Ino was upset to find that she hadn't so much as raised Temari's arm in the air before things went downhill.

'You're leaving now and once you're back where you belong, I'm going to crush you,' The Sand ninja announced, Ino backing away in terror, 'Out.'

The astral form of Temari backhanded Ino in the face, sending her crashing out of her body and back from whence she came. With a jolt, Ino's once-limp body gained a consciousness, and she wobbled awkwardly to her feet, her brain reeling.

Sakura frowned, knowing something went wrong, 'What happened? I thought for sure Ino-pig had her...'

'No way!' Shikamaru and Chouji were as equally stunned as Ino, never before seeing a mind that she could not gain control over.

Asuma sighed, fearing what would happen next.

Once Temari was back in control of herself, she opened her fan fully, glaring at Ino, "Cutting Whirlwind!"

The blast of wind hit Ino with incredible force, knocking her against the back wall as the gale sliced deep into her skin. The attack was vicious and intended to be so. Temari would not stand for her mind to be violated.

Ino fell, unable to fight.

"Temari is the winner." Hayate found her technique impressive and even more so, the power of her own mind, which could fend off intruders.

With a disheartened sigh, Shikamaru went below to retrieve her. Though she weakly protested his help and refused to raise her eyes out of shame, he gave her a soft word, commending her for her effort. Chouji was relieved that it hadn't gone worse, and offered her a snack when she had returned to her team, scratched and bruised. She accepted it, unwilling to look at them.

Sakura felt something constrict in her stomach: pity and a mix of disappointment. She had hoped to be the one to defeat Ino, but at the same time hadn't expected her to be beaten so badly.

Hayate called out the new names the board displayed, "The fourth match will be between Kanosuke Nari and Kankuro."
Gaara's light eyes followed after his older brother nostalgically.

Kankuro frowned, hoped to have had more time to congratulate his sister, but proceeded down anyway, hoping Miosuke wouldn't act like a jackass around her. He found it curious that he would be facing a Cloud shinobi even when Kumogakure had been allied with Sand and Sound for the upcoming invasion planned for the end of the exam.

Ally or not, he refused to hold back.

“You may begin when ready.” Hayate stepped back again, allowing the fight to commence.

With no hesitation, Nari took the chain-scythe that had been waiting at his side and flung it with a cry at his opponent. Kankuro could not dodge easily with his cumbersome puppet still on his back and only managed to avoid the sickle.

Nari pulled back, looping the chain around Kankuro's arm and attempted to drag him nearer. A moment later he formed hand seals while still gripping the chain, sending an electric current through the metal towards Kankuro.

He had seen it before and anticipated this new Cloud nin to have a similar strategy to the ninja they had encountered in the Forest of Death. The shock, much to the Kumo nin's astonishment, had not effected Kankuro at all.

The henge fell and what the young Cloud shinobi thought he had been attacking was in actuality the puppet that had been carried on Kankuro's back. Logic then proved that the person emerging from the bandages beside Karasu must have been the real Kankuro.

He smirked, his face paint making his face look more aggressive than he truly was, “Surprised?”

With a sudden tug, Kankuro directed Karasu to pull back on the chain tangled around its forearm, yanking Nari forward, his boots scraping against the floor. Unable to free his scythe in time, the blue haired ninja was enveloped inside the battle puppet, finding blades waiting inside that would shred him at Kankuro's whim. The boy cried for help, acknowledging his defeat.

Hayate called the match, not wanting it to end in an unnecessary death, “The winner of the match is Kankuro.”

Temari smiled, glad Kankuro was able to overcome the Kumo ninja which had been a difficult task for them days earlier. Even Baki was pleased as he stood and observed, noting that there wasn't a scratch on him.

Miosuke wiped his nose, unimpressed, “Cloud shinobi are bogus!”

Temari restrained the urge to punch him full in the face. Their days as teammates, two years earlier even, had not been happy ones. Miosuke was always provoking them, causing trouble, and certainly not very worried over anyone other than himself.

So she wouldn't go as far as to say that they were friends. More like associates. Disdainful associates.

Kankuro averted his eyes from Gaara during his return to the balcony, feeling some indescribable pain raking at his gut.

It hurt that their brother had to live his life in another village. It hurt even more that before the exam's end, Konoha was scheduled to be invaded. Needless to say, Kankuro was having second
thoughts and so was Temari.

Gaara had found a new home and they had yet to decide if they were willing to destroy it.

The board overhead flashed a pair of names that startled Team 2.

Hayate read aloud the next combatants, “The fifth battle will be between Sosumi Miosuke and Gaara.”

Naruto and Haku turned to him, wide eyed and grinning. They knew there was no way he was about to lose this match. Gaara blinked at them, accepting their confidence in him, and turned to go down, ready as ever.

Jiraiya smirked at the red haired boy as he stalked off, “Kick some ass, Gaara.”

Leaf genin had their eyes set on Gaara as he ventured down. No one was more apprehensive than Sakura. She swallowed audibly, wanting to wish him luck, but discovering that her voice had abandoned her, 'Gaara-kun...just don't do anything too rash...'

From the beginning Gaara had found Miosuke's attitude repulsive, especially in regards to his teammates. He was admittedly glad he had been selected a challenger worthy of a severe beating. Although he hadn't quite expected the mousy Sand nin's thorough knowledge of him.

Miosuke's voice was a low hiss, something only Gaara could hear, “Hey there, Ichibi-chan...”

From above, Temari and Kankuro found themselves unable to speak. They could tell somehow that Gaara intended to show little mercy to their arrogant teammate and they didn't blame him for it either.

'However this turns out...' Kankuro thought, 'It won't be good.'

By the time Hayate had advised them to begin, sand was pouring out of Gaara's gourd, and Miosuke had put a large distance between himself and his foe, ready for long-range combat.

“Let's see if you're really as tough as they say you are!” Miosuke barked, readying his enormous boomerang, “Jet Stream Slash!”

The ivory and red arc shot across the room, creating a fierce shockwave in its wake. The resulting gust nearly knocked a few nearby genin off of their feet. Gaara stood very still, scowling with his arms folded. He had seen this jutsu before.

His sand reached it half way, swarming around the boomerang, and by the time it had even gotten close to Gaara, it had been stopped fully. With a clatter, the arc dropped to the floor, useless, and unable to return to its master.

The mousy antagonist was troubled, but just as talkative, “You know, it isn't very fair that you have that sand advantage of yours when you aren't even of Suna anymore!”

Gaara's eyes widened, wondering how much his opponent would dare to expose about him.

“Can it you ass!” Naruto howled, sharing Gaara's fear, “Just shut your mouth!”

“What does he think he's doing?” Temari hissed, giving a worried look to her mentor, “He'll...he'll ruin the mission!”

“If he even tries it,” Baki growled in response, just as displeased, “I'll end this match myself.”
Lee turned to his own sensei, confused, “What is that Sand ninja's meaning? Gaara-kun is not originally of the Leaf village?” It was something Neji had assumed on his own, but Tenten had never suspected that a genin could hail from a different village.

Gai figured it was best not to lie, “No Lee. Gaara arrived here many years ago when he was a young child.” He gestured over to the remainder of Team 2, “The same can be said for young Haku-kun as well, who is rumored to have been born nearby the Mist Village.”

“How fascinating!” Lee didn't object to the idea at all.

“But sensei...why would they be forced to leave their own villages and come here?” Tenten asked, still finding it odd.

“That Tenten, I am afraid, is confidential...” Gai answered, his voice stern, “Their past lives are none of our business.”

Miosuke's attention had turned to Naruto, who was yowling down at him from the upper level. He hadn't expected someone to defend the secret of Shukaku's container so fervently.

“What does it matter to you?” Miosuke spat, his wicked eyes connecting with Naruto's fiery blue ones, “Monsters like this deserve to be exterminated! You have no idea of what you speak you idiot!”

Gaara's sand had impacted him, cutting his rant short and barreling him over.

Miosuke struggled to his feet again, fuming.

'He'll be wanting his weapon back, seeing as he has no skill in close-quarters,' Gaara predicted, untying his gourd and letting it fall to the floor with a thud, 'If I catch him by surprise he will be all too easy to defeat, being he's so distracted.'

After all, Miosuke's words would not win him the match.

Gaara was more about action.

Jiraiya eyed the crater Gaara's sand gourd had formed incredulously. 'Yeesh! What is that kid thinking? He could injure himself carrying around all that weight!'

Sakura's eyes widened, much like Kiba's had, who stood next to her. She had no clue as to what he was planning, 'Since when did he get this strong? I know he said he and Naruto-kun have been improving their taijutsu but...could he be over-doing it a little?'

Gaara's sand swarmed over the earthbound boomerang, obscuring it from sight. Miosuke ground his teeth together in frustration, 'I can't take him close-range...if I don't get Tsubakura back, this may take longer than I expected.'

“Come on you bastard!” Miosuke hurled an alarming number of kunai and shuriken with deadly accuracy and Gaara didn't bother to avoid them.

To the mousy shinobi's horror, his projectiles bounced off of Gaara futilely, leaving him unharmed, “But how-?”

“Sand armor!” Haku muttered, smirking, “It will slow him down though. It’s heavy and consumes a lot of chakra. He's sure to discard it soon...”

“Looks like that Sand creep isn't so tough after all!” Naruto snorted, folding his arms.
Gaara, being a courteous ninja, decided that Miosuke could not be crushed to a bloody pulp when he was the teammate of his siblings. Still, he wouldn't hesitate to beat him into submission.

Jiraiya raised an eyebrow as Gaara's sand armor peeled away from him and he rushed at the stunned Sand ninja, who found he was out of shuriken.

“I thought he could only fight with sand...” Temari whispered, having never seen Gaara utilize hand-to-hand combat skills. It was almost fulfilling to watch Miosuke stumble as he received a jab in the gut, and double over in pain after Gaara delivered a fierce roundhouse kick.

“Looks like he's learned a thing or two while he's been here...” Kankuro surmised, giving her a lopsided smile. He too found it amazing.

“Yeah! Gaara!” Naruto's cheers were far louder than anyone else's, though only a margin above Sakura's.

Miosuke's pathetic block was broken and he was sent crashing into the wall a moment later, his eyes watering. He touched his chest gingerly, wondering if any of his ribs had been broken, *This freak...he's using that thing's chakra to make his blows stronger I bet!*

“Woo hoo!” Lee's excitement radiated off him, “Just like in our training Gaara-kun!”

The battered Sand ninja slid down the wall, exhausted, wiping the blood from his lip.

Gaara knew there wasn't much more he could take.

He turned away, sand gathering around him in wait, “Proctor,” Hayate looked to Gaara from the sidelines, “Call the match.”

It seemed that it was something he was already considering without Gaara having to tell him.

Miosuke, seizing his chance, drew back on the chakra strings he had concealed, pulling Tsubakura back to him frighteningly fast. Gaara stood near his gourd, not intimidated.

The Sand nin's eyes lit up with new hope as his hands closed around his beloved boomerang, and they narrowed at Gaara as he stood shakily, calculating his next move.

*He must enjoy pain,* Gaara thought blandly, not interested in fighting any longer, *Ninja like him don't survive long anyway...*

Miosuke gripped Tsubakura eagerly, “You filthy monster! I'm surprised they kept you here at all outside of a cage!” He couldn't stop his rambling mouth, and he gave a brief glare up to his teammates, “Temari and Kankuro said that you are ten times the ninja that I am,” Miosuke smirked to himself, “But I don't make a habit of listening to demon-loving traitors!”

Few noticed the murderous looks that came over both Kankuro and Temari's faces. If Miosuke so much as even hinted about the presence of the one-tailed beast again, they'd aid Baki with disciplining the fool.

“That idiot!” Naruto was furious, “Do you hear the trash that guy's talking? If it wasn't Gaara-kun's match I'd-!”

“Relax Naruto, it's not your fight,” Jiraiya patted the blonde's head, quieting him, “So he knows more than he should, but his knowledge is the only leverage he has against Gaara. Do you really think he'd throw the match if someone threatened his secret?”
“Well...no...” Naruto frowned, “But he'd still be pissed!”

“That's true...and the Hokage, did he make a law preventing others from learning about Gaara's demon like he has for Naruto?” Haku asked curiously.

“In fact he did. No one who already does know is allowed to tell anyone, not even you two,” Jiraiya pointed out matter-of-factly, “Actually, only Gaara may tell another, so it's not likely to spread around the village as a piece of gossip, if you get my meaning.”

Gaara hardly spoke, let alone gossiped.

Naruto returned his gaze to the cloud of sand Miosuke was swiping at with his boomerang. It was pointless, he and Haku could tell. The sand was already gathering around the loudmouth, poised to finish him, 'Wow, he got Gaara pretty mad...'

Miosuke had realized that throwing his boomerang again would only leave him defenseless against his foe's sand, but there was little he could do to protect himself at all. Stubbornly, he refused to withdraw, even when Gaara's sand had clustered around his flailing arms.

The red haired boy scowled as he closed his fist, exercising an abnormal amount of control as he crushed only Miosuke's arms, leaving his teammates to attempt to ignore his screams.

Hinata turned away, hating the violence. Sato stood beside her, fascinated by Gaara's strategy.

“The winner is Gaara.” Hayate's voice could barely be heard over the sand nin's wails.

“He did use excessive force...” Haku said softly, concerned. He could tell Gaara had issues with the Sand team other than the fact they were of his old village, though it seemed more than ever he'd be unwilling to talk about it.

Gaara returned, hostile, and stood beside Jiraiya. His teammates knew better than try to make a conversation when his mood was ruined. His match had been an easy win, no doubt, but Miosuke had unearthed old wounds that stung like they never had before.

The mousy antagonist was taken away by medic-nin who were unable to quell his agonized cries.

Naruto sighed deeply, scratching his head, 'Oh man...Gaara-kun, he really wanted to kill that kid. He probably would've if he’d said anything in front of everyone about the-'

“Naruto-kun, look!” Haku pointed over to the screen where his name had appeared.

The blonde's brooding thoughts melted away, “Alright! Finally I'm up! This is gonna be great!”

Predictably, Hayate called down the next two contestants, “The sixth match will be between Uzumaki Naruto and Inuzuka Kiba.”

Naruto gave a foxy grin to his teammates before leaping over the railing, 'Oh yeah! I am totally ready for this match! I hope Sakura-chan doesn't mind if I kick dog-breath's butt!'

'Do your best, Naruto-kun...’ Hinata's undying faith was with the blonde haired boy in this match, whether he knew it or not.

Kiba, from across the way, believed his match would end quickly, “Hey! Check it out Akamaru! We're up against the kid! Looks like we lucked out...”

“Kiba-kun,” Sakura's pastel eyebrows knitted together in a frown, “I don't think you should be
underestimating Naruto, I mean...he's come a long way.”

“Oh right...” He didn't want her to fret about it, “I promise, Sakura-chan, I won't bust him up too bad. I know he's a friend of yours.” Akamaru barked in friendly agreement before they ventured down, Kakashi stifling a chuckle.

’He really could be a bit more humble...’ The pink haired girl thought, knowing she'd be unable to cheer for either side during the match. Her head felt heavier and her gut churned in anxiety, This is a crappy match up. Why did it have to be Naruto-kun of all people? I can't stand it...’

Sakura leaned her head against the Uchiha prodigy's shoulder with a disconcerted sigh.

Rather than shrugging her off, he replied to her nonsensical grunt, “It is what it is, Sakura. There's nothing that can be done about it now.”

“I know...” She muttered irritably, “I just don't want to watch this fight.”

“Then close your eyes.”

On cue, she felt her eyelids droop, “Oh...I um...” Sasuke didn't have to think hard to find a solution for her problems and it annoyed her slightly.

Curious, her forest eyes flickered over his features, wondering if her physical contact was bothering him yet. His arms were folded, a sign that he was high-strung, but other than that he was surprisingly acquiescent with the contact.

Obediently, Sakura shut her eyes a moment later, trying not to think about it.

Hayate announced the start of the match, “Begin.”

“Here we go!” Naruto immediately created four Shadow Clones, ready to coordinate an attack.

Kakashi raised a silver eyebrow, 'Shadow Clones...it isn't a common ability for genin. It seems training with Jiraiya has really paid off for him and his teammates, but Kiba will still be a tough opponent to beat.’

“Sit tight Akamaru, while I set things up,” Kiba growled down to his companion who waited beside him, tail wagging in excitement. He ran ahead, tossing a smoke bomb in the midst of the clones, lessening visibility.

’I can't fight if I can't see, better get out of here...’ Naruto made a grab for the nearest clone as he felt Kiba rush past him recklessly, nearly hitting him. Naruto dove up and out of the cloud, while his clones tumbled out of it, waiting for Kiba to reappear.

’He's gone into this fight with a strategy.' Haku smirked inwardly, foreseeing Naruto's plan, 'I believe he's even used this attack pattern on me once before...it isn't pleasant.’

Kiba tore out of the dark cloud with terrifying speed and shredded the nearest clone. The action had riled Akamaru up, who raced over to him, wanting in on the beat down.

While Kiba's attention was set on the clones, Naruto used the stolen time to hurl four kunai at Kiba from overhead, with exploding tags attached. Predicting the assault, his shadow clones leapt back, avoiding the blast, as did Kiba and Akamaru, though slightly singed.

'Those were the last of my tags...I'll have to ask Sato for more.' Naruto mentally noted while creating two shadow clones beside him as he descended, which flung him at Kiba who was
unprepared for the random attack.

The Kyuubi container landed a flying punch on Kiba’s face, who knocked him away shortly after. One of the Shadow Clones had gotten a hold of Akamaru, who nipped furiously at the surrounding, grinning replications.

Kiba, it was visibly clear, had a change in his plans, “Naruto, if you're smart, you'll let Akamaru go...” He tossed a pill at his dog who caught and swallowed it and then ate one himself.

“Eh?” The clone that had been holding Akamaru hostage observed inquisitively as the dog’s fur turned red, and was then destroyed with one swift kick from the animal's hind legs.

Kakashi smirked from beneath his mask. Sakura’s eyes remained closed, but she could tell things were getting serious as she felt Sasuke's shoulder tense from beneath her cheek.

The little red dog leapt up, teeth bared, and blew apart two more of Naruto’s nearby clones. The last two Shadow Clones stood on either side of the real blonde, regrouping, 'What the hell? It's like the dog has super powers or something!'

Akamaru raced back to Kiba, who kneeled down for him, and leapt onto his back, his crimson fur on end. The Inuzuka boy formed hand seals, ready to get serious, “Beast-Human Clone!”

Akamaru transformed into the spitting image of Kiba, who leapt off of his master's back, itching to fight. Naruto’s eyes widened, ‘O-kay...I didn’t see that coming! Better take out the real Kiba, and then his mutt won't have a chance.’

Naruto sent one of his clones to charge Kiba and his double as a distraction, while the other stayed near him as he hastily began to form the Rasengan.

Back up on the balcony, Haku and Gaara observed, wanting to get a better look at the new technique Naruto had revealed days earlier to them. Jiraiya folded his arms and chortled to himself, knowing that if his student did land the attack on his opponent, it wouldn't fall short of overkill.

Kakashi's visible eye widened in shock, dancing within it distant memories of his old mentor.

“Gatsuuga!” Both Kiba and Akamaru threw themselves into a coordinated spinning attack, easily eliminating the oncoming clone.

Naruto's final shadow clone ran ahead of him. It intended to draw Kiba and his companion nearer so Naruto would have a more accurate shot at them.

It happened nearly too quickly to see: Kiba, raking the last clone apart and the real Naruto catching one of Kiba’s two replications, slamming the Rasengan into the nearest foe's gut. Kiba went flying backward, and his counterpart skidded to a frantic halt. Akamaru reappeared, an instant knockout.

“Ah well...there was only a 50-50 chance of getting the real one anyway...” Naruto muttered, wishing to have finished the true Kiba.

It left many genin and jounin alike stunned. The Hokage himself, who had been watching aloofly, looked to Jiraiya with a disapproving smile on his face.

“What the heck was that?” Sato blurted out loud, “Naruto-kun just totally annihilated Akamaru!”

“The Rasengan...” Hinata clarified for her team. She was in awe, despite having seen it before.
Sato gave her an astonished look, wondering how she had known.

“You...” Kiba's voice was a low growl, stitched with rage, before he attacked Naruto again, “Gatsuuga!”

He hit Naruto full-force, sending him crashing to the floor. After a short, painful tumble, Naruto stood again and wiped the blood from his arm, as Kiba slowed and turned around to attack again.

The blonde cringed at the gash running up his arm, bleeding freely, 'He's pissed alright...but I'm not out of ideas yet!'

Naruto created half a dozen more clones as Kiba came back at him, howling in outrage. Two clones were devastated by his assault, but one lucky clone got behind Kiba as he slowed and managed a fierce, unexpected kick that sent the Inuzuka boy upward. The remaining clones followed through with the attack, leaving no room for Kiba to counter.

Naruto leapt above his shadow clones and hit Kiba squarely in the face with one final kick that knocked him down to the concrete floor. Drops of blood splattered as Kiba made no move to get up.

Hayate didn't have to examine Kiba long to know that he was no longer able to continue fighting, “The winner of the match is Uzumaki Naruto.”

“Ha ha! Yes! I knew I'd come out on top!” Naruto’s ecstatic chatter followed thereafter as he then returned to the balcony. All the while, Haku and Jiraiya cheered ecstatically for the blonde while Gaara opted for quieter congratulations.

“Open your eyes now.” Sasuke instructed, knowing the battle had ended in her favor. He himself had expected Kiba to be defeated, though not by such a powerful display.

Exhaling, Sakura opened her eyes and smiled at Naruto's victory, “I know Kiba-kun will be okay.”

“For the most part...” Kakashi interjected, finding the interaction between his two remaining students curious, “Though the technique Naruto used against Akamaru was for Kiba, so you can imagine the pain the little fellow is in right now.”

She frowned, hoping the small puppy would be able to recover from the blow.

Passing by Team 8 up on the balcony earned Naruto an onslaught of congratulations. Sato remained blissfully unaware of the blonde boy's suspicious look at the two, short blades he had with him, “Awesome fight, Naruto-kun!” Shino, who stood recovering beside his silver haired teammate gave a nod to him in his usual quiet way, though it seemed more approving than previous ones.

Naruto rubbed the back of his head sheepishly, “Er...thanks,” He tried to be polite, “Hey Shino, your fight with Fuzzy-brows was pretty cool.”

“Naruto-kun...” Hinata was wearing a bright smile, “You should take this...” She held out a small container to him which he regarded quizzically.

“Oh, thanks Hinata-chan!” He grinned at her, accepting it, “What is this stuff?”

Kurenai was also smiling, “It's a healing ointment, Naruto. Go ahead and use it, you've earned it.”

Down below, medic-nin escorted Kiba and Akamaru away. Upon rejoining his team, Naruto was
already rubbing the ointment on his already-healing wound, amazed by its effects. He then smirked at Haku and Gaara, “So what did you think of that?”

Jiraiya patted Naruto's head again, “I'd say all of your training has paid off.”

Haku nodded in agreement, “It really has, Naruto-kun. You did very well.” Personally, seeing his teammates' performances only made Haku more nervous of his own match, ‘I just hope I don't make a fool of myself, not after Naruto-kun and Gaara-kun have won.’

To Haku's dismay, his name appeared on the board readout a minute later. It was funny, he thought, how he could stress over something until the time finally came to act. His teammates were clearly pleased and wished him luck before he went down; doing a last-second count of how many senbon he had with him.

“The next match will be between Abumi Zaku and Haku.” Hayate announced as the contenders proceeded out to the middle of the floor. Naruto cheered fanatically from above, and like he, many Leaf genin were pulling for Haku.

Haku had only noticed once they were facing off that his opponent, a Sound ninja, had both of his arms in slings. The dark haired boy frowned, unable to stop himself from being sympathetic, ‘He's been this badly injured and he's still competing? This exam is brutal! I don't know if I want to be the kind of shinobi who preys on the weak...’

“Begin.” Hayate's voice seemed distant.

“Before we begin, I would advise you to withdraw,” Haku suggested to his opponent, “There's no sense in a struggle that will only worsen your injuries.”

“He's awfully nice to his foe...” Shikamaru muttered, finding Haku's nobility rather impractical. This was an opportune battle, an easy win! It was only because Sasuke had gone a bit overboard in the Forest of Death when Sakura had been ambushed. Zaku would never make that mistake again.

Zaku, not in the least dissuaded, glowered at Haku, “Save your pity! You think I can't fight? Heh! It looks like I've got some movement in this arm...”

Zaku's left arm shuddered out of the sling, his glare still focused on the dark haired ninja, “I'll win this match yet!”

Haku, though surprised, decided that if there was no convincing him that his opponent would have to learn the hard way.

Sakura felt anxiety creep over her as she watched Haku face off against one of the Sound ninja who had ambushed her team days before, ‘That's the one that Sasuke-kun throttled...’ She remembered vividly how Sasuke had woken from his coma and used an inhuman sort of power to scare off the team of Sound nin.

The pink haired girl frowned, stealing a glance at the mark on her teammate's neck, ‘What happened back there...it definitely has something to do with that weird mark. What did Orochimaru want with Sasuke-kun?’

Haku began by throwing six senbon at his opponent, who raised his shaking arm up to defend himself, “Slicing Sound Wave!” The sound waves he emitted knocked the needles away before they even came near him.

Haku's eyes widened, ‘I've never seen a jutsu like this! Pressurized air is coming out of the hole in
his hand...' He frowned, 'It is both strange and problematic.' He held back, deciding to learn more about his foe before attacking again.

“That's it? Out of tricks already?” Zaku was becoming increasingly confident, “I'll end this match right now!”

The Sound shinobi fired continuous jets of air from his hand, chasing Haku around the arena. Fortunately, he was agile as ever and easily avoided the sound waves. His senbon were utterly useless against an enemy who could knock them away without even trying.

'It's futile to get nearer with those blasts...I'll have to use a jutsu.'

Haku formed hand seals and above on the balcony Orochimaru smirked.

“Demonic Crystal Ice-” As he drew on his chakra, Haku slammed into some sort of painful inhibitor, disabling the jutsu. He stumbled, his breath stolen from the immense pain shooting through his neck, ‘What's happening-?’

The remainder of Team 2 was immediately concerned. Naruto turned to Jiraiya, “What's he doing? Is he still sick or something?” Jiraiya frowned to himself, unsure of what had stalled Haku.

The dark haired boy's pause cost him, “Slicing Sound Wave!” Zaku's attack hit him fully, barreling him over. Haku's head was spinning and he was completely disoriented by the blast. His dark hair splayed over his shoulders as he tried to regain his bearings.

“Haku-kun...” Hinata looked on, immensely worried. She was also aware of the troubled expressions both Naruto and Gaara wore.

“Haku-kun! Come on!” Naruto barked from above, “You can take this guy!”

The dark haired boy stood again, shaken, desperate to find a way to fight back, 'What's happening to me? It's this thing...' He touched the seal on his neck, trying to understand how it worked, 'It won't let me draw on my own chakra.'

Zaku, though unsure of what had slowed his opponent, continued to fire sound blasts at him. Jiraiya frowned, certain that something was wrong, 'Haku...if you've gone into this fight in anyway impaired you'll have me to answer to!'

Haku kept moving, trying to come up with a solution, 'There's got to be some way I can counter! This mark, it's as if it-.' He avoided another sound wave, but could still feel the sting where the air had sliced near his shoulder.

In that moment his desperation was great enough for him to draw on the cursed seal, even if he hadn't fully meant to. Orochimaru watched, delighted, as black scales began to creep up the boy's neck and cheek, and a dark chakra radiated off of him as he slowed, feeling rejuvenated.

Naruto, baffled, looked to an equally astounded Gaara and then to his sensei whose enraged face was turning many different shades.

Haku found the new chakra strange, but it didn't stop him from proceeding with his original plan, “Demonic Crystal Ice Mirrors!”

He had only created two ice mirrors, one stationed ahead of Zaku and the other behind him. They were tinted a pale indigo, with jagged edges rather than the smooth sheets of ice he was normally able to make.
It was enough to make Gaara speculate, “What is he doing? They’ve never looked like that before.”

“Don’t ask me!” Naruto scratched his head, as clueless as his red haired friend, “Something is definitely up!”

What’s happening to me? Haku disliked his physical change, 'Orochimaru! He's got something to do with this!' He fought against it as he raced to the nearest mirror, Zaku still standing in total confusion, 'I...no...I won't let this mark control me. I won't!'

The dark scales that had formed receded after a short-lived internal struggle and by then he was safe inside his mirror. Naruto cheered as his friend vanished momentarily, and then reappeared in the reflection of the dark ice mirror; to the shock of nearly all watching, including the Sandaime.

“So you're gonna hide in there, huh?” Zaku spat, assuming it was some sort of trick, “I guess I'm just gonna have to smash that glass thing of yours then!” His right arm, in worse condition than his left, somehow lifted from his sling, and Zaku aimed both of his arms at Haku's image, “Slicing Sound Wave!”

The blast of air hit the mirror, but did not break it. It merely bounced back, slashing at Zaku with an equal force. Stunned by his own attack, the sound ninja fell to his knees in pain, leaving himself open to a counterstrike.

“I've never seen Haku-kun do something like this before!” Sakura was amazed, “This is an ability that can only be used with his Kekkei Genkai, right Kakashi-sensei?”

The silver haired jounin had temporarily stopped reading his book just to watch the match, “It is Sakura. No other ninja can use this jutsu, not even me.” He paused, “It's a unique technique that I've never seen before.” Kakashi pulled up his hitai-ate, exposing his Sharingan eye, wanting to get a better view of Haku's movements.

It was something that many of the Leaf genin could not see. Haku darted with an untraceable speed between his two mirrors with Zaku in the middle and landed senbon after senbon at his helpless opponent.

The sound nin was unconscious even before his face hit the cold floor, needles protruding from various pressure points Haku had targeted.

It was precision work that Tenten had only thought Neji capable of, or herself, but it appeared Haku was more than adept at incapacitating his opponents with his unique ability.

The dark haired boy stepped out of his mirror, dispatching it, and re-acquainted himself with the slower world. He looked up to Naruto and Gaara and smiled at their more-than-approving expressions.

“The winner is Haku.” Hayate announced, his words followed shortly after by cheers from many of the Leaf genin. Among those satisfied with the battle were also the Sand team and Orochimaru, though Jiraiya was far from proud of his bright pupil.

Once Haku had returned to the balcony, the toad sennin didn't even allow his teammates to congratulate him, “Haku, come with me now.”

He had been, at that moment, riffling around his gi in hopes of finding a replacement for his hair tie which had snapped during his fight. Haku as well as Naruto and Gaara were hushed by the deep anger that was audible in Jiraiya's order.
Although the dark haired nin had wanted to stay to see the remainder of the matches, he knew better than to argue with his mentor when he was angry, “Yes, sensei.” He gave an unnerved parting look to his friends before following after their jounin instructor.

“What do you suppose Ero-sensei is so mad about?” Naruto inquired of his remaining teammate, worried of what fate was in store for Haku.

“It has something to do with that thing on Haku's neck.” Gaara pointed out, still uncertain of what it did or how it had gotten there.

“You mean those black spots that showed up on him?”

The red haired nin nodded, “It was effecting his Kekkei Genkai during the match. It could be harmful in some way...” If there were any further issues, he could only speculate, “It's likely Jiraiya-sensei is going to remove it from Haku now.”

“I sure hope he'll be alright...” The blonde muttered. The two didn't notice the new names that appeared on the overhead board as they discussed what had so deeply bothered Jiraiya.

After a short round of coughing, Hayate called out the next combatants, “The eighth match will be between Haruno Sakura and Tenten.”

The surprise that dawned on the pink haired girl's face was painfully obvious, 'Tenten? She's got to be the best kunoichi who graduated last year!' Sakura honestly knew little about her other than her amazing skill with weaponry, 'Well, it's better than having to fight Hinata-chan...'

If she were to face off against her pale-eyed friend, well, Sakura would much rather call the match. It was something her heart would be unable to take.

“Look sharp, Sakura.” Kakashi smiled at her from behind his mask and she nodded to him brightly.

Inwardly, however, the silver haired jounin knew better than to underestimate Gai's students, least of all the kunoichi of his team who, it was rumored, had already thrown down a number of Rock ninja on a past mission, 'She needs to be cautious in this fight. I didn't train her to fend off weapon-masters...'

Sakura felt lighter after receiving a confident nod from Sasuke and moved down to the main floor. The Uchiha prodigy then aimed a contemptuous glare at Tenten who, across the way, was also descending for the match.

Lee's cries of encouragement rang after Tenten as she sulked off, wishing Neji could've at least attempted to not be indifferent about the development. She tried to clear her head and focus on Lee's advice: “Harness your burning flames of youth, Tenten!”

Tenten focused on relaxing more than Lee's proclamations.

Hayate glanced at either kunoichi before backing away, “You may begin when ready.”

“Sakura...” Tenten's eyebrows furrowed in concern, “I don't want to hurt you.”

“Give it all you've got!” Sakura gave her a blissfully cheerful smile, “I don't want either of us to do less than our very best!”

Tenten would've liked to have protested further and convinced her to concede, but Sakura had
begun without her as she hesitated.

The pink haired girl hurled a handful of shuriken at her opponent as a starting diversion, while leaping back to add some space. Tenten deflected the projectiles expertly. Sakura frowned, *If she's really as good as they say, it'll be more of an accomplishment defeating her than even Ino-pig!*

“Yeah, Sakura-chan!” Naruto grinned down as the pink haired kunoichi darted back from Tenten, forming hand seals. Gaara's eyes narrowed suspiciously when he observed for the first time that Sakura's hair was noticeably shorter; something that irritated him a great deal.

Two clones formed on either side of the pink haired ninja, hoping to confuse Tenten who had already thrown two infallible kunai at the duplications. To Sakura's annoyance, they were destroyed nearly as soon as they had been created.

Tenten tightened her grip on her kunai, looking for an opening, *That can't be all she's got...I know that she has a plan of some kind! I...oh...what the-?*

The bun haired girl felt a strong sensation of dizziness catch her off guard as her head swam in a fog. Sakura paused for a moment, glad that her genjutsu had taken effect. It was the first time she had used it. She was unsure if it had been successful; being that she herself had no direct control over her opponent's visions.

The victim created their own illusion, Kakashi had told her after demonstrating it, that being the reason it was so unpredictable. It was a slightly more advanced technique specifically for surfacing things in the foe's mind that they feared the most, trivial or profound. Sakura waited, noticing Tenten's movements slow.

Tenten shook her head from side to side momentarily as her vision became focused again, *Good...now back to business!* She raised her kunai again, moving ahead to catch the pink haired girl.

She found something different.

Tenten saw herself, though at first she hadn't quite been able to recognize it. The familiar posture and hair style came to her attention. Her doppelganger's back was turned from her and she halted again, perplexed, *What? Wait! I didn't make a clone or-!*

She saw Sakura again.

Her double had plunged the knife into the pink haired kunoichi's throat, not in the least bit reluctant. It was a motion so practiced she was certain that she had actually done it.

Sakura fell to the floor, completely still, but the proctor did not call the match. Tenten didn't even bother to look around for Hayate, because she was preoccupied with the horror of her physical double's attack and how Lee leapt down and ran to Sakura, futilely.

The doppelganger then moved to Lee, fluidly, gracefully, and Tenten felt her voice catch in her throat like a fluttering bird as her reflection aimed a downward slash at his back, *No don't-*!

Gai, furious and uncomprehending, descended after Lee tumbled down on top of Sakura in a heap. Her sensei knocked the kunai out of the double's hand, ready to pummel her, but the sword in the left hand had gone unnoticed until Gai had been skewered.

Tenten's legs were locked, *Stop it! You can't! I won't-*!
It shouldn't have been that easy. It couldn't have been. Tenten then saw the face of her malicious doppelganger lit with childish delight. Countless other ninja had by then jumped down, reluctant to go near the crazed kunoichi.

Tenten was beginning to wonder if they could even see her.

What she wished wouldn't have happened did in fact occur.

Her last teammate appeared, his fierce eyes teeming with the power of the Byakugan. Neji moved to the double without fear, hands poised to strike tenketsu. The sword moved downward again with freakish speed and Tenten was moving, at last, seizing her double and grappling with the bloody demon even as Neji struck them both brutally, unable to tell the two apart. As if they were one and the same.

The same.

The blade was ripping down her arm, aimed for the Hyuga prodigy. Tenten felt no physical pain, but she couldn't on top of the guilt that was clawing its way up through her throat, 'I won't let you! You aren't me! I would never do this!'

The fog came back and Neji vanished, even as she reached out frantically with her cries unheard.

Sakura's genjutsu had only lasted about two seconds, much to her disgruntlement, and the pink haired girl found it intriguing how it had frozen the opposing kunoichi in her tracks. She then planned her next course of action as Tenten began to come to.

Lee turned to Gai again, “Gai-sensei, what has happened to Tenten? Will she be alright?”

“I can't say that I know, Lee,” Gai frowned, “Though it appears she has now overcome the genjutsu.”

Kakashi's Sharingan eye narrowed after sneaking a peak at the effects of Sakura's attempted genjutsu, 'My...I'm sure that has to be disturbing. What has Gai been doing to evoke such a fear in his own student? This is serious. I didn't know any of Gai's students were this capable of killing yet...’ He pulled his hitai-ate back down over his red eye.

“Sasuke,” The Uchiha prodigy looked up at Kakashi when he had been addressed, “This is more dangerous than I thought.”

“What are you talking about?” He was annoyed with his teacher, as usual, “Sakura's holding up well.”

“It isn't Sakura who's the problem.” The jounin answered, though Sasuke still didn't understand his meaning.

Tenten straightened herself, back in reality. Her eyes were dark.

A hail of kunai and shuriken shot forward unexpectedly, and Sakura barely had time to substitute as she avoided the storm of weapons, 'I guess my jutsu didn't work. She's just as strong as ever...’ Sakura gave a crack at another genjutsu, creating dozens of replications of herself, completely surrounding Tenten, 'Maybe this will slow her down!’

Sakura had unwittingly pushed Tenten to her psychological limits.

Tenten procured two familiar scrolls on reflex, not even noticing the horrified look on Gai's face, “Rising Twin Dragons!” The weapons specialist leapt up, hurling various weapons at the
numerous pink haired replications encompassing her.

“Sakura-chan!” Naruto’s eyes widened in alarm as the blades rained down, and he turned to Gaara, “What does that girl think she’s doing? She’s gone crazy!”

Gaara couldn’t say he disagreed with the idea. Tenten had suddenly become ruthless, almost panicked.

Sasuke was finally beginning to see Kakashi’s point. Even he would have trouble facing down someone who kept that many weapons with them.

The genjutsu dispelled instantly once Sakura had been hit, and she did her best to avoid the last of the incoming projectiles but with little luck.

Tenten landed; aggression visible on her delicate features. She felt so violated, so horrified that someone had actually been able to exploit her true vulnerability. It something that not even Neji had accomplished.

Sakura removed a shuriken which had sunk into her shoulder, and ignored the many gashes and cuts lining her quaking arms and legs.

The on-looking genin watched apprehensively, unsure of what would happen. Kakashi knew that he may soon have to step in if Gai didn't, judging by the dark look on the taijutsu specialists’ face.

“I won’t give in...” Sakura whispered, knowing that she still had a chance, “I guess I can't save this for later like I wanted to...”

Sasuke's eyes narrowed, anticipating Sakura's next move, and Kakashi gave him a curious sideways glance.

Her hand seals were hurried as she rushed blindly at Tenten, who was already drawing out another scroll, “Katon: Grand Fireball Jutsu!”

Tenten had the present sense to leap out of the way before Sakura breathed a huge fireball that completely dumbfounded Naruto and Gaara.

Kakashi raised an eyebrow at his student, “Now I wonder where she picked that up from?”

Sasuke smirked, proud of her mastery of the jutsu.

Sakura's attack ended a few moments later only for her to see, much to her terror, that Tenten had disappeared, ‘Did I...did I get her?’

Neji, being the most familiar with the tactic, was the first to look up. He was just in time to see Tenten summon her Bo-staff. She plummeted down and Sakura leapt back a split-second before the bun haired kunoichi reappeared, unscathed by the fire jutsu, 'She avoided it!’

Tenten had always been an adept jumper.

Naruto called down to her as Sakura blocked the first blow, but Tenten merely had to poke her gut to stun her before landing a knockout blow to the side of her head, which she found much more preferable than finishing her with another hail of knives.

Sakura landed on the floor with a soft thud and Tenten frowned, upset with herself, “I'm sorry Sakura...I took this too far and you paid the price,” The pink haired girl didn't catch her apology, “I should've had more control over myself.”
“The winner is Tenten.” Hayate stifled a cough after declaring her the victor.

Gaara was very still at that moment, unable to take his eyes away from the pink haired kunoichi who had shocked him completely.

“Gaara-kun?” Naruto gave him an incredulous look, “Are you coming?”

The red haired boy was silent.

Tired of waiting, the blonde shinobi jumped down to Sakura, Sasuke having beaten him to her.

Kakashi sighed aloud, grateful she hadn't been harmed any worse than she had been as Gai approached him, looking solemn, “Kakashi?”

He turned his visible eye to Gai knowingly.

“Tenten did her best to hold back, I can assure you,” Gai appeared deeply troubled, “However, on a recent mission she was unfortunately forced to take a life—”

“I know Gai. I don't take it personally.” The silver haired man didn't want Gai to feel guilt over things beyond his control.

Lee looked to Neji uncertainly, unsure of what to do. His first thought was to go see how badly Sakura had been injured, but he feared that checking on the pink haired girl would offend his teammate who had fought against her.

After using his better judgment, Lee decided to stay where he was.

“Hey Sakura-chan,” Naruto gave the pink haired girl a small smile as she leaned against her teammate, numerous wounds lined her pale skin, “You did awesome!”

Her head bobbed as she nodded, smiling back at him in response.

Sasuke couldn't think of anything comforting to say, being he had his gaze locked on the weapons specialist as she returned to the upper level, *The match should have been even. Something happened that made that knife-freak panic around Sakura.*

His glare intensified as Lee and Neji looked down at him, sensing the killing intent aimed for their teammate. Tenten was far too exhausted to pay any mind to the Uchiha as she trudged down the pathway, grateful she hadn't actually killed anyone. Neji stared back down at him. His expression promised death if Sasuke made so much as a slight pass at Tenten.

“Tenten! Um...your battle was very impressive...” Lee's congratulation was unsure and peculiarly quiet, “Are you feeling alright?”

“I am, Lee...” Her reply was gloomy, not at all like her normal tone of voice. She settled between her teammates and leaned on the railing, feeling slightly ill as she noticed Gai exchanged a word with Kakashi across the way, ‘Great...I've caused a problem for Sakura's team? What's wrong with me? Why did I have to freak out like that?’

Her anxiety doubled when her eyes locked with Neji's, almost as if he had seen right through her façade. It was if he could tell what had unnerved her during her battle, even if there was no evidence of it.

To her relief, he spoke, “It was no contest, Tenten. Your skill is above that of any other Leaf kunoichi.”
Tenten briefly wondered for a moment if she had misheard, *Did he just praise me? Like he actually thinks I did something right?*

It was an absurd notion, although it was accurate.

She nodded, giving him the most cheerful smile she could muster, “Thanks, Neji.”

It was a heady feeling, having the Hyuga prodigy name her the most skilled kunoichi right out of his own biased opinion. The fluffy, warm feeling ebbed away after she noticed Lee behind her nodding sagely, approving of Neji’s confidence in her.

Naruto reappeared beside Gaara, knowing better than to say anything. He knew that more than anyone, Gaara had wanted to be the first to rush to Sakura’s side, but he was so emotionally crippled at the time it was difficult enough just to speak to Naruto.

Gaara kept his gaze away from his brother and sister, wondering how he was supposed to explain their presence to his friends.

Hinata stood beside Kurenai, sadness visible in her silvery-white eyes, *Sakura-chan...please feel better soon. I know Tenten-san never meant for you to come to harm.*

Hayate called down the next two shinobi displayed on the board, “The next match will be between Akimichi Chouji and Kinuta Dosu.”

Chouji's stomach growled audibly and he frowned, not looking forward to facing one of the Sound ninja he and his teammates had encountered in the Forest of Death, “Er...sensei, why don't I just withdraw from this match?”

“Aw, giving up so soon?” Asuma smirked down at his hefty pupil, “Even if I take you to an all-you-can-eat buffet if you win, Chouji?”

Ino joined in, wanting to motivate him, “Yeah, Chubby! What do you say?”

**Ino! I'll finish this guy quick and then teach you a lesson!”** A mix of anger and determination was engraved on his face and he immediately went down to the main floor.

Shikamaru sighed, knowing it was a match he was not intended to win.

“Begin.” Hayate backed away and Chouji didn't waste a second while performing his trademark jutsu.

“Human Bullet Tank!”

Chouji transformed himself into the human equivalent of a steam roller that could have landed a devastating attack on Dosu, had he not been moving so slowly. The Sound ninja dodged his rolling attack with no effort and merely led him along until he crashed into a wall.

“My sound amplifier is the only thing I need to finish you.” Dosu announced, brandishing the device attached to his arm.

“You can't hurt me if I can't hear you!” Chouji hadn't heard Dosu's warning, which may have been a bad thing.

The sound ninja jabbed Chouji’s gut with the amplifier, letting the ultrasonic waves course through his body. It didn’t take long before Chouji had fallen unconscious, and Hayate had announced Dosu as the winner.
Ino frowned, “Darn...I thought getting him mad might have helped him win.”

“Being angry is one of the worst ways to fight your battles.” Shikamaru replied lazily, offering her some wise advice that Chouji could have definitely used.

Temari exchanged a nonplused glance with Kankuro, not expecting a match to be so short.

“Hey, check it out Gaara-kun. One of those Sound ninja made it...” Naruto hadn't expected anyone from the team of Oto ninja to proceed past the preliminaries.

His friend made no reply and Naruto faced him fully, miffed, “Hey are you listening to me? I know you're upset about Sakura-chan but she's gonna be okay! You really should-”

“Naruto, the next match will be starting soon.” Gaara gestured to the overhead board and Naruto compliantly glanced over to it.

Kurenai closed her eyes briefly, sighing, “Hinata, I will let you proceed in whatever way you judge to be right. This is your match after all.”

The shy Hyuga girl was abnormally calm, “Thank you, sensei.” Her behavior earned her quizzical looks from her both of her teammates.

As expected, Hayate called out the next two ninja, “The tenth match will be between Hyuga Hinata and Hyuga Neji.”

Naruto felt his heart break as the examiner announced the next match, 'No! This isn't right! Not Hinata-chan! Anyone but her! They're cousins so why would they...why does it have to be this way?'

The golden haired nin watched as Neji moved down from the balcony, his face as stoic as it had been before. Naruto felt his lips peel back into a frustrated snarl, not comprehending how the Hyuga prodigy could not be troubled, 'Looks like he's not too upset! What does he think he's supposed to do anyway? I...I can't believe this!'

He turned to his crimson haired friend, totally distraught, “Gaara-kun, there's no way that they-”

“You know that we are utterly incapable of interfering,” Gaara knew exactly how he was feeling, “This match is going to be a clash of rivals all for the sake of an old feud.”

“But there's no way this fight was random! I mean, it's the both of them!” Naruto's anxious ocean eyes were beginning to unnerve his friend as well, “What are the chances? There's just...no way...”

“I...” Gaara could not find the words, “I have no foresight on the outcome of this match...”

Sato looked to Hinata as she swayed where she stood beside Shino, she herself quite stunned, “Are you gonna be okay, Sunshine?”

A small smile appeared on her face, “I'll b-be alright.”

He nodded to her before she moved on, steeling her nerves and feeling something like lead weighing her stomach down. Kurenai's ruby gaze flickered over to Gai, where both he and his students looked on grimly as Neji arrived on the main floor first.

'Is Neji actually going to go through with this?' Tenten wondered if perhaps she should have
asked him before he had left, *There's no way she'll be able to withstand him. She doesn't know him like I do. He'll...* She clenched her fists, fearing for Hinata, *He won't hesitate to crush her...*

Hayate wore a doubtful expression before starting the match, “You may begin.”

Hinata faced her cousin nervously, desperately clinging to her resolve, her inspiration, and everything that Naruto had taught her. She felt like she was drowning in her own ideals, with no hope of treading the sea of expectations her father had swamped her with.

Neji's white eyes settled on her, uncommonly soft, yet no less threatening, “Hinata-sama...”

She felt her chin snap up in response. She already knew what he was going to say.

“Hinata-sama, there is no one in our clan that I respect more than you,” Neji's sincerity had floored her completely, “However if you do not withdraw, this match will hardly count as a match at all...”

“I can't...” Her voice was like a fragile pane of glass, “I cannot do that, Neji-niisan.”

He found it strange that she was not as controllable as she most often was, “I am grateful to you Hinata, but I can no longer have you influencing my future. It is something that I must create on my own.”

“Neji-niisan, as your rival, I do not strive to do my best as a l-leader...but...only to prove something to myself...” Hinata looked up briefly to Naruto, trying to draw on the strength he had given her.

“You can prove nothing in this match against me,” Her cousin reminded her, “You and I both know, Hinata-sama, which of us is destined to lead the Hyuga clan out of chaos.”

“Chaos? In Sunshine's clan?” Sato turned to Kurenai, “Is there a fight going on or something, Kurenai-sensei?”

“An old and bitter feud between the Main and Branch houses of the Hyuga clan has yet to be resolved, even after countless decades,” She replied, sighing, “Neji is the first Branch member ever to rise as a candidate as the next leader of the Hyuga clan. Hinata has not told you about this because...within this notion lies her worst fear.”

“Her fear?” Shino prompted, unsure of her meaning.

“Yes, her fear of her father. He dictates her future depending on how quickly she gains skill as a ninja,” Kurenai explained, “If Hinata outmatches Neji there will be no repercussions for him, but if Neji defeats Hinata...her father has the final say on what happens to her.”

“So what if she doesn't become the leader of her clan?” Sato barked indignantly, “Her dad wouldn't demote her in her own family...would he?”

Kurenai shook her head, “I just...I myself cannot be sure. This match dictates Hinata's fate.”

“Neji-niisan, I will not concede, not when I m-must know if I've been able to change...” Hinata's voice was soft but stern, “Defend yourself!”

Neji sighed heavily, tired of trying to persuade her, “If that is what you believe, Hinata-sama...then it cannot be avoided.”

Lee's prominent eyebrows furrowed in concern as his eternal rival took an offensive stance, with
his younger cousin mirroring him, neither willing to back down.

“I will not hold back.” The Byakugan appeared in Neji's eyes automatically and Hinata frowned, her nervousness quickly being replaced with scraps of a plan.

Tenten leaned on the railing, disbelief clear in her features, “Lee...how can this be happening? There's just no way...”

He was unable to think of an answer for her, being he also was troubled.

Neji watched intently as Hinata wove away from his Jyukken strikes with grace, and paused abruptly when she formed a hand seal, a determined frown plastered on her face.

“Shadow Clone Jutsu!”

To her opponent's greatest astonishment, three shadow clones formed beside her, looking just as fierce as their creator, ‘She must have learned that from Naruto! He is the only other genin capable of the jutsu!’ It was frustrating enough to admit that he could not discern the real Hinata from her duplications because her chakra was so expertly distributed.

“Go Hinata-chan! You've got this!” Naruto’s cheers were borderline screaming as he hung off the edge of the rail. Sato was also raving nearby.

Both Lee and Tenten were pleasantly surprised alongside their mentor, not expecting Neji to be caught off-guard by his cousin.

Kurenai smiled broadly, flashing an appreciative glance to Naruto.

'I will do my best!' Hinata moved in perfect coordination with her clones as they encircled Neji, countering and delivering relentless slaps of Jyukken. Four pairs of Byakugan eyes surrounded him, searching for weaknesses. To her shock, he was able to dodge many of the strikes from her clones even while attacking.

'It won't be long before Neji-niisan disposes of my kage bunshin...’ She noted, evading a jab that might have knocked her out, 'I must do this quickly!'

Hinata and her clones leapt back, preparing to regroup. Neji fell back into his first stance, totally calm and expecting her next assault.

“Hakke Rokujuyon Sho!” Hinata cried as all of her clones closed in again with blinding speed.

On her own, Hinata scarcely used the Divine Sixty-Four Palms, having only accomplished it once in front of her father; but had found after training in secret with her shadow clones, it was made all the more devastating when coming from all directions. Neji could certainly see the attack, but that did not mean he could counter it.

“She...she's really got him...” Naruto mumbled in awe as the clones synchronized their attacks with Hinata, each focusing specifically on 16 different tenketsu all at once. Gaara stood beside him, equally amazed.

“Hakkesho Kaiten!”

Tenten flinched involuntarily as Neji rotated, creating a 360 degree shield of chakra that blew apart the shadow clones instantly, forcing Hinata back as well. Tenten knew better than anyone how painful it was to be knocked away by the Hyuga prodigy.
The Hyuga girl stumbled away from the crater Neji had formed and called on her Byakugan again, still not defeated. Distantly she could hear Naruto hollering from above, making her more bold.

'I can do this! I see it now! I've found my way!' Hinata steadied her footing as Neji retaliated with powerful blows that were much more than small slaps of Jyukken.

Her evasion was faultless as she dodged away from his strikes, desperately trying to deliver her own, but with little success. Hinata's silvery white eyes burned with a determination akin to Naruto's, 'I will keep going! Neji-niisan is fighting back now! If I wear him down...'

Neji hadn't fully expected her to be so fiery in her attacks, but he knew that if the match persisted he would be forced to harm her more than what was necessary, 'I will end this match now.'

Blocking her assault, Neji landed an uppercut that had sent her reeling, frantically trying to regain balance. He seized his chance to finish her, knowing that she would have done it no differently, "Kaiten!"

It was a weaker rotation that was enough to position her in the air, where he struck her solar plexus expertly, watching as her eyes fluttered in reaction to the mind-numbing pain. He backed up; watching as she stumbled again, stunned, and tumbled down with a soft thud.

The silence of the observing ninja hung thick in the air, even leaving the Hokage to speculate the meaning of the bout.

Neji's Byakugan deactivated with a mere blink of his eyes, “Don't you see, Hinata-sama? Your place as a leader of our clan was determined long before this match.”

Hayate frowned, not very much a fan of the Hyuga's brutal fighting style. He looked over to Hinata who was crumpled over in anguish, staying very still.

He cleared his throat, “The-”

“Don't you dare call this match!” Naruto howled from his place on the balcony, furious, “Not yet! It's not over yet!”

Hayate gave the crazed boy an incredulous look before looking to Hinata again, where she had miraculously staggered to her feet, wiping the blood that was smeared on her mouth. Neji’s eyes narrowed as they fell upon her shuddering form. He believed that a wise person would admit defeat when their bodies could no longer continue.

His cousin was not nearly so wise.

The proctor remained silent but did not back away. It was clear the girl would not last much longer.

Hinata coughed, flecks of blood polka-dotting her jacket. Her eyes remained fixed on her cousin, open to a new truth that she had discovered while fighting him, “N-Neji-niisan...”

The other Leaf genin were astonished by her endurance.

“Neji-niisan...I know now what I f-fight for; why I am a ninja...” She held her sides, her shoulders were quivering in pain, “I need n-nothing more than my nindo: to n-never give up...but you, Neji-niisan,” Her eyes were glassy, “Do you even know what you're really fighting for?”

He said nothing, because in truth he didn't. Neji had never questioned the fact that he had been
training tirelessly to become the heir of the Hyuga clan since his father's death, but it had never honestly been something he himself had wanted, not entirely.

Once Hinata stumbled again, Hayate called the match without being interrupted, “The winner is Hyuga Neji.”

Naruto and Sato had moved simultaneously, abandoning the balcony for the floor below. Hinata lay in agony on the floor, coughing up many more red spots onto her jacket.

Gai sighed heavily, having predicted that the fight was fairly one-sided, no matter how formidable Hinata may have become. Even Lee had not yet defeated the Hyuga prodigy. Lee stood quietly beside Tenten, watching Neji with an unspoken dream as he left the main floor.

Tenten averted her eyes from Hinata when Naruto kneeled down beside her, and she wondered if her teammates would have been as concerned for her if she had been defeated in her match.

Her insides churned in horror as she sent her greatest sympathies to Hinata, the one with whom she could relate, 'Neji you...you really don't know what you're fighting for do you? She's right about you. You fight simply because you can, not because you fight for those you care about...if you care for anyone at all.'

Hinata felt humiliation creep over her as Naruto settled beside her, looking enraged, “N-Naruto-kun, I'm s-sorry. I thought that if I c-could change-”

“Whoa wait, Hinata-chan, what do you think you're apologizing for?” He grinned at her, trying to ignore the blood she was covered in, “You were amazing! I didn't even feel this proud winning my own match...”

A smile of relief settled on her face, “I'm glad...”

Her white eyes drifted closed shortly after and Sato smirked down at her, glad she had given her cousin a run for his money, “You did awesome, Sunshine.”

Naruto made sure to advise the medic-nin to take extra-good care of her as they prepared to escort her to the hospital. He looked up to Neji, his blue eyes wide in anger, 'I can't believe he did that to Hinata-chan! Even after she helped him! She was his friend and he shot her down! I...' He grimaced, 'I will win! I'll beat him and make him see what it's like to struggle!'

“Yo, Naruto-kun, I suggest you head up now. My fight is next!” Sato smiled at the blonde haired boy, snapping him out of his thoughts.

“Oh, right,” Naruto hadn't noticed Sato's name had appeared on the board readout, “Just don't screw up you crazy idiot.”

“Uh...sure.”

Lee's congratulations to his teammate was prompt and a bit shaky, “Neji! As expected your skills are yet unequaled!”

The Hyuga offered him an imperceptibly raised eyebrow before turning to Tenten. He had at least anticipated her to grin mischievously at him or rant about some observation she had made of him, but she said nothing.

Tenten stood silently beside Lee, disturbed by what she had witnessed. Her eyes were trained on Hayate, determined to pay Neji no mind. Neji found it dissatisfactory, 'It isn't like her to ignore me. She's being irrational.'
Displeased, he settled beside her, for once missing the approving words she often gave to him. Gai on the other hand, was just as responsive as Lee, “Neji, my prodigy! Well done! That was a splendid display of your youthful abilities!”

Neji frowned as Tenten remained quiet. Her silence indicated that she was nowhere near approving of what he had done.

And it was something he regretted, if only a little.

“The next match will be between Hatake Sato and Toshi.” Hayate announced, eyeing the silver haired boy curiously as he waved up to his team enthusiastically. ‘It makes you wonder if Kakashi may look like him without the mask...’ He speculated, noticing the striking similarities between the two.

Toshi, the second genin from the surviving team of Cloud nin, leapt over the railing eagerly. He was sick of waiting for his fight. It came as a surprise to Sato, as well as a number of others, how closely the Kumo nin resembled Naruto; although his gold hair was tied back into a short ponytail.

Watchful sapphire eyes locked onto Sato as the Leaf ninja stood a short distance away, stretching thoroughly in preparation for the match. Kakashi made a sound of embarrassment at the sight of his ridiculous nephew, suspecting he had a few stunts to pull.

Sasuke's eyes narrowed in thought, 'That just leaves the last Cloud shinobi then for my match. If I watch carefully I may learn some of the techniques that my opponent will have.’

Before Hayate could tell them to begin, Sato raised his hand expectantly, “Uh, proctor-sir? Can I just have a moment before we get going?”

The examiner shrugged in response while coughing, wondering what the boy could possibly do at the last second.

Toshi scowled in impatience as Sato hastily retrieved a small thermos from his back pouch, confounding the whole of the audience with the exception of Kakashi, who merely saw it as a routine gesture.

The silver haired genin quickly guzzled down the last of the coffee he had saved for himself in hopes of replenishing his energy before his fight.

“What is he doing?” Gaara was annoyed that he had actually expected Sato to have a serious fight, as far-fetched as it sounded.

Naruto had been witness to Sato's coffee-drinking habit and was able to identify it, “You don't want to know. It's just too stupid...”

Sato tossed the empty thermos over his shoulder a few seconds later, satisfied, and Kurenai sighed as she caught it with ease from her place up on the balcony. Asuma smirked at her from a short distance away.

“Okay, I'm ready!” Sato announced, giving a thankful grin to Hayate.

The proctor frowned at him as he cleared his throat, “Then begin.”

“He's just as weird as ever, that kid...” Naruto muttered half to himself, “There's no way he's strong enough to win this one.”
Without missing a beat Sato had formed three unusual hand seals and produced four clones of himself. Naruto had picked up, however, that one of the seals that the Leaf nin had used was similar to the seal required to create shadow clones, *There's no way he can make shadow clones! I know he steals scrolls just as often as Haku-kun does, but he couldn't have learned that jutsu!*

Toshi took to an offensive stance, his broad physique clearly suggesting he was skilled in taijutsu; something that disappointed the Leaf ninja. Sato and his replications drew out metal wires from their respective holsters and darted forward in full cooperation.

The clones leapt clear over the Kumo nin's head and scattered throughout the room, securing the wires to walls with metal pegs and kunai. Sato moved directly to his opponent with a cry, in order to distract him from his clones' trap-setting.

"Whatever trick you've got planned won't work on me!" Toshi slammed his fist into Sato with dead-on accuracy and power, but only hit air, "W-What?"

The smirking image of Sato faded away as Toshi skidded to a confused halt, "It was genjutsu?"

"Yup."

The humiliated Cloud shinobi turned around, seeing the true Sato all the way on the opposite side of the gymnasium. His duplications were still busy hanging kunai from the wires they had suspended.

Kakashi chuckled to himself, *It looks like he's gotten faster. It used to take him ages to set something up, and now he has an entire unit doing all the work for him...maybe Gai's niece is rubbing off on him.*

"I may not be big on the whole hand-to-hand combat gig, but I get by..." Sato smiled openly as Toshi raced back at him with startling speed, and halted again when the once-laboring clones Sato had created abandoned their places and dove for him wildly.

Toshi retreated back, blocking their attacks, not expecting them to be solid. Sato leapt up with ease onto his suspended-wire network with cat-like poise and drew a kodachi, "Let's get started!"

With a gentle pluck, the blade severed a specifically chosen wire and let loose a flurry of shuriken that had been in plain sight.

"Wouldn't a trap be more effective if it was hidden, maybe?" Ino frowned, just as stupefied as many other shinobi by the silver haired nin's strategy.

"Not always. A trap that the opponent is allowed to see is the one they react to," Asuma clarified, taking a short drag on his cigarette, "Which forces them into another trap."

In unison, the clones evaded the projectiles, as did the Cloud shinobi with little effort. Toshi had found himself back in the center of the gymnasium where he had started after he had avoided the first wave of attacks.

Sato, in the midst of his scrambling clones tossed a unique kunai that skimmed past his opponent, missing by inches. He frowned to himself, slightly upset, but continued on severing wires as he moved, not giving the Cloud nin a chance to counter.

One of the clones had been careless. Stumbling after being struck by a jab to the side, the stunned clone was hit again with a brutal sweep kick that destroyed it, and in turn, caused it to burst into flame.
Toshi leapt back, confounded, “What the-?”

The intense fire flickered out where the clone had been eliminated, and in response, the rest of the replications and Sato perched up on the wire network, fearing they too would be pummeled.

“What was that?” Temari narrowed her eyes in confusion, “That was no ordinary clone!”

“A Fire Clone,” Baki muttered, impressed, “Leaf shinobi seldom use such outdated techniques and it is a skill few master. Similar to shadow clones, fire clones are solid enough to strike an enemy and handle weaponry, but they have a major drawback that shadow clones don’t.”

He has his students’ full attention, “Elementally they’re unstable and burn themselves up only after a few short minutes...making them perfect for ninja who utilize traps and explosives.”

They looked backed down as Toshi decided on a different method of destroying the last of Sato’s clones, taking aim with kunai.

“Whoa wait a minute!” Sato leapt in unison with his clones, abandoning the wire they had been balanced on which was then snapped by the oncoming projectiles. The Kumo nin had sprung Sato’s own trap and both Cloud and Leaf shinobi were scrambling around avoiding the metal darts that were raining down.

It easily finished two of Sato’s clones, leaving only one as they darted around the Kumo ninja, not wanting to get too close.

“That pansy! He’s afraid to use taijutsu so he’s just running in circles! Even Hinata-chan could take this guy!” Naruto found Sato’s strategy atrocious, and as an afterthought, ‘Well, there was that one time I punched him and he was completely out...it’s like he’s flimsier than Haku-kun!’

The final fire clone dove at Toshi, who avoided it as its glowing form reached out for an object forgotten on the floor beside him. Sato smirked an leapt back up onto his cable net, watching as the clone made contact with the kunai he had thrown earlier and the tag that was attached to it.

Shikamaru knowingly covered his ears with a sigh.

Sato knew it was a bit too much gunpowder for such a small tag, but he loved his traditional, ‘cannon-like’ weapons, as he had once explained to his teammates. The clone had detonated it, and Toshi had disappeared inside the billowing cloud of smoke.

Kakashi blinked in amusement, having predicted his nephew to have tried something of the like.

The leftover crater revealed a charred substitute and Sato scratched his head, annoyed, “Aw, rats!”

“That's more like it!” Naruto yowled down at the Leaf ninja, pleased with the explosion even if it had left himself and Gaara half deaf.

“Okay...time to try something else.” Sato frantically drew out a summoning scroll and procured a chain-sickle, still bent on trapping his opponent.

Toshi was forming seals by the time he had thrown his weapon, and the chain successfully tangled around the Cloud nin's arms, the scythe's blade bit into the skin of his shoulder. Toshi gave him an amused look, having finished his jutsu.

Sato yelped after a powerful shock of electricity ran through the metal chain, setting his hair on end.
Dizzy and burned, he pulled the chain away from Toshi before he could make more hand signs and discarded it, discomposed by his lack of progress, *This is not working...my traps only go so far and I don't know if I can keep up genjutsu to avoid him,* he glanced down at the kodachi at his side, *'I may actually have to start...trying.'*

“You should give up now, you hack!” Toshi smirked, rushing at him, “Since you're out of ideas!”

Sato deflected the onslaught of kunai with both of his kodachi, wheeling away with the grace of a cart-wheeling pinwheel. The Cloud ninja refused to relent as he threw round after round of shuriken at the surprisingly acrobatic Leaf genin, while he shimmied his way nearer to his remaining trap wires.

“He can wield those blades almost as well as Tenten!” Lee exclaimed, unable to believe there was another Leaf genin who could wield a weapon bigger than a kunai besides her.

Neji gave her a suspicious sideways glance as her face paled.

She frowned, wishing Lee was a bit less vocal with his observations, “Well, he is my neighbor...”

Abruptly, Toshi had stopped launching kunai and used another jutsu while Sato paused to catch his breath, “Raiton: Cage of Lightning!”

“Ack!” Before he could hope to dodge, Sato had been encircled in a tight prison of electricity.

Toshi folded his arms and watched as Sato struck out at the strange, pulsing bars surrounding him with his kodachi, only to get zapped more fiercely than he had before.

Stubbornly he shuffled around, jabbing at it, trying to find a weakness in the cage, and shocking himself each time in the process. Leaf ninja above watched in alarm when he finally tired and sheathed his short swords.

“Ow! Ow!” Sato tenderly rubbed his burnt forearms, finally realizing that the end of the match was drawing near, *'That's it...if I can't get close enough to him with my kodachi, or far away enough to use my traps...damn! He's already seen my fire clones too...'*

Toshi mercilessly hurled the last of his shuriken at Sato, which penetrated the cage, and two of them bit into his shoulder and thigh. Above, both Shino and Naruto winced, wondering how much longer it would be before the match was called.

*’Maybe...’* Sato frowned in thought as he extracted the bloody weapons from his skin, *’Maybe Tama’s dad is right about me...maybe I’m a loser like he says. I...’* His frowned deepened, *’No. What would Tama say about that? Or Shino or Sunshine? I've got to do this!’*

In obvious pain, Sato glanced up at his mentor, smiling faintly. Kurenai sighed, knowing that she had to allow him to be free to do his best.

*’He's been pushed to his limits,’* Kakashi noted, watching expectantly, *’Now he'll fight back...’*

Toshi watched in annoyance as Sato formed hand seals hurriedly inside his prison, “I suggest you give up now before you fry yourself. You can't get out of there no matter what you do!”

A mix of aggravation and relief washed over Kurenai's face as chirping filled the air, and many of the observing shinobi witnessed the technique for the first time.

Sato forced the crackling Chidori in his right hand through the electrical bars, interrupting the flow, and completely disabled the cage. Toshi stood a ways off, dumbfounded and unable to react.
On his last legs Sato charged ahead, dragging his Chidori along with him as he rapidly picked up speed, knowing it was the only thing of consequence he had left.

'No way! The only person I've seen use that jutsu was...' Sasuke slowly glanced over to his mentor in shock, recalling their perilous mission to the Grass Village. He had only seen Kakashi use the Chidori, and didn't see how a rookie genin like Sato could be able to perform it.

Sato slammed into Toshi, who had been too bewildered by his jutsu's failure to counter properly, knocking him back with tremendous momentum. The Cloud nin flailed momentarily, unsure of what had happened.

'Crap, I didn't have enough chakra for it!' Sato gritted his teeth as he jabbed Toshi as hard as he possibly could, even with his Chidori fizzling out, 'I wore myself down way too fast...I have to think of something quick!'

The wound on the Kumo shinobi's shoulder wasn't very deep, and Sato seemed to peel away from him dreamily, the light in his palm puttering out. Toshi planted his feet, balancing himself, ready to finish the match.

'What would Tama do?' Sato pondered, back flipping away as gracefully as he had earlier, 'Oh yeah!'

Swiveling on his blackened hands before he could land on his feet again, Sato struck Toshi unexpectedly with a reverse-kick that bashed his nose further up into his face, and sent him careening to the floor with a pained and astounded cry.

Like a pinwheel he had righted himself with ease and Sato stood grinning, observing his handiwork, 'I think she'd approve...'

"Why do you have to show off you twinkle-toes!" Naruto hollered, unable to believe that the physically-challenged genin would actually be able to knock out his opponent.

Sato hobbled about, pulling his wires down, stepping over the unconscious Cloud ninja during his work.

Hayate cleared his throat, “The winner is Hatake Sato.”

Kakashi chuckled, ignoring Sasuke's infuriated expression.

Excited and exhausted, Sato rejoined his team back up on the balcony, glad that he had earned a victory for his team.

“Sensei,” Kurenai turned to Shino addressing her, “Forgive me for breaking my promise.”

“What promise is this?”

“The one in which both Hinata and I swore to prevent him from using the Chidori,” Shino clarified, “My lack of action was attributed to you seeming uncertain if there should have been any intervention.”

“I…” She hadn't expected the Aburame boy to be keen enough to notice her indecision, “Yes, you were right in not acting Shino. I will not allow him to use that technique again, but I feel it was important for him to win this match.”

Shino nodded, suspecting that if she had been adamant about Sato not using the Chidori she would have quickly ended the match herself.
“I'm back!” Sato wheezed, collapsing onto the railing beside Shino and he smiled up at Kurenai, “What did you think, sensei?”

She frowned, “You smell...singed.”

“The final match will be between Morimoto Chiko and Uchiha Sasuke.” Hayate announced, glad that the preliminary rounds were about to end.

“Good luck.” Kakashi smiled beneath his mask as Sasuke gave him an annoyed look, not pleased that his match would be the last one. He went down to the main level, stone-faced, knowing that he had to earn a win for his team.

His opponent, much like the other Cloud ninja he had been watching, was tall and broad. Unlike his teammate Chiko was dark-skinned with light, sharp eyes and what seemed to be a bad attitude.

“Sasuke's match...” Naruto muttered to himself, not noticing how Gaara's expression darkened as he stood beside him to watch.

“So I get the Uchiha, eh?” The Kumo nin's voice was a low growl, “This won't take long then.”

“Don't fool yourself.” Sasuke didn't care how badly he would beat the Cloud shinobi, not after seeing how both Kiba and Sakura hadn't even come close to winning their own fights.

“You may begin when ready.” Hayate stepped away to let the match commence.

The Uchiha disappeared after hurling a mass of kunai and shuriken, and the Kumo ninja dodged left also, refusing to lose track of his foe. With a clamor the projectiles impacted the opposite wall, skimming past Chiko as he took a familiar offensive stance.

‘Looks like he'll be using taijutsu like the last one did.’ Sasuke observed, preparing to counter as the Cloud ninja sprang, and then vanished from sight, 'He's fast!'

‘Lightning Palm Barrage!’ He was hit side-on by a number of powerful, accurate blows. The areas where Chiko had struck him with an open hand had left him completely numb and slowed down his reaction time.

'I can't counter him if I can't feel my body moving!' The Uchiha prodigy evaded another round of electrically charged slaps, finding his hand-eye coordination quickly dissipating, 'I have to use my Sharingan!'

As he feared, the curse mark on his neck began to react as it had the last time he had activated his bloodline limit. His eyes flickered red while he stumbled in pain.

Kakashi's visible eye widened, 'Not Sasuke too. I had thought only Haku had been branded with that mark...but it appears I've been wrong.'

'I won't let this thing control me...’ Sasuke managed a sweep kick to trip up and slow the charging Kumo nin as he forced the mark back under his control, the black tomoe receding further down his pale neck.

His red eyes narrowed as they locked on to the off-balanced Cloud ninja, watching carefully as he prepared to attack again. As Chiko launched another round of painful slaps, Sasuke countered with little effort, seeing his movements nearly before they happened.
'How is he blocking me? I can't get to any of his vital points!' Chiko's shock escalated when Sasuke had maneuvered around his defense with surprising speed and mimicked the painful, static-jabs to the Cloud nin's vulnerable points.

“Alright!” Naruto and Sato were the only two ninja lively enough to be cheering on their fellow Leaf genin. Gaara's sour mood only seemed to worsen at the sight of Sasuke doing well in his match.

A swift uppercut knocked the stunned Kumo ninja into the air, where Sasuke leapt above him and finished with a powerful, electrical kick in the gut. There was a sharp crack when Chiko hit the floor, moaning in pain and he was unable to move after being paralyzed by his own jutsu.

Dizzy, the Uchiha prodigy regained his footing, pleased he had learned a new technique during his match.

Hayate looked down to Chiko, knowing he wasn't about to get up anytime soon, “The winner is Uchiha Sasuke,” The cheers that followed were cut off as he continued, “This concludes the preliminary round. All remaining genin may come down to the main floor now.”

Perplexed, Naruto looked to Gaara, not expecting it to be over so abruptly, “What about Haku-kun? You don't think he'll be back soon?”

“I doubt it.” Gaara answered dryly, following the blonde nin down like those remaining.

Troubled, Naruto said nothing more on the matter and looked at the final group of passing genin that were assembled on the floor.

Sato, Shikamaru and Sasuke had made it, unlike the rest of their teammates; where in contrast the entirety of both Team 13 and Team 2 had all passed. One Sound nin and two of the Sand shinobi also remained, something else Naruto hadn't expected to happen, ‘I really thought it was mostly gonna be Leaf ninja...’

The Hokage also descended and behind him Hayate had set up a chart labeled with lines and numbers. Sarutobi spoke slowly, observing the last of the genin, “Well done, all of you. You will all proceed to the final stage of the Chunin Selection Exam, which is to say, quite different from all the other stages.”

The genin were silent, listening intently.

“The finalists participating in the Third portion of the exam will be taking part in a tournament. The general public and nobles of many countries are eager to watch this competition,” The Sandaime explained, “Unlike the other stages, these fights will not be randomly chosen and you will by now have a fair knowledge of the opponent you will be facing.”

“A tournament?” Shikamaru didn't like the sound of it, “So only one of us here can get the chance to become a chunin is what you're saying?”

“No. Actually you all have an equal opportunity to be selected to become chunin during this portion of the exam, whether you win or lose your final match.” Sarutobi smirked at their surprised faces.

“So there's a chance that we all become chunin...” Temari pointed out, hopeful.

“And there is just as much of a chance that none of you will become chunin,” The Hokage reminded, “However, before the last part of the exam may begin you must first draw a number from this box to determine which opponent you will be facing.”
That was when they noticed Hayate going down the row holding a box from which each ninja drew a piece of paper. It went quickly, and when each had gotten their own number, they read it aloud, as to be written in the proper place on the chart.

Naruto stole a glance at the chart, eager to see his own match, 'Whoa, right off the bat I'm in the first fight!' His eyes narrowed dangerously when he noted that he had been pitted against Neji. His luck could not have been any better, *I'm gonna teach him not to mess with Hinata-chan!*

Shikamaru sighed, upset he had been placed in the second match, “And I'm against another girl too...” He frowned as he looked over to Tenten who stood beside Lee, also observing the chart.

Gaara observed all of the matches. The fourth, much to his delight, would be between Lee and Sasuke, something he didn't want to miss. The fifth...between his brother and the last Sound ninja.

'So that leaves my match against...' It felt like he had been clubbed over the head with a very heavy rock when he noticed that he would be facing Sato, one of the last people he had expected to fight. In all honesty he couldn't say how he'd imagined that fight to work.

“And that leaves Haku, who isn't present, to be in the third match against Temari,” Hayate finished examining the chart, not noticing the horrified look on Gaara's face, “Is there anything you would like to add, Hokage-sama?”

The Sandaime nodded, “You all have one month to train and prepare before the beginning of the final stage. I strongly suggest you all use your time wisely.”

The tension in the air seemed to melt away after the Hokage had dismissed them, and Naruto turned to his red haired friend, psyched, “Yes! I'm up against Neji! I'm gonna school him once my match comes, just you see!”

Gaara nodded absently to him in response, giving a concerned glance to his older sister, wondering what ill fate had placed her against one of his best friends.

Kakashi nudged Sasuke in the back while reading his naughty book, “Congratulations on winning your match, Sasuke. Now I feel it would be a good time to inspect that mark on your neck before we go check up on your teammates.”

The Uchiha nodded and followed after him, not so much thrilled with his future match as Lee was, who wooted and hollered across the room at his exhausted teammates.

As they exited the tower, Naruto looked to Gaara, aware of his troubled expression, “Hey, are you alright Gaara? You should cheer up! We did awesome just like I said we would!”

“It's about Haku-kun's match.”

“Hm?” The blonde boy blinked at him, “Against that girl? Don't worry! He'll totally kick her butt, you'll see!”

The red haired boy sighed, torn, “Go find Jiraiya-sensei and Haku-kun. I'll catch up with you later.”

Naruto frowned, knowing something was off, “Why? What's up?”

“There's someone I have to talk to.” Gaara answered simply and said nothing else before walking away.
Aftermath

Chapter Soundtrack: “Amber Light” by Reki (Tribute to Jun)

The soft sound of rustling leaves soothed him in the darkness, taking his mind off of the silence and emptiness all around him.

“Maybe you should get going now, Naruto. You have much to do today.”

“...yeah. I guess you're right...”

A pause.

“Say...can you tell me where this place is?”

The voice was amused; Naruto could tell by the chuckling, “You already know where you are!”

“Oh. I do?”

“Oh course.”

He took a moment to consider it, examining his memories, “Well...I guess this place is pretty familiar.”

“You should really get ready now. Gaara and Haku are waiting.”

“Hey! How do you know about my friends?”

Still, with an amused inflection, “How could I not know about them?”

“Eh? Just who are you anyway? I don't know you!”

“You know me much better than you realize.”

“What the heck are you talking about?”

The gentle crescendo of leaves began to fade.

“They're waiting for you.”

“Hey wait! Just tell me who you--”

“Wake up now.”

Naruto’s eyes blinked open, peering up at the ceiling from beneath his golden bangs. His dream had left him confused, and unlike his other dreams he felt he wasn't likely to forget about this one.

'It was creepy...what person who I don't know could know about Haku-kun and Gaara-kun?’

He sat up and stretched fitfully, deciding to push it to the back of his mind.

It had only been a day since the preliminary matches and already Naruto had too much on his mind to rest peacefully any longer.

The sun shone through his window brightly, 'I slept in pretty late...' Naruto was not going to beat
himself up about it. Readjusting to his normal sleeping pattern after the main part of the exam had been difficult.

He dressed himself mechanically and proceeded onward while yawning, following the smell of food that hung in the air.

Gaara greeted him at the table with a friendly blink.

Haku, predictably, had prepared breakfast and left it out for them before he had left. Naruto sat across from his red haired friend silently, too sleepy to begin a coherent conversation. Gaara regarded him inquisitively for a moment as he chewed, wondering where all his energy had gone.

“Haku-kun went to the hospital to see Sakura-chan a while ago.” Gaara stated, noting how life seemed to return to the blonde boy's features.

“Oh? Oh, then we should go there too!” Naruto replied and then glanced down at his untouched miso soup, “Let me just finish this first...”

Gaara watched as Naruto proceeded to inhale the noodles, not in the least afraid of how very much he resembled a vacuum cleaner.

“We won't be going just yet.”

Befuddled, Naruto continued his slurping while still managing to ask, “Why's that?”

A far-off look came over the redhead’s face, “There are two people who I want you to meet first.”

Haku lifted the pink orchids from the vase after inspecting them carefully, ‘These will do. She won't want anything too extravagant.’

He had taken the liberty to stop by the Yamanaka flower shop to get gifts for Sakura and Hinata; orchids for Sakura and white iris for Hinata. Since neither Naruto nor Gaara had been able to wake up early enough he had gone ahead without them, as usual.

Ino sat at the counter watching him in fascination. It wasn't often that boys stopped by to pick up flowers but she was well aware of why he had come.

“Good morning, Ino-san,” She smiled at his formal greeting, “I hope you're feeling better since the exam.”

Ino shrugged, trying to hide her humiliation, “I'm feeling fine, Haku-kun,” She eyed the flowers he had chosen, “Hm...forehead-girl will definitely like those. Tell her I said hello and that I don't plan on surrendering Sasuke-kun to her anytime soon.”

He handed the money over, wearing a sheepish expression, ‘I doubt that Sakura-chan is competing for Sasuke at all...’

“I will, Ino-san,” Haku decided to be compliant while she handed him his change, “Oh...I thought you might like to know that Naruto-kun has informed me that I will be facing Temari of the Sand in the final round.”

She raised a fine, blonde eyebrow, “Oh? Well, do me a favor and beat her ass. Be careful though, Haku-kun...there's something wrong with that girl.”

He nodded to her before leaving, taking Ino's advice into account.
Hinata sat quietly, staring down at her hands folded in her lap. She found it strange how with those very hands she had dared challenge her older cousin, a living prodigy; and with those very same hands failed to defeat him.

Being the honest person she was Hinata could admit she hadn't expected to win her match against Neji. Something told her that it was the act of trying to defeat him that held more value than the victory itself.

Maybe at some point Neji had realized that.

Hinata couldn't say for certain if her cousin had any revelations at all once he had thrown her down, no matter how much she hoped he had. Neji, as expected, was the stronger of the two. Her father, her sister, her friends and her entire clan were aware of it. Some denied that fact and some openly broadcasted it. And while all of their attention dawdled on her cousin she was pushed to the wayside, free to live and train as she saw fit.

That was until the pressures of being the heir to Hyuga name and her father's disappointed gaze returned to her.

She wished more than anything to become a strong, respectable leader for her clan, but with time Hinata had come to understand that she had not become a shinobi to fulfill her father's expectations of her.

She had done it for herself.

Now she was having difficulty remembering why. Most especially after having spoken with her father who had mentioned the possibility of being demoted and the tarnishing of the Hyuga name at the cost of her failure during the exam.

Hinata sniffled, fighting the frustrated tears threatening her pearly eyes. What good would come of crying anymore? She had hit rock bottom and she could only work her way up from where she had landed herself.

The idea didn't make it any less difficult for her to keep trying. Her clan had never had that much faith in her anyway, so why not start anew?

She took a deep, steadying breath, disliking the overly-sanitized smell of her hospital room, and shifted beneath her blanket, hiding her pale hands beneath it so she would no longer have to look at them and be reminded of her failure.

There was a knock at the door.

Hinata looked up, anxious. A fair number of visitors had come to see her since she had arrived at the hospital, yet Naruto and Gaara hadn't been to see her yet. Her last visitors had actually been Ino, Shikamaru and Chouji who had brought her an assortment of barbeque which she didn't have the heart to tell them she most likely wouldn't eat. She had appreciated their concern nonetheless.

The second knock was brief and less intrusive. That's when she had known it was not Naruto. And probably not the nurse either because she tended to announce her presence.

Hinata blinked her white eyes curiously as Tenten slipped inside. Oddly, neither Neji, Lee or her energetic sensei were with her.

The brown haired girl wore a cheerful smile at the sight of her awake and unharmed. The last time she had seen Hinata she had been indistinguishable from a punching bag.
“Hey there, Hinata-san!” Tenten paused briefly, noting all the 'get well soon' gifts at her bedside, “Uh...I'm sorry that I didn't bring a present for you or anything.”

“N-No! It's...it isn't n-necessary.”

Hinata found it strange how very little she actually knew about Tenten; funny how these things worked.

The weapons specialist sat down in a vacant chair beside the bed while Hinata scooted further under her blanket shyly.

Tenten regarded her speculatively for a moment, “I hope you're feeling alright.”

“I'm feeling m-much better, thank you.”

“Good, I'm glad!” Truthfully she was, but Tenten frowned as she thought, 'She's so timid around me. It's probably because I'm Neji's teammate...' She hadn't come here with the intentions of threatening Hinata and she'd prove it too.

“Tenten-san...” The weapons specialist reasserted her attention as Hinata continued, “Is there any p-particular reason that you've come here?”

'I'll give her credit, nothing gets past her...' Tenten decided, expecting Hinata to be the sort of person who got straight to the heart of the matter.

The brown haired girl nodded in confirmation, “I skipped out on training to make sure that you were okay.”

Hinata's embarrassment meter escalated a few notches at the news.

“Look, Hinata...Neji wasn't himself in that fight.” Tenten attempted to explain it but found that she couldn't, “And I...well, I wasn't really myself in my own fight either...”

Her guilty expression caused Hinata to take immediate 'do-not-make-visitor-feel-bad' action.

“Sakura-chan is f-fine, I'm sure!” She was glad to see Tenten's expression lighten, “Haku-kun told me so when he s-stopped by to see me earlier.”

“That's Haku for you.” Tenten smiled, grateful to him.

Hinata found herself sitting cross-legged. It was a habit she was picking up from spending time with Naruto. She was relieved that her father wasn't around to see such behavior.

“I just wanted to apologize on Neji's behalf if he hasn't already,” Tenten summed up the point of her visit, “What happened during the exam...it wasn't personal.”

Sadly, Hinata had to disagree. Everything about her match had been personal for the both of them.

Instead of protesting, she nodded politely, accepting the apology in good grace.

“Are things going to be alright in your clan?”

Tenten, unintentionally, had hit the nail right on the head.

Hinata's face saddened considerably before she answered, “I...I've already spoken with my father.”
It was troubling enough to hear that her own father had to have a serious talk with her while she was still in the hospital, of all places, but Tenten was aware that it hadn't been a pleasant conversation either.

“I see...” Tenten found her spirits dampen for the younger girl, wishing that Neji could stop causing so much grief for her.

“You don't have to worry, Tenten-san,” Hinata assured her, her voice was a little braver than what it had been, “I know that I will b-be alright.”

It was quiet for a long moment and in that time Hinata considered that maybe Tenten hadn't believed her reassuring proclamation.

Tenten stood, an uncanny serious look on her face, “You just feel better then, Hinata. I'll see you soon.”

Hinata unmasked herself with her blanket, just a margin.

The weapons specialist closed the door gently behind her and began her ritual walk to her team's training grounds. She was deep in thought and she did not care that she was late. She was surprised to find that her new favorite member of the Hyuga family was Hinata.

It was the first time she had ever placed Neji second, to his cousin of all people.

Haku had wondered how he had managed to land himself at Ichiraku Ramen without Naruto or Gaara with him.

He supposed that the closest explanation he could supply for himself was that while on his way home Sato had grabbed him unexpectedly and forced him into the seat beside an equally un-enthralled Shino. The silver haired nin had declared they should celebrate his victory, his treat.

So Haku had stayed, listening to the recap of the last fights he had missed during the exam. Shino did well to correct Sato's exaggerations of some of the matches.

Sato chewed lazily on a pickled vegetable and asked, “Hey, where are Naruto and Gaara anyway, Haku-kun? I thought they'd be hanging around with you at a time like this.”

“Actually, I'm not so sure where they are at the moment...” Haku lowered his chopsticks in thought, knowing the smell of food would've definitely woken them, “They should've been here by now.”

“They are easily side-tracked,” Shino predicted their course of action, “They will turn up here eventually.”

True. Naruto and Gaara did have a favorite restaurant, and Haku knew the place very well by now. It was only a matter of time.

“Maybe they went with your sensei to train,” Sato suggested, crunching a piece of shrimp, “Just to get a head-start on the exam. Hm...not a bad idea for us either, eh Shino-kun?”

Shino's expression was bland, “Only you have advanced to the final round.”

“So what?” The silver haired boy was indignant, “You can kick my ass easy! I need to get as much training done as I can get if I'm gonna face Gaara-kun...” Sato shuddered at the thought and Shino smirked, glad that he was taking the fight seriously.
Haku was still stuck on the mentioning of Jiraiya. Their last encounter had not been a friendly one.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” The sennin’s face was red with anger as he had to resort to scolding his brightest and most reliable pupil.

He had taken Haku to the other side of the tower after his match and began the preparations to seal the mark on the boy’s neck.

Haku sat shirtless in the center of a seal that Jiraiya had drawn on the stone floor, flinching as his mentor roughly painted markings on his back.

“I didn’t know what the seal was capable of, sensei.”

“That doesn’t matter!” Jiraiya wouldn’t put up with excuses, “I won’t let Orochimaru turn you into one of his pawns in his little game! Not you or the other squirts, you hear me?”

Slightly traumatized, Haku nodded, coming to grips with the magnitude of the situation, “I’m sorry Jiraiya-sensei. I will never let it happen again...” He lowered his eyes in apology, realizing that the toad sage only wanted his safety even if it meant screaming at him.

“We’ll see,” Jiraiya had calmed down, just a little, “I just can’t understand why you didn’t tell me! Do you realize that this mark could've killed you? It should have...”

Haku remained silent.

The sennin frowned, noting the boy’s submissive behavior and he took it as a good sign. If he was scared it meant he understood.

“You need to hold still while I seal this mark on your neck. Do you understand, Haku?”

“Yes, sensei.”

Jiraiya laid his hand over the mark, noticing how Haku's back straightened in anxiety, “Fuja Hoin!”

The seals Jiraiya had painted on Haku's skin earlier snaked upwards toward his neck and formed a ring around the scaled marks there. The dark haired boy's cry of pain was cut short when he passed out from the pressure.

It had gone quickly and successfully, and Haku had been too exhausted either way to stay conscious. Jiraiya knew the boy would thank him later.

“There, that should hold it,” Jiraiya sighed heavily, patting Haku's head, “You know squirt, you're the dumbest smart person I've ever met.”

The dark haired boy was still shaking in pain, unresponsive.

“This seal is only as strong as your will power is, kid,” Jiraiya muttered, half to himself, “Make sure you stay in control.”

Haku gingerly touched the sealed mark on his neck, remembering some of what had transpired, as well as his sensei's very loud and outraged warning of Orochimaru's treachery.

“I'll look for them later.” Haku decided aloud, deciding to take Sato up on his generous offer.
The silver haired boy shrugged before waving Ayame over, “Yo, miss! Do you have coffee here?”

“Hey, Gaara, just where exactly are we going anyway?” Naruto walked alongside his friend, his arms folded behind his head, “At least let me know that much if you've got to be so secretive and stuff!”

The blonde nin had a suspicious feeling ever since breakfast that morning. Gaara had been acting strangely; more so than usual. It was apparent to Naruto that he was having a difficult time trying to explain himself, rather than keeping things short and sweet as he normally did.

‘That means something big is up...’ Naruto surmised, watching Gaara give him a shifty sideways glance, ‘He's thinking way too much. He can't focus.’

“It isn't far now.”

Naruto nodded, scowling moodily at the red haired boy, “Yep, cuz that really helps you know! What's so important huh? If there's anyone you can tell it's me!”

Gaara's pace sped up just a fraction, “I am...going to introduce you to my brother and sister.”

He was glad he ignored Naruto's dropped jaw, and right on schedule, “You have SIBLINGS?”

They veered off course and stepped out onto the side of the road, where Naruto could reassemble his jumbled wits. Gaara found it hard to answer vocally in the affirmative, so he just offered his friend his most compassionate nod.

Naruto ran a shaky hand through his golden hair, breathing deeply, “Then...how come you never told us?”

“You never asked.”

Now was not the time for his cranky retorts, he knew, but Gaara just couldn't pin the reason down. It felt like if he did tell while still living with Naruto and Haku, that it would make them less family than the real one he still had back in Suna.

“But didn't you want to talk about them even a little?” Naruto was desperately trying to make sense of it, “You can trust Haku-kun and me!”

He could admit he felt more attachment to his goofy friends than his own flesh and blood, but Gaara still felt the pressure to mend his broken past. He couldn't do that if he turned his back on his true family.

“I do trust you but I do not trust myself,” Gaara admitted, begrudgingly, “The life I left behind was a disaster. When I came here the only thing that came naturally was to let it go.”

It was quiet for a long moment and the red haired boy felt like he couldn't look at Naruto. Guilt washed over him at the sight of the blonde and he couldn't bear it at all.

To his shock, Naruto only grinned. He always did have a quick-acceptance complex, “Well cool! So they're from the Sand village right?”

They continued walking and Gaara found the subject open up with such ease he couldn't help but press to the point of the matter. Naruto had that effect on people.
“They are...” He paused thoughtfully, “You've already seen them, actually.”

“Whoa, I have? Well, uh...where are we supposed to meet them?”

“Outside of the Academy.”

Naruto nodded in confirmation even though he still hadn't caught on fully, “When did you get the chance to talk to them?”

“After the second stage of the exam.”

The missing piece clicked in Naruto's head and he then recalled the two formidable Sand shinobi who had, like Gaara, progressed to the final round...with the exception of the trash-talking bastard of their team.

He frowned, “Wait a minute, aren't they mad that you for...you know, busting up their teammate?”

Gaara's chuckle was dark and pleased, “Surprisingly, no.”

Naruto felt his spirit lighten at the sight of Gaara happy for once. Rather than the brooding, calculating, stubborn exterior he had often seen, Naruto was glad that his friend had something to not be so irritable about.

Naruto looked forward to meeting the other members of Gaara's family tree.

Upon arriving at her team's training grounds Tenten discovered Lee training alone just as enthusiastically as ever. He was thoroughly disciplining a training post with round after round of punches.

“Lee?” She watched curiously as he seemed to bounce over to her like an obedient puppy. She found it just as endearing as it was scary, “Where's Neji?”

“Ah! Our teammate has been detained at a meeting at the Hyuga household, Tenten,” Lee announced, looking helpful, “This I know with certainty for I have gone there to check myself and was...promptly dismissed. It looked important.”

Tenten didn't fight the sigh of exasperation she gave in response to Lee's update. So that was the way it was. Neji had thrown his clan for a loop and now they had to decide what to do with him. Peachy.

“I...I just can't believe that he's getting all this grandeur for beating on his younger cousin, you know Lee?” Tenten leaned against a nearby birch tree, where he took a space beside her, listening intently.

He was partially unnerved by her foul mood and wanted to dispel it, “But it means a lot to him, Tenten, and who are we to interfere with his goals and clan life?”

“I don't know, maybe his logical teammates? The friends who can keep him on the straight-and-narrow? Pick one...” She felt bad that she had snapped at him, but then was even more troubled that she had used the term 'friends.'

Tenten gave a semi-horrified look to the Green Beast of Konoha, “We are his friends...right?”

“I would say so,” Lee agreed, then added gloomily, “Although, I am unsure if it is a mutual sentiment.”
Neji never really had tried to bond with them beyond the point of training and missions. It was hard to tell if there was anything more he had bothered to work on.

“What I mean is: do the ends justify the means? I've been to see her Lee and things don't look so good.” She was grateful she could always confide in him on just about anything, “What do you think?”

“Perhaps he could have used more restraint...”

There it was. So it wasn't just her. Tenten was glad about that, that there was proof that there were others who found the Hyuga clan's structure to be questionable. As well as the stability of Neji's psyche, for that matter.

Gai had somehow snuck up on them. He appeared on the opposite side of the clearing and he was not alone, “Tenten! Lee! My youthful students! We have a guest with us today!”

Oh joy. And to think for a moment Tenten had actually believed Neji had ditched the old Hyuga buzzards and joined his team for a helpful day of training before the final stage of the exam arrived in only a few weeks. It was sad how much she expected of him.

They approached curiously. Lee, of course, was a bit more chipper at the sight of the newcomer.

“Hi guys!” A familiar face, thankfully, had replaced Neji, “I'll be training with you for the day since I'm off from work! Uncle Gai said you wouldn't mind.”

“Hey Tama!” Tenten opted for being friendly since her sensei's niece wasn't nearly as crazy as her uncle, “You should stop by more often, of course we don't mind.”

Lee was predictably ecstatic, “Miss Tama! It is so good to see you again!”

“Gai-sensei, do you know what's holding up Neji?” Tenten felt a second opinion may clarify some things. Not that she doubted Lee, but some time had passed.

“I was informed he is at a promotion ceremony,” Gai recalled, not announcing his source, “He should be back with us by tomorrow, I can assure you.”

Tenten chose then to dismiss the matter until tomorrow. Tama looked like she would be a challenge and was rumored to specialize in taijutsu, 'Isn't she a dancer? Or a baker or something?'

Lee didn't seem to care as to why Tama had visited as long as she planned on bringing more youthful sunshine to their team.

“I'm aware that you have only met briefly a few times before,” Gai's introduction of Tama was less flowery than usual, “But you'll both be pleased to hear that at the time Tama attended the Academy she was a genius of hard work!”

That was all it took for Lee to be inspired. Tears began to roll down the boy's cheeks in the likeness of his sensei. Tama patted his back worriedly, knowing how sensitive he could be at times, “Are you okay, Lee?”

Gai continued, thinking it was going well, “My beloved niece was renowned for her taijutsu, much like myself. It is the Maito blood that creates true hard working shinobi!” Naturally he just had to brag a bit, since this was an opportunity for it.

Tama's sheepish chuckle carried with it a tone of annoyance. Gai was exaggerating, but that was
Tenten, however, was as impressed as Lee had been. So Tama was in fact a shinobi in spite of the fact she had other occupations. She could say the same for herself with regards to her weapon-forging business.

She decided to break the ice, “I never knew you were a kunoichi, Tama.” Her approximated guess wagered that being that the girl was about fifteen and so she had to be a chunin, “So, um, where’s your hitai-ate?” It was not visibly displayed, at least not to Tenten at the moment.

Tama's smile weakened, “I never got one.”

There was an uncomfortable silence.

“How can that be?” Lee’s outrage was well-contained, “If you have such talent, then why has that not been acknowledged?”

Gai was about to brush the subject aside but Tama decided to answer, not very much bothered by the idea, “There was an accident that forced me to retire early from the Ninja Academy.”

Her uncle’s face saddened at the memory. Apparently something had not gone right when she had started on the path to becoming a shinobi.

Tenten and Lee wisely decided to drop the subject.

Tama, not very disgruntled at all, continued “Now...who wants to train with me first, huh? I didn't come out here to just stand around!”

Lee’s hand shot up immediately.

Naruto's astonished voice was low and anxious, “Wow. You really do look like them. I never noticed that before…”

Temari frowned at the sight of Naruto, recalling him from the preliminary rounds. He hadn't been half bad of a fighter either, but he had been loud and quirky. She turned to Gaara who stood beside his friend, looking stilted, “I...thought you said you were bringing both of them?”

“Haku chose to sulk off.” The redhead answered simply, not really sure what had happened to him.

“Figures.” Kankuro responded with arms folded across his chest, “There isn't really a rush either. This is good for now.”

Naruto was still very perplexed, “Just who are you people? You act just like Gaara!”

That much was apparent.

Temari's smile was friendly, “We are Temari and Kankuro of the Sand.”

“And you're supposed to be Gaara-kun's brother and sister?” He couldn't help but be skeptical; it was a bit far-fetched after all.

Kankuro nodded, “You got that right.”

Gaara chose to remain silent for the time being. Their interaction was so amusing it would be a travesty to interfere.
Naruto, unlike his teammate, wasn’t as amused. He didn’t like the fact that these people could show up out of nowhere one day and claim things such as family ties. It was a serious matter in his opinion, “Then what the hell took you so long to find him, huh? Can you tell me that?”

“Our father assured us that he was dead. What were we supposed to do?” Temari was also touchy about the subject, “We had no way of knowing he was alive or where he was. Don't make it seem like we're the ones to blame.”

Things were getting a bit tense.

Gaara did not feel like discussing such a painful matter, so he merely changed the subject, “Where’s your teammate?”

Kankuro’s frown was emphasized by the markings painted on his face, “He’s at the hospital. He hasn't shut up since the match.”

It was with that notion Naruto was reminded of a pressingly more important matter, “Oh yeah! The hospital! I better get going and see Sakura-chan and Hinata-chan!”

Gaara gave a quizzical look to his friend who had turned to face his siblings, a bit awkwardly, “Uh, it was nice meeting you, Temari and Kankuro! I’ll talk to you guys another time! I've really gotta go right now!” Naruto darted off a moment later, hoping he had been polite enough.

His impression of Gaara's brother and sister had been what he had anticipated them to be: duplicates of Gaara, except older.

“Hm. He's...interesting,” Kankuro observed, “And you've lived with him for how long?”

“Ever since I left.”

“You can go with him if you want, Gaara.” Temari notified him, aware of his anxious expression, “We'll meet up with you later.”

Gaara hesitated for a moment, considering the idea. He then nodded to them and quietly followed after Naruto.

It had gone quite well.

Three Days Later

Kurenai could honestly say she had never been brought out to a nice restaurant before by a younger man…especially a man who was twelve and kept snapping pictures of unwilling people on the way there.

They were seated at a small table out in front of the establishment, out in the sunlight. Kurenai frowned at him as he fiddled with his camera, “Sato, may I ask what this is all about?”

“I'll tell it to you straight, sensei,” The young Hatake caved, “This isn't a date.”

“If it had been you would have regretted it.” She warned. She would've happily smacked him back to his senses.

“You see, I've been having trouble with a technique I've been working on...” Sato explained, his dark eyes shifting nervously about the place.
Kurenai could tell something serious was afoot, “What is the nature of this problem?” As his mentor it was her ritual duty to spare him from certain destruction.

As an answer, the silver haired boy handed her a photograph which she took from him with a questioning look.

After a moment, she frowned at him, “Sato, this is a picture of the Academy with no roof.”

“Whoops! Wrong one!” He took it from her and rifled around through a small pouch of other pictures he kept on hand. Sato handed her a different photo, this time certain it would explain his query.

The waiter stopped by while she inspected the picture, so Sato took the liberty of ordering for the both of them, “Coffee for me please and...shochu on the rocks for my sensei here.”

The man taking his order frowned at him, taking him for a punk-ass kid, “That's a bit strong don't you think?”

“Not for my sensei!” He had confidence in Kurenai or at least in her tolerance of alcohol.

Astounded and slightly insulted, the waiter left, muttering to himself in irritation.

After a long moment, Kurenai looked up at her pupil, “I've determined that this photograph clarifies nothing.”

Sato grinned at her, “Aw, but you know a picture says a thousand words!”

Her glare silenced him.

The boy sighed heavily, deciding to get to the root of the matter, “Sensei, I took that picture a mile away from her!”

Kurenai's ruby eyes widened in understanding, “I see your point...”

“It's like this sensei,” Sato began, looking a bit distressed, “I never met my dad, but mom refused to get rid of his stuff after he died...”

The waiter returned with their drinks and set them down.

“I see.” Kurenai nodded, “That explains where you got this summoning contract from. It is not typical of the Hatake family.”

“Yeah well...the boss that my old man originally called died two days ago apparently,” A nervous look came over his pale face, “The new boss, if I get around to summoning her that is...I don't know if she'll tolerate me or if any of the others for that matter.”

“That is problematic.” Kurenai answered darkly, “There is only one way for you to find out with certainty...”

Sato frowned, “I'm serious sensei! A new leader of the flock might make my contract invalid. I mean, it's all the way from Hidden Dragonfly...it's not like I can renew it or something.”

The waiter returned and set their drinks down without a word.

“Why did you come to me with a dilemma such as this then?” Kurenai could name another silver haired nin who'd be able to relate to Sato, “How am I supposed to help you?”
“Well, I’m not exactly sure how to talk to a girl-leader...” He admitted, sheepishly, “I was hoping you could help me out!”

If it was something that basic he had a lot to work on. She was flattered that he considered her the foremost female authority he knew.

“Sato, I'm not so sure about this particular situation.” She muttered, weighing the prospects, “It doesn't look too good. I can supervise you during your appeal to the new leader, however I cannot guarantee you won’t be harmed.”

Kurenai took a proprietary sip of her drink, ignoring Sato's horrified face.

When Naruto had woke up the following morning both Haku and Gaara were gone. It was something he was getting used to, they had different agendas after all: Gaara reconnecting with his siblings and Haku...well, he wasn't so sure what Haku was up to.

After dressing and a delightful breakfast of ramen Naruto set out for the Hyuga compound. He had been told Hinata had been discharged from the hospital perfectly healthy, but he felt it would be a good idea to see for himself.

Not many of the white-eyed people were about the estate that day, he had noticed after jumping the wall and entering. What that indicated he didn't know, and Naruto had made a bee-line to Hinata's bedroom window which had been left open.

“Hey! Hinata-chan! You're feeling better?”

She wasn't present. He frowned, plotting the next course he should take in order to locate her. Naruto by now had a thorough cognitive map of the estate in his head.

Out on a nearby porch, he noticed Hanabi, who wasn't nearly so pleased to see him, “Yo! Hinata's sister!” That certainly got her attention, “Where's Hinata-chan?”

With a sigh of irritation, she responded, “She is on the Eastern side of the grounds and my name is Hanabi, you fool.”

“Er, right. Sorry!”

He moved across the sunny lawn, hands jammed into his pockets, 'I wonder...maybe Neji's around here?' It had occurred to Naruto that encountering his opponent before the final match would be terribly awkward, especially with the fact that the only thing he could think to do once he saw Hinata's cousin was to beat him upside the head.

Naruto kept a wary eye open for the Hyuga prodigy, 'I'll beat him! I will! He can't go around thinking that it's alright to just bulldoze everyone in your path...he's got to learn to compromise just like me, Gaara and Haku have.'

He bumped headlong into someone, too deep in his own thoughts to see where he was going. Hiashi turned around to face him, annoyed, giving him an inquiring expression.

“Whoa, Hyuga-sama! I didn't see you there!” Naruto had been told countless times by Haku to address Hinata's father properly and now it was second nature, even if it came out a bit goofy.

“Is there something you need, Uzumaki-san?” The clan head had grown startlingly tolerant of Naruto.
The blonde boy paused in thought, “No, I’m good. I’m just looking for Hinata-chan!”

“Of course.” Hiashi walked away, not very interested.

Naruto continued on noting that, as of recently, that was the most Hiashi had spoken to him. He couldn’t tell if the clan head was stingy simply because of his knowledge of him being the Kyuubi container or if he needed better people skills. It could have quite possibly been a bit of both.

As Hanabi had instructed, the Eastern garden had occupants. The blonde boy was momentarily startled by the presence of his jounin sensei standing nearby as Hinata tossed feed into the koi pond, answering his questions.

Naruto exploded onto the scene, attacking Jiraiya and he was easily evaded. He had surprised the pale-eyed girl, “Grr! What the hell do you think you're doing here, Ero-sensei!”

The toad sage raised his eyebrows, “So you finally showed up, Naruto! And what's with that hostile tone, eh? Just visiting is all,” He frowned at the blonde nin, “Princess here has begun to use Shadow Clones, I hear. It's a bit dangerous don't you think?”

Oh crap. He had forgotten about that.

He decided to play dumb and grinned, “Yeah! How about that?”

Hinata's face was very, adorably red.

Jiraiya pulled Naruto by the ear, leaning in close so he could whisper, “That is a jounin-level technique! If she gets hurt while using it, you know who to blame, right?”

Naruto nodded, frustrated, but he also understood Hinata needed training and discipline to master the jutsu.

“I've said my piece.” Jiraiya announced, drawing out his pipe. He waved goodbye to Hinata before he had left.

Naruto had wondered if there had been a double-meaning, perhaps, in his sensei's method of communication, 'Oh whatever! He's just being a crazy, old pervert again.'

Hinata's smile was meant to be welcoming, but it was sad and frail. It was upsetting him immensely and he wished that she'd do away with it. Naruto swallowed before he spoke, “Hey Hinata-chan, how are you feeling?”

She hadn't the ability to lie about her current state, but she could delay the subject, if only a little, “I...I would like to be somewhere else right now.”

His blue eyes softened. He could fix that; he just needed to know how, “Sure! Where do want to go?”

“Somewhere far away f-from here...”

Naruto nodded, “You got it! Just follow me. I know this place, well...you'll see.”

She hadn't once questioned him on their way to the Hokage monument, even if it had been a slightly longer trip with a companion by his side. Naruto had settled in his usual spot overlooking the village and Hinata sat down beside him, very quiet and very bemused.

Hinata had, being the attentive girl she was, noticed which Hokage's head they were roosted on.
She made no comment about it and gazed out over the city below, hoping she wouldn't cry.

She had missed him so much and it was slightly overwhelming that he had rescued her from the intolerable stiffness of the Hyuga compound. He broke the silence, even if it had been peaceful; it needed to be done.

“Is...everything going to be alright with your family?”

She shook her head. Her smile was gone, “My father is...so upset w-with me...I knew h-he would be, but still...there was a chance that I could have made him p-proud. I thought m-maybe...”

“Hinata-chan, I told you, I'm going to help you!” Naruto wouldn't stand for it, “I'll make Neji and your dad come to their senses! They just don't get it!”

“I just don't know anymore...” Hinata was uncertain and her faith had been shaken since her match.

It was quiet after that and Naruto waited for her voice to return so she would pour out all of her worries for him to hear, just like Gaara and Haku would when they were frustrated. But it never happened. Her silence was chilling and he could feel the pain and effort it took for her to keep all of her thoughts bottled up inside.

He would wait. It didn't matter to him how long it took. He believed in her and was sure she had yet to bloom.

“I think that the only way I can help you is if...you help me a bit first,” Naruto scratched his arm, thinking of what to say, “What I mean is...you'll have to put me through the ropes of Gentle Fist and stuff if I'm gonna pound Neji, you know? I've seen you and you're...”

‘Amazing.’ He thought.

It was strange how he never said the word but she had still heard it, somehow.

She refused to let him down. He was the last person on earth that she would abandon, “I'll do my best to h-help you, Naruto-kun. I can get you prepared, but...” Her voice lowered, “You will have to look after Gaara-kun and Haku-kun as well. They need you too to prepare for the tournament.”

Hinata rubbed absently at her eyes. They were hurting again.

Naruto had noticed, “Hey, you feeling a bit sleepy? We can go back if you want.”

“No, I just...I'm not tired.” She didn't elaborate further so he let it go.

After a long moment he chuckled, “Heh...Ero-sensei didn't know I taught you how to make Shadow Clones. I guess I surprised him! Well, you surprised him. It's a jutsu not many people can do you know.”

A small smile appeared on her lips, it was getting easier for her to remember how, “He stopped by and said that you probably shouldn't have showed me, b-but...he was proud of me.” Her smile brightened, “It made me happy that he was pleased.”

Naruto could understand her reasoning. Her father was almost never pleased with her, so she must have been glad at least Jiraiya had seen potential in her. It was a start.

“Yeah, and I bet your sensei is proud of you too, right?” He couldn't help but add to the idea.
Hinata hugged her knees to her chest, nodding, “Yes, you're right...Kurenai-sensei was glad too.”

“You're getting stronger, I told you,” Naruto glanced over to her, smiling, “The only person who has a hard time believing that is you.”

Color returned to her cheeks and she changed the subject, “When you came to see me at the hospital...you said that you m-met Gaara-kun's brother and sister. You never told me what they were like.”

“Oh yeah! That's right!” Naruto nodded, remembering the news from days earlier, “Overall, they're mostly just like he is! Except that they live in the Sand village.” He smirked at the thought, “Come to think of it...he hangs out with them a lot. I can see why. I’ve got to say, I liked them!”

“Uchiha Sasuke and Haku-kun have both been admitted to the final round, just as you predicted, Orochimaru-sama,” Kabuto had become the main informant for Orochimaru in terms of what was happening in Leaf.

“Very good, Kabuto-kun,” The snake shinobi was pleased, and folded his arms as he leaned contentedly on a wall in the alleyway, “And what of our One-Tailed friend?”

“The Ichibi has made contact with two of our Sand agents. It's only a matter of time now,” Kabuto had also been following the movements of Baki's team, “He'll be all too easy to control once he's tamed.”

Orochimaru's chuckle was merciless, “Excellent! Gaara-kun will play a key role in the destruction of Konoha. Delightful isn't it?”

Kabuto remained silent but had nodded in agreement. He didn't have much love for the sand manipulator.

“Yes, it won't be much longer now...” Orochimaru’s plans were already being set into motion.

Team Gai had anticipated the day to be just another normal day of training.

Neji's training with Tenten had continued as it usually did, as did Lee's training with their sensei. Neji had been reunited with his team, greeting them with the subtle news that he was being considered by the council of his clan to become the next clan heir in Hinata's stead.

Needless to say, Tenten was not pleased with the update, even if she had pretended to be.

Her discontent became more and more obvious throughout the morning, in which knives and sickles she had been throwing had been launched just a fraction too fast, or the senbon had been aimed peculiarly close to fatal areas. She had summoned a short sword after a while to keep his Jyukken at bay, which was also, like she, becoming steadily fiercer.

‘How can this be happening? He shouldn't be allowed to achieve his goals this way...’ Her slashes were wild as she thought, her attention had been divided down the middle, ‘And she tried so hard!’

It became silent when they had separated, circling each other as they searched for an opening. The Byakugan was thoroughly scanning her for weaknesses and could not immediately detect any. She was a radiant, angry being and Neji was not sensible enough to back down.

An aggressive foe was a challenging one.
Gai was aware of the change in attitude across the field between his two other students. They had gone from snappish battle cries to total, dead quiet. It was the quiet that he was familiar with only when a ninja battle was beginning. It made Gai uneasy. It wasn't like them.

They sprang, relentless and stubborn, and Tenten had found the time to summon a second sword that no more lethal than the one she already had, but two hands meant twice the speed, forcing Neji to compensate. He batted at her, stunning her hand, knocking the blade away before the other came careening down, forcing him back.

Slaps of Jyukken became painful jabs and the weapons master danced around him, furious, evasive, and progressively more fatal. Slashes became finishing blows that she had seen her father use in his days in the Black Ops; blows that he had expressly told her not to use on friends.

'He's just so─!' She had surprised herself when she had sliced his shoulder open. Tenten thought to pause for a moment and her brain felt like scrambled eggs. His only reaction was to retaliate with twice the force.

Neji had slammed into her stomach with a spike of Jyukken that left her breathless and cross-eyed, and they leapt a second later in unison, utterly possessed, so stubborn and arrogant that there was no chance either would back down.

“Eight Trigrams: Sixty-Four Palms!”

She hadn't thought to evade. Tenten was unable to think at all. The same could be said for an equally angry Neji who had come after her with hopelessly fast and unavoidable strikes that were sealing off tenketsu. Vicious and eyes blurred with pain and rage, Tenten let the blade rip down expertly with a practiced motion that halted his attack.

It wasn't a particularly deadly stab wound because she had missed. If it had hit his exposed back before he had thought to move, it would've been. The sword had raked mostly skin, a few inches of it on his right flank, and the blood was everywhere.

Neji struck her again, trying to put distance between them while his brain no longer functioning. She was reeling with pain. Both were on their last legs and were tackled at the same time, completely blind-sided.

Gai had head-locked Neji and thrown him down with a thud, eyes nearly bugging out of his head. Lee had taken Tenten and discarded her sword, pinning her flailing, weapon-throwing arms.

A true catastrophe for Team 13.

Tenten could no longer hold in the cry of pain from the purplish, bleeding points lining her arms and abdomen. He had nailed her, she admitted. Lee's frightened cooing was indistinguishable beneath her agonized wails as he grappled with her, fearing he was hurting her more.

Neji had regained his wits rather quickly, just in time to feel Gai's fist meet his cheek, knocking him back to the ground again. His head was spinning and the blood...ugh, it was unusual. In his time knowing Tenten; never had she once actually, terribly injured him. It was unpleasant and satisfying all at once.

When had she grown so destructive? Under his very nose!

Gai stood menacingly between the Hyuga prodigy, who had been applying pressure to the cut on his back, and Tenten who was writhing away in pain from Lee's arms. That was the final straw!

“This is inexcusable!” Their sensei's voice was much louder than they had ever heard it before, “I
will not tolerate such un-youthful and savage behavior, most especially between trusted teammates! What in the *good, righteous name of earth* has gotten into the both of you my disappointing pupils?"

Lee had flinched under hearing Gai's booming, indignant, voice. His grip tightened around Tenten who had stopped her trashing. Her sense had returned and she was appreciative of Lee's concern but she didn't want it. She didn't want anything. She didn't regret anything. What had happened was *necessary*, no matter what her sensei said.

Gai's outraged monologue continued, “How *dare* you two commit to such violence! More than anyone, my two prodigies know better than to turn against each other! There is a clear line of difference between sparring and fighting and I will not permit violence on this team!"

Neji's eyes were narrowed in Lee's general direction. He needed an aspirin. Or five.

Lee's distress was unfathomable. He couldn't believe his team was falling to shambles at a critical time like this. Even more dubious to him was that Tenten would even consider attacking Neji after she had confided in Lee her admiration of the Hyuga prodigy. It didn’t add up.

“*Make amends,*” Gai's demand was simple and unmitigated, “If either of you show such un-youthful disrespect to each other again, you will answer to the Hokage! Is that understood?”

He was met with silence but he accepted it as a valid answer.

“Lee, we will now continue with your training.” Gai didn't bother giving him the option. Tenten and Neji would have to sort out their issues without intervention.

Lee stood obediently and gave a look of confusion and worry to the kunoichi of his team. He followed Gai who was still agitated beyond recognition.

Miffed and horridly bruised, Tenten got to her feet and hobbled over to Neji. Her pride had never been more injured. It was hard for her to believe that Sakura's genjutsu during the exam had had her in fear of harming her teammates, and yet she had no fear of tearing Neji to ribbons. Perhaps she had overcome her fear...or just hadn't wrapped her head around it yet.

'*He'll be fine, the friggin prick...’* She suddenly wished she had hurt him more seriously. She didn't want to tend to his wounds, but with Gai watching her like a furious hawk from a few meters away she had no choice.

Tenten settled behind him. He was sitting on the dusty ground and bleeding profusely. He said nothing as she tugged rudely at his shirt, pulling it over his head and fishing through her back holster for gauze and bandages. She was pleased to find she also had a small vile of rubbing alcohol with her, '*Not like my weapons aren't sanitary...’* For her, even weapons needed hygiene, '*But he's got to understand that he's not getting off easy!’*

Gai's frown threatened the longevity of his face and he decided it would be better if Lee was distracted from the chaos, “Lee! Run 500 laps around Konoha. Keep your leg weights on.”

“Yes, sensei!” He chirped and departed, trying to figure out what had happened.

Tenten had saw to the gash on his side first and made sure that the Hyuga’s teeth were clenched in pain before she laid off the disinfectant, and reached around his waist to wrap up the wound. The bleeding had slowed considerably. His shoulder was mended more quickly, though she was honestly surprised with his near imperceptible yelp of pain, '*Maybe I did get through to him. Maybe.’*
Gai's glare was not the like of the ones he gave to Kakashi: all in good sport. He had not been close to such a level of discontent since Tama's days at the Ninja Academy where havoc had struck one terrible day, ruining her hopes of graduating.

Neji hadn't even been able to replace his shirt before he was made to reopen all of the tenketsu he had sealed, relieving Tenten marginally of her excruciation. He made no effort to apologize. He wasn't sorry.

“Neither of you may leave until you have come to an understanding,” Gai had one final word before he left, “You owe that to each other as teammates.”

Once he had gone, very little had changed.

They sat in the dirt, angry and stubborn. The silence was imbued with tension and confusion. Neither of the two were exactly sure why their fracas had escalated to the intensity it had. They had been angry, but were unable to fully remember why.

Tenten was first to recall the reason.

“Why?”

He looked up at her, questioningly, his wrath wavering, “Why what?” Neji would rather not be subject to meaningless inquiries at the moment.

“...how could you do that to your own cousin?”

Oh. That was a bit more decisive. Still, the last person he had to answer to about his family matters to was her. Her allegiance was to him, not Hinata. She wasn't allowed to take it back.

“It was nothing personal.”

Her anger only multiplied. Neji clearly wasn't trying to fix the situation. He was encouraging it. It was the only thing he knew how to do.

He made note of her scowl and pulled his shirt back on, not thanking her for seeing to his injuries. After all, she had been the one who had inflicted them.

Neji was mad at her simply because she did not concede. Not like every other time she had when they had trained together. This time she had pushed it too far. She had tested him. As new and interesting as it had been, even with her new strength he had miscalculated, she wasn't allowed to be stubborn. He always won. That wouldn't change. Something about her was different and he had yet to decide if he liked it.

“Your own match wasn't so smooth either, Tenten.” He pointed out and she turned away, trying to forget the fact that Sakura hadn't been in a much better position than Hinata had. Neji had a point, but still, even if she couldn't explain it, she knew he was wrong this time. Tenten just had to figure out how to show him that.

Apparently, her use of weapons wasn't going to help.

“Neji, you have no idea what I've been through.” She stood up after he did, her voice was a low growl, but she wouldn't allow herself to lose control again, “Stop acting like you do.”

“What makes you think you know what has happened to me then?” He wasn't about to let her win, “You could never understand.”
She fell quiet again, fed up with him. Why was it that he so badly did not want to listen? Why couldn’t he accept the fact she had nearly beaten him? Killed him? Or that he had nearly done the same to Hinata?

Tenten had wanted to ask him, but he spoke again. He sounded almost sad, but she knew better.

“It seems...that there is very little we really do know about each other then.” He concluded. He wouldn’t look at her and it was better that way. Her stomach was hurting and not because he had punched it.

When Neji walked away she looked down at her hands curiously, wondering how she had not noticed his blood on them earlier. He had bled a lot. Something told her it wouldn't be the last time either. Gai-sensei would be pleased they were at least talking to each other, but they were still far from an understanding.

‘I've been a fool...’ She decided, beginning to collect her weapons that were scattered about the place, 'If he won't listen to me, then maybe he's better off just...'

She didn't want to think about what his future held.

That night Gaara had once again joined his siblings in order to get reacquainted. It was going well. Much to Gaara's disappointment, Haku hadn't taken the news about his brother and sister as well as Naruto had. He almost objected to it. Gaara couldn't understand the reason why. Haku was all for rediscovering lost families, most especially his own.

It bothered him very little, at the time, but later on he began to wonder if Haku had a lack in trust in him because he was related to Temari.

“Please understand I will not hold back,” Haku had said before he had went to bed, tired and annoyed, “I have no reason to. She is my opponent.”

Gaara had told him that it was fine and that he understood, hoping it would help Haku invest more trust in him. He would not sacrifice his bond with Haku in order to forge one with Temari and Kankuro. Haku had won out, fair and square. He had been there for him all his life as Naruto had been, and he wasn't about to overlook that fact. Naruto had told him that Haku had his doubts about Temari and Kankuro and that was why he had refused to meet them.

Gaara had believed he was just being oversensitive, as that was his way. But Haku did tend to be very temperamental in issues involving family ties. Jealousy was not beyond him, considering that his reunion with his remaining clan was nigh impossible.

Naruto had said not to worry about it. He said he'd handle Haku if he decided to get moody.

So there he sat on the rooftop beside his family, staring at the crescent moon suspended in the sky. He had hoped that Haku would return to his senses before the final stage of the exam, but the outlook did not look very good even with Naruto's reassurance.

“Your teammates will think that you're avoiding them if you come by this much.” Kankuro pointed out. He was aware that their presence had disturbed the equilibrium of his 'brotherhood,' or so Jiraiya had labeled it.

“I don't think so.”

Temari had also been gazing at the sliver of the moon in the night sky. She had considered that Gaara, being a link between herself and her future opponent, may feel the pressure to prep her on
Haku's abilities, “I don't want you preparing me for my match, I hope you know.”

“It never crossed my mind.”

She smiled genuinely in response.

Kankuro folded his arms behind his head, deep in thought. There were many questions he had been wanting to ask. They still wouldn't be sufficient enough to get answers about the time they had spent apart. It would be too much to ask of his brother.

Gaara kept watch of the moon, basking peacefully in their presence. It was calming. He still found it unbelievable they had been reunited under such conditions. After the initial shock of it, they had all felt relieved.

Temari observed him for a long moment and then hesitantly asked, “Gaara, were you...were you happier living here than back in Suna?”

It was quiet.

“Yes.”

Her expression saddened, but she understood. How could he not be? Here he wasn't a monster. Here he had friends who loved him and accepted him for who he was. Here there was a future and back there was pain.

He then added, much to her surprise, “But I've dreamed of you.”

The two Sand ninja were silent, taking in what Gaara had said, unsure of what he had meant.

“I wonder why Dad never came looking for you...” Kankuro speculated, unable to understand it, “You've been here all this time, never too far away.”

Gaara said nothing. He didn't want to talk about their father.

The troubled looks on their faces confirmed Gaara's suspicions. They were holding back.

“There's something you're not telling me.” The red haired boy's voice was low and partially offended.

Kankuro had hoped it wouldn't come to this, “What? We've been talking non-stop since we met up! What have we been hiding?”

'Besides the whole invasion of this village...' His mind supplied blandly and he was starting to hate himself for not saying anything, but neither he nor Temari could, 'Maybe we can take him back with us before it happens...maybe we can spare him.'

“Your sensei is never around,” Gaara's observations were as keen as ever, “And your teammate knows much about me.”

“That can't be helped. He's overheard too much, that idiot,” Temari snapped, not bothering to defend Miosuke, “You've done him a service, Gaara, by breaking his arms.”

“That's not what teammates should say about each other.”

“Really? Well, someone should explain that to Miosuke because he just doesn't get it.” Kankuro spat, equally disgusted with him.
Gaara could see his point. Why treat a teammate well if they simply disregard you? He pitied them for their rotten luck in team placement. He, however, had the best luck of anyone in his village. Or at least was lucky enough to have Iruka organize his team.

Temari’s reluctance faded away and she spoke again, knowing the subject would be very delicate, “Gaara, you should really consider coming back with us to Suna.”

“Father doesn't want me back. He won't want me back.”

“But we do,” Kankuro sided with his sister, “We can fix things, we have to try!”

Gaara shook his head, unwilling to even consider leaving, “I cannot go with you.”

“You can and you should,” Temari wouldn't take no for an answer, not when he was here in front of them, not when he was alive for the first time in a long time, “Ending up in Konoha has separated you from your family! You can have it back if you want!”

“I have never been without my family,” He said simply, stunning them, “They have always been there for me.”

There was a long, painful moment in which both Temari and Kankuro realized he was not referring to them at all.

Gaara returned his gaze to the moon, his mind made up, “And I will always be there for them.”
Hinata laid back on the soft grass. Strands of her indigo hair were plastered to her face with sweat, and a cool breeze herded clouds along up above, relieving her somewhat. She was glad that her father was not around to see her so disheveled.

The Hyuga heiress glanced over to her left, where Naruto lay a few feet away from her. He, contrary to her state, was far from tired. He hadn't protested when she had asked for a break from their training, he had only grinned and then plopped down to the ground, talking up a storm.

Naruto's voice soothed her but it didn't lessen her worry that in only a few days he would be facing Neji in the final rounds. Naruto had spent a majority of the month training with his team. He visited Hinata in between sessions to get some inside pointers on how to not get slaughtered by Jyukken.

Her cousin though, she had warned him, was an entirely different level than she. Everything she had shown him would be twice as fast and twice as powerful when he faced Neji.

Naruto told her that was a load of crap, and then went on to asking if the Byakugan could be disabled by a good ol' fashioned eye-poke. Slightly frightened, she had admitted it was possible, but he should refrain from trying it.

From the expression he wore she feared that he was even more inclined to attempt.

“So when he says, '64 palms', is it really 64 or is he just saying that?” Naruto continued on, recalling her warning of it earlier and he delighted in how she could so easily answer all of his questions.

“Well, 64 is the usual minimum for that technique…” She replied quietly.

He shuddered, 'Minimum, huh? Makes you wonder about the maximum then…'

After a minute he recalled another topic of interest, “And that spinning-thing he used in the preliminaries, how does that work? Can you use it?”

“Eight Trigrams: Palm Rotation forces chakra through all of the tenketsu in a person's body, creating an ultimate defense that cannot be penetrated. And…only the most skilled of ninja can use it.” Hinata summed up the overall gist of it, being she herself had never been able to perform it.

“Then I shouldn't have any problem with that!” Where some people found his explosive confidence ignorant and annoying Hinata found it very endearing.

“It is very difficult to learn and master but…maybe we can accomplish it together.” She wasn't about to discourage him, perhaps he could pull it off.

“It's worth a shot!” He nodded, appreciative of her offer, “Hey Hinata-chan, why's Neji so driven to be ahead of everyone anyway? I thought he'd be happier since we stopped him from getting that seal.”

Hinata frowned in thought, wondering about the answer herself, “Neji-niisan believes that the only way he can prove he is truly beyond the Branch House is if he becomes the next head of the
“Why would he do that? People already know how great he is!”

“I…I don’t think he even knows why he wants to do it.” She said softly, “His ambitions are still unclear to him, as if he never had to think about them because they were already provided for him.”

Naruto nodded, understanding, “So it’s his identity then, isn’t it? He isn’t trying to figure things out for himself. He just acts on opportunities that show up.”

Hinata eyed him for a long moment; curious as to how he could understand how Neji felt.

The blonde boy smirked, noticing her wonder, “I know that feeling, well, the opposite of it really. I know I want to be Hokage. I decided on it myself…but…I don’t get many opportunities to strive for my dream. I need to make do with what I have.”

She smiled at him, proud. She had chosen well when she had trusted all of her hopes in him.

“Naruto-kun, you’re right. The Branch House…they know the same feelings that you described. They know what it is like to go without certain privileges.” Hinata spoke at length, “My heart is with them because of that.”

The blonde boy sat up, ruffling his hair, and she watched him inquisitively from her spot on the grassy lawn. So far no other Hyuga residents had stumbled upon them, but it was only a matter of time before others ventured into the garden.

“May I…tell you something?” She asked softly. Her eyes followed the trails of cirrus streaking through the sky.

He nodded half yawning, “Sure.”

Hinata closed her eyes for a moment, wondering what to say. Perhaps now was the time to confide in him all of her secrets, after all, he had been the first person to actually listen. He was the first person to actually understand her feelings.

Though rushing things could ruin it, so she decided to start small and work her way up. She was still a world away from having the courage to profess her true feelings for him.

“When I was young, my mother became very ill after my little sister was born…” Hinata began, and Naruto’s eyes immediately shifted from the surrounding greenery to her saddened face. He feared he knew where this story was going.

“She was always so close to me. She told me to smile even when things around me were dark and lonely. She died and I remember how sad my clan was after that…but I still tried to smile.” Hinata recalled; her voice strangely distant, “The Branch Family was very sad after that. It was because she was always so kind to them.”

Naruto lowered his eyes, sharing in the loss. He himself had never known his mother, though when he imagined her she had always been very beautiful and compassionate.

“I remember when she used to take me to this garden when I was small. She would have me help her pick flowers.” Naruto was surprised to see her smiling when she spoke, “We used to leave the flowers all over the wing of the Branch Family. It always made them so happy to know that the Main Family still had love for them.”
Her voice wavered for a moment, “A-After my mother died…I did that once on my own. I was so glad that it still made them happy even during a time like that.”

Naruto folded his legs, listening intently. He could tell she had more to say.

“But when my father caught me he told me never to do it again. He said it wasn't the proper thing to do…” She paused, “But I know he didn’t want me to do it because it reminded him of her, and he was so unhappy without her. Maybe I should d-do it again…because it always reminds him of my mother and I don't want him to forget her.”

Hinata glanced over to Naruto, who had gone eerily quiet. She noticed him discretely rubbing his eyes with the back of his sleeve. She hadn't meant to make him cry.

“When I was little, I never did stuff like that.” Naruto announced, composing himself, “Now I kinda wish I had.”

Hinata sat up as well, interested in his reaction.

“When I was younger…I hated everyone. I didn't care about anyone else's feelings because they had always ostracized me. I never cared about the feelings of people who were cruel to me.” It had been a long while since he had recalled his days before living with Gaara and Haku.

“I was always alone…always sad. I never had a family, not like you do.” Naruto did his best to keep bitterness from dripping into his tone.

“W-What happened to your parents?” Hinata asked quietly; it had always been a question burning in the back of her mind.

“I never met them.” He answered honestly, “I was an orphan from day one, I guess.”

Hinata sniffled. His reply certainly had cleared up a few things. She wished that hadn't been the case.

“The only people who ever understood what I was feeling were Haku-kun and Gaara-kun,” Naruto surmised and then added, “And Sasuke too, I think.”

“Neji-niisan understands that feeling too, Naruto-kun…”

Naruto turned to her, startled, “Why would he?”

For a moment, she felt as if she had said too much, “It isn't m-my place to say…”

“I want to know,” The blonde boy frowned, “I want to know why he is the way he is!”

Hinata stared at him for a long moment. He had a right to know, she decided. Naruto would be the one fighting Neji in the last part of the exam. Maybe he would be able to teach him a lesson, or two or three.

“Neji-niisan…his mother died when he was born, so he was always very close to his father, my uncle Hizashi.” Hinata began, staring at her grass-stained knees.

“Oh yeah! I remember him!” Naruto recalled his very first visit to the Hyuga compound, as well as running into Neji and Hinata’s fathers, “He was a pretty nice guy, actually!”

“Neji-niisan’s heart was broken after his father's death.”

“What?” Naruto turned to her in shock, “You mean he…?”
She nodded silently and Naruto felt guilt wash over him. He hadn't known about Neji's losses, nor had he particularly cared about them until now.

“Naruto-kun, why was it that people always treated you badly when you were younger?” Hinata asked, feeling as if they no longer had taboo subjects.

The blonde boy's face darkened, “I don't like talking about that.”

Upset by his defensiveness, she mentally berated herself for asking him. Who would want to talk about something like that? Even if she was curious and he was her friend, it certainly wasn't any of her business.

Naruto turned away from Hinata, taking a few moments to think the situation over, ‘If I do tell her, she'll hate me for sure…and I don't want that! I like that Hinata-chan likes me! I want her to!' He scowled inwardly, 'But she'll never like the real me…the me that keeps that goddamn Fox locked up all the time!'

“I'm s-sorry, Naruto-kun, if I upset you…” Hinata apologized, even with his back turned to her, “Gama-sennin only said that things were very d-difficult for you when you were born….that you carry a burden.”

Naruto's eyes widened momentarily and he faced her, “Is that all he said?”

Hinata nodded, not wanting him to be angry.

He frowned to himself, “I just can't explain it now, Hinata-chan.”

Hinata decided that since he was so uneasy it would be best to change the subject, “Maybe now we could investigate the Kaiten…if you'd like?”

Naruto jumped at her suggestion, “Oh right! You still have to show me how it works!”

She was relieved some of his spirit had returned and she proceeded to explain the fundamentals of the technique, wondering if perhaps this wasn't a very good idea.

“You can try first if-”

“Alright!” Naruto hopped to his feet, ready to get going. In his opinion, they had burned enough of the morning light with chatting, though they did have some pretty interesting conversations.

Hinata stood up as well, brushing her pants off, “The first step is to learn how to push an equal amount of chakra through all of your tenketsu. It may take a long while.”

“No sweat! Er…” Naruto frowned, “I don't really know where my chakra points are.”

“I know.” She muttered softly, “Byakugan!”

Hinata looked him over with super-charged eyes, scanning for tenketsu dotting his chakra circulatory system. All the while he felt his face heating up, 'Wait a minute...she can see through walls and trees and clothes...then she can see-!' Naruto shook his head frantically, puzzling her, 'Heh heh! Yeah right! Hinata-chan isn't like Ero-sensei!'

At least, he was fairly sure she wasn't.

She approached him, wearing a clinical look, “I'll mark them for you w-with some of my own
chakra.” She began poking his arms with practiced fingers, leaving the spots tingly and bruised, “It may feel a little funny, but they'll be open a bit w-wider so you can sense them more easily.”

Naruto frowned in concentration, doing his best to feel out the pinhead-sized dots she was mapping out. To his surprise, he found he was quite aware of them; he had just never really paid attention to them.

“Yeah…I can feel them,” He raised his eyebrows at her, “I didn't know there were so many though! They're all over the place!”

Hinata nodded, “There are quite a few. 361, I think.”

“Holy shit that's a lot…” Naruto mumbled, “And you can see all of them?”

“Most of them,” She corrected, “Skilled ninja in my clan can see all of them at once, and close specific ones to manipulate an opponent's chakra.”

“Like Neji?”

“I don't know if he's that skilled,” Hinata said quietly, “It takes time before the Byakugan b-becomes that powerful…”

“So how am I supposed to send chakra out of all my tenketsu at the same time then?” Naruto was flummoxed. None of this had seemed so hard earlier.

“I think you should send a small amount of chakra through your system s-so you can locate them. You'll feel a prickling sensation when you're aware of all of them.” Hinata then added, “Though even I have trouble doing this…”

Naruto hushed himself, focusing. His flow started from the stomach region and moved outward, certainly he could tell where his chakra began, but he was unsure of where it was supposed to end.

He was tense and rigid, trying to feel them out, but only sensed a few at a time. The blonde boy couldn't determine whether he had skipped over some or if he was just misguided in his senses.

Time dragged by and Hinata had settled in the grass again, watching Naruto's facial expression shift between near success and frustration. A few of her relatives passed by curiously, wondering what exactly she was doing watching the strange boy meditating.

His cerulean eyes opened briefly and he said nothing. He closed them a moment later, getting back to business. Hinata watched as the boy's face became gradually calmer. Naruto had stopped trying to determine whether his senses were real and began to trust his instincts.

“I think I have it.” Naruto spoke up, his eyes still shut, “It's like a light went on or something.”

“That may be it.” She smiled at his progress.

Hinata assumed that Naruto would need quite a while to sense chakra points, but she concluded that she hadn't been giving him enough credit. His mentor was one of the Legendary Three who he had known since he had been a child. On top of it, his teammates shared with him their remarkable talents and abilities, so she admonished herself for believing that he would be worse off than her.

It was the other way around.
What would my father say if I told him that Naruto-kun would make a much better Hyuga than I?’ Hinata pondered, ‘It's as if I'm lacking something that I'll simply never gain.'

“What do ya think Hinata-chan?” Naruto’s voice snapped her out of her thoughts, “Did I get it?”

“I think you did.” She answered, partially distracted, “There aren’t m-many people outside of the Hyuga Clan who are very aware of their chakra network.”

“I'm not surprised to hear that, it's tough!” He folded his arms behind his head, grinning, “So what's next?”

“You've sensed your tenketsu, so…you'll have to force a great amount of chakra through all of them at once, which should throw your body into a spin to create a barrier.” Hinata droned the information from pure memory, “Theoretically, I mean! I've only seen my father use it. I was never able to learn it myself.”

He noted the embarrassment on her face while he created two shadow clones, “Hinata-chan, don't take this the wrong way, but your dad is asking too much of you if you ask me…”

“W-What?” Hinata felt a mixture of insult and agreement at his words.

His kage bunshin scowled at him and he threw his hands up defensively, “What I mean is, he wants you to be just like him and do everything his way! But you're two different people, you know? It can't work that way. Besides, why won't he just let you make your own style?”

“Because my own way is not the proper way,” She repeated mechanically, “Really Naruto-kun, you shouldn't say such things.”

“Tch! Yeah, well…it was just a thought.” The blonde boy turned to his shadow clones, getting ready to try the next phase for himself.

Hinata wanted more than anything to agree with him. She owed very little to her father as it was, but it was a reflex to defend his honor when it was expressed to her, even at the cost of her own dignity.

Why not just scrap everything her father was trying to ingrain in her head and start fresh? The worst that could happen would be Neji taking her place…and she had a suspicion that was about to happen anyway, so it was a moot point.

A sudden burst of chakra was her reality check yet again when Naruto and his clones were tossed back by the unstable power being disproportionately sent through their respective tenketsu.

“Naruto-kun! Maybe a little less chakra?” Hinata squeaked. He had landed in a patch of hyacinth nearly the full way across the clearing.

“Yeah, sorry!” Naruto stood, brushing his knees off, “That was a bit scary…woosh! Ha ha! Bet that's happened to Neji a few times, huh?”

“Maybe…” She couldn't fight a small grin that came over her lips.

It was a disaster for the next half hour. Naruto, for all of his chakra control and use of powerful jutsu, constantly, without fail, had the rotation backfire on him time and time again.

It was exhausting for the Hyuga heiress to just watch him, hurtling about all over the garden as his shadow clones were smashed to smithereens. Naruto had come nowhere close to getting it right, but she admitted it was no train-wreck. He was doing surprisingly well for someone unfamiliar
with the technique. There was only one thing bothering her…

*He's been using so much chakra!* She was frightened at how he could keep going long after she would've needed a break, *If he doesn't stop soon he'll hurt himself...but it's strange...he isn't tired at all.*

“Wah!” Naruto was in the habit of landing on his feet for the past five minutes, “Whew...ergh...dizzy...” He took a moment to gather his bearings, “That wasn't as bad as the time I landed on my head.”

*I'm never gonna be able to pull apart Neji's strategy like this.* Naruto thought to himself, his head still spinning, *I'll give him props though...this shit is hard!*

Hinata again decided to briefly view him with the Byakugan, still seeing a steady flow of chakra that he had since he had begun. It wasn't the first time she had seen his overwhelming supply and she was curious about it.

After the better part of an hour, one last painful jolt stopped Naruto, and he fell to the ground onto his backside, “Nyah! We should try this another time maybe. I have way too many bruises right now.”

The blonde boy had to admit, if Neji could perform such a technique on a whim, he certainly had something going for him. That kind of talent was raw, something Naruto knew he'd have to work for like crazy to even get close to.

He looked up to where Hinata stood near a butterfly bush. Her pale eyes were glowing. For a moment he raised his eyebrows at her, aware that she was deep in thought. Naruto wiped the sweat from his eyes, hoping she was all right.

“Your chakra is unique,” She pointed out quietly, and his eyes snapped up, “I've never seen anything quite like it, Naruto-kun...”

There was a very long silence and he stared at her, wondering if she had the faintest inkling of what she was addressing.

Naruto admitted it wasn't wise to push his limits in front of anyone outside of his team. He intended to keep Hinata in the dark about what was really the cause of his tremendous chakra capacity.

*She'd hate me if she knew...* He assumed, his opinion was the same as it was before: it wasn’t worth her finding out. Naruto was beginning to find her Kekkei Genkai just as intrusive and problematic as much as it was helpful.

“Yeah, I'm...special like that.” Naruto waved the topic off with a half-hearted voice.

She smiled and his chest clenched painfully. That smile was causing him a lot of grief right now.

If he did share his secret with her it would be safe; he knew she would never tell another living soul. The issue would be her horrified reaction and the vanishing of the smile he was becoming as dependent on as drawing a breath.

If he lost that he'd be nothing short of dead, where neither Gaara nor Haku would be able to resuscitate him.

Naruto stood up and asked about lunch and her first suggestion was stopping by Ichiraku Ramen. Things felt almost normal after that.
Kakashi looked up from his book with a lazy eye. His team's raucous during their training was distracting him from his reading, “Keep it down you guys, you're getting a bit rowdy…”

They didn't hear him.

Kiba lunged in unison with Akamaru with claws outstretched. Sasuke disappeared a moment before they could strike. His rapidly increasing speed put his teammates to shame, so Kakashi had them gang up on him to try their luck. Even if they were noisy as hell, he was surprised at how fervently both Sakura and Kiba had kept up with the Uchiha.

Sakura was on him once he reappeared, flinging kunai at him with a cry. Kakashi chuckled to himself at the sight of her; she had a spark in her recently that was definitely going to keep her male counterparts on their toes.

“I'm out!” Kiba groaned, Akamaru whimpering beside him, “We haven't even breaked for lunch yet, so I'm getting something to eat!”

He and his dog limped to the side of the field where Kakashi was spread out and helped themselves to a bento. Sakura and Sasuke, however, were not as tired.

Sakura dove away from the Uchiha's fierce strikes, surprisingly nimble, and predicted his next course of action faultlessly. She mimicked his hand seals, countering his Grand Fireball Jutsu with one of her own and then leapt away again.

“Well isn't that something?” Kakashi spoke sidelong to the Inuzuka boy, “Sakura certainly is a bit livelier than you today, Kiba-kun. Perhaps you're losing your edge?”

“Feh! No way sensei!” Kiba grinned, still chewing, and Akamaru bayed from atop his head in agreement, “They just don't know when to take it easy.”

“Maybe you're right…” Kakashi muttered, going back to his reading. Kiba did make a good point. While it was productive to train like this, it was taxing. Their health would surely be much poorer than Kiba's at this rate.

Again, the two remaining genin of Team Seven attacked each other in unison, “Katon: Hosenka no Jutsu!”

Fireballs rained down, one of which sailed dangerously fast towards Kakashi, who leapt out of the way just a fraction before he may have been scorched. Kiba yowled at Sasuke for his poor aim. Kakashi settled behind him, wiping the sweat off his brow, “That...was a bit too close. I didn't know Sasuke has been teaching Sakura so many fire jutsu.”

“Yeah, well, she knows just about all of them now,” Kiba grunted, annoyed, “You'd think he'd find something else to do with his spare time.”

“Well, since she learns them so quickly I see no real harm in it.” Kakashi opened his naughty book again, “Not yet, at least.”

Kiba snorted and went back to his lunch. It was unusual how close the egotistical prodigy actually was to Sakura, Kiba noted, not understanding it. If anything, he'd be less inclined to train with a girl, but as Kakashi had said, she had a certain charisma these days that was more than noticeable.

The Inuzuka boy could easily see the liking Sasuke had taken to her and he was troubled by it. Sasuke was consistently unpredictable and had a habit of causing problems for his team. It may
have seemed a harmless thing at the time, but Kiba felt the future could turn things sour if the affections persisted.

Sakura jumped up onto a high branch, her brain scrambling, *I'm nearly out of chakra and he's only getting faster...if I can just-*'

She leapt a fraction too soon, startled when Sasuke appeared in front of her. She lost her footing and tumbled down, crashing through leaves and twigs as he soared up above, still fighting-fit.

Sakura glued herself to the tree trunk with some chakra before she had nearly slammed into the ground. Of course, Sasuke had already been there, prepared to grab her if she failed to catch herself.

Although, her relief did wilt after she noted the kunai a few inches from her neck. Sakura scowled at Sasuke's amused face, one slip-up and he could make a mockery of her.

“I win.” He said playfully, holding the knife out to her, “This is yours, actually.”

“Yeah, I dropped it somewhere near your head!” She recalled as she took it from him, still miffed by her defeat.

It only widened his smirk and eventually she gave in, grinning broadly, “Whatever...I got pretty good though, right? Almost as good as any Uchiha when it comes to fire jutsu!”

He stared at her for a long moment, thinking, and then said, “Better than most I've seen. That's enough now, let's eat.”

She followed after him, gently rubbing her hands that had been scraped by the rough tree bark during her fall, *Better than most he's seen? Well then, he hasn't seen much...*’Sakura frowned inwardly at the thought, *He was little when his clan was murdered, I shouldn't be thinking like that...besides, he's proud of me! I'm getting better.*

Sakura looked over to Kakashi who was laughing quietly to himself. She had a feeling it had something to do with her, but decided to disregard it. She was hungry and Kakashi could keep his humor to himself.

“Lady, I dropped off two rolls of film and these pictures are of some kid's birthday party!” Sato was fed up with the incompetent pharmacist he had been trusting his prized photos to, “It’s under Hatake! Can't you do anything right you lousy hag?”

The wrinkled woman had a very dull look on her face, as if she hadn't even heard his blatant insult. She accepted the pictures back from him and trudged back into the storeroom without a word.

“Jeez, I should just develop my own stuff...I can't believe I'm paying for this shit!” Sato still couldn't stop his ranting as he paced in front of the counter.

He had things to do. He had to train so he wouldn't die in his upcoming match. He had to get the hell away from this stupid woman!

The silver haired nin hushed abruptly after noticing someone approach. He turned about to see Haku giving him a concerned look.

Sato sighed in relief, “Oh, it's just you. I thought you were Shino for a second!”
“Why would you be afraid of Shino?” Haku asked, blinking, “He's your friend isn't he?”

“Sure he is,” Sato shrugged, “Even if I take into account that we've been training non-stop for weeks on end, and I've never been beaten so badly in my entire life!”

Haku offered him a sympathetic look, but he hadn't exactly come here with the intentions of shouldering Sato's woes, so he got straight to the point, “I came here to ask you if you could help me track down a specific water-jutsu scroll that you may have come across.”

“Eh?” Sato, who had been leaning on a shelf of various allergy-relief products, gave him an inquisitive look; “You could just ask Naruto or Gaara to help you with that, Haku-kun.”

“It's better that they don't know about this.” Haku said quietly after a long moment, lowering his dark eyes.

Sato regarded him for a moment silently. Something was up. Haku always chose Naruto and Gaara to aid him in his expeditions. If suddenly there was something interfering with that unmitigated postulate-of-life, then it was better, he supposed, if he didn't ask.

“You're right about one thing: there's a storeroom in the archives of the Hokage's tower that has some nice scrolls like that,” Sato admitted, looking smug, “The security was low enough for a no-good thief like me to get past when I…” He paused, frowning, “Yeah, well…that's none of your business is it?”

Haku smiled wearily in response.

“So what's in it for me?” Sato asked, wanting some sort of collateral before risking his neck again in the name of new jutsu that were not-so-legally acquired.

“You have a promise of a dozen boxes of pocky, if all goes well…” Haku told him. It sounded strange when he had said it. Pocky wasn't much of a payment at all, but he knew it would be enough for the sweet-toothed Hatake.

Sato agreed instantly, “We better go quick if we're gonna steal anything by noon.”

He lost his train of thought when the incompetent employee returned with a new set of developed pictures, which Sato immediately scrutinized and was yet again dissatisfied.

“Goddamn it!” Sato threw the pictures back behind the counter at the woman and started off on another rant that even Haku would be unable to interrupt.

Late that night the sky was cloudy and black. Gaara sat lazily beside Temari, eating mochi that she had retrieved for her brothers after their insistence for a snack. Kankuro's feet hung off the side of the shingled roof while he ate the last of his dumplings, very deep in thought.

Soon this calm, relaxing time would end. The truth was Gaara's new home was going to be massacred tomorrow, and then he would realize that his own flesh and blood had turned against him. It wouldn't have been the first time.

Kankuro had come very close to warning Gaara of the impending doom of Konoha before he noticed a ninja skipping like a phantom over rooftops towards them, “Hey, Gaara, do you know this one?”

Gaara blinked at his brother and then said simply, “Haku.”
Temari raised her eyebrows, “So he finally decides to show his face? The night before the final rounds no less!”

The red haired boy handed the last of his mochi to his sister which she took no interest in, and tossed over the side of the building casually. She had never met Haku before so this would be quite the education for her.

Haku landed like a cat on the side of a nearby air-duct. The metal made a hollow ringing sound as his feet connected. He looked tired. More than that, as far as Gaara could see, he looked troubled.

Kankuro exchanged a confused glance with Temari as Gaara walked over to his friend. After a moment, they too rose and approached the newcomer. They should at least try to be polite before the fighting started up again, Kankuro thought.

“You should come home now. We all need to be rested for the exam.” Haku said while stowing away a scroll in his gi, “Have you eaten anything yet?”

“I'll be back later.” Gaara stifled a yawn. He had eaten lightly. It would be enough to hold him over.

Haku was visibly annoyed. The frown on the fair-skinned boy's face did not bode well at all.

That frown, Gaara noted, was directed at the two Sand ninja standing behind him, observing Haku inquisitively. He was well aware Haku didn't trust Temari and Kankuro as far as he could throw them, but he had at least expected him to have some manners.

“I don't suppose you're ready for our match?” Temari was being sociable, even if she was a bit haughty at the same time.

Haku stepped down from the vent, offended. He hadn't known it was simply in Temari's nature to be condescending. Naturally, it provoked from him one of his less-polite responses, “Only as ready as you are, with regards to how much he's informed you.”

His voice had been icy when he had referred to Gaara. Temari scowled at him for it, and he glared right back with sharp, beautiful eyes that made her shiver. She sensed almost the barest hint of killing intent.

“I haven’t said anything about you!” Gaara snapped. It had barely been a minute and already Haku had pissed him off.

“I'm sure.” The lack of trust in the water nin's voice only escalated Gaara's frustration.

Kankuro, the only one who had not yet been upset, stepped between his sister and her future opponent, “Whoa now! Let's take it easy! No one's said anything, believe me.”

Temari backed off, not bothering to get worked up. She could teach Gaara's cranky friend a thing or two tomorrow!

Gaara observed Haku for a long moment. He was well groomed, as usual, but somehow he looked far less agreeable. He had come here only with the intention of speaking to Gaara, and was not looking forward to meeting his so-called siblings.

“You aren't yourself.” Gaara pointed out, pulling back on the reigns of his anger.

“You wouldn't know,” Haku looked taller when he was fuming, “You hardly see me these days, or Naruto-kun for that matter!”
Gaara bristled and his brother and sister watched in alarm. They hadn't been anticipating a confrontation between two best friends.

Haku's livid rambling continued, "Perhaps you'd make a much better Sand shinobi if you prefer a crowd of-!

He failed to finish his sentence once Gaara's fist slammed into the side of his face, making his siblings jump in surprise. After that, they went wild. The two leapt up onto the air-ducts close by, scuffling, punching and knocking various things over with a resounding crash.

Temari's eyes were wide, 'Just what the hell is this? In the preliminaries he was so docile and calm...though now it looks as if he's just as angry of a person as Gaara is.'

With a thud, Gaara knocked Haku back down to the tiling, and was about to hit him again before his brother caught him about the shoulders, restraining him.

Haku stood and wiped the blood running from his lip. His eyes were still locked with Gaara's. The hostility was tangible.

“What's with you?” Kankuro barked, releasing Gaara once he had stilled, “I thought you were friends!”

“We were.” The redhead said shortly.

Haku turned to Temari, totally ignoring Gaara, “At the finals then…”

She scowled at him and he left a moment later, not wanting a reply.

Kankuro sat down on the railing, glad that Haku had gone, “Unbelievable! What the hell was that all about?”

It took about a minute before Gaara's wits had come back. He hated it when he was angry. It made him blind. It brought him closer to the thing inside of him that cheered merrily every time he felt the need to kill.

He almost felt as if, much to his disgust, he had needed to kill Haku. That feeling had gone rather quickly since he reminded himself that a living Haku was much more valuable than a dead Haku. The monster fell back into its quiet growls after that.

“Haku would prefer that I train with my own team and only my own team,” Gaara explained, knowing exactly what he had been feeling, “He's insufferably narrow-minded when it comes to family matters.”

“You better set things straight with him,” Temari said darkly, “It isn't worth all the trouble. Your fighting will hurt your team and make you weak.”

Gaara agreed with her. What she had said was true but he didn't really care at the moment. Haku was being an oversensitive asshole who needed to be hit very hard in the head until he understood that he had no right to flat-out reject Temari and Kankuro before actually meeting them!

“I'll see you tomorrow. Don't look for me.” Gaara was still halfway pissed when he had said it.

Kankuro smirked at him, “Sure thing. We'll find you before the final matches start.”

Partly amused by his brother, Gaara set out over the sea of buildings in the same direction Haku had left in.
He didn't feel like going home, not when he knew that Haku would be there. He would still be as close-minded about his siblings as ever. Gaara moved like a shadow through the darkness, unhindered by the gourd tied to his back.

The clouds moved away and moonlight seemed to drip over him as he hopped from roof to roof. He supposed Naruto would have to be informed of the row he and Haku had been in. He had a right to know as a member of Team 2, most especially when a disagreement threatened their chances of becoming Chunin.

“Aw…is Haku-kun causing you trouble?”

Gaara paused on top of a chimney. The voice was all too familiar and his guard was up in an instant.

He turned his head slightly and saw Orochimaru perched on a pole behind him. A twisted smirk adorned his wan face.

“I have no business with the likes of you.” Gaara said bluntly and he turned to leave, recalling Jiraiya's warnings about Orochimaru.

Gaara didn't even flinch when he turned to see the vile ninja standing in front of him. Intimidation didn't work on the red haired boy. He was the one who practically invented the concept, and Orochimaru was little more than a cockroach who hadn't yet been squashed, in his opinion and his sensei's.

“Indeed,” Orochimaru droned, rather bored of Gaara's flat reaction, “Not since our game in the Forest of Death. Now tell me you didn't have a fun time in there?”

“Keep your distance from my team and I won't kill you,” Gaara's eyes were narrowed and calm, “I can't say my sensei will be half as tolerant of you as I have been.”

Orochimaru laughed wickedly, crossing his arms, “Your sensei? That simpleton couldn't kill me even in his fantasies! You are the student of a fool who has nothing better to do than let the Hokage play zoo with a few jinchuriki!”

Even if Gaara had steeled his nerves, it stung that he and Naruto were only viewed as sacrifices in the eyes of the Sandaime. His teeth ground together noiselessly as he fixed his cold glare on the snake. Perhaps he could save Jiraiya the trouble and finish him immediately.

“I can assure you I haven't come for Haku-kun this time…”

He had been prepared for the blast of killing intent that swept over him and fought against it. Gaara readied his sand and Orochimaru disappeared, chuckling to himself. It was a game to him. He enjoyed tormenting Jiraiya's witless pupils. They had been no different from the first batch he had tried to exterminate. At least when Jiraiya had trained his first genin team they had put up more of a fight.

Gaara turned, feeling a pressure on his arm. It hadn't occurred to him at the time he was in danger until he heard the sennin perform a jutsu he knew he couldn't counter, “Four Point Unsealing!”

His sand forced Orochimaru back, but not soon enough. The searing, slow burn on his arm had distracted him and Gaara stared with wide eyes, wondering how Orochimaru had known of his weakness.

'If he was once Jiraiya-sensei's teammate…then he has just of much skill with seals.' Gaara
shielded himself, watching Orochimaru stand on a nearby power line gloating at how easy it had been to penetrate his defenses.

He heard another voice then that was not Orochimaru’s. It was loud and recognizable, and Gaara felt his hands rise up to cover his ears reflexively. It was then he understood the voice came from inside of him.

The cacophony of howls and snarls was overwhelming. He had forgotten. He had forgotten how terrifying it had been when he had no barrier against the presence of Shukaku. It had been so long since he had been in fear of it. The memories all came flooding back.

Gaara’s knees met the plaster of the roof. His sand swirled turbulently around him as it had when he was a child. Orochimaru was thrilled.

“That’s a bit better isn’t it Gaara-kun? It’ll be so much easier for you to get in touch with your inner-self now.” Orochimaru smirked down at him, “We’ll meet again at the exam and until then….pleasant dreams.”

The snake left after that, his task accomplished. Gaara stood helplessly with his sand cascading around him in wait. Immediately, he struggled to push the Ichibi to the recesses of his mind. It was less difficult to do than it had been when he was younger. All the same, he knew damn well he would not be sleeping that night.

After regaining control of his sand, Gaara steadied himself.

He had to find Jiraiya.

The following day troops of anxious fans, shinobi, gamblers and local lords piled into the athletics stadium at the center of the village, eager for the highlighted matches of the final rounds of the Chunin Exam. It was only early morning, however, and none of the participants had yet arrived.

Naruto was seated at Ichiraku Ramen enjoying his breakfast by himself. Ayame had been troubled when neither of his friends had been with him.

“Tell me about it!” The blonde groaned at her, exasperated, “Haku-kun tells me he’ll see me in a little while and then he just totally disappears! I don't even know where the heck Gaara-kun is and-!”

To his surprise, Gaara walked in at that very moment. At the sight of him, Ayame hurried to fetch him something to eat. He took a seat beside Naruto silently while the boy blinked at him curiously. He looked nothing short of atrocious. It had been a while since Naruto had ever witnessed his friend in such a state of dishevelment.

Gaara rubbed his temples absently, and Naruto did briefly wonder what could possibly be ailing him just a short time before the final rounds.

The red haired boy spoke in a low voice, “…where is Jiraiya-sensei?”

“He went off again peeping before I could talk to him yesterday, that pervvy bastard!” Naruto glowered at the thought, “Are you okay, Gaara-kun? You didn’t come home last night. Where were you?”

Gaara knew there was no way he could fully explain what had happened. He had combed the majority of Konoha just looking for their jounin instructor, and had found no sign of him that night. The rest of the time that had spanned between then and the current moment were intervals
of searching and resting, with the fierce policy of not drifting to sleep.

In short, it had been a nightmare.

His body was not used to a lack of rest at present, and his energy reserves were waning after the long night he had spent keeping Shukaku at bay. Gaara stared at Naruto for a moment, wondering if he'd be able to take all of the news in at one sitting. So he decided to just sum it up, which would be just as effective.

“My seal has been malfunctioning.” Gaara admitted quietly, not wanting Ayame to overhear as she hovered nearby, ‘As if she'd even understand…” He scoffed in his own mind.

Naruto said nothing for a minute. His eyes narrowed in understanding, and at the time he hadn't even bothered asking what exactly had gone wrong. He was fully aware of what toils Gaara had been enduring, and feared them nearly as much as his friend himself.

“How are we gonna find him then?” Naruto hissed as Ayame offered Gaara a bowl of steaming ramen, on the house, “The exam starts in an hour!”

Gaara tried to think of a solution but he could think of nothing. From here on, he knew, only luck could draw in the elusive sage, “If he's anywhere, chances are he'll end up at the stadium. We'll look there first.”

Naruto pushed his bowl nearer to his friend, “Right, now eat something! Maybe it'll perk you up if have something in your stomach.”

Highly doubtful that it would help, Gaara started slurping down the noodles.

Shortly after they set out together and Gaara looked no better than he had earlier.

The stadium, to Naruto's amazement, was nearly packed to capacity. The many people in the audience that would be watching only added to the pressure of the current situation.

Naruto scratched his head, distressed, “I think Haku-kun's gone missing…I lost track of him this morning.”

Gaara only gave him a sideways glance at the news. Even if Haku was one of his least favorite people at the moment, he couldn't help but wonder if Orochimaru may have had something to do with it. He decided it would be better not to alarm Naruto and see how things worked out.

Haku was fairly reliable. He wouldn't let himself be victimized too easily, and Gaara figured that he would be relatively safe with so many people suddenly occupying Konoha.

“I can't believe what nasty luck we've got today…” Naruto grumbled, folding his arms, “First your seal, now Haku-kun. What else can go wrong?”

“It would be better not to explore that,” Gaara said bluntly, and nodded his head towards the entrance of the stadium, “Hinata's team is here.”

Naruto's eyes brightened, “Great! Let's go!” He ran ahead to meet up with the Hyuga girl and her teammates and Gaara followed slowly behind, searching for signs of his brother and sister.

“Have you guys happened to see Ero-sensei or Haku-kun by any chance?” Was Naruto's opening line and Hinata gave him a small smile as he and Gaara approached.
“If by that you meant your instructor and teammate, then no, we haven't.” Shino answered. He never had understood why Naruto and his team so often addressed their mentor informally.

The blonde boy scratched his head, frustrated, “Hm, didn't think so.”

Sato stood beside Hinata with his hands busied in his jacket pockets. He observed Gaara with a skeptical look for a long moment and then chuckled, “Wow, you look like shit, Gaara-kun…hey! Maybe I'll actually beat you!”

Gaara answered him with a noncommittal glare that lacked its normal threat. He seriously doubted that his opponent could even come close to such a goal. The silver haired boy looked hopeful though, as if he had some sort of half-baked plan he intended to use.

The redhead snorted at the thought and turned his gaze to Hinata, who was quietly scolding Sato for his rudeness.

Naruto was still distracted with other issues, “Look this is important, if we don't find Ero-sensei soon…” He gave a short glance to Gaara, “Gaara-kun won't be able to fight!”

Gaara gave him an annoyed look. Things weren't that serious, in his opinion. Sato, in contrast, looked relieved in that moment.

“We'll help you.” Hinata said encouragingly.

Sato turned to her, whining, “Sunshine, please…this is my golden opportunity!”

Shino overrode him, “We'll split up and meet back here.”

Upset that he couldn't have been given a free win even by his own teammates; Sato trudged after Shino in aggravation, heading towards the East wing. Hinata stayed behind with Naruto and Gaara at the blonde boy's request. Her Byakugan would certainly come in handy.

They headed in the opposite direction of their auxiliary and headed up to the second level. Their searching persisted for a long while, and at one point, Naruto had nearly mistaken someone he spotted in the crowd for Haku.

Hinata corrected him that it was actually Tama, grinning and talking to other members of the audience excitedly. She was eager to see Sato's match. Gaara frowned at the information. He wouldn't delight in crushing her fiancée in front of her, but it couldn't be avoided.

While traversing the upper level Hinata noticed, much to her fright, her father and sister entering the stands. She stifled a small whimper. She had been expecting them to arrive so they could watch Neji's match, though the sight of them made her spine go rigid.

Hinata glanced towards Naruto; glad he hadn't yet seen them. He was muttering something to Gaara in annoyance and her eyes scanned along a nearby stairwell. She was afraid, but not mainly for Naruto, she knew well that he was more than prepared to face her cousin.

Her thoughts probed into the future, and what the results of the match would be. It also worried her of what an uproar the rest of the Main Branch would be in if Neji became a Chunin under such circumstances.

‘Naruto-kun…please, don't ever doubt that you're strong enough. Neji-niisan needs to learn that he has to think of others.’ Hinata looked to Naruto again as he was asking an ANBU guard if he had happened to see his missing teammate, 'You've helped him once...you can do it again.'
Finally, Naruto turned to her, motioning to Gaara to come down from his perch on a nearby rail. He looked to her and his eyes spoke of frustration.

“Hinata-chan, we'll keep looking, but you better go back and tell Sato and Shino,” He sighed and then said, “It's kind of my fault that Haku's missing. Don't worry, okay?”

She shook her head weakly, “There's still time…”

“No, there isn't,” Gaara's voice softened at the sight of her troubled expression, “Go now. If he isn't found by the end of Naruto's match, then I will keep looking until my own fight.”

“I'll tell them.” Hinata nodded, her pearly eyes narrowed slightly. She had a fervent urge to hug Naruto right there, even with Gaara watching, but relented after seeing that he was upset and anxious. She knew it would mean less to him than it would if he was merely uneasy and looking for reassurance.

Naruto noted her stare and felt his face heat up, 'Does she think I'm totally pathetic for letting Haku-kun disappear?' It didn't look like it. She'd stuck with him this far and she'd been great. Now he had to take matters in to his own hands.

“Good luck, Naruto-kun…” Her voice was quiet and sweet and she then waved goodbye to Gaara before leaving, appearing very nervous.

Naruto watched her disappear down the stairs before turning to his remaining friend, his face grave, “Listen, if we can't find Ero-sensei and the matches start, I think you should withdraw.”

“I have no reason to,” Gaara folded his arms, quite insulted, “He's no threat. I'll defeat him quickly.” And anyone else he would be pitted against, his mind added, though he wasn't very certain how he would react if he had to fight Naruto.

“This isn't about that!” Naruto's voice was something akin to a bark, “Sometimes you lose your cool in fights! I've seen it! This isn't the place for that.”

Briefly, Gaara recalled the massacre he was responsible for on the bridge in the Land of Waves. His memory was still terribly foggy on the event, but the killing that had ensued was still prominent.

Still, he doubted something such as that could ever apply while facing Sato, “I won't withdraw.”

Naruto was irked by his stubbornness and had expected it too, “Fine! Fight! If you freak out, even if it's just for a second, I'll be there to bitch slap you!”

Gaara blinked at him and nodded. It sounded fair enough.

The blonde boy was still partly fuming before suggesting that they join the rest of the participants on the balcony below. The trip there was tense and quiet and Gaara wondered if mentioning the fight he and Haku had been in would be a good idea. Naruto probably wouldn't appreciate the news at the current time.

Once there Sato was already fidgeting around, observing the huge audience that had turned out with wide eyes. Gaara grimaced at the sight of him and then looked across the way to the adjacent balcony where his siblings stood in wait.

He knew better than to leave Naruto and join them, especially when he was still irate that Haku had not arrived.
Shortly after, something peculiar happened.

Team Gai arrived quite suddenly and the normal energy that they usually carried with them was nowhere to be found. Naruto tried to control himself at the sight of Neji, who was impassive as ever, though he did see something strange.

The Hyuga prodigy and Tenten stood on opposite sides of Lee, dead silent, and appeared outwardly irritated by the other's presence. Lee, between them, had never looked more distressed in Naruto's time knowing him. Clearly his teammates were not agreeing on something and he had been caught in the middle.

'I know that feeling…' Naruto thought, still on edge, 'I wonder how Neji will fight if he's this distracted?' He didn't want to be disappointed when he knocked the prodigy's teeth out.

Gaara tensed and Naruto looked to their left where Haku had arrived, looking as calm and casual as ever. Naruto stormed over to him, blue eyes blazing. “Where the hell have you been? I thought you just vanished or something!”

“Naruto-kun, it's alright! Really!” Haku didn't overlook the attention Naruto's ranting had attracted, “I really am sorry if I held you up, but I did tell you before I left that I might be a bit late…”

Naruto blinked, “Oh. You did? It must've slipped my mind then I guess…a lot of crap happened this morning.”

Haku smiled at him weakly and said nothing to Gaara.

Naruto equated the coldness of the members of Team 13 to that of which was emanating from Haku and Gaara. It was something he would not stand for and it did explain a few things.

“What's with you two?” Naruto looked between his friends, sensing they had had a spat, “If one more thing goes wrong I'll beat the shit out of both of you!”

If he had to be the disciplinarian then so be it. Naruto was not willing to ruin their chances of gaining Chunin rank, even if they were.

Haku apologized again, he sounded sincere too, “I just needed to fetch something for my match. I had almost left it behind.”

Gaara scowled openly at him. Whatever scheme he had concocted to get around Temari's use of wind jutsu he judged to be nothing short of elaborate and infantile. He had a feeling it would be a close one though.

Down below, Hayate stood at the center of the arena, and the roaring clamor from the crowd died down momentarily as he announced, “The final rounds of the Chunin Selection Exam have begun,” He glanced up at the Hokage briefly, “The first match will be between Hyuga Neji and Uzumaki Naruto.”

Haku and Gaara simultaneously observed their friend as he stared out ahead into the stadium.

'I can do this,' Naruto resolved, 'I have to!'

Neji ventured down without a word to his teammates. He didn't need confirmation from them that his match was as good as won, although Tenten might have tried to make him believe otherwise. She knew nothing. He had no reason to hold back. Now was his time to prove to the Main House just how wrong they were.
“You can do it, Naruto-kun.” Haku said quietly, staring at the back of the blonde boy's head. To his surprise, Gaara nodded in agreement. The only thing they didn't seem to diverge on was their confidence in Naruto.

Naruto turned and grinned at them, “Yeah, I've got this one in the bag!”

He raced down the stairs, unwilling to let Neji show him up.

Once down to the ground level, Naruto was able to see just how huge the stadium actually was. The roar from the watching crowds was indeed a bit distracting, but Naruto had set his mind on one thing and one thing only.

'I'll make him pay for what Hinata-chan's been going through!' His expression was confident as he neared Hayate, who waited with Neji at the arena's center, 'I can't lose!'

The face-off was particularly uneventful and Naruto could feel his teammates staring at the back of his head. Neji's white eyes were as stoic as ever, but he could tell that somewhere beneath the anger and stubbornness Neji was feeling something that was very real.

Hayate muffled a small cough while observing the first two combatants. Both of them looked hostile, 'It'll make an interesting fight then…'

“If the opponents are ready, you may begin now.” Hayate backed up a ways from the two genin, listening as the audience came to life in excitement behind him.

Neji fell into a practiced Jyukken stance, his face grim, “This would be the time for you to back out, should you decide not to humiliate yourself.”

“Tch!” The blonde boy's eyes were like flaming sapphires, “Not until I teach you a lesson!”

The Hyuga wasn't inclined to wait much longer, “What could a dropout be able to teach me?”

“How to lose!” Naruto formed hand seals, “Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!”

Two dozen replications materialized beside Naruto, sharing in his determination, and leapt ahead to get through Neji's defenses. The Byakugan illuminated Neji's eyes and he moved with skill, knocking away and destroying the clones methodically as they came within range.

It wasn’t long before all of the shadow clones had been spent, and the last remaining Naruto was the one Neji charged for, hands striking the nearest tenketsu expertly. Haku grimaced as Naruto recoiled in pain and then reverted to a puff of smoke.

The true Naruto came from above with a dropping aerial kick. Neji hadn't been counting on his speed and barely evaded the assault, which was a mere distraction for something more fatal.

Neji righted himself, his sandals skidding in the dirt, and watched the blonde boy form more seals, “See if you can handle this! Kuchiyose no Jutsu!”

Four red warrior toads appeared and Naruto, in imitation of his sensei, perched on the head of the nearest one. From the balcony Haku and Gaara both grinned openly, while Shino and Hinata watched in astonishment from the stands.

A fair distance away from where Hinata was sitting, Hanabi turned to her father wearing a worried expression. She hadn't come to this match expecting her cousin to be facing someone capable of summoning creatures into battle.
Neji was not very impressed, or at least, appeared not to be, “You think that these frogs are a match for me?”

A vicious tongue extended without warning, knocking the Hyuga back a number of feet and to the ground with a *thud*. The toad in question was the very one Naruto crouched on top of, and it looked rather insulted.

“Toads!” Naruto corrected him, and he could tell that after that things were going to get serious.

Naruto and his comrades closed in on Neji who stood in wait, calculating. His eyes picked apart every aspect and weakness of his opponents. The Hyuga prodigy's rotation sent two toads reeling before they could get near, while the other two drew their swords. Naruto briefly wondered just how violent the match could get if his toads intended to skewer his foe.

Neji was reading the awkward body language of the toads as they bounded within striking range, the angle at which the blades were held, even the slightest twitch of muscle beneath skin was completely visible to him.

Naruto abandoned the toad he had hitched a ride on as it swung its dagger, watching as the metal sang through the air with a soft hum, *'Is this it? This is the payback I wanted for Hinata-chan?’*

From her place in the stands the Hyuga girl's eyes were as wide as saucers as the battle toads closed in around her cousin. It was likely that even behind his glasses Shino's were as well.

The blade came down and met earth. The second came with a horizontal slash that was so powerful, the toad lost its grip once its weapon also missed the target, and it was embedded in the loose dirt of the crater Neji had created.

Though he wasn't about to admit it then, Neji's training with Tenten was responsible for his ability to evade weapons. The toads weren't nearly as skilled with swords as she, and dodging them took very little effort. Too sluggish to recover, the toads were helpless against Neji’s counter, “Hakkesho Kaiten!”

The last two toads were dispatched with a rotation twice as powerful as the last. Naruto steadied himself, planning his next means of attack, *'He's using that technique Hinata talked about like it's nothing!'* He frowned inwardly, *'I didn't even come close when I tried it...just how much of a genius is he?’*

*“Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!”* Naruto created more shadow clones and dove through the dust cloud that had been kicked up.

Watching the match from their place on the balcony, Neji's teammates had their mouths hanging agape. They hadn't seen anyone other than their sensei summon a creature before and Naruto seemed to have the ability down pat.

Lee inclined his head cautiously to Tenten and asked quietly, “Is it possible that just maybe...Naruto-kun might be able to defeat Neji?”

There was a long silence, and Lee suspected that she wasn't interested in commenting on the match until she did at last answer, “…let's hope so.”

Lee laughed loudly at her snappish voice, but was glad to see her smirking playfully. Tenten had no intentions of taking out her frustrations on Lee. It appeared to her that Naruto was doing all the hard work for her.

While letting his clones act as a diversion, Naruto built up his chakra, knowing if that he didn't
finish the fight soon he wouldn't be able to at all.

By then familiar with Naruto's attack patterns, Neji eliminated the second wave of clones quickly, but not after suffering a blow to the gut from a rogue slide-tackling clone that made him consider the usefulness of free-thinking replications. It hadn't really worried him though, 'His use of shadow clones is sloppy...and he'll be made to regret it.'

“This is pointless.” Neji said at length, staring down the blonde boy across from him, “All you have to show for yourself are some big words and a few tricks…not unlike Hinata-sama. The only way I'll ever be defeated is by a truly skilled ninja.”

“You're wrong!” Naruto’s voice was a snarl, “You had no right to treat Hinata the way you did! Even if you think you can pass judgment on others, that doesn't mean that you're right about other people all the time!”

“Believe what you like.”

“She's strong! She's worth it!” Naruto found himself a bit incoherent in his anger, as if he was affirming himself, “You just want an excuse to make it alright to hurt Hinata the way you did! The things you did…and said! You've got it all wrong!”

“You have no understanding of the Hyuga Clan at all.” Neji's temper was flaring. Naruto was treading treacherous waters.

“Sure I understand them!” Naruto wasn't backing down, “They're all a bunch of tight-asses who put others down to protect themselves!”

From the stands, Hanabi flinched at the sight of her father's furious face. Naruto was brazenly insulting the Hyuga even if he had been telling the truth. It would not bode well in terms of him defending the Clan Head's daughter. At that point Neji looked more respectable than Hiashi had ever seen him, but the guilt was still present in his mind while he watched his nephew begin to drown in his anger.

“You have no reason to be involved. You'd never understand!” Neji's eyes were narrowed, “Everything I do is necessary if the Hyuga Clan is to be changed. The hardships of the Branch Family are ongoing and no one is inclined to end their pain.”

Naruto recalled the day he had been at the Hyuga compound and witnessed a Branch family member attack Neji. He hadn't known why it had happened. Even stranger, he found, was that he was curious enough to hear more.

The crowd grew restless in the stands, wanting the action to commence. From the balcony, Haku and Gaara paid close attention to the words exchanged.

“Before my father's life was sacrificed in place of my uncle's, I was spared the seal of the Branch Family,” Neji reiterated, “It had made no difference when I was adopted into the Main Family. I am not blind. It is all a ploy to make it so the suffering in my clan will continue.”

“A ploy?” Naruto didn't know a conspiracy was involved.

“The Main Family will no longer use the Branch Family as scapegoats,” Neji declared, “The Hyuga clan must change and I will be the one to do it!”

“So what if you want to fix things? Is it worth hurting people? People who only want to help you like Hinata?” Naruto bit back, his knuckles turning white.
From above, Tenten had her eyes fixed on Naruto. She wondered how he had taken the words right out of her mouth.

“She chose to fight me. It is her own fault and not mine for what happened to her.” Neji dismissed the idea, “She did not know her place and chose not to back down.”

“For someone who wants his clan to be equal you sure have a superiority complex!” Naruto roared, undeterred, “I'll prove that Hinata’s better than you!”

Neji's anger cracked through the façade on his face. It was an expression Lee and Tenten had only seen when he was ending a fight; more recently, if they recalled, in his quarrel with Tenten.

It was a rare moment when both Hinata and her father shared the same feeling: disbelief. It was the first time Hiashi had had a glimpse of his nephew's motives for replacing Hinata as clan heir.

Haku blinked and found he had nearly missed Naruto's burst of speed as he leapt for Neji, only to be knocked away by a rotation.

The golden haired ninja ground his teeth, *This is it! It's now or never!*' He created a shadow clone and gathered an enormous amount of chakra into his right hand, his blue eyes focused on the Hyuga who had already anticipated another attack. Naruto and his assistant charged and Hinata closed her eyes, fearful of what would happen.

“Kaiten!” Neji countered the assault with faultless timing.

It destroyed Naruto's shadow clone with ease, but the blonde boy thrust his hand forward recklessly, howling, “Rasengan!”

The raw amount of chakra in the attack briefly disrupted the shield surrounding Neji, before interrupting it completely with a terrible shudder that shook the ground violently and sent the two flying apart.

Hayate leapt away with wide eyes to avoid the tremendous wave of recoil and excess chakra.

“Yeah! Naruto-kun!” Hinata opened her eyes to see Sakura a short distance away cheering, standing up beside the equally excited Kiba, Ino and Chouji, “Show him who's boss!”

Hinata returned her attention to the fight, deafened by the enthused roar of the crowd. On the balcony, Haku and Gaara noted the astounded looks on Lee and Tenten's faces.

Naruto and a new batch of shadow clones wasted no time and charged Neji while he was still regaining his footing. The Hyuga glared in outrage, *There's no way I can be beaten by someone as frivolous as this!*

With far more chakra than was safe, Neji unleashed another fierce rotation, blowing apart the oncoming crowd. Once the dust settled again he smirked at the sight of his opponent lying in a heap in a crater from an earlier rotation.

“You may have more ability than you've led most to believe,” Neji commented, “But as far as I can see you haven't proven anything. Stop trying to be a hero and just accept things as they are. You are too weak to defeat me.”

On a silent cue, Naruto erupted from the ground beneath Neji's feet with the remnants of a Rasengan he had used to burrow, and slammed into him full-force. Neji's eyes watered in pain for a moment before he tumbled back, crashing to the ground.
For a long, dizzying moment, Naruto stood panting, waiting for the Hyuga prodigy to stand up.
Behind him, his shadow clone that had distracted Neji long enough for him to land a solid blow
dematerialized, revealing a hole beneath it.

He found it strange and relieving to see Neji unable to fight any longer, laying on the ground with
eyes wide in incredulity.

“Maybe…your eyes don’t see as much as you think they do,” Naruto managed a shaky breath, “I
know what it’s like when you have to prove yourself to others. The only way you really succeed is
when you don’t knock other people down…”

Hayate cleared his throat after glancing down at Neji, “The winner of the first match is Uzumaki
Naruto.”

The crowd increased its volume even further.

Haku exchanged a brief glance with Gaara, one that surprisingly held no contempt. It was always
great to see Naruto teach valuable lessons to his peers.

Hinata sat up very straight, staring at Naruto and unable to suppress her wide smile, ‘Oh Naruto-
kun! You did so well!’

Lee and Tenten watched in confounded silence as medic-nin placed Neji on a stretcher and
escorted him out of the arena.

Naruto balled his hands into fists, listening to the hollering audience, 'I'm strong! This victory is
definitely going to help Hinata-chan!' After receiving an approving nod from Hayate he returned
to the balcony, still ecstatic over his triumph.

After reuniting with the waiting genin on the balcony, Naruto received very animated
congratulations from both Haku and Sato. Gaara had a horrible headache, but still made an effort
to congratulate his friend, “Well done, Naruto-kun.”

Naruto slapped the red haired boy on the back, grinning widely, “Aw thanks, Gaara! But you
knew I was gonna kick Neji's ass!”

Haku chuckled quietly while Gaara massaged his throbbing temples. It was too loud.

The Kazekage glanced over to the Hokage who was seated a short distance away from him,
“My…what an exciting first match, don't you think?”

Hiruzen nodded absently while watching the blonde boy celebrate his victory from across the
way, “Indeed, Kazekage-sama. You can always count on Naruto to keep things lively.”

With no further preamble Hayate announced the next battle, “Er-hem! The second match will be
between Nara Shikamaru and Tenten.”

Lee had recovered rather quickly from Neji’s loss after hearing it was Tenten’s turn to fight, “Woo
hoo! You can do this Tenten! Make Gai-sensei proud!”

She gave him a sheepish look, wondering if that alone was enough motivation.

From his place beside Sato, Shikamaru groaned in annoyance, lacking any and all conviction, “I
really don't feel like fighting…much less a girl…”

Naruto, still a tad over-enthusiastic, walloped Shikamaru on the back, “Get down there you bum!
Just try to not lose!” The Nara fell ass-over-teakettle over the side of the railing with a cry and into the arena. Sato held his shaking sides while he cackled in laughter.

The Hokage merely sighed at the sight.

Sakura smirked at Ino beside her, “Is he always this graceful, Ino-pig?”

“Can it, Sakura!”

Once on the ground level of the arena, Tenten still didn't have her full concentration, 'Neji...how could you have lost? Is that even possible?' Shikamaru didn't meet her eyes when they faced off, 'You had it coming though! Maybe it's enough to deflate that ego of yours...but still, I'm going to win this match for you!'
Friend or Foe?

Chapter Soundtrack: “Kodo” (Inside the Sun Remix) by Yoshida Brothers

Shikamaru detested fighting girls.

At the present time he viewed this notion from a totally new perspective. Rather than disliking them because of how distracted they could be or just being plain weak, he came to the conclusion that Tenten was someone who was not to be taken lightly.

Even if she was a girl Shikamaru did admit she was a fierce contender, as to be expected with the genin of Team Gai. ‘I wouldn’t fancy going up against that Sand-girl either…’ His mind supplied as a side note and he shifted from one foot to the other uncomfortably, trying to ignore her focused stare aimed at his jugular and stomach regions.

He doubted there were any shinobi their age who were more adept with weapons, male or female. He shuddered, wondering just how long it would actually take her to make him look like a shish-ka-bob.

And of course Hayate just had to rush things, “When you are ready you may begin.”

“Aw man…” Shikamaru stepped back a few paces, “I really don’t feel like fighting right now!”

Her facial expression was one alarmingly similar to Neji’s during the beginning of his own fight. He watched with near clinical curiosity as she procured a scroll and held it up to him.

“Shikamaru, this is one of my best weapons. I’m going to use it.” She was frowning, “Please don’t make this difficult.”

For a moment he weighed the prospects. By ‘best weapon’ Shikamaru was relatively certain she had meant “something that will end the fight quickest.” Still, he wouldn’t actually know what it was until she was made to use it.

“I think you already know that I don’t like it when things get complicated…” He formed hand seals, hating himself for provoking a battle he didn’t want to take part in, “Kage Shibari no Jutsu!”

Anticipating the attack she leapt back well out of harm’s way and opened the scroll, believing she had given fair enough warning.

Shikamaru felt his knees quake violently as he saw an enormous zanbato appear. Much to his shock she leaned it casually on her shoulder, getting a good grip on its hilt.

While the audience cheered in excitement at the scene Sarutobi felt his blood pressure rise considerably. Genin weren’t legally permitted to own or wield such swords in the Fire Country. He noted however that he was being a hypocrite to recall that, due to the fact that he had given her custody of an equally powerful weapon not too long ago. He decided to let the match proceed uninterrupted.

“Ino?” Sakura was concerned as the blonde girl beside her began to hyperventilate and Chouji was in a similar state.

“She’ll…she’ll chop him up like liver before this is through!” Ino hollered and then stood, “Shikamaru! DO SOMETHING!”
The Nara could hear Ino's shrill cry from a distance and he grumbled. Her confidence in him was certainly helping…

“I work in all ranges, so there's no way I'll let you catch my shadow...” Tenten informed him, hoping that if she stalled for long enough he'd change his mind and back out. She really didn't want a repeat of her mission in which she first encountered an Iwa nin.

Shikamaru briefly reevaluated the situation, realizing Tenten had inadvertently given him an advantage, 'She's sacrificing speed to hold that thing up. This doesn't seem as hopeless as I thought…'

Asuma puffed nervously on a cigarette beside Kurenai. He dearly hoped that his slothful student could come up with an effective strategy before anything unfortunate could happen.

Naruto turned to Lee, demanding an explanation, “Just what the heck is going on, Fuzzy-brows! Is she gonna kill him or something?”

Lee shook his head, “No, Naruto-kun. Tenten uses Chinigui merely to intimidate enemies and halt their attacks. It is just as effective defensively as it is offensively.”

“Ch-Chinigui?” Haku stuttered, his face turning very red. Lee nodded to him in confirmation, aware that Haku hadn't realized Tenten was able to fully use the sword he had given her.

“It is an odd name…but fitting, I think.” Lee offered his opinion. Changing the name from Cow-Killer to a name that literally meant 'wiping the blood from a blade' had an ominous undertone.

Gaara watched with interest, wondering what would become of Shikamaru.

The Nara threw four shuriken at her, aiming to buy himself some extra ground. He ran to the cover of trees near the arena wall as Tenten blocked the projectiles effortlessly with the big blade.

Shikamaru pressed himself behind a tree trunk, thinking feverishly. Nearly a dozen plans flooded into his mind, and he had to decide which courses of action would bring him closest to victory and farthest from harm.

Tenten frowned, expecting to fight less of a coward, “Hiding won't do you any good, Shikamaru!” She pulled back on the zanbato and shifted her weight, beginning to spin herself in circles.

“This is bad.” Asuma pointed out, taking a long drag and Kurenai gave him an even glare. His student was in more peril than he would've been if he had been made to fight even Neji.

Shikamaru squatted down below the tree, meditating, unaware of the incoming danger.

“Hah!” Tenten hurled the blade with her built-up momentum and sent it soaring across the clearing and into the nettle of trees. The zanbato hacked through the trunks with ease, and with a metallic ringing noise, imbedded itself in the wall as few inches above Shikamaru's head.

It had shaved a few hairs off of his ponytail though, leaving him a bit horrified, 'I don't think she was really aiming for my head, but still!'

He may have been calmer if the trees hadn't toppled over helplessly, leaving him in clear view of his opponent.

Tenten threw a kunai, hitting a tree stump near Shikamaru and detonated the exploding tag attached to it, driving him out of his hiding place. He dove back out into the light, seeing an
opening, “Kage Shibari no Jutsu!”

He barely missed, Tenten noted. She'd have to be more careful if she intended to avoid that potentially problematic jutsu of his. She threw another volley of kunai, driving him back towards the wall again.

While avoiding her projectiles Shikamaru kept a keen eye open for the shadows distributed about the arena. There were a healthy number of them, and he began to devise a plan of how to formulate a trap with his given resources.

“You're braver than I thought, Shikamaru!” Tenten hurled another round of kunai as he charged, wondering if it was a mock-assault. She was surprised to find it wasn't.

One of her kunai shredded his shoulder as he soldiered nearer, too near, in fact. His shadow stretched again, reaching ever closer to its goal.

Tenten panicked and drew out two more scrolls, “Soushouryu!”

Frustrated, he made note of what a clever move it was. As she rose higher into the air, her shadow began to shrink and became too small for his shadow to contact. The smoke released from her attack was enough of a buffer to stall him.

In the stands, both Ino and Chouji were sharing in a frenzied conniption as their lazy teammate evaded the oncoming weapons raining down from the air. It was about as much as Sakura could stand, being that she had fought Tenten herself and no one then had lost their cool, ‘Maybe they expect less of Shikamaru than they do me…’

“Maybe it would actually be harder to fight her than even Neji!” Naruto observed aloud, “She's brutal!”

Lee nodded, “That may be true for some ninja. Tenten has trained with Neji every day for the past two years. Her skills can be lethal if a shinobi cannot counter against weapons.”

Naruto looked visibly troubled by the news, but then concluded that he had defeated Neji, so he may have stood a fair chance if he had been pitted against Tenten.

After ending her attack, Tenten was back to dodging Shikamaru's ever-persistent shadow as it streaked along the ground towards her. In a frantic moment of avoiding his jutsu she had an epiphany.

Tenten turned about and raced to the other side of the arena, scaling the wall with chakra and gluing herself to it once she felt she had gained enough height. Shikamaru was bent double, trying to catch his breath while keeping an eye on her, ‘What the hell is she doing up there?’

She was beyond his physical reach, but unfortunately for Shikamaru he was not beyond her's.

'I'll end this now! This fight can't keep dragging on like this…’ Tenten summoned her yumi and focused chakra into her right hand.

From afar Shikamaru was already aware she was planning a long-range assault, “This is such a drag!”

Lee's eyes widened knowingly and Naruto and his teammates had a feeling something serious was afoot.

Tenten expertly fired a chakra arrow down at the Nara. Shikamaru had dodged to the side just
after it was launched, but he had not been expecting the explosion that followed once it had struck the ground. The shockwave barreled him over, knocking him to the dust where again he had to regroup.

Sato whistled loudly, impressed by her cunning attack.

Tenten focused more chakra into her hand to prepare an arrow, 'One more blast can knock him out! He already looks dizzy enough to-

She froze.

A look of relief came over Shikamaru's face from down below, where he had stretched his shadow to an impressive length, “Well, I've got to admit…that was really troublesome…but it looks like even you couldn't escape my Shadow Bind technique, Tenten.”

'But how could he have-?' It was then Tenten noted she had caused her own demise. She had forgotten how many weapons she had scattered across the field after she had used Soushouryu. Cleverly, Shikamaru snuck his shadow amongst the fallen projectiles, linking and weaving his own shadow through their own to get near enough to the opposite wall and ensnare her.

He took a step forward and, unable to fight against it, Tenten fell forward off of the wall. She tumbled to the ground painfully. Lee flinched, looking heartbroken. More than anything he had wished the beautiful flower of his team to obtain a glorious victory that would do justice to her youthful spirit.

Shikamaru had stolen it from her.

Tenten gritted her teeth miserably as she and her opponent neared each other with cautious steps, 'I can't believe I let him get to me! I was so sure I could avoid him that I didn't notice my weapons had shadows he could use against me…'

Her golden yumi dropped uselessly to the ground after he extended his hand, with her mirroring his every movement. From the stands, Ino and Chouji were shocked and amazed at what they were witnessing.

“No way…” Sato muttered from his place beside Team 2, “I thought ol' Shikamaru was an even crappier fighter than me, but it looks like he did it!”

Hayate watched expectantly as Shikamaru approached and then finally stood directly in front of Tenten. The match was nearly over, that much was clear.

Tenten closed her eyes, waiting for the finishing blow, 'Neji…I'm sorry…I guess we both let our skills get to our heads, didn't we? Maybe it's better that we both lost...maybe it was necessary so that we'd just give up and move on. I just hope that you-

“I forfeit.” Shikamaru announced casually without a trace of regret on his face.

Tenten’s chocolate eyes were very wide when he had said it.

He turned to her, looking bored, “I must've come up with 200 different strategies to beat you, but you're pretty damn unpredictable for a girl…and I'm totally out of chakra.”

On cue, his shadow retracted, freeing her. Hayate muffled a cough, admittedly not surprised Shikamaru had decided to withdraw. In fact, it was the wisest move he could make, “The winner of the match is Tenten.”
Tenten’s shock morphed into an amused smile, “You know, Shikamaru, you’re the only person who’s ever bested me, besides Neji, that is.”

He looked at her for a long moment, “Eh…you'll have to give that to me in writing because no one will believe me.”

Hands jammed in his pockets, the Nara trudged back across the clearing with her while she recalled her weapons. ’He's not so bad, actually…’ Tenten thought to herself, impressed with his brilliant tactics. From the balcony, Lee and Sato were cheering, in contrast to a very quiet and confounded Team 2.

Asuma didn’t hide the proud smile on his face as he watched his student return to the upper level.

The Kazekage spoke in an entertained voice, “What a talented kunoichi, Hokage-sama. She will make a very fine chunin…”

“Chunin are not named for their power, but for their ability to guide and be sensible, I'm sure you are aware.” Hiruzen retorted, he himself rather alarmed by Tenten's performance, “Though no doubt she is as talented as her parents were…”

The next fight was announced by Hayate, “The third match will be between Temari and Haku.”

Naruto gave his friend a reassuring grin, “You'll be great Haku-kun! Just stay cool and everything will be fine!”

Haku shuddered involuntarily, unable to bring himself to look at Gaara. He wasn't half as angry as he had been the night before. In truth, anxiety had replaced most if not all of his bitterness, 'I know what this means to Gaara-kun, but I can't just back out.'

Gaara gave an annoyed look to Naruto as he cheered for Haku while he proceeded down to the arena. He didn't feel like wishing the dark haired boy luck, but he couldn't bring himself to root for his sister either. It felt like he was torn down the middle as if he had some invisible zipper of shame.

He stared silently ahead, watching as Temari disappeared down the stairs from across the way.

Temari arrived shortly after Haku did. She scowled openly at him. She didn't like him and she couldn't for the life of her understand why he was Gaara's friend. Though she could see a few similarities they were very different from one another and she wanted to put him in his place.

Kankuro had told her to finish him quick and save her energy for later, when she'd need it. She planned to. Haku, much to her surprise, looked in that moment very much as docile as he had been during the preliminary rounds, 'I don't get these mood swings of his…' 

Temari wouldn't let that sweet, demure face of his fool her, even if it nearly had.

“You may begin now.” Hayate backed away and Temari had almost not heard him, being so caught up in her thoughts.

With a startling burst of speed Haku had attacked first, which she hadn't been anticipating. Temari was unable to open her fan before he had closed in, moving with the ease of a creature underwater, and landed a roundhouse kick that sent her crashing to the ground.

Above on the balcony, Naruto glanced inquisitively over at Tenten and Lee who were cheering, supposing they had something to do with his new ability in taijutsu.
He'd thank them later.

What Haku lacked in strength was compensated for in speed. He circled around Temari as she swung her iron fan down, missing him, and tripped her up with a devious slide tackle on his way past her.

The crowd's keyed up roar filled Temari's ears and her blood boiled. She refused to be made a fool out of. As she stumbled she opened her fan hastily, managing only two moons, but it was enough to blow him away.

She smirked in satisfaction as he fell through the air until she noticed him procure a summoning scroll, *'He's summoning something, that girly brat! Whatever he calls it won't do him any good!'*

Temari did briefly recall Naruto summoning huge battle toads during his match. That memory alone was enough to make her slightly nervous of what his teammates were capable of.

Haku's feet were planted on the ground again, and the scroll swirled elegantly around his arm for a moment before recoiling back to its original shape. Their stares locked for a moment and Temari paused, confused, *'What was that? A bluff? There's nothing here!'*

She looked left and right to make sure he hadn't summoned any creatures into the arena, and was relieved to find there was nothing new present.

Naruto turned to Gaara, a bit bewildered by Haku's theatrics, *'What is he doing? Haku-kun can't summon anything! Is he trying to fake her out?'

Gaara frowned, *'I honestly don't know what stunt he's trying to pull this time.'*

Temari grinned at her opponent, crouched low to the ground in front of her, *'You must think you're very clever, huh? Stalling like that, you nearly had me fooled!'

*’Who's stalling?’* Haku rose to his feet, wearing a genial smile.

A lone, fat raindrop landed squarely on the end of her nose and a growl crept from Temari's throat as she turned her attention to the sky, *'I don't believe it!'*

Overhead the once-sunny sky was thick with dark clouds that had gathered directly over the stadium. From behind Naruto and Gaara, Sato laughed aloud and they turned to him wearing questioning looks.

*’He said something about a new jutsu he had learned but I didn't know it'd be something as dorky as calling rain clouds!’* Sato tried to explain, half laughing to himself.

Gaara's glare threatened the longevity of his face, *'There's nothing dorky about it if you have complete control over water.'*

Sato fell very quiet, *’Oh…now that I didn't know. That's...that's kinda cool!’* He had only thought Haku was capable of certain water jutsu and never considered the possibility of a Kekkei Genkai.

Naruto chuckled at Gaara's irritated expression.

The scattered drops of water quickly escalated into a full-frontal downpour, making many members of the audience grateful they were seated beneath an overhang.

Temari's bangs were damp and heavy within moments, clinging to her forehead uncomfortably.
She was aware that this was one of the worst conditions a Sand nin could fight in, being that she herself rarely ever saw rain of this magnitude, let alone battled in it!

Haku held senbon steady between his knuckles, his eyes scanning over Temari. Abruptly, he ran towards her, aware of every raindrop falling past him, launching them with a warning cry.

Anticipating the projectiles, Temari revealed the third moon on her fan, “Daikamaitachi no Jutsu!” An even more powerful whirlwind knocked Haku and his senbon into the air, cutting him repeatedly in the process.

“Haku-kun!” Naruto leaned over the railing, not expecting him to be hit with such a powerful attack. Gaara's eyes narrowed at the sight. It wasn't like Haku to make himself so vulnerable.

Haku fell back to the ground helplessly and splattered into a puddle of rain water.

Temari’s eyes widened, 'He substituted with a water clone!'

She looked around, horrified to see a dozen water clones surrounding her, all wielding senbon. She hadn't even seen him form them, let alone heard them close in. Temari suddenly wished she had a bit more of a background in fighting ninja capable of water jutsu.

“If this is all you can do I'm not impressed!” Temari swung her fan in a huge arc, blowing away the incoming clones and needles as they approached. Haku amassed more and more clones with little chakra and she continued to stubbornly hack and slash her way through them.

'Soon she'll realize she's only attacking water, which is not the best idea while it's raining…’ Haku wondered if Temari was actually aware she was only tiring herself out, or if she was possibly preparing a counterstrike.

Deciding to get in close, Haku and a clone dove for her from behind. The clone landed a punch before she sliced it in half, and Haku aimed a few senbon expertly at her exposed arm, hitting pressure points that would slow her movements.

Hissing, she switched hands, to his shock, and attacked just as fiercely as she would with her other arm. The fan came sweeping down, and a blade of wind left a gash on his chest that stung like fire.

Haku leapt back, trying to regroup, throwing more senbon at her other arm. Unfortunately for him she was more cautious than she had been before, and kept her functioning arm out of his range.

He let his clones distract her as he inspected his wound for a moment. It was fairly deep and bleeding freely. He commended her on her ingenuity, 'I don't have time to heal myself... I have to end this fight…’

Temari cut her way through the water clones, keeping track of the real Haku, 'It'll be easier to spot him in this rain now that he's bleeding! Even his water clones can't fake that!'

“Gaara…” Naruto muttered to his friend and he understood. Things were getting serious and he knew Haku wouldn't last long injured.

Temari had finished the last of the clones and faced off against the waiting water nin who had more senbon at the ready. She moved forward and gave a small cry when she slipped and fell unexpectedly.

The water on the ground had frozen over into a sheet of ice.
Temari couldn't get sure footing on it and watched wide eyed as Haku raced toward her with perfect balance, \textit{'He fights dirty! He can walk on this like it's nothing!'}

Haku reached her just as she had slid her feet feebly beneath her, and knocked her fan away while she was struggling to regain her balance. She snarled at him, swiped at his head and then dove for her weapon frantically.

Her iron fan clattered to the icy ground where the incoming raindrops pelted it, freezing it like an icicle in seconds. Temari didn't bother to reach for it, knowing it would be a vain effort.

He had deprived her of her weapon.

Clenching her teeth in rage she drew a kunai and glared at him, taking a step back warily on the slippery ground. She bumped into something solid and from afar she could hear the distant sound of Kankuro's shout.

Temari glanced over her shoulder and saw her own face. Startled, she turned about completely, only to see an ice mirror, \textit{'But this is-!'}

She turned back to her opponent who stood outside the house of mirrors that were forming all around her. It wasn't the first time she had seen it, but she suspected it may be her last if she didn't move quickly.

Temari slid ahead over the ice sheet, accustoming her feet to the ground with chakra. It was a different type of water-walking, but water-walking all the same.

The rain was becoming unbearable, and she knew it would be more difficult to fight and think clearly while she was shivering and sopping wet, \textit{'I have an idea though. His strategy is so predictable!'}

Haku disappeared into one of his mirrors and she steadied the kunai in her hand patiently. He reappeared in the mirror in front of her, looking just as tired as she. For a moment the blood that had soaked the side of his gi looked as if it would actually drip out of the pane of ice.

“You really are Gaara-kun's sister, I don't doubt that now…” Haku admitted quietly, “I have no intentions of harming you.”

“You could have fooled me!” Temari snapped in response, not buying his soft voice, “Let's end this!”

He obliged her by leaving his mirrors a fraction slower than he would normally have and hurled senbon in threes. She blocked them as they came near, her keen eyes searching the mirrors he dashed through.

Gradually he began to move faster, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to block the needles he threw. A few of them had sunk into her shoulder and lower back. They hurt terribly. Temari had managed to block the senbon aimed for vital areas, a fact she took pride in.

From his fleeting reflection in a mirror to her left, she could see his blue gi was soaked a deep maroon, \textit{'Does he want to bleed to death? It won't be long now…'}

“He isn't going to last much longer.” Gaara was aware that Haku had strained himself to use so much chakra during his fight on top of being wounded.

“Should we do something?” Naruto was doing his best not to become nervous but it was very difficult, “He's hurt pretty bad. I don't think Haku-kun's gonna win this one…”
Gaara could find nothing to say. He hadn't been able to foresee the outcome of the match between his friend and his sister, and now he was certain he didn't want to see the conclusion.

"He's only got a few senbon left...after this he'll leave his mirrors and try to slip me up again!" Temari was predicting his future course of action, "One blow to the head ought to do it, he's been weakened.'

Senbon came at her again and she raised her kunai to block them. It was a surreal moment in which the needles halted a few inches from her face and she slashed at them in confusion, wondering why they were icicles rather than the metal senbon he had been using before, 'Is it...it's a-?'

Haku pitched his last two senbon.

'-a decoy?'

The needles stuck in the side of her neck as she stared ahead, not realizing he had moved to the mirror behind her while she was distracted. Temari shuddered, feeling everything from her chin down go numb, "Oh."

She toppled over onto the icy ground and the rain began to slow. Kankuro gave a frustrated cry from his place above the arena, unsure of what had happened.

Haku, exhausted and in pain, dispatched his mirrors while taking a shuddering breath. The downpour ended shortly after, and the ice on the ground proceeded to melt away. Hayate crouched over Temari, inspecting her, 'That kid's got some aim...she's dead as a doornail!'

Naruto noticed as Gaara went rigid beside him. He recalled the day Gaara had once told him that Haku didn't kill people, and wondered if his red haired friend was going to reconsider his words.

'Oh this is bad, really bad,' Naruto stared down into the arena, 'Haku-kun would never!'

Hayate stood up, his expression grim, "The winner of the match is Haku.”

The crowd cheered wildly, most especially those who had placed their bets on him.

Haku paused beside Hayate, putting pressure on the gash below his collar bone, "Sir, she isn't dead."

The examiner gave him a skeptical look, "She has no vital signs."

Haku bent down and carefully removed the needles from the Sand kunoichi’s neck. He tossed the bloody senbon aside and stood up when she rolled over like a boneless fish, trying to regain consciousness.

Gaara's facial expression relaxed and Naruto grinned at him, "Come on! You know Haku-kun! He'd never hurt someone you cared about!"

Gaara had known that Haku wouldn't actually kill Temari, though it did startle him to see that he had the capacity to do so with ease.

He was honestly glad that he had spared her from more pain, although it seemed that Haku had not received such generosity from Temari as he limped away with the medics while they tried to tend to the wound on his chest.

From above, the Kazekage narrowed his eyes gleefully, not commenting on the fight.
Hayate watched as Haku left the arena, impressed, ‘Shinjutsu like that could take out even a jounin if they're not careful!’

The sky was blue once again and Temari was cleared by a medic before returning to Kankuro, who was a bit surprised to see her on her feet.

“Don't look at me like I grew another head or something, will you?” She grumbled, peeved that she had lost, “I'm fine. He just got a lucky hit.”

Kankuro calmed down a bit and smirked at his sister, “Right, because you definitely were in control throughout the whole match.”

She punched his shoulder with what little strength she had left in her and he snickered.

Hayate cleared his throat, “The fourth match will be between Rock Lee and Uchiha Sasuke.” The crowd's volume escalated significantly and he nearly had to cover his ears.

Tenten gave Lee a pat on the back while he tore off on another youthful rant, “Yes! Finally my match has arrived! Today I shall defeat a genius with my hard work and make Gai-sensei proud!”

“Go for it, Lee.” Tenten smiled at him, knowing he could hold his own.

Once Lee had raced down the stairs, Haku had returned to the balcony looking a little less beat up. His upper chest and shoulder were swathed in bandages and he had been given a white shirt as a replacement for his saturated gi.

He took his place between his teammates and smiled thoughtfully, “She really is just like you, Gaara-kun!”

Naruto nodded sagely, “See? I told you Gaara, you're like clones of each other! Does everyone in your family have a bad attitude?”

Gaara blinked at the blonde boy, not seeing how he had made his observation.

Haku chuckled, playing along, “Maybe there's a hereditary cantankerous gene in Suna that's responsible for-”

“There is just as much a trait for being irritable in my gene pool as there is one for you two being idiots!” He hated it when they ganged up on him, but it was preferable to fighting with them.

Naruto and Haku laughed at their friend as he folded his arms and scowled.

From the stands, Ino turned to the pink haired girl beside her, “Sakura, just where is Sasuke anyway? How can he be late for his own match?”

Uncertainty winced over the pink haired girl's face, and she turned to Kiba beside her, “He will be here, right Kiba-kun?”

Akamaru relocated to Sakura's lap and Kiba frowned, “I haven't seen him since yesterday. I really can't say what the hell he's up to if he hasn't shown up by now…”

Worry dominated Sakura's expression and Ino chuckled sheepishly, “Don't worry, Billboard-brow, I know he'll be here! Heh heh…what could possibly make him want to throw this match? He's up against that crazy kid from Team Gai!”

Sakura gave her a dark look, “Don't underestimate Lee like that. If he's anywhere near as strong as
his teammates he'll give Sasuke-kun a really hard time!"

Once Lee had descended down to the arena, Tenten didn't miss his disappointed expression upon seeing his opponent was still missing, *'Don't sweat it, Lee. Even if you win this match by default because he doesn't show up Gai-sensei will still be proud of you...and maybe in the later matches, you'll get to fight me!'* She laughed silently to herself; that would certainly be an interesting fight.

Hayate glanced down at a pocket watch he had with him, keeping track of how late the second genin was for his match, *'This can't end well. I don't mind calling this bout, but all the gambling lords up there won't be too pleased on losing their bets right now...'* Many people had money riding on the Uchiha.

With a sigh he glanced over to a patient-looking Lee and then up to the Hokage, *'Er-herm...since the opponent has failed to arrive, victory automatically goes to-'*

A swirl of leaves blew into the arena, directly in front of Hayate before he could finish his announcement.

Naruto blinked a few times before he was able to confirm it, *'Hey! He decided to show up!'* He turned to Gaara, *'Looks like you get to watch Lee give Sasuke a thorough beating after all, eh Gaara?'*

Gaara didn't bother hiding his smirk. It had been something he had been looking forward to seeing.

Below, Sasuke stood back-to-back with his sensei, standing in the midst of the windstorm. Kakashi looked up from his book and smiled sheepishly at Hayate, *'Hi there! Sorry for the inconvenience...I hope Sasuke isn't late or anything?'

Hayate glanced up to the Hokage again, and after receiving an approving nod he turned to the Uchiha prodigy, *'You came close to forfeiting your match. If you're ready it will begin momentarily.'*

Lee, though thrilled, kept silent as Sasuke stayed behind while his mentor went up to the stands. He was still reading his book.

Hayate cleared them to begin and Sasuke regarded Lee for a moment before asking, *'They say that you can't use either ninjutsu or genjutsu. You really expect to win this fight with only taijutsu?'*

Lee smiled, unimpeded, *'Yes that is correct. But I will not need those skills to match you, for I have trained harder than any ninja to be where I stand today!'*

*‘If that's true, you won't mind if I restrict myself to taijutsu as well?’* The Sharingan appeared in Sasuke's eyes for a brief moment, and Lee felt a stab of insult at the boy's words. Rather than loiter, he took an offensive stance which Sasuke mirrored perfectly.

*'So this is what Gai-sensei meant by the power of the Sharingan,'* He recalled everything his sensei had warned him of, *'I will have to be twice as diligent if I am to triumph in this match!'*

Sasuke attacked first, lashing out with a speedy jab that Lee countered reflexively. Lee was startled once Sasuke countered his own maneuver with ease, and knocked him back with a kick that seemed more of a warning than an assault.

Sakura and Kiba looked on apprehensively as the fight intensified. They themselves were unsure of Lee and Sasuke’s full strength, so the outcome of the match was still unclear.
Gaara's eye twitched for a moment while he observed. Shukaku's angered growls had grown much louder at the sight of the Uchiha, and he was beginning to suspect the demon also had a deep loathing for him as well. He wasn’t going to try to find out why that was.

In a blur of movement Lee vanished, and Sasuke allowed himself to be kicked into the air, watching as Lee appeared beneath him. His arm bindings secured around Sasuke. The Uchiha had seen this move once before, but this time he was paying attention to it.

“Front Lotus!” Lee turned downwards, dragging Sasuke with him, and pile-driven him headfirst into the dampened ground. The recoil was heady and Lee leapt away, his arm bandages still slack. From the balcony, Tenten was cheering louder than even Naruto.

Lee grinned up at her from the ground level after hearing her ecstatic shrieks. He looked a short distance away to the impact crater in the ground and saw a demolished log, ‘It appears I have forced him to use a substitution jutsu! I should expect he will use more jutsu once he is stressed…’

Sasuke stood a fair distance away. He had decided the match would end more quickly and in his favor if he utilized his impressive repertoire of ninjutsu.

Lee looked up questioningly to his sensei, who was watching from the stands like a grinning fool. Gai merely gave him a thumbs up, approving of Lee's unspoken request. Lee took a moment to remove weights hidden beneath his leg warmers and Tenten fell silent, seeing things had just become more serious.

Lee dropped the weights and the ground imploded where he had dropped them, due to their tremendous mass. Kakashi glanced over at Gai for a moment, finding his training methods just as old-fashioned as they were ridiculous.

Sasuke raced through hand seals, “Katon: Grand Fireball jutsu!”

The intense flames died down a moment later and Lee had appeared behind him within the blink of an eye, avoiding the fireball completely. Sasuke was pleased to see he had gotten a reaction and his eyes blazed red with the full strength of the Sharingan.

Suddenly, Sasuke was nearly as fast as Lee.

There was little the audience was actually able to see other than two blurs meeting and parting, and the painful sounds of violent contact that followed. For watching shinobi with trained eyes it was a marvel to behold.

The blows exchanged were ruthless and timed, and Lee had found that within seconds, Sasuke was able to mimic his movements and counter nearly all of his attacks. Sakura was wide eyed as the Uchiha prodigy kicked Lee into the air in imitation of Lee's earlier attack, and got a firm hold on the older genin, preparing his own variation of the Front Lotus.

Lee was too shocked at first to struggle, and was just barely able to break free before being subjected to his own technique. He tumbled away from Sasuke, kicking up mud, and found himself offended that one of his prized attacks had been tarnished at the hands of his opponent, ‘Gai-sensei! I will win this match! Forgive me, but I will do what I must to preserve my ninja way!’

Tenten recognized the opening of the second gate and was fairly sure Lee did not aim to stop there, “This isn't good…”

“Why's that?” Sato was curious as he stood next to her, snapping a few pictures of the fight.
“This is the part where bones get broken…” It appeared as if she had put it very mildly, not wanting to admit that something worse was a possibility.

Sato reacted in the only way he knew how, “Cool!”

Gaara sighed from his spot nearby, hoping the silver haired nin would be less oblivious in his own match.

Sasuke had decided to bide his time, analyzing his foe's weaknesses as he built up more and more chakra, ‘So he can open chakra gates. I've heard of something like this but I've never actually seen it…’

Gai seized the opportunity to boast to his eternal rival, “Lee is able to open Five of the Eight Chakra gates, Kakashi. I would advise you be prepared to pull Sasuke from this match should things become too dangerous…”

Kakashi turned his head slightly, “Hm…I suppose. But you do know that saying Gai, to never count your chickens until they’ve hatched?”

“Are you comparing my student to poultry, Kakashi? I challenge you to a contest of honor!”

“Sure, Gai, later…” Kakashi waved him off, looking back to the fight.

Lee's speed was phenomenal with his surplus of chakra and he was landing merciless blows on Sasuke, left and right, many of which the prodigy could not defend against. Sasuke managed to exert some of his own chakra to lessen the blows and counter, but the pain was distracting at a time when focus was everything.

“Fourth Gate: open!” Lee's chakra had caused a small gale to form, and he had wasted no time in preparing for the Fifth Gate and the Hidden Lotus. He had hit Sasuke hard enough to send him skyward again, but was cut short in his attack by a pain shooting up his spine. A dizzying moment later, they were descending, and Sasuke was jabbing him with electrical strikes that were intended to paralyze.

Lee recognized the assault, 'In his preliminary match that Cloud ninja was able to stun him in this way! I should have-!'

He leapt away, finding it hard to slow down with the enormous momentum he had built up. The earth beneath Lee's feet had been softened from Haku's rainstorm, and it disintegrated at the presence of his tremendous energy.

Sasuke had taken a spot high up on the wall as Tenten had, Lee noted, and was also regrouping. He no longer intended to fall prey to any of Lee's Lotus attacks. After a few short hand signs, Sasuke gripped his left arm as chakra crackled to life noisily.

“That's what Sato used in his preliminary match and Kakashi-sensei too…” Sakura muttered to Kiba beside her, “Sasuke-kun learned it?”

“Looks like it.” Kiba narrowed his eyes, “But he's stronger than Sato, so this time it should turn out like it’s supposed to!”

From his place on the balcony Sato took a picture, evaluating Sasuke's form, 'Looks like Kakashi taught him too…bet Sasuke didn't have to beg though! Kakashi likes his own students more than he likes me!' A small frown flickered over the boy's face, 'I'm not jealous! I'm not! He's never liked me anyway so what do I care if he plays favorites, that selfish bastard!'
Sato didn't admit it, but his relationship with his remaining kin was not a good one.

Lee watched pensively as the Uchiha prodigy prepared his finishing move, *'I have come so far to become strong and do my best as a ninja but he is indeed a match for me! If I am to succeed in this fight I must surpass my limits...for Gai-sensei, for Tenten, and for Neji! To prove to them that my ninja way is the path of a true shinobi!'*

Lee steadied himself, preparing to open the Fifth gate. He had only attempted it once before and he knew that it was a gamble to use it during the first match. Gai had never expressly told him not to and he believed that Gai would step in if he felt it was unnecessary. Near his center, chakra surged through the newly opened gate, fueling his muscles. Sweat evaporated off of him as radiant steam and the rapid circulation of blood made his skin appear red.

Sasuke was careening down the wall, smashing concrete with screaming chakra in his hand. Lee focused and then charged at his opponent.

By then both Gai and Kakashi were compelled to intervene, but knew that doing so may get someone inadvertently killed. They made no move to stop their respective students.

The cheering had slowed once Sasuke had reconnected with the ground, making a bee-line for Lee as he built up chakra, at a speed barely perceptible to the human eye.

*‘No way!’* Naruto watched in awe alongside his silently astonished teammates.

In a fraction of a second, Lee met Sasuke's jab with a counter, surrounded by a corona of turbulent energy. The light from the resulting collision made the proceedings difficult to distinguish even by carefully observing ANBU. Lee had built enough speed to partially avoid Sasuke's initial strike, but the Chidori raked up along his arm mercilessly, leaving open, burning lacerations in its wake.

Refusing to be stopped by the terrible pain, Lee offered up his wounded arm to block, and after pinning Sasuke's flailing free arm, knocked him back with a flying kick so powerful it sent him careening to the opposite side of the arena with a violent explosion of dust and mud, *‘Reverse Lotus!’*

Lee fell back with the speed of an earth-bound meteor and met the ground in a similar fashion.

Silence had unexpectedly taken over the audience while dust hovered in the air, making it impossible to determine who was still left standing.

Hayate cautiously neared the center of the arena, and nearly lost his footing in a massive ditch that had been carved into the earth. Beyond him he could see a form face-down in the baking mud, vainly struggling to stand, and then became still with exhaustion.

*’Looks like Lee's had it…’* He turned to see Sasuke across the way, also falling unconscious after suffering such a massive blow, *‘They were both lucky to avoid the worst the other had to offer!’*

After a very long moment, Hayate cleared his throat as the dust cleared, *‘Both opponents are unable to continue, so this match has been declared a draw.’*

A ferocious tumult of cheers and cries of disdain followed thereafter, and medics rushed back out into the arena, looking horribly overwhelmed after witnessing the damage.

Both Gai and Kakashi were too stunned to say anything after seeing the power displayed.

Even though it had a horrendous outcome, Tenten didn't fight the swell of pride in her chest after seeing how Lee had kept up with Sasuke. She jumped down to the ground level, intending to
wake Lee up and congratulate him on a fabulous draw, though he would be none too pleased to hear about it.

Kiba studied Sakura's astounded face for a long moment as Akamaru tried to snap her out of her unblinking stare. Certainly she was frightened, he could tell that much, but there was something else in her expression that he did not fully recognize. He'd venture a guess it was something close to inspiration.

Gaara had decided it was a match not worth complaining about.

Naruto was ranting to a gaping Haku beside him as they watched Lee and Sasuke be escorted out of the arena, “Holy shit! What was that? Did you see that, Haku-kun? Ha! I bet I looked just as cool in my own match!”

At about the same time, Gai had also gathered enough wit to rave about the fight, “What a glorious spectacle of burning youth! My student utilized the Fifth Gate all in the effort of countering the Chidori! A marvelous feat, is it not Kakashi?”

Kakashi blinked over to him stupidly, “Hm? Did you say something Gai?”

From the opposite side of the stadium Temari turned to her brother, quite unnerved, “Looks like you're next, Kankuro. Don't take too long. Baki said we'd be mobilizing before the end of the first round matches.”

He gave her a suspicious sideways glance, “Did he tell you anything else?”

“What? Well…no, he didn't exactly have an itinerary planned yesterday.” She frowned at the thought, “In fact, he hasn't really explained anything in so far as we hold off the Leaf ninja.” Temari faced her brother, “What does that mean?”

“It means we've been denied information,” Kankuro folded his arms, troubled, “I think more than just an invasion is going on here and I can't help but think we shouldn't get involved.”

“And how do we do that?” Temari hissed, upset he was deciding to back out at such a late time, “He won't let us withdraw just because we've seen Gaara. He doesn't even know we've noticed him at all! Kankuro, how are we supposed to fix this? It's too late now! Gaara, he's…” Her eyes lowered, “He's one of them.”

“He isn't just one of them!” He snapped, trying to remain calm and failing miserably, “He's one of us! Our brother! Are we going to kill his friends just because we've been ordered to? Are we going to kill all of them including him?”

“No!” She was indignant but frightened, “Of course we wouldn't!”

“Then what do you suggest we do?”

“I… I don't know.” Temari admitted in defeat, “It doesn't look like there's anything we can do, Kankuro. I didn't come here expecting to see him. He was supposed to be dead…”

“We can't let this happen,” Kankuro was trying to come up with a plan before his match started, “Maybe during the confusion we can get him out of here.”

“How?” Temari didn't like the sound of it, “How are we supposed to explain all of this?”

“We can't.” He looked down into the arena in annoyance as Hayate announced the next match, “When I get back, we've got to think of something.”
She nodded solemnly as he proceeded down to his match, feeling a frog in her throat. Temari knew that there was little they could change when they themselves were unsure of what to expect, ‘I can’t believe Baki hasn’t ordered us to do anything yet…it’s like we’re leaving all of the work to Sound and Cloud.’

She was also aware that if they did try to spare Gaara from the madness he probably wouldn’t have any of it, knowing that they had conspired against his village.

In short, the only way they could make a difference would be if they switched sides and defended the Leaf, ‘Which is out of the question!’ She looked over to where her baby brother stood beside Naruto and Haku, and she could still feel the dull sting of the spots where the water nin had hit her with senbon, ‘I’m sorry, Gaara. I didn’t want this for you…’

Kankuro stood near Hayate in the arena, disguising his anxiety with boredom. Hayate looked rather perplexed that another genin had decided to be late. Nearly ten minutes had passed, and there was still no sign of him. It did briefly make Kankuro wonder, ‘What was his name again? Dosu? Hm…he’s with Sound. Maybe his orders were changed and he couldn’t show.’

Hayate could tell from the look on the Hokage’s face that he’d rather not waste time, “Kinuta Dosu has failed to appear and has hereby been disqualified. Winner of the match by default is Kankuro.”

Kankuro did not miss Gaara's approving smirk from above on the balcony, and he couldn’t ignore the twisting feeling in his gut at the sight of his younger brother so unaware of what was about to happen.

He ventured back up to the stands, thinking frantically of what could be done to avoid disaster. By the time Kankuro had reached Temari, Baki had arrived.

“You two have new orders,” Their sensei’s voice was grave, “Temari, how bad are your injuries?”

She looked up at him, slightly irritated, “It’s nothing really. I can fight.”

Baki nodded, “In that case, start preparing now. We've received word from Sound that the attack will begin in this arena and you are to prevent any Leaf shinobi from interfering.”

“Interfering with what?” Kankuro was confused, “When does it start?”

“Orochimaru intends to release the Ichibi in this stadium,” Baki announced, overlooking their horrified expressions, “The signal should be coming soon now…”

“B-But that’s crazy! They can’t do that to Gaa- I mean, how is that possible?” Temari couldn't believe what she was hearing, “That would mean that a jinchuriki is-!”

“Do not let anyone interfere! Those are your orders,” Baki repeated fiercely, not wanting their input, “When you see the signal meet me on the ground level and we'll proceed from there.”

He was gone before Kankuro could protest, but then again, he figured it wouldn’t have much of an effect on the matter. He hadn’t known they planned to actually use Gaara in the attack.

“This is worse than I thought.” He muttered, changing his plans of action, “We have to act now.”

Temari nodded, her expression dark, “On the signal we get him out of here!”

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Below Hayate was calling for the next match, “The sixth match will be between Hatake Sato and
Gaara.”

Sato raced past Shikamaru and down to the arena, glowing with determination. Grudgingly, Gaara turned to Naruto, wondering if he had any advice to give on the silver haired boy.

Naruto shrugged to him unhelpfully, “Just finish him quick, I guess. Don’t make it more painful than it has to be.”

Haku couldn’t think of anything heartening to say as Gaara moved to the stairs, taking his time as he went down. He did wonder how Gaara planned to deal with Sato.

Hinata tensed beside Shino, watching as Sato appeared in the arena with a cheerful bounce in his step. From a short distance away, she smiled as she heard Tama begin cheering for him wildly.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Asuma asked slowly, noting Kurenai's troubled expression.

She sighed at length, “I admit, Sato has grown much over the time he has been given but I am unsure of the fight's outcome.”

Shikamaru stepped up beside Naruto and Haku to watch, “You two may have to step in, you know, to prevent a slaughter. This match is far from even.”

Naruto did not answer him, because even if Shikamaru was being sarcastic he wasn’t far from the truth. With Gaara's seal faulty, Sato was in more peril than he would normally be, 'Haku-kun and I have to be ready if anything weird starts happening!'

Gaara looked up to the Hokage thoughtfully as he stepped out into the sunlight. He had considered asking for his help after being unable to find Jiraiya, but he knew that he would only be pulled from the exam altogether if he expressed his concern to him. At least with his perverted teacher he’d have a chance to fight unhindered.

His gaze traveled guardedly to the Kazekage a short distance away: his father. The idea barely registered in his mind. At the moment, the lord of the Sand village seemed the farthest thing from his father, leaving a strange, bitter taste in his mouth.

At the sight of Gaara's arrival Sato had an attack of nerves, 'Just stay calm! Stick to the plan and everything will fall into place!'

Gaara was totally relaxed as far as he could tell. Sato gave him a weak grin and asked, “Hey, Gaara! I hope you're not a supporter of the whole 'turnabout is fair play' idea?”

The red haired boy shrugged, not sure what he was so worked up about.

“You may begin.” Hayate stepped back, wondering how evenly matched the opponents honestly were.

Tama’s encouraging cries could still be heard clearly from the stands, and Gai and Kakashi returned their attention to the make-or-break fight of the final rounds.

Sato immediately formed hand seals and created ten fire clones, preparing his first strike. Gaara was taken aback at how similar the strategy was to one of Naruto's attack patterns. Undeterred, sand began to surround him and he waited for the Hatake to begin.

A few of the silver haired replications leapt clear over Gaara, nearing the opposite side of the arena. As they scaled the walls with chakra and wire, Gaara could already tell it was the same tactic Sato had engaged in his preliminary fight.
He wasn't much bothered by it. Traps would do him little good in this brawl.

The other observing genin recognized the strategy as well, wondering if it would produce the same results.

While the clones busied themselves suspending weapons on the wire network above the arena, Sato held his ground, facing Gaara. He then deployed a new method of attack.

He drew both kodachi steadily, watching Gaara with calculating eyes, “You know I'm not half bad with these!”

Gaara folded his arms, not impressed. He'd be crazy to attack him head-on, though he wouldn't put it past him. A sand shield began to form around him reflexively as the blades glinted in the sunlight.

Sato leapt upward, startling Gaara, and balanced himself perfectly on the criss-crossing wires. On cue the clones ended their labor and dove for the opponent in unison. Gaara's sand ravaged them, buffering the flames, and while he went about crushing the clones Sato methodically plucked stray lines of the netting with his kodachi to trigger the traps.

Kunai and shuriken rained down from the air and Gaara paused to let his sand shield block the assault, leaving him to ponder how to get near his opponent if he held the advantage of "higher ground." In this fight he realized it would give Sato an edge.

Sato continued slashing specific wires from his vantage point in frustration, dismayed at how Gaara continued to approach unhindered by the waves of projectiles, ‘I've got to pick up the pace before that sand of his gets too close!’

Gaara blinked up at him, knowing he wouldn't put up much of a fight.

The battle remained little more than a child's snowball fight until Sato was reduced to his last trap. He slashed through the remaining wires, releasing a fuuma shuriken that he had planted explosive tags on the day before.

Gaara's eyes widened briefly and he dodged, his sand shielding him from the blast. It was almost humiliating to be stuck in such an uneventful fight so Gaara intended to make it more dramatic.

Sand lashed out at the last suspensions and snapped them, intending to return the silver haired nin back to the ground to even the odds.

It was once Sato bit his thumb and formed seals on his way down did Gaara realize that Sato had expected him to dismantle the traps.

Naruto's hands slammed down onto the railing in disbelief, “He's summoning something!”

Haku watched as well as the smoke cleared and a truck-sized bird flapped about, disoriented, as if bewildered by the brightness of the stadium. Sato landed squarely on its head, grinning, “Let's go! I know you're sleepy but it's time to fight!”

The bracken-colored bird was still too dizzy to respond and floundered about pathetically before attempting to land, which was a mistake on its part.

Gaara's sand swarmed as it came nearer and crushed the bird instantly, leaving Sato to jump off frantically and form more seals to call another.

“What is going on? It's like he had no control over it!” Naruto observed, disgusted with Sato's
“Naruto-kun, I don't think it's really his fault,” Haku remarked quietly, making his friend turn to him questioningly, “Didn't you see what he summoned? It was an owl; most tend to be nocturnal and now isn't the most appropriate time for them to fight. It must have been sleeping when he called it.”

“An…owl? It was pretty big too!” Naruto scratched his head, “Though I thought he'd go for something goofy like a kangaroo or a giraffe.”

“That kid's such a bird brain.” Shikamaru muttered, not impressed.

Sato successfully called a second owl, this one a mix of white and brown plumage and it appeared fully alert. He landed on it as it settled into a comfortable glide and avoided Gaara's sand.

Sato berated himself for his inexperience. Only recently had he begun summoning his contracted animals and he had been using one main bird for most of his aerial techniques. He admitted it wasn't fair to call an owl into a battle that wasn't well acquainted with him. He decided he'd remedy that later.

It was a fantastic feeling to be able to avoid Gaara with ease, and Sato felt that if there was ever a good time for him to end the match it would be then, “Get ready, Gaara-kun, I'm going to finish this with my most powerful jutsu!”

The bird climbed higher, beyond the reach of the stadium, forcing those watching to tilt their heads up to observe. Gaara suspected the Chidori after seeing him use it once before, and then seeing Sasuke use it correctly. He had a feeling he might try something else after seeing him summon owls.

“He has only recently mastered this attack under my supervision,” Kurenai informed Asuma as he watched the shrinking form of the bird ascend, “It is a finishing move. Gaara will be lucky to escape it…”

Asuma gave her a quizzical look and then took a drag, wondering how her eccentric pupil had managed to turn the tables so abruptly.

“He takes after his father after all.” Kakashi felt an odd sensation develop in his stomach as he watched his nephew rise up into the local sky, “He takes after his father after all.”

Gai laughed jubilantly beside him at the notion, “Indeed, he would make Riei proud!”

Sato drew out his trusty chain scythe, recalling how it had failed him during his use of it in his preliminary match, 'Not this time, though! This time I'm ready!' His avian escort provided a second chain sickle that had been concealed in its down, and he took it gratefully, “I'll see you around, Kutaiku! I can take it from here!”

The bird's voice was concerned, “You're wings are still smaller than his…don't do anything foolish!” He had worried for the boy's safety, but departed in a cloud of smoke obediently.

Sato moved upward with the leftover momentum, a bit unnerved by the terrible height, and Gaara was a mere dot below him, 'If I do this right like last time then maybe I won't die!' It was something he looked forward to.

He spun the chains with great effort, and in seconds the centrifugal force upheld the motion and he began to fall downward again with speed, letting himself be thrown into a wild spin.
Gaara watched the rapidly gyrating nin descend, and prepared himself a thick shield, wondering if it would do him any good, *This attack will be massive if it hits. I need a way to avoid it…’*

Naruto and Haku were alarmed as well, not suspecting that Sato had been able to broaden his arsenal. In contrast, Shino was very pleased by such an unorthodox assault. Hinata held her breath, horrified of what would become of the two combatants.

The velocity of the rotation had distorted his vision, but Sato was aware his target was drawing near as wind whipped past his ears, carrying the cries of the excited crowd along with it, *“One Thousand Chains of Saturn!”* 

The spiraling sphere of blades met the earth and tore up what was left of the even ground, kicking up a storm of debris and forcing Hayate to take cover in a nearby balcony. Gaara disappeared from Naruto and Haku's sight.

“Gaara!” The blonde called down into the thick cloud, the sound of chains still horridly audible, and he received no answer.

Below, unseen to those trying to watch, Gaara's sand had managed to pin one of the chain sickles, embedding the blade into the wall next to him, which was scored with hundreds of slashes from the reckless assault. The second chain of the brace, however, was still in motion and was tossed in a sweeping arc toward him.

Gaara dodged clumsily, barely avoiding the high-speed weapon as it hacked at his sand armor. He watched as Sato struggled to stay on his feet, wobbly yet resolute.

Sand captured the second chain, buying enough time for Gaara to render it useless and wrench it from Sato’s hand across the way. He had been too dizzy to retrieve it, and opted for regrouping while in the cover of the dust cloud that was quickly clearing.

Two fire clones attacked Gaara as a diversionary tactic, while Sato attempted to come up with another way to end the match.

The debris cloud disappeared and Naruto was cheering once again to see Gaara in one piece, *“This is the best exam ever!”*

Tama called down to Sato encouragingly, *“Pick up the pace! You can still win this!”*

Gaara crushed the pair of clones, avoiding their fiery after-effect and turned to Sato, *“Give up. If that was your best technique then this is over!”*

Sato hurled a kunai past Gaara's left ear, nicking his cheek, and it embedded itself in the far wall behind the red haired boy. Something had been amiss about the attack, and Gaara glanced over to see if the kunai had an explosive attached. Although it didn't, a small tag was there with the character for 'singularity.'

It was baffling but he decided not to stress about it if it wasn't about to blow up.

“I don't use forbidden jutsu often, but you and your crew seem to be a bad influence, don't you think?” He formed hand seals, his expression grim, *“Forbidden Summoning: Prison Gravity!”* 

*That explains the kunai…’* Gaara glanced back at the glowing tag, unsure of what the exact function of the jutsu was since nothing happened immediately.

Kakashi frowned. He knew that Sato would have one last trick up his sleeve, *“That jutsu can put everyone in this stadium in danger if he's careless, but if he uses enough chakra this match is
Weapons that had been scattered over the gouged ground, along with wires that had been torn
down earlier began to shudder and slowly shimmy in Gaara's direction. He didn't overlook the
strange force being exerted from the wall behind him.

Gaara chose to react too late, finding it difficult to move against the direction the mass behind him
was pulling in. He glued his feet to the ground with chakra, refusing to be pulled back against his
will. Sato, a ways ahead of him, watched carefully as if he were waiting for something.

In moments, kunai and other discarded weapons were being pulled in by the strain, soaring past
Gaara in the most bizarre, unearthly fashion. It wasn't much later that his own sand shield began to
rip itself apart and be pulled towards the amassed gravity point.

It was then he felt slightly worried.

Sand was his main offense and defense; he wouldn't be able to go long without it. From the
balcony Temari and Kankuro were just as horrified as Gaara's teammates.

His footing was no longer adequate and Gaara felt the massive power behind him draw him in like
a helpless leaf in a gale. He slammed into the wall painfully, his gourd dissolving back into sand.

Sakura stood up, wide eyed, “Gaara-kun!”

By then, Gaara had acknowledged the fact that he was utterly immobile, *I'm completely
vulnerable!*

Somewhere in the back of his mind he could hear the Ichibi declaring vengeance on the Hatake,
and he did his best to ignore its incensed yowls.

*Take my chakra and crush him. He is but a worm exercising power that is not rightfully his!
Kill him and show who possesses true power here!*

It was a very tempting offer, but chakra wasn't going to do him much good if he couldn't move
freely.

Up on the balcony, Lee and Sasuke returned after being inspected thoroughly by medic-nin. As a
result of opening the fifth gate Lee walked slowly and carefully, exhausted from the strain it had
put on his body. His right arm was heavily bandaged and in a sling, and Sasuke did not appear in
much better health either. Lee was still so thrilled over his match that he had been raving about it
to Sasuke the entire time the medics had been tending to them. Sasuke endured the excited chatter;
he too had to admit it was extraordinary.

Below, Sato was preparing to use the Chidori even as the gravity he had called upon began to
slowly drag him in as well. He had stolen the technique from the archives and learned it before
Kakashi had pried it out of his hands. Sato had searched for a way to immobilize a foe because he
lacked the Sharingan as a means of improving his accuracy. He narrowed his midnight hued eyes
purposefully, *This is it. Now I can prove to my team and Tama that I really have become
stronger!*

“Stunning!” Was Lee's first word on the scene, “It appears as if Sato-kun has copied Sasuke who
has copied Kakashi!”

“I really can't say what's going on Lee…” Tenten replied meekly, unnerved by the proceedings.

Below, Sato was half-running and half being dragged by the misplaced gravity pulling him in, the
Chidori's light blurred into a beam with his speed. Naruto grimaced as he watched, warning Haku, “Gaara's in trouble!”

Sakura observed in horror, disbelief written all over her face, *This jab is worse than Sasuke's! It's moving with so much force that Gaara-kun might...he might get...'*

Sato crashed headlong into the red haired shinobi, hitting him in the shoulder with white-tinted chakra that sang like thousands of birds.

The recoil knocked him back and the gravity jutsu abruptly wore off, dropping all of its imprisoned contents to the ground with a clatter, Gaara included. His scream was not audible over the Chidori’s chirping.

Sato stumbled to his feet, panting and completely out of chakra.

Gaara clutched his bleeding shoulder. His expression dark and his breathing was labored. The blood was everywhere, soaking his side and was splattered on the wall behind him. His sand hovered inexplicably all around him as if just as stunned as he was.

“I'm sorry, Gaara-kun,” Sato said quietly, totally exhausted, “I guess this fight is over.”

Kurenai had nearly had a heart attack from her place in the stands. She was grateful to see both genin still alive.

Gaara stood shuddering. He was unable to recover or defend himself. The wound would force him to admit defeat.

*You fool! You cannot deny my power! If you will not end this, then I shall...*

The idly floating sand came to life and latched onto Gaara's arm, forming a sort of claw-like appendage. His face was twisted with fury that was not his own, and his eyes locked on to his target, who would be too weakened to escape.

*He isn't backing down even after all of that?* Reluctantly, Sato drew both of his kodachi again and took an offensive stance, *How is he able to keep going?*

Gaara's sand lashed out at the Hatake viciously, knocking him back. Sato slashed at it vainly, trying to keep it at bay, yet it continued to swarm mercilessly around him with an unprecedented speed.

“We have to get down there!” Naruto had feared the idea of Gaara losing control, but hadn't truly expected him to be pushed so far.

Haku also agreed it was time to intervene. They both abandoned the balcony and made for the arena.

Sato had lost his grip on his weapons while trying to avoid the sand that had encased him in a coffin, knocking him down to the ground. He did not realize Gaara was not himself, “Hey! I give!” The sand smothered him, silencing his cries as it obscured him entirely.

Hayate wasted no time in calling the fight, “The winner of the match is Gaara.”

Gaara ignored him and from his place above the Kazekage restrained his mirth.

The Hokage had not noticed the Kazekage’s laughter, being he was too absorbed in his own shock of how Gaara could lose control of himself. He contemplated going down into the stadium
to repair Gaara’s seal, but doing so in front of an audience could jeopardize his identity as a jinchuriki.

“What's happening?” Sakura was alarmed that Gaara had not let Sato go.

Kiba could only think to address the obvious, “Looks like... he's gonna kill him.”

“What? Why?” The pink haired girl was frantic, “He'd would never!”

Tama was already on her feet, wanting to act, but could think of nothing that would help.

“Gaara!” Naruto and Haku had caught their crazed teammate and began to grapple with him, fearing he would crush Sato, “Snap out of it!” Naruto had tackled his demonic arm while Haku settled for his left arm, nearest his wound.

The blonde boy’s hollering had actually forced the Ichibi back somewhat, reviving Gaara’s true consciousness. It was a battle to get back in control, but he was at least able to see what was happening. He saw how Haku and Naruto had not abandoned him, how he had won his match even after suffering such a terrible wound, and how Sato's life hung in the balance.

Shukaku was still infuriated once Gaara had banished it back to the corners of his mind, and he dispelled his sand instantly, releasing his captive. The sand receded and Sato was still, laid askew on the ground.

Hayate quickly moved to him, surprised to see he was able to draw breath. The medics that had earlier been upset by Lee's match were in even more of a frenzy at the sight of this fight's injuries. They went to the unconscious Hatake first.

Hinata and Shino looked on, dumbfounded as Sato was removed from the arena in a near death-like state. Kurenai shared their terror.

“I told you that you shouldn't have done this!” Naruto hissed in Gaara's ear as he came to, looking just as bewildered as he was in pain, “Come on! We'll get you out of here and we'll find Ero-sensei! You'll be okay!”

“I'm not... I can't just-”

Haku interrupted Gaara, putting pressure on the wound, “Stop it! You're hurt badly. You're seal is not stable enough for you to argue!” Haku added in a low voice, not wanting to clue in any eavesdroppers, “Gaara-kun, please, you'll be fine if you-!”

Gaara knocked them away, still too disoriented to focus on what needed to be done. He was in too much of a panic that he had exposed his biju captive.

Hayate neared cautiously, unsure of what had happened.

The audience was in a state of true confusion and did not take notice as they drifted off to sleep. A genjutsu spread from an unknown source and some shinobi were able to quickly dispel it. The rest dozed off in their seats, unaware of the impending danger.

Sato was already long gone with the medics, but Gaara was in no state to cope with his victory, 'I will not lose control again...’ He fled immediately in a gust of sand, not giving his teammates the chance to prevent his escape.

“Gaara!” Naruto's cry was cut short by an explosion near where the Hokage was seated, and it was then he noted that none of what had happened was merely a coincidence.
'Someone took advantage of Gaara-kun's craziness!' He narrowed his fiery blue eyes, 'Hokage-sama will be okay, but Gaara-kun won't if we don't follow him!'

Naruto turned to Haku, looking determined, “Haku, let's go get him before anything else happens!”

A bit stupefied by what had transpired, Haku looked to his friend and slowly nodded in agreement. He followed after Naruto as they left the arena with speed powered by fear.
Invasion

Chapter Soundtrack: “Hyakkin” by Kenji Kawai

Tama watched ninja scrambling to remove Sato from the arena below, while Gaara was tackled by his not-so-thrilled teammates. She had honestly believed that Sato was going to win.

Another truth, however, was that she did not very well know the extent of power his opponent possessed; or most of the other competing genin for that matter, *'I was so sure he was going to do it...he tried so hard. It's as if he's been attacking a brick wall all this time!'*

Miserable over his defeat and more so over his injuries, Tama stood and proceeded to scoot down the aisle, not wanting to see any more of the upcoming fights.

*'Sato didn't deserve to be beaten like that! I just don't understand it…' She was halfway up the stairs to the second level when she heard a cry from the crowd, followed by a deafening crash from where the Hokage and Kazekage had been seated.

Tama stumbled, knocked over by the force of the nearby explosion. She could only see a cloud of smoke and dust from where the Sandaime had been, but it was then she felt her heart begin to beat frantically in her chest, *'Something's very wrong! Relax. Stay calm and just keep moving. Whatever's happening the Leaf ninja will-'*

She frowned at the soft, misty feathers drifting in front of her face, making her eyelids feel heavy. It reminded her of the irritating genjutsu Sato would practice on her just to get on her nerves when he was bored, “Release!” She had muttered it with a seal in annoyance, not sure where exactly it had come from.

The black haired girl brushed off her pants and proceeded up the stairs with a huff, somewhat nervous, not overlooking all of the people in the audience who were nodding off as she passed by.

“Was it a…sleeping genjutsu?” Tama asked herself quizzically, not comprehending it, “Why would they put the whole audience to sleep if the exam isn't even close to being finished? Unless it had something to do with that blast…”

She planted her feet on the second level and rolled up the sleeves of her shirt. The ice blue color clashed with the tan of her skin, making her very noticeable, *'Am I the only one who's awake? Just what is going on here?'*

She felt like a sheep separated from its flock, except that the flock was asleep while she wandered about trying to find an explanation for it.

In the back of her mind Tama was aware that some sort of attack was beginning. Even if she lacked the knowledge of who was responsible and what the goal of the raid was, she knew that if she stayed she'd soon be in no better physical condition than Sato.

Trying not to panic, she trotted down the empty overhang, searching for signs of any other Leaf shinobi. To her dismay, she saw no one who was awake.

*“Over there! He missed one!” Tama snapped her head around to see a ninja garbed in dark attire pointing at her from his position concealed within the audience, “Get her before she leaves!”*

A moment later she was running full-out down the hall, keeping track of her pursuers as they appeared in her peripheral. She doubted she'd get away if they followed but she wasn't yet
frightened.

Three of them blocked her path and one stopped behind her once she halted. Tama felt her stomach do a flip at the sight of their head bands, “Sound ninja? What is it that you're planning?”

“Be a good girl and go back to sleep now, what do you say?” The leader, it appeared, didn't seem interested in fighting. He crossed his arms in amusement, “You don't have anything to worry about…”

Her fists balled automatically and she leapt. The Oto nin on her far right reacted the fastest, moving to counter her. She tripped him with no effort and let his head connect with the nearest wall, while delivering a pitiless uppercut to the leader who followed. She could hear him gag as he bit his tongue off.

The last two attacked in unison, and she took an offensive stance, her face composed, “Maito Diversionary Tactic!” She leapt up and they skidded to a stop, unable to evade as her hands swept down and knocked their heads together.

After that she chose not to loiter. Tama continued running, knowing they'd be following her again soon enough. She wore a smug smile at the fact they hadn't realized she could fight, ‘Sexist bastards! I hope they don't forget they got their butts kicked by a girl!’

Her heart sank as another Sound shinobi appeared ahead of her, drawing out kunai. Instantly, her hands went to her sides, ready to counter with her own knives, yet she had none.

'Well duh!' She mentally slapped herself, ready to strangle her parents for telling her it was impractical to carry weapons around, 'From now on I bring them, even if it pisses them off!'

Tama put her arms up in front of her, preparing to block the projectiles that were coming at her, except that they didn't hit. Gai exploded onto the scene with a valiant cry, knocking the Sound ninja out instantly with a flying kick.

“Uncle Gai!” She was relieved to see a familiar face, and scurried over to him.

He gave her an expectant look, “This is no time for games, Tama-chan. Our village has come under attack!” Her onyx eyes were wide at the news, “You must leave the stadium immediately, these ninja are treacherous!”

“But I… I don't have any weapons with me!” Tama felt her voice crack nervously, “Do I have to go alone?”

Another Oto nin approached and Gai knocked him out and tossed him down the nearby stairs, “You will join Lee and Tenten once outside, understood? I've sent them there already and they will be waiting for you.”

Tama crouched down over one of the ninja her uncle had pummeled, examining his holsters, and taking what weapons she pleased, “Okay, I'll find them… what about you?”

“I must defend this place for now. I will find you when I can,” Gai gave her a reassuring grin, “Now go!”

With a compliant nod she departed, continuing down the walkway. She ran past Kakashi who was courteous enough to dispose of a lone Sound nin who began to follow her.

Tama hadn't exactly planned an escape route, but thankfully, she was a frequent visitor of the arena and knew its layout well. She turned right into a closed stairwell and jumped over the
railing, landing silently on the floor below. After verifying the coast was clear, she proceeded to
slink down the nearest hallway.

Every sound that echoed in the hall had her on edge, even her own footsteps had her wary of her
surroundings.

She peaked around a corner and pulled her head back, waiting for a sentry Sound ninja to pass by.
Tama took a deep breath and then moved ahead, sneaking down a small, easily overlooked
corridor where an emergency exit was closed off by a lock and chain.

With Maito-strength, she pulled one of the double doors off of its hinges as quietly as possible.

Once outside, Tama abandoned the exit and fled for the cover of the nearest tree, from which she
planned to keep lookout for her uncle's students. She balanced on a branch thick with leaves,
hoping it would be enough to keep her out of sight, *Where are they? He said they'd be here!*

Even though she had only waited a grand total of two and a half minutes, it was more than she
could bear. Her anxiety had her legs itching to guide her to the nearest safe place, which was
probably no longer safe.

'Maybe they've already gone ahead without me, I don't blame them...I can barely stand still
myself!' There was no sign of them, and Tama decided it would be wiser to keep going, *They
couldn't have gotten far...'*

Tama dropped down from the safety of the tree and after a short prayer she bolted.

She had known it was risky, but she hoped she would not be spotted immediately when she ran
for it. Luck, it seemed, was not on her side today.

'More of them? ' Her heart was in overdrive, frenetically delivering blood to her legs as a small
squad of Sound nin chased after her, *This is just ridiculous!*

Taking a leaf out of Lee's book after seeing him fight earlier, she opened one of her own chakra
gates and ran pell-mell down the street in a blur of pale blue and black.

They notified a group just around the corner, much to her disgruntlement, and she decided it
would be better to improvise than to let them herd her farther into the belly of the town where the
remainders of their units were most likely waiting.

On her way past a sign with directions to the nearest shopping center, Tama reached out and
grabbed the pole, letting her pent up momentum swing her around, back in the direction of her
pursuers.

She grinned like a madwoman as she soared past them. The squad leader angrily told his cronies
to about-face. They did so with startling speed and followed her as she disappeared down into the
side streets.

It was difficult for her not to panic as she ducked into the narrow alleyways with a unit of five
shinobi on her tail. Tama weaved between buildings cleverly, knowing the area like the back of
her hand, yet for all of her evasive maneuvers she could not shake them.

'Up there!' She jumped abruptly, nearly missing her target, and scrambled up a fire escape to the
top of an office building, *If I go downtown I can lose them for sure!*

In seconds they joined her on the rooftop, fed up with her antics. Tama backed away from them
with cautious steps, nearing the edge of the building.
With no warning she leapt over the side, dropping down beyond their sight. A flagpole on the side of the building was her salvation as she grabbed it on her way down, and swung herself neatly to the concrete of the alley below.

Her athletics put Sato and Lee both to shame, but she admitted they were nearing her level of mobile-artistry thanks to their rigorous training.

Tama commanded herself not to get distracted as she wove into the nearby complexes, swerving in and out of streets, her pursuers long gone. She'd make sure not to pick up any more of them.

High on adrenalin, she scaled a telephone pole and raced along the wire, wanting to get a view of the local area and hopefully her friends, “Lee, Tenten, where are you two?”

While running along the cable she looked off to her left at the business district, observing in the distance buildings crumbling in the wake of a monstrous serpent.

In her terror, she nearly lost her footing. She returned to the ground, not wanting to see what other horrors were visible from that height. She was becoming frantic because she had not found any Leaf ninja. If she did not come up with a new plan she would still be in danger.

‘I'll just see if I can find mom and dad then, if someone else hasn't...’ She reasoned, fearing for their safety, ‘I don't want them to be in the middle of working when some ninja bursts in on them and-'

Three ninja surrounded her and forced her to stop with a hail of shuriken. Tama dodged, alarmed that they had caught her off her guard.

They too were Sound ninja, and she was growing increasingly tired of seeing them. She swallowed the lump in her throat, desperately trying to concentrate.

“It's pointless to struggle…” The shinobi to her right had an almost friendly voice, “You should come quietly if you don't want to die. We've had reports about you running amuck. It's about time you call it quits, missy.”

She steeled her nerves and took an offensive stance that matched Lee's perfectly, “I think you should know that I've never declined a fight from anyone!”

Tama picked up a piece of loose pipe to block the volley of shuriken thrown her way and leapt back, swiping the pipe at the ninja who had snuck up behind her. He knocked away her improvised weapon and she grappled with him, listening to the cracking noise as his arm was removed from its socket, ‘I can't hold out much longer! They may be pushovers in taijutsu, but not in everything!’

Fortune smiled down upon her at long last.

Lee and Tenten came careening down from a nearby rooftop, taking on the last two ninja. A hail of knives and sickles stopped one of the sound ninja in his tracks, hitting the backs of his legs. Lee delivered an award-winning kick to the fool who chose to remain rather than flee. Even with his arm in a sling he was able to deal considerable damage.

Tama also knocked out her own opponent and grinned at her saviors, tremendously happy to actually see friendly faces amidst the chaos.

“Tama! We have to head for cover and escort any stragglers to safety before more of them get here!” Tenten was beside her a moment later, giving her a rundown of the details, “Where were
“I…thought you went ahead without me.” She admitted, very sheepish and cross with herself.

Lee shook his head, “Never, Tama-chan! Gai-sensei trusted us with your safety and we will not fail him!”

She glad to hear it. She should've known better from the start. She was out of practice as a ninja and she should not have panicked. Tama followed close behind them as they moved on with kunai out and at the ready.

A small explosion knocked a brick wall over and a Sound nin fell to the ground unconscious with black snakes coiled around his neck. They paused, watching in confusion as Anko appeared, looking pleased with her handiwork.

She glanced over to them and raised an eyebrow at the sight of them, “What are you three gawking at? Hurry it up so we can get to the barracks already!” It sounded as if she had been expecting them but they couldn't be too sure.

Tenten chuckled weakly and she followed after the jounin with Lee and Tama in tow, wondering what exactly Anko had been doing on her own.

“Tenten, Lee, I…” Tama felt her chest clench painfully, “I’m worried about Sato-kun and my parents! Is it right for us to just leave them behind?”

“All of the injured were evacuated from the stadium immediately, Gai-sensei said,” Lee repeated, almost parrot-like, “Sato-kun will be perfectly fine!”

“But my parents…they work near the business district and I saw a giant snake over there crushing everything!” Tama couldn't help the frightened pitch of her voice, “I don't know if they're still there or not.”

Anko paused briefly and looked to Tama, “Everyone in that district has already had a chunin guide them away from the fighting…well, should've had a chunin lead them away. Everyone who was available to escort civilians to safety is already over there. But let me tell you something kid…” Tama gave Anko her full attention, “You better get used to seeing snakes, because the king of them is responsible for this mess.”

Naruto and Haku had leapt the wall of the stadium without delay, desperate to catch up to Gaara. They hadn't gotten very far from the arena before they were stopped by enemy ninja.

“Sound.” Haku muttered lowly, glancing over to his friend beside him, “Are they responsible?”

The blonde boy cracked his knuckles, glaring at the four shinobi blocking their path, “Even if they aren't, do we have a good enough reason not to kick their asses?”

Haku saw his point and threw a round of senbon to distract them, while Naruto and three of his shadow clones ravaged the unprepared enemy ninja. The fight hadn't lasted long, but it had wasted time and Naruto couldn't help but feel the pressure begin to mount, ‘Why is this happening now? If we don't find Gaara soon he may lose control again!’

“Naruto-kun,” The blonde boy looked to Haku beside him as they raced out of the city and into the woods beyond, “I know this isn't helping now, but I confess I'm the one responsible for Gaara's rage, I think.”
Naruto frowned at him, “I guessed as much. But I don't give shit what you two were fighting over! If we don't find him he could get killed!”

“I swear I'll never let it happen again,” Haku vowed, pushing aside his doubts, “I know now that he was truthful and I had no right to judge his family…I just-”

“I know, Haku,” Naruto interrupted, his voice quiet, “He has what we don't. He's lucky. But none of that's gonna matter if that demon gets loose from his seal.”

The dark haired boy fought back a shiver, recalling Gaara's outburst at the end of his match. He followed behind Naruto, hoping they'd catch him before it could happen again.

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Gaara had gained considerable ground after fleeing the arena.

He had reached the forests on the far outskirts of Konoha before stopping, trying to stay in control of his consciousness. More than ever, Shukaku's presence was becoming progressively more difficult to restrain after fighting Sato.

Sand had latched onto his arms and he found he lacked the strength to dispel it, 'This can't happen…I won't allow it!' He paused beneath a tall cedar tree, kneeling down in the shade and trying to catch his breath.

He'd give anything to be free of the demon's cruel laughter echoing in his head.

**Don't be frightened, you've been surprisingly fun so far! Helpful too! Now that those other two idiots aren't around you and I can have a little chat.**

'I refuse to indulge your will.'

_Do as you like. It makes little difference, for the next fool to come near us is as good as dead, isn't he? Even you like killing just as much as I do, I'm sure! It makes you feel satisfaction that even your precious ones cannot give you…_'

'I kill only when I have to. You hold no sway over my actions.'

_Liar! You are a jealous, carnal being. Killing gives you more pleasure than even that pink haired wench you're obsessed with._

'Leave Sakura out of this!'  

_Oh! Sorry, Gaara. Does it pain you that she knows nothing of your desire? That you loathe the Uchiha who keeps her under lock and key while you are near?_'

'I am not like you! Naruto and Haku will-

_Eek! I am terrified of them! They'll scare me away and keep you safe! Ha ha! You bring me so much entertainment, small one, more than any of my past jailors! You should be honored!_'

'Your very existence is an embarrassment to this world. It is my duty to keep you from harming anyone.'

_We biju have existed in this world long before humans, you insufferable sack of guts! And if your sacrifice for concealing me is so noble perhaps you'll try your luck at hiding me from that fellow over there?_
Too caught up in his thoughts to have noticed, Gaara looked up to where a ninja had settled nearby, watching his internal struggle. He was vaguely familiar, but Gaara hadn't recognized him right away with his vision blurred by frustrated tears.

His spectator chuckled, “Don't remember me, Gaara? I'm not surprised, you've had a very trying examination, haven't you? I've been keeping track of your more impressive achievements, however…” The silver haired boy sighed, “This village will be destroyed soon…it'll be amusing to watch!”

“Kabuto…” Gaara ignored the Shukaku's laughter, glaring at the traitorous ninja, “You never were convincing enough for me to believe you were loyal to the Leaf!”

Kabuto grinned at him, pushing his glasses further up the bridge of his nose, “Maybe so, I haven't been the best actor…but I'm glad I caught up with you, Gaara-kun! Orochimaru-sama even admits that none of this could be possible without you, you know.”

“He is scum not worthy of such titles,” Gaara hissed, feeling his sand circle around him with malevolent intent, “I will make him pay for what he's done to my teammates!”

Kabuto frowned, “You can try,” He formed a hand sign a moment later, initiating a powerful genjutsu, “Sleep well, Gaara-kun.”

Gaara could only hear the joyous screeches of Shukaku as his mind faded into darkness.

“Stop a sec, Haku-kun,” Naruto paused momentarily on a branch after feeling a violent tremor reverberate through the ground and rattle the entire forest, “Did you feel that?”

Haku nodded, wary, “Yes, and still no sign of him…do you think that he may have-?”

“No! Don't think like that!” The blonde boy clenched his fists, “He's gonna be fine, we just have to find him is all!”

“Hey! Naruto!”

Naruto turned and he was truly surprised to see Sasuke approaching with a small dog beside him. Sasuke looked rather peeved he had to actually exert himself to catch up with his fellow Leaf genin.

The Uchiha prodigy stopped on a branch across from Naruto, frowning, “Any particular reason your friend decided to run off like that? You'd have an easier time keeping him on a leash…”

Naruto nodded in agreement, “Couldn't have said it better myself!”

Haku's face was the epitome of astonishment. He hadn't expected the person Gaara disliked the most to arrive to help them.

The dog that had come with Sasuke spoke up impatiently, “Listen boys, I'll be able to track Gaara. I caught his scent trail before we set out.”

Naruto blinked down at the dog, not very surprised it could talk, “Er, good dog…so where was he headed?”

“It's Pakkun and he's moving erratically, probably due to his injuries.” The pug replied, “If we don't hurry he'll be halfway out of the Fire Country before we find him.”
Seconds later they were soaring through the canopy, following the small brown dog that scrutinized air currents along the way, calculating their course.

Sasuke turned to Haku, still unsure why Kakashi had ordered him to follow the runaways, “Do you mind telling me exactly what's going on?”

“Gaara-kun is not in a healthy state of mind at the moment,” Haku didn't want to break the Hokage's law at a moment as crucial as this, but Sasuke needed to have some idea of what they were up against, “And when I say that, I mean that he is potentially dangerous to himself and those around him.”

Sasuke raised an eyebrow but accepted it as a valid answer.

“We have to move faster, we're being followed,” Pakkun sniffed guardedly as they picked up speed, “Eight...no, nine ninja approaching, fast. Pick up the pace!”

They indeed did gain speed, but it made little difference as they ran for a long while after that, unable to evade their pursuers.

“We can back-track to throw them off course,” Haku suggested as they descended to the forest floor, “We still have some considerable ground over them...”

“Not for long, hurry it up so we can keep moving.” Pakkun leapt backwards with Naruto and Sasuke as they followed Haku, retracing their steps, careful not to leave evidence of their intentions.

They traveled Northeast in silence for nearly ten minutes, careful to not leave any evidence of their presence, but even then it had not been enough to fool the Sound ninja following them.

“It's no good, they're getting closer,” The pug was troubled that they had been unsuccessful, “We'll have to try something else.”

“A decoy,” Sasuke recommended, “One of us stays behind to slow them down, that way the others have a better chance of finding Gaara.”

Haku and Naruto nodded in understanding, before Sasuke added, “Though the one who does...is likely to die.”

They paused on a large tree branch, knowing it to be the truth. They were low on stamina and chakra after their respective matches, and one against nine enemy shinobi had unfavorable odds.

The genin stood in silence, thinking the situation over. It was the only option they had left that was likely to give them the advantage, even at the cost of one of their lives.

After a long moment, Haku spoke up, “I'll do it. I can stay behind and stall them while you go ahead.”

Naruto directly protested, “No, Haku-kun, let me! You don't have to do this if—”

“I insist,” Haku's face was grave and he glanced over to the blonde boy and Sasuke, “I've made up my mind about this. It's my fault Gaara's been suffering. I must do this.”

“We can't waste any more time,” Pakkun cut in, “He stays, he's decided. It's time to keep moving!”

Sasuke regarded Haku for a long moment, “If you're sure...just make sure you get them by
Naruto's face was pained, “Alright. You stay and we'll go...and you better be careful!”

“When am I not?” He offered his worried friend a convincing smile.

Hesitantly Naruto continued on with Sasuke and Pakkun at his heels.

After a long minute, Haku let out a deep breath he had been holding and then leapt down to the forest floor, turning back to confront their enemies.

He settled behind a tall oak, reflecting on his decision, 'They will find Gaara-kun, I know it. As long as I am here I will not allow them to pass!' He knew he probably wouldn't be rejoining them after fighting off the Sound nin, 'I am not afraid to die...not anymore.'

A span of ten excruciatingly long minutes granted Haku the necessary time to plan an ambush, although he was uncertain of what to expect from the squad that had been following his friends.

Without warning the troop of Oto ninja descended and surrounded Haku, three of them drawing kunai and closing in. He hadn't been able to react in time.

The Sound ninja recoiled angrily after shredding a water clone, knowing they had exposed themselves to a counter.

Haku and a second water clone landed senbon on a number of the opposing shinobi, paralyzing the majority of them as the needles sunk into the backs of their necks.

Three of them were able to evade and closed in again, wary of the needles Haku had steadied between his knuckles.

'I won't be able to keep this up!' The fatigue he had been ignoring up until then had finally caught up with him, 'I'll have to use a jutsu!

His last water clone was destroyed by a shinobi who was handy with a sword and Haku leapt back, preparing to use a water jutsu.

He had nearly been bowled over by a tremendous wind that raked through the trees, and blew away his remaining opponents easily. Haku regained his footing, recognizing the slash marks on the three ninja who had been hit by the gale.

Temari appeared shortly after, looking smug.

Haku didn't hide his relieved smile, “Temari! I'm...honestly glad to see you right now.” He blinked when he noticed she was alone, “Where's your brother?”

“Kankuro? He's holding off the rest of them so they won't follow me.” Temari frowned at him, “I thought there were others with you.”

“They went ahead,” Haku said absently, taking a head count of the fallen ninja on the ground, “Wait...Pakkun said there were nine; there are only eight here...”

“What are you talking about-?”

“Move!” They were barely able to dodge as shuriken rained down from the tree tops, exposing the last Sound ninja.

Without missing a beat, Temari swung her fan in a vicious arc, knocking him from his hiding
Without missing a beat, Temari swung her fan in a vicious arc, knocking him from his hiding place and Haku landed senbon at specific points that would render him immobile once he hit the ground.

Temari closed her fan, looking grim, “We have to find Gaara before he's made to transform! We haven't got a lot of time left.”

Haku stared at her suspiciously, “How do you know that?”

“Because…it was what my sensei briefed us on earlier during the exam,” Temari admitted grudgingly, “They made Gaara a key part in the destruction of this village.”

“Then why are you helping me?” His hostility was quickly returning, “You're on their side.”

“No, I'm not! Even if I should be,” She snapped, her eyes narrowing, “Kankuro and I refused the mission. We aren't going to let them hurt our brother!”

That was all Haku had to hear. He smiled in relief, “Then I should thank you. I really am sorry for what—”

“Enough! Save it for later,” Temari didn't want him to get mushy, “Quit loafing around and follow me!” She leapt away and he flanked her without question, finally holding her in high esteem.

“K-Ken, what do we do now?” A dark haired woman shrunk behind her husband in horror as their chunin escort dropped dead to the ground in front of them, “They've cornered us!”

She had good reason to be frightened. At the time of their evacuation they had already come under attack, leaving civilians to flee the fighting while ninja attempted to protect them.

Their escort, however, had no warning once he had been stabbed by two crazed Cloud ninja. Now they had no defense and were likely to be killed next, but what she feared more than anything was the safety of her daughter, Tama.

Her husband, equally as brave as his brother Gai, sucker-punched one of the unwary nin before backing away again, “Quiet, Miako, you'll have to leave now while I hold them off.”

He stood in front of her, fiercely protective, but he doubted he'd be able to contend against ninja. He was a banker for heaven's sake!

The other Kumo nin glared at him and prepared a favored lightning jutsu, intending to finish them, that was, until another Leaf ninja slammed into him before he could use his technique. It was an instant knockout.

Ken blinked down at the genin who had saved their lives, indistinctly recognizing him, “You're one of Gai's students, aren't you?”

Neji blinked at him, noting how the man speaking to him resembled his sensei, yet with less prominent features. Miako stepped out from behind her husband, looking deeply grateful.

“I am,” He said flatly. He hadn't been intending to rescue civilians, but his conscience, though narrow and abused, got the better of him, “Are you alright?”

Ken nodded, “For now. We're headed for the garrison. Can you take us there?”

Neji nodded and activated his Byakugan, “Stay close. There are at least a dozen more approaching. You'll have to run if we're to avoid them.”
“Whatever you say, Hyuga-san.” Miako looked up for the challenge and grinned just like her daughter did. She tagged along behind Neji as he went ahead, her husband rushing to keep up.

Neji disliked their lack of speed, but was aware that they were not nearly as fit as ninja would be, and more than likely scared beyond comprehension.

They had covered an excellent amount of distance. The street had been cleared of most enemy ninja by the Leaf shinobi who had passed through. Unfortunately, one squad of Sound ninja remained and decided the three stragglers on the road below would be easy prey.

Neji had seen them long before they had decided to ambush him. He turned to his charge, “Stay back, I'll finish them.” Although curious as to who he had been referring to (the road was clear) they backed up anyway, not wanting to get caught in the crossfire again.

The four Oto nin leapt down from their position on a nearby bridge and Neji easily dispatched them with a single rotation that sent them crashing into the display window of a small shop.

Ken raised an eyebrow at the impressive display of strength, now understanding why Gai took every opportunity he had to brag about his students.

After Neji had determined it safe to continue they moved on, silent and guarded.

As promised the Hyuga prodigy delivered them to the barracks within five minutes. It had been about the same time Tama, alongside Lee and Tenten, had arrived with Anko.

With a sigh, Neji accepted their gratitude as Tama rushed to her parents eagerly, “Mom! Dad! You’re okay?” She hugged her father and then turned to their escort and grinned, “Thanks Neji, I owe you!”

Lee and Tenten were quick to spot their teammate and flocked to him, glad to finally be reunited. Neji frowned at them, “You could have found me sooner. I was waiting.”

Tenten shrugged, long since over her grudge against the Hyuga, “Sorry! Lee and I had to kick some butt before finding you; you know the drill.”

In fact he did.

“Iruka!” Neji turned to see a chunin rushing toward the academy teacher who was tending to his class of undergraduates, “We have a report that Cloud has infiltrated the village along with Sound and Sand, but they're strictly hunting Hyuga. We've lost four shinobi to them already! Are all of your students here?”

Iruka nodded, “They are, although those who were watching the finals at the exam are still at the stadium,” He frowned inwardly, “Including Hyuga Hanabi…I'm afraid all we can do is have them gather here. We can't afford to go out and find all of them.”

Neji looked away, his expression dark. It was bad enough people were dying, but to have people of his own clan targeted during the confusion was more than what he could stomach. He turned to his teammates, “I can't stay here…I have to find Hinata-sama and Hanabi-sama.”

Lee nodded, “Then we shall go as well! We will shoulder this endeavor with you!”

“We have to go now before we're accounted for…” Tenten added in a whisper.

A moment later they were gone, but their absence had not gone unnoticed. Iruka immediately had a fit upon noting their disappearance, “They'll get themselves killed out there! What are they
thinking?"

Tama turned to her old teacher, “Iruka-sensei, I think they'll be okay. They brought me and my family here, but I don't think they're quite done helping out yet.”

After a moment he nodded to her in understanding, returning to his panicked students.

“Where do you think you're taking us?”

“Away f-from here!”

“But you can't keep us safe! You're too weak! Take us back to that Aburame boy!” Hanabi was indignant as her older sister led her away from the arena, watching the streets vigilantly with her Byakugan, “Where is he anyway?”

“Father told me t-to take you far from the stadium, so I will!” Hinata announced in finality, “Shino-kun went to make sure Sato-kun made it to the hospital safely. We must stay out of sight until Father finds us.”

“But I don't want to!”

“Hanabi, please!” Hinata silenced her, flashing her white eyes desperately, “I am doing all that I can…please accept that.”

Hanabi fell silent, disgruntled, even though she had known her sister was only doing what she had been told. Hanabi was not sure what was going on or how to avoid the invading shinobi.

Hinata fled to the cover of a nearby park with her younger sister close in tow. It was quiet and shady there and would provide sufficient protection until their father came to collect them. She sat beneath a maple tree, motioning for her sister to take a place beside her.

They sat in silence and Hinata deactivated her Byakugan, rubbing at her aching eyes. Hanabi paid her no mind and remained watchful of their surroundings, then suggested, “Why don't we just return home? Wouldn't it be safer there?”

Hinata shook her head, “No, Father said that we are not to go there.”

“And why not?”

“I d-don't know…” She truthfully didn't. Like Hanabi, she too had first thought of the Hyuga compound a safe place to be during an attack. It was well-guarded and in a strategically defensible area. Hiashi, however, had stressed that they do not go there under any circumstances.

Hanabi, tired and hungry, rested her head on her sister's shoulder, feeling supremely bored. She'd have preferred to stay and watch the action at the stadium but she doubted Hinata would be able to stand it.

Hinata shifted and pulled her sister to her feet, before running headlong into the more thickly wooded area of the park.

“What are you doing?” Hanabi hissed, not liking being handled so roughly, “Why can't we just-?”

She saw the Byakugan illuminating her sister's eyes again and it was then she understood that they were in danger.

Glancing over her shoulder as the rushed through the underbrush, Hanabi could make out three
ninja pursuing them, making a raucous as they crashed through the treetops.

“They’re…they’re chasing us!” She squealed in horror, her eyes wide, “What do they want with us?”

Hinata didn't answer as she kept running, soon pulling her smaller sibling into her arms and leaping into the trees at great speed, doing her best not to become hysterical. She could see with her Kekkei Genkai their hunters closing in rapidly, and she knew that they didn't need a good reason to attack them if they had raided their village in the first place.

Boldly, Hinata dropped back down to the ground and faced the enemy ninja with her sister clinging to her in fright. For the first time in a long while she was not afraid. Even if there was no guarantee that she would leave unharmed, Hinata refused to let them near Hanabi.

Judging by their headbands she could tell immediately they were from Kumogakure, and Hinata quickly realized their intentions, *They've long been after the secrets of the Byakugan. They've sought us out on purpose!*

She stood in front of Hanabi while the Cloud ninja snickered openly.

“What's your name, girlie?” One of them asked, as if he wanted a specific answer, “We only want Main House brats this time, not those Branch slugs who have their eyes disintegrate after you kill em’!”

“Hanabi, stay here,” Hinata muttered under her breath, not wanting the Kumo nin to overhear, “I promise you’ll be alright.”

Hanabi sniffled, upset that she was totally reliant on her older sister for protection. She could only hope she had become stronger as the blonde dope said she had.

“Not telling us, huh?” The impatient Cloud shinobi asked, eyeing Hinata, “That's fine, we'll just take our chances. You look like you have the right eyes…”

Two of her shadow clones that had been hidden in a nearby tree tackled him, knocking him out with a few precise jabs of Jyukken before the other two shinobi destroyed them, angered that they had been fooled.

Hinata charged with a cry, scanning for tenketsu as she attacked. They ganged up on her in a pincer-movement, slashing with kunai, and were again foiled with another shadow clone, “Just where is that sorry little bi-!”

They were sent flying by a sudden burst of spinning chakra that Hinata recognized all too well.

Hanabi scurried over to her sister and father as they made sure the opposing ninja were unable to cause them further trouble. Hinata blinked up at her father gratefully, “Father! I did as you asked! What are we to do n-now?”

“Be silent and stay close to me,” He replied curtly, pleased by his eldest daughter's cunning strategy, “It appears Cloud have come here with the intentions of picking off Hyuga during the fighting and we are at the greatest risk at this time.”

“Is that why we can't go home?” Hanabi squeaked, trying to keep up with her father and sister as they soared through the forest with startling speed.

“It would be foolish. There is no one there presently,” Hiashi explained, “The Cloud will be waiting there for stragglers, but in times like these the Hyuga do not return to the compound; they
gather at the garrison as all others do.”

“Do they know where it is?” Hinata asked worriedly, hoping they wouldn't be followed any further.

“No,” Her father answered, “But we are still a fair distance away from it. We must move quickly.”

Once passing through a large clearing in the forest, there was a confusing warning cry, and ten enemy ninja deserted their positions among the trees and surrounded the small group of Hyuga, as if they had been expecting them.

Hiashi merely kept moving and met the Kumo ninja head-on, blowing them away with a massive rotation that left a crater half the size of the entire forest clearing. Other wiser ninja kept a fair distance away from the range of his rotation and drove him away from his children as they fought.

The last thing Hiashi intended was for his daughters to be taken, not when he had a say in the matter!

Hinata fought bravely, but four on one was a devious match up while she tried to defend her sister from the hail of shuriken and kunai that came at them in endless rounds. She battled defensively, knowing there was little chance she could defeat them as her chakra was beginning to dwindle.

Hanabi hurled kunai skillfully from behind her sister that the Cloud ninja had discarded, landing few hits that were not fatal. She paused in her motions as she watched shuriken sail past Hinata, slicing her arm open in a spray of scarlet.

Hinata paid no mind to her injury and continued on, gradually wearing down. Hanabi ducked behind her, tugging on her jacket, “Enough! Let's run now! You don't have to do this!”

“No!” Her sister hollered, her eyes blazing, “They won't let us get away! I will not back down!”

A vicious kick sent Hinata crashing to the ground and Hanabi scuttled behind her, fearing the finishing blow that was due any moment. From afar, Hiashi made little progress against a clever jounin who had directed his squad to form a wall of lightning.

Hinata stared at the Kumo nin who was closing in, looking pleased as he prepared a fistful of shuriken, ‘If it's me that's alright, just not Hanabi…oh Naruto-kun, I fought so hard, but will you ever know? Will you ever know how I-?’

Someone leapt clear over the Hyuga girls and dove for their assailant, catching him completely off his guard. The Leaf ninja summoned a katana and let it rip through the enemy’s throat in one capable stroke.

He fell back, finished, and the remaining three ninja scattered as more Leaf shinobi appeared, surrounding Hinata and her sister, well aware of the Cloud ninja's goals.

Lee made short work of the three spineless Kumo nin even with his injured arm, and across the way Neji was assisting his uncle in dispatching the last of the importunate Cloud shinobi.

Hinata and Hanabi stared wide eyed at Tenten as she stood over the body of the fallen Kumo ninja. Not an ounce of regret was visible on her face. It appeared she was making certain the enemy was dead.

“That…that crazy girl just killed someone!” Hanabi stood up and pointed an accusing finger at Tenten, too distraught to think clearly.
Hinata hobbled to her feet shortly after, putting pressure on her arm, “Hanabi, shh! She's on our side, calm down!”

“Are you alright, Hinata-san? Hanabi-san?” Lee, predictably, had gone to make sure the two girls were intact. Neji and his uncle approached as well, looking satisfied with their methods of demolishing the opposing shinobi.

Tenten seemed to snap out of her trance and hurried over to the Hyuga girls a moment later, “You're not hurt are you? Is it bad?”

Hinata shook her head, “No…it's just a scratch and the bleeding has already stopped.” The brown haired girl sighed in relief, almost as if she had been anticipating worse.

“We leave now.” Hiashi commanded, not inclined to linger. He herded the group along, silently grateful his nephew had taken the initiative to search for them. Without his help he doubted things could have ended as well as they had.

Iruka had immediately neglected the angered speech he had prepared to give to Team Gai once he saw them return with Hiashi and his two daughters. He fell silent and then smiled to himself, knowing that he should have expected as much of them, and that Tama had been right all along.

A medic quickly went to see to the new additions, examining Hinata's wound and making sure that Hanabi was not injured either, all the while Hiashi glared at him like a vigilant hawk.

It was enough of a distraction for Neji and Lee to find Tenten as she sulked near the entrance of the barracks, cleaning off the blade of her sword with a frown.

Lee, for once, could think of nothing to say. He stood near her while trying to look cheerful, but it was difficult when she seemed so upset. Neji watched her with steady white eyes, waiting for her to speak.

“I'm sorry you two had to see that…I hadn't planned it,” Tenten admitted, putting the sword away, “They were in danger. It was the only thing I could think to do.”

“You should not feel badly about it, Tenten.” Lee understood and it made her feel better. Lee always understood her, even if things seemed unbearable.

“I'm used to it by now, I guess,” She shrugged, finding her conscience was not bothering her at all, “It wasn't nearly as bad as the first time.”

“The mission to retrieve the yumi then?” Neji inquired, sharp as ever. She nodded and he closed his eyes, deep in thought.

It was the first time Tenten was able to sense the anxiety radiating from her teammates simultaneously. She hoped that it wasn't a bad thing, but it felt surprisingly good to get it off her chest and see for that they hadn't made a fuss over it.

Exhausted, they all took a seat on an unoccupied bench, looking ready to doze off.

Just as things appeared to be looking up another Hyuga appeared. It seemed Neji recognized him but he said nothing as the boy rushed up to Hiashi with a report, “Hiashi-sama, one of the Main House was taken by Cloud!”

“Anyone else?”
“No sir, but…” The boy swallowed fearfully, “It… it was my younger brother sir, when we were leaving the compound. They threaten to kill him unless they can get you or either of your daughters…”

Hiashi was silent. He understood the pain of having a brother being sacrificed to the Cloud.

The young man fought back tears, refusing to show emotion that was swiftly overwhelming him, “I won't ask this of you, Hiashi-sama, but I fear for my brother. I offered my own life but they will have no one else!”

Hiashi stared at him for a long moment, thinking, and then turned to Hinata as she sat kneeling beside her younger sister. Their eyes met and she understood.

Neji leapt up frantically from his place near the wall, not having any of it, “Hiashi-sama, please, I will go. In Hinata-sama's stead I can-”

“Be silent, Neji, this doesn’t concern you.” Hiashi wasn't in the mood to hear any protests.

Neji fell quiet but stayed where he was, unable to believe Hinata was going to be sent as collateral. It would have been different if he could have been traded, but after fighting Naruto and seeing that Hinata had already risked so much for herself and the people she cared about he wasn't about to let her be forsaken.

“I will let this decision fall to you,” Hiashi spoke directly to Hinata, his voice distant, “As my eldest daughter you have already proven to be wise and courageous. Choose what you believe to be best.”

The anxious Main House boy stared at her fearfully and Hinata smiled at him, not even remotely upset. She had gotten a bit of a head rush from her father commending her, but Hinata had found that the solution was rather simple.

“Kage Bunshin no Jutsu…” Hinata replicated herself perfectly with a short hand seal, startling those who watched.

The look of pride on Hiashi's face was a nice change, “Take this shadow clone and retrieve your brother. Go quickly.”

Relieved, the boy grinned and guided the clone along. He left with his squad of fellow chunin to make the exchange.

Neji, frozen to the spot, let a small smile dawn on his lips, 'Naruto... you are right about Hinata-sama. No one is more worthy than she to be responsible for the safety of my clan. I am grateful to you both.'

“Stop!” Both Naruto and Sasuke halted and turned to Pakkun. The pug looked unnerved by something, and they hoped that their trail hadn't been picked up again by enemy ninja.

“Gaara's trail ends here, we can't go any further. And also…” The dog paused, “There's a monster up ahead.”

“Are you serious?” Naruto was thoroughly distressed, “I thought we'd make it in time before he'd…”

“Before what?” Sasuke was fed up with being in the dark, “Why don't you just explain what's-”
“Look out!” The dog howled. He retreated and they followed as a huge, rattling tail was visible above the tree tops as it crashed down, just barely missing them.

The tremor was monstrous and easily crushed all nearby trees. Naruto glared up at the towering figure of the sand demon that had completely possessed his friend, “I'll save you! I swear!”

“How?” Sasuke wasn't nearly as optimistic after observing the monstrous tanuki, “If that thing has him you'll need something just as large to-!”

Naruto had finished making hand seals, focusing a huge amount of chakra that even left the Uchiha baffled, “Kuchiyose no Jutsu!” A billowing cloud of smoke erupted and obscured a majority of the forest, forcing Pakkun back a ways.

Sasuke was at first only aware that they had risen a considerable height into the air. What exactly had been summoned, however, was unclear to him, This creature is huge! Can Naruto really summon something as massive as this?

The Uchiha stood, securing his footing, and was finally able to see just how enormous the sand beast ahead of them was.

“Sasuke…” Naruto's voice was low, “That's Gaara over there, see? And he can't help anything that happens from here out. Even if he attacks us, all of this is that snake-bastard's fault, Orochimaru!”

Sasuke gingerly touched the seal on his neck, recalling the loathsome snake, realizing he wasn't the only one being made to suffer at his hands.

“What the-?” Gamabunta blinked in confusion at his surroundings, “What the hell am I doing here?”

“Hey, Chief Toad!” Naruto called, “You've got to help me out! My friend's in trouble!”

“Oh…not you again!” Gamabunta grunted, recognizing Naruto from their previous encounters, “What do you have to bug me for-?” It was then he noticed the massive demon ahead of them thrashing its tail wildly in anticipation.

“Eh…that is the Ichibi no Shukaku, the dreaded demon of the sand!” Gamabunta recalled a brief bit of history about the creature, “Isn't that a sight only a mother could love?”

“Come on, Chief Toad!” Naruto was grinning, “Help me fight this thing!”

“…no.”

“This isn't just some joy-ride! This is for real!” Naruto insisted, desperate, “If we don't do something Gaara-kun might die!”

“Hm…you mean that weird sand kid?”

“Yeah! That's him!” Naruto confirmed, growing frantic.

“He's too much like you then, I suppose.” Gamabunta muttered in annoyance, “Well, I guess I should help you since you've been my henchman for some time now…”

Naruto was embarrassed by the comment.

Sasuke gave the blonde haired boy an inquiring look, “You serve a toad?”
“It’s a long story…” Naruto dismissed the subject, his eyes widening as Shukaku screeched in delight, launching immense sand shuriken their way, “Hang on!”

As the blonde boy had predicted, Gamabunta leapt into the sky to avoid the attack. Naruto had little trouble keeping his hold on the toad, but Sasuke had to scramble to stay aboard, not at all prepared for it. Even more dubious to the Uchiha was how Naruto looked as if he enjoyed the sensation of flight while it was curdling his stomach.

Back on the ground Gamabunta drew out his dagger, preparing to attack, “Here goes!” The toad raced forward with bizarre speed, slashing wildly at Shukaku and tearing off one of its arms as it moved to counter.

The blade went flying after severing the huge sand appendage and the Ichibi reeled back, howling in outrage.

Gamabunta noted that Naruto was not the only one on board at that time. One of his eyes rolled up to examine who was on top of his head, “Eh? An Uchiha?”

Sasuke stared into the large yellow eye that had glanced up at him and nodded, “What of it?”

“Use a fire jutsu now,” Gamabunta inhaled deeply, “I said now!”

The sand demon had regained its balance and turned around to face them, cursing at the impudent toad and his lackeys.

“Just do it!” Naruto hollered, not understanding but confident that Gamabunta obviously had his reasons.

Sasuke decided to oblige the giant toad and formed hand seals, “Katon: Gokakyu no Jutsu!”

The boss toad spat out a mouthful of oil and Sasuke's jutsu ignited it. The attack enveloped the raging sand demon in a storm of flames that stretched over almost the entirety of the forest. Even the Uchiha prodigy admitted there was no fire jutsu nearly as powerful in his clan compared to what the toad was capable of.

“Air Bullet!” The sand beast pounded on its gut, firing a condensed orb of wind and chakra that sailed through the flames directly towards Gamabunta. The toad boss had barely any time to dodge and leapt abruptly, knocking Naruto and Sasuke from his back.

With the aid of a chain of shadow clones, Naruto quickly pulled himself back onto the toad’s head as he soared over the treetops and watched helplessly as Sasuke dropped down into the forest below, ‘Damn it! There goes Sasuke! But he’s probably better off staying out of this…’

The Uchiha prodigy avoided the giant toad as it lumbered out of the way of Shukaku's attacks, not wanting to get stepped on. Pakkun quickly discovered him, “Sasuke, we can't stay here! There’s nothing else you can do in this fight!”

He followed the dog, glancing back in wonder at Naruto as he stood steadily on the toad boss's head.

“We've got to do something, Chief Toad!” Naruto's insides were twisting as he watched Gaara's sleeping form hanging limp atop the Ichibi's head, “Think you can get us closer?”

“Does it look like my legs fell off or something?” Gamabunta grumbled before leaping at the enemy, only to get walloped in the head by an unexpected tail-swipe from Shukaku.
It barreled the toad over and the demon laughed heartily, its screeches echoed for miles. Gamabunta righted himself, making sure Naruto was still on his head, “Nyeh… I admit I'm a bit out of shape…”

“Now you're starting to sound like Ero-sennin!” Naruto pointed out, not liking the excuse.

“Got any more bright ideas you little squirt?” The toad barked resentfully, knowing that the genin had a point.

Temari skimmed above the treetops on her fan with Haku, keeping a lookout for Gaara. Even if they had set aside their differences all for the sake of the red haired boy, it was still a bit constraining to suddenly have to work together.

“That's it up ahead isn't it?” Haku asked, noting a dust cloud swirling and the outlined figure of a gigantic beast that thrashed about, shrieking in fiendish delight.

Temari narrowed her eyes, deciding to fly higher to get a better look, “There's nothing we can do now, we're too late. We'd be killed before we could reverse the transformation…”

“Giving up is not going to save him!” Haku's voice was grim, “If you aren't willing to fight then stay here.”

“What are you doing-?” Temari's eyes widened in shock as Haku leapt from her fan, totally bent on saving his friend, “Are you crazy!”

A small ice mirror had formed in mid-air and he landed on it, assessing the situation. Shukaku was in plain sight, rapidly demolishing the surrounding forest, and Gaara just barely visible on the monster's head. Far to his left he could see Naruto had already summoned Gamabunta, and he took it as a good sign, ‘Temari's right…I can't stop this thing, but maybe I can slow it down so Naruto-kun can!’

Temari circled back around, refusing to leave. She was frustrated that Haku was foolish enough to believe he could make a difference. The Ichibi continued attacking Gamabunta, completely unaware of Haku as he began to form hand seals, *This is the jutsu I learned from the Forbidden Scroll, one that I would never have had enough chakra to perform… until now!*

Willingly he drew on the power of the cursed seal, calling on as much of the dark chakra as he could stand. Haku stared ahead at his target, black scales creeping across his skin, *It isn't too late! I can do this!*

Haku finished sealing, surrounded by turbulent dark chakra, “Suiton: Suishoha!”

Water began to condense from thin air immediately, swirling around the Shukaku in a massive current. Upon witnessing it Gamabunta found the sheer bulk of water outrageous, “That is a jutsu only known to the Second Hokage!” He looked to see Haku in the distance, following through with the jutsu, “That boy is a fool; using that much chakra will kill him!”

“Haku-kun stop it!” Naruto's cries went unheard. He could only watch helplessly as the airborne current of water closed in around the Ichibi, slowing its movements.

“Little morsel has made a puddle for me to play in!” Shukaku jeered at the genin challenging him, “What fun! I'll kill you next!”

“Freeze.” Haku commanded and the water obeyed. The current surrounding the Ichibi's remaining arm froze into blades of ice and severed the sand appendage. Shukaku reared back its head and
screamed in outrage.

Gamabunta looked on in silent astonishment and Naruto grinned, impressed by the attack. The ice dropped down to the forest below with Haku having no more chakra to control it. The seal was pure agony and Haku flailed for a moment, unable to concentrate.

Unfortunately the Ichibi recovered fast, “Air Bullet!” Another wave of chakra-thick air was aimed for Haku and missed, but the impact from the blast knocked him from the air and sent him plummeting to the woods below, unconscious.

“Haku-kun!” Naruto couldn’t contain himself any longer. The Ichibi was tormenting his friends and he had to put an end to it.

Temari flew beneath the dark haired boy and caught him, mumbling, “Leaf shinobi are such idiots…” She was honestly astounded by the attack she had witnessed and glad she hadn’t been at its receiving end.

Shukaku stomped about, armless, babbling to itself in a rage.

Gamabunta took advantage of its distraction, “Water Bullet!” The blast hit the Ichibi directly in the back and it turned around, yowling in fury, awakening its sand to attack again.

“Naruto, the only way to get rid of this demon is to wake that kid up,” The toad boss explained, dodging blasts of sand and wind, “It's the only way this will end before the whole place ends up looking like a desert!”

“How do I do that?” The blonde boy asked, looking confounded.

“Just give him a good smack!”

He was startled by what a simple solution it was and Gamabunta closed in on the sand spirit, grappling with it, and was promptly knocked back by its thrashing tail that was followed by another air bullet.

“Chief Toad, what's going on? I can't hit him if you don't get me close enough!” Naruto steadied himself as Gamabunta leapt back from Shukaku, trying to regroup.

“I can't get a grip on that thing! I don't have any teeth or claws!” The toad retorted, frustrated, “It appears this calls for a combination transformation…”

“What's that exactly?” The blonde boy was unclear on the subject.

“I provide the chakra for the jutsu and you provide the seal, since I never was very good at performing them…” Gamabunta explained hurriedly, “Think of something we can take the shape of, something with teeth and claws! Now hurry!” He charged ahead again, not giving Naruto much time to think of a useful form.

'Teeth and claws huh?' For Naruto, only one thing came to mind, 'I hope this works!'

Gamabunta transformed and the Ichibi was confronted by a monstrous fox demon that was running full-pelt towards it, plucking up trees on its way with its many tails and hurling them at the enemy to stall him.

The Kyuubi-disguised toad bit down on the sand spirit, getting a sure hold, “Now squirt! Get going!”
“Right!” Naruto broke off the transformation and leaped from the toad boss's head, landing on Shukaku's snout. He could feel the massive beast moving, trying to knock Gamabunta back again, and Naruto stumbled up the face of the Ichibi, trying not to sink into the turbulent sand.

The blonde boy reached Gaara while he slept and grabbed him roughly by the shoulders, “Gaara-kun, this is for being a stubborn bastard!” Naruto delivered a head butt that was more than enough to dispel the jutsu that had forced Gaara to sleep and it left him cross-eyed.

Gaara woke rather suddenly, eyes wide and bloodshot, and Naruto grinned for a moment before tumbling backwards as Shukaku thrashed furiously, no longer in control of its host.

Gamabunta watched approvingly as the huge sand beast began to crumble and break apart, “Well, that about does it! I'm beat! Time to go home…” The toad boss departed in a cloud of smoke.

Both jinchuriki fell back down to the forest below as the sand dissolved, and Naruto rushed frantically to his friend through the tree tops, still uncertain if he was going to be alright.

“Gaara!” He leapt over to where Gaara had settled, bent awkwardly at the base of tree, shuddering as he suppressed the angry demon that had just been forced back under his control.

Gaara's in bad shape and he's still hurting from the injuries he got during the exam...' Naruto crouched beside the red haired boy, What's going to happen to him now?

He could remember the fear that had been in Gaara's eyes as he suffered through long nights of the Ichibi's heartless babble, I'll never let this happen again, Gaara, you don't deserve this!

“Step aside, Naruto,” The blonde boy looked up to see his sensei pushing past him, making his way to Gaara, “Come on kid! Sit up straighter…” Jiraiya immediately went to work on the damaged seal and Naruto was left to wonder how he had even known there was something wrong with it in the first place, He's been gone since yesterday that useless bum!

Ultimately, Naruto was glad to see the perverted sage.

Temari appeared shortly after, carrying the weight of an unconscious Haku on her shoulder. She walked over to Naruto and gently plopped the water nin down beside him, “Here, he'll be alright…but he sure is an idiot.”

The blonde boy chuckled, “Yeah…sometimes he is.”

They watched Jiraiya finish his work and then sigh, fishing through his pocket and drawing out a pipe, “Damn…you sure are lucky sand kid.” He patted the boy on his head affectionately, “You held out pretty well. I’m sorry it took me so long to get here.”

“Thank you.” Gaara said quietly, not yet ready to look at his sensei. There was a part of him that was still ashamed that he had lost control of himself.

Temari kneeled beside the red haired boy and hugged him, smiling widely, “Wow! I didn't realize your team would handle all this so well!”

He closed his eyes, liking the closeness, “You have no idea.”

Kankuro arrived shortly after with Sasuke and Pakkun, and the sand ninja quickly reunited with his siblings, surprised to see they were relatively unharmed.

“I knew you wouldn't betray me.” Gaara smiled at his brother and sister, ignoring their alarmed faces.
Sasuke sat down by Haku, exhausted, and wondered what exactly had just happened.

Naruto watched Gaara interact with his siblings briefly before turning to his sensei. He was startled to see that Jiraiya had been staring at him in silence.

“Ero-sensei, is something wrong?”

Jiraiya closed his eyes, sighing deeply, “No, Naruto, I guess not.”

The toad sage recalled from a short time ago how he had abandoned his sensei in the stadium in order to save his students from Orochimaru’s treachery. He hoped The Third would hold out and defeat the snake, yet he felt that he should've stayed to help somehow, even if there was little he could do.

Now was not the time for regrets.
“What is this, Orochimaru?” Hiruzen’s voice was low as his former pupil abandoned his disguise as the Kazekage. He held a kunai warningly to the Sandaime's throat, “How dare you return to this village after all that you have done!”

The snake sennin smirked widely, staring blankly ahead, “Oh, I think you know very well what all of this is, Hiruzen-sensei,” Nearby, other Sound nin were approaching the rooftop of the stands, “It's time for you and this miserable village to die, but you don't need me to tell you that, do you?”

Hiruzen broke away from Orochimaru's hold, turning to face him, finally seeing through the lie of the Chunin Exam. It had only been a cover so that the snake sennin's plans could be set in motion and with no warning to Konoha either.

‘Indeed, he is as cunning as ever…” Hiruzen cast aside his robe, staring at his former pupil, 'I could have ended this long ago and now I have no choice!”

The pale-faced shinobi observed his former teacher in amusement. He looked far less formidable than he remembered: resembling a short, stick-like creature in his black attire. He was certainly no longer a ninja in his prime years of life.

“This is the end for you,” Orochimaru warned while four Oto ninja took their places at each of the four corners of the roof, “You knew that if I did not die by your hand that you would die by mine!”

Hiruzen closed his eyes, troubled by the memory of when he discovered that his most gifted pupil was experimenting with people all for the sake of creating new jutsu. He could not bring himself to kill him that day, even when given the opportunity.

“Four Flames Formation!” The four Sound ninja who had arrived used a powerful barrier jutsu that encompassed the entire building surrounding Orochimaru and the Hokage. ANBU guards scrambled up the stands from the battle below, able to sense that the Sandaime was in peril.

Hiruzen attacked first, forming familiar hand seals, “Katon: Karyu Endan!”

The Third spat out a vicious flamethrower that raked across the rooftop, incinerating tiles in its wake, and sped directly toward the snake sennin. Orochimaru had foreseen the attack and dodged with ease, greatly entertained by the Sandaime’s hot-blooded assault.

Orochimaru’s laughter filled the air as he avoided Hiruzen’s volley of attacks with little effort. Outside the wall of the barrier, Black-ops teams had descended frantically, fully aware of what the snake sennin’s intentions were.

“Wait!” The ANBU captain halted a few paces from the barrier, as did most of his subordinates. One of his more eager warriors darted ahead without stopping and met the wall, slashing at it with his sword. He was in flames the next moment and dead soon after.

A grim expression was hidden behind the captain's mask, “This wall is impenetrable! We'll have to hold back until it comes down.” His team agreed with him silently, but they too were still restless, desperate to help their Hokage.
Orochimaru paused, calculating his next move cautiously as the Sandaime attacked him again, “Shuriken Shadow Clone jutsu!” The hail of shuriken Hiruzen had thrown multiplied into a storm of projectiles aimed expertly for his former student.

The snake sennin countered with a jutsu of his own, “Kuchiyose: Edo Tensei!”

A coffin rose up from the tiles in front of him, meeting the majority of the shuriken and halting them completely. The remainder of the projectiles soared past him harmlessly on either side and he proceeded with his jutsu, two more coffins rising up on either side of the first.

Hiruzen stared ahead in horror and watched as the containers opened. The previous Hokages of Konohagakure emerged from them and they were bewildered by their surroundings.

The Second turned to his older brother with a detached look of curiosity, “We have been summoned here, I see. The use of my forbidden technique is responsible for this.”

The First turned to him, nodding, “Yup, this is all your fault, Tobirama. This kind of jutsu should never have landed in the wrong hands! Just who expects to accomplish anything by reanimating us?”

Both the first and second Hokages turned to the last of the trio who emerged from the center coffin with an adorable look of surprise on his face. He had a mop of golden hair and bright blue eyes that belied his youth.

The Fourth blinked while looking to his counterparts nearby, very confused, but managed a very bamboozled, “Well hello, gentlemen!”

They nodded to him in acknowledgment and the First spoke again, “Ah! So this is the Fourth Hokage! I am so glad the village has endured for so long!”

“Hashirama, surely you expected the Leaf Village to prosper?” Tobirama grumbled, embarrassed by his older brother’s bubbly personality.

They were still unaware of the presence of the snake sennin who had summoned them. He waited behind them silently and readied three kunai with seals attached that would put them under his complete control.

Tobirama noted the Third ahead of them, “Hiruzen! Much time has passed since I last saw you… you must be a grandfather by now. Are you the one responsible for this?”

The Sandaime was white as a sheet upon seeing his old mentor, “I am not the one responsible for this, sensei! It must be undone quickly!”

Orochimaru moved ahead casually and stood between the first and second Hokages. He stabbed controller knives into their backs and took them over, 'It really is such a wondrous feeling! At long last I have the chance to wield the abilities of the past leaders of this village!'

He brought the third kunai down, aimed for the back of the Yondaime’s neck, except that he suddenly wasn’t there. In a surreal moment Orochimaru blundered with his strike and observed in outrage as his target, completely unaware of him, had abruptly moved with some aggravating speed to stand beside the Third Hokage.

ANBU watching from the outside were speechless at the sight.

Deciding to establish control over the Fourth later, Orochimaru turned to Hashirama and Tobirama behind him, prepared to puppet them into battle.
“Sarutobi-sama!” The Fourth always had possessed a great respect for the Third, “You don’t look so well…what’s happened? This reanimation technique is dangerous!” The blonde haired ninja looked over his shoulder and assessed the situation, “I see Orochimaru is here.”

Hiruzen nodded to him, “Yes, this is his doing. I hope you'll forgive me for letting this happen…”

“You have nothing to ask forgiveness for, Hokage-sama,” His voice lowered, “But I do believe a serious fight is now unavoidable.”

Shouts came from outside the barrier and the ANBU turned to see Jiraiya approach them, his face red with fury, “I leave this village for one day of research and it falls to pieces!” He turned to the ANBU captain, “What's going on here?”

“It's Orochimaru, sir. He's trapped Hokage-sama inside of this barrier and it can't be breached,” The captain reported, “Where have you been during all of this?”

“Trying to get back into this village,” Jiraiya admitted, observing their surroundings, “The fighting’s getting out of hand. It was like running through a funhouse just to reach the stadium—” He paused in his explanation as he saw a familiar face appear near the Third Hokage and he rushed up to the wall, despite the protests from the captain.

Jiraiya made sure not to touch the fiery barrier, unsure of how it worked, and stared ahead at the Yondaime who he had not seen since long before his actual death, “Minato!”

The Fourth responded to his name immediately and also moved to the wall, facing his teacher, “Jiraiya-sensei! I see through his plot!”

It was as if nothing between them had changed and Minato explained the situation, “Orochimaru intends to destroy our village through an outside invasion. He has also cornered Hokage-sama while others are distracted by battles. He has used a reanimation technique to revive myself, the Shodaime and the Nidaime. I think he is already controlling Hashirama and Tobirama, somehow.”

“All that and you haven't even had to interrogate him, eh?” He couldn't help but smirk at his old pupil, “I understand. Stay put, Minato, I'll have this barrier down in five minutes just as soon as—”

“No, there's no time to waste!” The Yondaime's eyes narrowed, shining like sapphires, “Your students will die if you don't go to them. He's been using them as well.”

“Eh? How'd you know about the squirts I'm training?”

“Go now! Please, Jiraiya-sensei,” Minato wasn't ready to answer any questions, “I'll handle this. Just trust me.”

“…alright, kid.” Jiraiya took one last look at his student before departing, feeling an aching weight in his chest, “Get this barrier down, captain!” The ANBU heeded his order before he rushed from the battle site, wondering how to go about it without being burned alive.

The Fourth returned to the Third, “I'll take Orochimaru, Hokage-sama.”

The Third raised an eyebrow at the golden haired ninja, “Do you intend to settle an old grudge match, Minato?”

“Of course!” Minato hurled a three-pronged kunai and zipped past the Shodaime and Nidaime, straight up to the snake sennin, ready to fight. Orochimaru had prepared his final kunai, itching to get the Yondaime under his control.
The snake sennin had miscalculated Minato’s speed; he’d forgotten how fast the man was. The Yondaime moved like the wind, side-stepping Orochimaru's predictable jab and boldly reached for the kunai, securing it, and tossed it sidelong into the barrier where it was instantly burned up.

Minato smirked at the snake, “You should know better than that, Orochimaru-sama.”

It was enough to get Orochimaru's blood boiling. He had always hated Jiraiya's prodigy student, long before he had even become Hokage, *If I can't control him then I will break him along with the Sandaime!*" 

“Mokuton: Birth of Dense Woodland!” The Shodaime's jutsu called enormous tree branches that crashed upward from the roof, trying to ensnare Hiruzen as he dodged.

The Third Hokage used another jutsu after avoiding the First’s attack, “Kuchiyose no Jutsu!” A large, black staff appeared and Hiruzen wheeled it about expertly, speaking to it, “We have trouble, Enma!”

The staff sounded annoyed when it answered, “You could have settled this long ago, Hiruzen!” The Sandaime attacked the Tobirama and Hashirama head-on, deflecting blows with his staff.

Orochimaru resorted to using his kusanagi sword after a short scuffle, forcing Minato to counter with one of his three-pronged kunai. With his free hand the Fourth made his feelings for the snake sennin perfectly clear, “Rasengan!”

The spiraling sphere knocked Orochimaru back across the rooftop where he slammed into a thick tree branch that the First had summoned, knocking the wind out of him.

“Doton: Doryuheki!” Hiruzen created a thick wall of mud that deflected a huge wave the Second had created, pulling water from thin air. Hashirama and his younger brother attacked in unison, soon overwhelming the Sandaime as he was forced further back towards the barrier.

“Hokage-sama!” Rather than finishing Orochimaru, Minato returned to the Third Hokage, noting he had been trapped in a powerful genjutsu cast by the First. While Sarutobi floundered in the darkness, unable to avoid his foes' strikes, the Yondaime managed to keep his footing long enough to release the illusion.

Both Hashirama and Tobirama backed off momentarily, avoiding a spiraling sphere of chakra that was flung at them, demolishing what was left the untouched roof tiles.

Enma was surprised to see Hiruzen had an ally and was quiet while Minato spoke, “Hokage-sama, our chakra is limitless and we cannot die. This impure resurrection can't be countered unless it is reversed…” He paused, smiling, “I will make sure they don't get in your way, but I must ask you to defeat Orochimaru. I'm afraid I cannot.”

“Very well, Minato!” Hiruzen agreed to the terms, watching as the Yondaime hurled his kunai directly for Orochimaru and disappeared soundlessly as if he were a ray of light.

“You cannot kill me with the Hiraishin!” Orochimaru deflected the kunai, knocking it away. Minato reappeared beside the kunai as it soared past Hashirama and Tobirama, and slashed at them, stunning them.

“Without these, they won't be very useful to you, Orochimaru-sama.” Minato reached for their necks and extracted the kunai from the First and Second. A few quick hand seals disintegrated the sacrificed bodies of the two freed Hokages and the blonde haired ninja sighed in relief.
It was that moment of delay that cost him.

Orochimaru was already at wits-end with the unpredictable Yondaime, and made it look all too simple as he appeared behind him, skewering him with his Kusanagi to hold him in place.

“You've been a nuisance ever since you became a chunin, you air-headed fool!” Orochimaru hissed, driving the blade mercilessly through his back and out through his chest, “You're no different from Jiraiya! Daydreamers who can't see past the now…”

Minato gritted his teeth, glaring at Orochimaru from the corner of his eye. He had no hope of countering and remained silent while the snake sennin spoke again.

“The greatest achievement of your life was sealing a biju into a filthy, worthless, little infant! You could have accomplished so much more!” Orochimaru smirked gleefully, “I've been waiting so long to gut you, Minato-kun…my only regret is that the Fox Demon could do it before I could!”

“It was my greatest achievement…but you'll see! My son will grow to be the shining star of Konoha!” The Yondaime smiled, “And he already outshines you.”

Minato hurled the two kunai he had taken from the Shodaime and Nidaime with the remainder of his strength toward the barrier, forcing chakra into the blades that swirled like wind about them.

Orochimaru released the forbidden summoning and dispelled the Yondaime, knowing he would never cooperate. He grimaced in disgust as the body became that of one of his deceased Sound genin, Zaku, who was smiling blissfully as the Fourth had been moments before.

He tossed the body aside, frustrated, only then realizing that the brace of chakra-enforced kunai Minato had cast seconds earlier had sailed through the barrier and met their mark.

Someone screamed in pain and confusion, alerting the snake sennin that two of the four Sound shinobi who had created the barrier had been wounded. A few moments later, it flickered and then came down fully.

The ANBU took immediate action, rushing to the Hokage, forming a defensive ring around him. The startled Sound shinobi also reacted, surrounding Orochimaru, the palest of the four murmured to the snake sennin, “Orochimaru-sama, Tayuya and Jirobo are wounded. They will not be able to.”

“They stay and fight!” Orochimaru hissed angrily, not caring if his subordinates suffered from injuries, “I won't have the Black-Ops getting in my way…”

“Eliminate the other four,” Hiruzen commanded, his anger only heightened by the snake’s disposal of the Fourth, “I will handle Orochimaru.”

They obeyed, moving quickly to counter traitor who had already taken the fight to the nearby stands as a distraction. Orochimaru readied the sword in his hand, glaring at his old mentor, feeling somewhat euphoric from his triumph over the Fourth.

'I have no choice…I must kill Orochimaru now or Konoha will surely be destroyed…' The Sandaime lifted his staff and charged ahead to meet his former pupil.

Their weapons met, clashing together, and were then knocked away from their respective owners from the impact. Enma fell through the air, landing behind Hiruzen, encouraging him to kill the snake quickly.

Hiruzen created two shadow clones and sent them to grapple with Orochimaru, who had retrieved
his sword. Without a second thought, desperate to prevent the sennin's escape, the Sandaime formed hand seals that he knew would be sure to end the fight, “Shiki Fujin!”

A large, transparent form faded into view behind Hiruzen, only visible to him. As much as he dreaded to see the shinigami, he knew that he had far less to fear than his former pupil would.

Orochimaru slashed at the pair of shadow clones restraining him, destroying them and then turning to see the Third Hokage as he collided with him frantically, seizing him by the shoulders, “This is the end for you, Orochimaru!”

Unseen to the snake sennin's eyes the shinigami reached through the Sandaime, latching on to his soul and moved ahead to take his own as well. Orochimaru, kusanagi still in hand, brought his sword down and stabbed the Hokage in his left flank, sneering at him, “Really old man, did you truly believe you could defeat me?”

The Sound ninja were holding up well against the ANBU, that was until the captain unexpectedly appeared behind one of the injured ninja, taking advantage of his wounds, and plunged a kunai in his throat. The remaining three attacked in unison, knocking the captain from the stands and down into the arena below. A few of his subordinates followed, while some remained to fight.

Orochimaru’s confidence wavered as he sensed a terrible force jolt his spirit and begin to drag it forcibly from his body, slowly and painfully, “What…what do you think you're doing-!”

“Minato was able to endure such a dismal jutsu,” Hiruzen spoke through gritted teeth, “Now you shall share the same fate!”

The snake sennin drove his sword deeper into the Sandaime's back, frustrated to see Enma pulling back on it with equal force, refusing to let him be injured worse. The monkey king snarled at him, infuriated that his friend was reduced to such measures.

For a long while it remained a stalemate, Hiruzen pulled with all of his might on Orochimaru's soul, barely able to extract it any further past his elbows, and the kusanagi which was embedded deep in Hiruzen’s back was frozen in place by Enma's determination.

'I doubt I'll be able to remove his soul entirely…' The Third realized he had underestimated his former student, 'Even so, I will not allow him to threaten Leaf! He will never use another jutsu again!'

“Just hurry up and die already!” Orochimaru cried heatedly, sensing Hiruzen’s end was near, “You can't kill me, old man! Just give up!”

“I can't kill you, Orochimaru. It has never been within my power to do so,” The Sandaime hissed, “But you should not expect to be so fortunate with the remainder of this village. They will end you swiftly and justly, and you will finally see the true strength of Konohagakure…”

“Hiruzen, wait!” Enma's hands were full of blood and slipping along the blade he had been restraining.

“Seal!” The Hokage allowed the death god to complete the jutsu, slashing at Orochimaru's arms with its dagger, disconnecting them from the rest of his soul.

Orochimaru reeled away in agony, abruptly releasing his sword. Hiruzen fell back, his own soul offered up to the mouth of the waiting shinigami. Enma caught his body gently, removing the blade in hopes of offering him some dignity in his death.

“Orochimaru-sama!” The remaining Sound ninja rushed to the snake sennin's side, abandoning the
fight with the Black-Ops. They withdrew immediately, avoiding a storm of shuriken that followed them as they fled the stadium.

The ANBU looked to their captain for orders, seeing that he was beside himself with grief. A small division of his team was sent to pursue the escaping Oto ninja while he went to the Hokage, the empty feeling in his chest telling him that the Sandaime was already dead.

Jiraiya only had to follow the trail of devastated forest and vegetation on his way to find his students, all the while very deep in thought, 'How could Minato have known that I'm training a new team? Hell, how did he know that they're in danger even?'

As much as he trusted his student, dead or not, he found that there was no obvious explanation of how he could have been aware of anything that was going on in the living world. Jiraiya quickly decided it was better not to question his good fortune, and he knew that the Fourth would be of great help to the Third in dispatching Orochimaru.

He was so confident he grinned widely as he moved through the canopy, 'I'll bet Naruto already settled things out here! It's too quiet and judging by the scorch-marks everywhere, I'd say Gamabunta also paid a visit…'

Like magic, out over the horizon line, Jiraiya could see the monstrous, sandy form of Shukaku crumbling pathetically, defeated.

“Hold still, Shikamaru, you're worse than Kiba-kun!” Sakura was tending to a cut above the Nara's eye once they had arrived at the garrison, “You're lucky that explosion didn't blow your head off. If you had just moved sooner you wouldn't have been hurt at all!”

“Well excuse me…it's not like we intended to get mixed up with those Cloud ninja…so troublesome!” He turned to Ino and Chouji beside him, “Ino, how's your arm?”

She flexed it curiously, wincing in pain, “Well…it's better than it was. Don't worry about me though; you and Chouji are worse off, right?”

“I'm fine!” Chouji informed her, procuring a new bag of potato chips. Shikamaru looked at the blonde girl for a long moment, not buying her story, and then closed his eyes with a sigh.

After aiding the Nara, Sakura turned to Kiba, who was sitting by a provision barrel with Akamaru perched on top of his head victoriously. Without his help, or Sakura's for that matter, Team 10 would have met a grisly end at the hands of the Kumo shinobi who had ambushed them.

Sakura frowned, taking a seat beside him, “Where do you think Kakashi-sensei went, Kiba-kun?”

“I don't know…but I don't think we should worry about him right now. He can handle himself,” He could tell she was exhausted, judging by her anxious expression, “Are you feeling alright?”

She nodded absently, pulling Akamaru into her arms and scratching behind his ears, “I'll be okay. I just…I still can't believe all of this is happening, you know?”

“Tell me about it!” He paused, sniffing the air, “Whoa, Sasuke's back! Let's go find him.”

Sakura was used to the fact that his acute sense of smell could easily locate anyone from their team with even the barest hint of a scent. She stood up and followed him and halted in her tracks when she saw Naruto and Gaara with an unconscious Haku, trudging behind their sensei, all of them looking very beat-up.
It was her first instinct to run to them and make sure they were alright, but Kiba pulled her along by her arm, seeing she was distracted, “Come on, he's over there with Pakkun!”

She followed Kiba to where the Uchiha prodigy was hovering, looking a bit aghast.

Naruto set Haku down, seeing he was waking up, “Hey Haku! How many fingers am I holding up?”

He waved a peace sign in front of his friend's face and Haku blinked dizzily, “Hm…more than one?”

“Close enough!”

Sakura had briefly checked on Sasuke and after noting that he was perfectly fine, she had excused herself and made her way over to where Team 2 had settled down, “Naruto-kun! Where were you guys?”

He blinked up at her, “Oh, hey Sakura-chan! Er…we kind of got caught up in the worst of the fighting, but we're fine! Isn't that right Haku-kun?”

Haku nodded, still very disoriented. Sakura smiled weakly at him, then turned to the blonde boy, “Are you sure he's alright? He look's horrible…”

“No, actually he nearly got himself killed,” Naruto admitted, frowning at the dark haired boy, “But hey, it wouldn't be the first time…”

Jiraiya approached Temari and Kankuro where they had settled near Gaara, noting they were from Suna and still couldn't help but be suspicious of them, “Will you two come with me, please? We have a lot to talk about.”

Gaara watched his siblings as they silently followed after the toad sennin. He knew it wouldn't take his sensei long to see what a great help they had been to the Leaf.

Naruto glanced over to the red haired boy, “Sakura-chan, I think you should talk to Gaara-kun right now.”

She smiled at him gratefully and walked over to the bench Gaara had perched himself on. He looked up at her for a long moment, inquisitively, as if a memory had crossed his mind.

“Who were those two with you who went with Gama-sennin?” Sakura asked curiously, sitting down beside him, “Are they Leaf shinobi?”

A ghost of a smile came over his face, “They're from Sand,” His smirk widened when she gasped in surprise, “It's alright, Sakura. They're with us.”

She crossed her arms, finding it difficult to believe, “How can you be so sure? So many ninja attacked today, I heard they even tried to take Hinata-chan!”

“It’s because they're my brother and sister, and they helped Naruto-kun and Haku-kun during the fighting,” Gaara explained and then added, “And even Sasuke, I've been told. I trust Temari and Kankuro with my life.”

“Temari and Kankuro, right…” Sakura spoke the names aloud for herself, mulling it over, “Yeah, Naruto and Hinata talked about them a few times…” She smiled, “I'm just glad you're alright, and well, glad that they helped you.”
Gaara fell silent, relishing the sound of her comforting voice. It hadn't taken her very long to accept his siblings, something he was grateful for.

His eyes scanned over to where Jiraiya was talking to his brother and sister, and then over to where a crowd of Hyuga were gathered. Gaara unintentionally smiled to himself while seeing Hinata trying to slink away from her father in an attempt to talk to Naruto while he tried to snap Haku back to his senses.

Even in the chaos of an invasion things hadn't changed. People were desperate to cling to whatever normalcy was left over, just for the reassurance that things would be alright.

I've been through hell and back and not once was I abandoned.' Gaara hadn't doubted that his friend's would help him, 'Orochimaru failed.'

“Gaara-kun, can you maybe tell me what exactly happened?” Sakura spoke at length, still pondering why he and his teammates had run off so unexpectedly, “Are you sure you're alright?”

The red haired boy wrapped his arms around her in silence and she let out a small squeak. She knew he was capable of showing affection, but she wondered what he must have been thinking about earlier that made him want to be close to her. He seemed overwhelmed.

Sakura rested her chin on his shoulder, ignoring Naruto's mirthful chatter from nearby. If Gaara wanted to embrace she wasn't complaining.
New Enemy: Akatsuki

Chapter Soundtrack: “Rainbow Wind” by Agatsuma

It had looked like rain all morning.

The sky was overcast and miserable, loomed over a crowd of shinobi clustered together below the Hokage monument. Genin, chunin and jounin stood collectively, all grieving over the passing of the Sandaime.

The funeral could have been a more pleasant affair had they not lost their leader during the invasion. Many had expected someone his age to die peacefully in his sleep, but it appeared that all of the past Hokages, Hiruzen included, could not avoid the destiny that all the leaders of Konoha shared: dying for their village.

Naruto stood between Haku and Gaara and watched stone-faced as his peers placed white flowers on the shrine dedicated to their late leader. Something inside him had changed. His understanding of what he believed the Hokage to be had deepened.

‘I'm looking at me, I know it. This is what I want...’ The more he thought about it, the less far away the whole idea seemed, ‘When I become Hokage I'm going to die one day too. Everyone dies...but this is how it is. When I die it'll be just like this...a hero's farewell.’

He could sense that Gaara and Haku had realized it too, finally able to accept the fact that what Naruto wanted was to be a noble leader who would ultimately die in battle. Though they feared the notion, there was always the underlying fact that once that day came they would be there with him, fighting by his side.

That softened the entire notion considerably.

The ceremony had proceeded even while thunder rolled threateningly overhead. Hiruzen’s remaining family stood at the front of the crowd beside the genin, many crying openly without signs of stopping.

A fierce wind knocked a few petals from the flowers that had been left in front of the Sandaime's memorial, scattering them across the platform. After a long eulogy and a silent prayer for a safe journey to the afterlife, the attending ninja began to file away from the lookout. All expressions were dark.

The genin left the ceremony together quietly, some reorganizing back into their squads just to spend the rest of the day with each other in hopes of lightening the mood.

Lee looked up as a crack of lightning illuminated the sky. He frowned disapprovingly up at the coming storm and then looked to Tenten, “Shall I walk you home?”

She, like all the others, was dressed in black. It was the same dress she had worn at her parents’ funeral, as a matter of fact. Tenten noted the umbrella in Lee’s hand and silently commended him for thinking ahead, “I'd appreciate it, Lee.”

She brushed her hand against Neji's arm to snap him out of his disconsolate trance. He glanced over to her, looking defeated. Tenten gave him a hopeful smile, “Listen, Neji, I'll see you tomorrow...we have a lot of training to catch up on.”

He nodded, “I look forward to it.”
Lee raised a furry eyebrow at Neji's response as the Hyuga prodigy joined up with the rest of his kin on their return trip to the compound. He fell in step beside Hinata and Tenten's smile widened approvingly.

“I believe your positive attitude is beginning to rub off on him, if it is not too bold to say.” Lee observed, opening the umbrella which was a deep cobalt blue. Tenten had half expected it to be green but she shooed the thought away.

“I hope so,” Tenten answered, joining him beneath the shelter of the umbrella as rain drops began to plop down to the concrete, “He's not so bad you know. His feelings get hurt too, he just doesn't show it.” Her friend nodded in understanding, seeing her point.

The walk to her apartment building was relatively short since it was nearby. She was outwardly glad that Lee was generous enough to keep her out of the pouring rain. He left her on the front steps of the complex beneath an overhang and she couldn't help but hug him.

He laughed at her expression of gratitude and told her to be prepared for a long day of training tomorrow. Lee scurried off down the sidewalk as the rain became increasingly worse.

Tenten had nearly entered the building before a crash in a nearby alleyway attracted her attention. Curiosity getting the better of her, she darted around the corner to check, finding a very drunk, very depressed Genma loitering around.

She had actually met him once before at a briefing with Gai-sensei. He hadn't been the most outgoing person she had met, but Tenten was sympathetic enough to offer to bring him home. Before setting out, she removed the senbon from his mouth for fear of him choking on it. He had protested in mumbles and broken phrases, but allowed the strange kunoichi to get him out of the rain.

Iruka had volunteered to clean up after the ceremony was over and was not surprised to find Naruto and his teammates had not budged since the service had ended, 'I should have expected as much. They owe a great deal to the Third…I doubt it will be easy for them to say goodbye.'

He walked over to the three boys, blinking in wonder to see rain avoiding them as it poured down, 'Haku's Kekkei Genkai, I forgot…'

Still, he wanted to get them out of the storm.

“Come on you three, the funeral's over. It'd be disrespectful to overstay your welcome,” Iruka found his voice had softened at the sight of Naruto's crestfallen face, “I mean...let Hokage-sama's spirit join the afterlife now. Let go. It's about time you all went home.”

“Iruka-sensei,” Naruto's voice was low, but somewhat optimistic, “I don't think his spirit's ever really gonna leave, you know?” He looked up at his former teacher, surprising him with eyes full of wisdom, “He's here to stay. He was an important part of this village.”

Iruka agreed, “Yes, that's right, Naruto…I…” He couldn't find anything else to say. He could tell then, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that this particular cell of genin was destined for great things.

“It was nice seeing you again, Iruka-sensei.” Haku bade him farewell and followed after Naruto and Gaara who had nodded respectfully to their chunin instructor.

Iruka watched them fondly as they left, smiling even as the heaven's rained down.
Four Days Later

Fog descended on the outlying forest of Konoha. A guard near the entrance of a small gate to the village noted two dark figures trekking through the morning mist, only the soft singing of bells a testament to their presence.

The two cloaked men paused momentarily at the gate as the guard stopped them and politely asked for identification. He fell unconscious a second later and collapsed to the ground.

The pair of strangers entered the village unchecked, ready to begin their search.

“An announcement?” Naruto inquired his dark haired friend as he and Haku walked to their training grounds, “What has Ero-sensei got to tell us now that's so important?”

“I'm not sure,” Haku admitted, “Gaara-kun should already be there, I think.”

Due to the fierce rainstorm days earlier, their training area was still completely doused with mud and unfit for training. They still used it for team meetings, however.

As Haku had predicted, Gaara was already there waiting for them, as was Jiraiya. The grave look on their mentor's face notified them that there were serious matters that needed to be addressed.

“Alright squirts, I'll get straight to the point,” Jiraiya took a drag on his pipe, looking clearly peeved, “Since yours truly here would rather not become the next Hokage, I've been appointed to find an old friend of mine who will take up the position as the Fifth.”

The three of them were stunned into silence.

Had Jiraiya been notifying them that he had in fact been appointed the new Hokage, they probably would have all gone into anaphylactic shock…since combining the words 'Jiraiya' and 'Hokage' was allergen enough.

“I'm here to check if any of you three are up to coming with me on this trip,” Jiraiya continued, ignoring their confounded faces, “It may take a while so think before you volunteer.”

Gaara lowered his eyes in thought, “Temari and Kankuro will not be returning to Suna yet because of the quarantine on foreign shinobi. I don't think now would be the wisest time for me to leave them here on their own.”

His sensei nodded, “You stay here with your brother and sister, kid. You won't be missing much.”

“I'm afraid I'm not up to full strength yet as well,” Haku said quietly, flinching under Jiraiya's knowing gaze, “The cursed seal had a heavy toll on my chakra…”

“I'm aware, Haku,” He said snappishly, still slightly angry at his pupil for using the seal twice, “Don't let it happen again, understood?”

The dark haired boy nodded and the toad sage blinked down at Naruto, who appeared to have no complaints or health issues, “I'll go, Ero-sensei! How long do you think this will take maybe?”

“A few days in the least, and if we're unlucky, maybe a week or so,” Jiraiya took another drag, “You up to it, squirt?”

“You bet I am!” Naruto folded his arms confidently, not caring if his mentor was particularly
vague on the details.

Jiraiya was grateful for Naruto's new maturity level, being that he had anticipated the boy to have a fit upon finding out the next Hokage would not be him. Realistically speaking, however, Naruto was still mindful enough to know it was a burden he was not ready for and still aimed to train rigorously for the years to come.

“Get packing then. I'll meet you on the East bridge.” Jiraiya concluded, then glanced at his remaining students, “As for you two, keep a sharp eye for trouble. With Konoha in this weakened state another attack is a possibility.”

They took the news into consideration.

Naruto left alongside his friends but split ways with them to return to the apartment and pack supplies. Haku and Gaara continued down the main street, wondering what to do with their stolen time.

“So…where are Temari and Kankuro at the moment?” Haku asked cautiously, knowing Gaara was still touchy on the subject.

The red haired boy, in contrast, was already aware of Haku's positive change in attitude towards his siblings, and acknowledged it, “Sakura-chan volunteered to show them around the village this morning to get them better acquainted, she had said.”

Haku chuckled, “I'm sure they're having fun then.”

Hinata had settled herself on a porch nearby her garden, hoping that some fresh air would make her feel better. Unfortunately there were few things that could help her at all at the time.

She had not made much of a fuss over it and now she was wondering if that was a mistake. Hinata was deeply troubled by the persistent ache behind her eyes that plagued her for days on end.

It may have been a natural occurrence, she once suspected. Yet if it wasn't she was too fearful to confront her father with the problem if it would jeopardize her place in the family, 'What coward like me would endure such pain, only for fear of a worse pain?'

Hinata had not thought very highly of herself after the Hokage's death, even though stories of her bravery during the invasion had spread through her entire clan. Her father had been raising his chin higher in her presence, embracing a newfound pride he had long overlooked in his eldest child.

Across the lawn, Neji had spotted her. His face was calm and surprisingly friendly when he approached, but she had been too high-strung to note his genial mood.

“Good morning, Hinata-sama,” He greeted and she was able to tell he had deliberately taken time out of his training to see her. “I want to thank you for what you did for Fujita-san during the attack.”

Her memory came back quickly: Fujita, the young boy who had been taken prisoner by Kumo, the one she had traded for a shadow clone she had made. Hinata smiled shyly at her cousin, “I really didn't think twice about it, Neji-niisan,” Then added, “Even without a kage bunshin, I still would've done it.”

It seemed he had more to say when his face was wracked with something akin to guilt, “I also want to apologize for anything disrespectful I may have said to you or Naruto during the exam...it
was not my place.” She nodded sheepishly, surprised to see him so humble.

As he turned away to leave, something made her speak up again, “Neji-niisan?”

Neji turned back to her, looking at her expectantly.

“May I tell you something?” Hinata asked quietly, “Something you will…not r-repeat?”

A secret. He smirked, automatically assuming it had something to do with Naruto, “Of course, Hinata-sama.”

She gulped audibly, wondering how he would react, and forced herself to speak, “My eyes, niisan, they are causing me great pain recently…” Neji gave her an inquiring look, “I have not been injured at all…I wonder…have you ever had such a problem?”

He had not been expecting such a dilemma from his younger cousin. Rather than answering right away, he activated his Byakugan and briefly scanned her eyes for any abnormalities. Hinata held very still, embarrassment quickly becoming visible on her pink cheeks.

“There's nothing wrong, Hinata-sama; that I can see at least,” Neji announced, eyeing her clinically, “The chakra coils behind your eyes are channeling more chakra than normal…you may have strained yourself during the invasion.”

She took his suggestion into consideration but still doubted it.

“Actually, I did have some pain when my Byakugan matured.” He admitted, recalling it as if it had happened not too long ago, “After a few days training with Tenten I was fine.”

Hinata frowned, adding one last piece of information, “My pain has lasted several months.”

Neji deactivated his Byakugan and stared at her for a long moment, looking slightly concerned, “Then I am not sure what that means. It shouldn't be lasting for more than a few days…”

Worry etched its way quickly across her features. If her problem was not the same as Neji's, it could possibly be more serious. That something she had not wanted to hear.

“If I can, I'll look it up in the Hyuga archives and see if it's a documented issue,” Neji offered, not wanting her to panic, “If it isn't affecting your Byakugan or overall vision, you shouldn't fret so much.”

She nodded, taking a deep, calming breath. Actually speaking to someone had done her wonders on the matter. She was feeling better already. Hinata had still astounded herself by speaking to her cousin of all people, but it had worked nonetheless.

The Hyuga prodigy was quiet for a moment and then decided, “I won't tell Hiashi-sama, if that's alright with you?”

“Thank you, Neji-niisan,” She smiled again and stood, feeling new energy, “I think I should find Shino-kun now. Today Sato-kun is being discharged from the hospital and I'm sure he'd like to stretch his legs…”

Neji smiled before biding her farewell.

Hinata parted ways with her cousin, hoping that the delicate new friendship she had made would only grow stronger with time.
The sun had risen higher in the sky and banished the faint mist from the village below. The two strangers stood side by side on a high tree branch overlooking Konoha, keeping a sharp eye for their target.

“You're sure he'll be here after all the fuss Orochimaru caused?” One spoke with a deep voice, and was clearly foreign to the region.

His partner answered succinctly, “He is near. Let's move.”

Naruto had packed quickly and before setting off to find his sensei, gave one last piece of advice to his friends, “Just make sure you guys don't burn the place down while I'm gone!”

He had locked the apartment door behind him and leapt over the balcony with an energetic wave, landing on the street below.

Haku couldn't help but grin at his friend's comedic behavior. It was something Gaara only snorted at. They went to fetch lunch shortly after that.

Naruto, on his way to the East bridge, cut across a training field where he was very glad to spot Hinata. She stood near a training post, staring at it contemplatively, “Hinata-chan?”

She jumped slightly at his voice but hastily turned to face him, “Oh, hello, Naruto-kun!”

He cocked his head inquisitively, “What are you doing out here all on your own?”

“Shino-kun went to get Sato-kun from the hospital,” Hinata explained softly, “I'm waiting here for them so we can train together.”

Naruto grinned, “Yeah, I'd bet he'd like that after sitting on his butt doing nothing for a few days….” He then went on to tell her of his new mission objective that he would be partaking without Haku or Gaara.

“Then I wish you luck and a safe return home.” She was smiling blithely after listening to his cheery explanation and delighted in the foxy grin he gave in response.

“You'll see, Hinata-chan,” He waved as he walked off, grinning widely, “When I get back, there's gonna be a new Hokage in town!”

Sasuke lazed about near the front of the stadium, watching the slow reconstruction of nearby buildings drag along. Sakura had convinced Kiba to help her entertain the two straggler Sand ninja for the day. When she had asked him if he wanted to join them he had to decline.

He felt it was a mistake to be friendly with shinobi from a village that had recently tried to demolish Konoha. Although she had insisted they had supported Leaf during the attack, he chose to keep to his own opinions.

'And that monster in the forest that Naruto fought against…' Sasuke recalled the giant tanuki that had gone on a rampage, 'That was Gaara. He's a demon.' All the more reason to keep a watchful eye on Sakura; she had been spending an increasing amount of time with the red haired boy.

It was a satisfying notion, in a way. He hadn't liked Gaara since the first time they had been introduced. Something about him had been off from the start. 'If he even comes close to transforming into that thing again, I'll be there. This time I'll be ready!'
The way he figured it, was that if he wasn't strong enough to defeat Gaara, he couldn't possibly be capable of throwing down his older brother. While devising new plans to counter the sand spirit inside of his new nemesis, a messenger hawk overhead caught his attention, *What does Kakashi want now?*

Annoyed by the interruption, Sasuke stood, moving on into town to find his mentor.

Kakashi waited outside a tea house for his student with his nose buried in a new copy of *Icha Icha Paradise*. While he read contentedly he could sense an unfamiliar presence close by, and wondered what it meant.

Right in the nick-of-time, Kakashi noted Kurenai and Asuma turning the corner together looking all gooky-eyed. He grinned at the sight of them, finding it cute, “Aw, are you two on a date today?”

“What? Don't be ridiculous!” Kurenai answered reflexively, “Anko asked me to get her some dango before I left…”

Asuma blinked at her, finding her cover story unnecessary, then turned to Kakashi, ”And what about you, Kakashi? It's not like you to hang around sweet shops.”

“Oh, just waiting for Sasuke is all!”

Inside the shop a man seated at a table had a fierce hand spasm and quickly overcame it. Kakashi as well as his companions noticed the eavesdropper's reaction to the name.

As if on cue, Sasuke crossed the street and frowned at Kakashi all the while, “You sent for me, right? Why did you pick a place like this? I hate sweets.”

Kakashi turned to his pupil, giving him a near apologetic look, “Hm…right Sasuke-kun. Sorry I forgot. It's always so much easier to get Sato in here. I'm afraid we'll have to cut this short though…” He glanced back over his shoulder, noting the eavesdropper and his friend had disappeared from their table, “We'll chat later, if that's alright?”

His student was confused, “I guess…”

Nodding to Asuma and Kurenai, Kakashi followed after them as they abandoned the tea house, ready to pursue the suspicious newcomers.

They had not gotten far.

“Where do you two think you're off to? Asuma inquired. He and his fellow jounin barred their path as they had taken to a road beside a canal, “I don't think I've seen you around here before.”

Kurenai stared ahead as they slowly removed their hats, the small bells attached to them ringing softly. The two cast them aside, startling the pair of waiting Leaf shinobi.

The shorter of the two intruders was pale with long black hair tied in a ponytail. His eyes were narrow and the trademark onyx of his clan. His expression was stoic but he regarded the shinobi in front of him for a moment, recognizing them.

“Uchiha Itachi! You've got guts coming back here after what you did!” Asuma growled warningly, exhaling cigarette smoke through his nostrils, “Someone as smart as you should know better than to return to this village.”

“Asuma-san, Kurenai-san, it has been a long time,” Itachi greeted them formally, his voice deep
and smooth, “I'm not very much interested in a conversation right now.”

They glared back at him, gearing up for a fight.

Beside him, his companion laughed at the sight of the standoff, “They know you, Itachi-san! Perhaps I should introduce myself too?”

“I know you: Hoshigaki Kisame. You're a nukenin from Hidden Mist and a former member of the Seven Shinobi Swordsmen,” Kurenai's eyes were sharp and wary, “Who thought a pair like you would be able to work together?”

Kisame was nowhere near as good-looking as his partner. He was tall and broad with pale blue fish-like skin and cruel eyes. Markings beneath his eyes resembled gills, adding to his shark-like appearance. A large zanbato was slung over his back wrapped in bandages.

“It's a shame we've been discovered so soon,” Itachi stated dryly, “It appears they'll have to be eliminated if we are to continue unnoticed.”

Kisame grinned, liking the idea, “Why don’t I start then?”

Anticipating an attack, Kurenai formed hand seals and used a powerful genjutsu that made her vanish. It was difficult to see the hand signs Kisame had used that formed a thick haze that blanketed the entire area, obscuring himself and Itachi from view.

Asuma whipped out his trench knives, slashing at the oncoming water clones that attacked from all directions. One of the five clones managed a savage hit that sent the smoking jounin flying down into the nearby waterway, knocking the cigarette from his mouth.

Kisame leapt gleefully down the bank after Asuma, enjoying the fight.

The lingering mist had not hindered Kurenai's genjutsu. Itachi made no move to struggle as a tree appeared behind him and ensnared him with thick roots. She loomed above him, half-melded with the ghastly tree and drew a kunai to finish him.

'What?’ All in an instant, Kurenai found herself substituted in Itachi’s place, trapped in her own jutsu, 'A genjutsu counter!’ The Uchiha watched her calmly as she struggled, readying a blade beneath his cloak. It was disappointing that she had not put up much of a fight.

'Jounin of this village act too rashly…’ He slashed unexpectedly, clipping her shoulder while she bit down ferociously on her tongue, freeing herself from the illusion. Kurenai stumbled away, unable to regroup as he came after her with the short sword.

“Kurenai!” Asuma shouted. He destroyed the last of the remaining water clones and made a move for the bank. Kisame stepped in his way, beaming while his massive blade ripped downward, missing his target by inches.

“Katon: Haisekisho!” Asuma exhaled a cloud of super-heated ash that would have undoubtedly injured Kisame had he not countered with his own jutsu, “Suiton: Suikodan no Jutsu!”

The attacks canceled each other out and Asuma leapt up the bank, standing beside Kurenai while Itachi neared with a blank expression.

“Suiton: Water Dragon Blast!” Kisame's follow-up jutsu was aimed for the shore. Curiously enough, two currents of water rose from the canal and crashed into each other before they could do any harm to the shinobi on the nearby path.
“What took you so long, Kakashi?” Asuma grunted as his friend appeared in front of him, able to counter Kisame's jutsu with the help of his Sharingan. Itachi had moved, he just barely noticed, joining Kisame out on the water.

The three Leaf ninja pursued, Kakashi at the front and was met by Itachi with a rapid volley of punches before grappling with him. Itachi's shadow clone abruptly exploded, blowing apart the water clone Kakashi had substituted himself with.

Both ninja regrouped, deliberating their next course of action.

“Listen,” Kakashi's voice was rough and nearly frantic as he spoke to his companions, “Close your eyes and stay away from Itachi! One look into his eyes will have you under a genjutsu in an instant…”

Baffled, Asuma and Kurenai obeyed and shut their eyes. After a tense moment, the kunoichi spoke up, “What's wrong Kakashi? Can you fight him?” Only his Sharingan eye remained open, but he avoided the Uchiha's gaze cautiously.

The Hatake quickly examined the situation in his head, 'No eye contact. It'll make his actions more difficult to predict…and his partner will attack again soon.'

“Stand down, Kisame,” Itachi said shortly, halting him before he had nearly charged at the unguarded shinobi, “I will end this.” Kisame watched knowingly as the tomoe in the Uchiha's Sharingan melded into a pinwheel shape, preparing a terrifying jutsu that even Kakashi could not counter.

Kakashi kept his gaze focused on the water. Even then, sadly, the reflection of Itachi's Mangenkyo Sharingan was enough to ensnare him in a genjutsu.

“Tsukuyomi.”

Kakashi froze, his mind captured in a dark world fully fabricated by the Uchiha. Kisame looked on silently, still intent on finishing Asuma and Kurenai as they waited behind the Hatake. They were unaware of what was happening.

After a few moments, Kakashi collapsed to his knees, startling his companions. Asuma opened his eyes, checking on his friend, “Kakashi! What happened?”

“Keep your eyes closed!” He rasped in response, his breathing haggard, “I…it was…”

What seemed only a few eventless seconds to onlookers had been 72 hours of endless torture for Kakashi with effects that had physically manifested.

Itachi, it appeared, had also strained himself in using the jutsu and allowed Kisame to proceed with the disposal of the remaining shinobi. He raced forward, only to be knocked back by a ninja that had dive-bombed him from the sky.

“Intruders have no manners!” Gai snorted, upset to see his eternal rival out of action at the hands of the pair of nukenin.

Kisame was impressed, if only for a moment, “You're very strong, aren't you?”

“Enough, Kisame,” Itachi had decided fighting was then no longer necessary, “We are straying from our objective.”

Kakashi raised his eyes to the Uchiha, realizing their intentions, “I've heard of your groups' plot.
You’re hunting the nine biju…you're here for Naruto!”

His companions were surprised when Itachi confirmed it, “Yes. We have come here in search of Naruto. He is all that remains of the Yondaime's legacy…” He turned to his partner, “Let's leave before we start a war.”

Kisame agreed without question and fled alongside the Uchiha, knowing the jounin would not follow them, or rather, could not follow them.

A local village had been taking down decorations from a recent festival once Jiraiya and his blonde pupil had arrived. The toad sage had even received a helpful tip from an inn keeper that he had seen a woman fitting the description Jiraiya had given him, not twenty minutes earlier.

Then began the frantic search to find her. Jiraiya had figured there was still a very good chance she was in the area and decided to not waste time, even with all the really cute girls floating around…

“So who are we looking for exactly, Ero-sensei?” Naruto asked curiously, noting the resolute expression on his mentor's face.

“Her name is Tsunade, but you'll have better luck looking for a busty, blonde woman who has an assistant and a pig waiting on her every whim,” Jiraiya announced, scratching his neck, “If you find her be respectful or you could blow this whole mission. We meet back at this hotel in twenty minutes, got it squirt?”

“Big boobs, blonde, something about a pig: got it!” Naruto nodded, “We'll find her for sure!”

They parted ways outside the hotel. Jiraiya turned left and his student went to the right. After a few minutes of looking, Naruto had already spotted several women fitting the description he had been given within the vicinity, all excluding the presence of the assistant and pig…yet he wondered if that was entirely crucial to finding her.

Very politely he asked the ladies their names, only to be disappointed time and again.

Jiraiya ended up near an open-air bar, inspecting the women nearby, keeping a sharp eye for Tsunade while picking prime figures he would consider penciling into his novels.

He bought himself a drink to pass the time and couldn't help but overhear the barkeep talking to one of his customers, “Yep! Two odd fellows in black cloaks stopped by here. They didn't say who it was they were looking for but I'd imagined it'd be something over money or-”

Jiraiya quickly abandoned the bar without paying his tab and took his drink with him.

“Excuse me, your name wouldn't happen to be Tsunade, would it?” The blonde boy asked courteously. He was beginning to lose enthusiasm for his appointed task after asking nearly three dozen women with no success.

“No, I'm afraid not,” The lady was quite friendly and in the middle of eating lunch, “You aren't lost are you, sweetie?”

“I'm fine, being lost is kinda the norm for me,” Naruto replied, disheartened, “Sorry for bothering you.”

Frustrated, he stomped hastily down the street, deciding he'd retire early and meet up with his
teacher at the hotel. *Yeesh, it's a madhouse around here! So many people and I'm only looking for one of them who I don't even know!*

Too absorbed in his thoughts, Naruto walked headlong into a tall man wearing a strange hat. He blinked up at him and apologized, “Sorry! I didn’t mean to bump into you! I’ve been looking for someone.”

“It's alright, kid, as it is,” His smile revealed unusually sharp teeth, “I'm also looking for someone…”

Naruto squinted up at the stranger, “Hm…that's a coincidence.”

“Indeed,” He laughed at the boy, “I can hold off my search for now and help you, if you like. I'm Kisame.”

Naruto sanguinely introduced himself, “Hey, thanks a ton! Uzumaki Naruto!”

A cheerful bounce returned to his step as he followed Kisame, explaining his goal, “Right! So I'm looking for this lady, though I haven't met her yet. Supposedly she's blonde, got huge boobs, and has a slave and a pig or…er, something like that.”

They turned the corner onto the main road and Kisame offered him the first bit of good news he'd had in a while, “It's funny you should say something like that. I saw someone like that not too long ago.”

“Really? Ha! I can't believe my luck!” Naruto was beaming at his good fortune, “Once I find her I'll make Ero-sensei buy me dinner!”

They drew curious looks from passers-by on the street, and the blonde boy had plenty of questions for Kisame, one of which commented on his peculiar facial features.

After a moment Naruto wondered if he had been rude to bring it up, but was surprised when Kisame didn't seem much bothered by it, “My entire clan looks as I do, actually. We hail from the Hidden Mist Village.”

“Hm, you don't say?” He was honestly intrigued, “My friend comes from a clan down there too! But he's a bit of a different story…”

“I should think he would be.” Kisame replied, knowing everyone in his clan with the exception of himself had been killed long ago. Oddly, he found that he was mildly interested in what the boy had to say.

When Itachi had described the jinchuriki they were looking for he hadn't pictured a friendly, conversational, overly-trusting genin who wanted to make friends with the entire world.

Things couldn't get much easier, so he decided to go with it and see how things played out.

After a short while of searching Naruto had insisted that they stop for some ramen, something to which Kisame did not object. In fact, he finished his bowl just as quickly as the boy did and found it bizarre how confident he was that he would one day be Hokage, *'Heh, like you'll live that long, kid!'*

They set out soon after and Naruto described the recent invasion of Konoha and how Sound and Sand had been thwarted. Naruto gave a questioning look to his friend when they had treaded into a deserted alleyway, “Hey, Kisame, do you think maybe we went the wrong way?”
“No, Naruto. We are definitely right where we are supposed to be.” Kisame assured him, smirking as Itachi appeared at the opposite end of the passage, “You were right, Itachi-san. He was easier to find than I thought.”

Realization flickered in Naruto's eyes and he glared ahead at the Uchiha, understanding he had played into a trap.

Itachi moved with blinding speed, landing a knock-out blow to the side of the genin's neck, and destroyed a shadow clone. He blinked slowly, muttering, “Clever.”

Dozens of shadow clones watched the two nukenin from the rooftops above, all wearing angered expressions. The real Naruto spoke up, fuming, “Someone like you should've known better than to take advantage of my hospitality!”

Kisame assumed he was referring to when he had treated him to ramen, “I like you, kid, really! But orders are orders. Once we take you in you may get lucky and we may not have to kill you…”

“Sorry, but that's not enough incentive!” Naruto snapped. He and his kage bunshin leaped down to fight.

Asuma, Kurenai and Gai had gathered in Kakashi's room, wondering when he would wake from his coma-like state that had been induced by Itachi's genjutsu. They sat quietly, wondering how long it would be before Itachi and Kisame discovered their target.

Sasuke's timing could not have been worse when he had stopped by the apartment, walking in and seeing the group of jounin waiting on his disabled teacher. He had been wondering what had been taking him so long, and was then certain that something was amiss, “What happened to Kakashi?”

Asuma smirked silently while he took a drag. Kurenai averted her eyes from the young Uchiha, leaving it up to Gai to come up with an explanation.

A moment later, a Leaf ninja poked his head in the door, wanting to confirm the rumors, “Is it true that Uchiha Itachi has returned and that he's looking for Naruto?”

There was a unified gasp in the room and all eyes fell on Sasuke, fearing his reaction.

Asuma's amused expression soured at the newcomer's blunder.

A long, gut-wrenching moment had passed before Sasuke immediately bolted from the room, dashing down the hallway with only one thing on his mind.

Each of the waiting jounin in the room gave the dunder-head a well measured scowl.

"He's here! I don't know why but he's here!" Sasuke quickly rearranged his priorities to accommodate the current circumstances, 'And he's looking for Naruto! Why? I've got to find him! This may be my only chance!'

Recalling Naruto's most favored spot in the village, Sasuke checked in at Ichiraku Ramen and was disappointed to see that he was not there. He settled for information on his whereabouts instead, “Where's Naruto?”

Ayame blinked up at him, “Hm? Naruto-kun? He may be with Haku-kun and Gaara-kun.”
Team 2. He left.


It was all so clear yet every second felt like forever as he ran, desperate to find some sign that would direct him to his objective and his chance to avenge his clan.

Gaara and Haku, thankfully, were nearby and on their way to join Sakura and her company. Sasuke leapt in front of them, startling Haku and annoying Gaara. He kept it short because he didn’t have time, “Where’s Naruto? He isn’t with you?”

The red haired boy gave him an incredulous look, “What business do you have with him?”

Sasuke glared at him, wondering if he’d end up killing someone before he got his hands on Itachi. Haku was more helpful though and gave a warning look to his friend, “No, Sasuke. Naruto went out of town with Jiraiya-sensei to find our replacement Hokage.”

“Where?”

Gaara really wanted to punch him. What the hell did he want with Naruto? Naruto was too good to socialize with scum like Uchiha, at least in Gaara’s opinion.

“At Tanzaku Quarter…” Sasuke left abruptly and Haku trailed off as he spoke, finding his behavior a bit alarming, “I think it would be fair to say that something is very wrong.”

“What was your first indication? When he showed up or when he spoke to us?”

Haku sighed, seeing his point, even if it was very sarcastic and uncouth.

“I’m going to see what he wants with Naruto-kun,” Gaara announced, suspecting trouble, “Keep an eye on Temari and Kankuro until I get back.”

Haku nodded, “Hurry.”

Gaara disappeared in a whirlwind a moment later.

Itachi followed Naruto as he raced over the rooftops. Kisame bulldozed a path for them with his zanbato, making short work of the hordes of shadow clones buffering them.

‘Looks like I jinxed it…’ Kisame figured, amused that Naruto had deceived them into a false sense of security. Now it was a matter of capturing and silencing the runt before more jounin arrived to stall them.

Itachi formed a shadow clone of his own and sent it to retrieve the pesky jinchuriki while a dozen blondes attempted to tackle him after shoving Kisame into a gutter. His kage bunshin exploded on the adjacent roof, knocking Naruto onto a balcony and destroyed the last of his clones.

Naruto took note of the maneuver, 'He can make his shadow clones blow up? I am totally gonna learn how to do that!'

The blonde boy returned to the top of a building where Kisame had been waiting, and ducked the oncoming swing of his gargantuan sword, “Suck on this! Rasengan!”

The shark-like ninja’s eyes widened in shock as the spiraling sphere of chakra clipped him on his side and sent him flying into a brick wall on the opposite side of the rooftop.
Itachi stood nearby on an air vent, watching interestedly as Naruto rounded on him, “Your power is impressive for your age. I was not expecting it. You truly are all that remains of the Fourth Hokage.”

“Dirt-bags like you have no place talking about people as great as him!” Naruto howled indignantly, his fists clenching.

“I had nothing but respect for that man.” Itachi told him.

Though it was supposed to be a compliment it made Naruto’s blood boil. Naruto formed hand seals and created more kage bunshin, ready to put the Uchiha in his place.

Jiraiya had a feeling he was getting closer to Naruto after seeing Sasuke run past him on the street for no explicable reason. He had not anticipated the Akatsuki to be hunting for Naruto so soon, but he was certain his young pupil had received enough training to hold his own against them at least for a little while. 'And if Sasuke's here that means he must know what's happening right now, or that knows that his brother has arrived, at least…' Jiraiya followed after the Uchiha survivor, keeping track of his movements as he weaved through the crowds on the street.

Kisame had attacked Naruto and his clones head-on while he had been distracted by Itachi. The blade grazed his shoulder painfully as it hacked through the kage bunshin surrounding him, beginning to feed on his chakra.

'When he gets close it's like I can't feel my chakra!' Naruto ducked back away from the sword, wondering what jutsu he could counter it with. He rushed through hand seals before Kisame could get close again, swiping his thumb over his bloody shoulder, “Kuchiyose no Jutsu!”

A frighteningly large battle toad appeared with a puff of smoke, crossing blades with Kisame as he growled in frustration. Naruto had proved to be a more capable shinobi than he had originally thought.

The blonde boy turned his attention to Itachi again, more interested in fighting him, 'This is the guy who killed all those people...he's Sasuke's brother.' His expression was one of righteous fury, 'I'll make him pay for what he did!'

It hadn't taken Sasuke long to catch up with the scuffling ninja on the rooftops. He had only had to follow the trail of rubble they left behind them. Naruto felt his jaw drop in horror as Sasuke appeared on the left side of the building, declaring vengeance on his older brother.

This changed things, Naruto noted. He watched Sasuke form the Chidori, and pondered if perhaps he would actually be able to kill his brother as he intended too.

He had a feeling he wouldn’t.

“Sasuke wait! He's too-!”

Naruto’s cry went unheard as the younger Uchiha charged across the roof towards Itachi, screaming one word that summed up all of the feelings he felt for his brother, “Die!”

Itachi side-stepped the attack with precision timing and grabbed his brother's wrist. His face was illuminated by the crackling light of the Chidori. The light pattered out as Itachi broke his brother's arm with minimal effort, oblivious to his cries of pain.

Naruto locked eyes with the nukenin, seeing in them a challenge, or a compromise, or something
that dared him to save Sasuke from a worse fate should he choose to do nothing.

'I can't believe this, it's like a hostage situation now…' Naruto stood very still while he watched Sasuke weakly struggle to free himself from his brother's grip. 'It's me they want, Sasuke shouldn't have gotten involved! But…if I don't do something that bastard will kill him for sure!'

Bored of Naruto's hesitance to intervene, Itachi proceeded to ruthlessly beat his brother, breaking through his blocks and sending him crashing to the concrete of the roof, taunting the jinchuriki to put an end to it.

“Just stop it!” Naruto roared, unwilling to surrender, but knowing better than to attempt to rescue Sasuke, “You'll kill him! He's your brother! Why would you-?”

Itachi carelessly tossed Sasuke off the side of the building after he had gone limp, and Naruto decided that risking himself was his only option. Three shadow clones materialized and caught the younger Uchiha as he fell, pulling him back to the safety of the ledge.

Itachi made a move to destroy the clones that had rescued Sasuke and Naruto raced ahead, unaware that Kisame had at last dispatched the troublesome battle toad he had summoned. He was hot on Naruto's tail with his sword raised to slash.

Kisame was blindsided by a Rasengan that hurled into him from behind, knocking him into the cluster of air vents ahead of him with a painfully loud crash. ‘I am sick of this attack!’

“Back off you miserable fish-face!” Jiraiya snarled, intent on finishing the Mist nukenin. His hair would turn pink before he let the Akatsuki lay a hand on his student!

Naruto turned, grinning, glad to see his sensei had caught up.

Itachi, meanwhile, had eliminated the last of the clones that had been defending Sasuke. The younger boy lay helplessly on the roof, his eyes dim and dispirited, 'It's just like last time…I wasn't able to do anything then and I can't now. I'm not strong enough…'

He felt a hand close tightly around his throat, lifting him into the air. Itachi was disappointed in Sasuke's lack of ability, “Sasuke, there is not enough hate inside of you to kill me. I thought you were serious about challenging me?”

His air supply was cut off and Sasuke made a vain effort to struggle until a blast of sand had barreled into Itachi, forcing him back to the edge of the building. Sasuke collapsed down to the roof again, his energy depleted.

Gaara folded his arms and stood beside the crumpled mess of an Uchiha that was next to him. He glowered ahead at Itachi, uncertain of what was going on, but still sure that he was an enemy.

Itachi swiped the sand from his cloak with only half a mind, “You are an enigma.”

The red haired boy decided to hear him out before crushing him, “You can tell?”

“For someone who hates Sasuke as desperately as you do…there really is no cause for you to save his life.” Itachi's powers of observation were alarmingly accurate, but then again, Gaara's loathing for Sasuke was rather easy to spot.

Gaara smirked, “If anyone is going to kill him, it's me.”

Naruto noticed Gaara's arrival shortly after Jiraiya had rushed over to him, making sure he was in one piece. Kisame, terribly aggravated by being throttled to easily, returned to Itachi's side and
glared venomously at Jiraiya.

Itachi made note that they were outnumbered and decided it wasn't worth the trouble, “Kisame, we're leaving.”

The two nukenin leapt down into the alley below to make their getaway, and Jiraiya pursued them, only to find that they had vanished. They had left no trace that would indicate where they had fled to and Jiraiya paced around in the alley by himself for a few moments, supremely pissed.

"Unbelievable! Can't get a goddamn break with these kids..." His eye was twitching uncontrollably, "First Naruto being cornered, then Sasuke pokes his nose into our business and of course the sand kid just has to save the day! What if they realized he has the Ichibi? Is it worth him jeopardizing himself at a time like this?"

Although he knew it was unlikely that Itachi and Kisame had recognized Gaara to also be a jinchuriki, it would only be a matter of time before they came looking for him as well.

Jiraiya had finally calmed himself down after a short while, just in time to notice a ninja racing down the alleyway towards him, “Dynamic Entry!”

A kick in the face sure brought him back to his senses.

It was only after his surprise attack did Gai realize he had ambushed the toad sage. He did sincerely apologize but, naturally, Jiraiya didn't want to hear it, “You're a bit late Gai, the party’s over! And why the hell did you kick me? Do you know who I am?"

A raucous on the roof reminded him that there were still serious matters that needing tending to. Gai followed after Jiraiya to the top of the building, still sheepishly apologizing for his mistake.

Naruto had managed to pull Sasuke in an upright sitting position, but he was drifting in and out of consciousness. It appeared as if the psychological damage done to him had arrested his physical functions. Gaara, as usual, was far less worried over the matter and was more concerned over Naruto’s welfare.

“Gai, take Sasuke back to Konoha to get his injuries treated,” Jiraiya instructed, fishing through his gi for his pipe, “Boys, I need to have a chat with you two right now.”

Gai promptly left with Sasuke slung over his shoulder and Gaara and Naruto gave their attention to their mentor, wondering what exactly had happened.

“Neither of you are hurt are you?” The toad sage inquired while lighting his pipe, “Those two could have easily killed you, you know. They are S-Class criminals.”

“Kisame got my arm pretty bad, but it healed up a while ago,” Naruto displayed the tear in his jacket where blood had dried but his wound was completely mended, “What the heck did they want with me, Ero-sensei? All I did was-"

“It’s not about what you did, Naruto, it’s simply about you in general,” He took a drag and then nodded his head to the red haired boy, “And you too, Gaara, believe it or not. This time they only came looking for Naruto, but you won’t be far behind on the list, I’m sure…”

“What are you talking about?” Gaara questioned, impatient with Jiraiya's chatter.

“Recently I've been keeping tabs on a dangerous collection of nukenin who call themselves the Akatsuki,” Jiraiya admitted, taking a seat on the side of the building, “They seek to gain power from the biju. You two each possess one of the nine. Because of that they've been plotting to
capture you and seal away your respective demons for their own benefit.”

Naruto, a bit overwhelmed by the news, sat down beside his teacher to absorb the information. Gaara preferred to stand, but still felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

“I didn't think they'd be looking for you this early but...it looks like I was wrong,” The toad sennin confessed, “From now on I advise you to be cautious. Be wary of your surroundings because they have spies that can dig up information on just about anything.”

“What about Haku? Do they know about him?” Gaara asked quietly, wondering if it would be an issue.

“Hm? No, they don't know him and don't care to know him since he isn't a jinchuriki like you,” Jiraiya dismissed the idea, adding, “Don't get me wrong; he's still got his own problems. He won't be able to rest easy until Orochimaru is good and dead.”

“Hey! We'll be fine, Gaara-kun! You'll see!” Naruto's confidence returned rather quickly, “We always watch each other's backs, so what are we worrying for? They won't be back for a while if they know what's good for em'!”

The toad sage chuckled, “I couldn't have said it better myself, Naruto. Now, I say it's about time we get back to our search…”

Naruto stood up and clapped Gaara on the back, “Hey, uh…” He lowered his voice, “Thanks for saving Sasuke back there…I'm sure that'll give you one up on him, eh?”

Gaara smirked broadly, “I'm going back home now. Don't get yourself killed.”

Naruto watched the red haired boy descend down to the street below and head south before turning back to Jiraiya, who was still smoking in order to settle his nerves.

It did cross his mind if Sasuke ever would be able to be at peace with his brother, at least by way of killing him. In his opinion it seemed a very lofty goal, but then again, one not as far-fetched as his dream of being Hokage, 'Everyone's got their own agenda, I guess…'

Haku had tried to explain to Sakura why Gaara had not come with him, and had hesitantly admitted that he had gone to check up on Sasuke after he had been acting strangely.

She didn't seem too bothered but had asked Kiba to retrieve them if he could. After Akamaru had picked up their scent he had left, assuring Sakura he'd make sure they weren't tearing each other's throats out.

That had left her a bit uneasy.

“I'm going to need replacement blades for Karasu,” Kankuro mentioned as they passed by Tenten's weapons forge, “You think we can stop here for a bit so I can make repairs?”

Temari recalled how his puppet had gotten quite mangled after fighting a Cloud shinobi who was surprisingly adept with a sword. She shrugged to her brother, seeing they had little else to do.

Sakura followed Kankuro inside the shop, wanting to say hello to Tenten and get some spare kunai if she could.

Temari waited outside the forge with Haku, observing the magnificent weapons on display in the window, “Not going in, huh?”
“I don’t think I should.”

She raised an eyebrow at him, “Why’s that?”

Haku smiled to himself, “Tenten has a lot on her mind, I’m sure. I tend to make her nervous when I’m around and I don’t want to bother her.”

“You like her?”

‘My…Temari really can’t differentiate between personal and casual questions…’ He decided to humor her, “I did once. Only as a friend now, I suppose.”

Temari looked as if she was interested in the subject and he couldn't tell why. She leaned on the wood panel of the door, folding her arms in the same fashion Gaara would, “What discouraged you then? She dumped you?”

“It was a bit of a disaster, really,” Haku chuckled, embarrassed to admit it, “I should’ve known better. Her teammates are very protective over her and I really wasn't being rational when I pursued her either…”

“A wise decision on your part,” Temari agreed, recalling Team 13, “You wouldn't want to cross that Neji-fellow if you don't want a beating.”

Haku frowned, remembering Neji’s jealousy, “I learned that the hard way…”

Temari laughed good-naturedly and he was glad that she had finally warmed up to him. Even if it had cost him an embarrassing story and nearly having himself killed, he was truly grateful that he had the chance to get to know her.

It was also fascinating just how much she and Kankuro were comparable to Gaara in physical appearance and personality traits, ‘Although, Temari is far more capricious than either of her brothers…’

He also found himself acting more and more puppy-headed, as Naruto had called it. The phrase was synonymous with overly-complaisant, he guessed. This fawning behavior had started after he had fought her in the exam, but he couldn't really justify himself.

‘She's dauntless, feisty, rude, very beautiful and…’ Haku paused and blinked at his reflection in the glass of the display window, ‘I really like her.’ The last time he had liked someone it had not worked out. Maybe now he was better prepared.

It was a sweet revelation with bad timing.

“Hello? Earth to pretty-boy!”

She had been trying out new nicknames for him, some more polite than others.

Haku snapped himself out of his contemplative state and gave her his attention, hoping she couldn't read his thoughts like an open book. Temari gave him a puzzled look, “You're not going to pass out or anything are you? You had that look again…”

“No, I'm alright. I was just thinking…” He searched for an easy topic, and picked one he was genuinely curious about, “What was life like for you when you were younger, when Gaara-kun still lived with you?”

She was silent for a long moment and looked away from him.
“Well…you can't really describe living like that. I'd call it terrifying, maybe, but that really doesn't do it justice,” Temari answered in a low voice, recalling how it was, “Everything was based on fear. My father had made so many rules and restrictions about Gaara that it made him seem less like our brother and more like a ticking time-bomb.”

“Were you afraid of him?” Haku asked, his eyes were gentle and understanding.

“A little. I was afraid of what he would do but I wasn’t afraid of him,” Temari explained, “I wanted him to get better. I remember being sad because our family stopped being a family and turned into a militia shortly after my mother died.”

Haku listened quietly, beginning to see how it was.

“All Kankuro and I could do was study and train to be shinobi because our father had devoted so much time to Gaara and he barely ever let us go near him. It was too dangerous…and only because he made him that way!” She sneered, hating her father, “The only person he allowed near Gaara was my uncle and even then, he was still bent on killing him when he thought that his powers had become too much to control…”

“He must have been very lonely.” The dark haired boy commented, and she sighed, trying to relax.

“It will never be that way again. He's alive and he's safe here…” Temari said softly, “We won't let him be unhappy like he was back in Suna. This place had changed him…” She turned to Haku, regarding him for a moment, “You changed him.”

He didn't want to take all the credit for it, but he admitted that he was a very positive influence.

Haku smiled at her, “Well, I do think you've answered my question to the best of your ability.” He looked into the shop through the window to see Tenten taking measurements of Kankuro's puppet and Sakura was helping her with the measuring tape, “How about we get some tea?”

“Tea?” Temari blinked at him, “Fine. But I only like ginseng with honey and I seriously doubt it'll be as good as it is back home…”

Haku walked beside her contentedly as they turned the corner to head for the teahouse, and he dearly hoped things would go more smoothly this time than they had the last time he had been there.
Chapter Soundtrack: “All We Got is Us” by Thomas Prime (Otso Remix)

Gaara promptly returned to Konoha in a foul mood after helping Naruto and their sensei dispatch their pursuers. He decided he would dull-down the details of the conflict when he recapped it to his entourage.

He paused as he entered the gates of Konoha. Entourage. Perhaps that was a better label for the group of knuckleheads he flocked with; a word he would use more frequently over posse or le retinue any day.

There was no describing how badly his head hurt. If he didn't know any better, Gaara would've guessed that a speeding freight-train had paid him a visit not too long ago.

It was unfortunate that he and Naruto were being targeted by a band of nukenin so early on, he noted. A year or more of training and Gaara surmised they'd be able to adequately defend themselves from S-Class threats, but it seemed time was not on their side.

‘How much longer before their next attempt?’ He wondered, finding himself a bit bitter over the subject, ‘How much longer before they realize I live here as well?’

Not too long, as Jiraiya had put it.

What was that saying? Birds of a feather flock together?

Gaara snorted as he turned the corner, guessing that next time he and Naruto would have to act as a unit to fend off their enemies, or better yet, have Haku join them in a surprise attack….and perhaps the whole damn entourage could get in on it.

He decided after careful consideration that it was better if his friends did not get too deeply involved in the matter. It was a problem he and Naruto had to bear, not them. It wouldn't be worth them risking their lives in such a one-sided endeavor.

Gaara didn't want to sound like a pessimist, but he was fairly sure it was only a matter of time before the Akatsuki would regroup and track him down, hauling him in even if he was kicking and screaming all the way. He had sensed the power Itachi and his partner had possessed and he was in no place to make light of it.

Temari and Kankuro had caught him off guard when they stepped in front of him, demanding to know where he had been. Haku and Sakura also looked at him as if he held vital information. They weren't far off in that respect.

“Well, was he up to no good?” Temari was beginning to harbor the same detestation for Sasuke as her younger brother, “What happened out there?”

“Two dangerous nukenin attacked Naruto in the next village over,” Gaara responded, ignoring their gasps, “Sasuke intervened, as did Jiraiya-sensei and I. They retreated once they realized they were outnumbered…” He locked eyes with Haku, “Itachi was there.”

Haku and Sakura were eerily quiet for a long moment and Temari and Kankuro gave them questioning looks.
As if understanding that it was a matter Gaara intended to discuss privately with Sakura, Haku ushered Temari and Kankuro along as if the news held little impact. “Well done then, Gaara-kun!” He turned to the elder sand siblings, “Tell me you two, have you ever gone swimming before?”

Temari didn’t like the fact they were being excluded but decided she could milk information from Haku later with enough persistence. Kankuro, though, decided to play along, “Swim? Eh, not in anything bigger than a tub I'd wager.”

“Then this should be quite the education for you…” Haku muttered, guiding them along, having an ideal lake in mind for the lesson, “We’ll meet up with you later, if that's alright?”

Sakura looked a bit torn to see her new friends swept along so brusquely. Gaara spoke up for her, amused, “Teach them well, Haku. It'll be valuable to them in missions outside Suna.”

Temari wore an irritated expression as she followed after her brother and the dark haired boy.

At last Gaara had a moment alone with the pink haired girl. He wasn't pleased to be the bearer of bad news for her, but he wasn't about to lie about the situation.

She was hugging him a moment later, murmuring into his shoulder and his headache immediately disappeared, much to his astonishment, “You said Itachi was there, right? Please tell me you're okay!”

“I'm fine. Naruto's fine,” He paused, the next words he spoke leaving a sour taste in his mouth, “But Sasuke was injured. He was foolish enough to challenge Itachi and he was beaten badly. Gai-sensei brought him to the hospital.”

Sakura pulled away, taking the news better than he had anticipated, “I…I understand.” She looked away from him for a moment, aware that he disliked Sasuke, “Will you go to the hospital with me to see if he's alright?”

'No.' Something stopped him from saying it outright. Even if he would've preferred to have left Sasuke for his brother to finish him off he had still saved him. Maybe not for the Uchiha's sake, but for Sakura's. Gaara respected her enough to allow her happiness even if he was not the source of it.

So Sasuke would live to see another day, it seemed.

“I'll go with you, Sakura-chan.” His voice was low, with an equal balance of pacification and frustration imbued in it.

Her eyes were thankful but she didn't smile, she wasn't able to. Sakura was frightened, struck with the thought of what may have happened to Sasuke if Gaara and Naruto had not also been there to break up the fight.

She knew the end result of that situation.

Gaara walked beside her silently as they turned around and headed across town for the hospital.

Once they had been directed to the Uchiha's room, Gaara's mood had not improved. Sakura's presence, however, kept it from downgrading.

He stood near the door with his arms folded as she sat beside the unconscious boy's hospital bed, her face wracked with worry. A nurse had stopped to check in on Sasuke shortly and then departed, seeing he remained in stable condition.
“I remember the promise I made to you…” Sakura said quietly, touching his hand gently, tentatively, “I'm sorry that this happened again. If I had known, I would've…”

Gaara was watching her with wary eyes and it made her uncomfortable. Her voice dropped to a whisper as she continued, “I don't want him to hurt you again. It won't happen again. I won't let it happen, Sasuke-kun…”

She drew her hand away and sighed, feeling strung-out. Sakura stood and noted that Gaara did not appear hostile over her renewed vow to her teammate. In fact, he seemed more fascinated by her devotion that upset by it.

She was then unaware, however, that he highly doubted Sasuke would take her words to heart the same way he did in that moment.

“Let's go now. He needs to rest.” The pink haired kunoichi exited the room as he held the door open for her, “Gaara-kun?”

He turned to her as he stepped out into the hallway as well, giving her an expectant look.

“You saved him, didn't you? When he got hurt?” Sakura had deduced that was why Gaara had been acting so oddly when he had returned, “That's why he wasn't hurt any worse than this?”

“It wasn't much of a rescue.” The red haired boy replied, not making a big deal over it.

She nodded, smiling gratefully at the confirmation, “Thank you, Gaara-kun.”

Gaara shrugged, finding the entire notion of Sasuke was bothering him much less than it normally did. Perhaps it was because he had witnessed that he was not very much a hindrance to his friendship with Sakura. In fact, Sakura seemed to be getting closer to him daily, he had noticed.

He then offered to take her to lunch at Ichiraku Ramen since Naruto had thrown his extra vouchers at him shortly before leaving on his trip with Jiraiya. No opportunities wasted, right?

Sakura meekly tried to decline, saying her parents would've liked to spend at least two meals of the day with her, but once he insisted she gave up and followed him out the front of the hospital, trying to suppress her delighted grin.

Once at the restaurant, Sakura had already decided on what type of ramen she wanted. They had taken their seats, and he judged it then to be too late to flee upon seeing Sato was there as well, chatting loudly and on his third bowl of beef ramen.

Sato, very annoyingly, very amiably, greeted Gaara, “Hey! Gaara-kun! I haven't seen you in a while! How've you been?” It appeared he didn't hold a grudge against him after their fight during the chunin exam…if he could recall it at all.

“Busy,” Gaara responded truthfully, and nodded to Tama when he noticed she was seated beside Sato, still not finished with her first bowl of ramen, “What are you doing here?”

“After training Shino and Sunshine ditched me like they had better things to do,” The silver haired boy summarized, smiling at his companion, “They kinder-dumped me on Tama, so as conciliation I decided to buy her lunch!”

‘Kinder-dumped? He makes himself sound like a five-year-old.’ Gaara found the Hatake's linguistics to be a bit outlandish.
“I actually requested that they let me steal you,” Tama corrected, her smile somewhat coquettish and only Sato missed it. “We haven’t seen each other in a while, you know?”

Sakura grinned at her from across the way, admiring her take-charge attitude. In her opinion, however, she would think of Sato to be the last boy any girl would want to pursue, ‘I mean, sheesh, he causes more trouble than even Naruto! And that’s a difficult record to beat!’

Gaara agreed with the idea entirely, something she was not conscious of. Sato just annoyed him in general.

Sakura ordered ramen for herself and Gaara while Sato proceeded to talk the redhead’s ears off. Clearly, Sakura noted, the boy hadn’t been out in a while; he probably needed to purge his system of all the pent-up nonsense in his head.

Gaara was relieved when the other pair finished their meals and stood to leave. Sato of course, before departing, tossed in his two-cents, “Enjoy your date, you two!”

He wasn’t about to be impeded by the chattering dolt, “At least now we can.”

Sakura laughed at Gaara’s response before taking a bite of her ramen.

In a vain effort to relax Naruto and his mentor stopped by the local hot springs.

The blonde boy sat beside Jiraiya moodily in the hot water, very deep in thought, ‘I’ve got to get stronger fast if I’m going to be Hokage. When I was fighting those two it’s like they weren’t even trying! How are Gaara-kun and I supposed to contend with guys as strong as that?’

He then recalled something that had really been irking him.

“Hey Ero-sensei…”

Jiraiya glanced over to him, adjusting the cloth on top of his head, “What is it, Naruto? Still hung up on that fight from earlier?”

Naruto nodded, “It’s just…that Itachi-guy…he had shadow clones too and he could make his explode! He blew all of mine away like they were nothing.”

“I’ll bet…” Jiraiya scratched his chin, “All of his techniques are borderline kage-level. I hope you know he was already in the ANBU Black-Ops by the time he was your age.”

“How did he do it? I’ve got to know! I mean…I could really use a trick like that!” The blonde boy didn’t want to make a fuss over it, but he was extremely frustrated that he had encountered someone more adept with kage bunshin than himself.

The toad sage thought about it for a moment before answering, “Fundamentally it’s easy enough to understand, but mastering a technique like that is something that would take even a jounin several years.”

Naruto gave him an annoyed look and his teacher gave up and explained it anyway.

“Consider this, Naruto…you use an unusually large amount of chakra when you make shadow clones, let’s say six or seven, sometimes even more…” Jiraiya began, folding his arms, “In this case the amount of chakra you gather is not distributed to the group of clones you intend to make, but to an individual clone. That is what gives it an unstable, bomb-like quality.”
“All that chakra in one clone? Isn't that a waste of energy?” Naruto pointed out keenly, finding his chakra control lessons had done him a lot of good.

“Think of it as a singular clone on steroids,” The toad sage suggested, “It's kind of a gamble when you're making a clone like that. Too much chakra will overload the little crapper and blow him up on the spot...too little and it's barely even worth calling a clone.”

The blonde boy raised his eyebrows, “Yeah, that part I've known for a while!”

“The tricky part is molding the chakra correctly. This isn't quite the same as the Rasengan...” Jiraiya added, smiling at his pupil as he listened intently, “The extra amount of chakra made for it is molded into a tightly-packed, volatile kind of reservoir inside of the clones chakra coils, you follow me?”

“That's pretty complicated.”

“It's worse, actually,” His mentor's face became more serious, “The clone you make won't be able to use any techniques without triggering the bomb. Also, the excess chakra the clone has cushions against enemy blows so they'll probably last longer...but using up that extra chakra can just downgrade it to a regular clone. There's a lot you have to keep in mind.”

Naruto took it into consideration, not yet discouraged, “I get it, Ero-sensei. But, um...how do you know all this exactly?”

Jiraiya made a pathetic face, “I'm old now. I've been around long enough to see all the weird shit and then some.”

His pupil sighed, figuring that was a good enough answer.

The toad sage was honestly impressed with his student's greater level of maturity. He guessed that it must have come about after the exam when his friends and village were in peril...or perhaps he had just grown into it, *There all growing up. Haku and the sand kid too...though Gaara is just wound too tight to exercise restraint at all sometimes.*

It was another thing he commended Naruto and Haku for: patience.

“Well, this skill is basically a matter of calculation, instinct and good judgment,” Jiraiya concluded his lesson with his student, “All things you could improve on, actually.”

Naruto took offense, “What? Are you saying I can't do this? Is that it you perv? I can totally do this, piece of cake!” His declaration continued even further, “You know what? I'll figure this whole thing out and then improve it, how's that?”

Jiraiya looked genuinely intrigued.

“Alright! I've had it with just sitting around doing nothing! Are we gonna find this lady or not?” Naruto stood up and left the water, through with slacking, “Come on Ero-sensei, let's get going!”

His teacher chuckled, following his pupil and wishing he still had the energy Naruto possessed.

Late that evening they had decided to take a break from their day-long search. Neither of the pair were in very high spirits, and Naruto was too tired to complain when Jiraiya led them into a tavern for some rest.

The place was dimly lit and smelled horribly of cigarettes.
Naruto scrunched up his nose, disliking the smoky atmosphere and followed Jiraiya wordlessly along the front. When his mentor halted abruptly Naruto bumped into his back clumsily, “Eh? Ero-sensei what are you doing?”

Jiraiya had paused and was staring across the room wearing a confused expression.

On the opposite side of the restaurant a blonde woman was shouting at a waiter to bring her more sake. At first the toad sage had thought his eyes may have been deceiving him in the poor lighting of the place, but when the woman noticed him her eyes widened in realization and he knew he had found who they were looking for.

“Well! Tsunade! It's been a while hasn't it?” He chortled, grinning, finding it typical to find her in such a place.

Naruto's eyes perked up, “Huh? The old lady's here?”

Jiraiya gave him a sidelong nod and Naruto decided it was time to be quiet and let his teacher do the talking.

They sat at the table Tsunade and her group were settled at, and Naruto wondered why Jiraiya was suddenly so light-hearted. It wasn't much of a discovery, but one thing he noted was that there in fact was a young woman with Tsunade, holding a pig in her lap and giving him an odd look.

“Hello Shizune, Ton-Ton,” Jiraiya greeted, nodding to them, “I hope you've all been well.”

Shizune gave him a weak smile, but it quickly disappeared when Tsunade spoke up, “What the hell are you doing here, Jiraiya?”

The black haired woman offered to share her plate of snacks with Naruto in order to distract him and he gladly accepted.

“Come on now, Tsunade. I thought you'd be happy to see me.” Jiraiya smirked, well aware he was annoying her as much as he used to.

“Don't kid yourself like that, Jiraiya.” The blonde woman began shuffling a deck of cards, not very interested in her old teammate's presence. Her eyes skimmed over Naruto and faint recognition flickered in them, “And who's this? A new apprentice? He looks funny…very different from your last student.”

“Who looks funny, lady?” Naruto inquired, grumpily.

Tsunade gave him an amused look, “Jiraiya's previous pupil was a very bright boy. Polite, popular and quite handsome too…”

“Not unlike his teacher!” Jiraiya agreed, grinning goofily.

Naruto was annoyed but remained quiet, helping himself to the snack plate while he listened. Shizune gave him an apologetic look and he wondered if maybe Tsunade was even more temperamental than Gaara.

“Relax, Naruto,” The toad sage could sense the boy's unease, “I've trained one Hokage, what's one more, eh?”

Tsunade's eyes narrowed warningly, “Don't get the boy's hopes up.”

She dealt the cards she had shuffled and Jiraiya looked over his hand, noting it was fairly good.
His expression became solemn a moment later, “Alright, Tsunade, I'll get to the point... I'm here to offer you the title of Godaime Hokage on behalf of the Hidden Leaf Village,” The hair on the back of Naruto's neck was on end upon hearing the words, “Well, do you accept?”

Shizune's eyes widened at the offer and she gave a pleading look to the woman beside her.

After a moment, Tsunade answered, “I refuse.”

The blonde boy stared at the busty woman across the table from his teacher, unable to believe that she had declined.

“Offering one's life all for the sake of protecting one village? That's a fool's bet!” Tsunade spat bitterly, “Even I know better than to put my life on the line for something as fleeting as being a martyr, Jiraiya.”

“How can you say that?” Naruto roared, jumping up from his seat angrily, “Someone like you doesn't even deserve to be considered for such an honor!”

Jiraiya raised an eyebrow at his pupil but made no attempt to interrupt him. Maybe Naruto would be able to convince Tsunade otherwise, he was hoping.

Tsunade also stood, slamming her cards down on the table, glaring at the indignant blonde boy, “Is that so, kid? You want to take this outside?”

“You bet I do!”

Jiraiya sighed, rubbing the side of his head in exasperation. Shizune also looked troubled as she watched the two blondes leave the tavern, causing an uproar, “I'm so sorry, Jiraiya-sama! Tsunade-sama's been a bit off recently...”

“I can tell.” Jiraiya followed Shizune and the pig outside, wondering if they should intervene.

The street outside was by then dark and empty and it appeared a fight was imminent.

“See this, boy?” Tsunade fingered the necklace adorning her bosom, “If you can defeat me I'll concede and let you have this necklace of mine.”

“You can keep the stupid necklace after I beat you!” Naruto snapped hastily and he turned to see Jiraiya had come to stand beside him.

“You know, squirt, that necklace is extremely valuable! It belonged to Tsunade's grandfather, the very first Hokage,” The toad sage gave him a brief history lesson, “Just thought you'd like to know!”

He backed off after that and Naruto changed his mind at the mentioning of the Shodaime Hokage, “On second thought, Baa-chan, that necklace would look way better on me than it does on you!”

Not amused, Tsunade rushed at him, flicking him with her index finger and sending him crashing down to the ground with incredible force. She was surprised to find she had only destroyed a shadow clone, ‘Well, well! It looks like the kid is smarter than he looks. All that time I was only talking to a shadow clone! He must've have substituted himself with it before leaving the pub.’

Naruto decided that her unprecedented strength could cause him some serious problems, 'Holy crap! She's strong! I've got to fight carefully or she'll poke a hole right through me!'

Shadow clones descended from the rooftops in pairs, attacking in unison, trying to test her
defenses. Tsunade destroyed them with minimal effort, appearing rather bored. It was then Naruto concluded her defenses were up-to-snuff.

From a vantage point on top of a telephone pole, Naruto hurled a fuuma shuriken he had been saving for a special occasion, “Demon Wind Shuriken: Windmill of Shadows!”

The deadly projectile soared for her and she leapt over it, turning to see its follow-through trajectory. Tsunade was mildly impressed when the shuriken transformed and reverted back to its original form, Naruto, and he hurled a kunai at her with a cry.

“Pretty clever…” She commented, catching the kunai and she tossed it back at him. The knife met its mark and destroyed a shadow clone. Tsunade raised an eyebrow,

'I thought for sure that was the real one! So where's-?'

The blue, swirling light of the Rasengan grazed past her face, nicking her cheek. Naruto landed behind her and let the spiraling sphere dissipate. His attack had been more of a warning, but he hadn't expected her to freeze where she stood after his mock-assault.

'Impossible! Jiraiya has taught this boy the Rasengan?' Tsunade's eyes flickered over to the toad hermit who stood watching smugly nearby, 'But how...how could he have mastered it so young? He's just a kid!'

Naruto's control over the technique was quite shocking. If he had wanted to, he could have easily blown her head off of her shoulders. Since he hadn't, Tsunade decided to seize the opportunity to put the boy in his place.

She punched a fissure in the ground and the blonde boy avoided it easily, annoyed that Jiraiya was half cheering, half barking at him from the sidelines, 'Cut it out, Ero-sennin, I'm trying to concentrate!'

After putting some distance between himself and Tsunade, Naruto summoned a fair-sized battle toad, “Do me a favor and spit some oil, will you Mr. Toad?” The blonde muttered and then grinned to see that the toad was able to comply.

From a ways off, Tsunade frowned inwardly, “What is that kid up to now? You gave him toads too, Jiraiya?”

The toad sage merely shrugged from his spot beside Shizune.

Naruto's toad spat a mouthful of pale liquid at Tsunade and she moved to dodge, her eyes widening in shock as Naruto tossed an exploding tag at the oil and detonated it.

Jiraiya and Shizune leapt out of the way of the attack as flames filled the street, missing Tsunade but leaving roadside signs and stands much worse for the wear.

Tsunade was perched on top of a lamppost and gave Jiraiya an annoyed glare. He chuckled sheepishly, “That one was Gamabunta's fault! I didn't teach him that!”

Naruto watched her disappear from her position, wondering if she was yet intimidated, 'Where'd she go?'

A relentless punch connected with his back and sent him flying down the street, crashing down to the road and digging up dirt as he tumbled. Tsunade took the liberty of dispatching the troublesome toad as well, 'It looks like he's more like Jiraiya's former student than I gave him credit for, but still, this proves nothing!'
Naruto hobbled to his feet, not ready to give up the fight, “Keep it coming, Baa-chan! Is that all you got?”

“I win.”

“Like hell! That was a cheap shot! I can keep going!” The blonde boy yowled, unwilling to concede, “I won't lose to you! I'm not like you, because someday I'll be Hokage! That's my dream!”

Tsunade fell silent after he had declared his goal, as if the words meant something to her.

“I was holding back, Baa-chan. You could've had it much worse…” Naruto couldn't help but brag since he could have easily summoned Gamabunta to stomp her, “You didn't win this one, not by a long shot!”

Tsunade settled her hands on her hips and frowned at the hot-blooded boy, “No holding back next time then, kid. If you're that stubborn about it, I'll offer you a rematch five days from now. Then we can go all out and see who's truly worthy of this necklace!”

Naruto brushed the dirt from his pants and watched as Tsunade called for Shizune and Ton-Ton before they left, ‘I'll show her! She'll see that she's wrong about being Hokage when I'm through with her!’

Jiraiya chuckled as he helped his wobbly pupil to his feet, wondering if Naruto's determination would affect Tsunade's decision on accepting the position of Godaime, “Well done, Naruto. Normally I would've stopped you, but I had a feeling you'd put up a great fight after you defended yourself against the Akatsuki. Your strategy was not half bad.”

“Yeah well, she's lucky Haku-kun and Gaara-kun weren't here to tag-team her with me!”

His teacher only laughed in response, “That would definitely be something now, wouldn't it? Let's head back to the hotel now, I'm beat. We'll see if we can change her mind tomorrow…”

The next day, Temari and Kankuro made sure to inform Gaara that swimming was not one of their strong suits.

“It sucked,” Kankuro announced bluntly, “Haku's a good teacher and all, but he makes everything look easier than it actually is.”

“At least you can keep your head above water.” Temari grumbled to her brother, still annoyed, “I don't like swimming.”

“Join the club,” Gaara smirked at her playfully, “It's a necessary evil, Temari. You'll thank him one day.”

“I doubt that.”

“Haku's got an unfair advantage. That guy's like a fish almost…” Kankuro added, finding his ability rather peculiar.

“If you'd rather skip out on today's lesson you are more than welcome to train with me.” Gaara suggested, fed up with their complaints.

They immediately agreed and left the apartment before Haku could stop them.
Later that morning Tenten arrived at the Hyuga compound.

Her primary concern was that Neji had not shown up for training at the designated time. She offered to go fetch him so Lee and Gai wouldn't be torn away from their youthful practice.

At first she had suspected that he may have fallen ill; he was under a lot of stress lately and his immune system may have been suffering. Tenten dismissed that highly unlikely idea. She knew him well and his overall health was spotless.

’Hopefully the Branch House isn't giving him a hard time again…’ She was aware that some of his cousins threw tantrums when they came across Neji and she knew that was always an unpleasant affair, 'It'll be safer if I just check myself!'

Hinata was tending to a small garden near the front of the mansion and Tenten figured she'd be the most help to her cause out of anyone living at the estate, “Good morning, Hinata-chan!”

The shy girl looked up at her and smiled slightly, “Oh, hello Tenten-oneesan! It's g-good to see you.”

After the events of the invasion they had begun referring to each other with affectionate terms. Hinata couldn’t help her habit of calling Neji her brother, and as a result begun treating Tenten as an older sister.

“Have you happened to have seen Neji, by any chance?”

Hinata shook her head, “I'm afraid not. He hasn't been with you?”

Tenten sighed, “No, he hasn't…well, no problem. I'll keep looking. Thanks anyway, Hinata.” She waved goodbye to the younger girl before moving on, not ready to give up her search so easily.

'That was weird…usually Hinata's pretty good at knowing where people are.' Tenten thought as she crossed over a small footbridge into the rear of the estate, 'Maybe I should have asked her to use her Byakugan for me?'

She halted in her tracks when a very familiar battle cry pierced the air, 'That's him alright!'

Tenten looked off to her right to see Neji in a courtyard with his uncle, evading shuriken and performing complex Jyukken attacks that he rarely ever used in her presence. Her chocolate eyes widened marginally, watching as the elegant fight progressed and suddenly she found herself walking away without even trying to call out to him.

Hiashi didn't particularly intimidate her, but she had a feeling she had suddenly become unnecessary. Poking her nose in Hyuga business would only offend Neji, 'And besides his skills will grow a lot faster if he trains with his uncle!'

Just the idea of her abilities becoming obsolete made her feel weak and light-headed. Tenten found she no longer had the energy to return to her team's training grounds and spend time with Lee.

She walked dejectedly back the way she came and tried to keep her head high as passed members of the Hyuga clan. Hinata could tell something was not right as the older girl left the estate alone and she hoped it was nothing permanently damaging.

Shortly after that Tenten was in her forge, hammering away her frustrations as she mended a broken blade for Gekko Hayate after he had stopped by a few hours earlier.
Her mind was all over the place as she worked on auto-pilot repairing the splintered sword.

It was a very cathartic process, pounding hot metal back into shape. She was upset that she had let herself become weak enough so that Neji had to move on to more challenging opponents.

'It's not really a bad thing…' Tenten admitted, rubbing the sweat out of her eyes with the back of her arm, 'It'd be stupid for me to go back there and ask him to train with me. It would be more like a sympathy-spar than anything. He'd go easy on me, I bet…'

The heat of the blazing hearth was licking at her back and she grimaced, turning the blade over and began to reshape it again, 'I must be crazy. It's not a big deal. It's useless to expect him to wait on me thinking that he's sentimental about our relationship.'

Suddenly relationship didn't feel like the right word. Even friendship didn't quite describe it.

'What the heck am I supposed to call it anyway? Association? Partnership? Everything is starting to sound so goddamn tacky!'

Tenten exchanged hammers as she began to work on the front edge of the blade, wanting to make sure it was the appropriate thickness. She worked through the rough edge with practiced hands and slowly began to realize that she wasn't giving herself enough credit.

'I am valuable in lots of respects,' She affirmed, readjusting the blade and beginning to hammer away at it again, 'I'm one of the few people of this village who's in this trade! Lots of ninja depend on me!'

Tenten had nearly forgotten that she had a life existing outside of training with Neji, and she wasn't about to lose touch with it altogether.

'And just because he's never reciprocated my feelings doesn't mean I'm disposable to him, right? I can live with that. He doesn't have to go out of his way for me because my heart is big enough for the both of us…I won't let him down.'

She finished laminating the blade shortly after that and set it in a basin of water to cool. Glad that she had finished early, Tenten wiped the sweat off of her skin with a towel and changed shirts, locking the forge behind her after she left.

Tenten recalled that when she got back from her next visit she'd have to fill Sabaku no Kankuro's order.

A few minutes later she had reached the memorial stone and was glad to see Kakashi was not loitering around it as he normally did.

Her eyes skimmed down the names listed on the stone of ninja killed in action. A set of names were placed side by side near the center of the stone with no surname for either.

Takaharu and Chinatsu.

They were listed with the rest of the ANBU who had been killed on past missions and Tenten sighed to herself, wondering where to start.

“I'm sorry that I didn't bring an offering for you guys today. I was working,” Tenten apologized, as if they were standing right in front of her, “You don't mind, I know.”

She searched for a subject to articulate to her parents, “Hm…well, you'll be glad to hear business
picked up after the invasion. Oh! And three Black-Ops bought replacement swords from me last week they were so impressed with the quality!

Silence answered her but she was still smiling at the memory, “They said they were just like your blades, Dad.”

The name Takaharu seemed to flash on the stone and her eyes dulled a bit.

“I actually came here to talk to you about something else,” She admitted, her voice lowering gloomily, “You remember the boy I spoke about last time?”

She continued as if the silence was speaking to her, “Neither of us were able to achieve chunin rank in the exam, but I know we’ve both gotten much stronger. Next year for sure!” Tenten frowned at the stone again, “I’d like to be with him, but it’s as you said. I’m a rationalist. I always think of a reason not to say anything to him. I wish you guys weren’t always right all the time.”

The wind blew in the trees nearby and a flock of birds soared directly over Tenten as she kept speaking.

“Neji’s got the romance of a log!” She laughed as an afterthought and then fell quiet, realizing she wasn’t feeling as light-hearted about the matter as she made herself appear, “Could you maybe tell me…if you know…”

The stone shone in the sun as she hesitated.

“Is it hopeless?”

The silence remained and she ignored it, proceeding to ask them for their permission to pursue him, “I want to become stronger for him and show him that I’m not a waste of time! You can understand that, right?”

She could almost hear her mother telling her that she was far too devoted to being a kunoichi and had to loosen up a little. Tenten supplied an automatic response to the non-existent nagging, “Come on! The statistic still stands that for someone in my position there’s over a 90 percent chance I’ll die before sex or marriage, you know! So don’t argue…I…I won’t complain anymore.”

They still tried to, it seemed.

She sighed, accepting the fact she was talking to a slab of polished rock.

“I have to get back to work now. It was nice talking to you,” Tenten concluded, feeling her spirit lighten a bit, “Do me a favor and look after Neji while he trains today, because…I can't.”

Naruto had time to train by himself as Jiraiya returned to the town to investigate and see if he could make Tsunade reconsider her rejection of the title of Godaime.

A small grove beside a river was conveniently located outside of the village, and Naruto decided it was a secluded enough area for him to train undisturbed.

He was resolute on the promise he made to master and to improve what Jiraiya called the Bunshin Daibakuha, or Great Clone Explosion. Once he had found a reasonable spot to train in he reflected on what Jiraiya had told him, 'So he said it was a tightly-packed reservoir of chakra that's got to be inside of the clones chakra coils. Hm. I guess I better figure out how much chakra one clone can take…'
Naruto calmed his thoughts and began to focus his chakra. He determined that it would be better to experiment with his clones from a distance should he be successful in his endeavor.

As instructed he made one clone to start with, forming the hand seal almost reflexively. He felt his chakra reserves drain the necessary chakra for the jutsu and then became aware of the sensation of excess chakra filtering into the technique. He had noted such an occurrence before, not at all on purpose, he recalled.

After first learning the shadow clone technique there had been times when he overshot the amount of chakra he really needed to use. Being he was currently so seasoned with chakra control, it was only second nature to him to use only the amount needed, and that earlier on he had only been wasting his energy.

What he then realized was that it wouldn't have been a waste of chakra at all had he known something could actually come of a clone created by way of surplus chakra.

Naruto donated a generous amount more to the jutsu and watched a shadow clone take shape near the river's edge…and violently combust a moment later, sending stones and rubble flying.

He ducked, shielding his head from the debris raining down, 'O-kay, that was way too much…but I sort of got it right. Maybe if I just cut back on the amount of chakra I use it won't explode.'

Naruto stood up again and brushed himself off, trying it again, and halved the amount of chakra he had used before. The clone it produced appeared stable enough and Naruto ordered it to transform, curious to see how jutsu and explosions were connected.

The clone, perhaps to anger him, used his infamous Sexy Jutsu against him and the blonde face-planted on the ground, 'WHAT? How did that not work? I didn't use too much chakra and there was definitely enough in that one to make something happen, but…it could still use a jutsu!'

He destroyed the impudent kage bunshin and then made note that he had not been concentrating as he had while creating the first clone, 'Yeah…Ero-sensei said the chakra has to be packed tightly in the coils so when it does try to do something it's like…it's like a trip wire for the explosion.'

It began to make more sense to him.

“Alright! This shit is complicated and hard to do but I am not giving up!” Naruto howled, unwilling to give in

Nearly an hour of experimenting with molding chakra and carefully adding excess chakra into an individual clone at last produced a positive result. After pounding the conditions into his head until he did it without much thought, he was able to create a clone that met the requirements and detonated properly.

He didn't let his success feed his ego just then.

Another hour of practice and he found he could command his clones to ignite silently, and even create two clones at a time that were capable of blowing up at different intervals.

His chakra reserves were running low as evening hastened, and Naruto collapsed to the ground to rest, running strategies through his head on how to incorporate his new ability into his fighting style.

The blonde boy also knew that just because he had been successful didn't mean he had mastered the technique. In a fight he knew he wouldn't have the time to stop and balance out excess chakra
and mold it for a clone. It had to be an instantaneous skill that he could use without thinking about it.

He was still far from that point but he smiled as he stared up at the sunset, ‘Hey, I've got all week! I'll keep at this until I can blow Ero-sensei's head off without trying!’

Two Days Later

Kankuro was thoroughly impressed with the replacement blades he had received for Karasu. They fit perfectly and were actually an improvement from the blades previously concealed within his puppet.

He thanked Tenten by paying more than what was necessary and leaving before she could notice. Rather than chasing the thankful Sand ninja down the street, Tenten decided to treat herself and Lee to lunch that day.

She chose a nice restaurant and when Lee had asked if Gai-sensei was invited she sheepishly admitted she hadn't been given that much money. So they ate without their teacher around noon and Lee had still been very excitable even without his idol nearby.

Tenten felt her appetite waver a bit at the sight of Lee ordering curry and eating it like it was ice cream. She was hungry enough to order a large platter of dumplings for them to share. She could not deny her favorite food.

While munching on dessert Lee began to ask questions on Neji's whereabouts, being that neither of them had seen him for the past two days.

“I'm not really sure…I guess he's been training with his uncle like he was earlier this week.” She theorized and was privately frustrated with the Hyuga prodigy for not having the courtesy to come tell them that himself.

The more she began to like Neji the more she found he got on her nerves, 'Maybe I care too much, that could explain why my head hasn't been screwed on straight recently.'

Lee eyed the platter of dumplings settled between them on the table with the beginnings of an idea visible on his face, “Tenten, do you suppose our teammate has had anything to eat yet this afternoon?”

“Probably not. Why?”

He stood, grinning, “We will deliver these fine dumplings to him as a peace offering, and in the process, find out why he has been avoiding us!”

“That's a brilliant plan, Lee,” She said it with sincerity, “I don't know if he likes these all that much, though.”

Lee dismissed the thought and she paid for their meal before following him to the Hyuga compound, wondering if it was a better idea than she had first assumed.

They ambushed him while he was meditating, very successful in startling him.

Tenten found his astounded face very amusing and couldn't help but grin as Lee practically forced Neji to eat the food they had brought for him, “Go ahead, my eternal rival! This food will fuel your soul!”
“Hardly…” Neji muttered, taking a seat again in the grass of the lawn and Lee and Tenten sat down beside him, watching as he grudgingly helped himself to a dumpling and bit into it, all in the hope they'd stop staring at him.

“You've disappeared off the face of the planet for the past few days, Neji,” Tenten purposefully exaggerated to indicate that they were concerned, “What have you been up to?”

Neji looked at her for a long moment, “I was being evaluated.”

There was a moment in which Lee and Tenten exchanged a confused glance, wondering if that in any way answered the question correctly.

“I am the new Hyuga clan heir.”

Somewhere in the village a window shattered and a cat's tail was run over by a bicycle.

They looked at Neji with wide eyes, quite stunned.

“You look shocked.” Neji pointed out flatly, as if they weren't supposed to.

_I wonder when he intended to come and find us so he could tell us this!_ Tenten thought in exasperation, but she honestly knew there was no point in getting worked up again. The title was his now, fair and square, even if he had to beat down several people in his way to earn it.

“Congratulations then, Neji!” Lee looked genuinely glad for him, something Tenten had not been expecting. Maybe perhaps because she was still touchy on the subject of Neji vying with his younger cousin in order to be granted her title.

Neji seemed to notice her disappointment, “Hinata-sama was not at all upset that I replaced her. She is still part of the Main House, as is Hanabi-sama. My uncle did what he judged to be right.”

“I see…well then…” Tenten smiled at him, “I'm glad, Neji. This is great, I mean, you've really worked hard for this. Like Lee said; congratulations.”

Neji's eyes softened on her and he seemed to have a boost in confidence. Perhaps being the new heir to his clan was giving him some anxiety, Tenten wondered.

And of course, Lee's curiosity had bad timing, “So you will still be training with us, yes?”

There was a silence and Tenten felt her stomach do some horrifying acrobatics.

“It isn't very likely.” Neji answered, looking as if he wasn't troubled by the idea.

Lee's eyes flickered worriedly over to Tenten, sensing her distress, and he wondered if he may have said something very, very stupid.

'It...isn't very likely?'

She paused to think it over again.

'Isn't likely?'

Tenten's eyes narrowed and she suddenly found that no amount of apologizing was going to fix her new foul mood. As if the Hyuga prodigy was going to apologize when he hadn't even realized how deeply he had insulted her.
She reached out and took a dumpling from the platter and took a fierce chomp out of the morsel, knowing that would be enough at the time to keep her from screaming at the top of her lungs.

'Isn't likely, he says! Why do I even bother?'

Lee looked horrified as she stood and began to walk away mechanically, knowing that he'd never forgive himself if he let Tenten drown in her own despair while there was something he could have done about it.

So he did something very bold and turned to Neji, ‘Neji! My eternal rival! Please understand women have very delicate feelings and that you may have offended Tenten by forsaking training with her!’

Neji gave him an incredulous look, “Offended? It's nothing personal, she shouldn't—”

Tenten continued to walk away but Neji was finally watching her leave, and Lee prayed that the Hyuga prodigy held at least a stitch of compassion for her, “For the sake of preserving your friendship with the beautiful flower of our team, I must insist you do something!”

Neji didn't take too well to Lee's pleading, maybe because it seemed like a command. Even if he didn’t say it, Neji was worried that he had upset Tenten.

Lee found it was exceptionally hard to explain Tenten's feelings to Neji without giving away too much. He stood up, almost frantic, and pondered what Gai-sensei would do.

Neji, fed up with the cryptic behavior of his teammates, stood up and threw a kunai at the back of Tenten's head.

Angrily, she blocked it and wheeled around, throwing a dozen shuriken back at him.

It wasn't what Lee had in mind when they had first intended to feed Neji…

Tenten stomped back to the two boys, no longer containing her anger, “Why not train with us, Neji?” She continued to block his incoming projectiles, “Are we that disposable to you?”

“Is this what you want?” He shouted. He was at least trying to understand what had her so upset, “Training with my clan is something you object to?”

They finally stopped throwing crap at each other and Lee calmed down marginally.

Tenten could see he still didn't fully grasp the point of why they had even stopped by the Hyuga estate to see him, and decided to dumb it down a bit so he could comprehend, “You're from a prestigious clan, yes,” She admitted, “But you can’t use Primary or Hidden Lotus.”

Lee found that obvious.

“You and your uncle can’t shoot an arrow several hundred yards accurately, and no one here can summon weapons as rapidly as I can. There are so many things you Hyuga can’t do. No one will replace us! There is no one here who even comes close to how Lee and I support you!” Tenten hoped she was being clear enough on how unique she and Lee were.

Neji understood her point, but wasn't going to concede as if he had done something wrong, “You have no right to doubt my family.”

'Like hell I do…’ Tenten groaned mentally, and decided his pride needed to be attacked if he was going to let her win this argument.
She reached into her hip pouch and drew out a scroll. She gracefully summoned Chinigui. At first Neji suspected she was picking a fight, but he was puzzled when she dropped the monstrous zanbato to the ground in front of him and the blade sunk into the damp soil like a fang into flesh.

"Of course I have a right to doubt your family! I'm your teammate! I know you better than they do," Tenten rested her hand on her hip, "I'll tell you what, if you can pick it up I'll believe you. Prove to me that is something a Hyuga can do!"

Neji was fully aware that he couldn't, not without hurting himself and looking like a fool.

Lee, seeing his reluctance, snickered playfully and Neji scowled at him.

Deciding that he'd be defeated before he even tried, he attempted to budge to zanbato. Neji got a fair amount of leverage on it, but holding a sword a few inches off of the ground hardly counts as lifting, Tenten scoffed. He dropped it quickly anyway. His face was furious.

They started laughing at him and his mood began to sour. He would not let himself be patronized, "This is pointless, Tenten!"

She unsummoned the sword and sighed, wishing that he would lighten up, "The point is that we're your friends, Neji. Because of that you shouldn't turn your back on us; we'd never do that to you."

Lee agreed ardently, "It is true, Neji!" He smirked knowingly before following after Tenten, "We will see you at our training grounds tomorrow!"

Once they had left they had made their point quite vividly, if not ridiculously.

Neji decided he'd excuse their behavior and succumb to their demands if they had to be so difficult about it. He looked down at the ground and saw that the platter of dumplings was still there waiting for him.

Neji smiled at the sight of it.

Late that night, Jiraiya wasn't surprised to discover Tsunade sulking at a bar in the town. He took a seat beside her and ordered a drink for himself.

She greeted him with a non-committal grunt when he turned to her; hoping persistence would remind her of her loyalty to the Leaf.

"Tsunade...I know you've endured a lot of pain, but you really have no excuse for turning your back on Konoha," Jiraiya said quietly, tipping some sake into his cup, "It's what they'd want you to do: Nawaki and Dan. You have the chance to fulfill their dreams."

"Jiraiya?"

He looked at her expectantly.

Tsunade lifted her glass to her lips, "Shut up, Jiraiya."

After several knocks on the door to his hotel room, Naruto managed to muster the strength to roll out of bed and answer it.

He was surprised to see Shizune and he was unsure of why she had come, "Naruto, is it? I need to
talk to you about something.”

“Erm…this late at night?”

Shizune nodded, “Yes. I…I just want you to know that Tsunade-sama has suffered many tragedies in her life and that I really don't think you should be testing her when she's in such an emotionally fragile state.”

“But I still have to fight her, sis.” Naruto reasoned, yawning, “I'd look like a coward if I let her win. She can't talk trash about being Hokage, not on my watch!”

“If you push her too far, she may end up making some very bad decisions!” Shizune argued, but then relaxed, “Naruto, that necklace you're competing with her for…everyone who has worn it in the past…has died wearing it.”

The blonde boy looked at her for a long moment and Shizune wondered if he really cared about the necklace's curse.

“Sis, I understand what you're trying to do, but I can't back down,” Naruto answered, undeterred, “She'll either accept that she's the next Hokage or I'll make her accept it.”

The following day Kakashi was still recovering from his fight with Itachi, and had not been pleased to hear that Sasuke had also been injured while encountering him.

For the moment he sat cross-legged on his bed, looking over a scroll he had been given that detailed past information on Itachi. Pakkun was sprawled out beside him and perked up his ears when he noted a third presence nearby, “Someone's at the door.”

“Go answer it then, please.”

With an annoyed grumble, Pakkun slid off of the bed and trotted out of the bedroom, towards the front door. One sniff told him who had stopped by and he pulled on a rag that had been specifically tied to the door knob for him. He opened the door and said, “Come on in, kid.”

“Hey there, Pakkun,” Sato gave the pug a pat on the head in greeting and closed the door behind him, “I came to see how my uncle's doing.”

“He's fine, but he's looked better…”

Kakashi shuffled out of his bedroom, cracking his shoulders as he stretched, “Well, isn't this a surprise? I didn't think you'd be paying me a visit today, Sato-kun.”

“I was just curious to see if it was true that you got your butt kicked by some crazy nukenin,” The genin explained, following his uncle into the kitchen, “They said you were totally out of commission…”

While retrieving two glasses from a cabinet Kakashi gave the boy a sideways glance, “You heard correctly, but as you can see I'm good as new now.”

Sato's cheerful expression began to weaken. His uncle frowned from beneath his mask, 'Maybe I'm not exactly as good as new…’ He poured milk into each of the glasses and returned the carton back to the refrigerator, 'He probably knows better than anyone when I'm not at full strength…it's as if he can sense it.'

“Thanks, Kakashi…” Sato accepted the glass he was offered and sat across from him at the table.
He was quiet for a moment after that, fingering at his drink disinterestedly.

“What's on your mind?” Kakashi could tell something was troubling the boy.

“I was afraid because I didn't find out until after it happened…” The silver haired boy said softly, “I was worried.”

“Worried? Of what?”

Sato raised his midnight eyes, his face serious, “I was worried because I knew that if you died that day then I'd really be alone, and there wouldn't be anything I could do about it.” His voice lowered, “It'd be just like when mom died…”

Kakashi understood and silence filled the room as he recalled his older sister. She hadn't been a very popular topic of discussion, for him, at least. Sato sipped at the milk half-heartedly, trying to settle his nerves.

“Your mother became very ill after she married your father,” He wasn't certain how to explain it to his nephew, “Her health only worsened after you were born.”

“…I know that.” Sato confirmed. He had already learned how leukemia was nothing easy to live with, and that she had put up a strong fight during her life to conquer it.

Pakkun, from his place on the floor beside the table, began to grow nervous. It had been several years since Kakashi had approached the subject of his sister and it only opened up old wounds, 'He and Semi never saw eye to eye, not once…though Kakashi still tried to protect her when he could.'

The main quarrel that had created such a large gap in Kakashi's relationship with her was the suicide of their father when they were children. Semi still respected and cared for her father even after his humiliating error on a past mission that tarnished his honor.

Kakashi told her she was a fool to still revere Sakumo after his failure to secure the safety of the village, but she had never paid him any heed. They began to grow apart after that, and she had always tried to show him that living "by-the-book" would never truly bring happiness to his life.

'And then she met that tramp from Hidden Dragonfly: Riei,' Pakkun recalled, smiling in spite of himself, 'He was the most reckless, high-spirited jounin to ever live in Leaf…and the bane of Kakashi's professional existence.'

Sato leaned his elbows on the table, his eyes dancing with a painful memory of his past.

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At eight years old, Sato was the average student at the Academy. It was the only time in his life when he had been truly and innocently devoted to his studies to become a shinobi.

He sat near the back of the classroom close to Chouji. His nose was buried in a scroll Iruka had handed out and given them a short time to look over. A few rows ahead of him Naruto chattered loudly with Sakura, making it slightly difficult for him to concentrate.

Sato had been working increasingly hard at school since his mother had to be admitted to the hospital for the third time that year. More and more treatments were necessary to keep her retreating health in check.

At the front of the classroom, a jounin who he did not recognize poked his head in the door and pulled Iruka aside to speak with him. A few other students looked up and then lost interest in the
newcomer when he stepped outside of the classroom again.

“Sato, please come down for a moment.”  Iruka called to him, and the silver haired boy rose from his seat and reported to Iruka obediently, “There is a man here who would like to speak with you.”

“Sure thing, Iruka-sensei.”  Sato stepped out into the hallway, sliding the door closed behind him.

The jounin's face was riddled with burn marks and his right eye was unusually discolored, Sato could tell from his first glance at the ninja.  His expression was solemn and for a moment he wondered why he had been pulled aside at all.

He assumed it was retribution for one of his more recent pranks with Naruto's caboodle.

“Hatake Sato, yes?”  The man confirmed and the boy nodded, “Would you…like to go outside for some fresh air?”

Sato raised his eyebrows at the offer, “Yeah, I'd like that.  Uh…am I in trouble, sir?”

“Hm? No, kid, you're not in trouble.”

That was Sato's first indication that something was not right.  He followed the man out to the courtyard and they waited for a different class to go inside the building after recess before beginning their discussion.

“Sit down, Sato.”  The jounin ordered and the silver haired boy plopped down on a bench behind him compliantly.

“Is everything alright?  You're a jounin; does this have something to do with my uncle?  Is he okay?”  Sato felt his stomach lurch with anxiety.

“Kakashi is fine…but,”  The jounin paused, averting his eyes from the boy, “Semi is not.  Your mother passed away about an hour ago, Sato.”

At first came denial, “What?  You're crazy, man.  I just talked to my mom this morning before going to school!  She was feeling great!”

“I really am sorry, kid,”  The jounin looked at him again, sadness visible in his expression, “I came here to bring you to the Hokage, actually.  He wants to talk to you about your options.”

“My…m-my options?”

“You haven't even graduated, kid, you'll need some counseling so you can-”

Sato had sprung up from the bench and ran from the schoolyard, not wanting to hear another word.  After he had mentioned the Hokage being involved he knew the man had been telling the truth but it didn't register in his mind.

His mother was his pillar and his morality.  She was sick every day of her life and she never once complained.  She couldn't be dead.  Not yet.  She wasn't allowed to die until he had said goodbye, not until he was ready.

'You're fine!  You're fine!  I know you're still here!  You wouldn't leave me without letting me see you first!'  His thoughts had totally rejected the idea of death and were replaced with delusions of farewells and comfort, 'I'll see you again!'
Sato's sandals hit the ground with heavy steps as he burst into the hospital, knowing its layout well since he had become a frequent visitor. The nurses he raced by wondered what a child was doing on his own during school hours.

'Just let me say goodbye!'

His face was wet and he couldn't see clearly through the tears. They dripped down his cheeks like fire as he felt like reality was gaining on him. He had to run faster to escape it. He was nearly there!

Her room was on the second floor; first door on the right. Sato rushed into the room with a bang, putting a dent in the wall after he had flung the door so forcefully.

Sato skidded to a halt.

The room had been emptied.

Reality caught up at last, 'Just let me say...goodbye...'

Then came the hysterics.

He became disoriented from crying and the lack of oxygen in his lungs. He had never run through the village so fast in his entire life, he had never had a reason to.

“Mom!”

Sato bumped into the panel of the doorway as he stumbled back into the hall, scraping his shoulder painfully.

He was screaming at the top of his lungs, his face burning from the salt. He didn't care that there were other sick patients in the wing he was disturbing, the only one who mattered was gone now and he refused to let her be forgotten so easily.

“Mom!”

He trembled in a large circle, howling, sobbing, fumbling along the wall until an ANBU guard seized him roughly and attempted to quiet him as patients poked their heads out of their respective rooms along the hall.

The ANBU, a woman, kneeled for him and let the silver haired student curl into her while he cried, knowing his pain could only be cured with understanding.

Sato peaked over the kunoichi's shoulder and saw a blurry Sandaime alongside Kakashi approaching him from down the hallway.

'...goodbye.'

Sato gulped down his milk. His throat felt dry as he recalled the day his mother died. It was probably because he had screamed himself hoarse.

“You know...you didn't look very sad when mom died that day.” The boy commented guardedly.

“I was, Sato. Believe me, sadness tends to follow me and my loved ones around…”

But he didn't believe him, not really. Even if Kakashi had in fact been sad that day, he still hadn't shown it and that was why Sato began to understand why his mother had always been so tense
around his uncle.

Kakashi sighed while pulling his mask down below his chin, taking a leisurely sip of milk.

Sato watched his face curiously for a moment, 'Hm...he has stubble. Looks like he had enough energy to at least shave this morning...'

It had reminded him of the first time he had seen his uncle's face. It had been the day of the funeral.

It was drizzling lightly that day. The sky was gray and empty and not many people had come to honor Semi, something that had troubled Sato. Had all of her friends disappeared that day? Or were they too overcome with grief to face the truth?

'I won't run from the truth.'

He remembered standing under a big umbrella with Tama, and the way her hair had been tied up with ribbons. His mother had loved when her hair was tied up pretty, so she did it that day and the days that followed.

Most of all, he remembered the way Tama held his hand.

He wanted her to but he didn't ask. Then like magic, during the service, their fingers were laced and his chest felt far less heavy.

Sato stared at the shrine dedicated to his mother and he felt that pieces of him had broken off and crumbled away since her death. He knew he'd never feel whole again no matter what he did.

He watched Tama's parents and her uncle leave white flowers on the memorial. At least they would remember her too, remember how wonderful she was.

'I won't forget you.'

When it had ended Sato had been invited to spend the rest of the day with the Maito family so they could comfort him and offer their condolences. Before he left with them Kakashi had gently pulled him aside. Sato had been annoyed that he didn't have an umbrella with him, "I don't want to get wet, please."

To compensate they took shelter from the light rain beneath a leafy tree that provided some cover from the drizzle.

"Can you see?"

Sato looked up at his taller relative, frowning. "See what, Kakashi?"

The jounin kneeled down to be level with him and it was then he finally noticed he had pulled his mask down, giving him a clear view of his face.

The boy's surprise was not well-hidden. Kakashi didn't look like he had imagined him to. His face was rather plain but with clear, pale skin and his mouth was drawn into a dispirited frown.

"You look like mom." Sato pointed out, "Why did you do that?"

"Because," Kakashi's voice was quiet, "It's what she asked me to do when this happened."

Sato nodded dumbly, understanding it a little. He felt better after that.
Kakashi stood up again and it had at last stopped raining. Sato walked beside him as they stepped out into the open again and then he paused, curious, “Um...Kakashi?”

His uncle looked down at him when they had stopped walking. They were the only ones left at the memorial.

“Does this mean...I'm going to live with you from now on, Kakashi?”

His uncle pulled his mask back up over his nose and looked up at the gloomy sky, “No.”

Sato finished drinking his milk.

Pakkun had settled on the couch in the living room for a nap, drained from waiting on Kakashi's requests for the past few days.

“Kakashi?”

He looked across the table to his nephew to let him know he had his attention.

“Why didn't you let me stay with you?”

Kakashi lowered his glass back down to the table, “I was in no position to raise a child, Sato.”

“That's such a load of bull shit.” His nephew growled, hating the excuse, “You just didn't want to! I needed you!”

His uncle looked at him for a long moment. His expression was clearly visible without his mask on, “The Maito family has always looked after you. It isn't as if you were left dangling.”

“It wasn't enough!” Sato snapped and he knew Kakashi knew it too, “You are my last blood kin, not them! I'll be with them for the rest of my life, but as far as my family goes you're all I have left!”

“Things are better this way, Sato.”

The boy's eyes narrowed challengingly, “I know you hated my father. Is that why you hate me too? Can't you at least pretend you care about me even a little?”

Sato's voice softened, “I'm always stuck worrying about the day you get yourself killed, because I never really know where you are or what you're doing. But you couldn't care less about what happens to me!”

Kakashi's frown deepened, “That isn't true. You know I did what I could to look out for you.”

“So what? You make sure I'm not sick or you'll teach me the Chidori and other jutsu, but you never stick around long enough to hang out with me! In the end you avoid me whenever you can.”

Pakkun listened from the couch with his eyes hidden beneath his floppy ears, cringing as the two spoke.

Sato stood suddenly and slammed his fists down on the table, toppling over Kakashi's glass of milk, “Just say it already! You like Sasuke better than me! Is it because he has the Sharingan like you? Or is it because he reminds you of Obito?”
A strange silence followed.

“…shut up.”

The genin refused to let the tears in his eyes overwhelm him, “**Tama** is the one who's been raising me and looking out for me, and it isn't even her job yet! But you have no excuse! I'll never forgive you for abandoning me!”

It was quiet again and Pakkun scuttled out of the room, upset by the shouting.

“Sasuke is nothing like Obito was…”

That was the last straw for Sato and it was then he forgot all restraint. He was tired of crying, especially in front of his uncle, “Maybe…maybe I'll get my eye poked out too and if I beg Sasuke long enough, he'll donate a Sharingan to my cause! Or just kill me and put me out of my misery!”

“Get out!”

“Gladly!” Sato moved back his chair and went to the door, “Don't get yourself killed anytime soon…”

After he had gone Kakashi pulled his mask back up, wondering how a child could tear at his heartstrings so.

The milk that had been spilled earlier was all over the floor and even though his mood barely permitted it Kakashi began to clean up the mess anyway.

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**Three Days Later**

Jiraiya and Naruto could tell something was wrong when Shizune appeared before them that morning, looking frantic.

“Tsunade-sama has gone missing, Jiraiya-sama!” She admitted, cross with herself, “I'm worried. If we don't find her soon she may accept his offer…”

“Who's offer?” Jiraiya asked, sensing it couldn't be good.

“Orochimaru's offer…” Shizune admitted quietly, upset that she and Tsunade had hid it from Jiraiya.

Naruto, it seemed, could tell that there would be no use in wasting time, “Then we've got to find her before the snake bastard causes trouble! Why did you let her sneak away?”

“I didn't! She slipped something in my drink last night and when I woke up this morning I couldn't find her anywhere!” The black haired woman explained, the pig beside her grunting in agreement.

“I suspect she must have slipped me something too when I last saw her…” Jiraiya added, following Shizune and his pupil as they raced through the streets, looking for signs of Tsunade, “It's restraining my chakra so it could be problematic…”

Shizune apologized on Tsunade's behalf to the toad sage and Naruto recalled how Orochimaru had caused grief for him before, *He put that mark on Haku-kun and made Gaara-kun lose control of his demon! Now he's going after Baa-chan too?*

Their first clue that they were getting closer to finding her was the demolished wall and craters
leading away from it.

“Signs of a fight…Tsunade-sama must have turned down his offer too and tried to kill him!”
Shizune guessed and then quickly collected Tsunade's jacket from the ground where it had been discarded, “We have to hurry!” She turned to the pig next to her, “Ton-Ton, can you track her scent?”

The small pig squealed in confirmation and darted ahead. The three shinobi followed her without question.

Orochimaru and Kabuto had forced the fight into a wide, open field outside the town. Kabuto fought toe to toe with Tsunade, his hand glowing with blue chakra that was intended to severe muscles and tendons when striking an enemy.

Tsunade's brute strength was enough to keep the traitorous med-nin at bay; one hit would be more than enough to pulverize him.

After an exchange of unsuccessful blows, Tsunade saw an opening in his defenses and prepared to land a blow to his neck that would kill him instantly.

Kabuto, thinking quickly, slashed his hand with a kunai he had been wielding, and splattered his opponent with his own blood and freezing her in her tracks.

Once she had slowed down, he smacked her away and sent her tumbling to the dirt, “My, my, Tsunade! It looks as if a little blood is still enough to defeat you…”

From afar Orochimaru watched with great amusement, knowing it wouldn't take much longer before Tsunade would crack and agree to his terms.

Kabuto's hand glowed with chakra again, poised to finish her off, but before he could attack a smoke bomb went off in front of his face and forced him to back away.

Naruto and Jiraiya with Shizune and Ton-Ton at their heels stepped in front of the shuddering blonde woman who was too overcome by her fear of blood to continue fighting.

The snake sannin noted such a turn of events was unfortunate, They'll only complicate things…'

The blonde boy was not very surprised to see Kabuto wearing a Sound headband, remembering him and his façade during the Chunin Exam, “Gaara-kun knew you were a fraud the second he saw you, Kabuto! I'll make you pay for what you did to him!”

Jiraiya hadn't expected his pupil to know the enemies he was facing so well.

Kabuto smirked at Naruto, not very threatened, “What? I didn't do anything to hurt him! I just helped him get in touch with his inner-self is all.”

Shizune kneeled beside Tsunade, covering her with her green jacket, “I'll look after you, Tsunade-sama.”

Kabuto returned to Orochimaru's side a moment later, preparing to aid the snake sannin in summoning. Jiraiya, recognizing their strategy from afar, also bit his thumb and formed hand seals, intending to counter their summon with one of his own.

Smoke erupted on both ends of the field: two, huge snakes appeared for Orochimaru and Kabuto, and Gamakichi bounced excitedly on front of Jiraiya, “Hey! It's been a while since I was last
summoned! How's it going?”

Jiraiya only sighed, upset that the drug had not yet run its course through his system.

Orochimaru laughed at his former teammate's pathetic display, “Just as worthless as always, Jiraiya!”

“Oh give me a break, Ero-sensei!” Naruto groaned, biting his own thumb, and summoned a massive golden toad with a large sword slung on its back.

Orochimaru fell silent with rage upon seeing the Kyuubi container summon a powerful toad for his mentor.

Gamakichi hopped a safe distance away from the battle site while Shizune looked on in awe as Naruto and Jiraiya stood on the larger toad's head, 'How can Naruto be as skilled as Jiraiya-sama in summoning already?'

“Thanks Naruto!” Jiraiya smirked at his student and Naruto nodded to him, getting ready to fight.

The summoned creatures dove for each other. Kabuto and Naruto leapt from their respective sides, meeting in the air and crashed to the ground in a fierce tussle.

Naruto used his shadow clones to probe Kabuto's defenses as he had for Tsunade, using combination attacks that drove him further back towards a rocky outcrop. Three of the clones surrounding Kabuto exploded on a silent cue, barely giving him an inch to evade.

Kabuto ripped through the remainder of the clones with his chakra-enhanced hand, and leapt back in surprise when Naruto had unexpectedly called two fair-sized battle toads. One of them slashed wildly at the sound ninja with its dagger, missing him, and cut into its fellow toad instead.

Naruto growled to himself, upset with their poor performance, 'Their coordination isn't exactly what it normally is!'

Down one toad, Naruto continued attacking Kabuto, grateful when Shizune joined the fray, firing senbon at the enemy. Kabuto knocked Naruto back with a relentless kick that sent him tumbling down a nearby hill, and Shizune seized the opportunity to attack Kabuto, “Ninpo: Poison Fog!”

She spat a cloud of poisonous gas at Kabuto, upset to see he knew better than to make the mistake of inhaling any of it, and then disappeared when the mist subsided, 'Where did he-?'

He countered her attack from underground, grabbing her legs and severing her tendons with a well-placed jab. Shizune fell to the ground helplessly as Kabuto came out of his hiding place, firing senbon at him and missing by inches.

When Naruto kicked Kabuto in the back of the head he did it exceptionally hard.

The silver haired medic tumbled to the ground, his eyes blurred, and hobbled to his feet to take a moment of rest, “You're not much of a threat without your teammates, are you Naruto-kun? You were all big-talk during the exam, but now it seems it'll be hard for you to live up to all of your ideals…”

“You should be worried about fighting just me alone…” Naruto rasped, catching his breath, “But if Haku-kun and Gaara-kun were here with me…you'd be dead already!”

Kabuto focused chakra into his hand again and attempted to charge forward, and was horrified to find an insidiously long tongue had seized him from behind, The other toad! He was distracting
me so I wouldn't notice I'd forgotten it!’

With Kabuto firmly held in place, Naruto ran ahead with a fully-charged Rasengan, slamming into the traitor fearlessly and getting jabbed in the chest in the process.

Tsunade watched in wonder from her spot nearby, never expecting to see such power and bravery from a young boy.

Kabuto was hurled back, crashing into the toad with a puff of smoke, and sent careening several yards until he slammed into a large boulder.

Naruto smiled, glad that he had won.

A moment later, he coughed up blood as a result from Kabuto’s attack, 'This can't be good…'

He fell backwards, unconscious.

“Naruto!” Tsunade struggled to her feet and stumbled over to the blonde boy, knowing something was wrong. She listened for a heartbeat and found that the struggling sound she heard was the sign of the heart muscles tearing, 'I've got to hurry! It's not too late!'

She tore the boy's shirt open and immediately employed her Mystical Palm Healing jutsu to repair the damage.

A fair distance away, Kabuto attempted to heal himself of the injury inflicted upon him, but found the Kyuubi's chakra was just too intense for him to overcome. Frustrated that he'd no longer be able to fight, Kabuto had one last shot at Tsunade's pride, “I cut off his chakra network from the Kyuubi so he can't use its healing abilities! Heh…there's nothing you can do to save him! He's dead!”

“Shut your mouth, Kabuto!” Tsunade howled, unwilling to give in.

Naruto's breathing stopped and she began to panic, 'No! Not yet! I won't let you die. You'll be alright!'

From within the seal, the Kyuubi could sense Naruto's life force waning.

_It's beginning to shrink in here. The darkness is growing. It isn't time yet!_

Tsunade began to cry hopelessly upon seeing her technique had little effect on his damaged cells. It was the same way she had lost her loved ones, Nawaki and Dan, and she couldn't bear it all over again.

“…hey…Baa-chan…”

She stared down at the boy as he reached up for the necklace dangling around her neck.

“Still up for that rematch?”

He fell quiet but Tsunade knew it was enough confirmation that the Kyuubi's healing powers or perhaps her own had been potent enough to repair some damage that had been threatening Naruto's life, 'Rest now, Naruto. I'll protect you…'

She leaned down, removing her necklace and replaced it on the blonde boy, knowing he had earned it.
Far off to the left, Jiraiya and his toad had managed to corner the two massive snakes Orochimaru had summoned in a smaller but no less effective Dark Swamp. Fending off Jiraiya's blows was much easier for Orochimaru with his opponent still struggling to call upon chakra.

He took notice that Naruto had prevailed over Kabuto and yet remained alive after the struggle, 'I had thought he'd make a fine gift for the Akatsuki after our first meeting. Now it seems the brat has a penchant for interfering! Someone like that should be dealt with swiftly!'

Orochimaru leapt from his place atop his summoned snake and Jiraiya was caught off guard, “Hey!” The toad sage immediately pursued him, only to be wrapped up in his foe's extended tongue and hurled to the ground from their unsafe height.

Jiraiya crashed painfully into the rocky ground below, too stunned to move.

The kusanagi appeared in Orochimaru's mouth and he made a bee-line for Naruto, intent on skewering the defenseless boy, “This ends now!”

His attack was halted when he hit Tsunade instead, stabbing her in the chest. Orochimaru glared at her interference, “Don't be a fool, Tsunade. This boy is too dangerous to be kept alive! Get out of my way!”

“No…” The woman backed away from the sword, determined to keep going, “I'm ready to put my life on the line too…I will protect this boy and the Hidden Leaf Village.” Her eyes were crazed as she challenged Orochimaru, “I'll be dead before I let you touch him!”

“It's pointless to risk everything for one worthless village!” Orochimaru yowled, attacking with his sword again, and Tsunade again defended against it, finally able to get past her Hemophobia.

Orochimaru hadn't expected her to recover from her fear so abruptly.

Tsunade, horridly wounded, still refused to be defeated. She tapped into the Yin Seal on her forehead that contained a deep reservoir of chakra, “Sozo Saisei…”

The seal on her forehead elongated into vectoring shapes on her skin and the stored chakra immediately healed all of her wounds. Orochimaru was impressed with her technique, “I should have known you would have created a jutsu of your own after all these years…”

Jiraiya was finally able to shake off his injuries after the drug had left his system and regrouped, seeing Orochimaru had not yet won.

Tsunade wiped a bit of blood from her shoulder, preparing to summon, “Orochimaru…you're going to die here.”

Orochimaru quickly reunited with Kabuto, also preparing to summon again, and Jiraiya wasn't about to be left out of the party either.

“Kuchiyose no Jutsu!”

The three boss summons appeared at the same time, towering high above the ground.
The Flight

Chapter Soundtrack: “Falliccia” by Kenmochi Hidefumi

A foreboding breeze brushed past Tsunade's check as she stood atop Katsuyu's head with Naruto unconscious at her feet. Across from the giant slug queen Jiraiya waited with Gamabunta, staring down Orochimaru and Kabuto who had settled themselves with Manda.

“I hoped I'd never have to see Orochimaru's ugly face again, Jiraiya,” The toad boss complained to his companion, sensing trouble was ahead, “This time we finish it!”

Manda, in contrast to the other summon bosses, was not very inclined to aid the one who had called him, “Orochimaru? How dare you bring me here with nothing to offer me!” Orochimaru remained silent, staring ahead at Tsunade.

Kabuto grimaced after hearing the snake's rumbling voice, 'This is bad. Manda would abandon Orochimaru-sama if he knew how severely weakened he has become...we must defeat the others quickly or he'll turn on us.'

“Once I kill them bring me one-hundred human sacrifices, do you hear me?” The giant snake decided to help but at a price and Orochimaru gave no answer. There was no time to arrange deals with his boss summon, especially since he did not have 100 humans to feed the snake with at the moment.

Manda rounded on Gamabunta a moment later, taunting him, “You filthy toad! You don't come anywhere near being a worthy enough opponent! I will crush you like the miserable frog you are!”

“It's lovely to see you too, Manda,” Gamabunta retorted, “I've been meaning to make myself a new snake-skin purse, now that I think about it.

Manda was seething at the words, but held still, waiting for the opportune moment to strike.

Nearby, Tsunade was murmuring orders to the giant slug that had come to help her, “Katsuyu, take Naruto somewhere safe!”

“Of course, Tsunade-sama.”

The slug obediently divided a smaller copy from herself that gently lifted Naruto and slithered down from Katsuyu's head. The slug clone joined Shizune on the ground who was mobile again after healing her legs and went to find cover.

Not long after, Katsuyu attacked, “Zesshi Nensan!”

A jet of acidic liquid had been aimed for Manda but the snake boss avoided the assault, counting by wrapping his massive body around the slow-moving slug.

Once his victim was thoroughly trapped in his coils, Manda opened his jaws wide, prepared to chomp Tsunade along with her summon. Gamabunta moved quickly, drawing his blade and slashing at Manda's gaping mouth as he crunched down on the metal.

Tsunade leapt from Katsuyu's head as the slug broke herself down into smaller slugs, escaping Manda's grip and slithered away to reform herself again.
Manda thrashed his massive head, knocking Gamabunta away and sent the toad's dagger flying through the air. The blade landed directly in front of Katsuyu, missing her by a few feet. The slug was glad that the blade had missed but did not let her guard down.

“Gamabunta, the oil!” Jiraiya cried, forming hand seals, and his partnering toad quickly spat a mouthful of toad-oil that Jiraiya ignited with a powerful fire jutsu, “Gamayu Endan!”

The intense flames enveloped Manda, incinerating the giant snake with ease. Jiraiya relaxed momentarily after seeing that their jutsu had been a success, but was on edge again to see that the opposing snake had shed its skin and disappeared.

Tsunade left Katsuyu again, making a leap for the huge dagger that Manda had discarded. Manda reappeared from underground, opening his fearsome mouth wide again, poised to finish Katsuyu.

Tsunade plummeted through the air after a mighty leap, bringing Gamabunta's dagger down and stabbed Manda's mouth shut before he could harm Katsuyu.

Furious, the giant snake began to writhe in pain, hissing in indignation, “Wench! I'll kill you…” While he struggled it became increasingly more apparent to Orochimaru that his defeat was nearing. With Kabuto unable to fight, Manda trapped and his own arms unable to function, he was disgusted to admit he was at a great disadvantage.

Jiraiya watched in awe as Tsunade leapt down from the dagger, taking Orochimaru head-on. Her punches connected with the vile snake sannin in an endless volley and Orochimaru was completely unable to defend himself.

Tsunade's pent-up fury was released bit by bit with every attack, yet her strength waned. Still, with barely any chakra left, she refused to stop hitting Orochimaru until she was sure he was finished.

“What is this feeling?’ She wondered, amazed that she had fought so hard, 'Even though I shouldn't be able to keep fighting, it feels like I can go on forever if I have to. I won't give in!’

Then she remembered Naruto and his selfless bravery, and his determination to be Hokage and protect the ones he loved, 'I understand now, Naruto...you were right all along.’

“Hah!” One final punch sent Orochimaru careening to the ground, and Tsunade stood on trembling legs, seeing that her opponent was then very still and not getting up.

'Did Tsunade really kill him? Is this over at last?' Jiraiya pondered, still dumbfounded that she had nearly single-handedly defeated their old teammate.

Manda, upon seeing Orochimaru's defeat, decided it was pointless to stay and left the battlefield in a cloud of smoke, “Never summon me again you fool! If you do, I will be the one to kill you!”

Katsuyu also departed upon seeing the fighting was over.

Jiraiya left Gamabunta and moved to Tsunade's side, shocked to see Orochimaru weakly struggling to his feet as Kabuto supported his weight. The snake sannin glared at his former teammates, spitting angrily, “Even if you aren't willing to heal me, Tsunade-hime, there are other ways to have my arms mended…”

He and Kabuto left abruptly, their spirits soured by their horrid defeat.

“Off to lick his wounds, the coward!” Gamabunta scoffed before he too departed. The toad boss would have liked to have killed the snake sannin but his humiliating defeat was prize enough at
Tsunade and Jiraiya said nothing to each other as they joined up with Shizune who stood watchfully beside Naruto. He was still unconscious. Shizune's eyes fell upon Tsunade and they widened in alarm, “Oh, Tsunade-sama! Are you alright?”

As the Yin Seal chakra wore off Tsunade had no energy left to fuel her youthful-beauty genjutsu, and was restored to her true age. It pained Jiraiya to see her elderly form so decrepit and frail-looking, and in his heart he wished there was more he could do for her, “Tsunade…”

“Don't fuss over me, please,” The blonde woman responded tiredly, “After I rest and regain my strength I'll look young again in no time…but for now let's take care of the boy.”

The following day, Naruto was again in prime health, bouncing off the walls with energy and insisting they celebrate their victory over Orochimaru. Tsunade, also her lovely, youthful self, agreed with his proposition.

They had lunch at the pub Tsunade had been visiting ritually earlier in the week, and all indulged because the food would all be put on Jiraiya's tab…though he had not been informed of it.

Naruto looked up from his steaming bowl of pork ramen, scrutinizing Tsunade's cheerful face, “You know I've been thinking, Baa-chan…”

“Hm? Oh! That's good to hear!” She smirked at him, going back to her meal.

“No seriously!” He barked and continued, “I'm starting to wonder if you're really the right person for the job of being Hokage. I still say I can wipe the floor with you if it came down to it and that'd mean that I-”

“Alright you bratty runt! Step outside and we'll see who's really fit to be the Godaime Hokage!”

Their rematch was about due anyway so Naruto slipped away from the table, cracking his knuckles while he followed her outside.

Shizune looked troubled, “Do you think we should do something, Jiraiya-sama? They were just starting to get along…”

The perverted sage shrugged, “Eh, it's better if they sort it out themselves. Besides, Naruto may have a point, if he can defeat Tsunade then maybe he is fit to be the Fifth if the occasion so calls for it…”

Shizune stared at him for a long moment, frazzled. Ton-Ton fidgeted uncomfortably in her lap.

He grinned at her jokingly, “Ha! Just kidding! I'd eat the sand kid's gourd before that ever happened!”

A moment later they too left the table. Jiraiya grumbled as he paid for their suspiciously expensive lunch and went outside to see what the damage was.

The impending fight had not yet started and Jiraiya and Shizune settled on the side of the road. Dozens of people shopping walked down the street leisurely, oblivious to the fact that two very stubborn blonde ninja could make their afternoon grocery shopping quite hazardous at any moment.
'Alright, I know what to expect this time! I can take her for sure!' Naruto took an offensive stance he had seen Gaara favoring recently, and put on his most determined expression. Something in the back of his mind warned him to not get too confident.

He hadn't expected her to rush forward with no warning like she had, swiping at his head and knocking his headband high into the air with a blow that just barely missed his nose.

Naruto involuntarily flinched when he saw Tsunade's fist come flying back down for a second blow, and he waited for a super-powered punch to send him flying into the next week.

It never came.

Instead he felt something warm and far from painful make contact with his bare forehead, 'Huh? Just what's-?'

Naruto blinked his eyes open, surprised Tsunade had given him an affectionate kiss rather instead of knocking his lights out.

“Grow and become a good man, Naruto,” She said softly so that only he could hear, “Grow and become a great Hokage!”

Instantly his spirits were raised and Naruto was comfortable enough to put all of his trust in Tsunade to protect his village. He grinned up at her brightly, “You got it, Baa-chan!”

From a short distance away there was a yelp of pain, and they turned to see Naruto's discarded hitai-ate plummeting from the sky and landing squarely on the crown of Jiraiya's head at several miles per hour.

Disgruntled, the toad sennin took the headband and tossed it to his student while rubbing his head, “Okay, let's not do that again please…”

They laughed at him. Jiraiya joined in their mirth after recovering and together they began their journey back to Konoha.

Shino leaned against a tree while waiting for his team at their training grounds. His hands were hidden in his pockets and a butterfly had settled on his shoulder, murmuring to him the best locations to find sweet nectar.

Although the news held little value to him, he thanked the helpful insect and sent some of his Kikai insects to the specified field for a well-deserved snack. Now and then his comrades deserved to be spoiled for all of their effort.

Standing in the center of the training area nearby was Kurenai, the second one to arrive. After a quick glance around she noted that two of her students had yet to make their appearance, so she decided to make small-talk, “You seem tense, Shino. What's on your mind?”

“Neither Sato or Hinata have been themselves lately. They are uncomfortable sharing their hardships with me,” Shino explained, knowing that Kurenai must've also been aware of their change in behavior, “I have no idea what I can do.”

“As you can imagine, Sato has been concerned for his uncle recently after our encounter with Uchiha Itachi. Hinata, on the other hand, well…” Kurenai sighed resignedly, “Her cousin has replaced her as the heir of the Hyuga clan. I had been fearing this for a while. There's no telling how this will affect her emotionally.”
“What can we do, then?”

“I feel there isn't much we can do, Shino. Once they are ready to voice their worries to us we must be ready to listen.” She concluded and he nodded in agreement.

Kurenai smiled to herself. She was glad that Shino had grown fond of his teammates, however quirky they were. She believed that in the long run, Shino, though reserved and sometimes harsh, would be a loyal, steady friend to those he cared for; and a close friend was exactly what Sato and Hinata both needed at the time.

Five minutes later Hinata arrived. Kurenai was pleased to see she was less shy and had stopped wearing her jacket during warm weather. That and she also found the pink T-shirt she was wearing very endearing, though the Hyuga girl did seem peculiarly excited over something.

Sato showed up a few moments later, beaming at his team, “Yo! Guys! I say we finish our mission quick today because Sunshine and I have the biggest scoop!”

His sensei raised an eyebrow at him, “And what may that be?”

“That Naruto's back,” Sato answered, adding, “And he brought the new Hokage with him!”

Later on that day, Tsunade's inauguration as the Fifth Hokage went surprisingly smooth. With much integrity she introduced herself to the notable jounin and chunin who worked around the office, familiarizing herself with their roles if she didn't already know them.

She had to ask Shizune to bring her some sake several times before the woman did so, and was then waiting in her office for her assistant to return, reading over scrolls outlining the abilities of that year's rookie genin.

After two brisk knocks on the door and Tsunade looked up from the stats on Hyuga Neji, seeing Shizune had returned wearing an exasperated expression, “Well, it's about time!”

Shizune nodded, “Yes, Tsunade-sama, and also there are some boys here to see you.”

She supplied that last bit of information with a dry, warning tone and Tsunade grudgingly hid the two bottles of sake in her desk drawer before shouting, “Come in!”

Naruto entered very loudly, “Hey, Baa-chan, how's it going?” He had not come alone.

Shizune left the room after greeting Naruto and his team, smiling, and Ton-Ton trotted along beside her, hoping to get a snack at their next destination.

“I'm fine, Naruto,” She rested her chin on her hand, smirking at the newcomers, “And these must be the other knuckleheads Jiraiya's training, eh?”

Haku smiled, liking how she phrased it, “We are, and it's wonderful to meet you at last, Tsunade-sama.”

Tsunade turned to Naruto, “Oh! I like him! Why can't you be as charming as your friend, Naruto?”

“I can when I feel like it!” The blonde boy grumbled, folding his arms moodily, “Anyway, this is Haku,” He gestured to the tall dark haired boy beside him, “And this is Gaara.”

Gaara bowed his head respectfully to the Godaime and she was pleased to see that the other
members of Naruto’s cell were a far less hyper than he. As well as the fact that Haku was a real sweetheart and sold her immediately.

“Overall you're different than what I'd been expecting, which is a good thing,” Tsunade made note of the guarded looks on their faces, finding it amusing, “I think I can trust you three to a C-rank mission today. What do you think?”

“Sounds good to me!” Naruto agreed energetically, “Where’s Ero-sensei? I want to get started!”

After setting Team 2 up on their mission, Tsunade sighed gratefully and was just about to open her desk drawer to enjoy her sake when there was another knock on her door, ‘It never ends around here, does it?’

“Come in!”

Nara Shikaku entered with his son in tow. She had sent for them earlier on behalf of reports from Anko on the most recent Chunin Exam. Shikamaru looked around the office disinterestedly, clearly unaware of why he had been brought before the Hokage. His father, on the other hand, looked very pleased.

“Nara Shikamaru?”

Shikamaru looked to the Godaime curiously, “Yeah, that'd be me.”

Tsunade continued authoritatively, “After examining your assessment from the Chunin Exam you were the only genin recommended to gain the next rank out of all of your peers,” Shikamaru raised an eyebrow at her, “I would like to congratulate you on achieving Chunin rank!”

Slightly surprised to find that Haku and Naruto and Tenten or someone of the like was not also in the office accepting such an honor, Shikamaru looked to his father for some direction on the matter, who only nodded to him.

“Er-herm…well, thank you, Hokage-sama.” Shikamaru responded, somewhat mechanically, wondering what was going to happen next.

“That over there is yours. It should be about your size.” Tsunade gestured to a thick flak vest waiting on a shelf on the side of the room, “You've earned it, Shikamaru.”

His father collected the vest for him since Shikamaru was too deep in thought to pay attention, ‘Great. Chunin. The only reason I became a ninja was so I could do whatever I wanted and now I've got to kiss up to the Godaime like she's doing a favor for putting me to work? What a drag…’

Shikaku handed the vest to his son, giving him a questioning look.

‘This is what happens when women take over high-ranking positions. It can only lead to trouble!’ Shikamaru thought to himself, staring down at the chunin vest in his hands, wondering how he’d explain it to his team.

“Well if that's all beat it already!” Tsunade snapped, startling the Nara men, “I've got work to do!”

After that they promptly left and she hurriedly retrieved a bottle of sake from her desk, glad to finally have time to herself at last.

After being released from the hospital, Sasuke was even more insistent that Sakura train with him.
Sometimes Kiba would join them but Sasuke seemed to favor the pink haired girl's company over his own, so the Inuzuka would often retire early to be out of their way.

They had been working with fuuma shuriken that day, and they had stopped to take a break after Sakura had nearly taken the Uchiha's head off with an overly-enthusiastic throw. She had told him she was sorry several times in rapid succession and he told her it was nothing.

*I'm glad he's doing better, but Sasuke isn't the same since he got into that fight with Itachi…’* Sakura thought to herself, settling beside him on a log.

He could sense her anxiety as she passed a water bottle to him, which he quietly accepted. Though her hair was considerably shorter now, Sakura had tied it up in a miniature ponytail after it began sticking with sweat. It gave Sasuke a good view of her slender neck which his eyes scanned over from time to time.

“Maybe that's enough training for today, Sasuke-kun,” Sakura suggested after a long silence, “You've been working nonstop since you were discharged. I think you should take it easy for a while. Besides, you've gotten a lot stronger! You don't have to—”

“I'm not strong enough,” Sasuke interrupted, bitterness dripping into his tone, “It wasn't enough. I won't be able to kill Itachi until I surpass my limits…I know that now.”

“Right…I know. I promise I'll help, but…” The pink haired girl watched him stand, keeping his back to her, “Sasuke, I really don't think revenge can ever make you happy.”

“Revenge isn't supposed to make me happy, Sakura, but it's the only thing that can bring peace to my mind. It's something I've gone without for a while.” He made his point quite clearly but she was no less worried.

Sakura's hands fisted in her lap, “But there are other ways! I just want you to be happy.”

“Thank you, Sakura,” The Uchiha prodigy turned to look at her, “I think happiness can wait for me.”

She nodded, swallowing her worry, “Okay. Well then, how about we get some lunch now with Kiba-kun? We've kind of been neglecting him lately and I feel bad about it.”

Sasuke turned the offer down, “Maybe I'll see you later. Right now I want to think.”

Deciding it was better not to pry, Sakura told him that it was fine and that she'd meet up with him in the evening if he wanted. She stood and left, unable to ignore the sinking feeling in her stomach.

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*Three Days Later*

“I can't believe that lazy-shit got promoted and we didn't!” Naruto howled, then aiming a fearsome kick for Haku's head while they were locked in a fierce spar, “You'd think the old lady, ugh, would at least recognize us for our abilities by now!”

The dark haired boy blocked successfully, putting some distance between himself and his aggravated teammate, “But it isn't simply our abilities that are taken into account, Naruto-kun! It is our proficiency with decision making and leadership that count as well.”

“We have the mindsets of chunin.” Gaara insisted from his spot near a target, at which he had been ruthlessly assailing with shuriken, “We are capable of the responsibility of such a rank.
Naruto is right: we are being held back.”

A small frown formed on Haku's face as he took in the words, understanding their frustrations. Eventually Naruto calmed down and stopped attacking Haku, noting that he had more to say on the matter.

“It's true...we are ready. But think! Aren't we most prone to provocation out of all the other genin? We overreact and sometimes deviate from the objective, to the point where it can endanger ourselves and others.” Haku admitted to his friends quietly, his eyes lowered, “You two most especially! Tsunade-sama and Jiraiya-sensei must see this in us after all we've been through.”

The blonde boy folded his arms, tilting his nose up in the air, “So we're a bit nuts, yeah! Then how come Shikamaru of all people, who nearly got his head chopped off, by the way, gets to be a chunin, huh?”

Gaara's stare met with Haku's thoughtful gaze before moving along to Naruto's fiery, defiant eyes. He felt he agreed more with Naruto and yet Haku had a point as well. No matter who was more right on the situation, it didn't very much affect his desire to gain a higher rank as a shinobi.

“Well, I suppose Shikamaru was recognized because…” Haku started chuckling, “It's simply because he uses his head and remains objective about things, even if he is a poor fighter. That's the trait of a leader. It's what they were looking for.”

“That doesn't necessarily mean he deserves to be a chunin.” Gaara added, his voice reaching a growl-like tone, “He, like the rest of us, still needs improvement.”

“That's just it, isn't it?” Haku asked, looking up at the clouds in the sky as the Nara would have, “His talents are few, but he can analyze and use other people's abilities to his advantage and organize a strategy quickly...with us it isn't quite like that yet.”

“What do you mean, Haku-kun?” Naruto was confused and squinted his eyes to emphasize his question.

The dark haired boy looked back to his friends, “We still view each other as equals. There's still too much of a balance between us. Until we can recognize a real leader among the three of us, for example, we will always be disorganized and throw off the flow that a team led by a chunin would have. Are we ready to start taking orders from each other yet?”

Gaara and Naruto remained dutifully silent and Haku sighed, “Stubbornness like this keeps us from leading each other. We depend on each other and work as a team...but we have no natural direction. Shikamaru could lead a group better than any of us.”

A smirk appeared on Naruto's face, “Well hey! Then it's you then, isn't it? You came up with this whole lecture so it's all in your head! You can lead us, we trust you! Right, Gaara-kun?”

Gaara frowned, “My opinion differs...but it isn't as if I would disobey him.”

Haku's eyes widened nervously, “This isn't an election, you know!” He raised his hands up in defense, “I was just explaining Shikamaru's position to you. Why me? I thought it'd be better if we just trained for another year so we could then see how our growth has affected us…”

“But you could do it; give us directions and stuff!” Naruto persisted, grinning by then, “Even if you don't have a biju like me and Gaara-kun, you have strength that comes from your head and it's valuable!”

Grudgingly, the red haired boy nodded, moving to stand by Naruto, “It could work if you keep
Haku stared at them blankly, not expecting them to so suddenly have a revelation about their team dynamic. In his own mind he was terrified. He didn't see in himself the things Naruto had been describing, and he was afraid that if he did become responsible for his team that one slip up could lead to tragedy.

Naruto then added with precise timing, “Right! So now that we've picked someone can we be chunin now?”

Gaara frowned at him, “I don't think it works that way, Naruto.”

Haku shook his head in a mix of amusement and exasperation. Even if Naruto had confidence in him, he still didn't fully understand the meaning of what he had been trying to explain. He decided that it would be better to just wait and see.

‘Naruto may grow out of his explosively-righteous attitude and become wiser. Gaara could possibly let go of his anger and pre-conceived notions of others and keep an open mind…’ And as an afterthought, 'And maybe I can learn to be a better person in general and stop viewing life as a book. I can't just read it; I have to live it…'

All in good time, he hoped.

“Well good for Shikamaru, then…” Naruto grumbled, then looked to Gaara, “Hey, what about your brother and sister? They did pretty good! So maybe when they go home they can-”

“I don't know…maybe,” Gaara answered honestly, “Tsunade-sama has ended the quarantine keeping foreign shinobi here, but they said they aren't ready to leave yet.”

Haku could understand that. Now that Temari and Kankuro had been reunited with their younger brother they weren't very inclined to just up and leave him when they'd be uncertain of when they'd see him again, if ever.

“I think maybe it'd be good for you to visit Suna for a few days then,” Naruto suggested quietly, “Just to make it easier for them to say goodbye?”

Gaara folded his arms, predicting the situation, “If I did that then they'd try to convince me to stay, so I won't allow them such an opportunity. Their skins are thick enough to allow them a journey home without bursting into tears on my account.”

Naruto laughed and then slapped the redhead painfully on the back, “Aw, you big softie! You don't want to go just because you'd miss us, right? Hee hee!”

Gaara’s nostrils flared in annoyance, “Don't count on it.”

Night had fallen and Sasuke sulked in a forested area, unwilling to return home while his mind was still full of turbulent thoughts.

‘Revenge. Sakura and Kakashi have to make such a fuss of it, but how could they really understand? Everyone was taken from me. I can't just accept their lives were taken from them and not do anything to avenge them…’

He sat very still on a high tree branch of an oak, his eyes lit with memories of his past. It wasn’t within his power to so easily forgive or forget. There had been times earlier in his life in which he had considered forgoing his revenge on Itachi completely. Once he had even felt that starting his
clan anew would be so much more fulfilling and that forgetting Itachi and leaving him to rot in his own hatred would be enough.

But he knew he couldn't live that way with a new family of his own; always looking over his shoulder for his older brother, being afraid that he would one day return and destroy what he worked so hard for. It wasn't worth the risk.

His first priority was killing Itachi. There was no other way he'd be able to live in peace.

'Happiness can wait.'

A rustle of leaves signaled incoming ninja and Sasuke raised his eyes, watching as three shinobi landed on branches surrounding him. Their headbands were of Sound shinobi so he didn't have to guess on who was responsible for sending them.

“Who are you guys?” He questioned, putting up his guard.

The ninja in front of him had six arms, not something one could overlook easily, “Kidomaru of the Eastern Gate.”

Next to Kidomaru a pale ninja spoke, “Sakon of the Western Gate.”

The remaining ninja was a girl with a very irritable expression, “Tayuya of the Northern Gate.”

The three Oto shinobi leapt in unison after that, racing around Sasuke with remarkable speed. Kidomaru aimed a roundhouse kick for the Uchiha and was surprised when Sasuke countered, leaping over his back and then hurled him into Sakon behind him, crushing them against the trunk of the tree.

They crashed into each other and Tayuya being knocked away in a similar fashion. Sasuke paused, waiting for the dust to clear and saw they had substituted themselves.

Across from the oak the three sound ninja stood observing him from a balcony. Sasuke glanced over at them with narrowed eyes, “I'm in a bad mood right now.” He warned, “I'm not holding back if you want a fight.”

“Don't talk big, weakling.” Sakon smirked at him, “I'll play the 'do re mi fa so la ti do' for you to break your ribs!”

Sasuke leapt from the tree without hesitation and Sakon met him with a flying kick. The Uchiha prodigy avoided the attack and drew out a wire, tangling Sakon's leg and then slipped the string between the floorboards of the overhang.

Sakon hit the boards with a thud, unable to move being ensnared. He blocked Sasuke's kick and the following punches, deciding it would be prudent to fight back, “Let's hear some good sounds…”

Before Sasuke could land his final hit Sakon knocked him back with a blast of sound, “Do!”

The Uchiha stumbled, stunned by the attack, 'What-?'

“Re!” Sakon sent him flying through the air with another blast of sound, sending him back against the oak with a painful crash.

While Sasuke fidgeted against the trunk of the tree, Sakon droned on in boredom, “Your bones have a low tone…let's hear a higher pitched sound! How about it?”
Sasuke ignored him, noticing Kidomaru's surprise attack and leapt away to avoid it. The spider-like ninja spat a mouthful of webs at him that latched on to his arms and swung him over to Tayuya, who kicked him back in the direction of Sakon who stood in wait.

“Next will be the ‘mi fa so’ combination…” Sakon left an opening while he attacked Sasuke and the young Uchiha countered, kicking him into the air.

Sakon was confounded as Sasuke proceeded with a round of vicious hits, sending him back downwards, as he recalled his match with Lee, “Shi Shi Rendan!”

He sent his foe crashing down to the balcony and Sasuke backed away, trying to catch his breath. He hadn't expected Sakon to be able to stand after such an attack, but the sound nin stood up with hardly a scratch on him, much to the Uchiha's astonishment.

A fierce punch toppled Sasuke over and Sakon lifted the shorter boy by his ankle into the air, watching him in amusement, “Why would Orochimaru-sama want a weakling like this? Kimimaro would've been a better choice…”

Sasuke looked at Sakon and tried to focus, his head spinning from being upside-down.

“As long as you stay in this shitty village, you'll be no stronger than anyone else!” Sakon went on, smirking, “You can't improve in a place like this.”

Tayuya landed nearby on the balcony, “Come with us. That way, Orochimaru-sama will give you powers.”

Sasuke felt a stab of pain hit his curse mark and he flinched, trying to ignore her as she continued, “It's pointless for us to force a person like you to come. We were told you must decide for yourself.”

Kidomaru waited from his perch in the oak, “Orochimaru-sama sure gave us a troublesome job So Sasuke, what do you say?”

Sasuke remained silent.

“Are you coming or not?” Sakon barked impatiently, tossing Sasuke into a wall, !So hesitant! I feel like killing him right here!”

Sasuke glared up at the three Oto nin, “Try it…”

As he called upon the power of the cursed seal, black markings began to slither down his neck and arms. He abruptly launched himself at Sakon, not caring if his assault was reckless.

Sakon knocked him back with little effort and it was then Sasuke could see that he too had a cursed mark appearing over his skin, “You're not the only one Orochimaru-sama likes, you know.” He chuckled, “You shouldn't be using the cursed seal so carelessly. It seems you lack control over it.”

Sasuke stared at the sound ninja, acknowledging the fact that he was at a great disadvantage.

“If you stay in the released state for too long the seal will eventually consume your entire body,” Sakon explained it, “It appears you're still in the first stage, so the speed at which it spreads is slow. But once it completely takes over your body you will lose yourself forever.”

“In return for gaining power through the cursed seal you will be under Orochimaru-sama's control,” Tayuya added, “We have no freedom. If you intend to gain something, you must first
throw something away.”

An empty look weaved its way across Sasuke's features and Tayuya sneered down at him, “What is your purpose? Is it to stay in this joyful village and lick each other's wounds? And then forget all about Uchiha Itachi?”

Sasuke's eyes grew wide at the mentioning of the name.

“Don't forget what your purpose is!” Sakon concluded, his pale form glimmering in the moonlight, “This village is only a shackle. You should break free from such worthless bonds. Then you can gain even greater power.”

Sasuke, against his better judgment, had heeded every word they had spoken. Before leaving, Sakon called back to him, “Do not forget your purpose!”

The Oto nin faded into the night and Sasuke fixed his gaze on the moon, deciding to consider the invitation.

Haku put his senbon away, judging that it was about time to return home for rest as Gaara and Naruto had done a bit earlier. They had trained well into the night, improving their techniques in the darkness in the hope it would help sharpen their senses.

Naruto and Gaara had also been putting into action a few battle strategies Haku had come up with. They were surprised to find just how extensively Haku could wield their abilities. Though his teammates seemed content with his plans, Haku was still less confident in his skills than his friends were.

Perhaps that was what was holding him back, he wondered.

‘When I second guess myself I waste time; time that we most often don’t have on missions…’ Haku thought to himself, plucking the last few of his throwing needles from his target, ‘I must work harder. I can’t afford to hesitate anymore!’

“This must be him, the pretty water-boy Orochimaru-sama spoke of,” Kidomaru spoke from behind Haku, setting him on edge, “What's his name? Haku?”

Haku turned about to face the three strange ninja who arrived. He remained quiet while he observed them, trying to gather as much information as he could. Their forehead protectors betrayed their village of origin and immediately he chose not to trust them.

After leaving Sasuke with a word that they were certain would bait the young Uchiha, the Sound ninja had moved on to find Orochimaru's second point of interest. It would be a different matter taking in Haku, though. They had been told that words were far more effective on Haku than force, but it would all be guesswork.

‘Orochimaru-sama wants to add another unique Kekkei-Genkai to his collection for studies and experimentation since a power like this is so incredibly rare, however…’ Sakon frowned inwardly, ‘We hardly know anything about this boy: what he wants…what he aspires to…it will be difficult to feed him sweet words when we don’t know what strikes his fancy. Indeed, this task he has appointed us with will be more difficult than dealing with Sasuke.’

“Sound ninja should know better than to set foot in this village at a time like this,” Haku warned, narrowing his eyes threateningly, “I advise you leave before I make you do so.”

“Hear us out then, before we go,” Kidomaru suggested smoothly, “We’ve only come here to talk,
Haku.

“Orochimaru sent you?” The dark haired boy confirmed, “I have no business with him. Don't waste your time on me.”

“But you stand to gain so much by joining Orochimaru-sama,” Sakon offered, smirking at Haku, “Sasuke-kun realized that after we spoke to him and he had no objections.” Haku's eyes widened, “What do you think?”

“I think Sasuke has made some bad decisions before, this being just one more of them,” The water nin replied, “I don't know what you told him but I'm sure it was far from the truth.”

“We are messengers of the truth, you stupid shit! Only an ignorant fool would choose to ignore us!” Tayuya was fed up with Haku's reluctance, “We were told you're a hindrance to your team you're so weak! A waste of time like you should seize an opportunity like this to gain power!”

Sakon feared that Tayuya's angered outburst may have killed their chances of baiting Haku.

“I was once told there's no shortcut to power worth taking,” Haku's resolve was firm, “I don't want anything to do with Orochimaru. I'll train with my team to get stronger, I prefer it that way.” He glared at the Oto nin ahead of him, “Now if you're through, I suggest you leave immediately.”

After a short silence, Kidomaru grinned, “There was…one last order given to us before we set out, if I recall…”

Haku felt something in his gut advising him to flee, but he refused to make himself look like a coward in front of enemy shinobi, ‘I'm through with running!’

“Orochimaru-sama warned us that you may make a fuss after hearing our offer,” Sakon explained smugly, “So in that event…we were ordered to use force if you're unwilling to cooperate.”

Haku reached for his senbon but was knocked backwards. Tayuya attacked suddenly with a note on her flute that made him completely disoriented. Hastily he made an ice mirror and positioned it in front of him to shield from their sound attacks.

Sakon smirked at the move, ‘Pretty clever! But this won't take long. Orochimaru-sama said he's no stronger than Sasuke-kun!’ He countered Haku's senbon with his own, distracting the dark haired boy from the spider webs raining down over him.

Kidomaru laughed from his place in a nearby tree as Haku began to struggle in the webbing, finding it impossible to cut. Tayuya and Sakon attacked together, landing two brutal kicks to the back of the trapped nin's head and gut.

Haku toppled over helplessly and Kidomaru reeled him in like a trapped fish with his netting, “So what do you propose we do about this one? Since he isn't coming willingly he'll be a burden. It'll make it more difficult to get him to Sound.”

“Orochimaru-sama is aware of that,” Sakon replied dryly, “That's why he's sending us assistance once we are outside the boundaries of this village. The faster we move the sooner we can deliver this brat.”

Tayuya smirked sinisterly, “Another little science experiment for Orochimaru-sama! This little bitch will go nicely in that tank next to Suigetsu. Now we'll have a complete aquarium!”

Kidomaru found it amusing how she referred to all ninja with water Kekkei Genkai as fish. He handed the webbing off to her. "Since you're so enthusiastic then you won't mind carrying him
first then, eh?’

Tayuya punched him full in the face before pulling Haku's cocoon over her shoulder.

Sasuke stalked past the ninja Academy soundlessly in the cool night air. It hadn't taken him very long to make his decision.

After returning home he had packed what few possessions he deemed necessary and turned over the photograph of his team, unable to look at their careless, cheerful faces.

There was no point in wasting time. He left without a second thought, pulling his bag over his shoulder and not sparing a backwards glance at his home. His village. His friends. Everything he had ever known he was casting away.

And when Sakura came around the corner wearing a suspicious expression he noted that he may not have cast aside everything just yet.

She paused, observing him for a long moment, “You said that maybe you'd see me later, though, by later I didn't think it meant this late.”

“It was the maybe part you should have been listening to.” He continued walking, trying to be nonchalant.

Sakura noted the backpack he had with him and added it to his curious decision to be on his own late at night. It made her feel nervous. It reminded her of earlier when she had been speculating if he may believe the answers he was seeking resided in Sound. Kiba had convinced her otherwise, but now she felt doubtful.

“Someone who's leaving the village has to take this road first.” The pink haired girl mentioned quietly.

Sasuke walked past her and she felt tears stinging at her eyes. She understood now that her instincts had been right and that maybe she could've done more to prevent what was happening.

“Why does it have to be this way? Why are you doing this?” Sakura turned around to face him, crying openly, “I thought we were dependent on each other…and yet you're still doing this!”

“The only way I can get stronger is if I move past this place. It's holding me back.” Sasuke answered, his hands hidden in his pockets, “I walk a different path now, one that few others follow.”

“You're hurting yourself this way! Choosing to be alone again; I won't accept that!” She shook her head as tears slipped down her cheeks, “I promised you that I'd never let anything bad happen to you! How can I if you leave?”

“We were children, then.” His chest felt heavy, much to his astonishment. The memory hurt because it held so much meaning and it was a memory that wasn't about to vanish. Sakura would be the hardest thing to let go of.

“But promises never age and I…” Sakura felt her voice catch in her throat and the words she wanted to say died on her tongue, ‘Please! Just stay. Or if that's not possible, then…then take me with you! I'll help you in any way I can! I won't break my promise!’”

Sasuke remained silent.
Her frustrated cries continued, “Please! I need to know that you won’t become Orochimaru’s pawn. I’ll help you with your revenge…so just…”

The silence of the place frightened Sakura. The moon dipped in and out of passing clouds, blinking light down on them. The tears were slowing but she knew there was nothing else she had to give by way of words. If there was anything more she had to offer she'd soon be defeated.

“My goals in this life are to kill Itachi for what he's done and to restore my clan. Neither is easy to do…” Finally he turned back to look at her, “Should I succeed in destroying Itachi…I want you to marry me and help me rebuild my clan, Sakura.”

The pink haired girl was stunned by what he had said. She figured that his request was also an invitation for her to come along but she wasn't certain. Suddenly her mind was thrown back into very simple methods of communication. No intelligent phrases came to her lips, so she waited until something coherent surfaced.

“Do you accept?”

The offer had much pending, she knew, but by passing it up Sakura knew that would be a betrayal of his trust. There was no other girl in his life, she realized. He was still dependent on her even if he wouldn't admit it. There was a word on her mouth so she decided to use it.

“Yes.”

It was quiet again. Sasuke stood there waiting; his face calm, but she could see the faintest of traces of relief in his eyes. Sakura hoped that would be enough to hold them together. She knew what was happening was wrong but fighting against it was futile.

Her feet started moving and she came to stand beside him, wordless and overwhelmed.

So this was the toll she had to pay. If she was going to stop him from making catastrophic choices she would have to trade him her future. Sakura had not truly been ready to do it.

Once Sasuke started walking again she made sure to follow. She had no idea where they were going or how they would survive.

The following morning Naruto's frantic cries woke Gaara up. The red haired boy tossed his blanket aside and rolled out of bed sleepily. He stepped outside of his bedroom to see what had the blonde boy in such a tizzy.

Naruto ignored the fact that Gaara was shirtless, once again, “He's not back yet!”

“Nm…what?”

“Haku-kun! Remember last night we got home and he didn't show, and you said he'd probably be turning in late or something?” Naruto reminded him, “Well he never got back! I checked his room and everything! There's no reason for him not to come home…something's wrong.”

Gaara stared at him for a long moment. Suddenly Naruto's panic was beginning to rub off on him. Not because he had made such a fuss, but because something was genuinely out of place. Haku had assured them he'd be back before midnight and now, at seven in the morning, there was still no sign of him.

“If there's trouble then we'll have to tell Tsunade-sama first before we go look for him,” The red haired boy began to dress quickly, “Bring some weapons with you. I think we'll need them.”
At the Hokage's office they were surprised to find that Tsunade was also up quite early (for her, at least) and had her office bustling with ninja coming and going, all awaiting orders.

Naruto was certain by the expression on her face something was already very wrong and it had nothing to do with Haku.

“Can I help you boys?” She didn't try to hide the bottle of sake on her desk. Her nerves were shot.

“Haku's gone.” Naruto replied quickly, “He didn't come home last night!”

She sighed, rubbing her throbbing temples, “I was afraid of this after I'd looked over the reports,” Noting their confused faces she decided to elaborate, “I think you two would like to know that I've received intelligence that Uchiha Sasuke and Haruno Sakura have also disappeared, and have been filed as nukenin.”

Naruto’s mouth hung open in shock in response to the news.

“Since these cases are related I suppose it'd suffice to say that Haku has also fled from Konoha, as they have,” Tsunade concluded darkly, “Orochimaru is responsible for this, and that being the case, I've sent as many teams out to search as possible…but right now Konoha's short on manpower so it's unfortunate that something like this had to happen now.”

Naruto wasn't listening to her, though. He was watching Gaara walk back to the office door, silent as a ghost, knowing that the mere mentioning of Sakura in danger was enough to mobilize him,

“Wait, Gaara! You can't just-!”

He watched his sand obscure him from view and then disappear, much to his disgruntlement. Naruto was about to give chase to his rash friend before Tsunade called to him, “Hold it right there, Naruto! I can't afford to lose any more shinobi at the moment!”

“But if he goes out there on his own then he might-”

“Let him go for now. I think he'd be more helpful searching on his own anyway.” The Godaime overrode him, “For now I need you here. You're close to Sakura and Haku so I need you to tell me what you can about-”

“It doesn't make any sense!” Naruto answered immediately, “I don't see how they'd leave like this! It isn't something they'd do! Maybe they were forced to, or…something! I don't know.”

Tsunade narrowed her eyes, “As the case may be the odds are stacked against them. There was no evidence of a struggle that was discovered, Naruto. They left of their own free will.”

The blonde boy shut his eyes, refusing to open them until the door opened again and Shikamaru entered. The chunin vest he wore had greatly changed his appearance, “You sent for me, Hokage-sama?”

Tsunade briefed him on the situation as she had with Naruto, all the while the Kyuubi container remained quiet, trying to calm himself down.

“This sort of mission should only be handled by chunin and jounin…” Shikamaru pointed out.

“I know. This is not something I'd normally ask and I'm sorry to say there are no more available ninja at this time I can send on this mission. I want you to collect as many shinobi as you can in 30 minutes and organize a search for Uchiha Sasuke, Haruno Sakura and Haku, understood, Shikamaru?” Tsunade wrapped up the mission briefing, “I know it's a lot to ask of a freshly-
promoted chunin but I was out of options.”

Shikamaru’s face offered little by way of expression but he took the task appointed to him very seriously, “Understood, Tsunade-sama. After I’ve picked my team we can leave immediately?”

“Yes, and try to be quick about it, since you have your first team member standing right beside you.” Tsunade answered and Shikamaru glanced over to Naruto, surprised that he had remained silent the entire time, “Dismissed!”

“You want Chouji to come with us?” Naruto inquired as they walked down the street, near the Akimichi’s residence, “Are you sure that’s a good idea if Ino isn’t around for you two?”

“Of course. Besides, he’s more reliable than Gaara, I’d say,” Shikamaru replied and the blonde boy scowled, “Maybe if he had waited up he’d be helping us out, huh?”

“He was worried…” Naruto said feebly but knew that the Nara had a point.

He watched curiously as Shikamaru opened a bag of chips and began munching, not going any nearer to the house. He offered Naruto to help himself so he didn’t bother to argue, though he did ask, “Aren’t you going to see if Chouji’s home?”

“I am. He’ll come out-”

Rather abruptly Chouji had rushed up to them (Naruto had never seen him move so fast) and snatched the chip from Shikamaru’s hand, claiming it for himself. After a moment’s pause the Nara finished his sentence, “-when he sees this is the last one.”

Naruto wore a baffled look and Chouji shrugged, “The last chip is always the best.”

He left it at that and followed Shikamaru and Naruto as they walked.

Shikamaru briefed Chouji in on the details of the mission and he immediately agreed to join, most especially since Shikamaru was the one leading the team. After a short walk down the next street over Kiba seemed to meet them head-on, looking frantic.

Akamaru whimpered from his place nestled in the Inuzuka’s coat. Kiba stopped in front of Shikamaru, anxiety clearly visible on his face, “Tsunade-sama told me already! I’m definitely going!”

Suddenly Naruto understood Kiba’s plight, ‘Man! He must be having a bad day right now! His team just up and left him! Sasuke and Sakura… I can’t imagine what Kiba’s feeling. Well, sort of… but I know Haku-kun would never abandon us! He isn’t like that!’

Naruto kept his thoughts to himself, understanding that now Kiba didn’t want anyone’s sympathy; he wanted to retrieve his teammates before tragedy struck.

Kiba was also helpful to Shikamaru in that he knew who was and wasn’t available, “Shino is on a mission with his dad and Sato may have taken a mission to secure the borders of the village, so he could be anywhere…”

“We don’t have time to waste,” Shikamaru would’ve liked to have had Shino or Sato’s tracking skills on hand to support Kiba, but they couldn’t afford to go look for them, “How about Gai’s team?”

Their search brought them to the Hyuga compound where they were lucky enough to spot Neji.
They neared the porch he was resting on with his cousin and Shikamaru again described the mission they were entrusted with.

“I will do what I can.” Neji agreed, standing and giving a long look to Naruto, sensing his immense worry over Haku.

“And Lee and Tenten? Where are they?” Shikamaru was not pleased to hear that they were still due to return from a mission in Tanzaku Quarter, only another delay, “Fine then, this team will do…”

“I…I wish to go as well!” Hinata stood up and raised her voice, determined to help them in their endeavor.

“This is a no-girls sort of mission, Hinata…”

“Then how come you wanted Tenten to come along, Shikamaru?” Chouji asked in a whisper.

“Skills like hers hardly make her anything like a girl. She practically is a boy, the way she fights!” Shikamaru was silenced by a very, very aggravated glare from Neji, and he admitted that he wasn't being completely fair to Hinata.

“Hinata-chan should come with us!” Naruto protested against Shikamaru's hesitation, “She can help track them down just as well as Neji can, and her shadow clones will definitely help!”

Neji, unexpectedly so, agreed, “Naruto is right. It would be foolish to leave Hinata-sama behind when we are seeking three fugitives. The more people on the team the better.”

Hinata looked to her cousin gratefully and then turned her gaze to Shikamaru, who was scrutinizing her as if he was having an internal argument. After a long moment he sighed, knowing he was outnumbered on the matter, “Fine. She comes. But women can be so troublesome, sometimes…”

“You're going to have to wait here for me,” Sasuke's voice was low as he gave instructions to Sakura in the treetop they had settled in, “There are only three of them, but it'll take some convincing to get them to allow you along.”

“Sasuke-kun, are you…sure about this?” Her eyes were wide with fear. Sakura was quickly beginning to realize how her presence was complicating the situation. Even so, the Uchiha was adamant in keeping her, even at the risk of angering the Oto ninja who had invited him to Sound.

He brushed his lips against her ear, murmuring, “Just keep quiet and stay here. They aren't far off, so I won't be long.”

The touch made her shudder, “Alright.”

Sasuke moved ahead without her and Sakura remained where she was, staring off into the thick of the echoing forest.

After finally coming upon the waiting Sound shinobi on the forest floor, some quarter mile North of where he had left Sakura, he discovered something rather disconcerting, “What is this?”

Sakon smirked at the slumped-over form of Haku who was being re-bound in webbing by Kidomaru, “Hm? Ah, Orochimaru-sama has also been keeping track of this boy as well, but he chose to be difficult!”
He shouldn't be here!” Sasuke growled warningly, not pleased they had taken Haku by force. Haku had never been particularly close to him, but Sasuke had never held a quarrel with the boy. His nature was far too docile even for a ninja.

Something made him want to demand they return Haku to Konoha immediately. Not because he wanted to deprive Orochimaru of a secondary prize, but because the absence of Haku in the Leaf village meant his number-one confidants would be hot on his trail, *If Naruto and Gaara come looking for him it'll lead them straight to me!*

After a moment's silence Sasuke decided to throw caution to the wind and let things resume. It may be good to have one of Sakura's good friends along for the journey even if it was against his will. Haku may be able to keep her company in the event he could not.

“This should do for now.” Kidomaru dropped Haku's limp form carelessly back down to the ground, “Little runt! I could've sworn he tried to kick me on the way here, bastard…”

“A fish out of water will always try to flap around.” Tayuya commented blandly, “A stupid shit like you should be more cautious.”

They turned their attention to Sasuke after dealing with Haku and Sakon spoke again, “We're sorry for our rudeness during out first meeting, Sasuke-sama! As of now we've decided that you will be our leader.”

Although Sasuke didn't quite care what they thought of him this news was actually welcome. With them viewing him as a superior, it would give him the proper footing to order that Sakura accompany them, but he stayed silent when Sakon had more to say.

“Also, there is an important message from Orochimaru.” Sakon added, restraining a chuckle, I've been asked to tell you...that you must die once.”

“Die once?” Sasuke found the message absurd.

“Enhancement pills: you will need to take these.” Sakon held a small bottle up to him containing many small dark pills.

“What do they do, exactly?”

“Your curse seal is at level one,” Tayuya informed him from her place to his left, “The pill will forcibly increase your seal to level two.”

Sasuke looked back to Sakon, his eyes distrustful as the Oto nin continued, “But at level two the speed at which the seal invades your body will rapidly increase. In that case you would die immediately.”

The wind moaned through the trees looming overhead.

“In order to control stage two your body must get accustomed to it over a period of time. If you do that you will be…” Sakon paused for a second, “You will probably be able to gain the same level of power as us. But after the change it will only be a short time until you die…”

“What is the point of this if it kills me?” Sasuke appeared outwardly calm, but his insides were twisting angrily at the thought of meeting his end before he could kill Itachi.

“There is no need to worry, that is why we are here,” Sakon assured him, walking up to him, “With our shield techniques we will block the side effects. Instead of dying you will receive the power and be placed in a temporary coma.”
“Can I trust your so-called 'shield techniques’?”

“Yes, Sasuke-sama,” Kidomaru spoke up, “We are Orochimaru-sama’s elite guard! Shields, defense ninjutsu and seal ninjutsu are our forte.”

Still, he wasn't about to take their word for it, 'No matter what happens I can't die yet!'

Sakon tilted his head, smirking, “If you're nervous how about we try it out on Haku first?”

Sasuke looked over to Tayuya as she dragged the unconscious boy over to Sakon. Sasuke wondered why they were so rough with Haku while they treated him like a glass-ornament. Sakon force-fed a pill to the dark haired boy and stood back, handing the bottle off to Sasuke, “You next, Sasuke-sama.”

The Uchiha watched as Haku struggled for a few moments, his body rejecting the pill's harmful effects. He went limp a minute later and Sasuke looked down at the pill he held in his hand, thinking it over, 'If I'm in a coma then there's no way I can protect Sakura from these three if they choose to give her a hard time...' He had considered mentioning her before taking the pill, but decided against it, 'She'll have to stay behind. I won't risk her getting hurt. I shouldn't have gotten her involved.'

Sasuke also swallowed a pill and at first felt nothing. After a minute he began to succumb to an excruciating sensation that stung every nerve ending he had. He began thrashing; his body was unresponsive. Kidomaru waited patiently for the Uchiha to pass out and caught him before he hit the ground, “How about now, Sakon?”

Sakon had already summoned a large barrel from a scroll in which Tayuya had placed Haku. There was room enough for the both of them and Kidomaru placed Sasuke's unconscious form in as well and then stepped back to help with the sealing.

Though there were only three of them remaining they were still able to effectively seal the barrel, though it cost a great amount of chakra to do it without Jirobo, “Shikokumujin!”

Sakon quickly wrote seals out on several tags before tossing them at the barrel, “Fuukoku Houin!”

After the hurried sealing was completed the three Oto ninja sighed in relief. Now the difficult task of guarding the two Leaf nin was their primary concern. Sakon also suspected that Haku may cause a problem when he awoke with his new level two seal, so it was imperative to keep strict tabs on the boy, while Sasuke was less of a problem since he had come willingly.

Kidomaru hauled the barrel onto his back and followed silently after Sakon and Tayuya.

“A formation?” Naruto found Shikamaru’s plan confusing, “We don't have time for that kind of crap! We need to get going now!”

“If we chase after them all jumbled and disorganized we leave ourselves open to an ambush or a possible trap,” Shikamaru retorted, his brow furrowing, ‘That's the plan. Now listen cause' I'm only going to explain this once…”

Naruto quieted down and settled beside Hinata, folding his arms irritably, 'If something happens to Haku-kun or Sakura-chan because we stalled I'm gonna be pissed! Gaara-kun better find them and slow them down or we'll be in the fryer!

“For now we're on the offence, which means it would be easy for the enemy to make the first
move,” Shikamaru began, “That's why, in order to protect from their random attacks, I will be deciding on a formation for us to move in. Should anyone ignore me and act on their own everyone could die.”

Kiba gulped audibly.

“The formation will be a line: the forerunner, who has the most important and crucial task…will be Kiba,” The Nara went on, locking eyes with the latter, “Every year you travel with Akamaru and you know the geography of the Fire Country. Your nose works pretty well so you'll be able to track Sasuke and Haku, and also detect certain booby traps the enemy leaves behind.”

The Inuzuka boy nodded in understanding, patting Akamaru's head.

Shikamaru continued, drawing the formation out on a scroll, “And second will be me, the leader. Since I'll be able to see the situation I'll be able to give out orders in front to Kiba. To the rear members I can give orders by hand signals.”

He then turned to Hinata, “Third, behind me, will be you Hinata,” She returned his expectant gaze dutifully, “With your eyes you'll be able to scout a bit ahead to warn us of potential danger or changes. Because you'll be gathering critical information like that you need to be near me in case I have to make up a strategy, though it may leave you the most open to attack, so that's why Naruto will be right behind you in line.”

The blonde boy nodded to her quietly, giving her a reassuring smile as Shikamaru added, “If Naruto is with you at the line's center his shadow clones combined with yours can give aid in all directions. He'll be the center of help: the gut of the line!”

The Hyuga girl nodded, seeing the logic in such placement.

“The fifth will be Chouji.” Shikamaru looked to his best friend, “You don't have speed, but you have the most physical power because of your size. Although it may be awkward, all of us in front of you will be using you as a base, as in home base. While the others act you and I can still use our combination techniques during a distraction.”

Neji's eyes were closed as he listened, “Finally you, Neji. I will ask you to do the most difficult and complicated task. Your Byakugan, like Hinata’s, will help scan and check the area. That way, the enemy can't get an attack in on us from behind, where we're most vulnerable…” The Hyuga prodigy nodded in agreement after hearing the explanation.

“And I want to check the weapons that you guys brought with you. Please let me see what each of you have and I will remember it.” Shikamaru concluded, rolling up the scroll he had doodled on, “Does anyone have any questions?”

Naruto shook his head when no one made the effort to speak up.

“Finally, this is the most important thing I have to say,” The chunin added, “I'm not personally close with Sasuke, Haku or Sakura, however…they are shinobi of Konoha: our comrades. That's why we must risk our lives to save them. It is our duty as shinobi of the Leaf Village. Even though I don't like doing troublesome things I am responsible for your lives.”

Kiba snickered, “Heh…now you're starting to sound like a real chunin!”

Chouji only smiled at his friend, having known all his life that even if Shikamaru often lacked conviction he was a true and noble leader.

“Once Neji-niisan and I check your equipment we can go.” Hinata said softly, feeling the pressure
mount now that she was the only female of the group. She and her elder cousin examined the
team's entire collection of weaponry side by side, and she had nearly asked him if he was sure
Tenten and Lee weren't available.

By the look on Neji's face, Hinata could see that now more than ever he wanted his most trusted
teammates beside him, 'At a time when he has begun to grow so close and fond of them...he must
undertake a mission without them.' She understood that feeling; Shino and Sato were abroad at the
moment. But as she considered it, she realized that everyone present had probably not seen their
teammates for a while, 'Shikamaru, Kiba and Naruto-kun have also been alone for a while...it
must be so hard.'

Once everyone had stored their weapons away the team began to move out through the front gate
of Konoha. There was a chilling moment as the sun shone down brightly on the six brave shinobi
that fell into line easily and then disappeared into the surrounding forest together.

He had been gone for nearly a quarter of an hour and it had her anxiously pacing the treetops like
a caged lioness, calling his name every so often.

'He's going to be back soon.' Sakura assured herself, her thoughts muddled, 'Sasuke will make
sure it's safe before we keep going together.'

When he had left he had looked afraid. She remembered the expression on his face very well, and
she couldn't understand entirely why he had thought it was perfectly fine to leave her alone in a
forest that most likely contained foreign ninja expectant of his arrival but not hers.

'Will they try to kill me if they find me? Would they even let me go with him?' Upon her flight from
Konoha alongside her teammate she had never considered the fact that she may be picked off like
a worthless scab.

Sakura had overlooked the detail in which they only wanted Sasuke when all was said and done,
and not some headstrong kunoichi who was merely a genin and bound to complicate things.

She was entirely and undeniably alone in that moment for the first time in her life.

The silence of the woods made the hair on her arms stand on end in terror. She leaned uneasily on
the trunk of the cedar tree she was perched in. She deliberated what would happen if the Sound
ninja discovered her before Sasuke returned. Would she fight? Would she flee?

'I'm not going back home...not unless Sasuke comes with me!' She thought, though it was
something she honestly doubted. He wouldn't be so willing to give up after he had so brazenly left
the village without batting an eyelash.

In a way she had known he had abandoned her. The only reason he would leave her behind
would be to do just that. Even if it had not been his first intention, she was still aware of the reality
of the situation. Though Sakura was loath to admit it she was indeed a big distraction.

And even worse, he hadn't planned a particularly helpful way to leave her either, 'Did he just
expect me to run back to Konoha without him if things went badly? Does he have that much
confidence in me to think I'd get home...alive?'

She had come so far and now it held no meaning.

"Sasuke, please, don't do this to me. Don't bring me with you and ask me to marry you and then
leave me behind!" Her voice was hoarse against the crescendo of singing crickets, "This isn't
going to solve anything. I know I'm an idiot for coming out here, but that makes you an idiot too!
How can I move on not knowing if you're even alive?”

Her pink hair was glued to her face with sweat. It was uncomfortable and only added to her discontent, 'I won't go. I'll wait. He may just be lost. He'll be back.'

She could suddenly sense a faint presence nearby, approaching quickly, ‘Is that a Sound shinobi?’

Sakura drew a kunai and crouched down on the branch she was balanced on, fairly certain that the individual nearing with such stealth and quiet intended to investigate and not ambush. Not Sasuke.

The immediate appearance of the newcomer surprised her and she pounced instantaneously, bringing her knife down in a sweeping motion which the newcomer easily blocked and then knocked the kunai aside.

Sakura waited for the violent counterstrike but it never came.

It was not Sasuke.

“Sakura you can't stay here,” Gaara’s arm was around her waist as her knees weakened in fright at the sight of him, “How long have you been here?”

The pink haired girl could give no immediate response. What the hell was he doing here anyway? How could he have known? Or better still, how could he have not known?

“Not long…” Her voice cracked with the weight of her emotions. Sakura closed her eyes, desperately trying to get a grip.

Gaara saw her distress. It was written all over her heartbroken face. He knew its source.

“Liar.”

She wriggled away and settled against a perpendicular branch, clinging to it to support her weight which felt like it had suddenly doubled. The last thing she would do was lean on Gaara and make him feel like he was right; like she needed his help.

“You shouldn't have followed us, Gaara,” Sakura said flatly, the words stinging her tongue, “I'm leaving with Sasuke. He needs me.”

“If he needs you so badly why isn't he here?” The anger in his eyes made them look like sharp, green fire. Maybe if Sasuke were present he wouldn't be half as angry as he was. That she was alone.

Maybe.

“He needed to make sure it was safe.”

“He's just as much a liar as you are,” Gaara turned from her, he was mad at her too, “A pair of liars! That's what I've been chasing.”

Sakura shook her head helplessly in denial.

“He has endangered your life by bringing you here. There is no way he can fully ensure your safety,” Gaara looked back to her, questioningly, “How long has he left you alone here?”

“Sasuke's coming back.”

“He's not coming back, Sakura,” His voice was rough, “He had the good sense to continue on
without you, at least.”

“No!” Sakura threw a flailing punch at him, tears beginning to blind her, “He'll be here! Sasuke!” She called for him, futilely. It only angered him more as he caught her half-hearted punches. He hated the affection reserved in her voice when she spoke the Uchiha's name.

“Sasuke has used you as a crutch for his misery, even if he hasn't realized that.” Gaara's eyes softened on her as she backed away, choking back hysterical sobs, “He has seen a future for himself with you in it, a future he is too cowardly to work for! He has chosen the easiest path to achieve his goal; to achieve power. I would never elect such a thing… I will never leave you.”

Sakura was wiping at her eyes, red and swollen. She looked a mess, but she didn't care; tact was beyond her. With Gaara all her dignity was stripped away and she was left naked, baring her mistakes in shame.

He reached for her and she backed away from his hand, like it too would betray her.

“S-So what if Sasuke-kun went ahead? I'll follow him! I'll find him! He needs me. I promised him I'd never let anything bad happen to him…” Her voice lowered, “He promised the same for me.”

“Sakura, people bent on power will always break their promises.”

“No! He wants to marry me! He loves me! Why would he throw that away? It isn't…it isn't about power, Gaara.” Sakura said it as if he didn't understand, as if she could convince him he didn't.

Finally she backed herself against the tree-trunk, unable to escape his persistent hold. His arms felt smooth and strong, and he held her as if she were a crazed pet trying to escape its owner.

Her struggling ended and she leaned into him resignedly. What now? What was the use? Gaara had caught her and she had no hope of getting away; that was for certain.

His embrace loosened. He was gentle. He said he wasn’t going to leave. All the same, she could tell he was still distraught. Her defection from Konoha must have hurt him. Her feelings for Sasuke must have hurt him more, and she knew they would.

“If it isn't about power then why has he run to Sound? Can you answer that?” Gaara asked quietly, knowing the cold hard truth was difficult for her to hear.

The tears streamed steadily down Sakura’s cheeks. He was right; she knew he was, but that didn't stop the pain and it didn't solve the problem. She had come all this way praying for a way for things to end well.

This is what she ended up with.

“If he wanted to marry you he would’ve stayed. He would’ve given you everything and cast his bitterness away for you. He would protect your dreams and keep you safe. Most importantly, he'd put you before himself.” Gaara explained, unmitigated, “It was a coward's love he gave you, which is far less than what you deserve.”

What was he preaching about this time? What was the point? He always gave her these longs talks that made her feel like a fool in the end.

“Sakura, he doesn't love you as I do. I ask nothing of you. I could never demand anything from you, not even on the day I arrived in this village. You had already given me so much when you chose to be my friend.” His voice was softer. Sakura raised her eyes to his.
“I’ve known it was not worth standing between the two of you, but I’ve waited.” He admitted, “You are the only person I have ever felt this way about. If I would make one demand after all of this time, then it’s this: I want you to live and that is all,” He lowered his mouth to hers, “So just live…”

There was sincerity in his actions, but the last thing she had expected him to do while he was angry with her was to kiss her. It was slow and cautious but unwavering, and Sakura let her eyes blink closed, unwilling to fight against the new contact.

’Gaara. Do you really?’ It was as if her brain had switched off, much as it had when Sasuke had proposed, however in this instance nothing about it felt wrong at all.

Gaara had surprised her. Again. Maybe that was why she had been so taken with him while growing up and at the Academy; even during the Tanabata Festival. But he had never shown interest, not in any way she could perceive, at least. So she had pushed her hopes for their friendship becoming something more to the wayside and focused on becoming a stronger kunoichi.

A fat lot of good that had done her.

She had scarcely improved and now all the old emotions were bubbling to the surface with great intensity, screaming at her in frustration. Why had she placed Sasuke over Gaara?

Sakura had always understood that she had Gaara's unconditional affection. She just decided not to act on it because there was no guarantee his mind wouldn't change about her. Now she had to accept her error.

Sasuke was the one who fled, not Gaara. He'd run after her and professed his feelings. It was surreal. Like some sort of tacky fairytale where everything straightens out after overcoming the obstacles. Still, Sakura knew there wasn't a snowball's chance in hell of this fiasco having a happy ending, even with Gaara around.

’We’re still in danger here but...he came to save me...’ Sakura’s thoughts drifted like mist through her head while she reciprocated. She remembered now. She remembered why Gaara and all that he represented had meant so much to her. He had suffered and overcome. He had been alone but chosen friendship. She remembered why she had chosen him.

He wouldn't let her down.

“You are so irrational…and…selfish,” Gaara started speaking the words against her mouth, “You're foolish and naïve. You'd get yourself killed if I wasn't around…”

Sakura kissed him again, placating, trying to shut him up. She wished that he didn't have to remind her of her faults, even if it was his job to do so.

“Every time…you were smarter than me…braver…what happened to you?” He still tried to speak, innocently curious, “I am like you…a fool…selfish…I want to die for you one day. You are all that is good in me…”

Sakura felt tears sting at her eyes again. Why did he have to say such things?

It was in his nature to complicate matters.

His hand had moved to her tangled, pastel hair. He closed his eyes finally. He was starting to trust the way she made him feel.
Sakura understood at last why she couldn't tell Sasuke those same words. She had tried to, but all along the only person she could tell them to and mean it was to Gaara.

“I love...” She tried to speak in the midst of their tousling but it was of no use. It was harder than it looked, and she silently commended him for his ability to multi-task: kissing and speaking.

The red haired nin pulled away from her. It was a very reluctant action and her eyes fluttered open to stare at him in wonder. Wow. Naruto and Haku were never going to believe this. Sakura was unsure if they even had to know.

“Just...live.” He mumbled, his nose pressed against her cheek contentedly.

She relaxed completely. Sakura had not felt this safe since before the Chunin Exam. It had been a while and so she welcomed the feeling back.

“Sakura?”

“Yes?” She responded, her chin resting on his shoulder lazily. Sasuke could wait. If she knew well enough, which she did, Gaara wasn't the only Leaf ninja out chasing fugitives.

She had faith.

“I'm sorry, Sakura-chan.” His words were frank and it frightened her.

“Sorry about what?”

“You'll be asleep for a while. You're going to wake up in your home.”

“I'm going to-?”

His elbow landed in her gut and the air left her lungs instantly. She was unconscious before she even realized what was about to happen. It was for her own good, Gaara reasoned. If Sasuke turned up again no doubt she'd rashly chase after him so it was better to be sure. Now she was not going anywhere on her own.

Gaara pulled her weight over his shoulder, preparing his nerves for the journey back to Konohagakure.

“Sleep well, Sakura.” He took off, not caring what fate held in store for Sasuke. He had someone precious in need of protecting and there was no one and nothing that would be able to stop him.

Shizune turned to teammate Iwashi, a worried look gracing her face, “Genma and Raido are late...we should go check on them.”

He nodded to her, having thought of it himself, “Let's go!”

The two jounin left the cover of the glade they had been taking shelter in and moved west, as the missing half of their team had earlier. They had been gone too long after they had went ahead to confront the nearby Sound ninja. Something was wrong.

Iwashi spotted them first, “Shizune, over there!” They descended upon a monstrous scene, kunai and shuriken dotting the surrounding ground and trees and blood pooling beside Raido and on the front of Genma's vest as he sat propped up against a tree.

“Raido! Genma!” Shizune rushed to them, frantic. She didn't understand. Her team
was entirely comprised of jounin, taking on only three Oto nin. It should have been no contest.

“How could this have happened?” She asked softly, immediately tending to Genma's wounds while Iwashi saw to Raido close by, “There's no way it should've ended like this!”

“Should I go after them?” Iwashi inquired, not wanting to decide too late if they were still in the vicinity.

Genma turned to him, his expression grim, “Don't. The power they displayed…it definitely has something to do with Orochimaru. We didn't have a chance.”

Shizune kept her thoughts private, ‘But then…the team of genin that Tsunade-sama sent out to retrieve Haku and Sasuke…they will have to contend with this!’

“Shikamaru! The air is thick with the scent of blood here!” Kiba reported, halting and the rest of the line behind him quickly did the same.

Observing with her Byakugan, Hinata confirmed it, “He's right…it appears there was a battle several yards east of here. There are some wounded Leaf jounin regrouping.”

Kiba watched the chunin steadily, “What do you want us to do?”

Shikamaru was silent for a long moment as he thought it over, “If there was a battle they may be able to give us some information…”

“But we can't waste any more time! While we sit around here and chat who knows what they're doing to Sasuke and Haku-kun?” Naruto protested, still terrified of what was to become of his dear friends.

Shikamaru gave him an annoyed look, “If they battled Sound ninja and they were jounin…and they were defeated…” Naruto understood his reasoning, “This is going to be a very troublesome time for us, Naruto.”

“Shikamaru, we do have a larger team. Naruto is right; if we don’t do something Sasuke and Haku might be in trouble!” Chouji was in agreement that, despite the peril, action had to be taken.

Shikamaru would always acknowledge his best friend’s words, “Fine! It'd be best to keep moving. It's just as likely those Leaf ninja can’t tell us what happened to them. Everyone stay on your guard! Keep moving: Kiba! Hinata!”

Kiba and Hinata darted ahead and Shikamaru followed, hoping he didn't just pass up an opportunity to gather consequential information.

'Gaara-kun…I sure hope you found them,’ Naruto thought to himself as he moved ahead, 'And if Haku-kun really did decide to run away then…he'll have me to answer to!'
Struggle

Chapter Soundtrack: “Ghost in the Shell” by Takkyu Ishino

“Yes, Hokage-sama, I'll go home and rest my head...I did hit it pretty hard.” Sato waved off Tsunade's concern while stepping out of her office, closing the door behind him. He had just returned from a border-scout mission and caught wind of Haku and Sasuke's earlier defection.

Tsunade told him that he should be glad he was left out. The only thing he should be pursuing now was “finally getting home from a long and exhausting mission and some shut eye.”

'Oh hell no! They're all out there!'

Sato left the tower in a frenzied sprint, hoping he'd catch up with the retrieval team before he missed any action, 'I can't believe they left me out! I am going to kick Shikamaru's ass!'

The excitement he felt about going to help the group without permission began to fade and suddenly, Sato slowed in his running, checking his holsters to see if he had enough weapons and provisions, 'Shit. I wish Shino was back! Normally I wouldn't sweat something like this, but...he's always there to watch my back. And now Sunshine's gone too? Jeez!'

He wouldn't allow himself to become afraid. He had to keep a level head and approach the mission with vigilance. If he didn't some Sound ninja was sure to make him sorry for his mistake.

And with Shino still out of the village, 'Who knows where?' Sato would be facing a great challenge of being without his best friend's abilities and wisdom.

After checking his weaponry he started running again.

Many buildings swirled past him in his rush, people barely seeing the blur that was the frantic young genin; pharmacy, restaurants, book shops, the Academy, gardens, nature trails and then someone ahead of him, 'Eh? I can't slow down!'

He crashed headlong into another ninja who was attempting to sneak out of the village...though with less speed.

“My, you are in quite a hurry, Sato-kun!”

The Hatake was nose to nose with Rock Lee.

“Yeah, well, can't let my uncle's habits rub off on me right?”

Sato stood and extended his hand to Lee, who gladly accepted it, and pulled the older boy up. He brushed his jacket off and then inspected his camera, hoping it hadn't been damaged during his tumble.

Lee looked from Sato to Tenten, who was staring at the gate ahead. He understood very well what she was feeling, 'Missions such as these always make her anxious. I think she would have liked to have gone ahead with Neji...but instead she was landed with me.'

As if sensing his thoughts, the bun-haired girl turned to her teammate, “Quit mopping, Lee! I'm fine. Whatever's in your head forget it now, okay?”

He nodded to her, astonished. Perhaps intensive weapon training promotes mind-reading skills?
He didn't know.

Sato sighed, seeing his beloved camera was intact, but tucked it away in his hip pouch anyway for safe keeping. He looked at the two restless ninja in front of him and then smiled, “Er, I guess you guys aren't just hanging out here because you're bored?”

“We've heard too. Lee and I are going to find them,” Tenten confirmed, “I guess you'll be coming with us then, if that's the case.”

He nodded cheerily.

“I wish that we might have returned sooner so we could've helped…” Lee added, his mouth drawn into a frown, “It will not be easy to track them.”

“No problem there,” Sato replied, smug. He bit his thumb and then quickly summoned a small tawny owl that clambered onto his arm after arrival, “Joushou! Do you mind helping us keep tabs on Shikamaru's team? They went ahead of us.”

The bird gave a short *tut-boo* of affirmation before fluttering out the front gate. Tenten gave a pleased grin to the clever Hatake before following Joushou, the boys soon flanking her.

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“Shikamaru-kun, I can see them! They're just ahead of us and they've stopped moving!” Hinata's announcement was quiet but filled with anticipation.

A quick hand signal from the team leader halted the entire line of ninja. They settled on respective branches up in the canopy, awaiting Shikamaru's orders.

“I don't smell any traps either,” Kiba added, narrowing his eyes, “They don't know they're being followed yet.”

“Alright, we'll break up into pairs and do some reconnaissance. See if you can pinpoint any weaknesses,” Shikamaru decided, “Stay quiet and meet back here in ten minutes.”

The team split up and paired off. They disappeared into the surrounding woodland.

The Nara peered silently from his position behind a thorn bush, “It definitely looks like they're tired…huh. There's only three of them. I thought there'd be more, but it looks like this won't be as tough as I thought when we outnumber them 2 to 1.”

Neji, beside him, observed with his Byakugan, “I can see Sasuke and Haku are in that barrel they have with them but it's clouded. There is a powerful sealing jutsu at work there…”

“Ambushing them shouldn't be much of a challenge…” Shikamaru trailed off of his verbal planning, watching in confusion as Sakon turned his gaze from the tree he had been propped up against and threw a kunai at their position, “They've seen us?”

He and Neji scrambled away before the exploding tag set off, giving away their hiding place.

Kidomaru passed the barrel on to Tayuya, “You and Sakon go ahead! I'll handle the trash!” The other two Sound ninja went ahead as Kidomaru went back in the direction of the commotion, ready to tear their pursuers apart.

Right as he had landed on a branch of an ancient tree, Kiba appeared beside Chouji below, preparing to attack.
“You're in for a world of pain!” Kiba howled, still furious that his teammates had been mixed up with such a despicable bunch of shinobi. From above, Kidomaru smirked at them, “Is that so?”

As the Inuzuka and Akimichi readied their specialty moves, they found themselves rooted to the spot, “What the-?”

A sticky, invisible web had been laid out on the branches below Kidomaru's position, gluing their feet with hopeless efficiency.

'With them acting as a diversion another one will try to catch me off guard.' Kidomaru noted, skillfully evading Shikamaru's shadow possession as it slipped along the branch. His strings lowered him to the trunk of the tree and he spat a web at the Nara as he swung past.

Shikamaru struggled as he was pinned against an adjacent tree, 'It's useless! He's added his chakra to these webs so they can't be cut!'

Kidomaru remained guarded as half a dozen shadow clones descended from higher up, nearly catching him by surprise. After twisting and spinning his way to avoid the clones he landed on another tree, snapping the strings he’d been using and prepared an even larger web.

“Bastard!” Naruto was frustrated with the spider-nin's evasion and redirected his clones for a follow-up strike. Then the net came down.

“Naruto!” Shikamaru called out to the ensnared blonde, who was among his duplicates in the web that had caught them.

Kidomaru grinned in satisfaction from his vantage point, “Kage Bunshin, eh? Let's see which one of you is real!”

Much to the Sound nin's shock, one of the shadow clones exploded and shredded the web, destroying a number of its cohorts. The two that remained dived back into the shelter of the forest to regroup.

Scowling that he hadn't even had the time for a proper countermeasure, Kidomaru nearly had been hit by the pair of Hyuga that dove for him with identical Jyukken strikes. He leapt again, pulling himself to another location with his strings, and watched as the two Hyuga continued their motion, powerless to stop in mid-air.

Kidomaru tossed another web, seizing them, and let it slam painfully into the trunk of the tree he'd been in previously. He observed Neji thrash about and Hinata disappeared into a cloud of smoke, 'Another shadow clone! So it's the two of them!'

He quickly scanned the undergrowth and spotted the true Hinata, busy at work trying to free Kiba and Chouji who were still unable to break loose. Kidomaru spat a golden web from his mouth and formed hardened spikes with it, intending to stop her in her efforts.

“You leave her alone!” Naruto landed a kick to the back of the Oto nin's head that sent him tumbling, hastily trying to right himself with his string. Kidomaru kept the blonde boy and his supporting clone at bay with the spikes he had created. Kidomaru was upset he'd been foiled.

Neji slashed at the sticky webs with Jyukken and freed himself. He moved quick as wind through the canopy and landed a vicious blow to Kidomaru while he was preoccupied with Naruto.

The Oto ninja was sent flying and knocked down a number of feet. While he tried to regain his composure, Hinata had fetched Kiba, Chouji and Shikamaru from their respective restraints. They huddled together on the branch Neji was perched on, observing the lone Sound shinobi.
“While we're all fighting him at once we're wasting time,” Shikamaru sighed, deciding on their next course of action. “We can't let the others get too far ahead of us. One of us should stay behind to finish him while the rest of us continue on.”

It was quiet for a moment and Naruto frowned in thought. He had heard of this strategy before. The last time they had employed it Haku had been left behind while he and Sasuke went ahead to find Gaara, *That makes it kind of ironic, I guess. I wish things were different right now...if we leave someone behind this time it could be bad!*

“I will stay and hold him off.” Neji announced, his eyes fierce, “The rest of you should go on.”

Naruto's eyes widened on the Hyuga prodigy, “Neji, wait! Come on! Can't someone else stay? I mean if you got-”

“Alright.” Shikamaru agreed, “We'll go then. Catch up with us when you finish him, got it?”

Neji nodded and then turned to his younger cousin, “Hinata-sama...will you be alright?”

“I will.” Her voice was soft, so only he could hear, “The pain is not enough to stop me now, Neji-niisan.”

He hoped that was true. Before they had left the village he could tell that she had been in a lot of pain. He hadn't said anything because if she had been left behind she would've never forgiven him.

*Naruto will look after her. Hinata-sama will not come to any harm on this mission so long as he is by her side,’ Neji looked to the blonde shinobi, 'He is her match in every respect. He won't continue on without her!’*

“Naruto.”

The blonde boy looked to Neji expectantly after he'd been addressed.

“You have better eyes than mine.” The Hyuga prodigy told him.

Naruto stared at him. An odd feeling filled his chest as he listened.

“Sasuke and Haku are now within the darkness,” The older boy said, closing his eyes, “You are the only one who can find them and bring them back.”

He nodded in understanding.

“Now go. I will follow later.”

The team moved out and Naruto called back to the Hyuga heir, “Hey! Hurry and catch up to us when you're done, Neji!”

They moved into the forest ahead and Kidomaru spat a mouthful of webbing hurriedly, “You're not getting away from me!”

Neji's eyes were illuminated with the power of the Byakugan, and as the web net soared through the air he sliced it with precise chakra strikes as if it were the most flimsy of cobwebs.

His teammates went on ahead unhindered and the Oto nin smirked at Neji's counter, *This guy is pretty good...’* He began to regroup, still determined to prevent the Leaf shinobi from catching
Sakon and Tayuya.

“I am not going to let you get past me.” Neji's voice was a low warning as Kidomaru spat another web at him and he easily shredded it, “It's no use.”

“I see! Well then, you are clearly the strongest of the group!” The spider-nin smirked again, “My playfulness is coming out again! We have to play the game slowly or it's a waste…”

Neji fell into an offensive stance, remaining silent.

Kidomaru furrowed his brow, “First I will play for three minutes. Then I will kill you.”

The Hyuga prodigy scanned his foe's body for weaknesses, reading the flow of chakra as it quickly began to race. He could sense another attack.

Dozens of webs came flying all at once and Neji sliced them apart warily as Kidomaru tried to create an opening in his defenses. Hashed apart three webs efficiently, but a forth, shadowing its predecessors, landed a direct hit and pinned him to a tree trunk. More webs followed, pinning his arms and Neji shook angrily, unable to believe he had miscalculated.

“I caught you!” The sound ninja was grinning, “Your skill with using chakra is quite high…and you have sharp eyes. You form the chakra into a needle at the end if your hand and cut through the thread at the weakest point.” He laughed to himself, “I heard about this from Orochimaru-sama. This is Gentle Fist, eh?”

Neji did his best to remain calm. Letting his enemy provoke him could lead to disaster.

“But if you can't use your hands, you can't cut the thread,” Kidomaru reasoned keenly, leaping to a higher branch, “Once you understand how to win the game it suddenly becomes boring! It's only still the first minute and I've become bored of you…”

Kidomaru began chewing on a new web in his mouth, preparing to finish the Leaf ninja. Neji closed his eyes, desperately trying to relax.

“Die!” The spider-nin spat a golden thread from his mouth, “Kumo Nenkin!”

Neji released chakra through all of his tenketsu in that moment, breaking the webbing that had been retraining him. He leapt, avoiding the golden web and then landed on it, running across to his foe.

Shock was visible on the Oto nin's face, 'How did he…?'

Neji landed in front of him, taking another Jyukken stance, “I will tell you a secret. It's not only my hands. I can control all of my tenketsu. And by the way…game over.”

A wheel of eight trigrams was measured out beneath his feet as Neji focused on his next attack, “Hakke Rokujuyon Sho!”

Kidomaru reeled back, snapping the golden thread, knowing he wouldn't be able to dodge the assault. The points of damage doubled as Neji drove him further along the tree branch, meeting no resistance, and blew the spider-nin through a tree trunk and out the other side, tumbling down to the forest floor.

Neji leapt down as well to make certain his opponent was finished.

Kidomaru stood slowly while dust obscured him from view but Neji could still see him, 'What is
The meaning of this? The spider-nin was covered with a sort of toughened webbing, 'A golden shield?'

As the web armor began to crack and peel off of the Oto ninja. Neji understood, 'It is made from the same substance that is coming from his mouth…'

Kidomaru stood erect, smirking, “Too dangerous, too dangerous! I was told that if I got seriously hurt it would damage my nervous system and I wouldn't be able to mold chakra. That was very close!”

“Are you a monster?” Neji asked, bluntly, “It seems that you do it from more than just your mouth.”

“Once my Kumo Nenkin makes contact with the air it is transformed into a metal alloy. Also, it doesn't allow chakra to pass through,” He was very proud of his ability, “And not only am I able to release it through my mouth but also from the pores throughout my body.”

’Jyukken will not work against him with armor like that,’ Neji noted in frustration, That is what it means.’

Kidomaru, across the way, was also absorbed in his thoughts, ’Web binding will not work. And also against a close range guy it's hard to get near him. That means that I have to assassinate him from a distance.’

The Sound ninja quickly withdrew back into the far reaches of the treetops. Neji stood watchful on the ground with his Byakugan, awaiting the next move. Abruptly, a kunai fell from the treetops with a tag attached.

Kidomaru smirked from his place hidden among the leaves.

'This kunai is a fake!' Neji could already detect a hail of gold-web projectiles raining down from above with his Kekkei Genkai. Moving fast, he rotated, knocking the storm of gold kunai away. As the attack ended, Kidomaru was baffled that he had managed to deflect it, 'Does this guy have eyes on the back of his head? And that defense earlier on…is he able to use chakra to block a direct attack?'

Neji hurled a kunai at Kidomaru who had hidden in the tree behind him and the Sound ninja ducked under it with surprise, 'He is able to see me! Who is this guy?'

“I know you're there,” Neji called aloud, “Come out!”

‘Those eyes…I’ Kidomaru observed Neji’s unique talent, 'Look like they can not only see the flow of chakra. Here exists an unexpectedly skilled guy!’

Neji made note of how long distance fighting would put him at a disadvantage. It was the first time he had ever entertained the notion, ‘When I am with Lee and Tenten there is no range too close or far. They should be here with me…’

Kidomaru let himself be seen, and hung suspended beneath a branch with a web thread. “I will admit that this is a high-level game,” He spoke while activating his cursed seal, “I will be serious.”

With his Byakugan Neji observed a change in his opponent, 'He is completely different from before. His chakra activity is suddenly much greater!' His eyes narrowed, 'And also, that curse seal…’

Kidomaru recognized that Neji’s normal eyesight was combined with his wide range eyesight, and
that a different sort of attack method was needed to defeat him. He bit his thumb, formed hand
seals and summoned a massive spider into the tree he had been waiting in.

“I will study your ability thoroughly and find your weak points!” Kidomaru proclaimed from the
back of his queen spider, and then moved to the egg sack she had laid in the web, slicing it open,
“Come out!”

Smaller arachnids poured out from the web and rained down on threads, all aiming for the Hyuga
prodigy below.

“Kaiten!” Neji blew them away with a rotation in response, but the webbing the young spiders
had attached to them began to slow his movement down.

“Right there!” Kidomaru threw a gold kunai once Neji had stopped; his aim lethally accurate.

Neji could see the incoming projectile and forced more chakra into his rotation, speeding it up
again and knocked the kunai away. The spider-nin noticed his reaction, ‘When the kunai was very
close he expelled more chakra and deflected it,’ He leapt into another tree, ‘I will not make that
mistake again!’

The Hyuga prodigy was upset that his rotation could be stopped by something as fragile as thread,
but knew that his opponent would exploit the weakness whenever he could if he did it again.

Neji avoided another hail of golden kunai that forced him back towards the smaller spiders raining
down from their web. Knowing Kaiten wouldn’t help, he took a different approach and attacked
offensively, “Hakke Rokujuyon Sho!”

Try as he might to knock them back, they kept coming, There are too many of them!’

Desperate, he resorted to his final move, and added another ring of trigrams to his field of divinity.
Neji calmed himself down, then attacked again, “Hakke: Hyaku Niju Hasho!”

His speed doubled instantly and one hundred and twenty-eight strikes was more than enough to
blow away the incoming arachnids. The summoned spider in Kidomaru’s web sent out another
legion of her offspring and in moments Neji was again overwhelmed, There are still too many! I
won't make it in time!’ His attack ended and he panicked, trying to rotate, but was caught up in the
webbing.

He cut himself free but not in time to evade one of the gold kunai Kidomaru had thrown.

The knife sliced his shoulder open and he hissed in pain, dropping to his knees to catch his breath.

The other knives had missed him, but the one that had hit was agonizing. For a long moment he
didn’t understand, until he recalled a similar event that had occurred weeks earlier, 'Tenten. It is
right where she cut me and it reopened the scar. It's the same wound…'

For some reason he smiled at the memory. That day had been one of the most interesting he had
ever lived through and now he would’ve liked to have gone back and thanked her for her
wisdom, 'There is no blade sweeter!'

Kidomaru was analyzing Neji’s ability, 'Looks like he has 360 degree vision! He studies things
through his close-range vision and he also has the ability to see far distances…with those two
combined, he seems to be able to fend off the enemy's attack.’

He watched his foe put pressure on his wound on the ground below, 'Furthermore, 360 degrees is
a scary field of vision. He was able to detect all the kunai around him within 50 meters, give or
Another wave of small spiders rained down from the tree tops and as Neji prepared to fight them off his breath hitched. Another kunai hit. Just below the other wound he had gotten after fighting Tenten.

She was the only person he knew who could so fully exploit the weakness of his blind spot, and now he was beginning to fear that his foe's success was not merely a coincidence.

Kidomaru caught on quickly, “This time there will be more than ever!” He launched a storm of gold kunai and Neji frantically blocked them along with the spiders. The spider-nin smirked inwardly, 'Now two will hit…'

Two more kunai landed in Neji's back, and he gasped for air, gripped with agony. His hair tie was snapped and his hair shook loose as he fell face-first to the ground, winded.

Kidomaru laughed heartily from his hiding place, “For your information I have figured it out! Your defensive technique looks like it has some weaknesses and that means your doujutsu is not complete!”

Neji's hand fisted in the dirt.

There was no time to waste on resting. His enemy was learning fast and had to be dispatched quickly; he was running out of ideas as to how. He forced himself to stand, shuddering with pain.

“Such willpower!” Kidomaru went on, “The game's conclusion is clear now!” He watched Neji gain his feet and grinned maniacally, “Hey, hey. Are you going to keep up this useless effort? The weak character in an easy game has the fate of dying first. You will not be able to beat me!”

Those words. They made him see faces. Faces that made his heart ache.

He remembered when he was younger, a new genin, freshly assigned to his team. He was always bored with fighting Lee, always telling him that he'd never prevail. Tenten had agreed with him and Lee had always grown more adamant and hot-blooded about it.

But it changed. With time, Tenten had stopped agreeing. She and Lee had become friends and he didn't understand it. She had talent when he had none. Neji had thought she was wasting her time.

And the day they fought back had confused him, shocked him. The same way Hinata had fought against him during the exam had slowly helped him realize that he had been pursuing something intangible and unrealistic. He was hurting people and they were tired of it.

He got tired of it too, especially after Naruto had ripped his pride away to show him that his ways were erroneous.

At least then he had tried to take back the words he had said with his actions, but inside he could tell that his friends were still in pain and he didn't know how to fix it, 'Will I ever know? Can I ever redeem myself in their eyes?’

Kidomaru commanded his summoned spider to attack, and the giant arachnid leapt from her web, intending to body slam Neji and crush him with her enormous weight.

The spider landed on him and he struck with brutal Jyukken strikes, quickly blowing her apart. The Oto nin was grinning, “Weak character number one: Destruction complete!”

He released another round of gold kunai that met their mark and Neji collapsed again shortly after.
Kidomaru stood up on the branch he had been observing the fight from, ‘Well, despite it being shitty I quite enjoyed it.’ Before he turned away completely he looked back, and was not pleased to see the Hyuga prodigy struggling to his feet again with several kunai lodged in his back.

Neji's breathing was uneven, but he was not yet finished. Some fight remained in him still.

The spider-nin smirked again, activating his level two form, ‘Either I missed his blind spot by the slightest bit...or because I am within 50 meters he detected my attack.’

“I see, so will you entertain me more, eh?” Kidomaru's skin had changed color and he had spat out a golden bow that quickly hardened into a functioning weapon. He aimed a golden arrow for his opponent, “Neju Seigo: 100 percent. Damage: at maximum!”

A third eye opened on his forehead to help ensure he would not miss.

“Die!” He launched and his arrow soared like a torpedo towards the young Hyuga.

When it made contact it left a huge crater in its wake.

Kidomaru was disappointed to see that Neji had evaded the attack. On the ground, Neji stood panting, his nerves shaken, That was too close! It would have been lethal...but I was able to divert it slightly...’ He closed his eyes, 'It is true. He has come to realize the secret of the Byakugan.’

Kidomaru was confounded that his attack had not struck the intended mark, 'What is this?’ The wound visible on Neji's back where the arrow had hit was off its mark, 'Why did it hit 15 centimeters above the critical point?’

Blood dripped slowly down the Hyuga prodigy's arm. He fell again, feeling his energy beginning to fade.

It was then Kidomaru realized how his attack had failed, 'So that's how it is. All this time he has been continuously releasing chakra around him. On such a wide scale! No wonder he was able to detect the arrow as well as change its course with that chakra.’ He chuckled to himself, 'To emit chakra on that scale must be a deadly struggle...he won't be able to dodge them without doing so.’

‘He isn't making useless attacks. He's using them to gain information.’ Neji coughed violently while he thought, 'He's beginning to see the shortcomings of these eyes...impressive. Of all the enemies I have fought he is the strongest!’

After analyzing the effects of all of his attacks Kidomaru understood that Neji could not actually see the attacks that were coming for him, even if he was able to partially dodge them. It was a flaw he was going to take full advantage of, 'There exists a blind spot radiating from a small spot below his first vertebrae…'

Neji stood again and began to run, pulling the knives from his back as he went.

'Now that he is aware of the danger he will guard his blind spot more carefully so I cannot hit it,’ Kidomaru noted, 'But this is not a problem for me! For him, he can only fight close range and he doesn't have the time to think about how he'll get near me...now he only has time to run! Whether you struggle or not, you will die!’

He fired another arrow with a thread attached to it as Neji ran.
When the projectile connected it left another crater, and Neji had taken shelter behind the trunk of an oak tree. Blood dripped down to the ground by his feet. His headband had been ripped by the attack and had fallen to the ground.

He stood very still, his cheek dripping blood from where the arrow had clipped him. It was then he noticed something peculiar, ‘String? I see, by using this string…’

Neji's knees met the ground again, his chakra reserves beginning to waver. He was running out of time.

Kidomaru was not pleased the trajectory of his arrow had shifted during the attack, ‘So this time I'll add a spin to it so it won't stray off. I can guide it with thread for up to 50 meters so he can't avoid it…’

Neji stood up again, ‘Strong…he's far stronger than me. I barely have any chakra left and I probably won't be able to completely avoid the next attack. Is this…it?’

His mind strayed to when he had fought Naruto in the exam and he smiled, ‘Naruto, what would you do?’ Neji spoke aloud, “It's fine…it's not as if I can dodge it anyway.”

He held still again, waiting for the spider-nin's next move.

‘He stopped moving, did he? He’s given up?’ Kidomaru watched curiously, 'But I have to make sure! Accuracy: 120 percent! Destructive force: the most immense!'

The Oto nin fired his newest arrow, directing it to his near helpless foe. Neji turned around to face the attack and was hit and dragged several yards back, blood splattering everywhere, before the arrow passed through a tree and pinned him against it.

“Got him!” Kidomaru cheered.

Neji could no longer feel any pain from his wounds. All that remained was determination: the need to fight back and finish it, even if it meant dying. It was all he could do.

He took hold of the thread that was still connecting them and forced his chakra into it, preparing a sudden and overpowered Jyukken strike. His remaining chakra raced along the string like a bullet train, rushing back to Kidomaru and slammed into him, knocking him from the branch he’d been perched on.

Neji disliked the metallic taste of blood in his mouth and desperately tried to ignore it. More still needed to be done.

While falling, Kidomaru assessed his injuries, ‘A number of organs have been damaged, but somehow I can still move…’

As he attempted to catch his breath, Neji's thoughts wandered. He could hear Naruto's voice echoing clearly through his head as he spoke of justice. He could see Lee and Gai training and laughing together playfully. He could feel Tenten and her blades and her eyes watching everything, keeping him safe.

He was not safe anymore and he didn't need saving. It was over and all that was left was to finish it.

Neji cut the string that was restraining him and ran ahead with what energy he had left, ‘I will not let myself lose! Even if the enemy is stronger than me! Even if my body should perish! I won't lose! There is a reason why I can't lose!’
Kidomaru sent a thread to a branch as he fell and caught himself, swinging back around, and was shocked to see Neji leap up to him directly attacking his face and chest regions with the most vicious Jyukken strikes he could muster.

Neji finished with a rotating strike that sent his foe crashing to the ground, utterly paralyzed. Kidomaru's cursed seal receded as he whined in pain, never having been injured so badly since fighting Kimimaro.

“How are you still alive?” Kidomaru demanded, “That hit should have killed you instantly!”

“I knew that I wouldn't have been able to dodge it anyway, so I was determined to take it on.”

Neji answered, not facing his fallen enemy, “You have been one of the strongest enemies I have fought, but I have a reason I cannot lose.”

Kidomaru had unwittingly given his undivided attention as Neji went on, “I won't let myself lose when there are people depending on me. My friends are precious to me and I will never turn my back on them again!”

Neji kneeled to the ground, his Byakugan fading, putting pressure on his wounds again, wanting some distance between himself and Kidomaru. It was over. For him, at least.

Kidomaru looked over to the young Hyuga, “Even if you resist you can't change the flow of time! Sasuke-sama has gone to Orochimaru of his own free will, and Haku-kun will soon be the first of an elite group of experiments…”

“No.”

The Sound ninja looked to the Leaf shinobi again.

“There is someone who can find them in the darkness and save them…”

“Their fate was Orochimaru-sama's possessions. No matter who, no one can save…”

“They will be saved!” Neji cried at the top of his voice, unwilling to hear another word.

And he didn't.

He looked back over his shoulder, seeing that Kidomaru had not talked back because he was dead. Neji had figured it wouldn't take long. The damage he had inflicted was severe and irreversible. He then wondered how long he had left himself, enduring such wounds as his own.

'My life has been a good life after all. I am grateful…' He saw many faces smiling at him again and he regretted how he had taken them all for granted. He'd never see them again after this point, They have made my life worthwhile.'

Neji reached for his headband in front of him. He had dropped it when he'd attacked Kidomaru earlier. He held it close, gazing at in wonder, until laughter interrupted his reverie.

“Well isn't this unexpected? Here I am tracking their progress and I find a crow left of the murder…” The voice was familiar and mocking, and Neji turned his gaze to his right where Kabuto stood watching with a wide smirk, “Judging by this scene… I take it Sasuke-kun and Haku-kun have gone ahead, haven't they?”

Neji gritted his teeth in frustration. Just as one enemy was defeated another one appeared to take his place, I can't fight anymore. If he goes ahead to find the rest of the team…he'll ambush them
Kabuto adjusted his glasses and asked, “Oh, you look like you're in pain flapping on the ground like that, Neji-san. Does it hurt?” He held up a kunai, “If you'd like, I can end it for you right now!”

“Traitor…” The Hyuga prodigy hissed furiously, finding that it was difficult to form words. His energy was depleted and so was his speech ability, it seemed.

The silver haired sound ninja laughed again, very amused, “It's just so entertaining to see so many Leaf genin on a wild goose chase like this! Don't you know? Sasuke and Haku have long been beyond your reach. There's nothing you can do.”

“If you're wise…you'd do well to crawl back under the rock you came from…” Neji managed, hoping a threat (though empty) would at least waste some time, “Stop following Shikamaru’s team…”

“I'm afraid I just can't do that, Neji-san. You see, it's my mission. I wouldn't want to disappoint Orochimaru-sama now that his time has run out.” Kabuto narrowed his eyes, “And now…so has yours!”

Kabuto quickly jumped back to avoid a storm of kunai and shuriken and other odd-ended weapons that were aimed for him. He was forced back to the very edge of the clearing and he glared at the newcomer who had caught him off guard, “So it's you…”

She had summoned a sword and held it up for Kabuto to see, “I'm going to run this through you for what you've done!”

“I was sure I finished that auxiliary group with those traps I set.” The Sound nin muttered in irritation, “I didn't think you'd be clever enough to avoid them.”

' Auxiliary group.' Neji hadn't known that back up had been sent for them. Now he was glad but still puzzled.

“A trap master can't be fooled by any of your trashy work, so I brought him along with me!” Tenten growled warningly, wanting to tear him to shreds, but knowing that if she stepped away from Neji even for a second he'd be vulnerable to an attack.

Kabuto smirked, “Well if that's so, then where are your buddies right now?”

The kunoichi grimaced at the words because in truth she didn't know. They had been separated earlier on and she'd been looking for them ever since.

“Enough. I don't have time to waste on the likes of you,” Kabuto was fed up with the distraction, knowing better than getting into a fight without his target in sights, “You won't last much longer out here as it is, so enjoy the free air for now…”

As suddenly as he had appeared the treacherous Oto nin departed, intending to catch up to the group pursuing Haku and Sasuke.

For a long moment Tenten stood waiting, wanting to make sure he had gone. When all was calm she tossed her sword aside carelessly. She had others, much better ones too, and losing a sword was the least of her problems at the moment.

Neji was on the ground trembling and she turned him over, her eyes widening in fright at his extensive injuries. She hadn't expected to run into him and now that she had she was unsure of
what to do next.

Frowning, Tenten got a grip on herself, *Knock it off, old girl, you're in control right now. If you lose your cool here it could mess everything up...*

“Honestly Neji, get a hold of yourself!” She barked impatiently, as she would with Lee, “What happened here?”

Tenten helped him into a sitting position and then reached into her hip pouch for bandages to swathe his injuries and control the bleeding. He didn't have to tell her much. Nearby she could see the body of what looked to be a sound ninja so she assumed the rest for herself.

“The auxiliary team... where are they?” His voice was a low rasp and she didn't like the sound of his labored breathing, *He's suffering, isn't he? I wish there was more I could do!*

“Lee and Sato came with me. We wanted to help you guys, but that bastard laid traps for us when he saw we found your trail,” Tenten admitted guiltily, “We got separated during an explosion, but don't worry! I'm sure they're fine!”

“That's good.”

His words were slurred and she furrowed her brow. Something told her that if he lost consciousness he probably wouldn't ever wake up again.

She had done the best she could with the gaping holes in his side, and wasn't able to do much about the multiple stab wounds on his back, *I'm not a medic. If he's not treated soon he'll...* 

Tenten killed that thought and decided that panicking was not going to help, *I've got to take Neji back to Konoha now. Even if Lee and Sato aren't with me I can't afford to wait for them...* 

She pulled Neji onto her back, coaxing him to wrap his arms around her shoulders, and she easily managed to lift the rest of his weight. Tenten could feel his warm breath on the back of her neck, and decided to use that as an indicator of his health on her return journey.

“Just stay awake, okay? We'll be back home in no time!” Tenten upheld her deceptively cheerful exterior in the hopes he could feed off of it for some extra energy.

He answered in the affirmative but there was no volume to his words so there was no sound. She leapt back up into the canopy, hoping she wouldn't come across any more Oto nin on the mad-rush back to their village.

“Look Lee, I'm sorry, but there's just no sign of her!” Sato repeated, trying to keep their search going, “We can't waste any more time looking for her! We're losing ground!”

"All of these traps have made such a mess of things!” Lee howled angrily, “I do not know what I would do if something happened to Tenten...”

Sato grinned, “Hey, she's a tough girl! She can handle it, but right now we should really-” His tracking owl appeared and landed on his head, “Er... is there something you want to tell me, Joushou?”

“Num... there's a dead body up ahead, about 110 meters from here.” The small bird replied, a strange accent making it difficult to understand its speech.

The young Hatake fell quiet for a moment and looked at Lee, hoping he wouldn't overreact. Lee
merely stood there, anxiety written all over his face.

“Is it... is it a Leaf ninja? Did you see?” Sato asked softly.

“No. There was a music note on the forehead, num, num...” Joushou cooed, and Sato removed the bird from his head, relieved.

“You keep looking then, alright? Get going!” He tossed the bird into the air and watched it fly ahead, glad to hear that Tenten was still out and about somewhere, ’And maybe even took out a Sound ninja, it seems like...’

“Well, Lee? You okay?” Lee nodded to the younger boy and followed after him a moment later as they went on.

“Hayate, sir! There's someone ahead of us,” A young chunin scanned the forest ahead of them with his Byakugan and reported it to his squad leader, “Should we stop?”

Hayate glanced over to him, considering it, “Yeah. Can you see who it is, Hikune?” His voice was no longer as hoarse as it had been during the Chunin Exam, at the time he had been suffering from a chest cold.

Hikune and the other two chunin beside him halted, and he peered ahead into the undergrowth, “I don't recognize her, but it's a Leaf ninja alright...there's someone with her as well.”

Hayate frowned inwardly, recalling what Tsunade had said earlier about a number of reckless genin who had gone ahead to join Shikamaru's cause without her consent. He was told to keep an eye open for them, but his primary goal was to find Shizune's missing team, ’Hopefully it's one of the genin who went out after Sasuke and Haku...’

“We move out now, they may need help.” Hayate decided, and his subordinates followed after him in their formation. Up ahead the squad leader caught sight of the aforementioned kunoichi and rushed to her, recognizing her immediately.

“Hayate!” Tenten addressed him with familiarity when he appeared. It was a habit of hers, especially since her father had been his mentor years ago. She stopped, kneeling down on the mossy ground to rest, and he peeled Neji off of her back who had smeared a considerable amount of blood on her.

“I take it things went unfortunately for you, or for your teammate at least?” He was frowning worriedly. His sensei would never forgive him if something happened to his daughter, dead or not.

“I lost Lee and Sato earlier. I don't know where they are…” Tenten turned to the Hyuga prodigy who was beginning to nod off again, “Keep it together, Neji, we're nearly there!”

Hikune knelt down beside the Hyuga heir, his eyes filled with concern, “Neji-sama! Who did this to him?”

“I don't know. I found him like this…” Tenten's voice cracked, and she pulled back on her ever-mounting emotions, “I couldn't do anything for him...”

“We don't have a medic-nin with our team and his injuries are very bad. He needs to get back to Leaf now,” Hayate handed Neji off to his fellow Hyuga, “Hikune, take Neji and Tenten back to Konoha and make sure they get treatment. Make sure they stay there, too.”

“But I'm fine, I can still fight! Let me go with you-!”
“No, Tenten, not this time,” Hayate overrode her, “You've done good work so far, but right now your friend needs you. Just do as I say and go back now.”

Tenten sighed and then nodded, knowing better than to go against his orders. He was a seasoned jounin now, and not the awkward chunin teenager she remembered from her childhood.

Hikune had pulled Neji over his shoulders as one would a lamb, and set out after Tenten had joined him. All the while she stared ahead, unable to bring herself to look at the Hyuga heir.

Dawn was approaching, but darkness still blanketed the forest with shadows. Tayuya and Sakon were huddled beside the barrel, trying to rest for the night while they still could. Exhaustion had slowed them down and they had realized it could take two days or more to deliver Sasuke and Haku, realistically speaking.

‘Kidomaru has not returned yet and there are five or more Leaf ninja out there still following us,’ Sakon's wit was as sharp as ever, ‘Until Kabuto arrives, we won't be able to put up much of a fight if more Leaf ninja show up.’ Something told him that Kidomaru alone would not be able to fend off against six, angry enemy ninja.

‘Until the sun rises we can rest easy, though…’ He thought, letting his chin rest against his chest, The Leaf shinobi are probably all huddled up around a fire at this very moment, licking their wounds…’

Tayuya gave a violent jerk and started from her sleep, her wide eyes settled on Sakon. He gave her a questioning look.

A thin metal wire had been tied to her hand before she had fallen asleep. It was connected to a network of other wires scattered across the ground surrounding them in the forest clearing. She had woken when the wire trembled, and something told her it wasn't just some passing deer, With all the traps we set a deer would be blown apart into a venison dinner…'

Something had evaded the traps and gotten too close for comfort, 'No dumb animal could do that!'

She motioned for Sakon to stand up but by then a number of ninja had already infiltrated the clearing and dove at them, forcing them to leap aside to dodge the attack.

Sakon was astonished, 'How can they navigate in the dark? There's no way they could get this close without us noticing!'

He then noted that things had only gotten worse once the entire team had them surrounded: five of them, much to his horror. It was a chaotic frenzy in the dark as kunai were tossed haphazardly and three forerunners wrestled with the unwitting Sound ninja who were guarding their barrel.

“Eh? Wait it's me!” Sometime during the confusion, Chouji had knocked into Naruto, being his sight and hearing was less than useful, but Kiba had kept up the assault while Hinata and Shikamaru prevented them from getting away.

A few blasts of sound had knocked them all back and Tayuya turned around, her eyes widening in shock before she let out an otherworldly screech, “It's gone! The motherfuckers got it somehow!”

Sakon turned about to see that the barrel that they had been so fiercely protecting had suddenly disappeared. Two ninja scuttled past him and he wheeled about, slashing at them with a kunai, and was surprised to see the team leader and the kunoichi of the team revert to puffs of
smoke, 'Shadow clones!'

“There are only three of them that are actually here! The other two went ahead with the barrel!” Sakon concluded, hissing to his partner, “Let's go!”

He and Tayuya abandoned the clearing to follow the escaping Nara and Hyuga. After a moment of composing themselves Naruto and Chouji followed after Kiba who was following Shikamaru's scent. Naruto was troubled, “Shit! I thought those clones would fool them for a little while longer, but they still figured it out!”

“They would've noticed eventually so there's no use belly-aching over it!” Kiba answered, Akamaru agreeing from his place within his master's coat.

It was difficult navigating the dark without Hinata, and Naruto and Chouji stayed close to Kiba for fear of being lost in the inky darkness and having to grope around for their missing teammates.

Ahead, Shikamaru was grinning broadly that their plan had worked so well, “Great work Hinata! You're our secret weapon when it comes to an ambush!”

“Thank you, Shikamaru-kun, but they are getting closer,” She replied nervously, “I think they've realized our doppelgangers are fake…”

“No worries,” He reassured her, “With Kiba following our scent and Naruto and Chouji ready to pound the living daylights out of those two Sound ninja, we're the ones with the upper hand. I doubt they'll catch up.”

Sunlight at last peaked over the horizon and illuminated the once impassable wood, and Shikamaru noted that if Sakon and Tayuya did catch sight of them, their chase would be much easier with visibility quickly increasing.

While leaping through the thick canopy together a shadow descended upon Shikamaru and his assistant, and Hinata gave out a cry of alarm as a third enemy ninja moved impossibly fast to Shikamaru, knocking him away from the barrel with ease and sending him crashing into the trunk of an old cedar.

Shikamaru popped his shoulder back into its socket and scowled, ‘There's no way we could've been caught when we're so far ahead! How did-?’

Hinata threw herself at the unknown Sound nin, beginning to close off several vital tenketsu, and then reeled away in shock as she cut her hand on something, but couldn't tell what, 'I don't understand…I targeted only his abdomen and he is unarmed! So how is this possible?'

She held her ground, unwilling to surrender the barrel so easily after they had worked so hard to retrieve it. Hinata applied pressure to the gash on her palm, staring at the Oto nin and realized some other force was at work.

Akamaru leapt through the treetops, planting explosive tags on numerous tree branches where they'd be hidden out of sight for the incoming Sound ninja still pursuing their stolen barrel.

“Hurry up, Kiba!” Chouji called. He and Naruto were already moving ahead. Kiba went to follow them, but Sakon had appeared earlier than expected and drew out a wire from a failed trap that they'd set up the night before.

Before Akamaru could get away, the wire had wrapped him against the tree branch he had planted an exploding tag on. The sound ninja smirked, “Planned on blowing yourself up, little dog?”
“Akamaru!” Frantic, Kiba turned back to rescue his ninken and Naruto looked on in horror as the tags began to go off, “Kiba wait!”

Tayuya evaded the explosions and moved on without Sakon. Her partner rushed at Kiba who was busy prying Akamaru free from his snare. After a few seconds the tag detonated, and blew the two ninja and the small puppy out of the oak and over the side of the cliff at the tree's base.

Naruto watched helplessly as the Inuzuka disappeared into the gorge with Sakon, 'Damnit! Should I go after him? I don't know if he can handle that guy on his own!'

“Naruto come on! She's caught up to Shikamaru!” Chouji urged the blonde boy on, “Don't just stand there, we'll come back for him later!”

Nodding in agreement Naruto followed after Chouji, hoping Kiba would be alright until they returned.

Shikamaru had called Hinata to stand by him until he had devised a plan on how to take the barrel back from the unknown Sound ninja. She obeyed, and watched as Tayuya descended, looking reverently at the shinobi she had earlier attacked, “Kimimaro…”

The white haired man looked to the sound kunoichi, displeasure clear in his voice, “You're too late, Tayuya.”

Her eyes were wide. From behind her, Chouji and Naruto came to stand beside Shikamaru, inquiring as to what had happened and who the new guy was.

“And also, what happened to the others? You were once part of the Sound Five…now those numbers are dwindling.” Kimimaro added to Tayuya, his face stoic.

“Why are you…?” Tayuya didn't understand how he could still function as a ninja, “Your body… your body was wrecked by illness…”

“I am no longer moving by using my body.” He replied, “I am moving with the power of my spirit.”

“Jeez, you're living beyond your time…” She muttered, amazed at how long he'd lasted.

“I am beginning to understand. It is the feeling of only existing with the mind, without the bondage of a body.” Kimimaro patted the top of the barrel, “It is like touching a part of Orochimaru-sama's dream.”

“Orochimaru!” Naruto growled. The mere mentioning of the name made him furious, wanting to tear into the bastard for how he had tortured his friends.

“These containers are essential to that dream. The bodies that Orochimaru-sama truly wants…but you all were a bit too late.”

A look of failure descended upon Tayuya's face. She knew that a reprimand was imminent after not having delivered the specified bodies to Orochimaru before he had to switch bodies. He had to resort to taking someone else's, and not one of the two he'd long been interested in.

'Another dangerous foe has arrived…and this feeling…he's not just anyone.' Shikamaru thought to himself, ‘Anyway, I have to assess the situation. If we are careless and attack without thinking…’ He didn't want to think about what could happen.

Naruto stood silently beside Hinata, awaiting Shikamaru's orders. He too could tell that Kimimaro
was no foe to be underestimated.

Kimimaro spoke to Tayuya again, “Tayuya, the reason why I have not killed you is that you must survive to accomplish a mission. And my mission is to take that to Orochimaru-sama.” He gestured to the barrel.

“Isn't it too late?” She asked again, wondering if it was worth the effort.

“I told you, these are the bodies Orochimaru-sama truly wants.” He answered.

“So…they're containers for the future, then…” She understood and turned her gaze to the four Leaf ninja watching her.

“These pieces of trash I leave to you.” Kimimaro announced and then turned, taking the barrel and moving ahead through the canopy.

“We can’t let him get away,” Shikamaru growled in frustration, “Listen, Naruto. You and Hinata track him and get the barrel back. Chouji and I will hold off the girl.”

The blonde boy nodded and then turned to the kunoichi of the team, “Ready, Hinata?”

“Of course!” She followed after him as he made a dash to pursue Kimimaro, and Tayuya immediately tried to intercept them, “Don't even try it you worthless pieces of shit!”

“Chouji!” Shikamaru was counting on his friend and was not disappointed when the Akimichi summoned a monstrous strength and hurled a tree at the last sound ninja, forcing her to dodge and preventing her from stalling Naruto and Hinata.

Shikamaru watched the divided half of his team until they disappeared into the forest ahead, then turned to Chouji who was on the branch beside him, “Why is it that I'm always stuck fighting some girl anyway?”

Naruto moved swiftly, following Hinata as she led the way with her Byakugan. Though it was currently two against one, he hoped the rest of the team would catch up to them soon, ‘If it's just me and Hinata-chan going after this guy it could be bad. Something about him is giving me this awful feeling…’

“Naruto-kun?” Hinata paused on a branch and he did the same, giving her his attention.

“He's stopped moving. There is a large clearing ahead of us where he is waiting and I…” Her voice became quiet, “I think... he expects us to fight him.”

“Does he, eh?” Naruto wasn't threatened by the idea, “We better not disappoint him then!”

Fearlessly he moved out into the opening in the forest: a wide, grassy meadow and at its center stood the final Sound ninja, guarding the barrel.

His blank expression made the blonde boy uneasy. If he couldn't read his opponent's emotions it would make a fight more difficult. Hinata stood beside Naruto and deactivated her bloodline limit, trying to remain calm. It was their last chance to retrieve the barrel, and if Kimimaro continued ahead she was sure they wouldn't be able to stop him.

“Just two left,” The white haired man spoke, “Two mice run to the falcon. They cannot see that what they seek is lost.”
“Give Haku and Sasuke back!” Naruto yowled, his features beginning to sharpen, “I won’t let you take them!”

“They are not yours to have. These vessels belong only to Orochimaru-sama,” Kimimaro’s voice was dreamy, “Do not interfere. If you chose to stand between Orochimaru-sama and his dream, I will kill you.”

Naruto’s expression darkened. Clearly this ninja was obsessed with serving his master. He had to approach the situation cautiously if they were going to succeed with their skins intact.

“Hinata, you're going to have to stay back while I take this guy,” The blonde boy said softly, “Look for any weaknesses he might have, and if you see an opening, take the barrel and go.”

“But I won't leave you behind!”

“Please…don't wait for me. If you fight him too and get hurt then…I don't know what I'd do. Just go ahead without me, okay?” Naruto was not giving her an option.

Reluctantly, she agreed, “…yes.”

With no further preamble, Naruto sent a number of kage bunshin to test Kimimaro's defenses, curious as to how he fought. In a matter of seconds he was shredding them with a bone protruding from his palm that was sharpened to a point.

'Yeesh he's fast! He can take out my clones without even trying!’ Naruto resorted to his newest tactic and detonated his last remaining clone, catching Kimimaro off-guard in the explosion.

Hinata observed with her Byakugan and was shocked to see that the Oto nin shook off the blast easily, though it had burnt his hair and clothes, 'His skeletal structure is so dense…he was barely scathed!' Kimimaro brushed flecks of dirt from his jacket, “So hasty…”

He looked up to see the blonde ninja charging at him with a fully-formed Rasengan. From an instant analysis of the technique, he decided that he wouldn't weather it if he didn't counter, and drew out the humerus bone from his left arm, “Tsubaki no Mai!”

Naruto met him head on, grazing his arm with the spiraling sphere. Kimimaro countered, slashing downward with his bone sword and cutting a vertical mark down the boy's chest.

They pulled away from each other and where the Rasengan had torn away much of Kimimaro's skin bone plating was visible beneath it. Naruto covered the bloody gash with his arm, 'Shit, if I get too close with the Rasengan he'll just slice me up! How am I supposed to-?'

Kimimaro was moving again, unaffected by Naruto's earlier attack, intending to flay him.

Hinata joined the fray, unwilling to wait any longer. She and a trio of shadow clones surrounded the Oto nin, all combing forces to inflict 64 points of damage.

“Yanagi no Mai!” He moved with untraceable speed, moving away from the Jyukken strikes and impaled the three doppelgangers with bones protruding from his arms and back. The real Hinata fell back and ended her assault, kneeling down beside Naruto.

“Naruto-kun…” Hinata felt her resolve weaken at the sight of his jacket dripping with blood, “Let me see it! I can help you-”
“It's fine. It's healing up pretty fast anyway,” He was smiling at her consolingly and upon letting her view the wound, she was surprised to see that his rapid healing ability was already sealing up the gash, “We're going to have to keep our distance for a while. He just shrugs off whatever you throw at him!”

Nervously she nodded, wondering how they'd manage it, *If we get too close, he won't hesitate to kill us…*’

Kimimaro raised his bone sword into an offensive position, “My next dance will finish the both of you at once, and then Orochimaru-sama's dream can finally become a reality.”

In the background on the opposite side of the meadow the barrel gave a great shudder and then violently burst apart, releasing dark purple smoke that had been contained within it.

Kimimaro paused and looked back to the emerging Leaf ninja curiously, staying silent.

Naruto watched as the smoke began to slowly dissipate. He could hear laughter, which unnerved him further, and only caught a short glimpse of Sasuke rushing ahead once the smoke had cleared.

To his relief Haku had not moved an inch, but had his back turned to the blonde boy.

“Haku-kun!” Naruto shouted, his voice cracking slightly, “Haku-kun it's me!”

The dark haired boy stared ahead at the forest Sasuke had fled to, and Naruto wondered if he had heard his call.

“Come on, Haku-kun! You've got to come back with us now!” Naruto persisted, wondering why his friend was not acknowledging him, “Please, you can't go through with this!”

Haku said nothing and Hinata felt her heart drop into her stomach, *Is he really…?*

Naruto refused to believe that Haku was leaving the village of his own volition. It simply wasn't something that he'd do; but now, after having chased him to the far reaches of the Fire Country and beyond, he was beginning to consider that maybe Haku had been tempted by whatever Orochimaru had offered him.

“Haku-kun!” His voice was panicked and he made a start to run to his friend, but Kimimaro took a step forward, raising his bone sword again. Naruto halted, frustrated and anxious.

The dark haired boy turned partially to look at the blonde ninja. He was silent and when his gaze met Naruto's, sadness was clear in his stormy eyes. Something was wrong and it appeared, much to Naruto's horror, he wouldn't be able to do anything about it.

Haku turned away from him and ran into the forest beyond after Sasuke.

A terrified scream left Naruto, **Don't go! Haku-kun!**

His dear friend had disappeared from his sight and behind him, Hinata was silently crying to herself, miserable that they had been abandoned to the fate Kimimaro had in store for them.

By their own friends.

They had failed to bring the fugitives back to Konoha, and Naruto briefly wondered if Haku had felt even the slightest bit sorry that he had ignored him and run away, *You were my friend! I thought you'd stay with me because we were family…and you went away just like that!*
Naruto rubbed at his eyes, mortified, ‘I don't care! I'll kill this bastard here and take you down! Even if I have to drag you and Sasuke by your heels and let Gaara beat the shit out of you when we get back! It'll be worth it!'

“This ends now.” Kimimaro’s voice was dark, and as he pointed his weapon at the distraught blonde and his partner an attack from behind caught him by surprise.

“Dynamic Entry!”

Lee had hit Kimimaro with a side-on kick to the face, but the Sound ninja quickly countered, holding his ground, and prepared to attack the newcomer…that was until Sato slide-tackled Kimimaro’s feet out from under him, and Lee landed another successful attack, “Leaf Whirlwind!”

Kimimaro was knocked back across the clearing from the tag-team ambush, and Naruto and Hinata were immediately snapped out of their despairing trances.

There was still hope.

“Naruto-kun, Hinata-san, are you alright?” Lee stood in front of them, wondering why they were both collapsed on the ground. They hastily stood as Sato joined Gai’s protégé.

“We're fine, but Sasuke and Haku went ahead, and this guy…” Naruto looked across the meadow to where Kimimaro was gaining his feet again, “He's really strong. He uses his bones to fight…”

“Ew…did you say bones?” Sato inquired, very grossed out, “That's nasty!”

“You go ahead and catch up to them then, Naruto-kun,” Lee advised, facing the Sound ninja, “I will be this person's opponent!”

“You too, Sunshine.” Sato smiled at the Hyuga girl's wide eyes, “Go help Naruto track them and bring them home, okay? I'll stay and fight with Lee.”

“Then please…be careful, Sato-kun. He is unlike any enemy we have ever faced.” She warned, her voice shaking. He nodded in response and watched as she hurried after Naruto who was crossing the clearing.

Kimimaro was not keen on letting them get away and Lee and Sato intercepted him, preventing him from attacking the fleeing Leaf shinobi.

“Please do not forget about us!” Lee cried, “We will now be your opponents!”

The Sound shinobi glared at them, not pleased with the development.

Kiba groped along the shallows of the river at the bottom of the gorge. Akamaru was on top of his head, badly injured and out of energy. Fighting Sakon had been a disaster.

At first he'd believed that his combined attacks with his ninen would easily defeat the Oto nin. That was until Sakon’s older brother, Ukon, left the body they'd been sharing and teamed up against him and his dog.

He had used his most powerful techniques and had no chakra remaining.

’Akamaru saved me, but…’ Kiba's eyes were troubled, 'He's in such bad shape…what kind of master am I to let him get hurt like this?’
He himself wasn't much better off than Akamaru at the moment as well.

After the dog had peed acid in his eyes, Sakon had gone to the river's edge to wash his eyes. Ukon had used a bizarre jutsu against Kiba in his brother's absence, entering his body with the belief Kiba would be too cowardly to attack himself.

Kiba had stabbed himself a few times without hesitation, much to Ukon's terror.

Though it was a self-inflicted injury Ukon had shared his pain and was quick to abandon the crazed Inuzuka's failing body. Now the bleeding wasn't as severe as it had been, and he'd taken advantage of Ukon's desperation to locate his brother to abandon the pebbled bank they'd been fighting on.

“Hang in there, Akamaru…we're almost there.” Kiba crooned. A forested area was visible ahead. He'd take shelter there and rest while he could, hoping his enemies wouldn't discover him so severely weakened.

His mind wandered to his teammates and he felt sick to his stomach, 'Sakura-chan would be furious to see us this banged up. I just can't believe Sasuke ran off with her like that, though. I'd thought it was harmless, but…should I have done something about it sooner? Now that she's in danger?'

A growl rose in Kiba's throat shortly after, 'And Sasuke…I'd thought he was alright. We got along pretty well for the most part, but he always hid what he was feeling. He never talked much, but… he was my friend, wasn't he? Does he really think so little of us?'

Kiba clambered up onto the muddy bank and back onto dry land. He knew that by dripping water it'd help his foes locate him should they come to look, so he created a false trail while he was still wet. After drying himself off, he chose a completely different place to hide, and then rested at the base of a tree.

He sat with Akamaru in his lap, stroking the dog's ruffled fur, “I'm sorry, Akamaru. There's really nothing more I can do except protect you now. I'm no good. If I can't keep you from getting hurt, what could I be able to do for Sakura and Sasuke?”

Kiba laid back and sighed, knowing he didn't have time to be remorseful. He tuned his senses in to the surrounding forest, wary of the Sound ninja's scent.

It was sickening how Ukon's laughter pierced the air that very moment, “Now don't you look so terribly pathetic?”

Kiba's eyes widened in shock. He stared to his left to see that his opponent had reappeared and was no longer suffering from his wounds, 'How did he get here without me noticing?'

Ukon gestured to the coat he was wearing, which was in fact Kiba's, “See this? You discarded this a ways back. I knew that you'd be keeping track of me and my Aniki's scent…but certainly not your own. Why would you worry if you were smelling yourself, I thought?” He laughed again, “Oh, it was all too easy…”

The Inuzuka scowled at the blunder he had made. Now that he was no longer able to fight, he'd be easy prey.

Ahead, Sakon had arrived, and unlike his older brother he was still in his cursed seal level two form. He grinned a fanged smile at Kiba from his place across the clearing, “Ready to die now, dog-breath?”
Ukon crouched down on the ground leisurely to watch his brother's finishing move. He was just as delighted, if not more so. Sakon charged with a kunai in hand and Kiba sat very still, helpless, and held his puppy close to his chest, *I'm sorry*...

Quite suddenly, Sakon had halted. Kiba stared up at the confused Oto nin's face and watched in bewilderment as he turned and rushed at his brother instead.

Ukon blocked the kunai strikes and was howling in indignation, “What the hell do you think you're doing? It's me you idiot!”

Sakon knocked his brother across the clearing with a super-powered kick, "I'm not doing this!”

Kiba felt something in his head click and he felt many times safer than he had.

Frustrated by the confusing issue, Ukon entered his brother's body again, and Sakon froze, fiercely fighting against the power controlling him. After a long minute, the control over Sakon had been released and he turned around to see who was responsible, “I thought Tayuya would've crushed a piece of shit like you in no time!”

Shikamaru shrugged, his hands buried in his pockets, “Most people get that impression about me…but when I work alongside my team I destroy people.”

Kiba observed as a preposterously large boulder was hurled at Sakon, who was too distracted to dodge it. It broke apart on the powered up ninja and had stunned him, barreling him over into the mud.

“Chouji's here too,” Shikamaru added to Kiba calmly, moving to stand beside him, “You should've seen how he thrashed that dumb bitch back there. While she was busy attacking me, he popped the yellow pill and crushed her…funny how these things work, eh?”

Chouji, still displaying the effects of the yellow pill, squared off with Sakon who had recovered thanks to the power of his level two form. It was a fascinating struggle to behold as the two clashed for a long while, neither backing off.

“Uh oh,” Kiba looked up to Shikamaru with a questioning look, “That's the red pill, there. The red pill's bad, hey Chouji! Don't even think about it!”

His friend had hastily decided to use his last pill, and it was even more impressive to see all the body fat on the Akimichi's body convert into pure chakra, all of it condensed and visible on his back, reminiscent of butterfly wings.

Sakon's blow was rendered ineffective after that, and Shikamaru watched in terror and awe as his friend delivered a punch of incredible force to his foe's head, killing him instantly.

After that, Chouji backed off; glad he had dealt with the last of the Sound shinobi.

Ukon crept out of his brother's body, infuriated, and pulled himself up with the last of his strength, “You bastard!”

He rushed in a blind rage for Chouji, tripping over his own feet, and maybe even truly grief-stricken over his loss. Before he had even come close to his intended target, he stopped abruptly, and then fell to the ground with a kunai lodged in the back of his head.

Kiba hobbled to his feet and watched as Shikamaru bent over Sakon's fallen brother, “Yeah…I got him: sever the brainstem and it's over quick. That's the first time I've ever done something like that…”
“What about Chouji?” The Inuzuka asked and Shikamaru glanced over to his best friend whose chakra was beginning to fade.

“Shit! That'd be a problem…” The Nara moved to Chouji, who was looking pale as the harmful effects of the red pill were closing in, “Okay Chouji, though you may dislike this and it really is troublesome, you'll thank me later.”

His father had told him a story from his youth when Chouza had resorted to the red pill during a mission. Rather than letting his teammate face the full effects of the capsule, he simply made his friend vomit before the last of it was absorbed into his blood stream.

Needless to say, it wasn't the most appealing of rescue methods.

After succeeding in gagging his friend, Shikamaru backed off and waited for Chouji to finish heaving up the contents of his stomach, 'Jeez…the things I do for these people!'

He then turned to Kiba, “Well, that…”

“Was troublesome.” Kiba agreed with him.

“Hey, Lee, you've sparred with Tama before, right?” Sato inquired sidelong to the green beast of Konoha as they faced off against Kimimaro who stood watching them with arctic eyes.

“I have on a number of occasions! When fighting Miss Tama it is like a dream. Her taijutsu style matches Gai-sensei's better than my own!” Lee answered honestly, “But there is no use in wishful thinking…she is not here to help us.”

“You're right about that, but I train with her all the time.” Sato chuckled, “She's trained me pretty well, so...just imagine she's me. Then we can take this guy no problem!”

It was a strange request but Lee considered it. If Sato could also use taijutsu in a manner similar to his own, they could coordinate their attacks. Sato often hesitated to use taijutsu so he had rarely ever seen the younger boy throw a punch.

He threw caution to the wind and decided to risk it. Hopefully the Hatake would pull through and show courage even against a terribly dangerous opponent like the one that was before them.

“Do not expect to leave this place with your lives.” Kimimaro warned icily.

In response, Lee and Sato attacked together, “Leaf Hurricane!”

Kimimaro had recognized that Lee's kicks were often high and immediately countered, and Sato's assault connected with a layer of bone plating on the Oto nin's shoulder.

They retreated and Kimimaro charged at them, twice as fast as he had been before.

Lee opened the First Gate to keep up with the increase in speed. Sato, in the meantime, was completely reliant on his unnatural evasion skills to avoid being slashed to ribbons, 'Yowch! Just kicking that guy hurts! If he hits me I'm done for!'

Sato, being the slower of the two Leaf ninja, was the one Kimimaro had decided to eliminate first. Kimimaro slashed wildly in combination with his dazzling acrobatics, in the full use of the Dance of the Camellia.

As Kimimaro's strikes became progressively faster, so did Sato's movements, and after a long
while of dodging and attacking the Sound ninja paused in his motions, “It appears you are familiar with a number of dances as well.”

Sato wondered how on earth he had figured it out, “What makes you say that?”

“It is rumored that when a shinobi grows skilled in that art of movement, they can detect an enemies' movements long before they are made,” Kimimaro’s perception had put the young Hatake on the spot, “Changes in air currents…even the tiniest pulse of chakra you can feel, and you'll move before you even recognize that you are doing so…”

“Well…I guess I'm flattered, then.”

With Kimimaro distracted, Lee seized his opportunity to attack, and kicked the unsuspecting Oto nin into the air, “Take this!” He leapt up, securing his foe in his arm wrappings, and then descended downward headfirst, spinning rapidly, “Primary Lotus!”

The impact shook the ground and the silver haired boy cheered as Lee leapt away from the crater he had made to recover. He knelt down nearby Sato, trying to rest his body which was overcome with pain, “Did that…did that get him?”

Kimimaro stood up in the center of the billowing cloud of dust, barely affected by Lee's attack. From his place across the field, Sato again could see the bone plating visible beneath Kimimaro's skin, That bone…he’s using it like armor to absorb the blows! How are we supposed to hurt this guy?

Abruptly the Sound ninja attacked, slashing Sato through his middle, and watched as his foe dispersed into flames. He assumed that while Lee had attacked him the silver haired nin had replaced himself with a fire clone.

Several other fire clones dove out from the tree line after Kimimaro's assault, attacking him all at once. As they approached he cut them apart with ease, but lost his footing when something tangled around his shins.

'Wire. He's laid a trap.' Kimimaro finished the last of the clones diving at him, 'He purposefully made them visible so I would cut them...which would trigger another, more dangerous trap.'

While deliberating as to whether or not it was wise to snap the metal threads wrapped around his legs, Kimimaro could see Sato rushing at him with the Chidori, not allowing his enemy the time to plan a means of escape.

“So Sato-kun it is too dangerous!” Lee barked from the opposite side of the meadow, knowing that he should never use the jab if he could help it.

After a short judgment period, Kimimaro cut the wires restraining him and triggered the trap, blocking the incoming projectiles and bombs with his blade. Sato had caught up to him, though, “Chidori!”

“Karamatsu no Mai!”

Sato’s aim had been perfectly lethal, aimed right for the center of his opponent's chest, but Kimimaro’s rib cage extended out of his skin and caught the blow before it could tear into him and do harm to his vital organs.

The Chidori fizzled out after a few moments and the young Hatake wriggled his trapped hand out of the bone defense and leapt away, upset he had failed, 'How did he counter that? I was sure I had him!'
He had never seen such a positively gruesome Kekkei Genkai. His wrist was dripping with blood from where bone had scratched him after pulling away. Sato felt his heart rate quicken as Kimimaro came at him again, intending to hack him apart.

Immediately he drew both of his kodachi, knowing that he'd been saving them as a last resort, but he felt he no longer had a choice. Sato blocked to the best of his ability, dodging when he couldn't counter Kimimaro's strikes (which were far more polished than his own) and prayed he'd find an opening in his foe's defense he could exploit.

'He is not as weak as he first appeared.' Kimimaro wasn't pleased to see that the silver haired boy's skills were an excellent counter to his own, 'I will make him submit!'

The Sound shinobi leapt backwards, rounding on Lee, and fired small bones from his fingertips as if they were bullets. At such a speed, they'd easily kill his target, and Lee was still in too much pain to move.

Beams of white light soared across the field and met the bones before they reached Lee. The heated, white chakra burned up the small bones and Kimimaro turned back to see that Sato had not left his friend unguarded.

Sato held up his blades, “See these? They're my Ni Hakko Chakura To. Only Hatake chakra will awaken the special properties in the metal.”

“Special…properties?” Lee muttered, finding it perplexing.

“Twin Chakra Sabres. They have not been in existence in a long while,” Kimimaro had heard of the ninja who used their white chakra in battle, “Something so outdated will be of no use today…”

Sato cringed. Kakashi had inherited his father's blade when he was young and according to him, he had not used it since his days as a newly promoted jounin because: 'Swordsmanship requires more discipline than I have patience for when I could be reading Icha Icha Paradise…'

So there wasn't mush Kakashi could teach him in terms of controlling his ability. Sato did what he could and went to Tenten to learn the fundamentals of Kenjutsu, but she had grudgingly told him that she would not be able to help him learn to channel his chakra into the blades.

He struggled for a long while during the preliminary rounds of the Chunin Exam to unlock the ability. Even by the final rounds he had still been hopelessly pursuing the elusive talent that was his birthright. Then one day, while on a mission with his sensei, there had been an accidental spark of chakra that knocked over their client while he had been chasing off a thief.

Sato was so surprised by his success that he had to ask Kurenai-sensei if it had really happened.

He did his best from then on to concentrate on the amount of chakra he used, and noted how the blades seemed to absorb it rather than accept it when chakra was forced at them, 'Who knew weapons would be so damn selective?' There were times where he could persuade them to take in a bit more chakra than they would have preferred to make his blows stronger, but he knew he still had a long way to go before he mastered his Hakko Chakura To.

Hopefully Kimimaro wouldn't figure out his technique was still unfinished, 'Or I'm really gonna get myself killed this time…'

Their swords clashed for a while and in the background Lee had struggled to his feet again, knowing that he couldn't leave Sato to do all the fighting. He began to methodically open the rest of his gates, and ahead of him, Sato managed a fearsome chakra blast that ripped off from the end
of his blade and put a crack in Kimimaro's bone sword.

The Oto nin looked at him for a long moment, “My sword is harder than steel. You've accomplished something no one else has by scarring it.” He activated his level two form after that, intending to be serious, “So I shall now privilege you with something no other ninja has been witness to…and lived.”

Kimimaro's skin and hair grew darker, and bones began to protrude glaringly from his back. He glanced to the young Hatake, his eyes hooded by the black markings on his face, and his lizard-like tail thrashed excitedly.

Suddenly Sato was no longer a match.

Kimimaro's movements were too quick and vicious to predict, and in the course of a few moments, Sato had been stabbed repeatedly, several times in his left arm and both shoulders. He leapt away, seeing that the Oto nin's attack had only been a warning, 'Next time he'll aim for my vitals...this is it. I've got nothing, there's no way I can beat this guy when he's already stronger than me...and keeps getting stronger!'

“You will die now.” Kimimaro said simply, raising his bone sword to attack again.

Neither of them had seen Lee move. Once he did, it had been after he had released the Fifth Gate, and had immediately gone to rescue Sato who was floundering, trying to cope with his numerous wounds.

The silver haired boy watched in awe as Lee kicked Kimimaro around like a rag doll with a speed that the Oto nin could not match. He wondered if any of the hits his friend was landing were effective when Kimimaro's bone armor was still in the way.

Lee's speed was tearing gashes in the ground, and when Kimimaro began to predict Lee's moves and counter them, the green-clad ninja decided it would be prudent to end his assault swiftly, “Reverse Lotus!”

Sato had to run to avoid the cataclysmic meteor that was Lee pummeling Kimimaro, and watched in bewilderment as half of the meadow was torn apart into a smoldering wasteland as they crashed down to the ground. A number of trees had toppled over and when the attack was through Sato could see Lee retreating, exhausted, but his foe was nowhere in sight.

The young Hatake sprinted over to his friend, unnerved by how he was shuddering in pain, 'I'm not hurt that bad at all…but when Lee opens his Gates he's really doing himself in!'

“Sato-kun, I…I don't think I will be able to fight anymore…” Lee admitted, his voice shaking. He was spent and the pain of two Lotus attacks was beginning to overwhelm him.

Sato was inspecting his stab wounds, glad the bleeding had slowed, “Hey, don't worry Lee! You finished him for sure! I don't think we'll be fighting anyone else after this once we go ahead to find the others…”

Sato sat down beside the older boy, panting, grateful for some rest.

Across the field, in the huge crater Lee had gouged out from his ruthless attack, Kimimaro pushed his way up from under the rubble and debris, muffling a number of deep coughs that were evidence that his illness was catching up to him, 'I do not have much longer…but I will not allow them to take what belongs to Orochimaru-sama.'

Sato was speechless as the near-indestructible Sound ninja moved again to even ground, and
removed his spinal cord to use as a weapon that appeared whip-like in function, *He just shakes off every hit. Every attack is useless.*

Lee was also shocked. He had truly believed the fight was over.

“Okay…I guess I'm just going to have to wrap this up then…” Sato concluded, his expression grim, “Lee, find a safe place to hide and rest. I'll finish this crazy bastard!”

“But you should not-!”

“Get going already!” Sato barked, summoning an owl and leaping up to land on him. Lee watched the young Hatake rise into the air and knew it was best not to argue. He retreated back into the forest, knowing he'd be of little more use in a fight.

“Kutaiku, listen! I'm going to need your help on this one since this guy is really tough!” Sato explained, “Can you go down there and rough him up? If you can't, then don't. I don't want to hit you by accident.”

“Are you doubting my skills?” The owl snapped, annoyed, “I will do as you ask and not come to harm, if that is your wish, but do not discredit me you reckless hatchling!”

Sato accepted the second chain scythe Kutaiku offered him once they reached the appropriate altitude, and the Leaf nin leapt up, preparing his attack. Kutaiku abandoned his charge and plummeted back down abruptly, talons stretched for Kimimaro below.

“A bird is challenging me.” Kimimaro observed, not at all threatened by the creature's size, “A bird that strays from the air is a dead one!”

Kutaiku loomed over his target, keeping his position in the air to prevent a counterattack, “Razor Down!”

A few beats of his formidable wings rained down hundreds of lethally sharp feathers, all expertly aimed for the Oto nin.

Kimimaro cut them apart before they could hit him with little effort, but the summoned animal was not about to give up, “Wind Release: Bursting Air Bullet!” An immense whirlwind followed Kutaiku's primary attack, knocking Kimimaro into position for Sato’s strike.

The bird looked up, seeing Sato was beginning the spiraling descent for his finishing move, and glided off into the thick of the woods nearby, doing as he was instructed.

Lee looked from Kimimaro, who was gaining his feet, ready to meet his opponent head-on, to Sato, whose final attack was dependent on timing and accuracy.

The chains came down with incredible force and speed, tearing up the last of the clearing and even shredding into the nearby tree line. Kimimaro was struck a few times by the fast-moving scythes, getting a few bones cut from his back. He lashed out with his bone whip, however, snagging both chains and then pulled back, tossing them aside.

The attack had left him relatively unharmed, but he intended to finish the fight after having grown weary of his opponent's futile assaults, and also when his disease was numbering his every breath, *There is no way they can defeat me. I no longer fight with my body…so I am now immortal!*

Sato could clearly see that he had not succeeded with his attack, *Not even a scratch…He's too good! I better get out of here!"*
Sawarabi no Mai…

The silver haired nin leapt before the ground surrounding him was pierced with a forest of super-sharp bones. They obscured the entire ground and Sato landed on Kutaiku again, who had already fetched Lee for him.

“I've got nothing left…” Sato said quietly, trying not to despair, “What do you say we do now, Lee?”

“I am not sure there is much more we can do at this point,” Lee replied, his voice optimistic, “But we still have Kutaiku, so we should not fret just yet!”

The owl grunted in annoyance, wheeling around in the air. He didn't feel like fighting anymore but with two helpless humans and a rampaging Sound shinobi about, he didn't have much of a choice.

Kutaiku hovered in the air, observing the field that was overrun with bones, some growing as tall as the surrounding trees, “I do not see him anywhere, Sato-kun. He may have fled.”

“Not without killing us first,” Sato pointed out gloomily, “Once he's through with us he'll probably want to go after Sunshine and-”

From a spike beside the summoned owl Kimimaro emerged, aiming a massive bone drill attached to his arm for his foes. The hana-drill was raised up and the Oto nin snarled, “You will not steal Orochimaru-sama's dream!”

The bone drill hovered above Sato's terrified face, squarely between his eyes. For a long, silent moment it hung there, unmoving. After seeing that the boys occupying his back had not been harmed Kutaiku hurriedly glided a safe distance away to observe what had happened.

“He's dead.” Lee confirmed as they moved away, “He died right there and we had nothing to do with it…”

The owl perched on the branch of an immense tree nearby for rest, glad the fighting was over.

“Stay with us a bit longer, okay?” Sato asked Kutaiku, “Sorry to put you through all this trouble… but I think we're going to need your help.”

“Very well. You've been fortunate so far, so I have no reason to flee yet.” Kutaiku ruffled his feathers before resettling them to be more comfortable, “If that ninja had not been ill you would both be dead now and I would be far away, not mourning either of you for being so foolish.”

“We had no choice but to fight him!” Lee protested, “What if he had gone ahead after Naruto-kun and Hinata-san? Could they handle such a burden if we chose to dismiss it?”

“Enough already,” Sato cut in, not wanting to speculate any further, “It's over. Kutaiku just hates fighting because he can't stand getting banged up or dirty,” The bird made a shrill noise of disagreement, “Anyway…we should keep going now and see if we can still find the others.”

The owl abandoned the tree after that and took to the sky again, not looking forward to rescuing any other Leaf genin if there would be fighting involved.

Naruto and Hinata's pursuit had led them into a cave where Hinata had been tracking Haku's retreating form as he followed Sasuke. In the darkness her vision was extremely helpful, but she
could no longer bear it.

Overcome with pain, Hinata had stopped running and deactivated her Byakugan, her head still throbbing even without straining herself with her bloodline limit.

This time Naruto was aware that something was very wrong, “Hinata-chan what's going on? You keep stopping. Are you hurt?”

“No, but I…” She sighed, seeing there was no use in avoiding the truth, “For a long while now, my eyes have been causing me a great deal of pain. No one knows except for Neji-niisan…and he promised not to tell.”

Naruto's brow furrowed in worry, “And he…he _still_ let you come along when he _knew_? Hinata-chan if something's wrong then maybe you shouldn't be-!”

“Please! Don't worry about me!” She smiled for him, “There's no point in turning back now, Naruto-kun. We must keep going. I promise, I will endure.”

Before he could protest Hinata continued on in the damp dark of the cave. Naruto followed apprehensively, wondering how things had gotten so out of control, ‘First Haku-kun running off and now Hinata-chan…she could be in trouble. What am I supposed to do if it gets worse? How can I help her?’

The awful truth was that there was nothing he could do. It was something that was tearing at his insides. From then on he could only stand by and watch as she struggled to use her Kekkei Genkai and help him find Sasuke and Haku.

After passing through the rock tunnel they came out on the opposite side, and from the ledge they had stepped out onto, a wide river was visible, framed between two massive statues of battling shinobi before crashing down into a roaring waterfall.

Hinata used her Byakugan again, briefly, and scanned the area, “There are tracks in the mud on the riverbank. I don't think they've gotten far…”

“We've got to hurry then!” Naruto leapt down from ledge to ledge with the Hyuga girl in tow, trying not to slip on the wet stones near the water's edge.

They moved quickly down the river, nearing the cacophony of the falls, and jumped hurriedly up the side of the immense statute that stood frozen beside the cliff. After scaling it, Naruto and Hinata found their footing and steadied themselves at the top, braced against the howling wind.

Across the way, at the top of the opposite statue Haku and Sasuke came into view, and Naruto felt panicked at the sight of them beginning to move on, “Don't even think about it!”

The two fugitives stopped and looked back at him. It appeared that they had not expected to be followed.

Naruto's furious voice called out across the gap again, “No more of this! Both of you are coming back to Konoha now!”

“That isn't going to happen, Naruto.” Sasuke was smirking, feeling confident enough about his new power to believe that there was no one who could deter him.

“I'll drag the both of you back myself if I have to!” Naruto cried, deeply frustrated that he could not get through to them.
“That is not going to happen either.” Haku answered, his eyes growing misty.

The blonde boy could only stare powerlessly at his best friend, still unable to accept that he was so willing to abandon his village and the friendship he had forged with him and Gaara. He wished that there was something he could say that would make him change his mind or help him remember how much he adored the Leaf village.

But something in his gut told him that he had misinterpreted something.

“No one is going to be dragged anywhere when it is not necessary. I think we all understand what is and isn't proper between fellow shinobi by now…” Haku glanced to Sasuke next to him, “Going back is something we can do on our own.”

Sasuke did not return his gaze as Haku spoke again, “Sasuke, going to Orochimaru is a grave mistake. He only knows how to make others suffer and he certainly won't give you the power you're seeking. I'm going back to Leaf and you will come with me.”

“So the only reason you followed me this far was just so you could bring me back yourself?” The Uchiha inquired and smirked, “You think you can actually take me on if you have to?”

Haku's expression grew solemn and he didn't respond.

Naruto watched and felt a horrible guilt settle in his chest. He should've known better. All his life he had lived with Haku and when it came time for him to trust his friend he had faltered.

“Haku-kun I'm…I'm sorry that I doubted you!” Naruto's apology was heartfelt, “I really thought that you were going to…”

The dark haired boy smiled back at him, “Don't worry, Naruto-kun! I understand. This is all my fault actually.”

'I'm sorry that I made you upset, Naruto-kun, but if you didn't believe that I was truly going to Orochimaru then Sasuke wouldn't have either.' Haku thought inwardly, 'Now that I've come this far I can fix things, I must!'

“Go back if you want, I don't care.” Sasuke grunted, turning his back to the water-nin, “But I won't be going back so don't bother.”

Haku frowned in worry, 'If his attitude stays this way it will be difficult to bring him back without force!'

“Now isn't it so very appropriate that everything is going to be resolved at the Valley of the End?” Kabuto chimed in from a rock ledge beneath the statue Hinata and Naruto were perched on, “It took a while for me to track you all, but it wasn't very hard!”

'Kabuto's here?' Naruto was not at all pleased to see him. Another Sound ninja had appeared, and Naruto knew very well how strong the treacherous ninja could be.

The bespectacled shinobi looked up at Naruto, “I wouldn't listen to your friend when he's so deeply mistaken, Naruto-kun. He doesn't realize yet that he's going to be joining Sasuke-kun on his journey to the Sound Village.”

“Keep dreaming you bastard!” The blonde boy snapped in response, not wanting to take his eyes off of Haku and Sasuke who were too far off to hear what Kabuto was rambling about.

Kabuto then looked to Hinata and chuckled, “Hm…I wonder if you knew that I ran into the other
Hyuga out here?"

“Neji-niisan…” Hinata whispered and both she and Naruto became uneasy. They hadn't considered that Kabuto had encountered their friends on the way.

“It was interesting to put the egotism of the Hyuga on the line,” Kabuto went on, seeing he had struck a nerve, “That boy was too proud to beg for his death, so I spared him the embarrassment and finished him quickly…”

Hinata's hands flew up to her mouth as she tried to silence her horrified cry, “Neji-niisan!”

He found it amusing how easily distraught the girl was, “Think of it this way, Hinata-hime; you don't have any more competition in your clan when it comes time to pick the next head of the Hyuga clan.” He paused, “Hm…and the others that came after you are probably all dead by now as well.”

“You're a sick bastard! Just shut the hell up!” Naruto bellowed, not wanting to hear another word and yet feared that it could be true.

“The pretty girl who came to help your beloved cousin at least died with a bit more dignity!” Kabuto added, watching in satisfaction as something in the young girl's face snapped at the mentioning of Tenten.

Infuriated, Hinata leapt down the statue without a word, chasing Kabuto as he retreated up the river. Naruto suddenly found himself torn down the middle and he promptly called out to her, “Hinata-chan, come back!” She did not heed his call.

Haku could see the two ninja racing in the opposite direction of the falls, and recognized that Hinata would not last long on her own while acting so rashly. He called out to his friend, “Naruto-kun, please go get her! We'll be fine over here.”

Grateful that Haku was granting him the opportunity, Naruto nodded, and then hurried after the hysterical kunoichi.

After having defeated Sakon and Ukon Shikamaru and what remained of his team had backtracked a ways and then stopped to rest, still struggling to regain their energy.

Chouji was still enduring the excruciating effects of his food pills, even though the worst of it had been buffered by Shikamaru's earlier interference. The Nara watched his friend while he sat wordlessly, not looking like his usual, plump self, 'He has to get back to Konoha soon to get some of Dad's antidote. Even if it's not bad now he can't go much longer without it.'

He also had to put into perspective Kiba's less-than-adequate health. He had a number of cuts and stab wounds and Akamaru, he could see, was even worse off than his master, 'And while we're all too exhausted to drag ourselves back to Konoha for help, who knows what's going on with Naruto and Hinata up ahead?'

Shikamaru was too bitter at the moment to admit that they had failed. He was still stubbornly believing that his last two subordinates had been able to retrieve the barrel, and by proxy, completed the mission objective. Yet still, being as intellectually attuned as he was, Shikamaru sensed that Naruto and Hinata were probably faced with their own obstacles as well.

'Even if we went looking for those two to help them, we've only got a few kunai between us and barely any chakra…' Shikamaru thought to himself, leaning his chin on his palm as he sat cross-legged under an ash tree with his teammates, 'We'd probably endanger them even more by
‘showing up, we're so helpless right now. If another Sound ninja shows up we're as good as dead.’

He glanced over to Kiba who was beginning to nod off, too drained to withstand consciousness any longer, 'And while we sit here we have no idea where Neji is, or what happened to him, for that matter! I've ruined my team. Half of them could be dead by now and I wouldn't even know it...'

“Yo! You all look like shit!”

For a moment Shikamaru looked around stupidly, wondering where the shout had come from. He and his bewildered companions looked up to see an enormous bird descending. It took a few moments for it to register in Shikamaru's brain that back up had arrived.

“I never thought I'd ever be happier to see anything other than barbeque…” Chouji mumbled, smiling contentedly as Sato and Lee leapt off of the giant owl and moved to their fellow Leaf ninja.

“It is good to see you too, Chouji-kun!” Lee agreed, pulling the Akimichi to his feet, stunned by how thin he suddenly was.

Kiba hauled himself to his feet, keeping his ninzen close to his chest, “Where the hell did you come from? I thought you were sent out on different missions!”

“When we heard what was going on we kind of 'jumped ship' to help you guys,” Sato answered, pulling up Shikamaru who was too lazy to stand on his own, “We held off that bone-guy so Naruto-kun and Sunshine could go ahead after Sasuke and Haku.”

It then made sense to the Nara why both Lee and the young Hatake looked so terribly beat-up, “That must have been tricky. That guy was the strongest out of all of them.” Sato nodded in confirmation and Shikamaru continued, “Well then, it'll be easier for Leaf ninja to chase other Leaf ninja, I suppose. Naruto won't come back without them.”

The exhausted bunch of genin and their chunin leader clambered onto the oversized owl. They were warned not to pull out any feathers or they'd be facing their first sky-diving lesson.

It was crowded on the bird's back and they all seemed to lean against each other pathetically as the ground shrank away and Kutaiku began heading south, back in the direction of their village.

As strong winds whipped past their faces Sato let them in on another piece of information, “We lost Tenten a while back…I don't think we should go back to Konoha without knowing where she ended up!”

Shikamaru was not pleased that they hadn't mentioned it sooner, “Could you be any more troublesome?”

Lee advised the Nara that they didn't question Sato's many levels of recklessness.

Sato summoned a second owl, jet-black unlike Kutaiku's light plumage, and leapt onto his back as he soared close to his fellow avian. Lee followed, realizing Sato's objective.

“You guys need medical attention as soon as possible, so you go ahead back to Leaf with Kutaiku,” The silver haired nin proposed, “Lee and I will go with Gyorai to find Tenten.”

Kutaiku continued ahead while the ebony owl wheeled around in the air, and began to move far faster than the previous owl would have been able to, scanning the ground for any signs of movement.
It wasn't long after Gyorai had something to report, “I can see evidence of a battle down below. Shall we examine the area?”

Sato agreed and Gyorai quickly landed, allowing his passengers to leap off and inspect the small plot of forest. Lee made note of the startling number of projectiles that were scattered around the clearing, and Sato found the body of the Sound ninja that Joushou had spoken of earlier.

“These weapons are most certainly Tenten's!” Lee announced confidently, “She must have happened upon Neji somewhere around here, which explains why he did not rejoin Shikamaru-kun's group!”

Sato didn't like the look of the many blood puddles dotting the ground, “Well that's definitely a relief. If they went back to Konoha then our work here is done…let's get going.”

Lee frowned, “Aren't we going to look for Naruto-kun and Hinata-chan now?”

The Hatake was silent for a long moment, “Even if we did; what could we do? You can barely stand up and I'm out of chakra. Without Gyorai we're sitting ducks so long as we're out here. We should do what Shikamaru said and go back while we can.”

“But I-!” Lee was interrupted by a silencing shriek from the nearby owl. Sato motioned for his friend to also get on Gyorai's back, which he reluctantly did.

After taking off and turning south, Sato did add, “There's no reason to worry. By now my idiot-uncle is probably back from his mission, so I'll just tell him to go look for them. What do you say to that?”

“Perhaps sending a jounin to look would be wiser…” Lee admitted and added with a grin, “And once Gai-sensei returns maybe he will go as well!”

“It's not right,” Sasuke insisted, frustrated that the Uchiha was completely immune to everything he had been saying.

“Go home then and do something if you're so worried.”

“You cannot abandon your village!” The dark haired boy shouted ardently, “You owe nothing to Sound! You are a Leaf shinobi!”

Sasuke's eyes darkened, “This is the only way I'm going to get stronger. I'll never be able to kill Itachi if all I do is waste my time in a spineless village like Konoha.”

“You don't know that,” Haku pointed out, his voice lowering, “I know what happened to you that day. I was there. I can see why you want revenge so badly, but when you go about it this way you're putting people's lives at risk.”

“As it goes, lives aren't worth much these days…” The Uchiha growled, “My brother didn't much care about the consequences of killing our entire clan. Who are you to lecture me? You don't know anything!”

It was silent on top of the statue for a long while.

“We are the same.” Haku said softly, “When I was young my father murdered my mother before trying to kill me. I was alone and every minute of it was misery. But I lived through it, and I found
a purpose in life beyond what I thought I had...you cannot let your hatred consume you this way.”

Sasuke's voice was saturated with contempt, “Whatever you think you know does not compare to what I’ve been through! You don’t understand what it’d be like to have a brother!”

“Maybe I know better than you do,” The water-nin answered boldly, “Because I have two of them!”

It was then the Uchiha's eyes blazed with the power of the Sharingan. Haku barely had any time to react as Sasuke attacked without warning, loath to what he had been trying to say.

A fearsome kick landed in Haku's gut and he was sent tumbling over the side of the statue.

“Hinata!” Naruto rushed up a rocky slope that was a fair distance away from the river's edge after spotting the Hyuga girl perched on top of a boulder. She was staring at Kabuto and the blonde boy wondered what she was thinking in that moment.

'If he killed Neji or anyone else, what are we supposed to do?’ Naruto’s thoughts made him feel sick to his stomach, 'Is she really going to try to settle this? We take him on here and now while Haku-kun deals with Sasuke?’

He didn't know if leaving Haku on his own was the wisest thing to do at such a chaotic time. But like Hinata he knew that he'd never be satisfied until his hands were red with the Sound ninja's filthy blood.

“You two are so incredibly predictable...” Kabuto sneered, adjusting his glasses from his place near a fallen tree, “I'm sure Haku is following Sasuke to Sound at this very moment. After all, it's not so hard to believe, is it?” He smirked, adding, “Someone with such a power over ice can easily freeze their heart and seize power if they wanted. I'm sure Haku-kun knows what he wants.”

“There's no way in hell that's going to happen!” Naruto roared furiously, “This time I am going to make you pay for all that you've done to my friends!”

Kabuto said nothing in response, and kept the same sickening grin on his face that seemed to reflect the blackness of his heart.

Naruto could feel a great stirring within the kunoichi beside him, and he observed the bright radiance of the Byakugan in her eyes as she lifted her head authoritatively, and for a brief moment he could see a glimmer of her father's indomitable spirit in her.

“I will show you the same mercy you showed Neji-niisan!” Hinata cried, raising her palms, readying the most brutal Jyukken strikes she had knowledge of, “Prepare to face the true wrath of a Hyuga!”

The Oto nin laughed at her, “Be serious now, Hinata-hime! If your cousin didn't put up a challenge then there's no way that you will!”

“When someone says that they're going to kill you...” Naruto's voice had dropped a few octaves and become a guttural snarl, “That's something that you should always take seriously!”
When the hospital came into view there was no relief. The panic that was swelling in her chest was still as heavy as it had been on the hurried journey back to Konoha. Tenten looked to her left to see Hikune sliding the unconscious Hyuga heir from his shoulders.

“Forgive me, what was your name again?” The Hyuga boy asked her, “Hayate-taicho had mentioned it earlier but I do not recall.”

“Tenten.” Her voice sounded dead.

He nodded, “Thank you.”

She could see he was beginning to tire and she didn't blame him. Running nonstop for over five miles with dead weight on your back was exhausting, she knew. Hikune slipped Neji's arm over his shoulder, careful not to widen any of the wounds near his chest or back. When the younger boy's weight was distributed properly they moved ahead again and crossed the street.

They were so close and yet they moved so slowly that the hospital seemed impossible to reach.

Medic-nin were already outside awaiting newcomers. Their eyes simultaneously closed in on the genin slung over Hikune's back and they darted forward in a group of three. Tenten could only watch Neji: the way his back heaved laboriously with each breath and the aggrieved expression on his face made her insides boil anxiously.

Neji did not show pain because Neji never got hurt. He was the victor of every fight: a born leader who was cunning and powerful and swiftly threw down any opposition. He was like a shard cut from a perfect gem, she had once thought, so unattainable and striking and could not be scathed by anything.

This was beyond that, though. Neji was hurt so badly that he was dying. It didn't register in her mind that it was even possible, and reality seemed to warp so that everything she saw felt like a dream. It felt like Sakura's genjutsu all over again.

‘When I wake up he'll be just as invincible as ever.’

“His name? What team was he with?” The medics bombarded Hikune with questions as they swiftly took Neji from him and laid him on a stretcher.

“Hyuga Neji, part of Nara Shikamaru's retrieval cell dispatched nigh two days ago.” He had his facts straight since Tenten had briefed him on what had happened after they separated from Hayate.

The medic scribbled the information down on a clipboard sloppily, “Right, we'll take him into surgery immediately.”

‘Surgery?’ Tenten turned her head to the side inquisitively, wondering how exactly they intended to repair Neji.

The medics seemed to vanish back into the building, shouting code names at each other and telling people to move aside. Hikune stared after them for a long moment and then turned to the silent kunoichi, “Tenten.”
She looked up at him.

He was devilishly handsome, she noted in that moment, but he didn't resemble Neji at all. Instead of the classic long, dark hairstyle of the Hyuga, Hikune's hair was a light brown and cut short against the neck. A few chestnut strands framed his sharp face, making him majestic-looking, typical of the Main House.

His eyes were not like Neji's. Round opals that were calm and gentle and Tenten then faintly recognized them, 'I've seen him before, haven't I? But where?'

"Are you going to be alright?" There was strong evidence of compassion in his voice when Hikune spoke. Tenten had only ever received such a mild tone of a Hyuga from Hinata, and she was a case unto herself. "Do you want me to stay here with you, Tenten? You look unwell."

"I am unwell," She replied, folding her arms, "My friends are out there without me; that makes me sick to my stomach! Can't you just let me-?"

"Hayate-taicho ordered me to keep you in this village." His voice rose a margin above her's, then softened again, "You are very brave, but right now you belong here with Neji-sama. Running off again will do no good to your comrades."

'A typical Hyuga…' She thought, and yet he was still unique, somehow, 'He's right though. I'm in no shape to go back out there again. I won't be able to track the others.'

"I know." Tenten lowered her eyes and stared at the grainy concrete of the sidewalk so she wouldn't have to look at the marvelous, iridescent eyes staring at her, "Thanks for everything though, Hikune, but you don't have to stay with me. I'm sure you've got a lot of work to do."

"Very well then. I do have to speak with the Hokage about this and Hayate-taicho's progress." Hikune smiled smoothly, "Should you change your mind I will be at the Hokage’s tower or my home. Don't try to act too brave, Tenten."

He made a hand sign and then disappeared in a swirl of leaves. She recognized it, 'Showoff! I could master the Body Flicker if I wanted to…' Tenten was miserable but she refused to admit to it. If she had asked Hikune to keep her company she was unsure of how she'd handle herself.

It had been a long time since she had last allowed herself to cry, and the sinking feeling that preceded such a wretched ritual Tenten could feel settling in her throat and shaking shoulders. She refused to let another human being see her cry, though. It had not happened, not even with her parents. It was a sort of egotistical trait she had inherently.

And perhaps Neji had strengthened that quality in her.

'Neji!' Tenten jogged into the front entrance of the hospital, cursing herself for dawdling like she had. At the front desk she asked for him, and was told he was in the emergency center. They then told her to stop shouting (she was frightening the other visitors) and to take a seat.

She didn't want to sit with all the normal people in the waiting room. They were not like her. They were average citizens with young children who had sprained wrists and elderly folk with circulation problems. They knew nothing of the horror's shinobi faced; the atrocities they inflicted unto each other.

Neji had holes in him. As in, see through to the other side, holes. Normal people couldn't even imagine such a wound, and Tenten could not bring herself to sit among them calmly and quietly because she felt like screaming in a panic.
With the stealth of a skilled ninja, she slipped down a hallway unnoticed and went upstairs, near the E.R., and found an empty marble corridor with a bench that beckoned her to sit and relax. It was silent and bright and it made Tenten feel more at peace. Here no one else could presume to relate to her heartaches. Here was where she really was and no one else.

With a deep sigh Tenten stretched out on the seat, loosening her tense muscles. This temporary tranquility wasn’t bound to last. It wouldn’t be long before more bad news came to greet her, ‘I didn’t want to think about it before but it’s…it’s real. If Neji does die then what have I been working for? Where does that leave me, Lee or Gai-sensei?’

Her nose itched and she crushed it against her shoulder in irritation, exchanging the tingling sensation for pain to distract herself, ‘But where does it leave me? There is no me without Neji. He defines me, or at least, sharpens what qualities I have. Literally…’ Tenten frowned against her skin, fighting the rising dread in her stomach, ‘I guess I never really did have plans for the life I want to lead. I never had a goal in mind until he came along, really…’

She felt so selfish and yet was being completely honest with herself, ‘I don’t really want to live if it means he won’t be there anymore. When mom and dad died I didn’t want to live, but when I was assigned to a team I felt needed again. And…and Lee can get by without me. He and Gai-sensei would…and I’d…’

Tenten sat up and stared at the wall across from her, ‘So it’s settled then. It's a lose-lose situation. It's not as if it’s ‘me or Neji’ it’s ‘me and Neji.’ Okay. That's not so bad. If things don't go well I'll see him after a quick jab with a tanto and I won't have to put up with this world's bullshit anymore.’

But that wasn't how she really felt. Not really. The truth is I don't want anything to happen to Neji because life is brief for shinobi like us, but it’s still great! He could really be happy in the future with so much going for him. And maybe I could…make him happy?’

Thinking about lives in the balance had her itching to get up and go reunite with her lost teammates, ‘Lee…Sato…you better be alright!” Tenten sighed to herself, “Everyone better be alright, or I'll march all the way to Sound myself and give them what-for!”

With a very emotional, very aggravated huff, Tenten crossed her legs and straightened her posture. Composure. Calm. Approach everything as if it's inconsequential and hopefully, her mind concluded, everyone she cared for would return unharmed.

A door clicked closed down the hallway, but the nurse who had left the room hadn't even seen Tenten as she went back downstairs to the main level. After a short while of scrutinizing the message board on the wall across from her, Tenten drifted off into a light sleep, the emptiness of the hospital echoing around her.

“I didn't think that birds could smell weird…but they do.” Chouji slid down from Kutaiku's back and down to the pavement, “Man I'm hungry.”

Kiba followed suit behind the considerably slimmer Akimichi, with Shikamaru sluggishly doing the same. Gyoraï landed beside his fellow owl and cooed in greeting, allowing Lee and Sato to return to solid ground.

Each boy was completely exhausted, eyes dim, and they moved ahead to the side entrance of the hospital as medics ran out to meet them. Seeing that Chouji and Kiba were in the worst health, they were quickly taken inside for treatment. A medic walked up to Shikamaru after getting a glimpse of his chunin vest, “Are you the leader of this team?”
The Nara rubbed his aching neck while he answered, “That is the deplorable truth.”

“Good. Will you please follow me? There are some forms you'll have to fill out on behalf of your subordinates.”

“Oh man…” Shikamaru shoved his hands in his pockets and walked after the retreating intern. He looked back over his shoulder, “Lee, Sato; you did good so go get some rest. I suppose I'll be stuck doing mission reports for the next six hours…”

Lee nodded genially, “Thank you, Shikamaru-kun!”

Sato watched Shikamaru trudge irritably into the hospital and then scratched his head, wondering what to do with himself, “Hm. Something tells me we still fucked up on this mission pretty bad even if we're all still alive. What do you think, Lee?”

“I think I must agree with you, Sato-kun,” Lee frowned slightly, “Though I might have used different language to convey such a thought.”

“Sato!”

They turned in unison when the pattering sound of footsteps sounded in the air, and the young Hatake barely had any time to brace himself as he was struck by an alarmingly fast moving Tama, who quickly ensnared him in an inescapable headlock, “Oh, heh…hi Tama!”

“Are you crazy? When I heard that you ran off I nearly had a heart attack!” The tall girl howled, purposefully choking him, “You're reckless, you're stupid, but you're alive! Don't ever do anything so hasty again!”

His face was rapidly turning blue, “…kay…”

With the affirmative response she released him and he gulped air in, but found himself grinning stupidly somehow, “It's good to see you too, Tama. You know I would've told you, but with you not being a ninja and all Tsunade-sama wouldn't have liked you helping out. It's too risky for you.”

She put a hand on her hip, “Well we'll never know that now will we? It's all over and done with…” Tama looked over to Lee, “Thanks for keeping him out of trouble, Lee. I know I can always count on you.”

He smiled uncertainly back at her, “I really did not do that much, Miss Tama.”

“Nonsense!” Tama waved a hand dismissively and then hooked it around Sato's elbow, “Come on you! I'll take a look at those wounds and patch you up!”

“Yes ma'am!” He was in no place to protest. It really would be a relief to have his injuries inspected, even though Sato did sense she was going to chew him out about it.

Lee could hear their loud, squawking chatter even after he had gone into the hospital. He smiled to himself, glad to see that they got along so well even under the most critical of times. He spotted Shikamaru near the front desk tapping a pen against his chin in boredom, staring at the stack of papers laid before him.

He turned and upon seeing Lee, snatched up the pile of forms and dropped them in Lee's arms that outstretched reflexively, “Thank you for volunteering. You take half and I'll take half.”
“I am afraid I do not have a-”

Shikamaru tossed a spare pen he had stolen over his shoulder as he strolled down the hall, and Lee, ever obligated, caught it in his teeth and walked after the lazy Nara. Passing doctors and interns paid them no mind as they crossed the corridor and took the stairwell to the second floor.

All the while Lee couldn't help but feel like he had been taken advantage of. Of course it wouldn't have been the first time, but he still felt like his moral ideology was something most people mistook for eagerness. There were times where he felt like taking a break too, he hoped they realized.

In retrospect, Lee was also unduly aware of the great amount of stress Shikamaru was under. Three team members were still missing, as far as the Nara knew, and they had not gotten very far before most of them had copped out and failed to retrieve either Sasuke or Haku.

The entire debacle had been questionable from the very start, but Lee supposed Shikamaru trusted Naruto enough to leave him in charge of whether or not the fugitives would be brought back to Leaf.

‘Naruto-kun will succeed for sure!’ Lee thought, a fiery glimmer waking in his eyes. He adjusted the pile of papers in his arms and remembered to breathe through his nose, for fear of choking on the writing utensil still clenched in his teeth.

Lee bumped into Shikamaru's back after he'd paused abruptly. Since he was unable to ask what had caught his attention, Lee looked ahead to see Tenten on a nearby bench with her legs crossed in high-fashion and her head tilted back slightly as she dozed.

Restraint ceased to exist.

“Tenten!” The pen went whizzing through the air after Lee cried out happily, clattering to the floor helplessly alongside the stack of papers that he had discarded. He ran over to her and encompassed her in a genuinely joyous hug, “You are alright! It was all left to speculation when we searched for you but you are here and well!”

She woke up right around the part he had said 'speculation when we…' and 'well!' and she blinked up at him, bemused, “Hey, Lee…”

Hugging Lee was always enjoyable, she remembered after a moment. He was always sincere and glad to embrace her, and it was in those brief moments of friendship where Tenten could share in physical contact with another human that was not remotely violent.

She let her eyes close again, contentedly, taking in the smells on him. Traces of wind: he'd been moving fast, as well as scents of forest and dirt and…slightly singed, ‘Another explosion maybe? Good grief…’

Tenten broke the contact, seeing Shikamaru had been watching their exchange with an uncomfortable expression, ’Surely he and Ino get along like this? Is it that strange?’ She didn't know. Perhaps her friendship with Lee was something unique to only her team.

“Where did you go after the blast went off?” Lee inquired, standing again, “Sato-kun and I looked everywhere for you!”

“I headed north like we planned, but I suppose I got a bit knocked off course.” Tenten admitted, then her voice lowered, “I found Neji while I was out there.”

Shikamaru had finished retrieving the scattered documents from the floor and looked over to her,
She stared at them for a long moment blankly, the horror of her discovery flooding her memory. Lee felt dread descend into his stomach at her reluctance to answer. He knew Tenten, and when her answers weren't pleasant, there was always a short pause before the truth was revealed.

"He's in critical condition right now." Tenten said with a surprising amount of aplomb, "When I found him he was a mess. He was in a really bad fight."

A look of guilt washed over Shikamaru as she spoke.

"Is he... going to be alright?" Lee asked slowly, not sure if he really wanted an answer.

Tenten frowned, "As long as Tsunade-sama is here I'm not worried at all. You'll see Lee, Neji's going to be on his feet again soon."

He could still pick up on the doubt in her tone, as miniscule as it was. Lee sat down beside her on the bench, deciding he could go look for Gai-sensei later. With his team in crisis, he felt strongly compelled to stay with Tenten for as long as she needed him. "I will wait here with you, Tenten, until we receive word on his condition."

"Thanks..." She sighed, trying to relax, and blinked as Shikamaru handed a pen to her and Lee.

"We're not getting any younger," Shikamaru's voice was a bit shaky as he handed them each an equal stack of forms, "If you're just gonna sit there, make yourselves useful."

"Excellent work, Hikune," Tsunade was pleased with the young Hyuga's undertakings, "Hiashi-sama asked me earlier to send all incoming Hyuga back to the compound when they arrive. It seems now the only person we're still waiting for is his daughter."

"Hinata-sama?" He raised his eyebrows, "She was with the retrieval team?"

"Yes, and she and Uzumaki Naruto have not come back yet," She folded her hands beneath her chin, "I'm not certain if I should take that as a good or bad sign. But for now you should relax. Go home and assure Hyuga-sama that his daughter is in no danger while Naruto is with her."

He nodded compliantly, "Of course, Hokage-sama."

He bowed and then left the office. Tsunade watched him leave with an upraised eyebrow, 'Boy, if I was a few years younger... that kid is a looker!'

She quickly reverted to her previous, somber outlook, 'This still isn't good. Naruto may be distracted if he's reduced to protecting Hinata. And there's still no way to know how things will work out with Haku and Sasuke...'

The door opened again with no knock preceding it and a travel-worn Kakashi walked in, greeting Tsunade amiably, "The whole village is in a tizzy, Hokage-sama. Everything seems to fall apart when I'm not around."

She accepted the scroll he had retrieved for her from the Bird Country and gave him a sour look, "I don't think you could be any more right about that, Kakashi. I was informed that your nephew ran off after the retrieval team and nearly got himself killed."

There was a pause.
“Well…I wouldn't expect anything less of Sato.”

Tsunade sighed, guessing his relationship with his nephew was still shaky. She then proceeded to fill him in on Sasuke and Haku's defection, and how the teams that had gone after them had fared.

“I recommend that you stay and rest before you decide to go out after them,” Tsunade concluded authoritatively, “It wasn't my first choice to send an inexperienced team led by a chunin, and all things considered, even a jounin should consider himself lucky to return to this village after all that they've gone through.”

Kakashi nodded silently, but inwardly he had other plans. After hearing Sasuke had been tempted by Sound he felt it was his ritual duty to fetch him from Orochimaru's clutches. Something told him that it was bizarre Haku had also left as well, with him being so attached to Jiraiya and his teammates, 'He doesn't seem like the type bent on power…'

All the same, he'd bring them back. But if he was going to do it, he couldn't waste time and rest like Tsunade wanted him to. Kakashi excused himself from the office when an intern from the hospital poked his head in, “Tsunade-sama, there is a request that you supervise Hyuga Neji's surgical procedure.”

She stood from her desk, her brow furrowed, “Alright, go and tell them to begin when ready. I'll be there shortly.”

Gaara looked up at the sky while he sat on a stoop of a residence on a quiet side street. He looked utterly out of place in such a cozy environment.

People walked down the road, unaware of his presence; unaware of what a lethal, powerful shinobi he was and how he had nearly had his heart crushed earlier that day. Something that could have proven fatal to anyone who crossed his path; except that he had taken charge, and trusted his emotions when violence seemed the most constructive.

He had calmed down once he had reached Konoha. His mind was clearer than it had ever been before.

And after returning Sakura to her distraught parents the thought of going back to search for Haku and Sasuke hadn't even crossed his mind. He merely sat on the front porch of her house, a loyal guard dog, unwilling to let himself stray too far from her.

He trusted Naruto and Shikamaru would organize an effective retrieval plan. Gaara highly doubted that Haku would truly want to leave the Leaf Village anyway, and he didn't much care what became of Sasuke.

Gaara had been loitering in front of the Haruno residence for nearly two hours before his brother and sister discovered him and loudly confronted him.

“Where the heck were you? You disappeared on us this morning and we looked just about everywhere!” Kankuro barked, his frown more pronounced with the strange patterns painted on his face.

“I had to save Sakura,” Gaara replied simply, calm in the face of his brother's anger, “She vanished from the village the same time Haku and Sasuke did.”

Kankuro relaxed a bit, aware that Gaara had a great fondness for the pink haired kunoichi. Temari hadn't overreacted much at all, to Gaara's surprise, “I see. We heard what was going on a little while ago, so Kankuro and I offered to help. Your Hokage wouldn't have it. She said that she
couldn't ask Sand ninja to interfere. What a load of garbage that was…"

Gaara smirked at her annoyed tone, “Tsunade-sama is right, though. So many ninja have been coming and going it isn't easy for her to keep track of them all.”

Temari shrugged in response and then settled on the porch beside her youngest sibling, patting his head affectionately. With a sigh, Kankuro sat on Gaara's opposite side, relieved that they had finally located their brother.

“So…this is where she lives?” Kankuro asked after a moment, noting the potted plant in the window. It was so different from where they lived in Suna.

“Yes,” Gaara confirmed it and added, “I don't think she'll be very pleased with me when she wakes. Her parents certainly weren't.”

“I can imagine.” Temari hummed with a mischievous smile, noting that Gaara would have to work especially hard to win over Sakura's parents in order to make things work with her, 'He'll figure something out. He can be surprisingly charming when he wants to be…'

“You're friends are still out there,” Kankuro noted, “Are you sure they're going to be alright without you?”

Gaara lowered his eyes, considering it, “I think they will. Even now I don't believe I could find them if I went back to look.”

Though he hoped that they would succeed in their endeavor, Gaara felt an unsettling feeling grip him in that moment, almost as if he could sense a changing of fortunes. It wasn't long after that he understood what the feeling meant.

'Naruto and Haku are in danger.'

It was strategically the worst place to fight.

Kabuto had led them farther north along the banks of the river that ran down the valley's center. The slopes were serrated cliffs with boulders and ledges jutting out every which way, and the added presence of water made the stones beneath their feet slippery and treacherous.

Naruto had wanted to tell Hinata to wait before attacking Kabuto, intending to draw him closer for a combined attack, but she rushed up to the high ground where the Oto nin had been waiting and slapped at him furiously, unwilling to stall another moment.

'If she's not careful he could tear her to pieces!' The blonde boy made a number of shadow clones before dashing up the hill after the Hyuga girl. He remembered fighting Kabuto and would not underestimate someone with such precarious medical jutsu.

“While I was in Konoha I studied the effects of Jyukken,” Kabuto informed Hinata, smirking, countering her frenzied blows, “Try all you like, princess, you can't harm me!”

He slashed at her with his chakra scalpel, forcing her to back off. Hinata huffed, her indigo hair sticking to her face at odd angles, 'I'm not afraid of him or anything he says! This time I will fight to the end!'

When the enemy had grown comfortable with the distance he'd put between himself and his opponent, Kabuto paused and Naruto's Kage bunshin pounced.
“Don't forget me, bastard!” Naruto cried. He and his duplicates pummeled the Sound shinobi from all directions. Kabuto managed to destroy a few of them, but the overwhelming assault had backed him against a rock wall with a thud.

Cornered, Kabuto counterattacked, frustrated, and balked in surprise when Naruto and his clones withdrew. Hinata came rushing in from behind him, “Hakke Rokujuyon Sho!”

“What-?” Kabuto stumbled after the first two strikes, and Hinata proceeded flawlessly into the zenith of the bombardment, leaving Kabuto stunned with closed tenketsu.

She landed a solid blow to his gut, knocking him from the loose rocks of the slope, and he fell back, landing on a boulder below with a loud thud. Hinata straightened herself, panting, and she backed away to be closer to Naruto.

He smiled at the sight of her shaking shoulders, 'She's so strong! If she'd heard she'd be this way months ago she'd never believe it!' Even Neji would be thoroughly impressed if he had seen her, Naruto thought, and then wilted after thinking of him. His chest ached with guilt over what had happened to Hinata's cousin, but he knew they'd be satisfied after throttling Kabuto.

It was when the Oto nin stood up and brushed the pebbles from his shirt did panic settle in Hinata's spirit, 'How can he still be moving? I was sure I'd-!'

“Scared, Hinata-hime?” Kabuto asked sweetly, moving to stand atop a large rock, “Worried? I told you your little attacks won't work on me! My chakra control can cancel the effects of Gentle Fist.”

“There's no way that's true!” Naruto barked, knowing that Hyuga taijutsu was among the most lethal in all of Konoha, “You're bluffing! She nailed you for sure! You'll fall on your face if you try to fight anymore!”

“Really?” Kabuto narrowed his eyes at Naruto threateningly. He suddenly ran up the slope, far faster than before, and planted a super-powered kick to Hinata's stomach. She made a soft noise of pain before she was sent hurtling down the hill, past Naruto, and she landed in a thicket of weeds near the water's edge.

Naruto froze. He knew that rushing to Hinata would give Kabuto another opening to attack, and with the alarming new power he was displaying it could prove fatal. Hinata was slumped over in the brambles, wiping the blood from her mouth and trying to untangle herself from the thorns.

Kabuto rested his hand on his hip, grinning, light catching his glasses and hiding his eyes, “I'm not in the habit of lying, Naruto-kun. It's actually simple enough for you to understand, really. She may seal off my tenketsu and attack vital organs, but I can easily heal myself from any wound she can inflict…and opening my chakra gates instantly reopens any tenketsu she can seal.” He laughed heartlessly, “Hinata-hime is useless to you in this fight!”

'So that's it...he can open gates too just like Fuzzy-Brows!' Naruto's eyes gleamed blue fire, 'But that doesn't mean Hinata's useless! It just means she's at as much of a disadvantage as I am...so we've got to work together!'

“We'll see who's the real waste of time!” Naruto shouted, and bit his thumb before summoning a large battle toad to the hillside. One of his shadow clones leapt up beside the toad, looking expectant.

Kabuto frowned at the sight, 'What does that idiot think he's doing?'

“Toad Flame Bullet!” Naruto's clone leapt ahead and detonated after the toad spat a mouthful of
oil, and ignited the jet of fuel streaking through the air. Kabuto nearly moved too late to avoid the fireball, and Naruto noted that his attack was more of a bomb than a fire jutsu, *That clone blew with too much chakra…anymore and it could've burned me and Mr. Toad here!*

The ball of flames slammed into the side of the valley wall, knocking loose a number of boulders and rocks, unsettling the already treacherous landscape. Surrounding trees were left smoldering and leafless, and most of the rocks on the hillside were looking much worse for the wear.

Kabuto had found a stable route up to the top of the rocky slope, and immediately attacked with a round of shuriken and kunai. Naruto's summoned toad was hit squarely between the eyes with the projectiles and vanished in a puff of smoke.

The Leaf ninja was frustrated one of his mimicry-attacks of Gamabunta had failed, and began to charge a Rasengan as he weaved his way up the slope with less-than-sure footing. Once or twice he slipped, but he continued on stubbornly, refusing to keep his distance from his enemy. He felt at least one tail of Kyuubi chakra coursing through his body as he closed the gap.

“You just make things too easy for me, Naruto-kun!” Kabuto's gate-assisted strength enabled him to knock free a rockslide from the edge of the slope, and it tumbled down with a crashing roar as Naruto continued up tenaciously.

Hinata had clambered out of the nettle and made a blind dash ahead to help Naruto. She skidded to a horrified halt as half of the cliff caved in on top of the blonde boy, “Naruto-kun!”

It had been his Rasengan that had saved him. Cleverly, Naruto held it above him as the stones rained down, and let the massive amount of chakra in the spiraling sphere tear the rocks apart into dust.

The counter had left a mess, though. Naruto had to inch out of the debris and mud, cursing the unstable terrain all the while, *This is worse than I thought. Out here everything can fall apart in a second…*’

While Kabuto had been distracted with crushing Naruto, Hinata had returned, scaling ledges up to the top of the valley wall and she dove for Kabuto, resorting to the most powerful strike in her possession, “One Hundred Palms of Fury!”

The Sound ninja quickly turned to face her and counter, but he had let his guard down, and one of her shadow clones had seized him from behind, securing him in his place.

Her attack was ruthless and blindingly fast, but it had purpose. Hinata had recognized that Kabuto was most dangerous with his abilities in medical jutsu, and aimed specifically for points in his main arm that would render it unusable.

After damaging his arm she moved for chakra points in his chest, wanting to crush lungs, arteries, everything and anything that would cause severe damage.

A sickening throaty sound came from Kabuto after she'd knocked him across the clearing with a finishing blow, sending him crashing through a tree and down into a gully.

For a moment she stood staring at the fallen Sound shinobi with her Byakugan, not trusting that her attack had been effective. But he did not move and after a few tense moments she deactivated her Kekkei Genkai, relieving herself from the excruciating pain that came with it.

“How about you?” After hearing Naruto call for her she moved to the side of the hill, and looked down to him, seeing he was still clawing his way out of the muck and rocks, “You okay?”
She felt alright. Adrenaline was making her a bit jumpy, and her eyes had felt the same as they had for the past day, but Hinata was unsure if she still was fighting-fit, “I'm alright, Naruto-kun! But I...I don't think I can fight any longer.”

“Good!” He grinned up at her, “Sounds like you got him! Just give me a sec to climb out of this crap and then we'll go help Haku-kun!”

Doubt settled in again. Hinata didn't know what good she'd be to Haku and Naruto trying to bring Sasuke back to Konoha, and she felt a dreadful obligation to go search for Neji's body and bring him home. She didn't feel any vindication on her cousin's behalf after defeating Kabuto, and she felt terrible that Tenten had suffered at the Oto nin's hands as well. 'Tenten-nee-chan was so good to me and looked out for everyone! I can't believe that...that...'

Naruto had climbed out of the debris, his orange pants and majority of his jacket muddied. He moved carefully up the slick ledges up the side of the valley wall, still unsure if Hinata was fine, 'Her eyes are probably killing her, I bet. I hope there's something we can do about it when we get back home.'

Hinata's back stiffened in fright once she sensed a great upwelling of chakra from behind her, and it was then, even without using her Byakugan, that she acknowledged Kabuto had again reopened his tenketsu, but it had taken him longer to do it.

She wanted to be brave, as Naruto would be. Hinata stood her ground and took a defensive Jyukken stance, which was promptly broken as Kabuto lunged for her with an even greater speed, and attacked with his chakra scalpel.

His attack raked her arm and chest, stunning her muscles, and she froze up, unable to stop Kabuto from hurling her down the side of the ravine.

“No!” Naruto had seen the struggle and made a strained, last second leap to catch the Hyuga girl as she fell from the top of the outcrop. He was inches away, his hands stretched out to her, and his eyes were still locked with her pearly orbs as he felt a number of kunai sink into his right side and arm.

He flinched from the pain, regrettably, and missed her as she slipped by and hit the rock slope with agonizing force. Naruto could only watch her tumble bonelessly down the remainder of the hill as he too plummeted, stunned by Kabuto's devious attack.

“Ugh!” Naruto landed on a stone ledge below on his back, his eyes still focused on Hinata. The girl had tucked her arms in close to her body, already badly cut from hitting stones on her way down. Naruto's heart halted in terror when the back of her head collided with the flat face of a boulder with an audible crack.

Alertness faded from her eyes and she slipped from consciousness after the knockout blow had connected. Naruto called out to her a few times to try and rouse her while pulling the knives out of his side, ignoring the blood it drew. Yet she did not respond in any fashion, and it was then he knew he was in this fight alone.

“Hm, how interesting! Only four chakra gates are needed to nullify Jyukken strikes. That really gauges the power of the Hyuga clan, I'd say.” Kabuto chuckled, watching Naruto remove the kunai from his arm as well, “Either that or Hinata-hime was just plain weak. They said she was the puniest of all her clan!”

“What did you do to her?” Naruto demanded, struggling to his feet.
The Sound ninja adjusted his glasses that had shaken loose from his nose during the fighting, “I simply attacked her heart, Naruto-kun. Soon she'll end up just like Neji-san…and you too, before long!”

He stared out to Hinata who remained unmoving at the bottom of the hill. Naruto was distraught, knowing there was no way he could help her when he knew nothing about medical techniques. Kabuto delighted in cutting down shinobi after playing games with their emotions, and Naruto was beyond the point of tolerating it any longer.

All that was left was to finish it.

The wounds on Naruto's side and arm healed up within seconds, and his ruby gaze rested on his enemy. Red chakra hissed through the air and a ghostly howl echoed against the slopes of the Valley of the End.

His Sharingan allowed him to see the trajectory of the senbon before they even left Haku's hand. Sasuke eluded every needle effortlessly; the water-nin's every move was clear before he even made it.

He purposefully stayed within close range, making it difficult for Haku to be accurate with his senbon, and used taijutsu to off-balance him. Sasuke landed vicious blows, taking advantage of Haku's lack of physical skill. They were at the bottom of the statue near the river's edge.

One particularly brutal roundhouse kick had sent Haku tumbling over the side of the waterfall. Sasuke paused near the water, staring down at the mist over the side of the cliff, and could discern a cry over the fall's roar, “Suiton: Water Dragon Blast!”

Sasuke hurriedly countered, “Katon: Dragon Fire Jutsu!”

The opposing elements collided mid-way, canceling one another and creating a violent explosion that interrupted the water crashing down the valley wall. Haku plummeted down to the river below and Sasuke leapt after him, intent on finishing him.

He hit the water and stayed on top of it with chakra, destroying the incoming water clones that Haku had created. Sasuke could distinguish the real Haku among his doppelgangers, and lunged for him with a kunai, slashing at his belly.

Haku dove beneath the water to avoid the attack, and resurfaced with one of his newest jutsu, “Rising Water Dragons!” Two streams rose up and coiled around each other in a helix, and Sasuke quickly recognized the move from the Chunin Exams when he had seen Tenten use it against Sakura.

The memory made his blood boil.

He melted the icicles that were raining down with a fireball, not stopping until Haku had run out of water to freeze and landed back on the water's surface.

Haku's eyes were pleading, “Sasuke, please! This cannot go on! You must reconsider coming back to Konoha. I don't want to fight you.”

“If you don't want to fight then you shouldn't have come.” Sasuke snarled, impatient with his opponent, and activated his cursed seal. His speed had more than tripled and several taijutsu combinations hit Haku in rapid succession with him powerless to counter.

Haku resisted valiantly, but had weakened after taking so many blows. He had barely so much as
scratched Sasuke and he was already exhausted from the violent struggle. After thrashing about on top of the water for a few minutes Sasuke had gotten a tight grip on Haku's arm, and spun, building momentum, before throwing him towards the shore.

The water-nin slammed into the side of a rock face, and tumbled down to the stone shore below. Haku fought for air, his chest tight, and he was sure he had at least two broken ribs. The bruises and blood barely registered in his mind, he was so fixated on deterring Sasuke, no matter how hopeless things appeared, 'He may kill me at this rate, but I will not give in! I can't let him slip into the darkness!'

He had rolled to his knees when he felt two senbon sink into his shoulder. Without even so much as wincing he extracted them, turning to Sasuke who was balanced on top of a log out on the water. The needles Haku had thrown earlier had all missed the Uchiha prodigy and it appeared he had salvaged some of them.

"With these eyes, my aim is a hundred times more accurate than yours," Sasuke boasted, casting the last of the needles and hitting Haku in his forearms and leg, "Give it up already."

"Even so, that doesn't mean you know where to throw them!" Haku cried, refusing to let all of his hard training be spat upon. He made a hand sign and sprang out to the water again where multiple ice mirrors were beginning to form.

Haku entered a mirror, knowing he'd be completely safe from any attack, and performed water jutsu that rushed up from the lake's surface and forced Sasuke back to the shore.

His ice mirrors had lined up to face the land, where the Uchiha had taken cover behind a boulder. He tried countering with fire jutsu, but it was useless to try and melt the ice mirrors when they were infused with so much elemental chakra. Ruthless water jutsu continued to pound against the shore, forcing Sasuke to stay hidden in order to avoid being hit.

He couldn't get near Haku without being subjected to the strength of his Kekkei Genkai, and it was then Sasuke wondered why he'd been foolish enough to let Haku fight in his own element, 'And even if I did get close enough, I wouldn't be able to touch him while he hides in those mirrors...'

Ice shards began to rain down and it was then Sasuke understood he didn't have long before Haku flooded the rest of the valley in order to drive him out into the open. 'I'll have to use my new power then, because there's no way he will!'

He tapped into the power of the level two seal Sakon had spoken of and let himself drown in it. The massive release of chakra caused him to change form, lengthening his hair into a mass of gray spikes. His skin and eyes darkened and two great wings bearing the likeness of hands emerged from his back.

The shape of his body had changed to facilitate the addition of chakra.

Water was no longer an obstacle and Sasuke raced out from his place on the shore, spreading his wings and letting the sheer speed he had built up carry him out over the still river.

From his mirror, Haku could barely comprehend the change he saw in Sasuke, but he was aware it would put him at a power disadvantage. He used another water jutsu, taking careful aim as the Uchiha neared.

Sasuke barrel-rolled in the air to avoid it and the dragon-like current kept moving toward the shore. Haku willed the current to turn about, but it did not move fast enough to catch up, and
Sasuke raked through the mirror Haku had been in with the Chidori, smashing it into thousands of pieces.

The current of water that had been redirected followed Sasuke's wake, and crashed into the remainder of Haku's ice mirrors, splashing against them.

Haku tumbled out onto the water's surface and was again powerless against his opponent. Sasuke reached him, moving through the air with ease, and tossed the water-nin around like a rag doll, not allowing him any time to create more ice mirrors.

He knocked Haku down into the river with a powerful punch, and left a gaping hole in the water where Haku had hit. Bubbles rose up and filled the gap in the water's surface and Haku did not come back up again after that.

“Weak.” Sasuke sighed in boredom, perching on a ledge hanging over the water, “Surely you aren't through yet? I knew someone so soft and gentle could never become truly strong…”

Beneath the river’s surface Haku made no effort to move. He was spent and in agony. The pain was crippling and the only place he could avoid worse injury was right where he was. Even through the suffering he was still burdened with the task of rescuing Sasuke, 'He's so willing to hurt me, a fellow Leaf ninja, and yet there still must be some part of him free of the shadows…'

He honestly didn't know where to look to find any good in Sasuke, but the village wanted him back. He couldn't give in while there was still breath in his lungs.

'I can't give up, not when there's still some good locked inside of him,' Haku decided, staring down into the darkness of the water below, 'Naruto-kun would never forgive me if I gave up the fight…'

But he had nothing left. Chakra dwindling and no senbon, he was about as useless as a dull blade. All that remained was the power of his cursed seal, and he had promised Jiraiya that he'd never use it again.

'Just this once, Jiraiya-sensei, and then never again,' Haku swore, 'Desperation overrides moral obligation, in this instance.'

The cursed seal burned when he tapped into its power, but he forced himself to accept it, and pushed his way to the level two power that he needed. Transforming was strange and he felt himself twisting around in the water, changing, gaining features that were both painful and wondrous.

His pale skin had become darker and his hair had grown into a long, white mane, straight and billowing. Sharp fangs pricked against his lip, claws hardened from his nails, and a cat-like tail formed at the base of his spine, bluish and split in two at the end like a nekomata.

When he opened his dark eyes they were hued the color of arctic snowcaps.

Haku's lungs no longer burned for air. Oxygen began to diffuse through his skin from the water around him. He felt like a fish and he felt like a cat, but more than anything he felt predatory and restless to fight.

He rose to the surface gracefully, not disturbing a single drop of water when he had emerged again into the realm of air. His lungs became practical again, and he stared calmly up at Sasuke who had waited on a rock outcrop on the shore.

He had nearly forgotten his objective because the power was so stunning. When he did recall it,
however, he addressed it, “Sasuke…this is your last chance to come willingly. Return to Konoha now and this senseless fighting can stop.”

Sasuke rose into the air again, disinterested in what Haku had offered, “I think I’d rather fly away…” He circled above Haku's head, tauntingly, his reflection shone in the water clear as glass.

Haku's tail thrashed with anger and impatience. He was through with Sasuke's games. The fight was about to become serious.

Sasuke hadn't expected Haku to be able to make such an unprecedented leap, but when he did, Haku snagged Sasuke’s wings in his claws, ripping angry red lines down the mutated flesh and dragged him out of the air.

A hawk in a panther's claws.

With newfound strength Haku hurled Sasuke back down to the water, which he met with a tremendous splash, and the Uchiha floundered with his large wings to find his footing on the river's surface.

Haku landed as well and narrowed his eyes at his adversary. “If you don't want to fight then you shouldn't have come!” He hissed furiously, and at his command the entire river, waterfall and all, froze into a great plain of ice.

Three tails of the Kyuubi's chakra was enough to start disintegrating the rocks and stones in the ravine, and Naruto swiftly dove up the outcrop for Kabuto, pulling himself up by his claws and chakra limbs. He leapt clear over the startled Sound ninja's head once at the top. His rage over Hinata’s condition had pushed him farther than he’d ever gone before.

He about faced and jammed his elbow into Kabuto with the force of a speeding train. The Oto nin was sent crashing into an adjacent slope, and boulders had come loose again from the tremendous impact.

Naruto dove for him again, but Kabuto dodged, relying solely on the power of his chakra gates to keep him a step ahead of the jinchuriki. The blonde boy spun about, slashing at the Sound ninja who leapt and weaved his way among the rocks and Naruto keenly followed.

’He's completely focused on fighting! He isn't paying much attention to his environment,' Kabuto noted thoughtfully, 'One false move on his part and he'll be covered in half a mountain!'

He avoided a potentially lethal Rasengan as it came sweeping for his head, and Kabuto seized his chance, and severed the muscles in Naruto's right arm with his chakra scalpel. Unfortunately for him, Naruto continued to attack with his functioning arm, 'No matter! It'll take a long while for the Kyuubi to regenerate all of the cells in the boy's arm!'

He unbalanced Naruto as he clawed his way up another ledge on the valley wall, and landed a solid kick that sent the Kyuubi container tumbling down the uneven slope.

Naruto managed to right himself halfway down and land at the bottom of the ravine virtually unharmed. He kneeled down to rest a bit, starting to come back to his senses, 'He blew my arm out…I won't be able to use the Rasengan until it heals.' He glared up Kabuto who watched him from the hilltop with a mocking expression, wanting to rip apart the disgusting Sound ninja.

While the two faced off in a heated staring contest, Hinata stirred at the bottom of the slope.

Hinata had gained consciousness and was quick to notice that the unbearable pain she had been
enduring for so long was suddenly absent. She had hit her head quite hard, she remembered, perhaps it had knocked some jumbled pieces back into place?

Once she was able to concentrate she was suddenly bombarded with sights and dimensions. Her perception of her surroundings had grown extensively, and she acknowledged that she was certainly not in a normal state of health, *My Byakugan is acting so strangely! Everything is so clear and open...how have I not ever seen these things before?*

Every stitch and detail of the valley was assaulting her brain with information. Tiny, insubstantial things, and some considerable sights she had never noticed before: the movement of chakra: actual, faint chakra in trees and plant life and water. Some residual chakra has stained the rocks that had been knocked loose by the combating ninja on the cliffside.

She could see it marked on things like paint, and she could see it swirling in the air like mist; most of it coming from Naruto. It swayed and flitted delicately, precisely, and Hinata then understood what she was seeing, *This is what his chakra control looks like. It is tamed by the owner and it exists in its own plain...how have I not...known this?*

Half the things she was recognizing with her new vision she did not fully understand, and yet her awareness of everything made time seem to slow to her whim. She felt safe and strong. She was surer of herself than she had ever been. A few moments later Hinata realized something quite startling.

She had not opened her eyes yet.

Tentatively she did open them and light flooded in, illuminating her surroundings, and everything that before had been slightly dim was intense and focused. In every object there was chakra, some with barely any and some with surprisingly great amounts.

The two beings with the most chakra were wrestling on the slopes, and Hinata immediately sprang to her feet, moving silently towards the tousling ninja. She recognized Naruto by the red chakra that flowed with beast-like reflexes up on the hill, and Kabuto's chakra was a dull humming blue, more human-looking than the opposing chakra.

Abruptly, Naruto pinned Kabuto with a chakra-cloak claw but was caught by another kick. The blonde boy hobbled to his feet, still trying to gain control over his nonfunctioning arm. He caught a scent and then a glimmer of chakra. Naruto finally noticed Hinata bounding up the slope with a distinct silver aura visible around her, *Is that...Hinata-chan's chakra? I can see it?*

Without warning Hinata lunged for Kabuto, making a fantastic leap up the rest of the hill and catching him with his guard down, *There's no way! I couldn't have missed the pulmonary artery...she can't be-!*

He raised his arms to block but her hands were too quick and she broke through, tripping him up and forcing him back up the ledge. Kabuto aimed again for her heart with his chakra scalpel, and she countered with a glowing Jyukken strike that struck his hand, disabling and numbing it.

He reeled back in confusion at the sight of the silver chakra, *That's impossible! She can't have visible chakra!*

As he stumbled away from Hinata he hadn't even seen Naruto come up from behind him. A Kyuubi-strengthened punch connected with Kabuto's back, and Naruto pounced, proceeding to knock the Oto nin around the rocky slope.

Naruto felt empowered at the sight of Hinata well and capable of actual fighting. He was surprised
that she had managed it, but was not one to question a blessing. When he saw her take a Jyukken stance he quickly got out of her way, and stopped to rest on a boulder on the far side of the outcrop.

Kabuto staggered, bracing himself against the side of the cliff, trying to slow the bleeding from the gashes Naruto had scored on him, 'With the both of them it's as if they won't tire! As time goes on they only get stronger, and I'm...I can't-'

A ring of trigrams was illuminated on the ground in front of Hinata. She read its inscriptions, knowing every single inch of it by heart. It was when a second ring of trigrams appeared she had to pay attention. Her eyes could see what other Hyuga eyes could not.

The trigrams flat on the ground existed in one dimension and measured distance and power. The second ring was suspended vertically in the air, in another dimension, and from what she could decipher it appeared to rate space and time.

Something told Hinata she'd have to be cautious or she could end up injuring herself.

Even where the blind spot was supposed to be she could see Naruto watching from a nearby ledge. She smiled, not understanding why the limitations of her Byakugan had been lifted, but she was eager to push the limits of what she had now achieved.

As Kabuto dashed to make a getaway, one of the new trigrams brightened and she moved through it, the speed of her attack catching Kabuto before he could even move a meter from where he'd been.

Methodically, as if she could take her time, she began to cherry-pick his tenketsu one by one. Hinata was not closing them off when she struck them, though; she burned them away to nothing, destroying them with her own potent chakra.

It didn't last much more than a few seconds for Kabuto, but it had been total anguish. She hadn't even noticed she had passed the mark of 64 strikes until she had completed 192 of them.

Naruto watched as his chakra cloak faded. His eyes caught a glimpse of the extraordinary speed that eliminated Kabuto's tenketsu and began to shut down his chakra circulatory system.

Hinata stopped the assault after 300 tenketsu had been drilled away, but by then Kabuto had already been dead.

He dropped down into the rough soil inertly, his eyes still open, and Hinata stumbled backwards, relieved and overwhelmed at what she had done.

This time when Naruto leapt forward to catch her he was successful. She landed neatly in his arms and he grinned, infinitely proud and in awe of her. He nimbly navigated the way down to the bottom of the ravine where they could rest.

His Kyuubi chakra was gone and he was left horribly fatigued, but Naruto felt some strange vitality at the sight of the Hyuga girl so incredibly...alive and well.

Her Byakugan deactivated and she blinked her eyes up at the sky overhead, resting quietly in his lap.

A moment later she was bawling uncontrollably and Naruto was caught completely unaware, “Whoa, Hinata-chan! What's wrong? You did great! Don't be sad, please! Whatever's wrong I'll-”

“Even if I am alright, after all of this...Neji- niisan is not!” She wailed despondently, choking on
her sobs, “There's no way to change it…”

Naruto felt horrible about the truth of the situation, and he hugged her shoulders tighter, guiltily, “I'm so sorry, Hinata-chan. If I could… I would've done anything to save him! I'm sorry, I'm sorry!” He buried his nose in her tufted hair, sniffing, and felt tears sting at his eyes. Now was not the time for crying.

He couldn't have an emotional breakdown when he was the one trying to make her feel better.

“If he was here he'd be so proud of you!” Naruto declared after he’d regained his composure, “If Neji had seen you and how wonderful you were, he would have begged you to be the heir to your clan instead of him. No one… not even me has ever seen anything like what you did just then!”

Hinata’s weeping had come under control, but tears still slid freely down her cheeks. “I'm afraid that doesn't matter anymore, Naruto-kun…” Her voice was so low he could barely hear it, “Maybe it would be better if… if our places had been exchanged, Neji-niisan and I…”

Naruto jumped at the suggestion and she tumbled off of him, quickly sitting up again and seeing the horror in his eyes.

He was up on his knees, shouting frantically, “That's CRAZY! How could you say something like that? Boy, if he could hear you now, Hinata, he'd lose it! Don't ever, EVER, say something like that!”

“B-But I'm not as important as Neji-niisan was… I can never be!” She cried hopelessly, letting her true feelings out, “There are so many people who depended on him! How can I ever live up to that?”

Silence followed and they settled down again, deciding it was better if they didn't shout at each other to get their points across.

Naruto stared at her with cerulean eyes. Ambition was clear in them, “You don't have to live up to it, Hinata. All I know is that I'd never get by without you.”

Her crying had stopped completely, mostly due to astonishment. Hinata clammed up, unable to say anything. She was glad that Naruto was always so honest with her.

He closed his eyes briefly, trying to stay calm.

He was upset too but he had to say what was on his mind, “I don't ever want to think about something happening to you. I don't know where I'd be if you weren't here, I mean… you were the first person to show me kindness and not steal it away.” Naruto found that admitting it was rather cathartic, “See… even if I have Gaara-kun and Haku-kun they can never be what you are. You were the first one who ever mattered! That hasn't changed one bit!”

Hinata found herself staring tactlessly, remembering the loneliness of her childhood. In Naruto she had found herself, and she reached out to help him because something had called her to. It was the same thing Naruto was describing to her, even if he couldn't label it exactly, she still understood.

“I don't want you to go away Hinata, so don't ever say that you will,” Naruto demanded in an emotional voice, “Just leave the rest to me. I'm going to protect you. I know you will be the leader of your clan and later when I'm Hokage maybe that'll be enough to impress your dad and we can… we could…”

It was awkwardly quiet once he’d realized what he’d been speculating.
“You have all this planned out very well…” Hinata commented softly, trying not to overreact. Much easier said than done; she felt her heart doing twists and loops.

“Yeah, I've...I've got a lot of big plans…” Naruto muttered, a bit confounded himself, and his voice lowered, “And it's kinda funny…”

She blinked, awaiting a response, and decided to prompt one when he wouldn't supply it, “Funny, Naruto-kun? Why?”

“Because,” He told her, “You're in every single one.”

And their mouths came together ungracefully.

Hinata decided the acrobatics in her chest were well-earned, and that Naruto was being no one other than himself. The sincerity in his words and feelings was more than enough to make up for the unorthodox kissing. Tact was unavailable, at the time.

She was quite certain she was a terrible kisser, much to her displeasure. Naruto was much too gentle and fearful, she could sense. Hinata had a feeling that he believed that she didn't like what he was doing and she didn't want him to think that way. It was polite and close-mouthed and Naruto was certainly not going to initiate any further for fear of dishonoring the most incredible girl he had ever met.

That was what he had thought until he felt her hand reach up into his hair and drag him down to her height, her nails nipping into his scalp. He blinked, slightly shocked, and could see her eyes had fluttered closed and that she was submissive but approving of the action. He took it as a positive response and relaxed, glad that she was pleased.

'I should say it...I should say it...' Hinata felt cowardly that she was still unprepared to admit her feelings. Not in a totally honest way, at least. She couldn't gather the bravery to confess the love she had felt for a number of years in a row, and felt rather deceitful that she couldn't come clean about it, 'He'll think I like him just because of this...but that isn't true! I've always, always, always...'

It ended abruptly, both parting for air, and Hinata was back in touch with reality after she'd noticed that she was curled up against him again, wrapped in an alarmingly possessive embrace. She greedily relished the contact. Every inch of him was magnificent and his eyes had never looked brighter.

Her hair tickled his nose and Naruto chuckled, moving to rest his chin on top of her head, “Yeah. I think this kinda goes without saying, Hinata-chan, but...you're my girl. That's it. There's no way I'm sharing you or giving you up. I hope you don't mind?”

“I don't mind.” She replied, dazed, “And...I can keep you too?”

“You bet!”

After a few minutes of laughing and snuggling they stood, knowing that wasting any more time could determine the success or failure of their mission. They headed back down the river to find Haku, intent on helping him rescue Sasuke.

They thrashed about, knocking into each other brutally, slashing and cutting and blood had splattered the icy surface of the river, red on white.

Sasuke's goal was simply to pull away. If he could get some distance from Haku he could fly
beyond his reach and gain the advantage. Sadly that was not what was happening. Haku was too cunning to allow him such a luxury. He sank his claws into any spot of flesh he could reach (most often his wings) and wrestled with the young Uchiha, wanting to wear down his stamina.

Any blows that Sasuke tried to land were often evaded; Haku was simply too slippery and lithe to be touched. And on the rare occasion Sasuke did spot an opening with his Sharingan, his attacks would glance off of the Ice Armor that had spread over Haku's skin during the fighting.

'There's no way he's stronger than me!' He refused to believe it. Haku was a weak, docile person who was barely fit to be a shinobi. Sasuke felt his hand throbbing in pain from where he'd punched the armor and only broken a few bones in his hand.

Haku wheeled about like a wildcat, scratching a dodging. He'd cut a clean line though the center of the Leaf symbol on Sasuke's hitai-ate with his claws. It hadn't been intentional, and yet Haku supposed the mark would serve as a reminder of what trouble he had caused for his village and comrades.

After stumbling over a weaker patch of ice Haku and Sasuke broke a part momentarily, but it was all the time Sasuke needed. He spread his wings and took to the air again, but Haku pursued with an inhuman bound. He caught Sasuke while he'd been rising upward and hooked onto one of his wings like a twisting feline.

He slashed downward, his claws diamond-hard and reinforced with ice, and he ripped the entirety of Sasuke's right wing off. The two plummeted out of the air, punching, kicking and slashing: furious and beyond the point of exchanging pithy words.

Haku disappeared while they were falling, but Sasuke had seen him slink off into another ice mirror with his Sharingan. The Uchiha prodigy slammed into the ice but quickly stood again, still intent on finishing Haku even if his flight ability had been impaired.

He assaulted the mirrors with powerful fire jutsu as they encircled him, making them steam, but not even remotely melting them. A spire of ice jutted up from the river's surface suddenly and Sasuke leapt back to avoid it. Haku caught him from behind after exiting one of his mirrors.

He held his flailing opponent up in the air by his throat, perched neatly on top of the tall ice tower he had created.

"You have lost, Sasuke." Haku informed him, his voice growl-like but still retaining the placid traces of his regular tone.

Sasuke writhed furiously, thoroughly caught. He was unable to put up a significant struggle when his windpipe was being crushed by a single, clawed hand. He kicked Haku, meeting the ice armor futilely. Sasuke's remaining wing flapped desperately, trying to off-balance his captor, but Haku was too angry and crazed to allow his victim to overpower him.

In a last effort, Sasuke spat in the water-nin's face and only gained a hiss in response. Next to Haku a sword comprised of ice began to form and with his free hand he seized it by its hilt.

Everything had been swept up in the moment. They were berserk, bloodthirsty ninja who were far cries from who they'd been when they had left Konoha. Haku narrowed his eyes and steadied the sword in his hand; Sasuke's exposed gut would be too easy to hack into.

"Haku-kun, stop!"

Things seemed to freeze up and Haku instantly, near instinctively recognized the voice that had
called out to him. He dropped his ice blade immediately, and turned his pale gaze to see Naruto and Hinata sliding out across the surface of the ice towards him.

He realized how far he'd gone, 'Too far. Our mission was to rescue Sasuke...not kill him. I am the greatest disgrace in all of Konoha...'. Haku felt ashamed that he had let himself get so carried away while fighting Sasuke. The power of the cursed seal was so intoxicating it had an almost brainwashing type of effect and he had fallen prey to it.

His mouth formed the words of his apology to Naruto and Hinata, and Sasuke as well, but there had been a bright light that distracted him. It had jarred him. Slowly, very confused, Haku looked down to see that Sasuke had taken his hand away from his wrist.

He had plunged the Chidori straight through his ice armor, in through his chest and reached out of his back.

Naruto had skidded to a horrified halt down below beside Hinata at the sight of Sasuke skewering Haku after he'd let his guard down. He was speechless at the sight.

Haku released Sasuke's throat and his feet planted down on the top of the ice spire in front of Haku. Sasuke withdrew his hand from his opponent, leaving a bloody hole where flesh and tissue had once been. Haku made no move to retaliate, he was so shocked. His cursed seal form receded; the white strands of his hair blowing away as snow in the breeze and his cat-like features disappeared within seconds.

The water-nin's eyes rolled back in his head, completely drained from his wounds, and he fell backwards off of the ice spire, landing with a painful thud to the frozen river's surface.

Hinata was the first to react. She quickly ran ahead to the fallen shinobi with a shriek, angry and heartbroken over what she had witnessed. She dropped to her knees beside Haku and used her Byakugan to scan for the worst of his injuries.

Sasuke leapt down from the ice tower and his curse mark also receded. Naruto couldn't believe the Uchiha had the audacity to face him after he'd punched a hole through his best friend.

“Naruto!” Hinata was calling for him, desperate, “I don't know if he's...I...I need help!”

He didn't budge and merely stared back at Sasuke, his stomach turning over at the sight of his stoic face, “...why did you...do that?”

“He got in my way.”

“He tried to save you!” Naruto bellowed, absolutely infuriated, “We all tried to save you and this is how you treat us?”

His eyes narrowed, “I didn't ask to be saved.”

“Neji's dead because of you! And who knows about the others?” Naruto howled accusingly, “If you had just stayed they'd all be fine! This is all your fault! Did you even think about Sakura-chan or Kiba? They'd do anything for you!”

Sasuke remained silent.

“Naruto-kun, please!” Hinata cried again, “I need you!”

Naruto was utterly torn in deciding what to do. He had to determine whether revenge or his friend was of more importance, and he didn't have much time to decide.
“If you want to fight me that's just fine,” Sasuke said smugly, seeing his indecision, “And if you do he will die. It's either me or him.”

It fell quiet again and Hinata's cries for Naruto reverberated through the chilly air.

“Haku-kun is my brother and I'm going to protect him,” Naruto announced boldly, “It looks like we have different missions in life, huh? You need to kill your brother and I need to look after mine.”

Even if it was only for a brief moment Sasuke's eyes looked troubled. Some sort of nostalgia still did reside within him for the camaraderie that existed between kin, but he had long since learned to live without it. It was one of the reasons he had felt so betrayed by Itachi.

“Go then if you have to!” Naruto snarled, “But the next time I see you, I'll make sure to do to you what you did to Haku, so don't forget it!”

He turned his back on the Uchiha and ran to Hinata, who had stopped calling for him after he'd gone to her.

Sasuke stood staring at the two remaining Leaf ninja dawdling over Haku. After a long, silent moment he also turned and walked away across the ice in the direction of the Sound village.

Tears of frustration slipped down Hinata's cheeks as she desperately tried using the Palm Healing Jutsu she had learned from her medical scrolls. Even if she could heal most of his minor injuries, she barely had any chakra left to tackle the wounds that were most life-threatening.

“How bad is it?” Naruto asked quietly, kneeling down beside her.

“I…I've stopped most of the bleeding but…I can't do anything about his internal injuries,” She shook her head, “I'm sorry I'm so useless, Naruto-kun!”

“Hey! Don't start that again!” Naruto warned her with a smile, “It's okay. We'll take care of him.”

Hinata nodded in agreement and asked, “But what about Sasuke? Aren't you going to-?”

“Haku's more valuable than he is.” Naruto growled darkly, and she hung her head, understanding the mission had failed because priorities needed to be kept.

Naruto pulled her to her feet, “Right, well, we've got to get going back to Konoha now. Otherwise we're all in trouble…” Her knees buckled unexpectedly, but he reacted quickly enough to catch her, “Woops! You still tired, Hinata-chan?”

She squeaked in embarrassment and he took it as an affirmative.

“Then don't try to look so tough when you're exhausted like that, okay?” He made a shadow clone that bent down for her and she climbed onto its back, grateful and yet slightly humiliated she had to be piggy-backed home. It felt good to relax her weary muscles, though, and she nuzzled the back of the clone's neck.

It was the first time Naruto had seen one of his kage bunshin blush.

Carefully, Naruto pulled Haku onto his back, “Hang in there, okay, Haku-kun?” He and his clone moved back in the direction of the forest southbound, desperate to get back to Konoha.
“You're such an irresponsible guy,” Tama said quietly, dabbing at the puncture marks along Sato's torso with a cotton swab, “I can't believe you went out there…”

They sat facing each other on a bench inside of her bakery. A first aid kit had been splayed open on the floor messily and a sign hung in the glass of the front door that read: 'be back in five minutes!'

It was probably going to take more than five minutes to inspect Sato's wounds, Tama suspected, but her customers wouldn't mind waiting a little while.

“Ow.” Sato had his shirt pulled up over his head and he winced every time Tama touched a particularly bloody spot, “Owie….eh…ow….eck! You're doing that on purpose!” He accused, “That hurts you know!”

“I'm not! You're just a big weenie, so will you hold still already?” She seized him about his shoulders, cautiously, and held him in place, “I'm sorry, Sato, but I wouldn't have to be doing this if you hadn't put yourself in jeopardy…yet again.”

“…I had to go.” He said gently and Tama frowned, a bit unnerved by the dutiful inflection of his voice.

She sighed after a moment, exasperated, “I guess you did…but I still don't see why you didn't just tell me first. You know I wouldn't have stopped you…and I would've liked to have helped too.”

Sato scratched his chin, “Well you see your dad wouldn't have thanked me for that. He can barely stand me already.”

“Stop talking rubbish!”

“No really! I think he's out to kill me, maybe!” Sato protested, flinching when she had found another stinging wound, “You think he'd stand for his lovely, innocent daughter being dragged into a dangerous mission with a hooligan like me?”

She smiled, “No…but I don't care what he thinks.”

“You slay me, Tama, really…”

Tama began wrapping up his injuries after she'd disinfected them. After a long, quiet minute Sato added, “Don't worry about it. I know Naruto-kun and Sunshine will pull through! For now we just have to sit back and wait.”

He gave a startled jump when a young, freckled girl walked into the room unexpectedly. He nearly knocked Tama off of the bench, and she quickly turned around to see what had startled him.

“How'd you get in here?” Sato asked, jumpily, and the girl wearing an apron gave him a confused look from behind the counter.

“Oh…I work here.”

Tama frowned at the young Hatake, “You've got to chill out. She's not an enemy ninja, Sato, she works here. It's a bakery after all…”

Her fellow employee began stacking fresh bread on the shelves, and asked over her shoulder, “Sheesh, Tama-nee-chan! What the heck is his problem?”
"There's a whole list of them, Ami, but let's not discuss it here."

Sato scowled, but yelped in pain when Tama again proceeded to wrap up his boo boos. Ami, by some stroke of good fortune, was able to completely disregard them and continued stocking the display shelves.

“You're right about one thing, though,” Tama said at length, “If either of my parents hear about me having to patch you up when I'm supposed to be working…or you just coming home with holes in you, they will definitely not be happy.”

“You got that right.” He agreed, sulkily. Sato turned his gaze out to the front window of the shop while Tama went about swathing the rest of his wounds. By some twist of fate, he spotted Shino walking past in the direction of the Hokage's tower.

He couldn't hold still.

“Shino's back!” Sato leapt up, and this time he did knock Tama off of the bench, “Oh, sorry Tama! I'll be right back,” He sprang for the door, shirtless, and hollering for his teammate, “Shino! Over here! Shino!”

“Get back here!” Tama scrambled out the door after the empty-headed fool, “You're still bleeding for heaven’s sake! Can't you wait?”

Ami watched the two of them have a footrace down the street to catch up to the startled Aburame boy. ‘Those two were made for each other…’

“Someone is coming, Naruto-kun.” Hinata announced softly as they raced through the treetops. They had covered a great distance in a short amount of time, but Naruto's stamina was beginning to wane.

He looked over to her nervously, watching his shadow clone carry her through the canopy, “Right…is it a Sound ninja?”

“No, I'm not, Naruto.” Kakashi descended with Pakkun beside him, and both Naruto and his doppelganger halted at the sight of a fellow Leaf shinobi. Kakashi observed that Naruto had been escorting both Haku and Hinata back to the village, and Haku most especially looking a bloody mess, “What happened?”

“I tried to stop him, but Sasuke, he…” Naruto's voice trailed off, “He did this to Haku and he was only trying to help.”

It was quiet for a moment, and Kakashi then sighed, understanding, “It's too late then, I see. I'm sorry. I wish I had gotten here sooner to put a stop to it.”

He moved to the shadow clone that was guarding Hinata and relieved it of its duty.

He pulled the Hyuga girl onto his back and she pouted slightly, much preferring Naruto's company. Kakashi could sense it too, and he chuckled quietly, “I'm sorry, Hinata-hime, but I suspect Naruto-kun is low on chakra now. Let's give him a break, hm?”

She blushed, wondering if it was that obvious.

Naruto's legs were a bit shaky, but he still felt he had enough energy to bring himself and his teammate back to Konoha. He glanced over to Kakashi as they set out, “I'm sorry about all of this, but I have to say…anyone who tries to hurt my friends is a person I can't trust.”
“And that is the truth of it, Naruto.” Kakashi agreed, finding his heart was not as heavy at losing Sasuke as he had anticipated it to be.

After agonizing over the paperwork with Lee and Tenten's help, Shikamaru had handed in the forms and found a quiet bench down the hall, wanting to put some space between himself and the remainder of Team 13.

He sat with his head in his hands, feeling like a complete failure. Shikamaru had been trying to ignore the painful feeling of how he'd been responsible for his team's welfare, and in the end he was unsure if most of them would survive.

Down the corridor he could see that Maito Gai had returned, and was loudly trying to cheer up his students. Even Lee appeared inconsolable, though, and Gai was taking their dampened spirits as a sign that Neji could be lost from their team at any moment.

He did his best to look optimistic in front of his anxious pupils.

Shikamaru tore his gaze away from them, feeling miserable, ‘If they lose Neji it'll all be on me. I shouldn't have left him…’ A tear slid down his nose, 'And I shouldn't have left Naruto or Hinata either! Now there's nothing I can do about it! They're still out there and they could be dead…I wouldn't even know it!'

“I don't want to do this anymore!” Shikamaru muttered, demoralized, “If this is what a chunin has to put up with then I don't want to be one! I should just quit being a ninja…all of this is just…”

“Too troublesome?”

Startled, he looked up and saw his father standing in front of him, wearing a disapproving expression, “Pull yourself together, Shikamaru. Did you really believe that things would become easier as you gained rank as a shinobi?”

“Of course not!”

“And even so, against your very nature to avoid exerting yourself or exposing yourself to pain and hardship, you believed that you could still guide your friends when they needed a leader,” Shikaku reminded him, “You should know better than to expect every mission having a fairytale ending.”

“But I led all of them to ruin! It's my fault they're hurt!” Shikamaru protested, staring up at his father, “I can't accept that.”

“All the same,” Shikaku went on, “Would you rather someone else doing it in your place? Some other ninja being responsible for the success or destruction of your friends? To give up on yourself is to abandon them, Shikamaru.”

His son calmed down considerably.

Shikaku patted Shikamaru's head, “Learn from this mission. From now on be a stronger leader and a stronger friend. Don't give in to every heartache that comes your way, Shikamaru, because I promise you, you will encounter many of them in your life.”

After a long moment, he agreed, “Alright, Dad. I think I get what you're saying.” Shikaku smiled, still proud that his son had done as well as he had on his first mission as a chunin.
Down the hall there was a commotion and Shikamaru turned to see two teams of shinobi had returned. One of them was led by Shizune, and Shikaku went to her, handing over an antidote that she would need to administer to Chouji.

The second team was led by Hayate, having been successful in recovering Shizune's lost team. After directing his subordinates to rest and file a mission report, Hayate went to where Tenten had been sitting with Lee to make sure she was alright.

Shikamaru decided then that sulking was not helping anyone, and instead of sitting by himself he crossed the hall to where Lee and Tenten were.

Sakura rolled over, letting her eyes blink open slowly. She was immediately aware of her surroundings for they were all too familiar. Her bed was neatly made beneath her and she was spread out on top of it, her face resting on her pillow. In a way, the softness and comfort upset her. If she was home it meant she was safe, but it meant Sasuke was still out there on his own.

The pink haired girl could distinguish shouting coming from outside of her room. Her parents were downstairs arguing again, about her, she assumed. It was bad enough she had run off and scared the living daylights out of them, but Sakura suspected they had given Gaara a chilly if not distrustful reception when he had brought her home.

She frowned inwardly. Gaara certainly had nerve, knocking her out like he had. She'd be sure to chide him about it later, but she felt more giddy and scatterbrained at the thought of the red haired nin than she did upset with him.

Sakura lifted herself from her bed and stretched. She momentarily considered going downstairs and explaining everything to her parents, *That'll take forever and they probably won't want to listen anyway…'*

She went for option B to escape her room via window.

She peeked into the hallway outside of her bedroom door discreetly, and saw her parents were still in a hotly contested shouting match, *How can they blame each other at a time like this? I'm the one who ran away!*

Sakura pulled on her sandals, considering what she should do, *I guess I'll go wait for Gaara-kun. He must've gone back to help the others after he took care of me.* Her brow furrowed in disappointment, *After the way he acted back in the forest I was so sure that he…well…I thought that he might stay for me.*

After she snuck out of her open window and dropped down to the ground level she paused. Sakura gawked at the three ninja sitting on her front step, all napping.

She couldn't contain her joy, “You DID stay!”

The three of them jerked awake and blinked over to Sakura. The pink haired girl was grinning, and went over to greet the sand siblings with a new bounce in her step. Kankuro smirked playfully at the sight of his younger brother's starry-eyed gaze.

“You certainly caused quite a bit of trouble, Sakura,” Temari yawned, pleasantly though, “We're glad to have you back.”

Sakura frowned slightly, “I really am sorry about that. I tried to fix everything by myself, but I guess…I guess that wasn't too smart, was it?”
Temari shrugged unflappably, “It wasn't. But I have a feeling you won't pull anything like that again, so make sure your Hokage knows it.”

Sakura looked to Gaara but she couldn't find anything to say. He looked happy to see her, but a slight bit of apprehension was visible in his expression. She had a feeling he thought she was angry with him for punching her earlier, which she was, but now probably wasn't the time to bring it up.

She hugged him, scooching in between her target and Kankuro who made an annoyed sound at being pushed aside for such a mushy action. Gaara ignored his siblings’ awkward faces completely as he wrapped his arms around her, “I don't think you're aware that a retrieval team went out to search for Haku and Sasuke. It shouldn't take much longer for them to get back.”

Sakura pulled back, looking at him in puzzlement, “Did you say Haku-kun left? There's no way! Why would he do something like that?”

“He wouldn't,” Gaara confirmed, kissing her shoulder and Kankuro snickered at Temari's traumatized face, “He was probably taken by force. You didn't see him when you were with Sasuke?”

“No, I didn't. They must have met up somewhere else or….I don't know,” Sakura pulled away from him again and stood up, looking dutiful, “I want to go back there and help!”

Gaara smirked, “That isn't possible. By now they're probably beyond the borders of the Fire Country, and Tsunade-sama wouldn't let a fugitive like you back out of the village anyway.”

She sighed, disheartened, but he stood up as well and turned to his brother and sister, “I think now's as good a time as any to bring Sakura to Hokage-sama so she can explain herself. What do you think?”

Temari stood up and linked arms with the younger girl, “Sounds like a good idea,” She grinned mischievously at Sakura, “Come on you little criminal, let's get going.”

Sakura sighed in annoyance and went ahead with Temari.

Kankuro stood and jammed his hands in his pockets, shaking his head at his younger brother, “You sure pick out the craziest girls, you know that?”

“I've only ever picked one, actually,” Gaara replied, haughtily, “And I'm grateful she's a bit strange in some respects, otherwise she wouldn't be able to keep up with me.”

He walked ahead of his brother and Kankuro blinked stupidly, finding his brother's reasoning just as disquieting as it was accurate, 'They're all loony birds in this village.'

After setting out to locate the Hokage they were informed that she had already gone to the hospital to tend to the wounded ninja who had returned to the village. In due course Gaara and his companions went there only to discover Sato, Shino, and Tama loafing off near the front entrance.

Tama had pulled Sato's shirt down successfully after much toil, while the silver haired boy went about explaining himself to his friend. Shino was clearly as offended as Tama had been about being excluded from the retrieval mission.

“Really, Shino, it was nuts,” Sato summed it up glumly, “If you had been there maybe we'd all have been alright, but…something tells me that even you would have had a tough time.”
“Your assumptions have been off before.” Shino retorted stiffly, his sharp hazel eyes gleaming behind his dark glasses, “Since you had the privilege of going you'll meet with me to train every morning for the next month.”

“...sometimes I really hate you, Shino.”

Tama grinned to herself, glad that Sato was receiving some well-deserved discipline.

The young Hatake spotted Gaara approaching with his cohorts, and he was quick to greet him, “Hey! Gaara-kun! We were wondering where you disappeared to!” He proceeded to fill him in on the details and status of the mission, and who was and wasn't out of commission.

“What do you mean Naruto and Hinata aren't back yet?” Gaara snapped furiously after hearing the news, “You left them out there?”

Sakura's eyes were wide with apprehension. She had thought that everyone had returned at least partially intact, but after being informed her good friends were still in danger, the guilt she had felt earlier resurfaced.

“There was nothing we could do! We were all exhausted, by then,” Sato explained, half-heartedly, “The only people who might've been able to keep fighting may have been Shikamaru and Chouji, and they were on their last legs too! What would you have wanted us to do?”

Gaara turned from him, “I'm going to find them.”

Temari and Kankuro seized his arms straight away, and his older brother glowered at him warningly, “Need I remind you that your Hokage ordered no one else to leave? Besides, you think Temari and I are going to let you go anywhere without us?”

“I can go.” Sato volunteered, smiling blithely, “We didn't exactly go to help before under orders and penalties for insubordination aren't that strict-!”

Tama grabbed him roughly and asked, “Shino-kun, how about a little help here?” The Aburame assisted her in dragging the foolish Hatake home, ignoring his protests and assurances that he was perfectly fine.

It was quiet after that with only the Sand siblings remaining. Gaara calmed down, understanding that what Kankuro had said was true. Leaving would be irrational, especially when Sakura had that despondent look about her again, 'If I leave her alone it could get worse.'

“I want to go make sure Kiba-kun is okay…” The pink haired girl spoke after a moment, “Will someone come with me?”

Kankuro and Gaara looked to Temari and she scowled at them, but then sighed, “Sure, Sakura. I'll go too.”

She followed after Sakura into the hospital, deciding to keep the downhearted girl company only because Gaara was so deeply fond of her.

After that it was only Gaara and his older brother, and the red haired boy sat on the curb of the street, sighing heavily. Kankuro did the same, seeing the magnitude of the situation was far worse than what they had originally believed.

For a long while they watched people come and go from the hospital, neither speaking to the other. The roads were uncommonly empty at such an hour of the day and it only made them more anxious.
“When are you going back to Suna?”

Kankuro looked sidelong to his brother, “What?”

“You and Temari don't have to stay here anymore,” Gaara reminded him, “When are you two going back?”

He looked ahead at an office building on the other side of the avenue, and a lopsided smile appeared on his face, “Well…we thought we’d stay here until we aren’t needed. With you being a Leaf shinobi and all…we thought we're kind of obligated to help you and your village in any way we can.”

Gaara snorted at the sentimental logic, but inwardly was grateful they were still willing to stay with him for as long as they could.

“Watch out, Kankuro, or soon you'll be wearing a Leaf headband too.”

It had been a frantic race back to the village. Naruto felt energy drain from his limbs with every second, but his indomitable spirit forbade him from stopping to rest. He was too proud to show weakness in front of Kakashi either, particularly when his best friend was in such a state.

Naruto had barely noticed when they had reached Konoha.

They flew past the gate, and Kakashi had gotten ahead of him, he being heartier at the time. Both kept to the rooftops with their passengers weak and huddled silently on their backs. Naruto looked over to Hinata from time to time curiously, his heart rate picking up every time he glanced at her demure face, 'I wish things had gone a bit differently. The last thing I wanted was to tell her everything when we were both losing it back there…it still went pretty well, though.'

He was also hoping her eyes were not ailing her, and that Kabuto had not inflicted any injuries to her that they had not yet noticed, 'He said he attacked her heart. He did that to me once and I only made it because Baa-chan was there. How did Hinata-chan survive something like that?'

They were closing in on the hospital and they descended back down to the ground since there was little traffic to avoid. The building came into sight and they were only a block away from it before Naruto stalled suddenly, and Kakashi halted as well, looking back to him, “Naruto? What's wrong?”

They were in the middle of the street. The hospital entrance was dead ahead. Naruto found it funny that things only got worse before they got better. He carefully slipped Haku off of his back, quietly inspecting him after he had sensed a sudden change in his friend.

Naruto's face went ghostly pale and he looked up at Kakashi with eyes wide as saucers, “Haku-kun, he's...he's not breathing anymore.”

As if on a silent cue Hinata shimmied away from Kakashi and scrambled over to the blonde boy as he frantically tried to revive Haku. Kakashi approached as well, tentatively, quite upset that they may have been too late.

Hinata, unusually proactive, gently pushed Naruto aside as he began to get hysterical, and she looked for a pulse, a heartbeat: some sign of hope. Her eyes scanned over Haku’s numerous wounds morosely, but she frowned in determination, not willing to let the dark haired boy slip away.
Naruto watched her bend down, her small mouth initiating rescue breaths and some part of him clenched up at the sight of the desperate act. He could hear her cooing softly, trying to persuade Haku back to life in-between breaths.

Kakashi laid a hand on her shoulder and pulled her away. She whimpered miserably, but allowed herself to be relocated, already feeling like a failure. Naruto cried openly, letting go of the optimism he’d been clinging to earlier. For once he could be honest with himself in front of Haku, and he hated that his friend wouldn’t even know it.

“…I'm sorry…” His voice shook despairingly, “I know that you…you're not like Gaara-kun and I. You don't heal like we do and you can’t keep up like we can…but I thought that if I pretended you were…like us…that you would be! That you’d make it!”

Hinata sobbed beside the Copy Ninja, listening to Naruto, and somehow understood what he was referring to. She had always known that he was different, and in some ways recognized that it was the reason for him being ostracized, but she had never suspected that it had also been something he and his friends had been depending on.

“If it were different…if it had been me with these wounds…I would've been okay!” Naruto cried, angrily, “I'd take it all, Haku-kun! I'd take it from you, if I could, in a second! I don't want you to…there's no way that you deserved any of this!”

His mournful wails had drawn attention.

Gaara could recognize Naruto's voice from a mile away, but at the present, he had only been across the boulevard when he had realized his friend had returned. Kankuro followed him quickly to the sight of Naruto's lament.

Hinata looked over to the red haired boy sorrowfully. The look of shock on Gaara's face was as clear as it was on his brother's.

Naruto completely ignored the newcomers' presence and continued on, “Was it worth it, then? I let him go thinking that I could help you. But if it would've turned out like this either way, Haku-kun…would you have wanted me to stay? Would you want me to kill him to get back at him? Settle the score? I would've done it! I would've done it if I'd known!”

“Naruto.” Gaara said, his voice low and aghast.

“What did you want me to do?” Naruto asked, staring at Haku's face, unwilling to bring himself to raise his eyes to Gaara.

When the medics arrived they had to pry the blonde ninja away from Haku before taking him into the building, and Kakashi restrained him from chasing after the interns, knowing he'd try to get his friend back if he could.

“Let go!” Naruto was hissing, and with a summoned strength he tore himself away from Kakashi's hold, flailing about, “What the hell do any of you know, anyway? He didn't die on top of you! He didn't suffer near you! Don't act like you-!”

Gaara walloped him ferociously in the side of the head, backhanding him, and Naruto was sent crashing down to the concrete. Hinata made a start to go to him but Kankuro held her back, shaking his head when she gave him an inquiring look.

The small group of shinobi stood in a circle around Naruto, silent, and the blonde boy hobbled to his feet, wiping his lip. He looked over to Gaara, finally back to his senses, “Thanks…Gaara-
Gaara folded his arms commandingly, seeing his friend was again lucid, “You have to stay calm. He isn't dead yet. But if you continue on acting like this then it's just as well.”

“I know. I'm sorry...it's just,” Naruto's voice grew quiet, “I don't know how I'd get by without Haku-kun. He was there for us since the very start...”

Gaara nodded, “I know.”

Seeing an opportunity to check on his team, Kakashi asked at length, “I'm sure at least one of you knows what condition Sakura and Kiba are in, am I right?”

Gaara turned to him, helpfully, “Sakura is fine. She's with Kiba now.”

The Copy Ninja nodded in thanks before departing to speak with his students.

“Naruto-kun...”

Naruto glanced over to Hinata who was standing timidly a short distance away from him. She spoke again, “I believe everything is going to be alright. We've come too far for things to fall apart now.”

He felt the warm feeling in his chest return again and he edged over to her, miraculously cured of his bleak mindset. He felt like kissing her again, mostly.

He gave her a soft word, trying to draw her in nearer, but curiously, she took a large if not startled hop back from him, leaving him puzzled. For no explicable reason Hinata's eyes had grown wide and were directed behind Naruto's fuzzy, golden head.

“Hinata.”

Naruto turned around to see Hiashi had appeared behind him, and it was then he understood why Hinata was desperate not to show any signs of the new relationship.

It would be a swift death warrant for her beloved, as well as her own traditional Hyuga “examination of chastity.” She shuddered.

Hinata bowed to her father and he nodded, not hiding the look of relief of his face at the sight of her unharmed. She was quite touched by such an expression.

“We're returning to the compound now. Are you alright, Hinata?”

“I'm fine, Father, but I...” She hesitated, “I do need to tell you something.”

“Very well, then.” He turned back in the direction of the compound, but Hinata was reluctant to tag along. Naruto gave her an understanding look, mainly comprised of disappointment that he wasn't able to kiss her publicly, but he knew that she was going to be fine, somehow.

Hinata gave a soft squeak of farewell to him before following her father home.

Naruto turned to go with Gaara after that and as they neared the hospital, Gaara thought to ask, “So it's you two as well?”

Naruto was befuddled, “What the heck is that supposed to mean, bastard?”

He smirked, “You look at her like you own her, Naruto. Don't think her father didn't notice.”
“Maybe I want him to notice!” Naruto growled, protectively, “I’m not gonna hide how I feel!”

There was a pause, “And what do you mean by: as well?”

“Sakura needed a disciplinarian.”

Naruto snickered, “Is that what you call it?”

Once in the lobby they had finished arguing over who had been more romantic. It had ended in a stalemate, but Naruto was convinced that he was the undisputed winner since he didn't have to knock Hinata out. Gaara promptly told him to shut up.

“You said that Neji's in surgery?” Naruto was absolutely perplexed after being informed, “You mean he's okay?”

“Okay, as in, not dead yet: yes.” Gaara confirmed darkly, “Tsunade-sama is with him now.”

Naruto sighed, relieved and shocked, “Whoa. Hinata-chan and I thought…well…some things happened.”

“We can discuss it later.” Gaara dismissed the subject, sensing Naruto had a long story to tell.

Kankuro announced that he was going to fetch some food because they hadn't eaten anything since the day before. He asked them if they wanted anything before he left: unanimously ramen. Deciding not to question their tastes he went ahead to the cafeteria, unsure if they served noodles in a hospital.

Naruto and Gaara had found the waiting room on the second floor was empty of civilians. Apparently, at Hayate's request, it had been reserved for only shinobi who were waiting on word about their injured teammates. Tenten was fast asleep in one of the burgundy armchairs, and they kept quiet, not wanting to disturb the anxious kunoichi.

Time dragged by hauntingly and the sun sank down below the horizon.

Passing nurses knew better than to ask the waiting ninja to go home (since they were notoriously stubborn and had dealt with them before) as hours crawled by in the night. The three of them sat silent in the echoing, empty room, the sound of their breathing was the only communication they needed.

The following morning Gai and Lee had come to check on Tenten, who was in no better state of emotional or physical health after spending the night waiting. Eventually, after a long, semi-persuasive speech from Gai and his protégé they managed to convince her to get some proper rest. They escorted her from the hospital to her apartment with youthful assurances that their treasured Hyuga warrior would be well in no time. Yet she was reluctant to assume anything when she still didn't know what condition he was in.

Gaara and Naruto did not budge from where they were, even at Temari and Kankuro's insistence. They were brought food periodically as they waited endlessly for word on Haku. Day turned into night again and they slept in the waiting room, spread out on the chairs uncomfortably. The next day arrived unceremoniously, and neither had heard a thing from any doctor on their friend, even after Naruto had implored some of them for information.

All they had been told was that Shizune had gone to him and that her face had been wracked with panic.
That didn’t necessarily make them feel any better, so after a while they stopped asking altogether.

They fell asleep again, both exhausted with worry. Naruto woke at noon to see Jiraiya sitting across from them in a chair, his hands resting on his knees while he watched them with a contemplative expression.

Naruto roughly shook Gaara back to consciousness, “The Perv’s back!”

The red haired boy blinked awake, disoriented and stiff-necked, but quickly gave his teacher his attention.

“When did you get back, Ero-sensei? Where were you?”

“I got back two hours ago from doing some reconnaissance near the country border.” Jiraiya answered succinctly, none of his playfulness present at the time, “I’ve just spoken with Tsunade.”

Naruto and Gaara quickly understood that he was referring to Haku’s situation, and they kept silent, waiting for results.

There was a lack of something in Jiraiya's gaze. He sighed deeply, staring at the both of them intently, “Listen. We all need to have…a long chat about what's just happened…”

Naruto felt something fluttering inside of him die.
The room was quiet and her palms felt sweaty, worse than they had when Gaara had cornered her. Now, Sakura watched Akamaru sleep peacefully on the table ahead, on his way to recovery.

After Kiba's sister had left, assuring him that his ninken would be fine, Sakura had stayed with him. For a while she had just watched his stare migrate between the clock, his puppy and the floor, she herself feeling terribly lost.

“You're still my friend, right Sakura?” He had asked after a long while.

The pink haired girl sighed, and came to stand behind the chair he'd been slumped over in. Kiba couldn't bring himself to look at her. Sakura hugged his shoulders, and his ruffled mop of spiky hair was surprisingly soft beneath her chin while she reassured him, “I'm always going to be your friend, Kiba-kun. Why would that change after all of this?”

“Because I thought you'd be upset if we couldn't bring him back.” Kiba answered softly, then corrected himself, “Because I thought you'd be upset if I didn't bring him back…”

“What we had? You know it wasn't that much…” Sakura snorted inelegantly, her temper flaring at the thought. She walked over to where Akamaru lay and began to stroke his white head, then added, “And…whatever the heck it was, it sure wasn't your job to keep it together. You're not an outsider looking in, Kiba, you were my friend from the moment you let me pet Akamaru. How could you think Sasuke would get in the way of that?”

“He's pushy like that.” He supplied feebly and then stopped talking. His feelings were still hurt and he couldn't understand how Sakura could be so calm about the whole situation.

At first he had thought he'd been most distressed over Akamaru's condition, but Hana had quickly laid his fears to rest. It wasn't long after that the dreadful feeling returned again, though, and he realized it couldn't simply be his failure that was worrying him.

He had relied on Sasuke and respected him. Kiba remembered the few times when he had gotten into a spat with the Uchiha, but they had never quarreled long or violently. He found himself reaching for friendship rather than rivalry, and had come to trust his teammate without question.

With him gone it felt as if he and Sakura had been abandoned, 'Like he went ahead to get something that he thought was better than us. Toss us aside like an old shoe! What did we mean to him anyway? He never made that clear…and I...I let myself believe that he was my friend! I'm just a big idiot!'

Kiba rubbed his watering eyes after Sakura had begun to stare at him. He gave up after a moment and decided not to hide it. He was sad and she knew it too. And even when she wouldn't show it, Kiba was aware that Sakura was taking Sasuke's betrayal the hardest, 'She just wants to protect...
everyone by hiding how she feels. In the end it won't do much good. Hiding it is just as bad as lying.'

Sakura wasn't sure if it would be wise to explain to Kiba that what he had believed existed between her and Sasuke was, in fact, a reality with herself and Gaara. Just the thought of the red haired nin raised her spirits, but she felt it was unfair to Kiba to not be showing remorse. She did feel pain over what had happened, but Gaara had turned out to be an overpowering drug that filled her with joy. That was something she doubted her teammate would understand.

Kakashi did not knock when he walked in, and he didn't have his nose buried in his book either.

“Kakashi-sensei!” Sakura took a step forward and then halted, feeling the need to explain herself if he didn't already know what had transpired, “I'm sorry! I could've done something earlier but I acted dumb and let Sasuke-kun leave. I wish now that I had done more. I'm…I'm sorry.”

He closed his visible eye briefly, “No, Sakura. I'm the one who owes you both an apology. Because I let Sasuke get swept up in all of this chaos, he ran to power instead of his friends, thinking it was the right path. Now you have to suffer because of it. I'm the one who's sorry, Sakura.”

“Maybe if I was a better friend then he may have wanted to stay,” Kiba spoke up, thinking it over, “I always acted like I understood everything but I didn't really. I wouldn't know how Sasuke feels completely because my sis would never betray me the way Itachi did to him. I could've done more if I'd put myself in his place…”

“Don't say that,” Kakashi patted the boy's head, “You can't expect to be perfect, you know. You did all that you could and that certainly doesn't mean you did anything wrong.”

“But, Kakashi-sensei, when are we going out again to find him?” Sakura asked eagerly, “We can still bring him back, right?”

He looked at her for a long moment, guiltily, “There's nothing we can do beyond this point. Sasuke is with Sound now, and the only way he'll be coming back is if he does it himself.”

“So this is how our team ends, huh?” Kiba growled bitterly to himself, “We get one try to make things right and when we don't succeed it's all for nothing!”

It wasn't the right comment for that moment. The bold façade that Sakura had been upholding crumbled at the harsh words the Inuzuka had spoken, and she caved, beginning to cry in the face of the truth of things. It had been something Gaara had stalled her from doing, but it was inevitable nonetheless.

Kiba, regretting his acrimony, stood from his chair and hugged her in apology. He didn't want her to be sad, but try as he might it was unavoidable; for the both of them.

“Our team isn't dead.” Kakashi told them, his voice stern, “As long as you remain loyal to each other your friendship can never be broken. In the scheme of things, this is only a wakeup call. Be glad we're all here and alive right now, because there will be times we'll be less fortunate.”

Kiba nodded, watching his sensei's face, obscured as it was, and found new strength welling up in his chest. Sakura calmed down as well and she hoped that the future, as perilous as Kakashi predicted it to be, would hold some remedy for their pain.

Teuchi watched his only two customers stare at their ramen bowls. The silent funk they were in had him extremely anxious, and after hearing of the uproar many Konoha ninja had been in a few
days before, he was hesitant to ask them where Haku-kun was.

“What's wrong boys?” He asked softly, “Do you want me to bring you something else?”

Gaara wearily took a nip at his ramen, saying nothing. Naruto was too lost in thought remembering all that had happened to eat his miso.

Jiraiya sighed deeply, staring at the both of them intently, “Listen. We all need to have…a long chat about what's just happened…”

Naruto felt something fluttering in him die.

“Out with it, then.” Gaara snapped, anxious, and his mentor didn't blame him for it either. Naruto was too distraught to make a snappy comment. He was sick with worry.

“As of now, Haku is in stable condition,” Jiraiya notified them, “However…” Both Naruto and Gaara flinched at the insensitive adverb, “His cursed seal is beyond my ability to restrain. There's no way I can barricade it now that it's gotten so out of hand.”

“But Ero-sensei you know that he wouldn't use it unless he had to!” Naruto reminded, “He couldn't help it! If he didn't use it then he might have gotten killed.”

“But the tradeoff is just as bad if not worse,” His teacher retorted, “Please understand that every time Haku uses that seal it gives Orochimaru more and more control over him. It's become too dangerous now. He's going to be a huge target in Sound being that snake-bastard doesn't want any wasted opportunities, if you get my meaning.”

Gaara agreed with Naruto despite the details, “Even if he is a target he really is the least promising one. Haku-kun won't use the Cursed Seal ever again and that leaves Orochimaru at the disadvantage.”

“There's no way to be sure about that.” Jiraiya said darkly, “When push comes to shove, Haku is as morally stubborn as you two…but there are some things that tempt even him, I should think.”

“That said, how about we go see him now?” Naruto interrupted, officiously, “We've only been waiting for forever!”

Again Jiraiya relented and he nodded to them, “Come on then. I should warn you he's not a pleasant sight. He's asleep now and he probably won't wake up for a while.”

They followed Jiraiya impatiently out of the waiting room and into the corridor, desperate to see their friend. They had only just woken but they felt more alert than ever now that their patience had paid off. They rounded a corner and Jiraiya opened a door on their immediate left, “In here.”

They entered and were met with the dismal sight of their teammate bedridden and hooked up to an IV. Naruto and Gaara immediately went closer, grimacing at the small bruises and burns lining his exposed arms. A few scratches remained on his porcelain face.

Haku was incapacitated but at least he was alive. That was all Naruto had to know. He plopped down into the chair beside the bed and watched his friend with a relieved smile.

Gaara, in contrast, shook furiously at the sight of Haku so badly injured. He knew he'd never be able to let Sasuke get away with it. Jiraiya laid a hand on the redhead's shoulder, sensing his mounting rage, “Cool it, Gaara. Make a habit of not living in the past. You'll be more helpful to Haku if you're not seeking vengeance.”
He relaxed a bit for the first time in a long while, agreeing with his teacher. And not a moment later Tsunade strolled in and blinked at the intruders in surprise.

“Is this a reunion party or something? I just got here so everyone get out while I check him!” She barked, and they swiftly scuttled out of the room, shrinking away from her fiery gaze.

Naruto finally began to eat his ramen, and then suggested sidelong to Gaara, “We'll go visit Haku-kun later when Baa-chan's less stressed.”

“I have no objection to that.” Gaara agreed. Seeing the tension had dissipated, Teuchi relaxed, supposing they were fine after all.

Lee had run up the stairs of the apartment building excitedly, careful with the box he had with him. Up a few levels and near the end of an echoing hallway he located a door and knocked with his elbow, for his hands were full.

“Tenten! Are you ready?” He called and he knew she could hear him. In fact, she had heard him as he had animatedly pranced through the main level door.

The kunoichi exited her apartment and Lee blinked, seeing she was dressed differently. Again she was in a Chinese-style top but it was red and with the contrasting black of her pants the colors made him see the spinning tomoe of the Sharingan for a second. Lee shuddered at the thought and then considered the two colors totally innocent.

“Wow, who knew you'd be the happiest now that visitors are allowed?” Tenten smiled, locking the door behind her, “What's with all the stuff?”

“I was not sure what sort of presents he would want, so I collected as many as I thought appropriate!” Lee admitted, grinning, and then eyed the items she had with her, “I see you have not brought very much…”

“Nope,” She tucked the parcels beneath her arm, “Less is more with Neji. Let's get going now, and then we can argue over who has the better presents.”

They set out and Tenten found that perhaps Lee had in fact brought better gifts than she had. She had gathered a few valuable things she had lying around that she would certainly be saddened to part with, but Lee had gone out of his way and bought a dozen too many things that he hoped Neji would be pleased with.

'He's outdone me this time.' Tenten thought to herself, 'Actually, he does that a lot.'

Once at the hospital they met up with Gai in the lobby who was waiting for them, grinning just as widely as Lee. He too had brought offerings to their recovering teammate, and Tenten was beginning to suspect they were trying to surpass her generosity on purpose.

“What's that?” Tenten asked curiously, gesturing to the heavy case Gai had with him.

As they went up to the second floor, her teacher gave her a proud look, “These are training weights much like the ones dear Lee has. Something tells me our prodigy would appreciate a more practical gift than some flowers and the suchlike.”

Tenten was floored, 'I feel like a cheapskate now! I brought three things and they're nothing really special. What's with these two today?’
Unlike they would have normally, Team Gai made a quiet, careful entrance into the recovery room of Hyuga Neji. They found him fast asleep in bed, bandaged, but visibly unharmed for the most part. The excitement faded from both Lee and Gai’s faces to see that they could not cheerily greet him.

“Tsunade-sama said that he may be asleep for a while,” Tenten explained to them softly, “Can you blame him? He suffered through so much…”

“Indeed, but all along I knew he would be fine!” Gai decided, his grin returning, “Let's set these aside for him and he can see them after he wakes.” They proceeded as instructed, and it was then Tenten got a glimpse of the rabble in Lee’s box.

She could see he had bought almost every sort of candy that was available in Hidden Leaf, and condensed it into one, chaotically organized pile tied together with string and ribbon. Beside the mountain of sweets were a set of new kunai and shuriken (which she gazed at jealously) and tape for wrapping his arms during training. There was a framed picture of their team which Iruka-sensei had taken once they'd graduated, 'Were we ever that ridiculous-looking? Well, it was thoughtful of him, though…' And next to it: a stuffed, plush giraffe that absolutely melted her heart and she was almost tempted to ask Lee if she could have it if Neji didn't like it.

The box of goodies was set atop the weight case on the bedside table, and Tenten laid her gifts beside it, inspecting them, hoping they too would be appreciated.

She had written up two scrolls the day before, sealing them with many (perhaps too many) sharp, polished, new weapons that she intended to teach him how to summon. The scrolls rested on top of a box of wrapped dango she had gotten, and was all tied to the top of an old, seemingly interesting book she had swiped from one of the shelves in her room, 'I've never read it, but the title looks interesting. Maybe he'll like it.'

It was after fawning over the presents she wished she would be waking to that Tenten turned to see Gai and Lee staring silently at Neji. It was eerie and she wondered what had them so bemused.

Tenten glanced over to the slumbering Hyuga and then noticed what had caught their attention. His hair: the long, dark, silky tresses she had come to so greatly adore, was cut, just above the shoulder in a short, choppy mess that appeared as if it had been done in a great hurry.

“It is just so **strange**!” Lee cried, halfway between grinning in amusement and frowning in disapproval, “I have never seen Neji with short hair! Not even when he was young when we first attended the Academy, it has always been long. He just looks so…”

“So very un-Neji-like.” Gai supplied, and his protégé nodded in agreement.

Tenten was quick to the Hyuga’s defense, “Will you cut it out? Stop critiquing him like there's something he can do about it, or you'll be getting a haircut next!”

“NO!” Both Lee and Gai cried, grabbing each other, fearful of having their bowl-cuts touched. Tenten sighed, a small smirk dawning on her lips, “You guys know I was kidding, right?”

They relaxed but Lee, ever perceptive and attuned to the emotions of his female teammate, whispered something imperceptible to his sensei and Gai nodded in understanding a moment later. Tenten rolled her eyes at their secrecy.

“Well now, it's about time I go check on my eternal rival before he lets his guard down! I will
challenge him to a contest of honor!” Gai announced, “Please excuse me Lee, Tenten, I'll take my 
leave now. Let me know when our prodigy rises.” Without missing a beat he left the room and 
closed the door behind him.

Tenten looked at Lee, decisively, “I get it. You don't have to make an excuse if you want to go 
too, Lee. I know you both wanted to see him when he was awake.”

Her teammate nodded, “Yes, well, I am just unsure if it would be right to leave you here all 
alone,” He smiled, “I was not going to make an excuse anyway.”

She grinned, so thoroughly grateful for his friendship. Lee waited with her for a long while, 
waiting patiently for any signs of their teammate waking. Time ticked by uneventfully and Tenten 
invested her claim on the stuffed giraffe if Neji happened to reject it. Lee gave her permission to 
adopt the plushy should it not meet the Hyuga's satisfaction.

An hour or two had passed and Lee had gotten up and stretched, declaring that he was going out 
for lunch. He tried to persuade her to come along and when she didn't, he acknowledged inwardly 
that Tenten was not the type to leave someone's side for any stretch of time, not without a struggle 
first.

'Sometimes I wish she loved me that way.' He thought to himself, and his smile flickered painfully 
on his face for a moment, 'Devotion like that is hard to come by. I can only hope that someday 
Neji will recognize it, and at least honor it if he cannot accept it.'

Lee steeled his nerves, forbidding himself from moving onto jealous, heated thoughts. “Come out 
for lunch soon, Tenten. Please do not stay in here all day.”

“I will.” She said airily, “I'll meet you in a little while, Lee.”

He left silently and gently shut the door after him. Tenten sat in her chair for a long moment, 
staring at Neji's face. He was tranquil and it was the first time in a long time she had seen him in 
such a state.

A few minutes passed before her voice broke the silence of the room, “Will you wake up now that 
it's just me, Neji? I know Lee and Gai-sensei make you uncomfortable when you're not feeling 
well.”

He remained silent and still.

Tenten sighed, watching his sleeping face, not fighting the affectionate creatures that she so often 
squashed when they began to dance around in her chest. She didn't feel like combating against the 
way she felt anymore. Denying it was more tiring than trying to make her hopes a reality.

“Just look at you: you look more like a kid now than you did when you were a kid!” She laughed 
aloud, finding the way his choppy hair framed his face silly, “I liked your hair better when it was 
longer, just like Lee said. I hope it grows back quick.”

Her chest hurt a little. She hadn't laughed in a long time and it felt like an alien action. More than 
anything, Tenten had wanted him to share in her fits of laughter with her, at least once. He never 
had. The closest she had gotten to a joyful snort with Neji was a good-natured snicker after seeing 
Lee drunk at a celebration they had once he'd mastered Front Lotus. Even something as small as a 
rude chuckle Tenten could remember, because any sign of humanity in Neji was something she 
would desperately cling to and nurture.

'If I told you how I feel you wouldn't take me seriously anymore.' She thought sadly, 'Sometimes I 
come close. Sometimes I think everything would be alright if I just said it. But you aren't like Lee.
Once I stop being strong you'll push me away. Is the only way I can stay with you is if I always stay tough and sharp? Would you ever respect the parts of me that are soft and gentle too?

Tenten rubbed at her nose, sniffling, 'Why are you such a jerk like that? I love you. Won't you just say that that's okay? Can't we just always be together and the rest not matter? I don't know how much more I can put up with seeing you get hurt and then hide how I feel. We're all gonna die one day, you know. Just say you'd rather die with me than anyone else and then I'll be alright.'

She touched his hand tentatively, hating the stinging feeling in her eyes. For a moment she was confused. His skin was soft and smooth, something she hadn't expected from a ninja who specialized in taijutsu, 'You? Vain? I did not expect that…'

It was a rare time where she found herself engaging in a tender activity with the Hyuga. Tenten did so selfishly, glad he was asleep. If he had been awake she'd sooner chop off her own hand. She was all too obsessed with keeping her affections under wraps when Neji was conscious, unwilling to jeopardize the few fond words she had worked so hard to earn from him.

When she was quite through petting him Tenten stood, taking a deep breath, recalling how Lee was expecting her.

‘I'll be back soon.’ She said quietly over her shoulder, and the door clicked shut behind her.

Later on, Tsunade had vacated the hospital and Naruto and Gaara were quick to visit their debilitated teammate. They snuck in, (Naruto doing most of the sneaking) unnecessarily so, and when they reached Haku's room, Gaara had been startled by Naruto's shrill cry of joy.

‘YOU'RE AWAKE!’ He sailed across the room and nearly gave the dark haired boy a heart attack. Gaara hissed at him to keep his voice down after he too walked in, but his annoyed mood immediately disappeared at the sight of his friend alert and smiling blithely.

‘It's good to see you too, Naruto-kun!’ Haku felt his face get crushed against the blonde's shoulder after he was assaulted with a cheerful hug, “Oh! Careful…that hurts.”

‘Eh? Sorry!’ Naruto backed off, grinning, “Well you're up now, finally! We were worried sick! How are you feeling?”

His friend blinked and answered, “I've been better…sore for the most part. Tsunade-sama said there's still some bruising on my ribs but she'll look at them later,” His eyes reflected concern, “And Naruto…were you able to bring Sasuke back?”

It was quiet and Haku watched Gaara's eyes close briefly at the words. His heart sank. He knew the answer even before Naruto explained how things had worked out, and how close he had come to losing his life.

Haku was silent after hearing the retelling of the mission. He felt absolutely terrible that he had allowed Sasuke to defect to Sound.

“He wasn't your responsibility, Haku-kun.” Gaara reminded him, sensing his friend's guilt, “What happened is nothing you should take personally. We're all here now and everyone is alive. That is all that matters.”

“But I tried my best. I thought that if I went beyond my limits like I had I could do something about it…” Haku admitted, feeling ashamed, “None of it was enough. What was the use of any of it?”
“No,” Naruto interjected, a growl in his throat, “It's my fault he didn't get dragged back here. I had the chance to bring Sasuke back. He was weak and I could've taken him out but I...I just chose not to. I was an idiot! I'm the one who should be sorry, Haku-kun! I messed up!”

“You're not to blame, Naruto-kun.” Haku said softly. In a way, he doubted that no person was more to blame than anyone else. Sasuke had hurt them all equally. They had all suffered because of his actions, 'And now we're left to wonder if there was anything we could've done differently so we may have been successful.'

Haku watched curiously as Naruto created a shadow clone and sent it out of the room. Gaara paid no mind, as if he had done something totally expected. Noting the dark haired boy's puzzlement, Naruto explained himself, “Ero-sensei wanted to talk to you when you woke up, but I don't feel like going to tell him myself.”

Gaara snickered at Naruto's ingenuity.

The blonde then proceeded to gossip to Haku, recounting how Gaara was: “Totally obsessed with making out with Sakura-chan! Yeah, that's right! He really kissed her!”

Haku laughed so hard at the statement that he tore some of his stitches. He was gasping in pain in-between chuckles, clutching his fragile sides.

Gaara volunteered to fetch a nurse to patch his friend up.

Hinata watched her father pour tea for the both of them from across the table. He had been listening quietly while she had been recounting her struggle against Kabuto.

They were seated out on the porch in the afternoon light, and while Hinata described how she perceived things with her Byakugan, her father's expression became progressively softer. Her story reflected all the peril and pain she had been in, and she could sense him grow tense at some dangerous parts.

When she had finished her tale she apologized, “I'm sorry that I didn't say anything about the pain sooner, Father.” Hinata lowered her head submissively and took a timid sip of her tea. It was pungently sweet, a sharp contrast to the bitter herbal teas her father often favored. She inwardly suspected he knew of her preference for sweeter flavors.

“Hinata,” She looked up in alarm when he finally spoke, “You should have been truthful. You should have shed light on your condition earlier, in the event it may have been fatal to your health. I would not have been cross with you over something you had no control over.”

“I worried over it so much and I was afraid you'd be upset…” Hinata admitted softly, “I won't ever hesitate again, Father.”

He nodded in understanding and she let out a low sigh of relief. Hiashi continued again, “The Byakugan has had genetic variations before in the history of the Hyuga, but these occurrences are very rare. Often they show no dramatic change from the original bloodline, in the records we've kept.”

She felt like using her Byakugan again, wanting to show her father what she could see until she reminded herself that he wouldn't be able to. Hinata was frustrated she couldn't properly demonstrate just how different her Kekkei Genkai had become.

“I believe that we both need to learn more about your new ability before we can draw any conclusions about it,” Hiashi decided and added, “I'd never expected one of my daughters to
acquire such a skill, but you have shown greatness before, Hinata. I would expect no less of my child.”

Hinata smiled widely and the gesture unconsciously drew a small grin from her father as well, “Thank you, Father. I don’t think I should keep Hanabi waiting much longer. I promised to tell her all about the mission.”

“You may speak with your sister in a moment.” When her father requested her to wait, she knew he had more to say, “You had mentioned him before briefly and I was informed by Hikune-kun that Uzumaki Naruto defended you during the more serious fighting, correct?”

“That’s true, Father.” She confirmed it proudly.

“Then I’ll ask you to send him my gratitude.” He said coolly, surprising her with his generous attitude. All the same, she was thrilled her father was suddenly being so agreeable, and she hoped things could stay so pleasant between them.

Hinata was beaming when she responded, “I will tell him, Father!”

She stood from her seat, only half-finished with her tea. The Hyuga girl had only taken a few steps from the porch before her father stopped her again, “Hinata…”

She faced him respectfully, wondering what more he had to say.

“Please remember that your mouth, no matter how eager it may be, is only to belong to your future husband, understood?” Hiashi smirked at her red face, uncommonly calm after seeing her affectionate interactions for the first time.

Hinata felt her stomach do what she would classify as a jackhammer-motion up into her brain. Terror and joy flooded her mind all at once at the realization that her father was aware of her young love. Strange how he took it all in stride, ‘Or perhaps he’s embarrassing me on purpose to make a point that I should not be with Naruto-kun…not yet, anyway.’

She didn’t say it then, but she couldn’t really care less about the prospect of her future husband. She already had what she wanted, but she doubted her father would want to hear about it.

Hinata agreed quietly with him and then padded away across the lawn to find her sister. Unknown to her was that her father watched her leave, laughing happily to himself.

Night had descended and by cover of darkness his eyes finally batted open.

Neji looked around, immediately aware of his hospital room; it’s dimensions, smell, as well as the exact location on the second floor. Mostly because he had inadvertently activated his Byakugan when he woke up and his head was flooded with images.

He needed more information.

His head turned slowly, dreadfully heavy on his shoulders, and on the wall to his right a digital clock read 1:08 AM in red block letters, ‘Morning. The question is how long I’ve actually been out and the results of the mission…”

Quickly Neji recalled how Tenten had fetched him, ‘I’m grateful to her. I may not have survived if I wasn’t found sooner.’ He often relied on her to watch his back in almost any situation, and even when he appeared to be alone and outclassed, she still arrived to protect him. It felt to him that God was asking him to stop taking advantage of her omnipresence, ‘I will gladly oblige.’
She had become valuable to him in so many other respects that he rarely ever viewed her as a
shield any longer. Tenten had almost become like his right hand: reading and obeying his thoughts
and perfectly in sync with him; nearly as lethal as he was.

After commanding his stiff muscles to move Neji sat up in the bed. He scratched his neck absent-
mindedly and it was then he noticed the presence, or the lack thereof, of his hair. The tips felt
jagged but brushed softly against his palm. He tested the length, estimating it, and was quickly
disgusted.

'Reading 15 seconds of being conscious I already have a reason to be irritable.' And Lee was
always telling him to cheer up; like he'd understand. Lee supported the notion of ridiculous
haircuts judging from his hairstyle. Neji actually was, to a degree, concerned with his
appearance…more than Lee was, at any rate.

He was too tired and aching to care very much what he looked like at the moment. He'd first tend
to his fundamental needs, and later to the psychological trauma of his massacred hair.

Neji inspected his torso, approving of how all that remained were faint crescent scars on his
skin, 'I've been mended well. Perhaps Tsunade-sama is responsible?' He'd thank her later. He
hadn't been too crazy at first about a female Hokage, but after Tenten's delighted speeches and his
own life rescued by said village leader his respect had been more than earned. A moment later he
made note of something quite urgent.

He was starving.

Neji's mind went to the notion of food. Obviously, there was no way he could get any at one in
the morning, and he certainly wasn't going to wound his pride and cry to a nurse pathetically for
sustenance. So he decided to make do with the gifts he found piled high beside his bed.

He reached for the packaged dumplings and candy, inspecting the sour flavors from the sweet. He
kept the sour ones and tossed the sweet morsels back in Lee's box. Neji sat cross-legged on top of
the sheets, sampling the candy in-between bites of dango. He remembered the last time Tenten
and Lee had fed him, and silently he thanked them for providing him with nourishment again.

After a few minutes of eating in the dark and not enjoying it, Neji scooted over to the edge of the
bed and switched on the lamp for some light. It burned his pale eyes momentarily, but it was
preferable to the yawning shadows about the place.

He finished his munching and tossed the rubbish leftover into a wastebasket in the corner. The
cold tile floor bit at his feet and he swiftly returned back to the warm bed, moving to inspect his
many gifts which, he believed, he had truly earned.

Neji extracted the stuffed giraffe from the box, blinking at it, '...it's an agreeable animal.'

One of the few creatures he didn't dislike. He propped it up against his pillow, deciding to come
back to it later. The weights Gai had supplied he was also intending to keep for later training
purposes. The only non-food item remaining on the table was the tattered old book Tenten had left
for him.

He lifted the blank hardcover inquisitively and opened it to its title page, 'The Tale of the First
Shinobi...'. Neji found the concept strange, but decided to read it anyway since he had little else to
do. The front cover indicated it had been printed in the Land of Stone.

He leaned against his pillow on the headboard and opened the book towards the light. Once he
was comfortable he let his eyes begin to scan the page:
Chapter 1

Ukigaru was a young field hand on his father's farm in the Land of Stone. He was just shy of twenty, with hair of autumn gold and sinewy, tan skin rubbed rough and dirty from endless hours working crops.

He lived in a small village at the base of a great mountain, and he and his father had heard of the recent formation of separate government bodies. A daimyo had been instated to rule over each of the infant countries. The reformer who had started the entire movement, according to the rumors Ukigaru had heard, was a powerful, mysterious warrior who was called the 'Sage of the Six Paths.'

“What wiseman would walk more than one road?” Ukigaru's father had pondered at the title, “I doubt there are six ways to lead a righteous life. Remember, my son, walk no path but your own.”

The new era had defined clear country borders and established capitals, and also put an end to the wandering, thieving tribes that went from town to town pillaging unsuspecting villagers. Peace was restored, even if the so-called 'Rokudou-sennin' was said to have single-handedly defeated entire armies sent by lords who opposed his ideals. Ukigaru believed such power was beyond human comprehension. He was glad he did not have to get swept up into such fantastic matters.

One day while working in a field of rice, Ukigaru saw a small troop marching down a road parallel to the rice patty he was laboring in. Three people walked in single file, two of which spoke quietly amongst each other. The man at the front had caught Ukigaru's attention.

His every feature wild and untamed; his black hair was long and unruly. He was dressed richly in fine garments and armor, and had a necklace of fangs adorning his breast. What was most hypnotic about the stranger, however, were his glowing, violet eyes: ringed irises lit with intense purpose and knowledge. Such eyes spoke volumes to the young farmer.

'You can see me. You must understand, then, that I am no phantom, young man.'

Ukigaru dropped his rake and stared across the road. The procession of three had stopped, and the violet-eyed man's two jabbering followers fell silent and watched him from their place behind their master.

The strange man had not spoken a word. Without the use of his tongue he had reached out to Ukigaru through his fantastic eyes. Ukigaru was fearful, but heeded the words that entered his mind with a disembodied voice.

'You will suffice. You, like several before you, have seen that I am no mere human. The question is, my friend, will you join me now or will you stand there and pass up an opportunity to become something great?'

"I'm not much of anyone." The boy replied quietly, doubting his own destiny.

'If you don't believe that you can become something more, then you simply won't. Stay here and work if you like, boy. If not, come with me and you will open the door to countless possibilities.'

Ukigaru did not think he was anything special. He was an only child and his mother had died when he was young. He had few friends and had never ventured outside of his village before. Yet on a whim of reckless curiosity, Ukigaru decided to hold fast to courage.
He stumbled out of the rice patty, his pants soaked and muddy, and without even thinking to go home and change his clothes, pack his belongings, or say farewell to his father; Ukigaru fell in step with the two people following the violet-eyed warrior.

He said nothing to Ukigaru after he had joined the procession, but his two companions were quick to greet him.

“So you must be the representative from this land he was looking for,” A young woman had said, “It's nice to meet you. Now I suppose we will be turning south again to look for a person from the realm of Wind!”

“Excuse me, but I'm afraid I do not understand.” Ukigaru had admitted, “You mean to say that he is looking for people specifically?”

“Yes and no.” A man beside the young woman had replied, “If you meet Rokudou-sennin's requirements he will take you. If you don't he just walks on. Don't ask me how he chooses, though, that even I don't understand.”

Ukigaru gathered that at least the person they were following was the famed Sage of the Six Paths. Even though he had earlier believed that he didn’t want to get involved in such feuding ideals of new government and clans, Ukigaru had decided to stay with the Rokudou-sennin and his disciples, knowing he’d never get such an opportunity again in his life.

Later, while traveling over a mountain path south to new lands, he had learned that the young woman was a scholar from the Realm of Water. She called herself Fei-Sun. The young man had given his name after Ukigaru had humbly introduced himself, “You're a farmer, you say? How strange. I am Lord Shishio, the ruler of the Realm of Lightning.”

Fei-Sun frowned at his boasting, “Yes, that is truly wondrous, Shishio-sama, but I do not think that Rokudou-sennin has chosen us for our class or stature. It must be something more.”

“Indeed it must,” Shishio agreed, “When a peasant and a lord are measured on equal ground, spirit and character must be weighed in such an event.” Then after Shishio was kind to Ukigaru, and treated him and Fei-Sun as equals. Rokudou-sennin said nothing on the matter.

They stopped to eat only when and where their master allowed them. They never questioned his words for when Rokudou-sennin grew impatient or frustrated, he began to speak through his eyes again and it frightened them terribly.

Once they reached the Realm of Wind they passed through many villages. None of the people they came upon seemed to be the type Rokudou-sennin would take interest in. It was after a kind schoolteacher named Nenmaru offered them shelter from the cold desert night did the Sage respond. His eyes spoke to Nenmaru just as they had for Ukigaru and his companions.

The following day Nenmaru joined them on their journey. He became fast friends with Ukigaru for Nenmaru was timid and reserved. Compassionate and outgoing Ukigaru always respected the schoolteacher's wisdom and morals.

After entering the Land of Fire they were quick to discover their last representative in a young artisan who was inquisitive and determined. He was a master metal-worker named Konohate and was in awe of Rokudou-sennin's prowess and natural leadership.

After collecting all of his followers, the Sage returned to his castle on a rainy hilltop, and introduced them to his eldest son, Tasaisha, who would also be joining their fellowship. Tasaisha had the same eyes as his father.
“You have all been gathered here to be taught the divine art of ninjutsu,” The Sage had told them, “It is a gift that not only I possess, and you all can learn such abilities if you surrender yourselves to my instruction.”

“Ninjutsu? What sort of art is that?” Konohate had complained, “My forging is enough art for me, thanks! I’d much rather go home to my wife and children.”

“Silence you whelp!” Tasaisha had scolded him, “How dare you criticize a skill that defeated ALL of the Shogun's legions!”

Konohate held his tongue after that and Rokudou-sennin continued his explanation without further interruption. “All of you have been chosen because you each possess a unique ability inherent in your blood,” He had said, “You also have an awareness of your chakra, but doubtless none of you have ever tapped into it.”

“What is this chakra you keep mentioning, Rokudou-sennin? You make it seem very volatile.” Shishio asked.

“It is a way for me to refer to chi, or a person's life energy, that fuels a human's body and abilities,” The Sage answered, “Once you are able to control your chakra you will be able to perform jutsu and reach your full potential.”

It was then Ukigaru understood the Sage's initial goal. Regardless of rank in society, he'd only been searching for people who had the potential to learn the skill he was going to teach, 'Which must mean he is able to see the chakra that he says we all have...' He thought afterwards.

He only chose one person from one distinct region: one person from the Lands of Water, Lightning, Stone, Wind, and Fire, respectively. He wanted each country to have an equal opportunity to expand on the abilities they were going to perfect.

The Sage explained that he could govern all of their lands at once, since he did indeed possess such power, but he did not want the burden of acting as Shogun and regulating every detail of their country's functions. He still intended to perfect and preserve his own jutsu that he had created.

In the meantime, everyone he had collected would stand as his vassal in their homeland and bring shinobi influence into their respective countries.

They all agreed it was a fine idea.

The first chapter had left Neji intrigued. He had never expected such ancient history on the origins of ninja, or what it had to do exactly with the First Shinobi for any important reason.

He marked his place in the book and set it aside on the table. Sleep was nearing again. Neji switched off the light, and lowered himself back down to the bed, crushing the stuffed giraffe beneath his chin. He could smell his teammates on it.

Tired as he was, even he was surprised at how badly he wanted to see his team. Darkness swallowed up the room again and he closed his eyes, dreaming of the journey from the book.

Later that morning as Tama left for work early her mother inquired why she was going out so soon. She dodged her mother's questions and told her she’d be home shortly after noontime.

Tama did not in fact go to work because she had off that day, 'Not like she needs to know that.'
She stopped by Sato's apartment to check on how he was doing. It was still earlier than she'd expect him to be awake, but Tama figured it wouldn't hurt to try. She knocked twice, patiently, staring at the door while she waited in the hallway.

“It's open!” His shout echoed from inside.

Tama let herself in and glanced around the foyer, wondering what he was up to. She set her bag down on the kitchen counter and turned the corner to his room. Unfortunately, he had left his bedroom door wide open, and she had not anticipated him to not be fully dressed either.

“Kya! Sato!” She turned her back to him, shutting her eyes, “Couldn't you give me some warning if you're indecent?”

He frowned while he hopped around, frantically pulling his pants up, “But you've seen me naked loads of times! Does it really shock you anymore?”

Tama faced Sato, sighing, “Just because I'm used to it doesn't mean it's acceptable.”

The silver haired boy merely laughed at her, digging through his drawers for a top. He fetched a white T-shirt and yanked it over his head and then ran after her into the kitchen, “Alright, I'm sorry, please don't be mad! Next time I'll say 'it's open and I'm naked!' How's that? Then you can pick whether or not you want to come in!”

She agreed to his weird suggestion and helped him prepare breakfast. He was a better cook than she in many respects; he had a keen sense of taste much like an Akimichi's. When the meal was finished they sat down and ate together, Tama nipping politely at her food while Sato hammered down several bowls of egg and rice.

“Kakashi-san asked me how you were doing yesterday,” She said, approaching the subject carefully, “He said he hasn't seen you for a while.”

Sato raised a silver eyebrow, “I'm surprised he cares at all.”

“Please try to be nice,” Tama admonished lightly, “Your uncle has been very troubled about all the chaos with his team. It really isn't easy to watch your students struggle.”

“That isn't my problem.”

She scowled at his cranky behavior and asked, “Are you and Kakashi-san fighting again? You know how that went last time…you can't keep acting like you're both strangers to each other! What did you say to him to get him so upset?”

“We're not fighting, Tama.” He said shortly, dodging the topic.

“So you have been fighting?” Tama confirmed it, through a precognitive wavelength, “Oh, Sato…please just let it go, whatever it is. I know it's not easy, but you've got to move on from…from what happened to your mother.”

Sato remained silent, staring down at the empty bowl in front of him. He was afraid if he said something she would detect the emotion in his voice and know just how much he was hurting inside. He always kept a smile on for her because he feared that if she knew how lonely and miserable he was she'd blame herself.

She had finished eating and then stood from the table. Tama walked over to where he sat and
kissed him squarely on top of his head, affectionately, “Look how Sasuke ended up because he couldn’t let go of his anger. Please, Sato; open your heart again, otherwise I won't marry you.”

He pouted sourly at the warning, “You don’t mean that!”

“Actually…I do.” Tama laughed softly, “I'll see you later and don't keep Shino-kun waiting! You still have to train with him remember?”

Sato watched the door after she had closed it behind her and left the apartment. He had guessed earlier that she would’ve only stayed for breakfast, but he hadn't been prepared for her to address something that had been eating him up inside. She had a knack for that sort of thing.

He rose from the table and began to clean up the dirty dishes, deep in thought, *I guess I'll just have to go talk to Kakashi later, then. Maybe I did say some things that I shouldn't have said…*

Tama had left *le chateau Sato* and gone straight to one of her favored training fields. Her secret passion was still perfecting her taijutsu even when her parents insisted she work hard to find her niche in the civilian world.

*My niche is kicking butt, not baking pie!* She had told them that on several occasions and they dismissed it. Her uncle had always found it a thoughtful, or rather, youthful aphorism.

Cunningly, Tama kept her parents in the dark about her training habits. They still believed she had given up being a ninja for good, when actually she still had a target set up in back of the bakery, and training weights hidden under her mattress, *'Oh it's the secret life of an ex-taijutsu specialist…I should totally write an autobiography!'*

Once on the field she realized it was already occupied.

Kiba was lazing about in the grass with Akamaru curled up on his chest, almost fully recovered and enjoying the fresh air. He sat up in surprise when she had snuck out into the open. Tama felt like an intruder even though she was the one who frequented the area; a consequence of a sneaky conscience.

“Oh, Kiba! I'm sorry if I disturbed you!” She apologized quickly, trying not to be conspicuous, “I'll just…go someplace else.”

“Hey it’s fine,” He replied calmly, and Akamaru leapt from his master and out into the grass over to the black haired girl, “I just took Akamaru out to stretch his legs now that he's doing better.”

Tama bent down and scratched behind the dog's ears, “I'm glad that he's okay now! I heard about what happened after the mission.” Akamaru sat blissfully in front of her, tail wagging like mad.

Kiba blinked at his ninken's friendliness, “Wow, he…really likes you.”

“It's mutual then, I guess. I love dogs,” She lifted the puppy into her arms, “Akamaru especially!” He could already tell.

Kiba watched her run around with his dog for a short while. Adoration bubbled up in his chest at the sight of how she moved; the clear sound of her voice, and onyx eyes hooded by long lashes. She was just as gorgeous as she had been at the Tanabata Festival when he had seen her last.

*I made myself look like a total idiot then, though…’ Kiba thought irritably, 'And she's totally out-of-bounds because she's already engaged. My luck stinks.'*

He blushed, acknowledging that his crush on her had not at all dissipated. Quite the contrary, it
had gotten worse. His infatuation with a girl already promised to someone else would lead to big trouble, he knew, but he couldn't help himself. Kiba envied Sato bitterly, nearly to the point of revulsion.

'I'd treat her like a princess if she was gonna marry me! And that idiot? Pft! He talks to her like she's his babysitter! What's with that? How's that supposed to work?' He was getting carried away in his contemplation, 'Looks like nothing can go right for me, huh? Sasuke runs off and there's nothing I can do about it. I nearly let Akamaru die on the last mission. Now the girl of my dreams is supposed to marry a lunatic. Oh yeah, I'm definitely living the good-life…'

“Hey Kiba!” He looked over to her when she called, “You wouldn't mind if I stayed and trained here would you?” Tama had put Akamaru down and he scampered happily back to his master.

“Uh…sure. Go ahead.” Kiba honestly had no idea that she was capable of fighting, let alone trained when she had the chance. He sat down again beside his dog in the grass, watching as Tama proceeded to beat the daylights out of a training post across the way.

Haku had been discharged from the hospital later that day. Tsunade had warned him to avoid any strenuous activity or high-level jutsu for the next few days before she released him to his knucklehead friends. She had also said she'd have Jiraiya checking up on him periodically.

He had only been walking down the main road beside Gaara and Naruto for a grand total of two and a half minutes before the mentioning of Sakura and Hinata slipped from his mouth. At the subject of discussion, both of his friends promptly decided to visit their respective female interests.

They abandoned Haku eagerly and dumped him off on Temari and Kankuro who were getting used to babysitting and the suchlike. They sympathized with the dark haired boy and offered to buy lunch for him.

The three stragglers settled at a seafood restaurant and enjoyed sushi for lunch. In the middle of their meal they were interrupted by Genma, who had just happened past. He blinked over at Haku for a moment, scrutinizing him, and then looked to Temari.

“Tsunade-sama wanted me to tell you that your teacher came here looking for you,” He informed them, the needle in his mouth bobbing up and down as he spoke, “He said that he had something important he needed to talk to you about.”

“I'll go see what Baki's up to, then.” Kankuro volunteered, and he stood from the table, “Temari, you should stay with Haku. I'll come find you two later.” Kankuro departed, following after Genma.

Haku suspected that their sensei had only returned to advise them to go home. They'd been in Leaf for a long while, he knew, and Sand was probably short-handed on ninja after the invasion.

“Do you think you and your brother will be going back to Suna anytime soon?” He asked, wanting to see what she thought.

“I'm not sure. Maybe.” Temari admitted, frowning at the idea, “Baki and Miosuke aren't as good as the company we've found in Konoha.”

He smiled, “I'm glad that you decided to stay.”

“I think I am too.” She agreed and smirked when she asked, “So, is your Hokage upset with you after all the trouble you caused?”
“Tsunade-sama wasn't very mad at all, now that I think about it,” Haku recalled when he had spoken to her last, “She was more remorseful that we were unable to stop Sasuke.”

The blonde girl was quiet after that, not interested in touching on the subject of the Uchiha when she knew that he had nearly killed Haku a few days prior. The thought of it was infuriating. Haku had even shown him mercy, Gaara had told her, and that made her even angrier. They finished eating and she didn't object when Haku offered to pay for himself.

“Maybe some light training will do you good,” Temari suggested, “I've been bored out of my mind recently and it's about time we had a rematch.”

He paled at the proposition, “Well…I suppose.” He smiled after a moment, “As long as you don't use your fan I'm sure we'll be evenly matched for now!”

Denying her wind jutsu was not something Temari wanted to agree to. Then again, he could barely use any of his jutsu at the moment either. She relented and approved of his idea before striding out of the restaurant. Haku followed after her, wondering why she hadn't tried to argue for once.

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After a while of searching, Gaara had learned that Sakura could be found at the Hokage's tower. It was not one of the places he had first expected to find her, but he gathered that she and Tsunade had a long talk after the resulting pandemonium from their most recent mission.

The redhead discovered her on the ground floor in a courtyard. Sakura stood over a table in front of a pool of fish. He lingered in the doorway, watching in curious silence.

From what Gaara could see she was struggling with a healing jutsu. Her chakra had been distributed properly, but Sakura was unsure exactly how much she really needed to help heal the carp with a wounded fin. Occasionally it would flap on the mat laid out on the table in front of her, but she received little more indication that she had been doing anything right.

He watched interestedly from his spot across the room, not wanting to disturb her from her concentration. Gaara had once seen Haku trying to use a similar healing technique during their days at the Academy after reading about it in a scroll. He guessed it couldn't have been easy repairing damaged cells.

Nearly a minute later the translucent tissues on the fish's fin were stitched back together. The carp gave a sudden flap and hopped off of the table, startling Sakura. The fish landed in the pool again and settled back into its normal swimming regiment.

The pink haired girl stared at the water for a long moment in surprise before giving a small cheer, 'That was a lot harder than I thought it'd be! Next time I won't take it so lightly…'

Gaara congratulated her as he walked into the room, “Well done, Sakura-chan.”

Sakura wheeled about to face him and greeted him with a hug. She promptly went on to explain what she had been trying to do, “I was surprised that Tsunade-sama actually accepted me as her apprentice once I asked, but I'm glad. I'm going to work harder than ever to become stronger!”

“Excellent,” Gaara's pride received a generous boost after the news, “She chose her learner well.” Sakura had pressed her nose up against his cheek and he then thought to ask, “I don't think you'd object to me stealing you from your practice now, would you?”

“Healing fish isn't exactly entertaining,” Sakura agreed, smirking mischievously, “You know…I think I saw a broom closet somewhere around here before I came in.”
Quickly he grabbed her hand and turned around, going back in the direction of the hallway to locate the secluded area she had mentioned. Sakura laughed as Gaara tugged her along through the courtyard impatiently.

Kankuro appeared in the doorway and Gaara immediately halted at the sight of him.

'Foiled.' Gaara thought; not pleased by the bad timing of his brother's interruption. He blinked inquisitively when another Sand ninja entered the courtyard behind Kankuro, vaguely recognizing him.

“There you are,” Kankuro addressed his younger sibling, “Gaara, this here is my sensei, Baki. He'd like to talk to you for a bit.”

Sakura gently slipped her hand away from the redhead's and he grunted lowly in annoyance. She offered him a look that translated to: be courteous now, we can fool around later.

He then looked to Baki, who spoke after he believed he had Gaara's attention, “We received intelligence not too long ago that you were still alive, Gaara. After Kankuro and Temari described your skill and fortitude many in Sand have come to feel that we can really use your help.”

“I have my doubts that I'd be welcomed back.” Gaara replied bitterly.

“The Kazekage was found dead a few weeks ago,” Baki added, and Gaara watched sadness wince across his brother's face, “Our village is severely weakened after Orochimaru's treachery, and we are in desperate need of dependable shinobi like you.”

He hadn't known that his father had been killed. Not that it mattered very much to him, really. But Gaara could see that it had mattered to Kankuro. Even when he had never had a recognizable relationship with his father, at least Temari and Kankuro had. Now it was gone and Suna was straining to hold up its defenses and morale.

'And I am a Leaf ninja,' Gaara reminded himself, 'I am content now. I have Naruto-kun and Haku-kun and I have Sakura. What do I owe Sand?'

“I've already spoken to Hokage-sama and she's given her consent for you to go to Suna should you decide to.” Baki added, knowing the decision wasn't easy, “Please try to understand I wouldn't ask you this if Hidden Sand wasn't in such peril. I'm aware you are very attached to this place, but remember that you were born to Suna.”

The expression on Kankuro's face was a mix of tension and reluctance. Even he didn't want to ask Gaara to leave his place of refuge in Leaf, but having him back in Sand could determine the success or downfall of the village.

Gaara realized that even if he had been able to overlook it for a while, he did owe something to his old village, 'I owe it my brother and sister. Certainly not to the people there who hated me, but I owe my allegiance to my family.'

“I'll consider it.” He told Baki.

“Thank you.” The jounin nodded to him gratefully, “Kankuro, we're going to check on Temari now.” His student agreed and left to go find his sister alongside Baki.

Sakura watched Gaara, her face troubled. She understood Sand's plight, but she didn't feel ready to hand him over to another village when she was so in love with him.
“It’s alright,” Gaara assured her, sensing her distress, “I much prefer Leaf. It's better to give them the impression of hope than turn them down rudely.”

“Maybe.” She said quietly, still a bit nervous. The whole idea to find a broom closet had been thoroughly killed, by then, so she turned back to the pool of injured fish and invited Gaara to stay and watch her technique.

He picked a dace with a ripped gill from the water and put it on the table for her. Sakura went to work and Gaara observed, wondering how he'd cope without her if he did return to Suna.

Just before noon Neji was discharged from the hospital and his team promptly arrived to escort him home. Lee took the liberty of transporting all of his teammate's presents while recounting the Retrieval Mission to him.

Tenten had to correct Lee on some of his exaggerations on the way to the compound. Neji wasn't very thrilled to hear that they had failed, but he didn't appear to be grieving over the loss of Sasuke. He was more concerned with the welfare of his friends.

After they reached the Hyuga estate Neji was greeted by his younger cousin with an overjoyed glomp.

“I am just…so glad to see that you are alright, Neji-niisan!” Hinata had told him, beaming to see him alive and well. It was not what she had been imagining during her fight with Kabuto.

Neji smiled for her, not very sure why Hinata was so overwhelmed to see him. Tenten noticed his happy facial expression as clear as day, her eyes were keen to it, and her heart melted at the sight of it, *'Not that we need to have near-death experiences more often, but if that's what it takes to get him to smile, I'll take it.'*

Hinata departed shortly after to go train with her father and they continued on, stopping by Neji’s room to drop off his many gifts.

Lee looked around the Hyuga prodigy's plain room briefly, not surprised by its lack of color. He was impressed by Neji's not-so-well-known arsenal that was lined up on the west wall of the room. Tenten quietly admitted to Lee that she had contributed to much of it, *'And he almost never uses any of those weapons either!'* She hissed to him in outrage, *'He might as well just give them back!'*

“I'd rather keep them,” Neji had smirked at her after overhearing her and Lee's hushed discussion, *'I've grown fond of them, but I don't share your tenacity for tossing precious works at foes.'*

Tenten blinked stupidly as he walked out to the porch outside of his room. Lee snickered at her dumbfoundment, and ushered her to go outside as well. *'I think that Neji does not take them for granted as you do because they are harder to come by for him.'* Lee suggested, *'He admires your work more than you do.'*

“Feh!” She had said, dismissing the idea.

Once outside again Lee asked Neji if he was interested in training, but Tenten was quick to shoot the idea down.

“Do I have to remind you that he just got out of the hospital, Lee?” She pointed out stringently, *'Let’s give it a rest for now.'*

Lee yielded and then offered to go inform Gai-sensei that Neji had safely returned home. Once he
had gone, Neji gave the kunoichi of his team a questioning look, “I didn't think that I'd have to tell you this myself, but by now I am fit enough to train.”

“I know,” Tenten answered, cleverly, “I only discouraged Lee so I could train with you”

He smirked, “You take advantage of Lee too often.”

“I beg to differ, my friend!”

A garden adjacent to the porch was the designated training area for the time being. Deciding to take it easy rather than returning immediately to their normal routine, Tenten addressed teaching him the proper technique on summoning from his new scrolls.

It had been a brief lesson in the Academy, but she admitted she had tweaked the scrolls a bit so the seals could be used more rapidly and effectively. Neji determined it would be better to hear her out than try it himself.

She had it so the scrolls were already primed to respond to him. Tenten outlined the basic artillery she had sealed into both of the scrolls, “Mostly shuriken and kunai because I know you keep things simple,” She explained, “But I did add in three tanto, two kama, two ebo, two tonfa, nunchaku, and a yari if you feel adventurous at some point.”

Neji's face was somewhere between amused and exasperated.

“I almost put in a naginata but I didn't want to start you off with something too serious,” Tenten added, “A weapon like that would take months for you to get used to, but a bladed pole-arm does have a lot of advantages with how it channels energy and all of the sweeping techniques considered…”

He had grown accustomed to her weapon-gibberish and listened as she rambled on about how naginata was arguably one of her favorite weapons, “But in my position I can't favor a weapon more than any other can I? Then I'd be a weapons specialist and not a weapons master.”

“There's logic in that, I suppose.”

After a short while Tenten caught herself babbling, and noted that it was mainly because she was just so thrilled to be training again with her most treasured sparring partner. She reverted to her previous goal and proceeded to teach Neji proper summoning procedure.

He learned fast, as she had expected. Tenten was surprised to see that Neji chose to use tonfa for a while and she critiqued his form occasionally. His attacks weren't as precise and rather sluggish, she found, probably due to his stiff reflexes and being hospitalized for a while.

Tenten noticed Neji beginning to tire as time passed, and before long she called for them to stop.

“Please don't push yourself after you just finished recovering.” She said worriedly, not wanting to make him feel weak. It was difficult to remind him that he wasn't at full strength without hurting his pride, which she tried to avoid doing.

He relented and Tenten relaxed a little. She told him to wait a bit and that she'd return with lunch shortly. She left her own weapons out on the porch with his own and then set out, grinning to herself, 'He's so cooperative all of the sudden! I wonder what's up with him?'

After Tenten had gone Neji went to a courtyard near the back of the compound. He intended to go back and have lunch with her when she returned, but he was curious to see Hinata train with her father.
He stood near the side of the lawn and watched his uncle circle around Hinata with his Byakugan active. It was a rare sight in all respects. Hiashi seldom ever had to use his bloodline limit against any opponent, let alone his daughter. Neji observed in fascination Hinata's own Kekkei Genkai, emitting some unusual silver glow when she moved.

Hiashi lunged forward to attack and it seemed as if he had miscalculated the distance. Hinata was nearly on the complete other side of the courtyard by the time he had turned around. She was quick, coming back at him and she wheeled about with a motion confusing to her father's practiced eyes, and landed two solid (yet restrained) blows that knocked him down to the grass.

Neji gawked at the sight of the leader of the Hyuga on the ground. Hinata had defeated him almost immediately, and he wasn't able to understand how she had done it, 'Hinata-sama has vastly improved… when did this happen? Why?'

Hiashi was on his feet again and it appeared he had grown more serious. He used a powerful rotation that left a deep crater in the clearing. Hinata had evaded it and broken through his defense with rapid Jyukken strikes. He took a stance to use sixty-four palms and she had mirrored him effortlessly, attacking twice as fast with little effort, countering his assault.

It ended shortly after in a stalemate and Hiashi had told her that it was enough for the day. He looked at his daughter smugly, “Tell me, Hinata, were you holding back at all?”

“Well I…I…” She hesitated and answered softly, “I was, but I didn't want you to think that-”

“It's quite alright, you did very well.” He waved off her concerns, “Your ability is very interesting. Whatever it is that you are seeing it is affecting your attack patterns, from what I can tell. I will speak with the elders later and deliberate if you will be reinstated as heir.”

She nodded to him sadly.

From his place across the way Neji had stepped out into the open. His uncle had made it clear that her bloodline was advanced, probably beyond even his own. It was still unclear why or how the change had happened, but all Neji had to know was that it may have been a critical error to name him the heir to the clan when Hinata was clearly excelling.

Hinata had seen him and the uncertainty on his face. She walked over to her cousin, feeling that she was stealing something from him that he had worked extremely hard for. She wouldn't stand for it.

Hinata stood in front of Neji and when he wouldn't say anything to her, she turned back to Hiashi, “Father, please listen to me!” He gave her his attention after he had moved to leave.

“Neji-niisan is the rightful heir to the Hyuga clan, and it would be completely unfair to take it back!” She announced boldly, not wanting her father to make any rash decisions.

“It's your right, Hinata-sama.” Neji had said quietly, not wanting to protest. When he compared his ability to her's he felt truly unqualified and weak. It was strange that his purpose had suddenly been jarred away from him by a strange turn in events.

Hinata looked at him for a long moment and said, “My aspiration is not to be the leader of the Hyuga clan, Neji-niisan. It is to…to protect the future Hokage and help him fulfill his dream.”

He was silent for a minute, thinking it over. Neji found it curious how he had immediately known that she had been referring to Naruto, even before she had said anything, 'If she is to lead this clan it will strain her chances of being happy with him. I'm sure she'd rather focus her energy all on
Naruto than on Hyuga affairs.’

“I think it is a fine goal.” Neji told her, smiling at the sentiment.

“Father, I would like it if you did not request the council to reconsider.” Hinata had stated in finality, “I am happy with the way things are…and I hope you are as well.”

Her father agreed, hesitantly, “Very well then, Hinata, I will see that I don't. But in respect to their curiosity I will have them discuss your new abilities to classify them.” He then looked to his nephew, “You will be the leader of this clan, Neji. That responsibility is solely yours now, I hope you understand.”

Neji nodded, somewhat overwhelmed. It was the first time he ever actually felt the pressure of the position he was in. He could understand why Hinata was glad to be rid of the responsibility.

Hinata invited Neji to lunch along with her and her father. He declined, informing them he had a previous engagement to see to. They parted ways afterwards and Neji returned to his room, wondering how to pass the time until Tenten returned.

He looked over to where Lee had dumped all of his gifts on a desk. The old book he had begun reading in the hospital peaked just over the lip of the box and he reached for it, deciding to continue with the story.

Neji settled himself out on the porch and opened it to the next chapter.

Chapter 2

Ukigaru quickly learned that he was nowhere near as naturally gifted as his peers.

Fei-Sun, he had seen, already possessed talent at manipulating water to her will. Both Shishio and Konohate were renowned swordsman and Tasaisha had already begun training under his father before they had all arrived.

It seemed that the only other person who lacked previous fighting ability was Nenmaru. He had spent most of his life learning and educating others. Ukigaru was frustrated that his only skill was tilling earth.

“Do not fret, Ukigaru-kun.” Nenmaru had told him, “We are here to learn, not outdo each other. You and I are blank slates which means there is more space in us for knowledge than our companions.”

Ukigaru’s troubles had faded considerably after that.

Over time they learned the limits of their chakra and how to perform jutsu with seals. Nenmaru translated the seals into writing after studying them, and even Rokudou-sennin was impressed when he could create a lick of fearsome flames with a stroke of his brush.

Ukigaru worked hard with his friends, training his body and mind, and after mastering his chakra, he found he was able to do things that he could not have accomplished even in his dreams. Breathing fire, dancing on water, wielding wind, and jousting with lightning had quickly become a reality.

After a few years training, Ukigaru's hidden talent the Sage had spoken of had become clearer.

“How you have long worked and listened to your land…” The Sage had said, “Now the Earth
will obey you completely.”

He had spent so long tilling and farming his fields Ukigaru had never realized how attuned to the earth he had been. Stones would tremble in his wake, and at his beckoning he could shape the ground to his liking and rearrange landscapes.

He always practiced his jutsu with great discipline, as did his companions, never being boastful or proud of their gifts.

Tasaisha, of all of them, had grown the most powerful. Though Ukigaru and his peers praised and admired the Sage's son for his skills, Tasaisha ignored their calls for friendship. He grew conceited and greedy, and over time began to question his father's teachings.

“Why teach so many witless commoners?” Tasaisha had asked, “Why not bestow all of your knowledge to your own blood and first son, and only he? He is far more worthy than some grime-covered welder!”

The Sage disagreed completely, “Hear yourself and think more clearly, Tasaisha. When knowledge is chained by constraints in blood it builds a dynasty, a structure that is fated to fall into ruin.”

Tasaisha challenged his father to a duel and when Rokudou-sennin refused him, the prince stormed from the castle in a fury, never to be seen again.

Ukigaru asked why he had let Tasaisha go unpunished after he had been so ungrateful and showed such disrespect.

“Because holding a quarrel such as that is to have a mountain tell the wind to be still,” The Sage had told him, “Neither force is able to relent, so things are best left as they are.”

Shortly after Tasaisha's abandonment Ukigaru and his companions had completed the Sage's training. He told them to leave and return to their homes, and share their wisdom to keep the balance in their lands.

“You are all equals amongst each other,” Rokudou-sennin had told them, “But know this: none of you are a match for me, your master. Should any of you grow your heads fat with sin as Tasaisha has you will meet a swift end by my hand.”

They swore to him their undying loyalty and thanked the Sage for his teachings. Ukigaru said his long goodbyes to his friends, deeply hoping they would all meet again one day. The Sage disappeared without another word to any of them, and they never did encounter him again.

Shortly after Fei-Sun returned to her family in the Realm of Water, as did Konohate eagerly. Shishio went back to his castle in the Realm of Lightning and the good friends Ukigaru and Nenmaru parted just at the border's edge of their homelands, reluctant to leave each other's company.

Nenmaru turned south after a fond farewell, and Ukigaru continued north to his home in the Realm of Stone.

It was late in the winter when he had reached familiar regions. Snow on the hills and mountainsides was beginning to melt; a harbinger of Spring. All the while feasting his eyes on the gray land laid before his feet, Ukigaru felt like a stranger in his old home.

He was dressed richly and groomed well after having lived in the Sage's castle for so long. As a result, none of his friends recognized him when he had returned to his village. He had asked for
news of his father, and villagers had informed him that his honorable father had died of heartbreak while he had been away.

Ukigaru grieved over his loss and visited his father's grave, deeply sorry for having left him so abruptly. He then had no family remaining in the world, and a great loneliness crept upon him. He was desperate to discover a greater purpose for his being in the Realm of Stone.

He came to see how his village had grown even more poor and desolate while he had been gone. Other residents told him how they had been suffering through a ten-year drought that had stripped the land of its fertility.

Now with Spring hastening they would soon have to sow the seeds for their crops in their fields again, but they feared to invest such precious commodities to land that was frozen and tough. The soil felt cursed those days, they had said.

Ukigaru had heard of their desperate plight and he decided to help revitalize the dead land that had been plaguing them.

The next morning Ukigaru went to the toughest, largest field in the village. Farmers watched him from the side of the road, bemused, wondering what it was he intended to do. All of the snow on the ground had melted, but the soil was too hard and full of stones to allow the water to permeate it.

Ukigaru focused his chakra and formed hand seals, getting a grip on the land, and he pulled up, seizing the hardest, most stubborn stones and ripped them from the ground.

The surface of the soil split and cracked, and boulders from deep beneath the ground heaved upward, rolling away from the dirt it had been holding captive. The farmers gasped in shock and awe as Ukigaru piled all of the intrusive rocks on the side of the field, all on his own, and then turned to the soil; churning it and turning up the nutrients that it had so long been starved of.

After thoroughly tilling the field he stopped, and the amazed farmers ran to him, cheering and praising him for such a wondrous talent.

By the end of the day all of the fields had been restored.

Ukigaru had explained to them all of the things the Sage had taught him and his fellow villagers were deeply grateful, glad such skills existed that had saved them from the effects of the drought.

And after they had finished sowing their fields they became fearful again.

“It won't be long before the raiders pass through this valley again,” One of the farmers had told Ukigaru despairingly, “There's no way for us to fend them off if they attack again.”

Ukigaru swore to help them.

He felt a deep obligation to protect his village after he had left it and allowed it to suffer. As the apprehensive villagers had predicted, the band of thieves that periodically plundered their homes arrived a few days later. The whole group of them were armed with knives and clubs, and easily struck terror into the hearts of the townspeople.

Ukigaru confronted the group of bandits bravely and said, “Leave this place now and I will stay my hand. If you continue to disrupt the lives of these people I will show no mercy!”

They laughed at the man who stood alone.
“Who are you to threaten us?” The leader of the thieves sneered, “You may be dressed well and look fearsome, but you are one against fifty strong men! Don’t be a fool and let us have our way…or you will be the one begging for mercy!”

Yet Ukigaru would not yield, and when the leader attacked him he struck back with ten times the force, sending him crashing back into his crowd of followers. Angrily, the thieves attacked, and Ukigaru fought furiously, using the jutsu he had learned, tearing up earth and breathing fire.

Before long, the terrified bandits that remained quickly turned tail and fled for their lives. Never before had they witnessed such formidable strength.

Astounded by such power, the village again came together and praised Ukigaru. They cheered happily, finally free of their worries, and asked Ukigaru if he would pass on his knowledge of ninjutsu.

Ukigaru gladly promised to teach them, wanting nothing more than to help and protect the people of his village.

“Hey, Neji!”

He looked up from his reading and saw that Tenten had returned with lunch. He put the book aside and accepted the bento she handed him gratefully.

Neji briefly wondered if he should tell her about the strange story he had been following, but then decided against it when she went on complaining about how they didn't have the sesame dumplings she had wanted.

'It'll have to wait for another time, then…'

After finishing with lunch, Hinata excused herself from her father's company. She had only caught a few brief glimpses of Naruto over the past few days, and she was curious as to where he had gone to.

The Hyuga girl passed through her own small garden on the side of the estate. Hinata stopped beside the koi pond and tossed a few handfuls of feed into the water, watching the fish flap about. She hadn't been to visit her garden for a long while, and she wanted to admire the new chrysanthemums that were beginning to bloom, 'I'll go find Naruto-kun in a little while…'

Most of the flowers were white, nestled in between burning reds from other autumnal blossoms. Hinata picked a few flowers up from the dirt by their roots, later intending to dry and press them.

“Hey…those are nice!”

She jumped in startlement when Naruto snuck up on her from behind. Perhaps she would've noticed him if she wasn't so focused on the flowers she had been examining.

Hinata held up a red flower beneath his nose, letting him have a whiff as she greeted him, “Hello, Naruto-kun! I was just thinking about going to find-”

“Yeah, I know, plants are distracting!” He quickly understood why she hadn't met up with him sooner, “I like them a lot too, actually. I have like six pots on top of my refrigerator because Gaara-kun won't let me keep anymore in the window. He says he has allergies but that's a load of bull crap…”
The white eyed girl laughed and brushed her knees off before standing. He accepted the red flower she had offered him, and observed it inquisitively before grinning at her, “Did you hear Haku-kun’s out of the hospital now? He turned out okay but he’s still got to take it easy.”

“Neji-nyisan is doing fine as well.” Hinata informed him, gathering up all of the blooms she had picked, “Though…his hair is…a bit strange now.” She giggled as an afterthought, “It’s so short he kind of looks like me!”

Naruto hollered in laughter at the notion and she didn’t try to quiet him. Hinata no longer cared if half of her clan knew Naruto’s exact location according to his volume every time he paid a visit. It was his trademark greeting to the Hyuga compound, by that time.

They calmed down shortly after, walking along the gravel path that led to the front of the estate. He gave her a sidelong glance and then halted, looking expectant, “So?”

Hinata blinked over to him, puzzled, “Um …yes, Naruto-kun?”

“Aren’t you going to say hello to me, eh Hinata?” Naruto asked, grinning, looking particularly fox-like for some reason.

“I thought I did…” She was confused, and adorably so, “Didn’t I, Naruto-kun? I’m sorry if I was rude!”

“Hinata, it’s really impossible for you to be rude, seriously…” He leaned in, eyes narrowed and cerulean, “If you’re happy to see me then you should let me know…” His mouth brushed against her bottom lip and she stumbled backwards, startled by his forwardness.

“I…I really-!” Hinata realized what he was referring to and was more than happy to oblige him, if it wasn’t for her father’s earlier warning, “I don’t think we should…I m-mean I want to, but…”

Naruto frowned, indignant, and tried to decipher her sudden indecision, “Alright. Is it because… I’m offensive?” He breathed into his palm to check, “I swear I brushed my teeth four times this morning for you! I wouldn’t want to-!”

“No! It isn’t that!” She raised her hands to quiet him, “My father. He said that…that my mouth is only to belong to my future husband…so…I don’t think he wants me being frivolous and all that…”

“…frivolous?” Naruto was silent for a long while after that, half dreading and half rejoicing that her father was aware and had not yet hunted him down. ‘But he totally gave me the boot by saying all that to Hinata-chan! He’s right though, I’m a no-good maniac with a ton of problems.’

He looked over to Hinata who was staring at her feet, and she couldn’t have looked any more depressed. The sight of her braced his resolution, ‘Fine! Let him strangle me for all I care! He’ll have to beat the living crap out of me before I let him tell me off!’

“Guess what?”

She looked up again, trying to smile hopefully and it partially worked. Naruto was chuckling to himself and Hinata wondered if he was going crazy; or if they both were.

“If your dad told you all that and meant it, I still think we don’t have anything to worry about,” Naruto informed her, “Even if it’s going to drive him bonkers, Hinata, you aren’t going to be marrying anyone else! That’s one thing I’m sure of!”
Hinata made a squeaking noise when he kissed her, this time successfully, and she supposed she should've known better. Naruto wasn't one who often followed rules anyway and she hadn't really expected him to.

She didn't close her eyes because she wanted to see him. She wanted to see him and be sure that he was really there. Hinata admitted she probably could've watched him even with her eyes closed (with her amplified blood limit) but she wasn't sure if he'd appreciate her face bristling with veins at the moment. She left her eyes half-lidded, watching his sharp, whiskered face and how his hair was golden with the afternoon light illuminating it.

“Enjoying the view?” He asked after a moment, noticing she was distracted, “I'm kind of doing all the work here. Come on Hinata, you were a bit more lively back when we-” Hinata responded, shutting him up, and accidentally nipped his lip. He didn't mind though. A reaction was a reaction, and she was utterly glorious no matter what she did.

After thoroughly kissing each other in the middle of the path, the two huddled up in a close embrace, muttering nonsensical, affectionate things. Hinata hoped that the person who just crossed the trail up ahead was not one of her cousins, and if so, that they hadn't noticed her kissing a certain blonde boy who most Hyuga had come to label "the crazy loudmouth."

It appeared they were undiscovered so she relaxed, and Naruto was content sniffing her hair, fascinated by her unique scent and the indigo sheen he so often overlooked. She seemed to fit into the line of his body perfectly, splendidly, and he believed he could stand there for the rest of forever if he had the time and inclination, but she would get terribly bored of it after long, he suspected.

“Those flowers you've got with you…” He said after a while, and she could feel him speak against her cheek, “Are you going to dry them out? I'll help you if you want.”

“Well, most boys don't like that sort of thing, I thought…”

“I'm not most boys. I'm Naruto. I'm going to be Hokage. And I'm yours.” The blonde nin declared, “If I want to press flowers with my favorite girl, then I'm gonna press flowers! And everyone else can shove it!”

“Right.” She nodded, approvingly, and let him hold her free hand as he tugged her along the path again, “Though…you wouldn't rather spend time with Haku-kun-?”

“I live with him. And mostly when we spend time we're training, studying, or washing dishes.” Naruto replied shortly, “I don't rather that sort of thing Hinata. I'll buy Haku-kun ramen later or something and I totally don't regret coming to see you!”

They turned left, off of the path, and onto the front lawn of the mansion. Jiraiya had found them while they had still been holding hands and he smiled to himself for a minute, 'Aww...Cute! When they're older they might just be the stars of my new book...but right now I'm going to have to break up this innocent liaison!'

“Er-herm!” The toad sage cleared his throat and Naruto sighed, recognizing the noise. He turned around to face his perverted teacher and Hinata did the same, but with far less disdain.

“Sorry to interrupt things, Hinata-sama, but Naruto and I need to have a little chat.” Jiraiya said smugly, “You wouldn't mind if I borrowed him for a bit, would you princess?”

She shook her head politely and Naruto had half-wished she was less cooperative and had sent the hermit packing. He decided to be pleasant, though, since it had been a good day. Hinata squeezed
his hand goodbye before he followed after Jiraiya and then turned to the compound, intending to set some of the flowers until he returned.

They stopped near the entrance to the grounds and Jiraiya looked down at Naruto, noting the annoyed look on his face. Before his blonde pupil could begin complaining, Jiraiya began, “So here's the deal, squirt; as of late I've been gathering information on the Akatsuki. Since they won't be planning their next strike for another two years or so I've decided I'm going to train you outside of the village during that time.”

“That sounds pretty cool, actually.” Naruto admitted, then asked, “Haku-kun and Gaara-kun are coming too, right?”

His sensei shook his head in the negative, “I can't risk it, Naruto. Haku is in no condition to leave the village especially when Orochimaru is still keeping a sharp eye for any sign of him. And bringing the sand kid would be the worst mistake I could make. You and Gaara together at the same time would be the ideal opportunity for the Akatsuki to pick you off.”

It was true. It was more dangerous to have his friends with him than without him, at the moment. That didn't mean Naruto liked it, though. He wished there was some way they could sneak out and train abroad, but they wouldn't be a very difficult bunch to find.

“I understand.” Naruto said mechanically. He hated the idea of being without his best friends, but he refused to pass up the chance for more intense training.

“I'm sorry about this, kid.” Jiraiya apologized, his voice was sincere, “You know I wish things were different too. We just got dealt a crappy hand is all, and we've got to play it safe for now and work with what we have. I'd bring them too if things weren't this way.”

Naruto was frowning, “I know. It sucks. But hey, when do we have to get going, did you say Ero-sensei?”

“Tsunade said we could leave immediately, come to think of it.” Jiraiya scratched his chin, “It'd be better to go sooner versus later. Time's not exactly on our side…”

The blonde boy was alarmed at the news. Immediately? That's...not cool. We all just got settled down and now I have to leave? What about Haku-kun and Gaara-kun? What about Hinata-chan!’ He wasn't at all prepared. He was happy and he was beginning to see just how comfortable his life in Leaf had become.

“Okay. Well...could you give it three days then?” Naruto asked, hoping for an adjustment period, “That way I could get ready and say goodbye to everyone?”

Jiraiya raised an eyebrow, “I won't argue with that. I wasn't exactly planning on leaving today either, that's too abrupt for an old fart like me. You get situated and hang around with your princess today. I'm off to go check up on Haku.”

The toad sage departed to find his recovering pupil and Naruto re-entered the Hyuga estate. All that he and his teacher had discussed weighed heavy on his heart, This is going to be really tough. I don't know if I'm ready...but if I've got to get going, I guess now's as good a time as any.’

He navigated his way to where Hinata's room was located and leapt up and into the open window. She didn't jump in surprise when he appeared. She had already spread out a number of thick books that she intended to flatten the flowers with. Naruto walked over to the middle of the room and sat directly across from her, reaching for a white chrysanthemum.

“What did Gama-sennin want to talk with you about?” Hinata asked curiously, handing him a
book to use.

Naruto laid the bloom flat between two pages and then closed the book, clamping down on the fresh flower carefully. He put it aside and looked over to her, "Nothing important. Don't worry about it, Hinata-chan. I'll tell you later."

The following day, all of the genin teams in Konoha had re-established their normal routines. They reunited to train and take missions as they usually did, still slightly disquiet after Sasuke's flight from the village.

Team 2 was no exception.

Naruto, Gaara and Haku ventured to their training area in the forest. They didn't begin to spar straight away, however, because Gaara had been telling them about how he had been approached to go to Suna. The subject had been prompted after Naruto had explained how he'd be leaving with Jiraiya soon and they were all a bit nervous about it.

"Right now Temari and Kankuro are with Sakura's team," Gaara added, leaning against a training post, "They're attempting to soothe the tension there, but I'm not sure if it'll do any good."

"Yeah," Naruto agreed gloomily, "I really don't think any of them will ever get used to Sasuke being gone."

When he had said the Uchiha's name he was surprised by how calm he was. After seeing that Haku had survived, Naruto was far less vengeful towards Sasuke than he had thought he'd be, 'All the same I'm going to kick his ass so hard...he'll be wishing he never left in the first place!'

"I have a suggestion," Haku spoke up after having been deep in thought, "Naruto-kun, if you are going to be gone for however long Jiraiya-sensei said, I think we should all exchange jutsu before going separate ways."

Both Naruto and Gaara's eyes lit up at the idea.

"Awesome!" The blonde cried excitedly, "We'll teach one jutsu each, how about it? Are either of you interested in Shadow Clones?"

Indeed they were.

Both of his teammates listened carefully to his instruction when he explained the fundamentals and details of the technique, since Naruto was clearly an old pro. He showed them the hand sign, and warned them that it'd be better if they didn't try to experiment with detonating clones, "Even I'm not that great at it and it's dangerous as hell!"

They learned the jutsu quickly but by no means did that mean they had mastered it, Naruto reminded them. Until they could practically create kage bunshin by blinking, and had fully integrated them into their fighting style, Naruto said he'd never be convinced that they were truly adept with the jutsu.

Gaara and Haku agreed with the notion, but the redhead went on and created ten clones to show off, while Haku only had the capacity for three. Naruto told him to quit it.

"My technique will require a specific location." Haku had said, and they migrated to the waterfall nearby the Hokage monument. He intended to trade them Water Dragon Blast, and both Gaara and Naruto doubted it would be a jutsu that would come easily to them.
The number of seals were more than what Naruto had the patience to learn, but he submitted himself to Haku's instruction and observed the jutsu in action. Both jinchuriki noted it was more useful to Haku than it would be to them, because their friend had the ability to fully control and recycle water. ‘We only get one shot with this jutsu!’ Naruto thought irritably.

They came to respect the brute force and power of the attack, and Gaara was flabbergasted when Naruto had accomplished a perfect strike sooner than he had. Haku had reasoned that Naruto’s chakra control was most likely more precise than Gaara’s, and of course Gaara grew agitated.

A short while later the red haired boy had also learned the water jutsu, and he and Naruto spent a long while recklessly attacking each other with blasts of water, trying to outdo the other. Haku could only watch their antics in amusement.

After being thoroughly drenched, they returned to their training area and took a break to dry off. While they waited, Naruto looked to Gaara, befuddled, “I'm wondering, Gaara, what jutsu do you plan on trading? It's not like we're any good with sand or stuff like that…”

Haku also found it a valid point.

Gaara stood up, deciding to proceed even if his shirt hadn't finished drying. “I did have to think about it,” He admitted, then smirked, “I figured neither of you would have a very hard time learning a fire jutsu.”

His friends balked at the statement.

‘He's totally bluffing!’ Naruto thought to himself, unable to believe it, 'How the hell would he-?’ The honest words had gone from Gaara's mouth to God's ears, and sure enough, he breathed a huge fireball in the center of the field that left his friends speechless.

“It's supplementary and easy for a Leaf shinobi to master,” Gaara shrugged, “Sorry I couldn't offer anything of a higher level. It was that or Sand Burial.”

“It will suffice.” Haku smiled pleasantly.

He and Naruto quickly learned the Grand Fireball Technique, and Naruto began to suspect that Gaara had learned the jutsu from Sakura, ‘It makes sense, really. He's been spending so much time with her, of course she's gonna teach him some of her jutsu!’

He could relate the situation to when Hinata had given him a crash-course in Jyukken.

After inquiring about the origins of the fire jutsu, Gaara admitted he had been training with Sakura in her free time. Most times Tsunade would shoo him away from the tower so he would stop distracting her pupil from her studies. When he became more persistent, she would attack him with volleyballs projected at him at speeds reaching 185 miles per hour or more.

“She hit me once too.” Gaara added, “Without my sand shield she may have unintentionally killed me.”

“Baa-chan's good at killing people unintentionally so watch yourself.” Naruto agreed, nodding with squinted eyes.

After fooling around with the two new jutsu they each acquired, the boys of Team 2 returned home for lunch. Naruto went to work preparing ramen and Gaara dropped onto the couch lazily, ready for a nap.

Haku had changed shirts, since his gi had gotten singed after Naruto had nearly missed him with a
fireball. He found the black shirt he had switched into was in fact Gaara's, but he didn't feel guilty; he and his teammates often shared their clothing…with the exception of their everyday outfits, 'I just couldn't see myself in Naruto-kun's attire…it just screams attack me.'

He passed through the living area unnoticed, and gave one last look to his distracted friends before silently slipping out the door. A few minutes later Naruto glanced over to Gaara on the couch, puzzled, and then turned back to the boiling water while he asked, “Er…is it just me, or did Haku-kun totally sneak off just now?”

The red haired boy opened one eye, drowsily, “He's good at that. This must be the first time you've ever noticed.”

“Well, sheesh! He's like a ghost sometimes!” Naruto barked back in annoyance, “I guess he doesn't want to stay for ramen. Where do you suppose he's off to?”

“Wherever he doesn't want us to follow.” Gaara droned, sleepy and yet still able to recite a dictum, “And since he won't be joining us I call dibs on his share.”

“No way you lazy piece of shit! I made it so I should get it!” Naruto retorted, grabbing the cup of noodles that had been set aside for Haku, “Make your own damn ramen for once!”

Gaara said nothing and rolled over, stretching out onto the full length of the sofa. Naruto had won that round lock, stock, and barrel. He doubted he'd ever take the responsibility to make his own food, or leave the comfortable sanctity of his couch.

While he drifted off to sleep for an afternoon nap, Naruto took advantage of his unawareness and ate all three cup noodles on his own.

Haku ended up on a training field that Team 7 had been using. Kakashi was not supervising his students, but Sakura had invited Temari and Kankuro along to help her and Kiba train. Temari’s wind jutsu kept the both of them on their toes, while Kankuro refrained from using his puppets against the Leaf ninja.

After a short while Temari excused herself for a break on the side of the field, and watched in amusement as Kiba dove and dodged to avoid incoming fireballs from the pink haired girl, 'And now that the Hokage is training her, she'll be a tough opponent for the dog-kid!' The sand kunoichi was beginning to like Sakura and her spirited personality. She could actually picture herself a sister-in-law with pink hair in the future, 'Though I don't want to think about any nieces or nephews I might have then …'

“What do you think of Sakura-chan’s team?” Haku had asked and Temari faced him after noticing he had snuck up on her. He was wearing black; a hue that made him look lean and more boyish.

“Naïve, for the most part. Sakura is pleasant company though, and that Kiba-fellow keeps challenging Kankuro to fight, which is absurd.” She replied, still believing she and her brother had more skill than the Leaf genin, “Hm…looks like their teacher finally decided to show up.”

Kakashi appeared with a small wave and both of his pupils stormed up to him, demanding to know why he had shown up three hours late.

“This is what it's like normally with Team 7.” Haku assured her.

“Strange.” Temari droned, “I think they're better off now than they were when the Uchiha was with their team. He probably wasn't much of a cheerful face while he was with them.”
“…please don’t say that.”

She looked to the dark haired boy, who had a tense expression after listening to her harsh words. Temari decided to drop the subject even though she had just as much dislike for Sasuke as her brother did. It was clear it was something that Haku was sensitive about, especially when he still felt responsible for the failure of the Retrieval Mission.

“Gaara-kun told me about his invitation to Sand.” Haku said thoughtfully after a moment, “I think it would do him some good if he spent some time there. He might find he favors his natural environment.”

“I doubt that…” She said quietly, and he gave her an inquiring look so she continued, “Even if he's with us it may bring up some painful memories for him if he goes back. And now that my father is dead the village is hectic. It won't be one of the most welcoming places for him presently.”

“I'm sorry about your father.” Haku mewed guiltily; unaware the Kazekage had been killed. Unaware Gaara's father had been killed.

Temari was silent for a long while and they watched Kankuro take on both Sakura and Kiba across the way. Kakashi sat reading his book on a tree stump as his students tousled with the Sand ninja.

“Don't be sorry. He...he didn't mean that much to me anyway. Now that he's gone it's just me and my brothers from here out...I guess I prefer it that way.” She wiped at her eyes, frustrated, “Did you know I was actually considering staying in Leaf? Then Baki shows up and tells Kankuro and I that we've been promoted to chunin, and that we're needed back home to help out…”

Haku felt unsettled at the sight of her so troubled. He understood. She wanted to be with her siblings in a place where they could all be content, but duty came before leisure. Now she was a chunin and she was being summoned back to Suna. Being taken away from a place she had grown fond of.

“Only do what your heart tells you to.” Haku recommended softly.

“Our hearts have been telling us to stay with Gaara,” Temari said lowly, “But how am I supposed to know for sure if he wants to go to Sand with us? I don't think he'd leave his friends.”

She turned away from him, refusing to let him see her distraught like she was. They were being torn apart again just like they had been when they were children, Temari felt. She saw little hope of her family ever being fully reunited again.

“Don't be upset, Temari.” Haku's voice sounded hopeful, “I think Gaara-kun will go with you if you ask him to.”

“But I won't ask him to. He'd be sacrificing everything he has here if he went with us.” She protested sullenly, “I couldn't do that; ask him to give it all up…”

'She cares much more than she'll let others believe.' Haku thought, keen to see through her façade, 'Temari will hide her compassion beneath the tough exterior she's created. It's a way to protect herself. In that respect she is just like Gaara-kun.'

It made sense they would behave in similar ways, he guessed. They had both suffered when they were young, and had to deal with the callous principles in Suna. They found ways to shield themselves from being hurt again.
Temari had calmed herself considerably, but she didn't appreciate how Haku stood in front of her, eyeing her inquisitively. He didn't look like he was going to exploit her moment of vulnerability, but she didn't know him well enough to trust him, *He probably thinks I'm a nervous wreck! Maybe that's accurate. But I sure as hell am not going to take any shit from this doe-eyed little-*

“If you won't, then I will ask Gaara-kun to go with you.” Haku decided, smiling considerately, “And if he’s hesitant about leaving…then I will go too. That way it won't be as uncomfortable for him as you make it sound.”

Temari hadn't been expecting him to relieve the pressure. She'd anticipated him to selfishly insist that Gaara remain in Leaf, but he had not. In fact, he had volunteered to join them if there had been any reluctance. Her opinion of him changed drastically. She could understand why Gaara held him in such high esteem.

“You'd actually go?” She asked, surprised, “You realize we live in the desert, right? Are you sure you could put up with that?”

He was empathetic to the point where he disregarded his own needs. At the time, she did not know it.

“Don't worry about me,” Haku answered smoothly, “You know Gaara-kun would never allow you to be unhappy…and neither will I.” Temari accepted the idea after the reassurance, but blinked in confusion when she felt a gentle sensation capture her mouth.

It was a very brief kiss, but she swore it left an electrical charge of some sort on her lips. It was so interesting and new it was scary and Temari leapt back, completely bewildered, “What the hell is your problem?”

Haku stood there demurely, hurt by her defensiveness, “There isn’t a problem, Temari.”

At least he hoped there wasn't. Even he was unsure why he had acted the way he had. She was beautiful and troubled and he felt compelled to do something about it. So he did what came naturally to him and showed affection. Haku had forgotten it was something Temari was in a constant feud with.

“When you act like a dunder-head I'd call it a problem!” Temari announced, hissing, grateful no one across the clearing had seen the curious exchange from a moment ago. She was unsure what all of it meant, for both her and her admirer.

“I'm sorry if I upset you, but I can't change how I feel.” Haku said quietly.

“You can't change how you-? No. No.” It clicked in her head then, and she quickly rejected the thought of getting involved with her brother's friend, “Does it even matter to you what Gaara thinks about this?”

“Of course it does.”

That didn't help. Clearly he wasn't in touch with the reality that there were certain courtship rules, and that friends ‘don't go for friend's older sisters’ if they're smart! Haku watched her, eyes stormy and brilliant, and she feared she wouldn't be able to convey to him how he may have been misguided in his emotions.

“You're…you're just being a ridiculous, pubescent, hormonally-driven kid who needs a reality check!” Temari tried to explain the incident through logic, “Whatever you think you feel about me is an illusion.”
“I'm quite sure it isn't.” He replied smilingly, with the imperviousness of a brick wall.

It was the same innocent, cordial face she had first seen during the final rounds. Haku was deceptively heedless and sweet, and Temari felt her resolve quake at the inviting sight of an expression that practically screamed: opportunity. The electric feeling on her mouth still resonated and she wondered how he had done it.

“You...you...better stop acting so goddamn cute all the time!” She concluded loudly, and then stormed off across the field back to Team 7, hoping he wouldn't follow.

Haku could see that she was flustered and had thoroughly turned him down. He inwardly admitted he hadn't expected her to allow his advances, but he didn't see himself giving up just then. She hadn't turned him down flatly. Temari had actually had a hard time telling him off, which was rare for an aficionada of rudeness.

'She may be as terribly stubborn as Gaara, but she must have a warm heart just as he does.' He was actually quite sure she was accepting, even when she so fiercely denied it. Haku wisely chose to leave the training area and let her be, knowing there would be other times to try and appeal to her.

Temari leaned on her fan, distracted, staring at the ground in bafflement after she had rejoined Sakura.

Kankuro looked to his sister, smirking, “What's up with you? Your face is all red!”

Sakura and Kiba observed as well and agreed, none of them the wiser that Haku had paid a very short, very interesting visit. Temari barked at them to mind their own business, and opened her fan, knocking her pestering brother into a bush with a gust of wind.

Little did she know that Kakashi had been witness to the events that had occurred across the field. He kept his eyes glued to the page, not wanting to get involved, 'Kids these days...they're all work and no fun.'

Later that day Hinata stopped by the Hokage's tower after being summoned. She entered Tsunade's office after knocking politely and was quickly let inside.

“Well done, Hinata! I want to commend you on your defeat of Yakushi Kabuto during the retrieval mission,” Tsunade was smiling broadly, “Naruto told me all about it. You've done a great service by dispatching one of the high-ranked enemies of Leaf listed in the Bingo Book.”

“I did what I had to, Hokage-sama.” Hinata answered modestly.

“Your father has also been bragging about your new ability to all of the clan leaders in the village, it seems,” The Hokage added, smirking when Hinata's face turned scarlet, “He's very proud of you. Since you've proven to be so dependable I've decided to assign you to a mission I have on hand.”

“A mission? Right now?” She was startled, “What about my-?”

“You won't need your teammates for this. It's simple.” She gestured over to another Hyuga who stood quietly on the right side of the room, “Since young Fujita here has just been promoted to genin rank, it wouldn't be wise to send him out of the village on his own with the threat of Sound so great.”
Her cousin gave her a small, timid wave hello and she smiled at him in greeting. She hadn't known he'd graduated, since it was said the most recent graduating class hadn't produced any capable ninja. It appeared he was the only exception, 'Does he have any teammates, I wonder? Is he being trained privately?' She decided to ask later.

“I want you to go with Fujita to the Village Hidden in the Grass to meet with his sensei, Nitobe Sawako. He is there gathering herbs vital to medicines we would like to produce here in Konoha, and at last Grass is cooperating.” Tsunade sounded very pleased, as if she had something to do with the change, “Go there and help him bring the supplies home.”

“Of course, Tsunade-sama.” Hinata accepted the mission, “How long do you think this will take?”

“No more than two days, I should think.” The Hokage estimated, “If you leave now no more than a day, maybe. It depends on Fujita: he hasn't traveled long distances at great speed like you have. This is his first time.”

The young boy looked embarrassed by his lack of experience, but that wasn't what Hinata was concerned about. ‘Two days? But Naruto-kun will be leaving soon! We'll have to go quickly or I won't be back in time to see him...’

“I expect you to take this seriously, Hinata, even if it is only C-rank,” Tsunade added, seeing the girl's distraction, “You are responsible for Fujita as the leader of this team. Now get going, so you can cover some distance before nightfall.”

They bowed to the Hokage and then left the office together. On the way out of the tower, Fujita looked to Hinata, “Hinata-sama, I...I really want to thank you for saving my life during the invasion. I thought that I was going to die that day, and my brother had done everything he could to try and save me. He said you are a great blessing to our clan!”

“It really was the least I could do, Fujita-kun.” Hinata assured him, smiling happily, “And I'm sure you will be just as great a shinobi as your big brother.”

Once they returned to the compound they parted ways temporarily to pack their belongings. Hinata packed feverishly, trying not to forget anything as she scrambled about her room preparing, 'Oh, I do hope we return in time! What would I do if I came home and Naruto-kun was gone?’

Hinata went out to the front of the estate to wait for Fujita. She looked off to her right, and blinked in surprise to see Neji reading quietly on the porch. She approached him and he looked up from his book, “Hello, Hinata-sama.”

Hinata summed up the goal of her mission and by the time she had finished Fujita had come back.

“The both of you be careful, then.” Neji wished them luck, ignoring how Fujita gawked at his suddenly-short hair. He watched as Hinata seemed to run frantically out through the front gate of the compound, with Fujita scrambling to keep up with her.

'She certainly is in a big hurry…'

By nightfall both Temari and Kankuro had bid their younger brother goodnight, and then returned to the apartment they had resided in during their stay in Konoha.

Kankuro had fallen asleep immediately, if his loud snoring from across the room hadn't been indication enough for Temari. She remained awake, restless from her little encounter with Haku. Her brother's snores weren't exactly helping her rest easy either.
'He's totally crazy, that kid.' She decided, and she had previous evidence that supported her conclusion. He often put himself in dangerous situations, acted rashly on missions, and never, ever put himself before others. In a way, Temari guessed those were a few of the reasons why he had such a strong bond with Gaara.

He had surprised her, though she supposed she probably shouldn't have been. They had been spending an increasing amount of time together and Haku always had possessed a “strange charm.” She hadn't realized what it had meant until he had to spell it out for her.

'He's too nice. It's almost like it's a phony act, except it's not. It's the weirdest thing I've ever seen…' Temari didn't know how to cope with his gentleness. Haku was too docile and sweet, and she had never encountered such qualities in a person before.

The way she viewed it was that her environment was partially to blame for her defensiveness. No one was nice in Suna. Life was hard there; continually dependent on support from outside the village for food and resources, and many times they had gone without necessities for periods of time when no one would lend aid.

The struggling in her village made most shinobi hard-nosed and distrustful. There, kindness was always considered the same as weakness and it was unacceptable. Haku displayed selflessness that she was unacquainted with and she hadn't known how to react to him. One of the last things people in Suna were concerned with was love and friendship, both things Haku had in spades. Though he was far from weak, she acknowledged.

Temari rolled over and gazed out the window. Trees creaked in the breeze outside and it was a sight she was getting used to. No matter how different Leaf was from Sand, she was beginning to grow very fond of it. The same could be said for her situation with the dark haired boy.

'I like him too.' She admitted, grudgingly, 'But where would that put me in standings with Gaara? Am I going crazy? Stuff like this shouldn't happen in the first place, but Haku sure isn't trying to fix it. He says he cares about how Gaara would feel, but he acts like it's no big deal if he finds out.'

She doubted her youngest sibling would take kindly to his friend after hearing his intentions. He certainly hadn't during the time frame between the preliminary and final matches of the Chunin Exam. They had gotten into a fight then, and she didn't want to be responsible for another calamity.

'It doesn't seem as likely, though.' Temari noted, pulling the sheets up beneath her chin, 'Things are resolved between them and Gaara isn't as hostile towards him after he landed in the hospital. Maybe it would work?' She paused, frowning inwardly, 'That's a big maybe, actually.'

After a moment she smiled to herself. Temari was familiar with taking risks and she figured things couldn't go too badly if she gave the kid a shot. 'He's not a bad kisser, that's for sure. I swear it still feels tingly…' She brushed her fingers over her lips at the thought, 'If he impresses me I'll let up. It's about time I got some admirer anyway and he is a piece of eye candy…'

She didn't want to think anymore after that and she rolled over, closing her eyes and welcoming sleep. Perhaps Haku would prove to be worth all the trouble he was about to cause. Temari wasn't about to stop him.
At long last he felt purpose again and it wasn't long before he began training three students of his own the disciplines of ninjutsu. He made each of them promise to only use the skills they learned to protect their village and loved ones.

Ukigaru was a patient, stern teacher and his disciples had come to adore him and his wisdom. They obeyed him without question and under Ukigaru's leadership the small village prospered.

One day he had left his students to train on their own and look after the village, and he took a long, quiet walk along the mountainside.

The trees were coming back to life as spring blinked her sleepy eyes upon the land. Ukigaru marveled at his beautiful home, and looked up to where a castle had been built on the slopes of the valley.

It was the home of the daimyo who owned the lands in the Stone Country. Ukigaru himself had heard very little about the newly instated lord and few people had ever seen him outside of his mansion. He went closer, just outside the castle, and peered up into a high window where a face had come into view.

A beautiful young woman sat beside the window, gazing out into the distance. Despite her lovely face she looked terribly lonely, and Ukigaru felt his heart swell at the sight. He decided to go and speak to her.

Using his chakra, Ukigaru leapt up onto the monstrous wall surrounding the palace and scaled it. The young lady was shocked to see someone had climbed the impassable wall her father had built, and she backed away in fright when Ukigaru entered through the window.

“Please don't be afraid,” He said softly, “My name is Ukigaru and I saw you staring out from your window there. I only want to speak with you.”

The woman relaxed, seeing his sincere disposition, and said, “I see. Well, Ukigaru, never have I seen a man scale such an immense wall before. You are very gifted. My name is Mameha and I am the princess of the Land of Stone.”

He was very pleased to meet her indeed.

Ukigaru was curious to know why she allowed all of the villages of the land to suffer through such hardships. “A good leader seeks to help those he or she governs” He had told her.

Mameha admitted that she truly wanted to improve the conditions the people lived in, but there was no way she could persuade her father to do so. “He is a stubborn man,” Mameha had said, “And a man who can avert the truth from his ears.”

Ukigaru explained how he was training the people in his village as ninja, and that if the daimyo lent them aid, he would benefit from their skill and protection in times of peril.

Mameha found the idea sensible and agreed to help him reason with her father. They went to his chambers and tried to negotiate with him, but the Lord Tokito was adverse to Ukigaru's suggestion.

“Those fools are of little use to me as it is.” The daimyo had said, “Teach them to fight if you like, but my army will always be greater.”

He would hear no more from Ukigaru after that and sent him away, not caring about the toils the village faced.
“Do not fret, I believe you can disprove my father if you do your best,” Mameha had told him as he went to leave, “And please return soon, Ukigaru-san. My father doesn't allow me many visitors and I enjoy your company.”

He agreed that he would before he left.

When Ukigaru returned to his village he shared with the townspeople his idea of earning the daimyo’s cooperation. They admitted it would be difficult, but many said that they would be more than happy to begin learning ninjutsu.

On days Ukigaru was not busy training and advising his students, he would travel up the mountainside and scale the castle wall to speak to Mameha. He visited her often and they spoke discussing the progress of the villagers' training. Ukigaru also told her stories of the time he had spent training with Rokudou-sennin and his friends. Mameha was quite fascinated by his adventures and shared with him stories of her own life.

He came in secret to see her, knowing her father would not be pleased to see him slinking about the palace again. Weeks passed and with the full arrival of spring the farmers' seeds began to take root and grow in the new, blessed soil. It was that time Ukigaru often spent laughing with Mameha and walking through her gardens with her.

One morning Ukigaru came to her window, bringing flowers with him, and said, “Come run away with me, Mameha, if your father irks you so! Come live with me in my village and I will show you only love and joy. Though I have little to offer I could be a good husband for you!”

She accepted the flowers from him and kissed his cheek, “There could never be a better husband for me than you, my love. Though my heart sings at the thought of escaping this place and living with you, I'm afraid I cannot go anywhere without my father's approval.”

Ukigaru was troubled, knowing the daimyo was very arrogant, but went to him the same day, courageously, and asked for his daughter's hand in marriage.

Tokito laughed in response, “Don't be a fool! You could never be worthy enough for my lovely daughter! Now leave this place at once!”

He sent Ukigaru away again and he did not see Mameha again for some time.

While he had been reading Neji shifted in his position on the bed. A piece of paper slipped from between two pages he had turned to and landed in his lap. He put the book aside and sat up straighter, curious about the old, yellowing slip of parchment he had discovered.

There was writing on it, neat and formal, and he recognized that it was certainly not Tenten's writing. He wondered if she had ever even examined the book she had owned before giving it to him. Neji read the sprawling note on the paper in the flickering rays of light from the lantern.

'It's addressed to Tenten!' He hadn't expected to find a message for his teammate, nor did he know who had written it. The note was small and looked as if it had been penned down in a rush.

'I don't know how old you are now that you're reading this, but I suppose now it means that I'm gone. I had hoped I would be around long enough to tell you these things myself, but your mother and I face peril every day, as you already know.

Neji assumed her father had something to tell her before he died and never got the chance to say it.

I want you to know that we love you and think of you always. Every mission we take is only for
You and the good of the village. I want you to know that even if they found us, if they are the reason I'm not with you today, that they will not be able to find you. You will be safe.

And if you ever feel like you need extra training go speak with Hayate-kun, and keep the forge orderly, please, I know you know how to manage it.

But Tenten, remember: if something goes wrong, if they do find you; you must resist with all your might. What they want is what you already have. I've left it for you in the black scroll. It's yours. Please keep it secret.

I love you and I trust you. Please don't forget us once you're a legendary kunoichi.

--Dad

Below that was written hurriedly:

Be careful with this book! We took it with us when we came to Konoha. It's my favorite and it's irreplaceable.

Neji sat staring at the paper, stunned. He couldn't believe Tenten had never found her father's last wish, and something in his gut warned him it was important that she read it herself to understand its meaning.

He replaced the slip back between the pages it had fallen out of and left the book on his desk. He dimmed the lantern-light before retiring to sleep. Neji wondered what on earth Tenten's father had meant by "them" being responsible for his absence…and why she had to be wary of them.

The next morning Naruto woke with the first light of dawn. He rolled out of bed, yawning contentedly as he strolled about his room with zombie-reflexes, and selected clothing for the day. He would have worn his normal outfit had his neon-orange jacket not gone suspiciously missing, 'I bet Haku-kun hid it! He hates that thing and says it's a beacon to enemies…he just has no fashion sense!'

As retribution, he stole one of Haku's fishnet shirts and claimed it for himself.

After dressing Naruto ventured to Gaara's room, entering with a loud bang. His red haired friend did not stir even with all the clamor he made, so Naruto took the more direct approach and leapt onto the bed, jumping, attacking, and talking Gaara back to consciousness.

"…leave." Gaara grumbled, half irritable, half asleep.

"Where did Haku-kun go off to, I wonder?" Was Naruto's response to his friend's sleepy demand.

"…don't know. Now leave."

"Aw, come on, Gaara-kun! You better wake up because you’re missing out on your precious time with Sakura-chan!" Naruto chided mischievously, still perched above Gaara's head.

"She's training with Tsunade-sama right now." He retorted blearily, desperately wishing for sleep, "I'll take her out to lunch later or something. Now get out…"

The blonde boy didn't take Gaara seriously, not when he wasn't entirely conscious, 'And that means he isn't dangerous yet! Provided that Shukaku is dormant right now…'

"You're a terrible boyfriend, Gaara! Get a move-on!"
Gaara told him to eat shit.

Naruto laughed, giving up and hopping out of the room. “I'm going to look for Hinata-chan, so I'll see you later!” He called over his shoulder, his loud, obnoxious cry echoing in Gaara's tortured ears.

Even after his friend had left he still could not get any sleep, so he grudgingly threw his blanket aside and proceeded to go shower. He'd go see Sakura anyway, even if it meant the Godaime violently chasing him off again. Gaara wouldn't stand for Naruto calling him a terrible boyfriend while he was clearly the incompetent one.

After washing up he got dressed and it was then Gaara did grow curious of where Haku had gone off to. It was in his nature to inform them of his future whereabouts, but recently Haku had been a bit sparing on telling them where he'd be.

‘Sneaky.’ Gaara first thought. He wondered if he was stealing ninjutsu scrolls again, or of he had picked up another improper habit. In due course he resolved to locate his shifty teammate before going to visit Sakura.

He found Kankuro first, inadvertently.

Gaara bumped into his brother after heading down the main road. He asked if he had seen Haku anywhere and was answered in the negative. Kankuro also looked perplexed, “Actually…I was going to ask you if you happened to see where Temari went.”

'Suspicious.' He found that their corresponding disappearances could not simply be a coincidence. Gaara recruited the help of his older brother to locate the two missing shinobi, and they went about searching the village.

About a half hour later, they did in fact find both Temari and Haku. They had been sparring together at Team Two's training area. Kankuro dismissed their previous anxiety, glad to see they were finally being friendly with each other. He trained with his younger, slightly-distracted brother.

Gaara countered Kankuro's puppets with his sand, all the while keeping an eye on Haku across the way. He could see his friend was using Shadow Clones against Temari, trying to become familiar with the new jutsu he had acquired.

Temari ripped apart an incoming fireball with a fierce wind generated by her fan. Time passed and both his sister and the dark haired boy continued to exchange savage blows without hurting the other. Their strange interactions had sidetracked both Gaara and his brother, and they stopped in their scuffling to watch the two fight on the opposite side of the field.

'Just what the heck is going on?' Kankuro thought to himself, 'Yesterday Temari was acting really weird during training and now she's completely...she's...' He didn't know what to label it. He had never seen his older sister smile good-naturedly during a fight. It was beyond all classification.

Gaara had known something was off from the start and watched with his arms folded, supposing Haku was yet again responsible for an incident.

Temari didn't appreciate how both of her siblings were brazenly glaring at her and her sparring partner, 'It's understandable, I guess. But they don't trust anything. They're just going to have to cope.'

And only with the intention of confounding her younger brothers, Temari grabbed Haku by his
arm while he had been tying his hair back and boldly kissed the startled boy full on the mouth.

Kankuro and Gaara watched the exchange from their place across the field, shocked. A shattering of comprehension seemed to create a fracture in their brains, and all logical thought was obliterated.

'She did not just…she did…holy shit.'

“Does that answer your question?” She asked them, smirking devilishly.

She received no response and Temari hummed triumphantly, having gotten the reaction she'd been looking for. Haku, at that time an innocent victim, stood dazed beside her and obeyed when she told him they were leaving.

Once they had departed, Kankuro, very slowly and hesitantly, glanced over to his brother. Gaara's eyes had not moved from where they had been focused and he hadn't blinked either in that time. Utter bafflement had taken over, and Kankuro had a moment to fear for his safety while he was still unsure if Gaara was about to go apeshit.

A minute later Gaara turned to leave, seemingly calm. Kankuro followed, but could have sworn he heard his brother mutter under his breath, “…I need therapy.”
Departure

Chapter Soundtrack: “One Dream” by Replus feat. Sam Ock

Hinata had never been to the Hidden Grass Village before in her days of traveling. She and her subordinate journeyed northwest all through the night (since Fujita hadn't protested) and they arrived at their destination at dawn.

“Wait…Hinata-sama…” The young boy rasped while he pelted alongside her down the dirt road, running out of energy, “Can we…can we just rest…for a bit?”

Hinata halted immediately, finally realizing her combined rush to finish the mission and her greater stamina were both contributing to Fujita’s fatigue. They sat down together on the side of the path and shared a canteen of water. Sunlight peaked over the horizon and they watched it quietly as they caught their breath.

“I'm sorry I've been pushing you, Fujita-kun,” She apologized softly, “I know you aren't quite used to any of this…”

“No! I think this kind of pace will build up my experience, just like my Aniki says.” Fujita disagreed, trying not to show weakness, “We can rest later after we find Sawako-sensei.”

She was glad he had such a positive attitude. If Sato had been with her, enduring such a night-long trip, he would've been complaining the entire time. Hinata smiled to herself at the thought, 'And Shino-kun would be telling him not to whine the whole way, I bet…'

They set out again shortly at Fujita's request, and Hinata could see the Grass Village coming into sight as they passed over a hilltop.

It wasn't what she'd imagined it to look like. The buildings were lower to the ground than they were in Konoha, providing more cover on the vast meadow it was situated in. It made sense, she supposed. A decently large wall fenced the village in for protection, and there were scant trees about the place. The city stretched out for a few miles, in contrast to the stories she had heard about it being small enough to hide in a blade of grass.

It must have rained recently, Hinata thought, because the ground beneath their feet was turning to soft mud as they continued on. The trail disappeared and tall grass replaced it. Suddenly she was anxious. Hinata wasn't sure if they'd be expecting Leaf ninja to arrive so early, 'I hope they don't mistake us for intruders…'

There was no gate, only a plain archway that opened up into the mouth of the town. Despite it being so early in the morning, people were already roaming about, though there were only a few of them. Hinata recognized quickly that they were all Grass shinobi, and a jounin, it seemed, had noticed them straight away.

He approached them swiftly and Hinata froze, Fujita quickly mirroring her. She didn't want to come across as disrespectful in another village, but she held her head high, not wanting to look vulnerable either.

“Well now, who do we have here?” His voice was friendly, and he scratched his scruffy head while he observed them, “Ah! You must be Sawako-san's group, yeah? Gosh that was fast! He wasn't kidding when he said Leaf ninja set their noses to the grindstone…”

Fujita chuckled sidelong to Hinata, “That's definitely something Sawako-sensei would say!”
“Follow me, you two. Thanks for showing up so quick!” He was so nice Hinata couldn't help but smile, “He just woke up an hour ago, I think. Must be organizing all the herbs he gathered. I'll take you to him.”

Hinata relaxed while they followed the Kusa nin across town in the early morning light. At first she hadn't been sure if she'd be able to so easily trust another ninja from a different village, not after the invasion, anyway. Now she could see she no longer had to keep her guard up. It seemed like there was going to be an alliance between Leaf and Grass if things were going so smoothly.

“Hey, Sawako-san! Your backup just arrived!” Their escort laughed as he stepped into a greenhouse, ushering them inside, “They're certainly not like the lazy kids we have here; I've got to say. They show up late for almost every mission…”

“Fujita? Already?” Sawako turned around, surprised, putting down a large box he had been carrying, “Excellent! And who's this with you? Another Hyuga has decided to join us?”

“She is Hinata-sama of the Main Branch of my clan, sensei.” Fujita introduced, “She's the reason we got here so early. She moves like wind.”

Hinata blushed, but nodded respectfully to Fujita's teacher. She had never seen him before, probably because he was an older jounin who looked as if he had seen his share of battles and was more interested in teaching. He wasn't one who hung around with "Kakashi's Bunch," or so Sato had called it.

“Since you traveled all through the night to get here and also because I'm not really ready yet, I'll ask you two to go get some rest.” Sawako reasoned, scratching the stubble on his chin, “I'll come find you later on when I'm all set, alright?”

“Thank you, Sensei.” Fujita was grateful his mentor had seen how exhausted he was. Sawako pointed out the building he'd been staying in across the road, and told them to go to his room if they wanted to sleep. Hinata followed behind her cousin, giving one last look to Sawako as they went.

“He's trained many great shinobi in his time,” Fujita had told her as they entered the apartment, “Inuzuka Hana is just one of them. He says he prefers training students one at a time rather than coaching three-man squads.”

“That's interesting.” Hinata smiled, truthfully fascinated. She had once heard that some jounin favored training apprentices over teams, though she had never seen an example of such a relationship before.

Fujita hadn't finished his anecdote, however. Once they had let themselves into the room he collapsed onto a bed and was instantly asleep. Hinata felt even guiltier to see how she had so thoroughly drained the boy of his energy. She settled on the bed on the far side of the room and closed her eyes, knowing she'd need rest.

After fighting back her fear of not returning to Konoha in time to see Naruto off, she found sleep came quickly.

“Hinata-sama?”

“…hm?”

“Hinata-sama, please wake up. I…I can't find Sawako-sensei.”
The tired Hyuga girl rolled over and looked up at her younger cousin. She blinked sleepily and then asked, “You…can't find him? How long have we been asleep?”

“It's almost noon now.” Fujita told her, “About six hours now. I'm actually feeling a lot better.”

Hinata sat up and rubbed at her eyes, looking around. After peering out the window she could see that the sun was high in the sky, and the whole town was illuminated. Sounds of people could be heard outside. She assured Fujita that they would find his teacher after getting up, and they left the room to explore the streets together.

Hinata spoke with Fujita while they traversed down the main road, sometimes stopping to ogle at the more decorated ninja hanging about. One team of Grass shinobi had their faces painted in a way that made them resemble cats, and she wondered if they were a rival clan to the Inuzuka.

“You look a bit lost.” A genin about Hinata's age happened upon them with his teammates, “Why don't we show you around a bit? My name's Shundei! What's yours?”

“I am Hyuga Hinata,” She answered gratefully, then gestured to Fujita beside her, “And this is Fujita-kun.”

“Wow, you're both Hyuga?” The kunoichi beside Shundei spoke up, “Nice to meet ya! I'm Saezuri and this guy here is Momiji.” A tall boy with long red hair winked at Hinata and she felt her face heat up, but she greeted him just as she had his teammates.

They stayed with Shundei's team for a long while, touring the highlights of the village. After passing by the Academy in the center of the village, Shundei motioned for them to be silent as they peeked into the window of a pottery shop.

“The old man's in there, Sae,” Shundei smirked at her, whispering, “Go in there and show Hinata and Fujita your jutsu!”

The green haired girl nodded and then silently slipped into the establishment. They watched from outside as she kneeled behind a counter, unknown to the shopkeeper, and formed hand seals, “Ninpo: Grass Whistle Jutsu!”

The eerie, shrill noise that passed Saezuri's lips caught the shopkeeper off guard, and Hinata did notice just as Shundei and Momiji had (much to their delight) how the poor man wet his pants after hearing it. Saezuri blew cover and scrambled out of the shop and the angry vendor chased after her.

“This is the part where we run!” Shundei laughed, and Hinata was nearly left behind they fled so quickly. Momiji had seized her hand and tugged her along with Fujita and Saezuri. They rounded the corner much faster than the shopkeeper and leapt up onto a rooftop to safety.

The whole team of Kusa trainees were snorting in laughter together and it was then Hinata understood why the jounin of the village were rather disappointed with the new genin, ‘They're pranksters...much like Naruto-kun used to be. Though...that was so much fun!’

Fujita asked why they were so inclined to pick on the man they had earlier teased, and Saezuri informed him that he was the grouch of the town and the easiest target, “He’s great for us to practice our skills on. He never sees us coming until it's too late!”

Afterwards Shundei offered to help them locate Sawako and they made sure the shopkeeper was no longer within the vicinity before returning down to the ground. Fujita headed up the front with Saezuri and Shundei, describing to them what his sensei looked like while Momiji hung near the
back of the group with Hinata.

“So your name is Hinata, is it? That’s a lovely name.” Momiji commented, smiling down at the shorter girl, “It’s almost as pretty as you are.”

“Thank you, Momiji-san.” She said quietly, trying not to get distracted. Her name had never received much attention back at home, since it was more or less a play on words that her mother had found adorable, and her father had not protested the idea when she had been born.

With a slight of hand, Hinata blinked when he drew a rose out of thin air and handed it to her, “It’s really a shame you won't be staying in Grass for very long, Hinata-san. I was looking forward to getting to know you.” She gazed at the rose he had given her and was reminded of Naruto, not listening as Momiji spoke, “I hope you don't have a boyfriend back at home or anything like that-”

“His name is Naruto-kun…” She said dreamily, smiling to herself. Hinata was oblivious to the Grass ninja's heartbroken face.

“Naruto? Like what they put on ramen?” He sniffed indignantly, “I bet he doesn't look even half as good as I do!”

“Oh don't say that…” If she had been listening, maybe she wouldn't have insulted him as she was about to, “You aren't ugly, Momiji-san. But Naruto-kun is very handsome and his eyes are like the summer skies…”

She walked on while Momiji stood in the middle of the road, aghast. Fujita gave her a quizzical look to see her staring at the flower she was holding and Shundei barked at his friend to keep up.

Once they located Sawako at a restaurant eating lunch they parted ways.

“Is that for me? How thoughtful of you, Hinata-chan…” Sawako plucked the rose from Hinata's hands and she was snapped back to reality, “Actually, roses are a key component in a number of ointments used for burns and other wounds, but I won't get into detail now. Come eat something!”

They ate lunch together and Sawako informed them of how all of the supplies were packed and ready to be brought back home. Hinata, upon hearing the news, insisted that they leave as soon as possible.

“Hm… I like your spirit, missy! We'll go just as soon as we're done with lunch.” Sawako turned to his pupil, “Fujita, learn something from Hinata here and try to be a bit more prompt about completing missions. Punctuality is a quality of a successful ninja.”

“Of course, Sensei…” Fujita agreed quietly, still wondering why Hinata was always in such a rush.

A large cart had been piled high with boxes of categorized herbs, weighted down by all that the Grass Village had donated. After saying goodbye to the friends they had made in Grass they departed, but at an unbearably slow pace.

Hinata headed up the front of the team while Sawako and Fujita struggled to keep up with her.

When Gaara at last arrived at Ichiraku Ramen, Naruto was aware that something was amiss. The red haired boy sat beside his teammate without a word, and Naruto had a few silent minutes to contemplate what was currently bothering him.

‘He didn't get home until late last night…and neither did Haku-kun, actually.’ Naruto frowned
inwardly as he watched Ayame swing by Gaara for his order, 'Oh God. I hope they aren't fighting again. It sure looks like Haku-kun's trying to avoid him, though! What is it now?'

The blonde boy didn't spend long deliberating the situation, 'I have my own problems! I'm not gonna put up with this crap right now!'

“I didn't get told until after I ran around the Hyuga estate six times yesterday that Hinata-chan wasn't there.” Naruto grumbled sidelong to his friend, “You'd think those people would have the decency to stop me at lap five, but I think they just like messing with me.”

Gaara grunted in response, agreeing, and yet not much caring about Naruto's woes.

“I can't believe she's on a mission right now! This sucks!” Naruto whined, and then turned to look at his friend, “Uh, hey, Gaara-kun…what's with the face?” Gaara was glowering at nothing in particular.

“I have a favor to ask of you.” He said shortly, not bothering to get into too much detail.

“Okay…then it depends on what you want me to do.” The blonde boy raised an eyebrow, “What did you have in mind?”

Gaara's voice was so calm Naruto nearly took him seriously, ”Please kill Haku."

“Uh…why?"

“For the sake of my mental health…”

“Oh come on! You've been going crazy since the day I first met you!” Naruto retorted in annoyance, “How's now any different?”

His friend remained silent and stared at the ramen bowl Ayame had put in front of him.

“That bad, huh?” Naruto asked, seeing Haku must have yet again stirred things up.

Gaara nodded in confirmation.

Naruto took a slurp of his pork ramen before coming to his decision, “Well if you've got to be so damn dramatic I'll go check on him. If it's really as bad as you make it sound, I'll bust him up for you.”

At that time, unknown to everyone else, Haku was in fact loitering around with Sakura in the Hokage's tower. He was very aware of how both Kankuro and Gaara felt about him at the present, and he decided he'd be safest with someone Gaara would never try to be savage in front of.

Haku admitted to the pink haired girl that he had no clue how to mend things. He hovered beside her while she tended to an injured kitten on the table. It had been attacked by a dog and was sporting a number of bite wounds, blemishing its powder-white fur.

“Don't you worry, Haku-kun. I won't let Gaara-kun hurt you so long as I'm around!” Sakura declared after hearing his plight.

He frowned slightly at her proclamation, “Sakura-chan…I really don't want to ask you to be my bodyguard. That would be avoiding the problem. I should settle things with Gaara myself.” And as an afterthought, 'That is if I have a death wish. Temari really has to make things difficult for
Sakura could see how nervous he was and she suspected that it didn't have everything to do with Gaara being upset.

She was aware Haku had been more or less a Don Juan in his days at the Academy. Girls loved him and still loved him. He never had to try very hard to be liked because he was simply adored by every female around him. Now she could tell he was stressed by actually having to commit to who was important to him. Love was just as much work as it was pleasure.

'And it's Temari...' Sakura thought, shuddering a bit, 'She is gorgeous and smart, but Haku is out of his league! She doesn't take kindly to most people, especially sweethearts. But maybe it could work...maybe Haku has grown on her more than she's willing to admit.'

She then recalled how Temari had hurled Kankuro into a thorn bush the day before with a gust of wind, and then envisioned Haku in Kankuro's place after she had gotten aggravated, 'On second thought...he's in for a world of pain.'

Sakura wanted to wish him luck but she feared Haku would have taken it the wrong way. Instead, she offered to teach him the Palm Healing Jutsu she had been working so hard to master. He gladly accepted the lesson and she set to work teaching him the basics.

After memorizing the hand seals and focusing his chakra, Haku pulled the mewling cat closer. He examined its belly where a worrying laceration rounded up its ribcage and over its shoulder. He was glad to see his use of the jutsu had just as much effect as Sakura's did. She raised her eyebrows, impressed to see the wound was completely gone.

"Oh, I don't think I've told you yet, Sakura-chan," Haku said while they took turns healing the kitten, "I'm going to Suna with Gaara-kun once Naruto-kun leaves. I suppose...that's one of the reasons I don't want him to be in a bad mood when we set out together."

"With Gaara?" She repeated quietly. The notion suggested that Gaara was, in fact, leaving for Sand. It was something she had not wanted to hear.

"I'm fairly certain he's been thinking about going there." Haku confirmed, and then saw how Sakura's carefree expression seemed to wither, "It's not permanent, Sakura-chan. As far as we know we'll only be staying a few months. You know Gaara-kun wants to stay with you."

"But I just don't know..." She mumbled uncertainly, and let the purring kitten clamber into her arms. Sakura stared down at it despairingly and Haku felt guilty at the sight of her so troubled.

He didn't feel it was very fair that he would have no problems with his relationship while it was still fairly new, and Sakura would have to be separated from someone she had cared for most of her life.

Maybe if she hadn't begun her apprenticeship under Tsunade so soon she could have at least joined Gaara in his journey to Sand, Haku speculated. Even then, he doubted her parents would allow it after the stunt she pulled during the Retrieval Mission. Family, in this case, was a constraint she would rather do without.

Haku trained his eyes on the wall across the room, again touched by the thought of family. He found it strange how it came up so often. In his case, he'd never had to worry about traveling, because he no longer had parents who were concerned with his whereabouts...or any other relative for that matter.
'But how do I know that for sure?' Haku thought miserably, 'I'm descended from a clan that still exists; people like me are still alive. How can I go on not knowing if I still have kin in this world?' He was still unsure if Zabuza had been truthful about having seen others like himself, but Haku didn't believe that it was something someone could so easily lie about, even for someone as despicable as Zabuza.

'Even Jiraiya-sensei said that there's a chance they truly exist...so then it can't be a lie.' He reasoned, 'If that's how it is, why am I doing nothing about it? I can't find them if I'm going to…'

“Well, I didn't know Haku-kun decided to join you today, Sakura.”

Haku and his friend, both deep in thought, jumped in startled when Tsunade appeared behind them, “It's good to see you back to your normal self, Haku. And it looks like you're also proficient in medical jutsu!”

He smiled in response, trying to be modest, “I'm only as good as my teacher, Tsunade-sama.”

Sakura's ego inflated a bit, as did the Hokage's simultaneously.

“In that case, you may find a position for yourself in the medical corps in Suna when you get there.” Tsunade smirked at the dark haired boy proudly, “They can use all the help they can get out there. Your talent will help save lives, Haku.”

“I will look into it then, Hokage-sama.” He agreed, deciding that Tsunade did indeed have a point.

Sakura didn't protest when her mentor scooped the kitten from her arms and inspected it, smiling, “Excellent work, Sakura. I couldn't have done better myself with this little one. It seems you're ready for injuries of the human sort.” She did her best to hide her anxiety as Tsunade praised her, handing off the cat to Haku.

“Come with me and we'll stop by the hospital,” The Hokage went on, “You may come with us too if you'd like, Haku.”

He put the cat down and let it scamper off through the courtyard, and then followed after the two kunoichi.

Elsewhere Sato could be found at a table with Shikamaru, straining himself in an appallingly one-sided game of Go. Sato's white pieces were quickly being captured, and he had no way to stop Shikamaru as he watched his stones rapidly spread across the board and demolish his opposition.

Ino and Chouji observed the board game massacre from the opposite side of the bench. The blonde girl had her elbows propped up on the table, resting her chin on her hands. Occasionally she and Chouji would snicker at one of their teammate's moves, which usually devastated Sato's stones.

After practically reading the silver haired nin's mind, Shikamaru concluded the game with a move that locked in his foe and Sato raised his eyebrows, impressed.

“Wow! He’s so smart! Doesn't it just give you the willies?” He asked Chouji, shuddering to prove his point, “Don't you wish that brains like his belonged to a handsome fellow like me?”

Ino smirked at him, “You could use a few more brain cells.”

Shikamaru turned to her and gave her an approving look. He couldn't have said it any better himself. He wasn't about to let Sato have the pleasure of thinking he was better looking and neither was Ino, it seemed.
Sato hid his embarrassment while Chouji proceeded to ask, “Why are you hanging out with us anyway, huh? I thought you were into photography and that kind of stuff.”

“I'm hiding from my uncle, actually.” Sato admitted.

Shikamaru frowned at him, “Why is that?”

“Well…he's just been popping up everywhere I go today and it's creeping me out.” The young Hatake explained in a low voice, “I want to avoid any physical or emotional trauma he intends to inflict.”

Ino rolled her eyes at his use of the word *inflict*.

“I think someone like you would already have realized that you can't avoid a jounin simply by hiding. They're trained to weed out people like that.” Shikamaru cleared the Go board from the table with Chouji's help, “You might as well just get it over with and go see what he wants.”

“I always have plan B.” Sato smiled to himself, “And plan B is to hide out with Shino. That solves every problem.”

“That might work,” Chouji agreed, “But how do you know Shino will help you? You are really annoying, you know.”

Kakashi, at that precise moment, came strolling around the corner at the far end of the street. His nose was buried in his naughty book nonchalantly, and he had not yet seen his nephew down the road. It was only a matter of time.

Sato ducked behind Ino at the sight of his uncle, “Hide me!”

“Oh will you just grow up you big chicken!” She hissed, glancing back over her shoulder, “What's the worst he could do to you?”

“You are by far the most troublesome person I have ever met.” Shikamaru droned sidelong to Sato, watching as Kakashi approached very slowly down the sidewalk.

“Don't I know it…” Sato didn't deny he was irritating, but it wouldn't be long before he'd find a new group to camouflage himself with, *'Kiba's team is next if all else fails. Once Shino turns up I'll be fine!'*

“Sato?” He looked up in alarm from behind Ino and saw that Tama had discovered him rather easily, “Sato are you…alright?” She wasn't sure if she should be upset about how he was clinging to Ino's shoulders, but the blonde girl appeared very uncomfortable with the contact so she guessed it was an innocent interaction.

“Oh…actually I need to make a getaway in like…” He peeked over Ino's head to see his uncle coming nearer, “Like three seconds. Can you help me out maybe?”

“Oh no…” Tama groaned, frowning, “Please don't tell me you broke someone's mailbox again!”

Chouji wondered why that was her first notion of what had gone wrong.

Sato, ever the smooth liar, saw an opportunity when he was confronted with one. He wasn't about to tell her that he was avoiding his uncle even after she had asked him to go speak to Kakashi, “I'm sorry, Tama!”

“You'll have to apologize to Anko-san again, in that case,” She informed him, her hand settling on
her hip, “But before she kills you I'll get you out of here!”

Shikamaru couldn’t believe how Sato could swindle his way out of any jam. He did suspect that it was partly because Tama was routinely saving his ass every other day, but he wondered if she ever stopped to think if he was being truthful, ‘She may trust this guy…but eventually she'll learn he's more trouble than he may be worth.’

When Tama procured a summoning scroll from her bag Shikamaru and his teammates were hushed into awed silence. They hadn't been aware of her ninja skills, and ninja-tool summoning, to them, was a sign of a talented shinobi. Sato cheered quietly as she the opened scroll and tapped a seal.

“I'll see you guys later!” Sato leapt out from behind Ino carelessly to join Tama, “Thanks for all your help!”

Kakashi looked up from his book and saw Team 10 gawking at his fleeing nephew.

After a puff of smoke and a woot from Sato, Shikamaru and his friends balked to see that Tama had summoned a bicycle. Sato hopped onto the pegs on the back wheel and Tama sped away with him before Shikamaru could blink.

A moment later Kakashi stopped by Team 10, wondering why they looked so frazzled. “Sorry if he's been a bother to you kids. Are you alright?”

“I guess.” Ino mewed in response, wondering if she could learn to summon getaway devices, “I still don't have a clue what Sato's problem is though.”

“You're not the only one…” Kakashi muttered, “I'll tell Asuma to keep an eye on you all. He's been slacking an awful lot lately.” He continued on in search of his nephew, not in the least impeded by Tama's meddling.

Team Gai had gathered in the Eastern courtyard at the Hyuga compound for a productive day of training.

Tenten held up a pair of bars connected by a chain, “These are nunchaku, Lee. Originally they were used as a tool by farmers to thresh grain, but after many decades they started to evolve into a weapon for self-defense. So I guess you-”

“You will teach me how to use them?” Lee asked, his eyes dazzled, “It would mean so much to me if you did, Tenten!” She had supposed earlier on that Lee was only interested in them because he had once seen Gai-sensei utilize them on a past dangerous mission.

“All right then, listen up!” Tenten rotated the bar around her arm and shoulder to demonstrate, “This is not a weapon to be used as an extension of the arm like a sword. It's based off of rhythm, so you can't be reckless!”

“There's a slim chance of that.” Neji commented snidely from his place leaning against an oak.

“Neji!” Lee hollered, responding to him with a challenge, “If you are so sure about that then you will not decline a sparring match! Both of us shall be armed with weaponry!”

He smirked, “I won't decline.”

Tenten huffed, having at least wished Neji would've backed off. It seemed things were back to normal. The Hyuga prodigy was reassuming his position as the bellwether of the team, as well as
putting Lee in his place. She hoped that Neji would go easy on Lee being that he had little to no experience with weapons.

She had to admit that she wasn't shocked to see the brawl didn't last over 30 seconds.

Neji summoned the tonfa that Tenten had given to him and Lee grimaced, unsure of what to expect from such a weapon. With his nunchaku in hand, he charged with a cry. The Hyuga prodigy jabbed at Lee and he quickly tried to counter, but his momentum and direction were not equal and when Lee struck out with his nunchaku, it spun round and connected solidly with the crown of his head.

“**Time out!**” Tenten jumped in-between the two combating males, and watched in horror as Lee's eyes rolled back in his head after the knockout blow. She caught him before he could hit the ground and she felt like laughing, having expected something similar to happen to him.

Instead Tenten kneeled down, cradling the poor boy, and she scowled openly at the Hyuga, “Why the heck did you have to goad him, Neji? I know I warned him it was risky, but if Gai-sensei finds out about this I'm the one who gets in trouble!”

“Lee regularly injures himself, so why would Gai hold you responsible unless you yourself bashed Lee on the head?” Neji reasoned, putting away his tonfa, “When you aren't responsible, you have nothing to deny.”

It was a logical statement but Tenten wasn't in the mood for it. Neji annoyed her just as much as he made her feel warm-fluffy feelings inside. She drew out a hand fan and flapped it above Lee's face, hoping it would be enough to help him wake up.

Neji watched her for a few minutes, fascinated. He had come to understand during the past few days how very close she was to Lee. He acknowledged that she pledged most if not all of her time to himself, but her friendship with Lee was unusually strong. Neji wondered if it was because he had always pushed them away when he was younger.

He had hated the notion of needing to depend on others. So while he berated them or avoided their company in their first year of training, he guessed it had helped them become closer to each other. He had promised himself during the Retrieval Mission he would become a better, more trustworthy friend, but it appeared to him that Tenten and Lee would need an adjustment period before they'd be able to fully open their hearts to him again.

Neji wasn't about to let it upset him, because he believed he deserved every ounce of dislike Tenten and Lee held for him (which was surprisingly little) after how he had treated them. There were times he envied the bond his teammates shared, but he admitted he had done nothing to earn something of the like. If he was going to gain their favor he'd have to start by looking out for them.

After a long silence Neji addressed something that had been concerning him, “Have you ever come across a black scroll in your possession before, Tenten?”

Tenten gave him a strange look from her place on the ground beside Lee, “A black scroll? I don't think so. Why would you ask that?”

Neji handed her the paper he had discovered the night before while reading and she stopped fanning Lee so she could take a moment to read it. Tenten handed Neji the fan and he picked up where she left off, attempting to revive their unconscious teammate.

He watched her eyes scan the paper and he was genuinely startled when Tenten shrieked
suddenly mid-way through reading. Whether it was due to a revelation or the fact that the note was from her father, he did not know. Neji had a fairly good suspicion it couldn't be a good thing.

“Uh…well…I don't know where you came across this, but don't worry about it!” Tenten laughed nervously, folding the slip and jamming it in her pocket, “This is so like him! My dad used to write weird stuff all the time back when…when he was around. But I honestly have no idea where to look for that scroll he was talking about.”

Neji observed the most miniscule of tremors in her right eye while she had said it and he could immediately tell she was lying.

“I don't think your father would write something so urgent to be a joke.” He pointed out, continuing to fan Lee. He understood that it wasn't necessarily any of his business, but it did matter to him if it meant Tenten was faced with danger.

“It's all been taken care of by now,” Tenten said, dismissing the subject, “Tsunade-sama already spoke to me about it.”

Neji gave her an inquiring look, “About what, exactly?”

Lee woke up at that moment, swiftly sitting up and rubbing his throbbing forehead, “Ugh! How unfortunate…this time I will not be so careless. Again Neji! We are not through yet!”

The Hyuga prodigy raised an eyebrow, wondering if he should oblige Lee. Tenten was grateful for the interruption and yet still worried about her friend, “Lee, after witnessing how hard you hit your head I think you might have a concussion…”

She helped him stand, but Lee didn't believe he had been truly harmed, “Nonsense, Tenten! I am certain I am fine!” He took a step forward and tumbled down to the grass, and Tenten again tugged him to his feet.

“I think you should get checked for brain damage.” Neji suggested to Lee, smirking good-naturedly.

Tenten glanced over to him, again displeased with his sarcastic remarks, but noted he was only being playful…something she had not known he was capable of.

“We'll be back in a bit…” Tenten sighed, pulling Lee's arm over her shoulder, and left with him to go find Tsunade for a head-examination.

Neji didn't appreciate how Tenten had dodged the subject of what her father had been referring to, but he imagined the book was the closest thing to an answer he had. Even Tenten had never read it, so he expected that he wouldn't fully understand until he had examined it thoroughly, 'Maybe he wrote more than simply that note for her?'

He returned to his room and found it on his desk where he had left it. He settled himself outside on the porch and opened it to where he had left off:

He sat in a depression, brooding over how he could prove himself worthy of his beloved princess.

“Bring Tokito-sama the head of a great beast you've slain,” One of his pupil's had suggested, “That will impress him for sure, Ukigaru-sensei!”

Ukigaru doubted something as trivial as a hunting trophy would be enough, and he despaired at the thought of living without Mameha. His fellow villagers tried to cheer him up but to no avail. Their master was heartbroken.
It was in these days of Ukigaru's lament that conspiracy was revealed. One of the lords that Rokudou-sennin had defeated had heard of one of his nemesis' pupils returning to the Realm of Stone. Bent on revenge, the angry lord commanded his army to attack Ukigaru's village.

Without warning, the foreign daimyo's troops stormed the valley, razing the small town in the early morning light. Ukigaru and his students fought bravely with their skills in ninjutsu, but they could not defend against a force of 400 men.

Ukigaru called for a retreat and led his villagers up into the winding cliffs of the mountainside to safety, leaving all of their possessions behind. The people looked on sadly as many of their homes were burned to the ground.

“What now, Ukigaru-sama?” One of them had asked. “They've raided our houses and will steal our crops by season's end. Is it our fate to relinquish what we've all worked so hard for?”

“Crops can be replanted and homes can be rebuilt; it is your lives you cannot afford to lose.” Ukigaru had answered. “But for now we will live on this mountain ledge where they cannot follow. I am afraid I just have no way to defeat so many soldiers…”

Saddened, the villagers set up an encampment on the cliffside and waited for the soldiers to abandon their valley. Yet the army did not leave. They lodged in the homes that remained in the ruined village, and Ukigaru and his followers wondered why they would not depart.

The next day the legion began their slow march up the mountainside to attack Tokito's castle. Ukigaru feared that if the army destroyed the palace that Mameha could be harmed.

Fueled by a new desperation to dispel the enemy forces, Ukigaru spoke to his students, “You have all learned well and become strong. I will now ask you to go and defend the castle, because I told the daimyo that we shinobi would offer our services. Go honor that promise and I swear to return with a way to defeat this army!”

They obeyed without question and went to protect the castle as they were told. The remaining villagers wished their leader good luck before he too left, knowing that he would return with a solution.

Ukigaru went south in hopes of crossing into the Realm of Wind. He knew that his dear friend Nenmaru would lend him aid if he asked for it. He also knew it would be a perilously long journey and he feared that they may return too late.

In his frantic rush to the country border, Ukigaru lost his footing and tumbled down into a deep chasm in the earth. Darkness swallowed him up and he cried out as he plummeted into the fissure.

When he woke he found himself uninjured and realized that his abilities would never allow the earth to do him harm. He stood and gathered his wits, and gawked when a ghastly light illuminated the crag.

Ahead he saw an armored, billowing, figure glowing like a phantom while suspended in the air. The being spoke to Ukigaru, 'I am the God of the Earth and you are trespassing in my domain. Who dares enter my home?'

“I am Ukigaru and I am in great need of a way to defeat an army terrorizing my homeland,” Ukigaru answered in a quaking voice, “O God of the Earth, hear me! I beg of you to aid me in my time of need!”
The Earth God recognized Ukigaru was no mere mortal and pure of intention, and decided to help him. He reached down into the depths of the earth and retrieved a shard from the planet’s belly.

The god held it out to Ukigaru and said, ‘Take this. It is the hardest, sharpest stone in the world. Work it into a spearhead and then face your enemies, wielding the true might of the Earth’s power.’

Ukigaru accepted it with great thanks and then the Earth God faded from his sight. He carefully climbed his way up and out of the chasm and turned back to the Land of Stone.

He remembered how Konohate and Shishio had taught him the discipline of weapons in his time with them. Ukigaru found a calm stretch of forest and carved a staff from a strong, ancient branch and fastened the spearhead to the end of the shaft.

Knowing he had little time to lose he decided against going to find Nenmaru, and raced back to his valley with his God-sent weapon. Ukigaru prayed he was not too late.

Back on the mountainside Ukigaru’s pupils fought fiercely against the advancing army. Mameha and her father watched; glad Ukigaru’s warriors had come to help his struggling soldiers. They defended the high wall as best they could, but the enemy army was led by their lord himself, who was a cunning military general.

His soldiers launched volleys of flaming arrows, lighting the wall and parts of the roof on fire. The daimyo's men were hard-pressed to quell the flames and fight all at once.

“Give up, fool!” The invading lord cried to Mameha's father, “I will crush all of the Sage's new lands, starting with this one!”

It was then Ukigaru descended from a high cliff ledge to the top of the wall, brandishing his weapon. Mameha and his followers rejoiced at the sight of him.

Ukigaru let out a mighty breath of water that doused the flames consuming the palace. The lord’s soldiers cowered back at such a display of power.

“Just a bit of magic is all!” The general jeered Ukigaru, “You will die!”

Ukigaru descended down the slope, swiping his spear and knocked foes away left and right, rushing at the general. His foe ordered his remaining soldiers to kill him, but the crowds of men that approached were cut down by the rushing ninja. Ukigaru swept through them and with the use of his ninjutsu and his chakra, the spear petrified incoming warriors, turning them to stone. He cleaved through the statues ruthlessly as he passed.

His students fell silent as they watched their leader fight. Once the entirety of the enemy army had been petrified, Ukigaru rounded on the general, who fell to his knees to beg for mercy.

“Spare me!” He cried, “I'll do anything you say!”

Ukigaru held the spearhead to the general’s throat, “You've killed many people and destroyed our homes! I should kill you for all the harm you’ve done!” The lord flinched in terror at his furious voice, “Do you feel so vengeful against me now that your army is finished? Will you fight me yourself to disprove Rokudou-sennin?”

He shook his head meekly and Ukigaru calmed himself, pulling his weapon away. “If that is how you really feel, then I suppose there would be no honor in killing a fickle coward. I will let you live, but you will return to your home and then speak of how it is wiser to befriend ninja than to
wage war against us. Do not let others like yourself make the mistake that you have made.”

The general nodded fervently and then Ukigaru let him go, watching smugly as the defeated lord fled the valley. His villagers descended from the cliffside to greet him, cheering, glad that he had succeeded. Ukigaru and his following returned to the castle and Mameha and her father quickly went to thank him for all he had done.

“I denied you my daughter because I did not believe you could contribute in any way to this land.” Tokito had told him in apology, “I regret how I acted. You have saved this land as well as my family and your people. If there is anyone worthy of Mameha it is you.”

Ukigaru humbly thanked him while the princess rushed to his side, showering him with sweet words and kisses. The daimyo looked to Ukigaru's villagers and saw in them the same courage that their leader possessed. It was then he saw a bright future for the Land of Stone.

Neji was surprised to see that he hadn't even finished half of the book once he was through with the first story. He was curious to see how much more there really was to the tale of The First Shinobi. Thoughtfully, he browsed through the pages, holding the book by its binding and was satisfied that his prediction of other notes had been correct.

A few slips of paper fell to the wood of the porch and Neji set the book aside to examine them. He found it strange that none of them were meant for Tenten.

One slip was scribble about what he supposed were different types of alloys and methods of lamination. Neji could only assume that since Tenten had often lectured on how not all weapons are created equally, ‘You wouldn’t use the same metal for a yari as you would for a katana. They’re as different as day and night!’

A few of the other papers didn't seem to strike him as important, mostly grocery shopping lists and memos to himself. There was one particularly short message that did freeze Neji up, however.

*Find Hizashi for 3:00. Bring pie.*

He blinked down at his father's name, feeling his stomach do some unexpected loops. Neji didn't know exactly how their parents had known each other, but he figured he'd find a clue from the paper that followed it.

Another errands list was predominantly ninja-related, unlike others that were mundane household tasks. Neji scanned down the paper, trying to understand how everything was linked.

--Clean storeroom and replace fan.
--Finish new sword for Hayate-kun.
--Pick up eggs.
--Send Thank You letter to Aburame-sama.
--Wish Jōdoko-chan Happy Birthday.
--Attend Minato-kun's inauguration.

Beneath all of the rambling tasks the handwriting changed into something more loopy and feminine and Neji presumed that Tenten's father had not written it, which became increasingly clear as he read it.
Don't think that I haven't noticed how you stole my mask again! I know you like mine better than yours, but you can't just take it whenever you have a mission. Return what you stole, or you're sleeping on the couch tonight!

A heart was drawn under the threat message. He smiled at it for some reason. It was, without a doubt, her mother who had contributed, and she sounded like she had been the aggressor of the relationship. Neji looked over the paper again and saw how the name Jōdoko was mentioned. He stared at it uncertainly.

There was no chance that it was a coincidence, he was sure. Jōdoko had been his mother's name, and Neji figured that both of his parents had been good friends to Tenten's father, judging by how they were included. He wondered what his mother had been like while she was alive. His father told him plenty of stories before he had died, but he had wanted to meet her himself. Now it appeared the only other person who had known her was also dead.

And as a result he regretted what had happened to Tenten's parents. He had never before considered her losses since she had never spoken about them, and it seemed that she had inherited much of her father's work ethic and her mother's charisma.

'Odd. They don't seem like they're gone at all.' He thought to himself, 'All of this rabble makes it seem like they're still busy and running around; on this paper they're still alive.'

Neji slipped the notes back into the book, deciding to keep them. He had grown fond of the echoes of the past he'd come across and he didn't think Tenten would argue if he asked if he could have them.

She'd understand.

After traversing the hospital with the Hokage and picking up some helpful medical tips, Tsunade dismissed her trainees for lunch. Sakura bade Haku farewell as she departed to join Kiba for an afternoon of training. Once she had gone he knew he was on his own. He remained vigilant.

Haku passed through the heart of the town, hoping to find a place of refuge, or at least someone he could stick around with to avoid the two Sand siblings who were displeased with him, 'Maybe I can find Naruto-kun or Hinata-chan. Then I won't have to-

"You look awfully pale, pretty boy!" And before he had known it he had discovered Temari.

"I have reason to suspect that I may be in peril." Haku admitted sheepishly, hoping she understood his meaning. How could she not after the stunt from the day before?

"Gaara and Kankuro are coping pretty well, surprisingly," She informed him, walking down the street with him, "You shouldn't be troubled over something that's perfectly legal."

"I have done worse." He smiled, because kissing someone was such a crime. Haku stayed close to her, taking in her unusual gait and how she didn't smell the same.

They proceeded to a training area in the forest after Temari had suggested they spar, and Haku asked her if she was alright once they had gotten there. The henge fell and Haku was confronted by Kankuro, who immediately attacked him with Karasu.

Haku was unable to dodge the puppet in time as it tackled him and Kankuro cursed loudly in frustration after he only destroyed a shadow clone.
"What gave it away? No one does a better Temari impression than me!" He wondered aloud.

After the clone had been destroyed, the information it had collected was instantly transferred to the real Haku, who had caught up with the actual Temari.

"Kankuro is still upset." Haku informed her, smiling weakly, "What a brutal attack! If I hadn't realized it was him when I did I may have been seriously injured just now…"

"You're too good to let a shit-disguise like his fool you, Haku," Temari purred, pleased he had made a fool of her brother, "I don't care if he's pissed! He just has to suck it up and get over it!"

At that time they were both passengers on her fan, flying over the village on a smooth breeze. Temari had said they'd be safest where her siblings could not reach.

A minute later Haku received information from his second shadow clone he had left behind, "Oh my…Gaara-kun is also on the hunt, it seems."

She smirked, "Aren't you the popular one?"

He nodded, glad that he didn't have to face her brothers on his own.

"Well, this is the most fun I've had since…ever." Temari decided, gliding above the rooftops, "Thanks for being such a trooper."

Haku was glad to hear that she was very entertained, but he did ask, "I hope that you don't always intend to lead Gaara and Kankuro on a wild goose chase all at my expense?"

"I think good families will tease each other whenever they can, that way they'll never be bored." Temari told him, grinning, "But not always at your expense, if that's what you're worried about."

Again she had reminded him of his clan, and he found that he couldn't relate to what she'd been talking about. Not necessarily that he didn't understand what she meant, he fooled around with Gaara and Naruto often, but he wished he could have a family to call his own again.

He didn't want to become distracted as he had while he'd been practicing with Sakura, but he was a bit too late.

"What's your deal? You just spaced out you know." Temari informed him, wondering why he was so lost in thought, "Did I…did I say something?"

"No, of course you didn't!" Haku answered hurriedly, "I suppose I haven't been myself all morning…"

"I suppose you haven't." She snorted, mimicking his enunciation with alarming accuracy.

After seeing his adorably bewildered face she decided to land, and touched down on a warehouse rooftop. Temari watched him as she folded her fan up and then leaned on it, seeing that he was still partially distracted, 'Looks like it was something I said… But what exactly? Even if he's been jumpy all day I guess I'm not helping out much…'

"Don't let them fray your nerves. You know you're allowed to hit back if they try to corner you again," Temari assured him, "The next time I see those two, they'll be the ones running."

He smiled and she felt her heart melt. She was glad she had decided to give him a shot. At first he had seemed like a pain in the ass, 'Which he is, by the way.' But Temari had found that she could be herself around him and that was all he wanted. It still took some getting used to: dropping her
guard and being easygoing, but Haku tended to infect others around him with goodwill and calmness. It came easier to her than she had anticipated it to.

If she had been paying attention she would have noticed that Haku had taken her fan and opened it out of curiosity. Temari watched him again, puzzled, wondering what he planned to do with it. Her mouth fell open in astonishment when he swung it and produced a powerful gale that knocked a number of shingles off of the roof.

“Oops! I didn't mean to do that!” Haku chuckled, hoping no one would notice the new gap in the roof, “I can see why you like this thing so much…”

“How…did you do that?” She asked slowly, wondering if she'd imagined it.

He handed it back to her, “While I was in the hospital Jiraiya-sensei explained a few things to me. He said that when I was first brought to Konoha a number of ANBU had been tracking myself, Gaara-kun, and Naruto-kun; observing our abilities. They said in their report that my Kekkei Genkai is a fusion type.”

“A what?”

“It means it combines two elements, which is uncommon.” Haku didn't feel like reminding himself how uncommon he was, so he explained further, “Jiraiya-sensei said he would like to see me start using just as many wind jutsu as water jutsu since I can manipulate both.”

“Fusion of water and wind…so that's how you make ice?” Temari repeated, understanding, “That actually makes sense…I thought you just made ice on a whim.”

“I do.”

“But I mean…just made it. Not combine a whole bunch of things to use those funny jutsu of yours.” She clarified and added, “That's cool that you don't even have to think about it. When I use wind jutsu I'm always focusing as best I can.”

“…my…funny jutsu.” Haku muttered, wondering if any of his techniques were really clownish, 'I suppose my ice mirrors could find a home in a funhouse…'

“Funny, as in, I like them.” Temari told him, smirking at his confusion, “I thought I told you to relax, Haku, you're so uptight today…” Haku sighed, trying to relieve his anxiety. It didn't work very well and the Sand kunoichi was aware of it.

“Well, as it goes, I don't think either of those two stooges are going to find us up here.” She commented, hoping it would help him unwind, “And since it's just us right now…how about we get some practice in while we can?”

“If you'd like.” Haku agreed, not understanding why she wanted to train on top of a warehouse, “Perhaps you could show me a few of your wind jutsu as well?”

Temari huffed and grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, “I don't mean that kind of practice you big dummy.” With no further preamble she cornered him in a ferocious lip lock, and he smiled against her mouth, glad that he was being dumb. His worries about being pursued by her siblings, his family woes, and the overall tension that had snowballed up until that point vanished instantly.

Haku was grateful he was tall for his age. His face was even with Temari's and he let his eyes close submissively after she'd initiated. Briefly he'd tried to pry her hands from his collar (she was choking him slightly) but she wouldn't budge so he let her be. His hands traveled to her hair, tangling in the blonde tresses and ruined how she had tied it up. Temari didn't seem very upset...
about it though.

He pulled away for a moment and she mumbled softly in objection, her hands still fisted in his shirt. He wanted to talk but Temari persisted, trying to persuade him to cooperate. “I…I think I'm going to be a medic-nin when we get to Suna.” Haku informed her. It was something that had been on his mind and he'd been looking forward to it.

Temari again imitated him, “And I think I'll be a chunin…when we get to Suna.”

“…you're making fun of me.”

“Yes, I am.”

Haku then grasped the fact that she couldn't joke about him if he was kissing her, so he did just that, and was glad the teasing ceased. It was nice and he did his best not to panic when Temari slipped him a bit of tongue. 'Good lord! I really do hope Gaara-kun doesn't find us anytime soon…' Haku shuddered at the notion, wishing Temari was a bit less fearless.

He had heard Naruto coming from about a block away and they had a moment's warning to separate and straighten themselves out before the blonde arrived. Haku wondered how Naruto could have discovered him so quickly or if it was simply luck. He could tell it was really him because neither Gaara nor Kankuro had the capacity to impersonate the blonde's pattern of babble.

Naruto arrived and observed them.

“Now I get it!” He declared, pointing at Haku, “She's been giving you flying lessons!”

Haku was embarrassed, “I can't fly, Naruto-kun.”

“Hm, well, since Gaara-kun was so mad I figured you were learning something that he couldn't. I guess I'll have to go with my second hunch…” Naruto scratched his chin, observing Temari's amused expression.

“What was your second hunch, Naruto?” She prompted, wondering if he expected any other impossibilities.

Naruto looked at Haku, frowned skeptically, and then approached Temari and whispered something in her ear. Haku had no idea what his friend was asking her, but he was sure it wasn't appropriate.

“I wouldn't go as far as to say that…” Temari replied, smirking, “But don't worry, he'll get over it eventually.”

Naruto backed away, finally understanding what was going on, “You guys are going to have to pray really hard you don't get your butts kicked!” He turned to Haku, “Way to go, Haku-kun! You know what? If you get married that'll make you and Gaara, like, in-laws! How creepy is that?”

There was a pause.

Haku smiled at the thought, “Oh. Well…I never thought of that.”

“You better stop thinking about it…” Temari warned him and he chuckled innocently in response.

“I'll stick with you guys in case Gaara-kun decides to ambush you,” Naruto offered, deciding to help their cause, “I've got your back!”
Sato, after having been rescued, joined Tama on her visit to a dance studio. He hopped around the mirrors for a while with her, loosening up, knowing he couldn't get away with avoiding another routine rehearsal.

“There's going to be a class here in two hours so let's not waste time.” Tama announced, locking the front door in case someone decided to come in early. She appreciated privacy.

“That bike is so cool!” Sato said, busy stretching his quads, “Where did you get it anyway?”

“Uncle Gai gave it to me as a birthday present.” Tama replied, smiling at the memory, “At first I wasn't sure what I'd use it for but it turned out to be really handy.”

She watched the silver haired boy bounce around, observing his reflection on the wall in amusement. “Every time I look at myself in the mirror when I'm here I feel like such a freakin' ballerina…” He complained, “It's really annoying.”

“These mirrors are necessary so that you can see if you're moving correctly or not,” Tama informed him, “And just so you know, you'll never be as talented as a ballerina.”

He snickered.

While they set to work Tama recalled how Sato had begun taking dancing lessons long ago. It was about the time his mother had died, she noted.

He had not started to participate because he had wanted to learn, but because he was terribly lonely those days and wanted to be near Tama: the only person he was sure he could trust. The time he could spend with her while he was not at the Academy was while she was at a dance class her parents had enrolled her in. He just joined in one day out of sheer loneliness.

“You're back has to be straighter, Sato,” Tama critiqued his form like a drill-sergeant, only quieter, “Keep your feet at an angle! Be more consistent about that. Don't look like I'm killing you, stop being so awkward.”

He corrected his flaws as they went along. He already knew all of the steps she was going over, but there were times he invented new ones just to keep things interesting. Sato found his biggest problem wasn't the choreography, it was his carefree nature.

“I wish you weren't so much taller than me…” Sato whined, “That way when we did waltzes and stuff like this it would look less weird.”

“You'll grow! You're due for a major growth-spurt soon anyway.” Tama assured him, because no one else would, “And I promise, until then, I won't wear heels.”

He wasn't sure if he was supposed to be offended or pleased by the statement. He let it slide and continued to follow her lead.

After a long while of practicing a number of different dances, the two took a break and sat down in the middle of the floor, feeling sweaty and accomplished.

“Did you speak to Kakashi-san yet?” Tama asked thoughtfully, hoping things between him and his uncle had improved.

The look on his face seemed to tense up as he scrambled for an answer, “I kind of sort of almost nearly didn't really want to find him and unsuccessfully speak to him…”
“I’m going to assume that means you haven’t seen him yet.” Tama sighed, smiling at his ridiculous answer, “Please go talk to him now and get it over with?”

Reluctantly he did as he was told and went out to search for Kakashi.

On his walk down the street he wished more than anything he had stayed with Tama. He could always escape pain and rejection when he was near her, but whenever he was with his uncle his heart bled terribly. Sato strolled down the sidewalk, busying his hands in his pockets.

‘I guess I really can’t act this way anymore…’ He thought to himself, ‘When I do that it makes me more like him and I’m different from Kakashi. I don’t really want to exploit other people’s feelings just because mine are so hurt. That’s not how I want to lead my life.’

Yet for all his new revelations he found that he could think of no proper way to apologize. Not after Sasuke had fled the village and how he had brought up the absence of Obito. Sato was aware his uncle was still seething over such topics, ‘I can’t believe I said all that…but I just had to. He’d never know how I felt if I hadn’t said anything. Looks like I’m just going to have to-’

“Well since you’re meandering idly now you wouldn’t mind joining me for some ice cream, hm Sato-kun?”

Sato about-faced and saw that his uncle had snuck up behind him. He wasn't in the least surprised by it either. Yet he was at a loss for words. He didn't think that Kakashi would be so amicable during such a wretched time. The young boy nodded and then quietly followed after his uncle down the road to the sweet shop.

They took a seat at a small table and ordered two cups of ice cream: one vanilla and one coffee flavor. He stared at the treats listlessly for a while, trying to avoid Kakashi's gaze, which, for some reason, was not glued to his novel.

“Aren't you going to eat anything, Kakashi?” Sato asked sulkily, raising his midnight eyes up.

Kakashi shook his head in response, “No thank you. These are just for you. I'm not in the mood for sweets today.”

Cautiously the genin helped himself to a spoon and nipped at the coffee flavor. He was already aware his uncle had been searching for him all day solely for the chance to speak with him. What he wanted to talk about Sato did not know, and he was certain that he did not want to know.

Oddly, the boy spoke first, “Kakashi…I…I really am sorry about everything that happened with Sasuke. I did my best to help get him back. I guess it didn’t do much.”

“Don't worry about it, Sato-kun.”

To Sato it sounded more like an automated response from an answering machine. He wouldn't stand for it from his uncle, not anymore.

“Well, even if I'm not worried, how do you feel about all this?” His nephew pried, slightly annoyed, “I know that there has to have been at least one thing that's been on your mind…otherwise you wouldn't have brought me here.”

For a long while it was quiet. Sato savored his ice cream in boredom, ‘Typical. Again he can't find the courage to tell the truth of how he-’

“I feel…that I made far too many mistakes while I was training Sasuke.” Kakashi admitted at length, “As a teacher I am not as talented as my own sensei was. I've felt hatred and I know what
it is to live with it. But with Sasuke...no matter what I did, I simply couldn't dispel his need for vengeance.”

Sato understood immediately.

“Sometimes…” The boy replied softly, “The past hurts too much. That makes you do stupid or impossible things to try and fix it. But the past is always dead. You can't repair yesterday…”

“I agree.” His uncle appreciated how he was being mature and not avoiding him anymore. Sato was wiser than he led most to believe. For a few minutes Kakashi watched Sato eat the treat curiously.

This child before him, he noted, was of his flesh and blood. A Hatake. For so long he had denied that truth and left the boy to fend for himself. Guilt was finally catching up. When he had been younger, after his father's suicide, Kakashi had always been tormented with balancing his duties as a ninja and his need for human attachment. He chose his career over his emotional health. He could see the same suffering in Sato and he wasn't about to let the boy be hurt the same way.

“Kakashi, what I said the last time I saw you...I didn't mean any of it.” Sato apologized lowly and he dropped his gaze shamefully. He was truthfully sorry, but he just hadn't been brave enough to say so for a while.

“Quite the contrary, I'm certain you meant every word you said, Sato.” Kakashi assured him, smiling beneath his mask, “And you were right about everything.”

Sato blinked in astonishment.

“I did abandon you. I won't lie about that.” His uncle explained, “Back then it was a time when I couldn't stand the thought of being attached to anyone anymore. My father, Obito, Rin, Minato-sensei and Semi...everyone who I have ever loved has died.”

His nephew stared at him unblinking, seeing that he also carried a fear of needing another person. Though it was a very complex issue, there were times he simplified his problems and often tried to avoid those he cared about to protect them from being hurt.

Kakashi closed his eyes while he spoke, “Sato, you have every right to hate me for what I've done to you. I deserve no less.”

Sato finished eating. The emotions bubbled up while he ate and made him feel sick to his stomach. If his own uncle was no longer trying to deny the truth then he couldn't either, “Hey...I don't hate you at all, Kakashi. Not one stinking bit! That's why my feelings were always so hurt. Because I cared so much and I couldn't do anything about it.”

His uncle had not been expecting such a reaction.

“Look...you're the closest thing I've ever had to a father. I don't want that feeling to go away.” Sato admitted; his expression somber, “I never hated you even though I wanted to almost all the time.”

Kakashi was silent after that.

The genin shook off the awkwardness, “Nah! We're manly men! Let's stop this sappy crap!”

“It's about time I've started training you to use your white chakra abilities and your Chidori.” Kakashi said abruptly, his tone serious, “You don't need the Sharingan to perfect it, not if you adapt it to your fighting style. It can be just as lethal in a different form, Sato.”
“But I can't counter without gravity summon, that's why I can't-”

“The Chidori is not a finished jutsu. Not for you. So I suggest you complete it just as Sasuke has. There's nothing holding you back.” Kakashi informed him, “If you'd rather go back with your lovely girlfriend and dance all day that would be perfectly fine…if not, you'll be training with me for the next month.”

Sato hurriedly finished off the ice cream, “Let's get going then, Kakashi!” He sprang from the table, “My jutsu is gonna school everyone in this village!” He left excitedly before his uncle had stood from the table.

With the arrival of the following morning Naruto was particularly anxious. He had packed what belongings he intended to bring with him on his journey the night before. When he woke up, he laid in his bed lethargically, staring at his travel-bag on the bedroom floor.

‘Time to go already? Sheesh. I was kind of hoping that today would seem more far away but it came pretty quick…’ He sat up and stretched, ‘Well, this is it! Time to make today count!’

Naruto kicked off his blanket and went about getting dressed. He noted how eerily quiet the apartment was as he got ready. Once prepared Naruto left his room and ran headlong into his roommates.

“I see you waited up for me.” The blonde raised an eyebrow, “Er…are you guys alright?” Both Haku and Gaara did not appear to be their usual selves. Naruto guessed they had the same anxious feeling that he did.

Haku only gave him his customary smile and Gaara frowned, “We should be going now. We're wasting time.” Though Gaara did his best to conceal it, he too was troubled over the fact Naruto would soon be leaving their village, possibly for a very long while.

Without further objection they left to get breakfast at Ichiraku Ramen.

Once at the ramen shop they sat and talked idly. It felt strange that they had to speak so openly without reservation. If they didn't, Haku had thought, they may not get another chance to for the next year or more. Naruto made note of how Gaara had relaxed considerably around Haku, which he found unusual after the previous day's manhunt for the dark haired boy.

Unknown to the blonde was that Gaara had resigned himself to Haku's new intimacy with his family, or primarily, with his elder sister. This was foremost attributed to having been subjected to Temari's earlier harangue about his and Kankuro's ridiculous behavior. But also Gaara had found was that he was going to be depending on Haku more than ever.

With Naruto out of the picture Gaara admitted that the only company he would have would be the water nin. If he remained hostile about Haku's affections for Temari it would put a greater strain on their friendship, and that was not what he wanted when he was destined for Suna within the next week.

Truth be told, he wasn't so much bothered by Haku's affections for Temari. At least he could ignore it if he had to, or when he began to feel nauseous at the sight of them.

Gaara's greatest dilemma was Sakura. He had not yet decided what he planned to do about being so far from her.

The red haired boy ate his ramen in thoughtful silence while Naruto congratulated Haku on his
decision to become a medic-nin, “Awesome, Haku-kun! Baa-chan's totally right! You're going to be perfect for that job!”

“A medic-nin, did you say?”

The boys turned to see that Iruka had stopped by, and he grinned widely at Team 2, “Well, Haku, that is an accomplishment! I'm glad to hear that you've found your calling in the shinobi world!”

“Thank you, Iruka-sensei.” The dark haired boy looked sheepish. He wasn't about to ruin their compliments with modesty about how Sakura far exceeded him in skill with healing. He had just happened to pick up the technique by chance.

Iruka took a seat beside the boys and made small talk while ordering himself a bowl of soba. Naruto paid for his former teacher's meal, saying that he wanted to treat him before he left with his perverted sensei.

“Gone for two years, huh?” Iruka repeated quietly after hearing Naruto's plans, “That's a long time, Naruto…but I know that Gama-sennin will train you very well in that time.” The blonde boy snickered, but decided to not make a rude comment about the toad sage.

After they had finished eating, Iruka bade all of them good bye and good luck before they left. By that time Naruto announced how time was almost up. They traversed the streets together aimlessly for a short while, and Naruto paused for a moment to stare at the face of the Yondaime on the Hokage monument, 'Watch me. When I go, when I train, and when I come home. I will be as great as you!'

Noon approached and they could waste no more time. It was a dreadful trip back to the apartment to fetch his bag, and Naruto reunited with Gaara and Haku on the bridge where Jiraiya had been waiting with them.

For a moment he had rashly decided not to leave.

He was simply too attached to his friends. They had become his family. Naruto wasn't certain what the future would hold for any of them if he left then. He stood across from them on the other side of the footbridge, looking hesitant.

“You must live only to waste our time, Naruto.” Gaara chided him with his arms folded, “You're going. Get over here and stop acting like this is such a tragedy.”

“You're such a heartless, uncaring bastard! You know that Gaara?”

Haku laughed at their banter out of reflex. Jiraiya couldn't help the smirk that cracked on his face. Naruto stormed up to Gaara to promptly throw a punch at him and he was met with a wall of sand. The blonde boy chuckled anyway, glad things were at least relatively normal.

“Okay, behave! Gaara, Haku…don’t think this excuses you from training hard. Both Gaara and Naruto need to be prepared to defend themselves from the Akatsuki, even though I have only seen them express an interest in Naruto so far. Be careful. Watch each other’s backs.” Jiraiya patted both Gaara and Haku on the head affectionately, “I will oversee your training when I return, so work hard in Suna. I'll miss you two.”

Respectfully, they returned their sensei's farewell. Not wanting to intrude upon his students' goodbyes, Jiraiya crossed over the bridge to wait for Naruto on the other side of the stream. Naruto stared at his friends for a long moment, at a loss what to do.

“We'll write to each other, how’s that?” Haku suggested, “So we can all be updated on what the
other is doing. Though…I think you'll have to inform us where you are weekly since you'll be traveling abroad, Naruto-kun.”

“Do they even deliver mail in the desert?” Naruto snorted in amusement and Haku shrugged. Naruto hugged the boy around his shoulders, knowing that he'd miss him terribly, “Yeah, well, be careful alright? I don't want that snake-asshole snatching you up or whatever…”

“I assure you that won’t happen, Naruto-kun.”

He turned from Haku to Gaara and punched him very hard in his arm. Gaara scowled in response. Though he had not been expecting a friendly embrace (because he hardly deserved one) he would've appreciated a handshake, or if Naruto had simply kept his brutality to himself for once.

“And you, Gaara! You better be nice to Sakura-chan, got it?” Naruto grinned at him widely, trying very hard to piss him off. It didn't work for some reason.

Gaara nodded to him in exasperation. One day he planned to pay Naruto back for all of his tomfoolery…and his wisdom. Without another word, mostly because he couldn't think of anything else, Naruto turned on his heel and ran across the bridge without looking back. If he did he feared he'd change his mind again.

After he had caught up with Jiraiya Naruto set out down the road with him. For a moment he paused and his teacher gave him a knowing look, “Not done with your goodbyes yet, are you Naruto?”

“Hinata-chan…”

“Right, right…” Jiraiya decided it was best not to argue. He went with the boy to the Hyuga compound which he hoped would be the last stop, and he waited at the gates of the estate while Naruto rushed ahead to find his darling princess.

Instead of finding Hinata, Naruto found Neji.

“She was sent on a mission a few days ago, I'm sure you recall.” The Hyuga informed him, "I apologize, Naruto. It is a considerable journey to Grass and she hasn't returned yet.”

A look of distress came upon Naruto, “She's not back yet? But I…I can't wait anymore. Ero-sensei and I are going in like…now.”

“I am sorry.” Neji was truthfully just as upset as Naruto. He was aware of how he and his younger cousin felt about each other, and because Naruto was such an honorable, honest person he felt that there would be no one better suited for Hinata. He regretted that Naruto had to leave without seeing her, “I will tell her that you came to see her when Hinata-sama returns…take care of yourself, Naruto.”

“Yeah, thanks…” The blonde boy hung his head and turned to leave, “I'll see you around then, Neji.”

Saddened, Naruto departed from the compound alongside Jiraiya. His teacher had seen the exchange from afar and was aware that it would be more painful for his pupil to leave the village with a heavy heart.

As they walked out the enormous front gate of the Leaf village, Jiraiya tried to console the boy, “Come on kid! You know that Princess will still like you when you get back! And you can write to her and all that sappy boyfriend stuff…”
“I know.” Naruto agreed, “I just wanted to tell her all that myself.”

Naruto committed the way the village looked one last time to memory and then did not look back. He followed after the sage down the path that led out of Konoha.

An eerie feeling had settled upon Gaara and Haku after Naruto had left with Jiraiya. Something still felt out of place even though they had said all their farewells.

They lingered outside the Hokage's tower and planned on informing Tsunade that they would be leaving earlier for Sand than they had originally expected. *It will be easier to accept Naruto-kun's absence if we are in a different place…*’ Haku thought.

As they were about to enter the ground floor of the tower, the door burst open and a very rushed, very flustered looking Hinata hurtled out in front of them. They balked at the sight of her, then acknowledging the meaning of the eerie sensation.

“Gaara-kun! Haku-kun!” Hinata was glad to see them and yet upset at the same time, “Where is Naruto-kun?”

“I'm afraid you just missed him, Hinata-chan.” Gaara announced grudgingly.

She hurried on frantically and both boys watched her as she swiftly shrank into the distance. Gaara doubted her chances of catching up to him, but it was the effort that counted. Haku blinked as a younger Hyuga hobbled out of the tower as well, looking exhausted.

He looked to Haku wearily, “Hinata-sama has been in such a rush to return here! She had me and Sawako-sensei running all the way home…”

Haku pursed his lips after hearing the news and felt bad about the circumstances, *So Hinata really has been trying to return in time to see Naruto. I wish that he had decided to stay just a bit longer to see her…’*

Rather than going to the compound to see if he had passed through, Hinata went directly to the gates of the village. The Hyuga girl hurried out onto the path a few paces before stopping, seeing that there was no sign of Naruto at all. He had left much earlier and she had fooled herself into thinking that he would've waited.

“Naruto-kun!” She cried despairingly. She had tried so hard and still she could not make ends meet for him.

Hinata stared out onto the empty trail ahead of her as leaves blew off of the trees on either side of the road. She stood there contemplating what she could have done differently. There was no way she could have declined Tsunade's mission or have made Fujita or Sawako move any faster, (and she still felt terrible about cracking the proverbial whip at them all the way to Konoha) Hinata assumed she was fated not to see him off.

She refused to cry, *'No. I will stay strong. I will become stronger just like Naruto-kun while he is away. I will train every day until he comes back!'*

Hinata blinked to herself as she stared ahead. For one confusing moment, she could've sworn she saw someone running around the bend down the path ahead; moving towards her. Very fast…

“Did you call me?” Naruto shouted, laughing, running at full pelt back in the direction of the village.

All at once she was surprised and relieved. Hinata hadn't realized he had not been very far ahead
of her, just within earshot it seemed. She laughed, completely unreserved as he seized her at a high speed and encircled her with his arms. It was the greatest hug in the history of hugs, Naruto labeled it.

"Wow, that was exciting! We've got to do this more often!" Naruto told her, grinning like a mad man. “I heard your voice and my feet just…well, they did all the work for me! I didn't even have to think about it!”

She leaned her chin on his shoulder, “I…I don't think my heart could take it ever again…you leaving without me, I mean.”

“I know! I'm so sorry, Hinata.” The blonde boy knew the same emotion, “Neji said that you weren't there and it broke my heart to leave without seeing you first. I thought I was going to lose it…”

“Mmm.” Hinata hummed, solely happy that she had been in time after all. For a long while they stood huddled closely, and Hinata decided that if there ever was a better time to initiate a kiss it would be then. She raised her lips up to his mouth, but to her surprise he immediately turned his face away to avoid her, “Hinata…Hinata please don't…”

His reaction hurt her, but she knew he wouldn't act in reluctance without a reason, “Why not, Naruto-kun?”

“Because…” He struggled to find the words to explain, “If you do that I think that I won't be able to leave at all.”

Naruto just couldn't accurately describe the magnetic effect she had on him. If it was difficult for him to leave because of Gaara and Haku; Hinata, he judged, was a completely different level of temptation.

Hinata took a moment to think about what he had said, “I understand. But if you won't let me just because you're afraid of leaving, let me because…it will give you a reason to come home again.”

It was logic that he wouldn't dispute. Naruto relented and her mouth bloomed like flower petals over his. It was a wonderful, slow kiss, but unlike the previous ones he had shared with her this one was saturated with emotion. He felt his heart rap up against his ribs painfully.

When it ended Naruto found that he still did possess the willpower to leave. Just as Hinata had said, it had become incentive for returning home rather than just staying with her. Naruto decided to lay down a few guidelines to help preserve their feelings for each other before he went.

“Okay, I've been doing some thinking so here's what I came up with…while I'm gone could you maybe watch my plants for me? The key to the apartment is in my mailbox. They need to be watered, like, three times a day, but two won't kill em…” Hinata nodded smilingly and he continued his rambling.

“Right, and just so you know I'm going to write to you every single day and tell you about everything I do. I'm also going to buy you tons of souvenirs and other things that I think you might find pretty…” Naruto paused, then went on, “And…if it happens while I'm away…that you find another boyfriend who you like better: that's totally cool! Just…could you maybe tell me in a letter first that you're sick of me and that you want someone else? A heads-up is all I need, I don't mind if-”

“Naruto, please…” She pinched his lips shut with her thumb and forefinger, “I don't really think that that's going to happen, but yes, I will tell you everything you need to know. Now I think it's
time for you to go…”

He nodded, ignoring Jiraiya's calls from down the road to get a move on.

“See you, Hinata-chan!” Naruto swiftly turned after pecking her cheek, and ran down the road to catch up with his mentor, though he couldn't help but look back over his shoulder a few times.

The next day Haku and Gaara pointedly tried to ignore the fact that Naruto was not with them, and wouldn't be for the next two years. After a while they got good at acting natural about it. After making sure Hinata was alright, which she was, Haku left the Hyuga compound to rejoin his friend.

Gaara then proceeded to lay down rules pertaining to his elder sister, “You can't touch her anywhere below…actually, you just can't touch her. Also, perform nothing that exchanges fluids or anything like that. Do you understand?”

“Yes. So I have to stand at least two feet away from her at all times and I am not permitted to touch her…” Haku repeated, “Of course, Gaara-kun, I agree totally. I would never do anything to compromise Temari's honor.”

“Listen, just because I'm allowing this doesn't mean I approve of it.”

Haku only smiled heedlessly. Gaara could talk all he wanted. Even if Haku obeyed all the rules he set, Temari certainly wouldn't. Accordingly, he would be glad to take advantage of that loophole whenever he needed to kiss her.

Before departing from the Hokage's tower, Tsunade had granted them both permission to leave the next day for Suna with Temari and Kankuro. Haku told Gaara it would be prudent to go spend the rest of his day with Sakura and his friend didn't disagree.

After that Haku continued on without Gaara to find Temari, who he was sure was currently being chaperoned by Kankuro everywhere she went, according to Gaara's warnings.

By that afternoon Sakura was curled up against Gaara comfortably as they sat together on the roof of a tall apartment building that overlooked Konoha. They had trained for a while, but then later decided that they merely wanted to bask in each other's company instead. Gaara had suggested a spot that he visited often when he didn't want to be bothered, and they ended up on top of Sato's apartment complex.

“I went to see Hinata-chan this morning,” Sakura announced, plucking aimlessly at Gaara's shirt, “She seems fine to me. She's only a bit jumpy now that Naruto-kun's gone.”

“That's a natural reaction.” Gaara agreed, because truthfully, his nerves were also frayed now that his blonde friend had left Leaf.

“She's also started a very tough training regimen with her team…” She added quietly, “They're all pushing themselves much harder now and she's a lot stronger. Did you hear what happened to her during the Retrieval Mission?”

“I doubt I have.” He admitted.

Sakura looked excited to be the first to publicize it to him, “It's her Byakugan: it's different now and Tsunade-shishou is interested in it. She and the rest of the Hyuga are calling it a new level of their Kekkei Genkai. I was told this kind of phenomenon is extremely rare.”
Gaara remained quiet, thoroughly impressed.

“Yesterday they decided to call it the Misago Byakugan, but they still aren't sure what it does exactly or how Hinata-chan got it at all…” The pink haired girl concluded, recalling what she had been told, “They're re-examining what happened during the mission to see how she unlocked it.”

“That may take a while.” He mumbled against her hair, “Those people will search for any reason to call themselves the superior clan in this village. I hope Hinata can handle all the pressure.”

“I think she'll be alright.” Sakura yawned, snuggling closer to the red haired boy, “Oh! Could I please go with you to Sand, Gaara-kun? I won't get in the way, I promise!”

“And just how do you intend to complete your studies under Tsunade while in Suna?” He inquired in amusement.

She fell quiet after that, thinking, then spoke up a moment later, “I guess I couldn't, really…but I just can't stand the thought of you going just like Sasuke did.”

“I am nothing like him.” Gaara said firmly, refusing to be angered by the Uchiha's name, “I am not leaving this village seeking power, Sakura. I am going because the people in that village need my help.”

She lowered her eyes, understanding, but still distraught.

“And I intend to return here whenever I can, which is more than Sasuke can say.” Gaara added, not wanting her to think she'd never see him again.

“I…I could join the medical corps in Sand!” Sakura turned to face him, recalling how Haku would be doing the same, “They could use my help too!”

He shook his head, “No. Your apprenticeship under the Hokage is too important for you to settle for a foreign job. All that I want for you is to be free and happy. I don't want you to sacrifice such opportunities for me, Sakura.”

She shook her head, not willing to believe it, “But I could go. I do want to and I'm happiest when I'm with you, Gaara. Please don't say that I'm sacrificing anything because I'm not-”

He kissed her to calm her down. Sakura hushed herself and then looked up at him again, “Thanks for that. But still, how can I be sure you'll come back? You may end up really liking it over there you know.”

He looked at her for a long moment and then turned, untying his headband that had been knotted around his sand gourd. Gaara handed it to her while she blinked in puzzlement.

“I'll be wanting this back.” He told her, lowering his voice, “Keep it safe for me until then.”

Sakura sighed and leaned her forehead against his shoulder submissively, “I will.”

By that night Naruto and his mentor had covered considerable distance. They had stopped at an inn outside the border of the Fire Country to get some rest before starting again in the morning.

Naruto laid restlessly on his futon, and after a long while of staring at the ceiling uselessly he rolled over and hissed, “Hey! Ero-sensei! I know you're not sleeping!”

Jiraiya stirred and then blearily turned his head to face his annoying student, “What is your
problem, kid? Can't a guy get some sleep around here?"

Naruto didn’t appreciate his attitude, “Forget it then…”

“Look if you had to wake me from a dead sleep then it's got to be worth hearing.” Jiraiya retorted, scratching his cheek sleepily, “Out with it.”

Naruto stared at his hands and then relented, admitting, “Look Ero-sensei, I just don't think that it's fair you're only training me and not Gaara-kun and Haku-kun too.”

“Naruto, I've been over this with you already; the techniques I plan on teaching you are exclusively suited for you, like the Rasengan. Gaara and Haku aren't cut out for these kinds of jutsu.”

“Then tell me why, at least!”

“ Well…you'll learn that for yourself once you start learning the techniques.” The sage smiled slyly, “There'd be no use in telling you this early on, Naruto.”

Naruto huffed in response.

“You've got to understand, kid, that when we do get back, those two are going to be a hell of a lot stronger too. You're not the only one who'll be improving.” Jiraiya pointed out, “It's good that you all have an opportunity to train separately for a while…that way you can discover yourselves more thoroughly.”

“I still miss them, though…”

“Yeah. I miss those knuckleheads too,” His mentor agreed, “But you will meet again, because nothing stands between best friends: distance, time…maybe women might. But that's about it.”

Naruto snorted at the thought and then rolled over, willing himself to sleep.

He had dreams of racing through Konoha alongside all of his friends.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Soundtrack: “Blink” by Hidetake Takayama

Haku scrubbed the pan thoroughly while in the kitchen. It was his turn to do the dishes, and unfortunately last night's meal had fed many mouths that weren't inclined to wash their own plates. Due to his accommodating nature Haku had gone ahead anyway and did the task that no one else was interested in. Later there would be a short reproving speech for his friends.

Tsunami walked in after him, carrying more plates and bowls stacked on top of one another. She saw Haku and smiled widely at him, “Now aren't you such a good son, Inari? Thank you so much for all of your help, sweetie!”

He blinked at the woman in alarm. He couldn't think of anything to say.

“So how was your day at the Academy, then?” Tsunami continued, helping him dry dishes on the side of the sink, “Did you master the replacement technique just like you told Grandpa you would?”

“Tsunami-san…I haven't attended the Academy for some time…” Haku said slowly, confounded, “And please…my name is not Inari. I'm Haku. Your son is a young boy who you raised with a man named Kaiza, remember?”

“Oh dear…there you go spouting nonsense again,” She smiled obliviously, “Now that you mention it Daddy is a bit late today…he missed dinner again.”

“Tsunami-san please, you have to tell me what's-”

“Haku.”

He turned round to face the owner of the voice. Haku could see an open doorway leading from the kitchen and he cautiously ventured outside. There seemed to be no overlapping land between the house and the Great Naruto Bridge, and he set foot on the concrete overpass, bewildered. He had just stepped out the door.

Gaara gave him a hateful look, “Haku…I don't want to be an uncle yet.”

He didn't understand and Haku was certain that he didn't want to. He didn't bother trying to console his irate friend as Gaara continued on angrily, “I will never let you see Temari again! Not after what you've done! I knew I couldn't trust you…all you'll do is hurt her.”

“Gaara-kun that can't be right! I promised that I-!” Haku felt something approaching and ducked down, barely moments before a zanbato arced over his head. He felt his heart rate pick up. Fear filled him. Suddenly Gaara was gone and he was left to face Zabuza as he raised his massive sword threateningly.

Haku faced the nukenin, not having the faintest inkling of what was going on, “What are you doing here?” Zabuza charged again and Haku evaded, tumbling away and slashing in retaliation with an ice blade he conjured. It hacked off the careless mist ninja's arm and he wasn't bothered by it in the slightest.
“I’ve seen better…” Zabuza grunted, eyeing the wound with a blasé look, “You don’t know anything. Your blood. Your lineage. You think you’re just like everyone else…but deep down you were bred to be so much more than what your Hokage leads you to believe. You could have been strong but you are just a fool.”

Haku stared with his jaw hanging as Zabuza moved through an ice mirror and disappeared into it. He wanted to know why he had left so abruptly and why he could use the same jutsu. The nukenin's departure wasn't half as strange as Naruto's emergence.

The blonde boy walked up to him, smiling normally, but a pair of small ginger fox ears protruded from his mop of wild golden hair. Haku narrowed his eyes suspiciously as Naruto’s bushy red tail wagged amiably behind him, “Hey Haku-kun! Are you feeling alright today?”

“Not by any stretch of the imagination, Naruto-kun.”

Naruto scratched lazily at one of his ears, fighting off an itch, “Sorry about that buddy! Hey! I met your mom back over that way!” Haku assumed he was mistakenly referring to the very confused Tsunami, “But it was weird, Haku-kun…why was your dad holding a knife?”

“A…knife?” Haku repeated quietly, and Naruto nodded in confirmation before running off on all-fours. He turned, sensing another presence, and Haku was not in fact shocked to see his own father had been standing behind him the whole time, “Hello…Father.”

He was in fact holding a knife. Haku looked at him curiously for a moment, startled by how much he did resemble his father in terms of eye color and height. He had never considered that they were alike in any way. Haku swallowed the lump in his throat, seeing that the older man was standing silently in guilt, grieving over what he had done to his own family, “Father…please…there are so many things that I want to ask you. I just can't understand why you were so afraid of us.”

His father looked up and gazed at him moon-struck for a moment. Haku blinked, not thinking to move when he raised the knife up in defense, “No don't! I won't hurt you. I'm not angry with you at all, Father. Just tell me why it happened!”

The knife came down anyway, sinking cleanly into his heart. Haku felt no pain, but watched mutely as blood rapidly soaked the front of his gi. He looked back up at his father questioningly.

“Haku…I am sorry. I do love you, no matter what you think about me.” His words were hushed and the dark haired boy felt tears sting at his eyes as his father wrapped a comforting arm around his shoulder, the other still held the dagger firmly in his son's chest.

“But you know…I would've loved you more if you had been normal.”

Haku woke up from the nightmare in a cold sweat. He had suspected that he had been dreaming at the point Tsunami had mistaken him for Inari, but he had still been lost in a fantastic world that seemed to warp around him and take him to all the places he needed to revisit and ask questions. The answers slipped away just as his eyes batted open.

Sunlight gleamed in through the window, lighting up the bedroom. He sat up, wiping the perspiration from his brow and sighed heavily, 'Morning already…I've overslept.'

And right on cue Gaara stuck his scowling face into his friend's room, “You overslept.”

He nodded absently and apologized for his blunder, “I'm sorry, Gaara-kun…I'll be ready in a few minutes.”
“Hn.” Gaara left with no further comment. He didn't have to rattle the boy to consciousness as he would for Naruto, so he let him be and went back into the living area.

Haku stood from the bed and proceeded to meticulously neaten it. He reflected on the dreadful dream. Though it had made his stomach turn it had still contained many painful truths. He dressed quickly and tied his hair up to get it off of his sweaty neck. Though he was again in reality he still felt nervous. He knew he couldn't afford any indecision on the day he was leaving for Suna.

His bag had already been prepared the day before. It was an eerie feeling as he went about the apartment with Gaara, turning all the lights off, closing doors, and eventually locking up the apartment one final time after they had exited. They traveled in silence through the building. Though neither had packed much, their bags weighed heavily against their backs.

“I'll meet up with you and the others soon.” Gaara informed his friend lowly, “I have to go see her now.”

Haku nodded pleasantly, “Of course, Gaara-kun.” He continued on and turned off down the street towards the Hokage’s tower, while Gaara moved up to the rooftops at great speed.

Sakura paced anxiously on a rooftop in wait. She and Gaara had come to an agreement the day before that he would not forget to wish her farewell before leaving the village. She hadn't been specific about what time she’d be expecting him, so she had been up for a long while simply waiting in the designated area, fearing however irrationally, that he would leave her behind.

‘Gaara-kun would never do that…he said he wasn't like Sasuke. He isn't going for himself…’ Sakura repeated the thought like a mantra, ‘He won't go until he sees me first…he promised!’

The red haired nin arrived promptly and she felt her heart rate quicken at the sight of him, “Gaara-kun! What took you so long-?” He had seized her about the waist and backed her up against a ventilation duct with a hollow thud. He had managed to do it gently.

Sakura opened her mouth to protest his rushing but he silenced her; his mouth was terribly persuasive and delivered kisses that were full of pent-up emotion. He wanted to go but he wanted to stay as well. She could understand that and he hadn't even said anything.

Sakura let his lips hover over her own for a while, allowing him a moment to calm down. Her arms were rested comfortably on his shoulders, and she nuzzled his neck once he had stopped to breathe. Gaara pressed up against her greedily, inhaling her flower-like smell. He would not know any trees or vegetation while he was away. She would have to be his memory of all that was verdant while he was in Sand.

“Say that you're mine…” He growled, almost angry, “Don't think about Sasuke anymore, Sakura. No one but me; I am the one who dreams of you always, whether I am here or far away, there is nothing else I think about…”

The pink haired girl stared at him, dazed, “Well…I suppose I won't be able to help it now will I?” She grinned at him, “I'm yours, if that's what you want to hear.”

“…yes…” His voice dropped a few octaves.

“What was that?” Sakura laughed, wondering why all of his neediness had to manifest just before he left, “Are you going to be alright, Gaara-kun?”
For a very brief moment Shukaku had exercised some control over vocalization, and yet it had said everything that Gaara had been feeling. For once Gaara couldn't say that he despised the demon because it was acting in accordance with his desires and not trying to eat away at his soul. Perhaps it too had grown fond of Sakura.

“**I'll be alright.**” He confirmed, his speech adjusting again, “**I'd ask you to come with me if Tsunade hadn't realized how talented you were.**”

“**Yeah well, she can't be legendary forever! Someone has to take over for her.**” Sakura smiled proudly, “**I'll still be here when you get back you know...but just remember while you're over there that I'm the prettiest girl you know, your favorite.**”

He nodded, liking how her mouth mumbled words against the line of his jaw.

“**Well...maybe except for my forehead. That may be one thing that could use improvement.**” Sakura corrected herself, not completely confident in her appearance.

“**Nothing about you needs to be changed.**” Gaara announced, “**Everyone's forehead should be as beautiful as yours, Sakura.**”

“**You're such a brown-noser...**”

He kissed her again and this time she cooperated. It was soft and wonderful, but it didn't last long. Gaara pulled away, knowing better than to dote on her too long. If he had done that, Shukaku may have gained enough control to have attempted to kidnap her...and he doubted he'd try to fight against it.

“**Time to go.**” He said somberly, and the pink haired girl followed after him without objection. It was a quiet walk across town to the Hokage's tower. Haku was already waiting out in front of it with Temari and Kankuro. Tsunade and Hinata showed up a few moments later as well.

Both Hinata and Sakura took their time saying goodbye to their friends, and Tsunade only watched with a smiling expression, finding the parting bittersweet. Once everyone had been hugged and wished luck, the Hokage spoke up, “**All of you have a safe journey to Sand! I want a report in about a week or so to see how you're all doing, understood?**”

She received an affirmative response from both Gaara and Haku and she was pleased.

“**Well then, kids, I'll see you around.**” Tsunade's voice was a deep rolling chuckle, “**Sakura, let's go now. It's time for your training...**”

“**Yes, Master!**” Sakura gave one last look as Gaara and his group continued on down the street without her. She hesitated to follow Tsunade for a moment. The pink haired girl turned to Hinata, “**Hinata-chan...would you like to join me and Tsunade-sama for a lesson?**”

“**I am afraid I can't Sakura-chan...**” The Hyuga girl smiled weakly, “**It's time for me to go water Naruto-kun's plants for him. I try to keep it at three times a day just like he said.**”

Sakura laughed and hugged Hinata in response, having a feeling they would do just fine without the knuckleheads they so adored.

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Sasuke sat on the edge of his bed meticulously wrapping both of his arms in tape. His onyx eyes stared down, hollow, as his hands worked methodically, hiding his skin from sight. It wouldn't be long before he'd have to train again.
His new life in Sound was like a well-oiled machine. It was quiet, organized and his regimen was completely controlled by his own needs. If he needed to eat he was served food. If he needed to learn a jutsu scrolls were given to him. There was very little one-on-one instruction when it came to his training…or rather, he didn't want it. He kept his distance from Orochimaru when he could.

His room was overly ornate, spacious, and the walls were painted a deep crimson that added to the darkness of the place. There were no windows.

He hated it.

Sasuke stood once he had finished his task and he left his room, stepping out into an echoing corridor. People who had been standing in the hallway, servant and shinobi alike, ducked away at the sight of him. Upsetting the young 'Uchiha Prince,’ or so they called him, would result in swift punishment or death by his hand. His skills had grown rapidly since he had left Leaf.

The only creature that didn't flee at the sight of him as he continued on was a small, gray cat, who had a bandana tied around its neck. It stopped and looked up at Sasuke, twitching its whiskers, “Good morning, Sasuke-sama!”

Rather than ignoring it, which he did with most people, he greeted it politely the same way. The cats that lived in the hideout often proved valuable to him for collecting information that he needed. Keeping a good relationship with them was vital. Sasuke moved on, turning left at the end of the corridor and pushed open two heavy doors.

From there he entered a dimly lit laboratory, filled with rows of water tanks. Some held captives used for experimentation. He wasn't initially interested in the lab at all, but the stairwell near its back that led to an arsenal, from which he intended to select better weaponry. Sasuke crossed the room slowly, his dark eyes occasionally scanning a tank or blinking meter that he passed.

“Wait, is that you again, Sasuke-san?”

The Uchiha prodigy paused and looked over his shoulder irritably, “What do you want, Suigetsu?”

He had happened upon an annoyingly chatty experiment when he had first arrived in the hideout weeks earlier. Now there was no reasoning with him.

In a tank that at first appeared to be empty, a watery form took the shape of a person, who pressed himself up against the glass inquisitively.

“The only thing I did want is out of reach now…” Suigetsu droned in boredom, “If only you had succeeded in bringing that water-nin boy Orochimaru-sama wanted then I'd have some company here!”

“Haku was a waste of time.” Sasuke replied shortly, not addressing the matter further.

“It seems there's a rumor going around that he's still alive, though!” Suigetsu added, smirking, “Orochimaru-sama can still sense his chakra...” His expression then soured, “Damn…if Kabuto wasn't dead I could go for a swim outside in the pond! Orochimaru-sama doesn't let me go anywhere unsupervised.”

Sasuke snorted at the statement, “Can you blame him?”

Suigetsu laughed in response, revealing shark-like teeth, “No…and I don't really want to be here either, so if he let me out I would run, of course. Here I am only an experiment, but outside I am a shinobi again. Remember, Sasuke, you may have come here of your own will but most of us were
kiddomed.”

“And somehow I still have no sympathy for you.” The Uchiha smirked and continued on walking.

He paused after a few paces, keen to the chakra signature of Orochimaru, who had appeared in the doorway. Quickly he bristled, having hoped he could have gone an entire day without having to look at the snake sannin.

“We have a visitor, Sasuke.” Orochimaru's sing-song voice carried through the lab, forcing the Uchiha to turn around and face him. Sasuke and Suigetsu both looked to the double doors where another ninja had appeared.

The newcomer's headband signaled to them that he was a Rock ninja. He was tall and slender, dressed plainly in dark attire. He had to have been about Itachi's age, Sasuke assumed. The man's hair was a shock of intense violet, offset by stunning gold eyes. He looked as if he had been painted to life and his heedless smile also appeared to be a thing of fiction.

“Ah, so this is the infamous Uchiha Sasuke! I'm pleased to meet you at last!” The man's smile was friendly and sincere, “My name is Shimofuri Koinyu and as I suppose you've already seen, I've come here from Hidden Rock.”

Orochimaru concluded the introduction, “Koinyu-kun will be standing in for Kabuto from now on. He will prove far more useful to us; so no attempts must be made on his life while he stays here, understood Sasuke-kun?”

Sasuke grunted in acknowledgment, though he could honestly care less about Koinyu.

“Orochimaru-sama, would it be alright if I asked Sasuke-sama a few questions?” The Iwa nin inquired respectfully.

“You may,” The sannin answered, then turned to leave the lab, “But that does not mean he will cooperate.”

He had left just as swiftly as he had appeared, and Suigetsu called out after him, “Wait! Orochimaru-sama! Could you maybe let me out for a little while?”

There was no response. Sasuke glared at the wall behind Koinyu's head, his Sharingan activated merely for the effect of intimidation.

Koinyu blanched for a moment, but then heaved a heavy sigh and approached the Uchiha. Suigetsu spitefully bared his teeth at the newcomer, wondering what sort of effect they would have on him. Koinyu thoroughly ignored him and stopped a short distance away from Sasuke, “I won't take up much of your time, Sasuke-sama, and you won't have to answer in too much detail either.”

Sasuke still remained unimpressed.

Koinyu fished through his tunic briefly before holding up a picture. There was no need to hand it to Sasuke, his Sharingan was already scanning every inch of it. The image was of a shinobi, who wasn't at all recognizable, but he didn't appear to be the focus of the photograph. The weapon he was wielding was a golden long bow in which he was captured forever in the moment of launching a blue arrow.

“Do tell me, Sasuke-sama, have you ever seen a weapon such as this in the Leaf Village before?” Koinyu asked amiably, narrowing his amber eyes as he waited for a response.
He scrutinized the picture in boredom, not seeing why it was pertinent at all. After a moment, a weak, distant memory floated up from the recesses of his mind, *The Chunin Exam*…

“Something like that was used in the Chunin Selection Exam months ago.” Sasuke reported dully, folding his arms.

Koinyu's eyes lit up with pleasant surprise, “Well that certainly is good news! Now can you tell me who was wielding the Hiyumi?”

“…just some girl.”

“Yes, I know it's a girl!” Koinyu snapped impatiently, “Her name: I need the kunoichi's name…”

Sasuke paused momentarily, realizing that if he answered the question he could quite possibly be jeopardizing Konoha. He had not yet decided if he was fully withdrawing his allegiance from Leaf, so he took the situation into consideration.

Iwagakure, he reasoned, still held hostilities with Konoha since the war. Their interest in this weapon could be some sort of trap that would endanger the Leaf Village. Also, Sakura was in Leaf. She was his salvation and his only chance at redeeming himself when his vengeance was carried out. He didn't want to risk her life while he was away.

Conversely, Tenten, the owner of the weapon, also resided in Leaf. He held little sympathy for her and didn't care to know why she possessed a weapon from the Rock Village. All that he was sure of about the kunoichi of Team Gai was that she had nearly killed Sakura once, even if it had been inadvertent. He judged that was something worth punishing.

“Her name is Tenten. No family name that I know of…” Sasuke replied, finding the information truly unhelpful. He still didn't see why there was any interest in the kunoichi.

“Ten-Ten?” Koinyu laughed, enunciating the name with a mocking tone, “That is the name of the last Sasagainu? Ha! Bi-sama will be amused by this.” He tucked the picture away, still chortling wildly to himself at the thought, and thanked Sasuke for his assistance before exiting the lab.

Suigetsu was terribly confused over what had just transpired, “What the hell is a Sasagainu?”

“It's a name you idiot,” Sasuke informed him dryly, “…a clan name.”

Gaara followed behind Kankuro as they passed through the Fire Country. It wouldn't be a very long journey to Sand, and things seemed to be going smoothly as he and his companions spoke light-heartedly and predicted things to come once in Suna. Haku, as to be expected, was the quietest of the group.

He hung near the back of the procession, his eyes downcast. The dream he had early that morning was still eating away at his mind. No matter how twisted and random it had been, the message it had relayed was still very clear to him.

*This isn't my path*…

He had been living life so far as if it had been a daydream. Everything had been handed to him and been made simple. Haku was aware that the complexity of his true goal would possibly bring him to his knees. It would be the hardest mission he could ever undertake in his life, if he chose to pursue it. He was torn between Sand and the truth.

“Hey, Haku, you don't look so good.” Kankuro informed him, concerned, “Is something the
matter? We'll be at the country border soon; it isn't more than a day's walk.”

He wanted to thank Kankuro for his reassurance but he found that he simply couldn't, 'No more lying…'

“I…I don't think that I can make the journey to Sand.”

Temari turned around to face him, her eyebrows raised, “Sure you can. You've gone much farther than this without complaint, Haku.”

He shook his head weakly, “It isn't because I can't make it…it's because I won't.”

Gaara, who was a few paces ahead of him on the path, paused. He turned and looked at Haku in silence. Earlier he had sensed the indecision in his friend when they had first left Leaf. In a way he had already known Haku's intentions.

“Come on kid, you can make it to Sand!” Kankuro laughed, feeling that Haku's insecurity was pointless, “You don't have a good enough reason to stay in Leaf, going somewhere new will be good for you. Trust me, I know.”

“I won't be in Leaf…”

Temari balked at the statement, her slate eyes widening a bit. She didn't bother asking Haku what exactly he meant because she expected him to explain. The kunoichi did her best to keep her bafflement under control but it was difficult.

“Gaara-kun,” Haku spoke up, finally raising his eyes, “This may be my only opportunity…if what Zabuza said is true then I must go find out for myself!”

“Who the hell is Zabuza?” Kankuro asked, puzzled. He was unfamiliar with the name.

Gaara narrowed his eyes. He didn't even remotely trust the nukenin they had battled long ago in the Land of Waves, but he understood that Haku had no other way to begin searching for his clan. Certainly once he was in Sand he wouldn't be permitted to leave lightly, there was too much hype from Leaf of losing him to Sound.

Gaara folded his arms, his voice was low, “If you do not come to Suna with us I will not lie for you. If Tsunade-sama finds out that you are in the Water Country instead, there will be huge consequences, as well as the threat of Orochimaru.”

“I would never ask you to lie for me, Gaara.” Haku smiled at his friend.

Temari was promptly infuriated, "Did you say the Water Country? Don't even think about it! You're coming with us! That's already been decided!" She and Kankuro turned to look at Gaara, and they were troubled when their sibling turned his back on Haku.

Gaara closed his eyes and then called aloud to the dark haired boy, “Go then, if you must. Find what you're looking for and then return quickly.”

Haku nodded in understanding, “Thank you, Gaara-kun…”

“Gaara…are you sure that this is a good idea?” Kankuro muttered to his younger brother, “You can't just give him permission! Then the Hokage will hold you responsible for what happens to him!”

Gaara said nothing. He didn't want to watch Haku leave, even when he knew it had to be done.
He didn't want to acknowledge the fact that his two best friends were going to be very, very far away from him for a long time.

Temari opened her fan to a full three moons, her eyes on fire, “You're not going anywhere! I'll break your legs if I have to!”

She swung her weapon and stirred up a powerful gale that was so sudden Haku didn't have time to evade. The fierce wind knocked him back against a tree trunk with a crack, and Temari's scowl grew even more after seeing she had only destroyed a water clone.

Enraged that he had gotten a head start, Temari barreled on ahead into the woods beside the road they had been following. She could see Haku ahead of her and she aimed ferocious wind jutsu for him. With his new awareness of his wind ability, he blocked the gusts with his own thanks to the Hyoton.

“I hate your stupid fucking blood limit!” She screamed after him, loathing how she had suddenly become powerless. After hearing Temari's shrill cry Haku stopped and turned to face her, knowing it could prove to be a foolish decision.

Temari crashed headlong into him, not slowing down in the least, and pinned him roughly against the trunk of a nearby tree, seething, “I swear I'm not letting you get away!”

“I'm sorry, Temari.” His apology was a sorrowful mewl.

“You're running away!” She yowled, her eyes were flashing with anger, “You're just like that Uchiha-asshole after all!”

There was a painful silence.

Temari felt her eyes begin to water but she refused to let herself cry. Not for him. Not over something as preposterous as this, 'This shouldn't even be happening!' She let herself calm down a bit, taking deep breaths, but she wouldn't remove her hand from the collar of his shirt. She wasn't letting him leave.

“So…had you actually been planning on leaving your village like this?” She asked slowly, still unsure if it had been a spur-of-the-moment choice. It didn't seem like something that he'd do.

“Yes.” Haku answered softly, “I just never imagined it to be this way…”

“Then if you were going to leave anyway…even after they brought you back home…why did you say all of those things to me? Why did you do all of those things? Why couldn't you have just left me alone you selfish bastard!” Temari hissed, her face an inch from his.

Her grip on his top was tightening. She didn't want to be with someone who was only going to run off to a place she couldn't follow. She felt it was a waste of time.

“I love you.” He said it with sincerity, “I did everything I did because I wanted to show you that…” Haku made a vain effort to pry her hands from him but it was no use, “I never wanted to hurt you…not even when we first met, and that was certainly no friendly meeting. This…this may be my only chance to search for my clan, Temari.”

“You don't need a clan! You have us!” Temari protested loudly, “How would you find them anyway when you don't even know your own surname?”

“I won't be searching alone,” Haku informed her, “Temari…I will go to Sand. I will stay with you. But for now I must go and see if my family still truly does exist.”
“You already have one!” Her voice rose to a screech again, “What more could you possibly want? Even if you do find somebody like you, you'll be strangers to each other! They won’t love you the same way, Haku. No one will.”

“Temari…I can't thank you enough for all that you've given me…”

“I don't want your gratitude you ignorant little shit-!” She was cut off when he moved to kiss her, succeeding, but she reciprocated in one of the worst ways. Temari drew a knife in response, and pressed it smoothly against his throat, threateningly.

“You're forgetting that I'm a shinobi, and I will act as a shinobi and make sure that Orochimaru can't get you at all…if it comes to that.” Temari warned, her voice growling and sharp.

Haku was utterly unafraid of her, “He won't. Please trust me, Temari.”

She bared her teeth at him, furiously, “I don't care about you! Even if I did it was all an experiment to see how things would turn out…looks like I made a stupid choice!”

“Just trust me, Temari…”

“No!” The kunoichi crushed him against the tree trunk, “I will never trust you again! You’ve lied to me just like I knew you would!”

“Not once have I lied to you…and I am not lying now.” Haku, fearless and love struck, guided her hand and poised the kunai over his heart, “You have my heart now. Do whatever you like with it because I've given it to you willingly. I trust you.”

“I don't want it! You don't mean anything to me!” Her howls shook through the surrounding forest, scattering birds that had been perched close by.

“You are in my heart always.”

“Then I'll cut myself out!” Temari shrieked and the brief moment in which the blade did come down she had ignored it. It was satisfying to stab him and make him feel pain. It was terrifying to stab him and make him feel pain. It was final.

She stared dumbly as his eyelids batted shut after her strike. She wanted to take it back but she knew she couldn't. Temari stared in horror, with her mouth hanging open in shock. ’He deserved it. He was a traitor and a liar. He was leaving.’ It was too quiet.

’…I do love you, otherwise I would've let you go.’

The shadow clone dematerialized with a brief puff of smoke, and there was a moment in which relief and wrath mixed into a dangerous concoction in the pits of her stomach. Of course he would've left a kage bunshin behind to stall her, she reasoned. By now he must have been a mile ahead and Temari knew he wasn't coming back.

Kankuro arrived a minute later, disheveled, and descended from the treetops. For a moment he only stood there, and then he looked at his sister uncertainly and asked, “Did he…did he really leave?”

“It doesn't matter, we're going home now.” Temari snapped angrily, storming past her brother, “As far as I know Haku’s dead and I'm the one who killed him!”

She hurled the knife pitilessly ahead of her, sinking it into a tree branch, and then rushed ahead to rejoin Gaara.
The current hideout was situated in a diminutive rocky location north of the Wind Country. They would be staying in it for some time, the leader had said. It was secluded enough so they wouldn't have many visitors. They came and went from the place like shadows.

The hideout sat on a high cliff and the mountainside was barren. The entrance was constantly buffeted by strong winds. Statues of lions dotted the uneven edge of the drop-off, and Kisame was perched on top of one of them lazily, seated between two great ears. He looked down to his left, where Itachi was leaned against the side of the stone lion. His partner stood in silence with his eyes closed.

Kisame wondered what he was thinking about briefly before turning his gaze back to the horizon ahead. The sunlight was considerably bright due to the lack of shade. He adjusted his hat to shield his eyes from the unforgiving beams. A flock of doves raced past.

“Itachi-san…how many birds are out there now, do you think?” He mused, blinking up at the acrobatic congregation wheeling through the sky.

“There are nineteen.”

“Ah.” Kisame smirked slightly at the answer, “You didn't count the falcon that's chasing them… or…is that because you didn't see it?”

“My vision is none of your concern, Kisame.” Itachi dismissed the subject yet again. This was the fourth time that week his partner had brought it up.

“As your partner I'd say that it is my concern,” He adjusted his hat again, knowing that he had little chance of effectively arguing with the Uchiha, “I'll only suggest that we find a healer soon to look at those eyes of yours…they certainly aren't getting any better.”

Itachi lowered his face behind the collar of his coat as a freezing wind rushed up against the cliff. “I'd prefer not to.” He said, killing the discussion completely.

A hunched figure approached them as it left the cavern. It paused a good distance away and then spoke in an irritated voice, “Leader wants to speak with you now, Itachi-san. Go to him.”

Without another word the Uchiha straightened and then left, walking in silence to the building.

“What does Leader want with Itachi-san?” Kisame asked after his partner had gone.

“It isn't any of our business. He just seems to favor Itachi-san over the rest of us…” The newcomer answered, his voice was a low rasp.

Kisame wasn't about to deny that Itachi was, most likely, one of the most powerful shinobi in the organization besides Leader. Few could match him if there was ever inner-conflict, (which he had proven with Orochimaru) and Kisame would even go as far as to say that even he would be slain if he raised his sword against his partner.

And yet Itachi was suffering from overuse of the Mangenkyo Sharingan. His vision was strained and Kisame could see it was beginning to affect how he performed on missions, even if it was only minute, ‘What sort of consequences will he face if his eyesight continues to deteriorate, I wonder…’ The outcome could certainly not be good. Though he didn't say it to Itachi, he was concerned for his life.

A shrill cry pierced the air, “Sasori no donna! You take so long! Hurry so we can reach the
Lightning Country!” Riding on top of a clay bird ahead, a blonde man impatiently urged Sasori to catch up.

Kisame chuckled darkly as he looked down at the hunched form again, “My sympathies, Sasori-san. Looks like you're stuck with a bothersome partner…”

Sasori grunted in response, walking away, “His art is an abomination. I've never seen such trash until he came along…”

It was another reason he was grateful Itachi was his partner. It meant he'd never be landed with a block-headed shinobi with a big mouth. He intended to keep it that way.

“Hey fox, are you there?”

**Where else would I be you dim-witted twit?**

Naruto peered up at the Kyuubi through the bars of its cage. For once, it had been a purposeful visit. He had decided earlier that if the Akatsuki were so interested in the demon he possessed he should learn a bit more about it.

**I would rather not be irked by your pitiful excuse for an existence right now,** The fox sighed heavily, almost dramatically. *Leave me be, Naruto. I have lent you enough of my services these past few months…*

Naruto frowned, wondering where the fox's apathetic attitude came from, “Oh come on! I just have a few questions is all.”

**And I am disinclined to answer.**

'**Must come with the territory…I’d be miserable too if I was locked up in here all the time…**' Naruto supposed, but still, he wasn't about to give up. The Kyuubi certainly couldn't avert its hearing and if he did ask a question, he may just receive an answer.

“What's the matter? Something's been bothering me.” The blonde boy went on, coming up precariously close to the glowing bars, “During the Retrieval Mission from a while ago…I'm pretty sure Hinata-chan's eyes are different now because of it. And I don't understand how Kabuto didn't kill her or...why she's even different in the first place.”

**You're referring to the young Hyuga that your mouth was practically glued to for a week?**

Naruto hollered at the fox in response.

**You needn't worry over such a puny female.**

“Don't talk about her that way you son of a bitch!” Naruto snarled, marching up fearlessly to the Kyuubi's grinning face, “I'm worried about her!”

**Of course you would be…but I suppose she would prove to be useful. It won't be long before she will be fertile and ready for mating…she would produce powerful offspring thanks to her evolved Kekkei Genkai.**

“Would you cut it out? Just answer the question!” His face was turning red very fast.

**Oh just leave already would you?** The fox groaned in exasperation and after it spoke the cage
began to rattle violently as if in protest. The Kyuubi disappeared into the darkness of its prison, howling angrily into the shadows.

Naruto, accustomed to such random behavior, waited for the fox to end its tantrum and return. After it had reappeared, to Naruto's surprise, it did answer, **The Hyuga girl met certain conditions and that is what caused the change.**

He frowned in puzzlement, “What conditions?”

**The loss of a close bond. Did someone die?**

“Yeah…” Naruto muttered, seeing that it may have been a psychological result, “We thought we lost Neji…”

**Ah.** The fox continued after getting an affirmative reply, **She must have also been faced with some sort of adversity. There was a struggle.**

“That's definitely true…”

**This has happened before in the long history of doujutsu. Many react powerfully to strong emotions.** The fox then grinned, **But the most important factor in the change of the blood limit was the absence of a restraint.**

“Absence of what?”

**She had no restraining seal. The one that those Hyuga fools put on the heads of their children?**

“Yeah…Hinata doesn't have one of those.” Naruto nodded thoughtfully, seeing she met a surprising number of criteria.

The Kyuubi continued, **And that is why when she was struck with a death-blow her body acted to protect itself.**

“D-Death-blow!” The blonde boy repeated, stunned, “Are you crazy? How could-?”

**She died you idiot. Briefly.** The fox sneered, as if there was no reason for Naruto to make a fuss, **Stranger things happen to evolve Kekkei Genkai, believe me. Is it really so unheard of? How else would you expect the Byakugan to dip into inter-dimensional vision?**

Naruto shook his head, terrified and amazed all at once, “I…I just…can't believe it. I don't understand how Hinata-chan made it…” It was then he knew that Kabuto's final attack had truly been fatal. There was still little explanation of how it had happened.

**Once the girl was killed, by whatever means, the Kekkei Genkai sent a signal to her tenketsu to restore chakra flow. It is self-regeneration on an autonomous level.** The Kyuubi clarified, rather proud of its knowledge.

**Hyuga, in a time before they were called the Hyuga, were aware of this power. The ability was a technique known to the very first shinobi, long before the Uchiha and Senju clans founded Konohagakure. It has long since been forgotten, as you can imagine.**

“How…how do you know so much about Leaf?” Naruto demanded, furrowing his brow in suspicion, “There's no way a monster like you could ever know all that!”
The cage rumbled so fiercely in that moment that Naruto was knocked off of his feet and fell to his rear, landing in the sewage water. He blinked up, watching the Kyuubi withdraw and it was then he understood, *The cage…the fox isn't the one rattling it! It's got to be something else!*

*Cretin!* The Kyuubi howled, fed up with interruptions, *Your opinion does not exist here!* The giant fox crashed around, snapping its jaws and yowling ferociously. Naruto rose to his feet again and ran up to the bars.

“Fox! Hey! Who's in there with you? There really is someone else!” Naruto shouted, trying to get its attention, “Tell me! What's going on in there?”

The biju reappeared suddenly and its fangs cracked up loudly against the bars, *LEAVE!*

Naruto awoke with a jolt.

Sheer terror raced through his veins. He had felt certain the Kyuubi would impale his tiny body with one massive tooth if he had been any nearer. Naruto had never witnessed such rage with the fox before and now he knew better than to test it again.

He sat up straighter in his seat, breathing deep in an attempt to relax. Naruto's eyes focused, and he could see Jiraiya sitting across from him on the opposite bench. His mentor wore a thoughtful look. The sight of his teacher helped him calm down completely.

Naruto glanced over the side of the boat they were on. Land was no longer in sight. He had fallen asleep shortly after they had boarded the ferry. It wouldn't be long before they reached the small, Southern peninsula Jiraiya had spoken to him about.

The toad sage smiled at him, “Did you sleep well, kid?”

“Not really…”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear it.” Jiraiya replied, “But now that you're awake it's time for your first lesson, or rather, question.”

The blonde scratched his head, “A question, Ero-sensei?”

“Yep,” He then held up a bizarre kunai to his pupil, “Take this, Naruto. It's yours to keep.”

“Gee…thanks.” Naruto accepted it and then observed the knife, having never seen one with such a strange shape before.

The sennin drew out his pipe and lit it. He then said, “Now if you can tell me by the end of the day what's so special about that kunai…I'll teach you three new jutsu.”

“Psh. You'll just teach me crap, I bet.”

Jiraiya raised an eyebrow at him, “You call three jutsu known to the Fourth Hokage crap?”

Naruto's eyes widened in astonishment and then he quickly looked back to the kunai in his hand. “Gah! What does it do? What does it do? What does it do?” He waved the knife in front of his face, trying to decipher any of its hidden qualities.

His teacher only laughed at his panic.

“That's enough for today, Sato…” Kakashi sighed, watching his nephew slow down as he raced
past again.

The Chidori he had been wielding fizzled out and the genin faced his uncle, “Finished already? But I still have plenty of chakra left!”

“I know,” He answered and chuckled, “But that last attack totaled my vest if you didn't notice.”

Sato glanced over to Kakashi, observing how his most recent strike had been a direct hit. His white Chidori had shaved away half of his uncle's jounin vest, “Wow… I did it. My technique definitely still needs work, but it’s not bad for a new jutsu!”

Kakashi tossed the ruined vest aside, “You did very well, Sato-kun.”

He moved a few paces away to lean against a training post and catch his breath. His nephew sat beside him and snapped a picture of the smoldering vest. When he offered to buy Kakashi a new one his uncle told him not to worry about it.

They rested in silence and Kakashi drew out a copy of Icha Icha Paradise out of habit.

“Um, Kakashi?”

He glanced over to his nephew, “Hm?”

Sato looked up at him with curious eyes, “What do you remember about my dad?”

Beneath his mask Kakashi frowned, but still replied, “If I recall… he lacked all discipline that wise ninja should have and he came from absolutely nowhere. No home, no background, no money to his name.”

“No background? Is that why I kept mom's name?” The boy asked keenly.

“Yes, that was what she wanted.” Kakashi confirmed it, “When Riei first came here he left his clan name behind to start anew; most refugees who come to Leaf do that.”

“Right…and… he's from Hidden Dragonfly, right?” Sato quickly corrected himself, “Was from Hidden Dragonfly?”

Kakashi flipped a page in his novel casually, “Not exactly.”

“Huh?”

“Your father was born in that village but he never lived there as far as I know.” He explained.

“Er…I don't get it…” Sato mumbled. He had been certain that it was his father's place of origin. His mother had told him so many times. Was Kakashi even sure he had his facts straight?

Seeing the boy’s confusion, his uncle continued, “Leaf was at war with Dragonfly, long ago. We destroyed that village completely. As morbid as it was, the survivors who fled were left to fend for themselves and made bands of wandering ninja who traveled through many countries. That's why your father grew up so… deprived.”

“My dad wasn't deprived!” Sato barked in disagreement.

Kakashi looked up from his book, “Please understand… that the first time your father had a permanent roof over his head in eighteen years was when he met your mother. He had nothing. And that roof he lived under happened to be my roof.”
Sato smirked, “So you took him in, Kakashi?”

“No,” He groaned at the mere thought of it, “Your mother did. Riei moved in and I moved out. She was twenty and innocent still. She was perfect and she loved him. Him, of all the men she could've chosen…”

“Was he really so bad?” Sato pressed, finding his uncle's account held much bias, “Mom said he was always laughing and making friends…what was it like when you first met him?”

Kakashi took a few moments to reflect on an irritating memory.

It was late in the morning. Wednesday. Normal.

Kakashi inhaled the sweet air as he soared through the treetops on his way to the south bridge. A passing group of Inuzuka looked up at him from the path below with admiring eyes.

He was seventeen and extremely confident. Kakashi had entered the ANBU a short while after the loss of his teammates. He was both feared and respected in the Fire Country. Copy Ninja Kakashi had killed many men by that time.

Once he arrived at the footbridge a blonde haired man came into view and he grinned widely at his student. Kakashi greeted his sensei with a brief, professional bow.

“Good morning, Kakashi,” Minato addressed his pupil, “Please take that mask off, would you? You hide your face well enough as it is…”

“Ah,” Kakashi removed the animal mask that was customary for shinobi of his rank, “What are the details of the mission, Minato-sensei?”

“You aren't on active duty today so Hokage-sama has decided to assign us a B-rank mission.” His teacher reported with a smile.

Kakashi’s annoyance glimmered darkly in his visible eye. The blonde man noticed it too.

“Kakashi...Hokage-sama and I are concerned about your social health.” Minato told him, his eyes serious, “You need to be able to interact normally with other people. Being in the Black Ops makes it difficult for some ninja to assimilate with society again.”

“I can interact very well, sensei.” Kakashi assured him, “I just don't see the point in my participating on such a low-level mission…”

The blonde man only smiled, “There is always room for improvement, Kakashi. And since when did B-rank become low level?”

“Since I began taking S-rank missions, sensei.”

“I take those more often than you do, remember.” His teacher admonished lightly, “And it is possible even for someone like me to be killed on a B-level mission. They aren't to be taken any less seriously than an A or S ranked task. Now...I wonder when our teammates will get here?”

After a short while two people appeared on the path ahead. There was a considerable height difference between them.

The taller ninja was clad in a jounin vest identical to Minato’s. He was lean muscle beneath tan skin and his hair was a mop of black spikes. Emerald eyes locked onto Kakashi, slightly
unnerving the young ANBU, ‘What’s he doing on a low-level mission like this? He’s practically the Sandaime’s right hand.’

Beside the docile yet remarkably intimidating ninja was a shorter young man who appeared rather sickly-looking. He walked quietly and tried to hide his intimidation with a blasé attitude. Kakashi identified the youngster as a former classmate, Hayate, who was still a Chunin as far as he knew. He picked up on Hayate’s nervousness immediately. It was a quality he preyed on in missions these days. Kakashi was the most advanced shinobi of his generation, and chance encounters with former friends and schoolmates often revealed the gap in their ability.

“You’re early, Minato-kun.” The veteran jounin greeted pleasantly.

“And you are right on time as always, sempai!” Minato smiled in response.

“Please stop calling me that…”

“If you prefer,” The blonde nin turned to Kakashi, “Takaharu and Hayate here will be joining us. We’ll set out for Mist after a quick briefing…”

Kakashi couldn’t keep in his snort of disbelief. “We’re bringing a Chunin with us?”

Hayate was ruffled by the harsh words but held his tongue. He knew what Kakashi was like, even since their days in the Academy.

Takaharu’s forest eyes burned when he looked at the silver haired nin, “Yes, Kakashi, that is correct. My apprentice has shown remarkable skill and I believe he is ready for a more serious mission.”

Kakashi fell silent again.

Minato snickered playfully at his student’s reaction and then turned to comfort Takaharu’s companion, “Your sensei and your master have both told me great things about you, Hayate-kun. Takaharu-shishou believes you will make a fine swordsman in time.”

“I hope so,” Hayate answered, his voice was surprisingly steady, “Takaharu-shishou has trusted me with many techniques.”

Takaharu patted his apprentice affectionately on the head, but rather abruptly, his entire body tensed. Minato gave his fellow jounin a curious look, seeing the change, “Is something wrong, Takaharu?”

“Minato…there is a strange presence. Don’t you sense it?”

The blonde man frowned, “Now that you mention it…”

A sudden explosion in the forest outside the village gates was enough evidence to support Takaharu’s suspicion.

“The briefing can wait,” Minato decided aloud, “The village may be under attack! Let’s go!”

He and his companions moved swiftly to the outskirts of the village, which was comprised mostly of woodland and training grounds for the village’s shinobi. Rather than the intruders they had expected, they saw something very different had caused the disturbance.

An enormous bird prowled just above the treetops, hunting an unseen object, and on top of its head a ninja shouted commands to it. It was certainly strange and not something they had
witnessed before.

'It must be searching for something...' Minato suspected to himself, 'But it's getting dangerously close to the village! We'll have to stop it if comes any nearer.'

“We should wait before we act. He hasn't seen us yet.” Takaharu advised while they took cover in the shaded canopy, “Let's see just what he's after…”

They continued to observe the rogue shinobi atop the bird's crest. It wasn't long before they realized he wasn't alone. He spoke haughtily, calling aloud to the forest below, “Come out baby cousin! Stop hiding!” He laughed pitilessly, “You can't run forever!”

Kakashi, followed closely by the rest of the group, moved nearer. It was then they could see the person who was being pursued. He was moving incredibly fast; a speed that had to have been assisted by a chakra gate, Kakashi estimated. He was running without direction, desperate to escape. He didn't blame him. Giant birds didn't bode well for anyone being chased.

He looked to be about Takaharu's age, Kakashi guessed. Maybe a bit younger. He had white hair like snow that was dirtied from reckless movement. He was clearly from another region. The Hatake blinked in confusion when the pursued ninja sharply turned, leaping up to the top of a tall pine and faced his cousin.

His cry was distant but could still be heard, “Nisa! Why are you doing this? You killed everyone and took everything; there's nothing left! Just let me live my life in peace!”

“I've chased you for a long time, Riei, and I am not about to give up yet! Not when I am so close to finishing you,” Nisa grinned sinisterly from his perch on top of his summon, “You also have the contract...because of that I can't let you live!”

“It was given to me! You stole it even when you knew you weren't worthy enough to have it!” Riei spat furiously, “You've used it to pick off those who were weaker than you!”

“And the weak deserve to perish, just as you will,” His cousin glowered down at him, “I am the predator and you are the prey...fight me for once you cowardly rat!”

He was more than willing to comply. He was through with fleeing.

Riei made seals and summoned another owl, but she was only half the size of her opponent. He leapt for her back, and the two birds rushed up to each other, clawing and screaming and kicking up fearsome gales with every wing beat. It was a defining battle with a bad location.

“They'll be a threat to the village if this fighting persists,” Kakashi pointed out, “They have to be stopped.”

“I agree,” Takaharu nodded to him, “I'll go break it up then!” After volunteering he moved ahead and Hayate mewedled for his master to wait.

Nisa's owl, after gathering a massive amount of chakra, spat a vicious energy beam that tore up a long row of trees, barely missing Riei and his owl.

“You alright, Kutaishi?” He called to her, concerned that she had lost her balance.

“I will manage...” She squawked, “Let's finish him!”

The huge tawny soared upward again and Riei made seals that allowed him to breath fire. Kutaishi fanned the weak flames with her wings, and the once-common fireball was escalated into
a firestorm that consumed Nisa and his owl entirely, “Katon: Burning Wind!”

There was a pause and then the fire subsided, it revealed the opponent had been unscathed. The bird's feathers hardened into metal to act as a shield, rendering the attack useless.

“Rip her apart!” Nisa howled, and his owl dove forward, talons stretched. Kutaishi scrambled to evade but wasn't fast enough. Nisa's bird snatched her wing in a vicious grip, sinking into flesh and tearing out feathers. She screamed in agony.

The larger owl hurled Kutaishi away, sending her crashing down to the forest, crushing trees beneath her. Riei scrambled to hang on, debris and sharp branches snapped up and cut into him during the tumble. She floundered, trying to right herself before Nisa's next attack.

“Kutaishi! I'm sorry.” Riei apologized to his friend, “I know this isn't a fair match up for you…” She wheezed for him to save his sympathies. She was born and bred for battle. The blood that came with fighting didn't discourage her at all.

Riei again made seals, knowing it was up to him to defend from the next attack. He launched a hail of shuriken for Nisa as he approached, “Raiton: Lightning Shuriken!”

His elder cousin blocked the projectiles but was promptly zapped in the process. It only added to his anger.

“Finish him now!” Nisa ordered, and again his owl gathered chakra for another energy beam. Riei looked on helplessly, having no way to counter. Kutaishi's wing was in disrepair and she lacked the strength to fly again. She wasn't prepared to use another jutsu either.

Nisa's owl spat another beam of elemental energy, expertly aimed, and Takaharu leapt ahead to meet it, “Doton: Mud Wall!”

A huge portion of the ground seemed to liquefy and rise up, buffering the owl's assault and saving Riei and his summon. He looked on in shock, not having expected another ninja to arrive, let alone help him. It was an opportunity he wouldn't waste, and he spoke to Kutaishi, pleadingly, “You have to leave now! You know I didn't want to get you involved in any of this…and if you keep at this you'll get hurt even more. I don't want you to suffer because of my weakness!”

“I won't readily leave you to die, fledgling,” Kutaishi sniffed, too proud to admit her disadvantage, “If you die only he will remain to summon my kind and I will not serve a murderer!” Despite her injuries she planted her clawed feet solidly on the ground, ready to fight again.

Takaharu's focus was on Nisa. He decided to give fair warning, “I will advise you to leave this place and take your quarrels elsewhere. You are endangering the Hidden Leaf Village and if I must I will use deadly force to protect it!

“Leaf can rot for all I care!” Nisa snarled in response, “Don't interfere!” He hurled a fuuma shuriken for Riei, ignoring the warning completely. Takaharu threw a volley of kunai in response with fatal accuracy, but he could do nothing to stop the fuuma that raced past.

Riei had left Kutaishi, and was nearly blindsided by the fuuma, but Hayate had followed after his sensei and darted ahead with a sword strike that deflected the oversized shuriken. It sank into the bark of a nearby tree, and Riei retrieved it, looking to the chunin gratefully, “Thank you my friend!”

Hayate nodded, still jumpy with adrenalin, and then sheathed his sword. He moved on to find his master. Riei also backtracked: he ought to return Nisa's fuuma to him!
 Ahead, Takaharu attacked fiercely, “Doton: Earth Break!” Two slabs of ground cracked up and connected solidly with the head of Nisa's owl. It departed in a puff of smoke, leaving Nisa to fight for himself. Once Riei came into view he rushed for him, but his little cousin had the fuuma which he immediately threw.

Riei skidded to a confused halt as the projectile sailed harmlessly through Nisa's middle, “Genjutsu!”

Hayate, not far from Riei, was caught in a rolling dive by his master, moments before Nisa could impale him with a naginata. Nisa leapt back to regroup just as Kakashi soared in and punched a hole through his chest with the Chidori.

“Damnit!” Kakashi couldn't draw his hand back after the attack. Nisa had substituted himself with a tar-feather clone that had him thoroughly trapped. Nisa reappeared swiftly and between the moment he began to slash downward and Kakashi attempted to counter with his free hand, a yellow flash was only briefly visible.

Minato raked Nisa's throat with a kunai before he could attack Kakashi. It was a strategy he used in battle many times before: his Hiraishin was the key to eliminating nearly any enemy. The clone that had trapped Kakashi dissipated after the original had been killed. The Hatake quickly went to his teacher after he'd been freed. The blonde jounin stared down at the fallen ninja, lost in thought, 'What on earth was that fighting about? It even sounded as if they were related…’

Kutaishi, exhausted, departed finally in a puff of smoke. Takaharu, accompanied by Hayate, went to Riei afterwards.

“Are you alright?” Takaharu asked him, “That was a great struggle for any shinobi. I suggest you get some medical attention.”

Riei nodded, growing delirious, “Thank you…I…I think I just need some rest.”

He fell over promptly after that and Hayate caught him before he hit the ground. He gave an uncertain look to Takaharu, “Is he dying?”

“I don't think so,” Takaharu told him, hoisting Riei's limp form over his shoulder, “He used nearly all of his chakra and he barely had any left when he started fighting…I'm actually impressed he fought as hard as he did. Don't worry, Hayate-kun, we'll take him to the hospital now.”

They rejoined Minato and Kakashi farther ahead, where the young ANBU was inspecting Nisa's body. He looked up after a moment, “He bears a symbol of Hidden Dragonfly, sensei.”

“That's ridiculous!” Takaharu didn't take the information seriously, “That village is long gone now.”

“That's true,” Minato agreed with him, “And yet we were the only witnesses to this battle. That makes it our responsibility to report this incident to Hokage-sama.”

The mission had been canceled for the time being. They'd set out after explaining the raucous to Sarutobi. Minato smiled at his pupil, seeing he was irritated again, “Don't worry, Kakashi! There's still a chance for you to improve your people skills today!”

He wasn't pleased by the news, “And how is that?”

Takaharu walked up to the younger man and passed off the unconscious shinobi he had been
hauling, “There you go! Now you can make a new friend, Kakashi-kun!”

Kakashi looked wearily to his nephew after the memory had glanced across his mind, “Trust me, Sato. Riei caused quite a stir when he came to this village.”

The boy smirked, “Well, now I know where I get it from!”

Sakura had been kept busy for a solid four hours alphabetizing the books in Tsunade's office. Tsunade said she would be busy meeting with the village elders for the day and had given her apprentice the day off. Oddly, the pink haired girl requested work so the Hokage obliged her. She wanted to stay as busy as she could, that way she wouldn't stress as much over Gaara.

'I wonder how he's doing…and Haku-kun…' She thought to herself, sliding an encyclopedia back on the shelf, 'And Naruto-kun too…it just isn't the same when they're not here.'

There was a brief knock at the door. Simply by that gesture Sakura knew it wasn't Tsunade or Shizune, since she barged in all the time to tend to the Hokage's needs. “Come in!” She called out, supposing she'd have to tell the visitor that Tsunade was out.

Ino entered, smiling widely, “Ah ha! I thought I would find you here…”

“Hello, Ino.” Sakura greeted her, but inwardly she felt exasperated. Whenever the blonde girl came about she always made it a point to antagonize Sakura. Her rivalry with Ino had died a long time ago, she felt. And yet she still disliked talking to her simply because Ino was too stuck in the habit of butting heads with her, 'I'm sick and tired of it…can't we just be friends again?'

“Hello, Ino.” Sakura greeted her, but inwardly she felt exasperated. Whenever the blonde girl came about she always made it a point to antagonize Sakura. Her rivalry with Ino had died a long time ago, she felt. And yet she still disliked talking to her simply because Ino was too stuck in the habit of butting heads with her, 'I'm sick and tired of it…can't we just be friends again?'

“Well, I heard that Tsunade-sama made you her apprentice!” Ino began, resting her hands on her hips, “So I just wanted to congratulate you. She wouldn't have picked you if she hadn't seen potential in you.”

Sakura decided to take the comment in stride, unsure if Ino had been serious about it, “Thank you, then…but it really is a lot of work to have on top of training with my team. I don't get many breaks these days…”

She nodded, “I can understand that. Though…I actually came here to ask you something…”

“Go ahead.” She kept on working, waiting for Ino to speak.

Ino looked very uncomfortable, but it was deeply rooted in her nature to speak her mind. After a moment she asked quietly, “Did you ever really…care about Sasuke?”

Sakura paused while she had lifted a medical journal.

She turned to look back at the blonde girl, frowning slightly, “I did. A lot, actually…but…I don't think I could ever feel for him the same way I do for Gaara-kun. It's really different.”

“I suspected that,” Ino nodded, taking a seat on a bench, “I… I'm happy for you, Sakura. I started to see a while ago that you were always hanging around with Gaara. I had always thought that he was creepy…but it turns out he's really great, huh? Look how Sasuke turned out. You must've done something right.”

Sakura smiled proudly, “I didn't do much. You'd be surprised by how not-creepy Gaara really is.”

“You're probably right.” Ino laughed softly, “The truth is…I never really liked Sasuke all that much. Back then…I guess I used him as an excuse so I could be your rival because…I was
jealous of you. You always had lots of friends around you who really respected you…all of my friends just liked me because I was popular."

The pink haired girl stared at her incredulously, “That's crazy, Ino.”

She shrugged, “I guess it was…”

Sakura paused in her book organizing, “Look…I only ever wanted to be your friend, but I couldn't be; there was always too much animosity…too much bickering. Ino…those days are finished. It's useless to reflect on them now unless you're going to change it.”

“I really am sorry, Sakura,” Ino said quietly, “To you and to Naruto. To everyone. I do want to change it…so what do you say we start over?”

The pink haired girl thought on it for a moment, “Hm…I don't see why not! I suppose I could teach you a bit about medical jutsu too while I'm at it…”

“Sweet!”

“But first help me with the rest of these,” Sakura gestured to the stacks of books surrounding her, “It'll go quicker with two people.”

“I guess it won't kill me…” Ino strolled over to her and began sifting through the piles.

Tenten had spent a long while floundering around in her own apartment. She paced up and down the hall, rereading her father's note, trying to see if he had left any helpful clues in it. She could come up with nothing.

'A black scroll. There's no such thing. Not that he's shown me anyway…where would he put it?' Tenten pondered to herself, growing anxious, 'Great…I'm almost a half hour late now! Lee and Neji are going to love me today…'

She tried to get ready while she searched but it was difficult. Tenten scuttled into the bathroom, snatched two hair ties, and began tying her hair up into the traditional buns, her father's note was held in her teeth. While she prepared, she decided to look again in her parents' room which she considered her room, at present.

Her bedroom, which she had slept in when she was younger, was still filled with children's paraphernalia that she no longer had use for. It was also small: her other complaint. She rarely entered it, disliking the memories of her youth that came to her while she was there.

Once her parents had been killed she began sleeping in their room. It helped her remember their smells and their appearances. She kept their clothes and belongings the way they were, unwilling to part with them. If the scroll her father had been guarding would be anywhere, it would be in the arsenal he had mounted on the wall of his bedroom. Both he and her mother had been dependent on it for reloading before missions.

Yet none of the scrolls that were there even remotely resembled the one her father had spoken of. Tenten reexamined it, wondering if she had missed something. She found nothing. She dressed in irritation, and then grabbed her travel bag beside the door.

'I'll swing by the forge real quick. The arsenal in there is even bigger so maybe that's where he put it…’ Tenten thought to herself, 'He has every scroll, weapon, and poison that's in existence in there.'
She could only hope that she would succeed in finding it. In all honesty, Tenten really had no idea what was contained in the scroll anyway.

'All I do know is that Dad wanted me to protect it…and I won't let him down!'

Chapter 4

The fateful day came that Ukigaru's students had mastered their techniques and settled in a new ninja community. His best student, Kamizuru Kosa, had grown powerful and wise, and assured his master that he would care for the newly-forming ninja clans in the region. Ukigaru was happy he could finally settle down and have a family.

Ukigaru had two daughters with Mameha. He loved both of them dearly and wished to one day train them to be fine ninja who would succeed him.

His eldest daughter was named Tian Tian. She was very much like her father: a determined, hard worker who was devoted to her studies of ninjutsu and kenjutsu. She trained tirelessly and read through many scrolls that her father had provided for her education. She loved her father fiercely and was completely loyal to him, and with time became one of his most powerful shinobi.

His second daughter, Hanone, was less involved in training. Her talent rested in politics and philosophy. She was a beautiful gem of the mountains, bearing a much greater resemblance to her mother. Though many men came to adore and woo her, Hanone was never satisfied. She was, in secret, terribly jealous of her sister. The grown sisters had trouble seeing eye to eye on the best of days.

One day Ukigaru called Tian Tian before him for a special task. He introduced her to a young man who was from a noble clan of Iwa. He had been sent by his father to receive ninja training since he had completed all of his advanced vocational studies. Ukigaru believed there could be no better teacher for the young man than Tian Tian.

Although she accepted her father's task she greatly disliked it. Tian Tian had always hoped to pass her knowledge down to another woman because she was frustrated that shinobi of her village were predominantly male. Quickly her student began to bother her, merely because of his gender.

The young man, however, was very respectful to the princess and introduced himself as Yuanjia. He was more than happy to be trained by a woman, since he was to be trained at all.

Once her father had dismissed them Tian Tian left the palace with her pupil in tow, aggravated, and guided him up to the mountaintop. There she told him he was to stay and meditate until she returned for him. If he came down before then she would punish him severely. Yuanjia did as he was told and remained there as Tian Tian slyly went back down the mountain and returned to the palace.

When Ukigaru asked her where her student had gone she sadly reported that he had run away. Her father told her not to fret and that Yuanjia had given up an excellent opportunity by forsaking training with her. Tian Tian bade him goodnight after that and went to her room to sleep.

She did not intend to return for her student. She supposed by the next day he would realize that she had abandoned him and then, motivated by thirst or hunger, he would disobey her and return to the village for sustenance.

The next day when Tian Tian awoke she practiced her sword skills and passed the day merrily.
She paid no mind to the fact that Yuanjia had not appeared in the village then. “It's only a matter of time before he gives up and goes home.” She thought to herself. Tian Tian went to sleep that night without giving him another thought.

The next day, however, there was still no sign of him. Tian Tian passed her time as she normally would, believing eventually he'd give up. Five days passed and still Yuanjia had not come down the mountain. Tian Tian briefly feared he had taken her seriously and stayed, thus starving himself in the process. Her father would be angry if she allowed her own student to die.

On the sixth day Tian Tian climbed up the mountain again to look for him. To her surprise, she found him in the exact spot she had left him in, meditating peacefully. She demanded to know how he had been able to stay there for so long. Her student was cunning.

“You told me to stay on the mountaintop until you returned but that was your only command.” Yuanjia reminded her, “I hunted birds and conies that lived on the rocks for food, and drank from a nearby stream for water. I had flint and tinder to build a fire on cold nights. Now that you have returned my task is complete.”

Tian Tian, at first, was unsure what to think of his survival method. Rather than punishing him as she said she would, she commended him, impressed that he had persevered without disobeying her. She then agreed to train him properly and promised no more tricks.

“Neji, are you ready?”

His reading was interrupted by Lee, who had slid the door open and poked his head into the room, “Where is Tenten?”

Neji stuffed the book into his travel bag, giving his teammate an annoyed look, “I haven't seen her since yesterday. I thought she was supposed to be with you.”

“It is not like her to be late when we have a mission…” Lee frowned to himself, wondering what was keeping her.

He and Neji left the Hyuga compound and went to the Hokage's tower to meet with the rest of their team. All the while, Neji thought about what he had read, mainly Tian Tian.

The Hyuga suspected that because Tenten's father had loved the book so much, it would explain why he had named his firstborn daughter for Ukigaru's child. Though he personally found Tian Tian's character deceitful and irresponsible, 'I don't understand why Takaharu would take a liking to someone like her…' He had to admit, Tenten did share a striking number of qualities with the princess from the book.

Tenten's feminist views of women being just as lethal as men in the shinobi world overlapped with Tian Tian's beliefs. Both were stubborn, clever and educated with weaponry. Neji, after thinking it over for a few minutes, decided to pass the personality traits off as mere coincidence.

He and Lee joined Shikamaru, the team leader, (Gai was assigned to a mission in the Land of Bears currently) outside the tower, and got a short briefing from him about their assignment. He was even less pleased than they about Tenten's tardiness.

‘Women.’ The Nara thought; knowing better than to badmouth Tenten in front of her overprotective teammates.

Kisame was beginning to wonder if Leader had taken notice of Itachi's failing sight. If he did, he
was curious to know what Leader planned to do about it. Would he dispatch Itachi? Trade him in for his healthier little brother? Terminate him?

He doubted that his partner could be killed so easily. Even if he began to go blind, his skills and knowledge would still be superior to most other shinobi; he'd still be valuable. Kisame was concerned over such things mainly because he had not seen Itachi since he had gone to see Leader. Much time had passed.

Kisame had explained these things to Zetsu, who happened to be in the vicinity for the time being. He was one of the most detached and trustworthy people in the organization. All information passed to him was certainly well-guarded.

They loitered on the bank of a shallow riverbed in a valley to the east of the hideout. Zetsu's blank golden eyes stared out into the distance. “Leader would not throw Itachi aside over such a petty disability!” His white half stated, after that his black half suggested, “If it comes to it, a new set of eyes could be acquired for him from someone else if necessary.”

Kisame chuckled darkly in agreement. An easy fix. Itachi was lethal with and without the Sharingan.

“Now go away.” Zetsu told his companion sharply, “I am waiting for a patron who will arrive soon. You are not to be here.” His black half added it would be extremely bad business if someone like him stayed.

Kisame snickered, but then moved to leave, knowing better than to try the Grass ninja's patience. After he had gone Zetsu waited for a while longer, not moving an inch from where he stood. He had seen his client approaching from a way's off.

On the opposite bank, a tall figure emerged from the shadows of the forest and then paused. They stood on opposite sides of the river for a long, silent moment and then the newcomer spoke, “I killed the old man as promised. You better have brought what was agreed on, or you'll be having your own funeral in a moment…”

“No need to be so hasty, Kurosuki-san.” Zetsu replied and then thanked him for his cooperation. A week earlier an elderly shinobi had discovered the Akatsuki's hideout, and wanted to deliver the information to the Mist Village. He needed to be eliminated, or else the organization would be uprooted again and have to move. It would've been too troublesome.

Zetsu drew a small bottle from his cloak and threw it across the river to the other nin, “It is medicine. It will help if used in moderation.”

The other shinobi caught the vile and passed it up beneath his hood. “Take this, Ranmaru…” He murmured. A small voice thanked him and accepted the medicine.

“Raiga-san, would you be interested in another mission the Akatsuki needs filled?” Zetsu offered, aware that outside help was very useful while members of the organization hunted jinchuriki.

“I'm not going out of my way for filth like you again!” Raiga flatly rejected the idea and then left, disappearing back into the forest after the exchange had been completed.

Zetsu had been expecting such an answer. He still found it bizarre how the other ninja kept a ward. It seemed it would be more of a hindrance than a help, at first. But Zetsu was keen to notice the child's Kekkei Genkai and how it could prove useful to the organization.

The trip through the desert was surprisingly agreeable. Gaara found he wasn't bothered by the dry,
hot air of his birthplace, even after living in such a mild climate in the Fire Country for years. As he and his siblings crossed through the sand wastes to reach their village, Gaara thought about how he had allowed Haku to leave.

He was deeply concerned for him. He would've been safer in Suna by far, but Gaara knew he couldn't have told him to stay. As his friend, Gaara understood that he was in many ways obligated to allow Haku to follow his own path. He'd be back, he was certain of it. Haku couldn't bear to be away from the ones he loved for long.

Their arrival in Suna was strange. Gaara found the place looked smaller than it had when he was a child. The village he remembered had seemed like an endless wasteland of cruel people back then. Now it looked like any normal ninja village would.

After entering the village they were almost immediately received. Baki had been waiting for them near a ruined statue of the Buddha. He couldn't help but grin at the sight of them, “Thank you all for coming back so soon. I'm sure you'll be pleased to hear that you've all received chunin rank.”

“I was not recognized as a chunin in Leaf.” Gaara informed him, wondering if that held any impact on the decision.

Kankuro smirked at his younger brother, “Even if you didn't achieve the rank in Konoha you've still earned it here. We wanted it to be a surprise for you.”

Gaara assured him it was.

“Gaara, as of now you will be assigned to Kankuro and Temari's team.” Baki informed him, “You will all begin taking normal missions tomorrow so you have the rest of today to settle in.”

They thanked him for the update and he then moved on to schedule missions for other squads. The siblings moved further into the heart of the village, not very sure what to say. Temari hadn't spoken at all since Haku had left. She kept her eyes downward while they proceeded up the main street of the city.

The last thing Gaara wanted was to see his sister heartbroken. It was another drawback of letting Haku break away from them. He wasn't certain how to apologize to her about taking away something she cared about. In a way he felt responsible for it.

He touched her shoulder gently after they stopped outside of a pawn shop. She calmed down considerably, grateful for her brother's compassion.

Temari looked at Gaara for a moment and then spoke, “I know it must be harder for you to get on without Haku since you've lived with him most of your life…I shouldn't act this way. I'm being selfish. I should be happy that we're home now, right? That we're together again…”

“He will return as soon as he can. That I promise.” Gaara assured her. He didn't doubt it in the slightest; he knew his friend too well.

Kankuro told them to save their heartfelt exchange for later. He wanted to get home.

They arrived at the Kazekage's mansion a short while later. The sight of it prompted Gaara to wonder how exactly the village could function without a leader.

“It certainly isn't functioning well…” Kankuro admitted to his brother as they entered the building, “There are stand-ins for the position but none of them are leaders. They just get the paperwork done. Soon we'll have to decide on a new village leader.”
They gave their younger brother a brief tour of the main floor of the mansion. After demonstrating the layout of the place they went upstairs to the second floor.

“We're the only ones who live here now, so we'll have plenty of privacy.” Temari guaranteed Gaara, “Anyone who shows up here has to be invited first.” Gaara was uncomfortable with the grandeur of the place. It was nothing like his old apartment in Leaf.

They stopped outside the first door on the left. Kankuro gestured to it, “This is me here.” Two doors down was Temari's room, he added. Gaara inquired as to why there were so many rooms.

“Our family used to be a lot bigger,” Temari told him, “It's much smaller now, as you can imagine.” Gaara moved to the door just after Temari's room. He assumed it would be his.

“You…probably don't want to go in that one, Gaara.” Kankuro warned him quietly.

The red haired boy gave him a puzzled look, “Why?”

“That was Yashamaru's room…”

His hand left the doorknob as if he had been stung. Gaara quickly turned away from the door and continued on down the hallway as a foul mood descended upon him. His siblings followed after him, beginning to feel bad about how he had reacted to their home.

Gaara felt out of place because he had never lived in the mansion when he was a child. His father had always kept him in a separate building so he wouldn't injure anyone. It was just another reminder of how lonely he had been.

At the end of the hall they stopped and Gaara stood outside the last door on the right. Kankuro nodded to him, “This one is yours, Gaara.”

Tentatively, his younger brother entered and paused after a few paces into the room. It was a suite. Huge, decorated lavishly with rich colors, and a number of beautiful paintings adorned the walls. Something so luxurious could not be meant for him. He stared out a large window on the opposite wall and asked, “Who's room was this?”

It was quiet for a minute.

“…Father's.”

Gaara again tried to leave straight away, but Temari entered and pushed him further in, aggravated, “Stop trying to dodge the past, Gaara! There's no need to. It's done and this is where you're going to stay.”

He stared at her, disbelieving. How could she even begin to tell him to stay here? His father, their father, rather, had wanted him killed when he had been a child. He had never been a decent figure in Gaara's life. He did not want to stay in the place that his father had dwelled in. Temari and Kankuro, however, blocked his exit thoroughly.

Their stubbornness forced him to relent, but Gaara was far from okay with it. He tossed his bag childishly to the floor, furious, “I don't want to live here.”

Temari glared back at him, “Tough shit. You're not staying in any of the spare rooms! They're too small and they're all empty. It's either this or Yashamaru's room!”

Gaara scowled.
She took it as a sign he preferred their father’s room to their uncle’s.

“Good. Thank you for your cooperation…” She stomped out of the room and announced, “I'm taking a bath now. Don't even think about trying to sneak off somewhere else, you hear me Gaara?”

She left after that and Gaara paced for a moment, feeling trapped in his new space. Kankuro watched his nervous behavior for a moment and then told him to relax.

“How easy do you think that is?” Gaara snapped at him. He traveled to the far end of the suite, eyeing a large chest of drawers there. It had caught his attention. Out of annoyed curiosity he pulled open one of the drawers to investigate and saw that some of his father's clothing still remained. He slammed it shut in disgust.

Kankuro desperately groped for a distraction. Anything to make the transition easier for his brother, “You're…definitely going to need new clothes now that you're here.”

“I brought my clothing with me.” Gaara said in a low voice.

Hence the bag. He certainly hadn't been carting china with him to Sand.

“That's all well and good,” His brother nodded in understanding, “But the climate here, even if you haven't felt it yet, is different here than it is in Konoha. You'll need more practical attire, Gaara.”

It was too much to take in all at once. Gaara breathed deep, thinking it over, trying to relieve some of his anxiety. Kankuro was only trying to look after him, he knew. He couldn't allow himself to get disgruntled just after he had arrived. He relaxed a margin.

“Alright then.” Gaara agreed and his brother nodded, sighing in relief.

They left the room and Kankuro added, “I’ll help you get all of Father’s crap out of there and we’ll get you what you need. I know a few good shops we can look in, and when we're finished we can meet up with Temari later and get a bite to eat. How's that?”

Gaara nodded mutely. He'd go. He'd cooperate. But so far he didn't like it.

All day long Naruto had spent trying to understand just what was so special about the kunai he had been given, aside from its shape.

He and Jiraiya had disembarked from the ferry and traveled westward along a mountain trail. The toad sage had been very amused by Naruto’s frantic thinking along the way. They stopped for lunch at an old shrine on the roadside.

After eating, Jiraiya went over his notes while smoking his pipe contentedly, and Naruto settled down for a nap. This one was also intentional, but he had been so high-strung he had nearly been unable to fall asleep at all. When he did, he quickly made contact with the darker part of his subconscious mind.

“Fox come on! I'm sorry about earlier, but I need your help with something!”

You rely too much on me for assistance. For once do something yourself.

Naruto ignored the Kyuubi's complaint and proceeded to describe the kunai he had received, “What does it do? You know so much already I bet you can tell me something about this, right?”
A hateful grin crossed over the biju's muzzle after hearing the boy's explanation, *Three-pronged kunai are designed with a special seal that is vital to the Flying Thunder God Technique…and it was used by none other than your beloved Yondaime Hokage.*

Naruto's excitement grew, “You don't say?”

**Such a jutsu had no effect on me.** The fox boasted, recalling his fight against the Fourth, *And yet…I have never seen another human use the jutsu equally. If your Toady-Teacher wants to teach it to you somehow he'd be better off asking you to fly! You can't do it.*

“And just to piss you off,” Naruto grinned, “I'm going to master that jutsu. Thanks for all your help fox!”

**Do me a favor and kill yourself to put me out of my misery…**

Team Gai, led by Nara Shikamaru, traveled northeast to the mountainous border of the Country of Lightning. They had passed by the Sound Village without a fuss and during their journey got to know more about their client.

They were guarding a merchant named Sukazu Kon on his journey home from a long season of selling goods in the South. It was more than standard protection however; there was quite a predicament Kon was faced with.

He had a younger half-brother named Sen who, unfortunately, happened to be a chunin with financial issues. He swore to Kon after pleading many, many times with no success, that he would come after him for money. He would take it by force if necessary, and his older brother knew better than to take the threat lightly.

So it was understandable that they did run into Sen before they had reached Kon's home. It was a rather messy ambush too: Sen had attacked during a terrible rainstorm leaving nearly everyone, with the exception of Neji, practically blind during the downpour.

Sen attacked mainly with earth jutsu, tearing up the road to buffer them. No one was hurt, but the cart that Kon had been peddling with him was overturned during the assault. Its contents tumbled out, landing in the thick mud of the road, ruining many of his goods.

Neji and Lee subdued Sen quickly, and Shikamaru trapped him in a Shadow Bind shortly after that since Kon had begged them not to hurt his younger brother. Though they would've liked to have beat on Sen for all of the trouble he had caused, they heeded their client. All the while, Tenten was busy digging, trying to help Kon salvage some of his possessions. Many of them were lost and too damaged to be of use.

The entire congregation was miserable and unable to escape the pouring rain. They continued on the path, demanding an explanation from Sen.

The foreign chunin spoke of how his village didn't pay well, and how even after asking his brother dozens of times he still refused to help him monetarily.

“Your money problems are not your brother's responsibility.” Tenten informed Sen, deeply irritated.

“A good brother would have helped me anyway!”

“And a good brother would also not threaten or attack his honorable older brother either.” Lee
replied, backing up Tenten, “You are at fault, Sen-san.”

“If things get hard you should find other work on top of taking ninja missions.” Shikamaru suggested to Sen, who was still bound in his shadow as they trekked through the downpour.

Sen complained about how his work was hard enough as it was, “I can't handle another job and I shouldn't have to! I should get paid better for risking my neck all the time!”

His attitude, along with the dreadful weather, had thoroughly angered Tenten, “Shinobi work isn't always enough to get by. You can't expect those earnings alone to support you. I would know! I have a second job that pays my rent and puts food in my mouth. I don't want to hear any of your excuses, especially when you've compromised your brother and destroyed half of his stock!”

Sen was quiet for the remainder of the journey.

They stopped at an inn for the night to wait out the storm. Sen, again trustworthy, was released from Shikamaru's hold at Kon's request. They entered the establishment, soaking wet, and both Tenten and Kon looked worse for the wear; covered head to toe in mud. The owner of the inn took pity on them and let Kon buy out three rooms at half price for the night.

Sen gave a heartfelt apology to his brother, who was more than willing to forgive him. He helped Kon with the rest of his possessions, and stored them in a room to attempt to clean and repair them. Lee and Shikamaru dried off and also went straight to bed, exhausted from the ordeal.

Tenten returned to the lobby after checking on their client. Neji was there waiting for her. Seeing the great amount of stress she was under, he took her bag from her, “Are you alright?”

“Not really.” Tenten sighed, hating how the mud was beginning to dry and crust against her skin. She appreciated Neji's concern though. It was the thought that counted. She went ahead to the baths to wash up, and Neji moved on to the last remaining room without her.

He set their bags aside and then changed into the dry tunic the inn had provided. The storm outside raged on and Neji considered that if it didn't clear up by morning, they probably wouldn't be able to continue on schedule. His fatigue was beginning to show; he was shivering and out of energy. He slumped to floor beside their travel gear and wondered if he should continue reading his book with his stolen time.

Neji decided not to and instead activated his Byakugan to check on the rest of his companions. Down the hall he could see Kon and Sen talking to each other. Their spirits seemed to be up, as if they had come to some sort of agreement. Next door he could see Lee and Shikamaru were already fast asleep, and had barely changed into dry clothes before having passed out. He didn't bother looking for Tenten. He knew where she was. Neji deactivated his blood line limit and then stood again, moving to the table where tea had been set out for him. He poured some for himself, glad it was still hot.

Tenten returned after a short while from her bath in nothing but a skimpy blue yukata that was cut off mid-thigh. As a paying customer she had demanded fresh clothes and they obliged the irritable kunoichi. Her hair was still wet and it hung loosely over her shoulders as she prowled into the room.

Neji watched in fascination as she violently tugged her bag open and retrieved two hair ties. Tenten marched up to a mirror hanging on the wall and proceeded to tie her hair up again, frowning at her reflection. She was still upset about how Kon could so easily forgive Sen after he had caused so many expenses in damage. She didn't know very much about sibling-love so she had to admit she couldn't relate.
After a moment, Tenten's gaze in the mirror flicked to the background and she caught Neji ogling her. It didn't bother her.

She finished pulling her hair into buns and then turned to face him, trying to stop frowning. It kind of worked. He had finished his tea and gone over to his bag to fetch a map. He wanted to reestablish the course they had plotted to reach Kon's home near the border.

Tenten poured some tea for herself and while she did, she let her eyes glance over to her teammate as he checked their current route.

His short hair almost suited him. His face was as calm and handsome as ever. The gi he was wearing was black and hanging open, revealing a slight glimpse of the ivory skin beneath. It piqued her interest. She stood up, sipping her tea, and then asked, “Neji, can I see something for a second?”

Neji looked up when she spoke and folded the map in half, “If you'd like.”

Tenten crossed the room with her teacup in hand and didn't ask for permission before she began tugging open the gi wider to get a view of his chest. Neji said nothing and only watched interestingly. He tried not to smile.

She examined him clinically, noting how the scars from the previous mission were surprisingly faint. It still bothered her that they were there at all. They reminded her of how terrified she had been that day.

“She did a great job with you…” Tenten sighed, closing his shirt for him.

“And by that you mean Tsunade-sama.” He confirmed.

Tenten nodded and for a moment she considered taking advantage of her closeness to Neji. Normally she never would have thought of such a thing, being he was her most trusted, loyal partner and teammate, but recently her nerves were so shot she wanted to cave into weakness. To be alone with him and to receive no protest while touching him was something she couldn't waste.

In the abstract: a small, winged angel (bearing her likeness) was circling her heart joyously, persuading her to confess to the Hyuga; spill her guts and break down and tell him everything. Half of her sang along with the encouraging, cheerful creature, but the other half of Tenten raised a mallet and bashed the poor cherub into smithereens, prohibiting such an action.

Tenten sighed aloud. It seemed there really was just no hope for her and her beloved. She had already accepted long ago that his feelings for her would not change, but in spite of it she couldn't help but love him anyway, selflessly.

“What are you thinking about, Tenten?”

She blinked, snapped back to reality, and answered as effectively as she could, “I just hope that things can go well for Kon and Sen…”

He smirked at her, “That was almost a believable lie.”

“If you already know what I'm thinking then why bother asking?” She snorted, sipping the last of her tea, and then placed the empty cup on a dresser beside her.

“Because I don't know, but I do recognize honesty in your expression and it is absent.” Neji answered matter-of-factly.
Tenten then attempted to make the most truthful face she could, and earned a chuckle from her teammate for her effort. The sound of Neji's laugh instantly loosened her inhibitions, and Tenten was barely conscious of the moment when she took a step forward and hugged him.

*I love you, I love you, I love you.* She was glad she remained silent. Her mouth may have caused her serious trouble just then. She wondered if she would be able to get away with it.

“Ah.” He said, and he touched her back curiously, “This is in fact honesty, but it wasn't what you were thinking.”

Neji closed his arms around her experimentally, trying to see if it felt remotely normal. It did, he found. He had no problem with the proximity adjustment, and he suspected that it was something he would quickly learn to enjoy. Tenten didn't dare look him in the eye; she feared it may lead her to do something very, very stupid.

The Hyuga could sense her inner-conflict and he didn't understand it. Whether it was attributed to her earlier anger at Sen or the current physical contact he wasn't sure. He decided to ignore it. He wanted to enjoy what was happening.

A moment later she pulled away sluggishly and mumbled an apology.

“Why are you sorry?” He frowned, “Nothing is wrong.”

That was news to her.

Tenten nodded in understanding and then looked off to the right, her face paling, “Right…so… who gets the bed?”

He looked to see that there was indeed only one bed. Neji wondered why he hadn't noticed it earlier. He blinked, thinking it over briefly, and then volunteered to take the floor.

“But Neji you don't have to-”

“Tenten. Go to sleep.” He didn't let her protest, and he snapped the light off, plunging the room into darkness. She huffed and the settled onto the bed, huddling indignantly beneath the covers. Neji sat against the wall and rested his chin to his chest, prepared to sleep uncomfortably so long as courtesy was preserved.

For a long while Tenten lay awake, only able to hear the pounding rain outside. She believed if anyone deserved the floor it was her, *This is not fair at all…*’ Guilt kept her from sleep.

“Neji…” She squeaked his name into the inky black darkness, “Just…just get over here, will you?”

He didn't decline her invitation, having concluded the wall was not meant to support a sleeping shinobi.

Neji stood up and padded through the gloom silently. He then took the empty space beside her without a word. She was annoyed that he chose to lie on top of the blanket, “Get under! You'll be cold.”

“I won't.”

“Oh just do it already! You're annoying the crap out of me!” Tenten hissed and he grumpily complied with the order and slid beneath the cover.
He laid on his back staring up at the ceiling, trying not to get in a bad mood. Tenten lay on her side facing the wall. Still, neither could sleep. After a minute Neji spoke up, “I know what you were thinking about before.”

Tenten could feel her face heat up in embarrassment, “You…you could tell?”

If he already knew how she felt then perhaps she had no real reason to be uptight about her feelings. It was just as scary as it was a relief.

“Your father's warning.” He said and her spirit dropped. Her heart rate returned to a normal pace as well. And yet he wasn't necessarily incorrect, because her father's bequeathal of the black scroll had been irking her to no end being she still couldn't locate it. But still, she was glad he guessed wrong.

“I'll be alright,” Tenten told him, “I think I know what I'm doing, Neji.”

He made a low noise of agreement in his throat before he too turned on his side to be comfortable, facing her back. He could smell spice and vanilla on her. It was a scent Neji approved of. He also appreciated the great amount of warmth she emitted, which was preferable to sleeping on the stinging cold of the hardwood floor.

It was then he could admit how intriguing she was. Neji had never thought much of girls before or had ever been attracted to one, but he was interested in Tenten because she was genuinely appealing…even if he had been able to overlook that for three years. She was the closest, most intimate person he had, and his trust in her had grown enormously with time. Neji decided that he did like being close to her.

He made sure to keep his hands to himself and he closed his eyes, trying to welcome sleep. Tenten had slowed her breathing to feign sleep, but he could see through the façade, “Tenten.”

“Hm?”

“You are my best friend.” Neji said quietly.

She had not expected to hear him say that. Though she was both touched and confused by what he had said, Tenten found that she could not say the same. Her dearest friend was Lee. He did mundane things with her, openly showed affection, spoke to her with no reservation, and shared her laughter and sorrows. Neji was never that way. She couldn't award him a false title. She loved Neji but he was not a good friend.

She cared for both of her teammates differently, and she was unsure of how to explain it, “Thank you, Neji…but you know…my best friend is Lee.”

“Of course.”

He didn't sound mad about it so Tenten relaxed. What she didn't know, however, was that that behind her Neji's face had drained of all color. It was unsettling to hear himself placed second fiddle to Lee in anything, though in this case it was justified.

Neji closed his eyes tightly, refusing to acknowledge it anymore. The last person he would EVER be jealous of was Lee.

He tried to sleep, swallowing his unease, although Tenten added quietly, “…but you are precious to me.”

He assumed she was referring to how she still regarded him as a close friend. He didn't want to
hear it. Neji forced sleep upon himself and Tenten lay awake for a while silently, wondering if she should have told him that she loved him.

“If only Sakura-chan could see you now.” Temari was grinning at her youngest brother. She was very pleased with his new outfit.

Gaara was garbed entirely in black. The shirt was sleeveless and tight to the skin. Black sleeves were fitted halfway up his arms, which he kept loosely at his sides. He frowned at her staring. The pants were baggy and numerous belts dangled from his hips.

After a long observation, Kankuro had told him he was too skinny. "You've got to try to buff up, Gaara. I've seen girls with more muscle than you!"

“You chose this clothing, idiot. It's not my fault how I look.”

“I like it.” Temari objected, “Don't listen to Kankuro; skinny-twig looks good on you. You pull it off…” She fiddled with the new leather strap that had been fitted to hold his sand gourd, “And that headband works for you too. Now you're a real Sand ninja!”

Kankuro agreed enthusiastically and said that he fit the bill for chunin. Gaara only wanted a change in topic, so he asked a question that had been on his mind, “Baki said that I was assigned to your cell. What happened to your other teammate?”

“Miosuke retired from shinobi work after the exam.” Temari replied, “He had no choice. His arms were screwed up even after they healed so he can't fight as well as he used to.”

Gaara dismissed the guilt he felt about maiming their former teammate. Both Temari and Kankuro had been unable to tolerate him, and he had done them a favor by disposing of him. Dark satisfaction replaced the remorse quickly, and he followed after his brother and sister to get some lunch.

That night Gaara was unable to sleep. A mix of old, painful memories and nostalgia for Leaf kept him awake. He laid in his bed, hating how it had belonged to the Kazekage before him. Someone who he had barely even known: his father.

The dark rings around his eyes began to grow more evident. For five days he adjusted to life in Suna. Gaara trained with his siblings and took missions by day, and during the night he endured the excruciating insomnia that had gripped him. He didn't say a word about his suffering to Temari or Kankuro.

The new morning routine was established. Kankuro was a startlingly talented cook. He made breakfast while Gaara sat at the table, his expression blank and exhausted. Temari took longer to prepare than either of the boys. She would undoubtedly be down by the time the food was ready.

“Your Hokage will want a report to see how you're doing soon,” Kankuro reminded his brother, dumping eggs into each bowl out on the table, “But what are you going to say about Haku?”

Gaara stared at the food that had been laid before him.

“I don't know.” He admitted.

He hadn't decided on what he was going to do about his friend quite yet. Tsunade couldn't be fooled for very long, he supposed. If Haku didn't return quickly there could be trouble.
Kankuro sighed worriedly before sitting across from his brother. A few moments later Temari joined them, looking dapper in a crimson dress she had fished out of her closet. An armored breastplate was tied over it and Kankuro whistled at her, “Wow. Nice. Looks like I'll have to change my style too…”

“We'll change your face paint while we're at it.” She smirked mischievously, “I was thinking cat whiskers and a mustache would really accent your-”

“Cut it out!” He barked in annoyance, “I'll take care of that myself, thanks. My face wasn't a finger-painting canvas, last I checked.”

Gaara muffled a low chuckle by stuffing his mouth with rice.

Later that morning Baki assigned them to another B-rank mission. It was originally rated C-class but complications had increased the difficulty.

A team of Sand genin had gone out on a one day D-rank mission without their sensei. He had been busy trying to negotiate better funding for the village with the local daimyo, and had permitted his students to go on without him. The children were four days overdue. There was suspicion of foul play.

Gaara and his siblings set out to search for the missing genin, keeping a wary eye open. Kankuro had informed him that all Academy students in Suna received immediate survival training, so that if it came to it, they could last in the desert for a week or two if obstacles arose. He had faith that if a sand storm had hit they would still be alive, “They'll probably be hiding somewhere, poor little shits…”

Gaara paused for a short while, focusing his chakra. He did a scan of the desert, sensing for abnormalities in pressure or temperature. It was an ability that expanded upon his Sand-Eye technique which he first tested on the night he arrived in Sunagakure. The vast expanse of the place, as far as he could tell, was stable, “There hasn't been a storm here for some time…it was something else.”

Temari exchanged a troubled glance with Kankuro and then looked back to Gaara as they moved on over the sandy wasteland, “You know, Gaara, things like this happen all the time. One of them probably got hurt or something and they had to stop to recover. It's even happened to us when we first started out.”

Gaara insisted there had been a confrontation. He doubted they had even made it back to the desert. He could not sense any other chakra signatures nearby. The search could take them out of the Wind Country and into enemy territory, if their luck continued to be sour.

They entered an area full of large dunes, and after scaling a rather tall hill the team was surprised to see people ahead. Temari gave a sidelong smirk to her brother but Gaara frowned, seeing things were not as she had predicted.

On an adjacent dune, the team of Sand genin had indeed returned to the Wind Country. They were trapped, however, surrounded by a group of enemy ninja.

“They must have been followed when they were trying to get back!” Kankuro deduced, charging ahead down the dune with his siblings at his heels.

After nearing the fracas ahead, Gaara noted that the opposing shinobi were familiar. They were the same team of Cloud shinobi that had competed in the preliminary matches of the Chunin Exam. The very ones they had defeated.
“It's a small world.” He thought to himself.

Kankuro snickered at his brother's comment and they rushed up the dune to aid their fellow Sand ninja, but once they approached they were spotted. A blue haired ninja snatched up one of the injured genin and pressed a knife to her belly, “That's close enough!”

Gaara and his siblings froze immediately. Kankuro recognized the shinobi threatening the kunoichi vaguely. He was Kanosuke Nari, the one who had been his opponent in the preliminary match.

“Robi-chan!” One of the girl's teammates threw himself at Nari and was easily kicked aside. The genin were out of energy and unable fight anymore.

Gaara folded his arms at the spectacle, “Just to feel powerful you would pursue them while they delivered a package to an outside village? No self-respecting chunin would need to terrorize younger shinobi that way.”

“We didn't make chunin, if you guessed that much!” Nari's blonde teammate, Toshi, spat angrily, “And they got in our way! We're just teaching them a lesson!”

“We didn't do anything Kankuro-sama! Temari-sama!” The other of Robi's teammates cried from the feet of the third member of the Cloud team, “Please help Robi-chan!”

“Quiet you pissant!” Chiko stomped on the genin's shoulder and he cried out in pain.

Gaara blinked. His siblings took the action as a ready signal. Before Nari could realize what was going on, the young kunoichi he had pinned in his arms was nothing more than a sand clone, “What the-?”

He turned and could see Robi stumbling down the dune. At the bottom she jumped in terror into Kankuro's waiting arms.

“Ryuusa Bakuryu!”

A wave of sand crashed down on Nari, sending him spinning wildly from the top of the dune. Toshi and Chiko moved to threaten their own captives in response but Temari was quicker.

“Gaara!” She called for her brother's attention before she attacked, “Daikamaitachi no jutsu!”

Gaara breathed a fireball that was doubled in size by Temari's fearsome wind jutsu. Toshi dodged frantically to avoid the combination fire jutsu but Chiko was less agile. His teammate had been scorched terribly and was left to flail in the sand in anguish.

Robi's teammates slid down the dune to join Kankuro in safety. Toshi and Nari lost interest in them and regrouped, attacking Temari together, “Raiton: Dry Air Thunder Clap!” An abrupt shockwave barreled Temari over before she could attack with her fan.

She rolled bonelessly down the opposite side of the dune, stunned by the jutsu. Kankuro glared at the Kumo nin who had ganged up on his sister. He kept his guard up but he wouldn't join in the brawl. If he left the children unattended for even a moment they could be picked off. As it was, Gaara appeared ready to finish the fight anyway.

It was fortunate that Temari and Kankuro were not in the way. Gaara formed hand seals and drew on a massive amount of chakra. He laid his hands on the ground and a huge tower of sand rose up from the dune.
Toshi and Nari skidded to a startled halt, staring up as the tower began to take shape: an enormous sand clone of Gaara.

They hadn't the sense to move out of the way before the clone pinned them swiftly with one impossibly heavy hand. They struggled for a few seconds, unable to move beneath the monstrous flow of sand.

“Shin Sabaku Soso!” The clone slammed down, sending a quake through the sandy earth that crushed everything beneath it instantly: Nari, Toshi, and even the helpless Chiko. He hadn't hesitated for a moment while using the jutsu.

Gaara turned and breathed deep, trying to calm down. He could see Temari hobbling dizzily over to him. She grinned, dusting sand from her skirt, “Well that was new! You never told us about that jutsu Gaara!”

“I've never had enough sand to use it before,” Gaara replied, knowing it was a matter of resources, “When I am here…the things I can do are limitless.”

“Gaara! Temari! Get over here!” Kankuro barked, “They're injured…”

His siblings went to him after he had called to help him examine the children.

Robi had a worrying cut on her lower back that had clotted, thankfully. There was still risk of infection. She sat tiredly between her teammates, Gintari and Asuo, and they were worse off than she. Asuo’s leg was broken in two places, Kankuro suspected. He had to keep off of it. Gintari's left eye was bleeding copiously, and on top of that he had been stabbed twice in the arm, but not in any serious areas.

“I'm just glad you got rid of scum who would attack genin without provocation!” Temari thanked Gaara and she then tore a piece of cloth to help Gintari put pressure on his wound.

Gaara looked at the children sadly, “My greatest regret is that they came to harm.”

Robi and her teammates animatedly thanked Gaara for saving their lives, but inwardly he still felt that he had failed them. Their injuries could have proven fatal had they been found any later. He believed he could’ve done more to protect them.

Gaara and his siblings each lifted a trainee and turned back in the direction of the village.

They saw to it personally that the genin received proper medical treatment. Once they were tended to Gaara and his siblings wished them a quick recovery before leaving. They rested for a bit and then wrote a succinct report. Kankuro turned it in to Baki when he swung by to check on them.

He was impressed that they found, rescued, and retrieved the youngsters all in less than two hours. And Gaara’s single-handed destruction of the opposing team also interested Baki, “Gaara…meet me outside the tower at sundown. You need to be reevaluated.”

“Oh course.” Gaara nodded respectfully and then followed Temari down the road to find something to eat.

Kankuro did not follow after them immediately. He turned to his teacher, frowning, “Reevaluated? What? You think he's dangerous?”

“He's very dangerous, being that he is the container of Shukaku.” Baki replied solemnly, “And that isn't necessarily a bad thing. This village needs someone like him.”
Though it had not been requested, Temari and Kankuro joined Gaara at sundown to meet with Baki. They wondered if perhaps their sensei wanted to see how well Gaara could restrain Shukaku now that he was older. No one had gotten around to explaining how Jiraiya had strengthened the seal so his student could rest easy even in the presence of the biju.

As promised, Baki was outside of the tower waiting and he nodded to them when they arrived. He turned his sharp gaze to Gaara and then said, “Attack me.”

“Are you crazy?” Temari snapped, and then balked when Gaara let a jet of sand rip loose at their mentor, “What do you think you're doing!”

Gaara's sand attacks were formidable and much faster due to the availability of sand. Baki evaded cautiously, reading his movements, and when an opportunity appeared he attacked with a wind sword. His slashes bounced off of the sand shield that automatically rose to defend Gaara. The red haired nin made hand seals, “Katon: Grand Fireball jutsu!”

“Futon: Gale Wall!” A huge whirlwind kicked up in front of Baki, ripping apart the incoming flames and nullifying the attack. Seizing his chance, Baki attacked again. He came in close and struck Gaara with a chakra-strengthened punch that would’ve been enough to blow through several brick walls. He recoiled in surprise when the chunin he had hit dissipated in a puff of smoke, “A…shadow clone?”

Kankuro and Temari watched, not hiding their pleased expressions. Baki had been fighting a fake the entire time. Their brother had actually positioned himself on a nearby rooftop before even coming to the meeting place. He finished making hand signs and then attacked the disoriented jounin below, “Suiton: Water Dragon Blast!”

The water tank beside him on the roof ruptured, and an angry jet of heated water streaked for Baki on the street below. Baki was nearly blindsided by the jutsu, and barely avoided it at the last second. He was still soaked, even if he had dodged the bulk of it. He struggled to regain his balance, and Baki was troubled even more by the sand that began to swarm around him. He certainly would have been agile enough to escape, but the sand began to stick to his wet clothing, weighing him down and slowing his reaction time. Baki became clumsy as he tried to swipe it away, while still keeping an eye on Gaara.

Another shadow clone plowed into him from behind and Baki wheeled about heavily, defending against its ruthless taijutsu combinations. The distraction disabled him from fighting off the rest of the swarming sand, and within moments Baki found himself trapped in a spherical sand coffin with no hope of escape. The kage bunshin backed off, seeing Baki could no longer defend himself.

“Good!” The jounin called aloud to Gaara. The red haired shinobi promptly released him, seeing the spar was finished and in his favor.

“It looks like I made an error when I estimated your skill level, Gaara.” Baki announced, swiping the wet sand from his vest. “You've improved your skills and control vastly. This is exactly what Kazekage-sama had envisioned when you were born to this village. Because I am in the position to award field promotions, I will confer upon you jounin rank!”

Both Kankuro and Temari were flabbergasted by their teacher's decision. Gaara was slightly less overwhelmed.

Baki looked to the red haired nin again, “Now that that's taken care of...there's a specific mission that I would like you to see to personally, Gaara.”
The following day Sakura was again busy cleaning in Tsunade's office. The difference this time was that the Hokage was no longer held up in meetings. She sat in boredom behind her desk, sifting through paperwork and pawing at a near empty bottle of sake that had been put out in front of her.

A messenger hawk landed on the windowsill and screeched to get Tsunade's attention. With a sigh, the sannin stood and crossed over to the open window, taking the scroll the bird offered her.

Sakura kept working diligently, cleaning out a drawer that was full of nonsense stationary. Tsunade took a minute to read the memo and then grinned widely, “Oh Sa-ku-ra…”

She looked up when she was spoken to, “Yes, Tsunade-shishou?”

“This message is from Gaara…”

“Oh!” Sakura bolted over to the Hokage excitedly, anxious to hear how he was doing, “What did he write?”

“Well it says here that both he and Haku-kun have settled comfortably in Sand. Haku is now on the medical staff and Gaara has been promoted to jounin rank…” Tsunade couldn't hide her proud smile, “As I expected of the both of them!”

“Jounin?” Sakura was elated to hear it, “So soon?”

“I would have promoted him if he had stayed here, after completing official evaluations of course,” Tsunade admitted, chuckling. “The same goes for Naruto and Haku, but there is always room for improvement. That's why I let them go on and train away from Leaf…it'll do them all good.”

Sakura understood exactly what she meant. After the two finished their cheers of excitement, the Hokage told Sakura to begin reading one of the new medical journals she had provided, “I'll take care of that drawer myself. It's full of junk and there isn't much worth keeping…”

Her student went ahead to find the journal and Tsunade sat back down at her desk to write a joyous reply to Gaara. She had a strange, unexplainable feeling that something had gone wrong somehow. Tsunade felt concerned over what would become of the strong camaraderie that Naruto, Gaara, and Haku shared. Would their friendship withstand the time and distance between them?

'Huh…it's funny…' She thought to herself, 'It feels as if I'll never see them again…'

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for sticking with this fic, dear reader! Please continue on to this story's sequel: Harbinger!
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