

## Prologue - Something besides the Wedding Invitation

Hatake Kakashi, the Sixth Hokage, found that he had a problem.

“Well then, what am I to do...”

His quiet murmurs drifted into the empty room, eventually swallowed up by the silence.

As usual, Kakashi was alone in the Hokage’s office, and grappling with a mountain of paperwork.

The pile of documents that sat front of Kakashi had actually reached such a height that they were blocking his line of sight from his seat. It wasn’t just the one pile either. Several piles of similar height were stacked around his left and right. As the village’s leader and Hokage, it was his duty to read through every single one of these documents.

However, that wasn’t Kakashi’s problem. Or rather, it wasn’t a very important problem.

The business of all the documents on his desk could be easily settled by reading through them one at a time and stamping them as necessary. For jobs like that, once you started concentrating, you would be surprised at how quickly it got finished.

Wondering if you could complete the paperwork faster than new work would get piled up in front of you, wondering if you could be quicker, thinking you’d turn it into a match and see- if you concentrated on your work with those kinds of thoughts, then doing paperwork naturally became something that was sort of fun.

As he stamped each document, Kakashi would think to himself ‘if I don’t pick up the pace, people won’t be able to see my face past this mountain of paperwork’, and keep himself entertained with silly thoughts like that as he worked.

However, his current problem wasn’t something to be handled so lightly.

Kakashi let his eyes fall on the Mission Roster document spread out across his desk. His hands started moving.

Or rather, to be more accurate, only his fingertips were moving.

In the silence of his empty office, Kakashi started tapping his fingers against the surface of his desk, their tiny strikes letting out a ‘ton, ton’ sound. Somehow, the rhythm of his fidgeting helped him collect his scattered thoughts.

As the name implied, the Mission Roster was a document that held the details for all the upcoming missions of every single shinobi in the village. What sort of mission they’d be on, how long those missions would take, every possible detail of their schedule was written down.

Kakashi was checking the Mission Roster far more carefully than usual, because of a certain circumstance.

His eyes slowly glanced towards the edge of his desk, where an envelope had been safely placed to make sure it didn’t get buried under the piles of paperwork.

Inside of that envelope was a written invitation to Naruto and Hinata’s wedding ceremony.

Kakashi had already filled out his RSVP form to say that he was going, and added in a congratulatory message. Normally, that was all one needed to do for weddings, but Kakashi had one more task at hand.

The task in question was to rearrange the Mission Roster to make sure that all of Naruto and Hinata's invited guests –especially their close friends– could attend the wedding without any mission's getting in the way of their schedule.

It was mostly a headache because Naruto and Hinata's comrades were all shinobi that were very active in the frontlines of the shinobi world. They were all first rate ninja, and always being handed new missions whether day or night.

And, missions like that always included possible misfortunes.

Messed up weather conditions, bad roads, injuries...the reasons and circumstances would vary, but it was often the case that a shinobi expected to return to the village in three days ended up coming back after a full week instead.

Kakashi had to rearrange the work schedules of such elite and busy shinobi while keeping in mind the fact that their missions could be delayed as well. It was an incredibly difficult task to distribute this kunoichi's missions, and that shinobi's missions...

Not to mention, he had to make sure he didn't arrange it so some poor sap would stagger into the wedding ceremony fresh out of a mission either...

Kakashi felt a parental sort of want to arrange it so everyone would have at least one free day prior to the wedding- however, in the real world, it wasn't so easy to put such a thought into practice.

Kakashi's eyes flickered back and forth along the roster. If he put that mission there this person could go, but then that that person couldn't, if he put this mission there that wouldn't work either...he was having an incredibly tough time.

And then on top of all that, there was the fact that in the world of adults and paperwork, there was such an annoying thing as 'appearances' to be considered.

If the leader of a group of elite shinobi, shinobi so dedicated that they wouldn't take any extra time to rest even when wounded or in the midst of a fever, then gave those shinobi consecutive days off, then it just wouldn't be proper.

He had to think about how it reflected on his official stance as the Hokage.

He had to handle everything smoothly, manage the village's affair without a hitch, and make sure that things went well.

And, he had to do both those things and somehow make it so that everyone could attend the wedding with smiles on their faces.

Kakashi closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair, thinking deeply.

He didn't really have any brilliant ideas.

Rearranging everyone's schedules was guaranteed to be a problem.

It'd be nice if he could just call the day of Naruto and Hinata's wedding a mission, and fix it like that...

It suddenly dawned on Kakashi's mind that he could.

If he did that, then all the other adjustments would be pretty easy...

- But no, that was, it was kiiinda...it would be an abuse of authority, right...

Kakashi crossed his arms, his face screwed up in thought.

In reality, the course of action that Kakashi had thought up of wasn't him abusing his authority in any way. After all, he was just struggling to do everything in his power to adjust everyone's schedules properly. However, Kakashi hadn't faced such matters in his paperwork yet, so he wasn't aware of that fact.

After all, Kakashi was a shinobi who spent most of his life flourishing on the frontlines of battle, not in politics.

"Well, it'll be my last resort I guess."

Kakashi let out a loud laugh, and then continued to stew in his thoughts.

## Wedding Presents, Full Throttle!

If you asked people about ‘the hidden villages of shinobi’, then you’d find a large number of citizens –the kind with no love for shinobi or their homes– who imagined those hidden villages as small towns enclosed by mountains on all sides.

Surely, those citizens would say, hidden villages are completely cut off from the outside world, isolated completely from everyone else. A sort of ‘floating island in the sea’, backwards and underdeveloped.

Definitely, they’d say, a hidden village is a place that normal people would be idiots to want to visit, and on top of that, somewhere you could only find with great difficulty. A ‘hidden shinobi village’ absolutely had to be that kind of place.

That was what a lot of people thought.

However, the reality was very different.

Konoha had a very well-known monument at its entrance, the \*“AUN Gate”.

If any normal person entered Konoha for the first time, they’d be dumbfounded by the sight that greeted them past the gate: a giant, sprawling village that was overflowing with activity and populous.

The village was constantly maintained and developing, and it was in no way limited to just the residential areas of the villagers. There were schools, hospitals, various shopping centres, and even recreational areas. There was everything a person needed to live their life to the fullest.

Absolutely every possible establishment could be found in the village centre alone. Konoha’s sheer size was to the point that if you called it a ‘city-state’, you wouldn’t be far off.

You could live your whole life never taking one step outside Konoha’s borders, and never want for anything, never lack any sort of comfort. And this very metropolis was nestled within the depths of a forest.

That was what the village of Konohagakure really was: a huge city that suddenly materialised within a forest.

There wasn’t a single shinobi who felt the slightest bit dissatisfied with a village like that.

Konoha had originally been a gathering of several shinobi and their clans, but when a group of people lived somewhere, they naturally end up wanting places that would make them food. And of course, after that there was the demand for stores that would sell daily necessities too.

Following that logic, it was natural that another group of people would come into the equation: merchants with an eye on the village full of customers.

So it came to pass that a group of non-shinobi –of sellers and crafters who wanted to take the shinobi on as customers– would end up moving to live close to the shinobi’s settlements.

And in the same way that shinobi had clans and families, the sellers and workers didn’t just come to the village all by themselves either. They brought along *their* clans and families too.

There were a lot of normal people who moved to the village along with their family for the sake of trade, as well as people who were originally shinobi but were now taking up different professions. There were also those who thought to themselves, ‘I don’t come from a clan of shinobi, but I want to send my child to the Ninja Academy’ and moved to the village with that intent.

Shinobi households, merchant households, crafters households...many, many different people from varying backgrounds and professions all came to live together in the village.

And as the moon waned, and the months and years passed, it was with those people that the settlement became the large metropolis that it was today.

And that huge village, even now, was still continuing to grow and advance.

Konoha’s great size made it so that circling around the entire village even once would be a tremendous effort. Going that kind of distance could even end up breaking your bones.

And yet, for a while now, someone had been running round and round the village of Konoha.

That someone was Rock Lee.

Dawn hadn’t even broken yet, and he was staggering as he ran around the village, with a face that looked like he could die any moment.

Why, exactly, was he running around by himself at this hour of night, when all the villagers and shinobi without missions were soundly asleep?

It wasn’t for any particular secret training. As a matter of fact, Lee wasn’t even running because he felt like he wanted to run. If he could, then Lee would have dearly liked to go back home and sleep. However, he had a certain circumstance that meant he couldn’t do that.

Everything had started about half a day earlier...

On that day, the Sixth Hokage Hatake Kakashi proclaimed a certain, special mission to those within Konoha.

It was a secret operation that Uzumaki Naruto and his fiancée Hyuuga Hinata absolutely could not find out. Cleary stated:

“All those who will attend Naruto and Hinata’s upcoming wedding must bring wedding gifts.”

A ridiculous mission, isn’t it? It was something that everyone would likely have ended up doing anyway.

You’d rightly assume that among the wedding guests there were people who had already bought wedding presents, or made preparations for them.

However, most of Naruto and Hinata’s friends were as young as they were. Most of them either hadn’t ever attended a wedding before, or were attending a close friend’s wedding for the first time.

It was likely for the sake of that majority of inexperienced wedding guests, that Kakashi had given this task a mission status.

After all, while he looked quiet and calm on the surface, Kakashi was a man with a sense of humour. This ‘top secret mission’ of his was something that fit his style.

That being said, there was someone among the wedding guests who had taken the words ‘top secret mission’ completely at face value. Someone who had received the mission proclamation with far more passion than anyone else.

That someone was, of course, Konoha’s self-proclaimed Beautiful Green Wild Beast: Rock Lee.

“I will repay Naruto-kun’s friendship by putting my whole body and mind into finding the best wedding gift!” Lee had declared to Kakashi, and then taken off running into the distance.

Lee was someone who firmly believed that you could come up with a lot of ideas during training. His personality wasn’t that of someone who would think while sitting still. ‘Moving my body will help me think better’ was what he had thought.

However...

Le had run and run around the huge village countless times, but he hadn’t been able to think up any ideas.

Well, to be more accurate, he had thought of one thing.

Somewhere around his second run around the village, the word ‘dumbbell’ had popped into Lee’s mind

But, that was ridiculous. Even Lee knew that nobody would ever bring dumbbells as a congratulatory gift to a wedding. Thus, his only idea had been rejected immediately.

And although he’d kept running and running, since then, Lee hadn’t thought of any other ideas, let alone a good one.

It had to be a present that nobody else would bring, something that spoke of his own character as well... a gift that expressed his heart...a gift that would be received with pleasure, the best gift ever...

But no matter how much he thought and thought, the right answer just wouldn’t come.

“The bonds between myself and Naruto should be better than this...!” Lee had muttered to himself as he ran.

He came to a resolution:

Until he thought of a gift, he wasn’t going to stop running!

His heart was set on it. Lee’s “Personal Rule” was in motion.

That ‘Personal Rule’ of Lee’s had been brought into existence for the sake of bettering his mind and body through training. The rule was this: once Lee decided he was going to do something,

then even if it looked like the world was going to crumble and disappear tomorrow, he would still see it through to the end. It was a principle he stuck to with overwhelming devotion.

Until he could think of a nice present besides dumbbells, Lee would run endlessly if he had to.

By the way, Lee wasn't counting just running around the village border as 'one run'.

The same way one goes back and forth around a room when they're wiping its floors- with such an example, it's easy to imagine the scene, isn't it? For Lee, 'one run' around the village meant running through the *entire* village, every nook and cranny and road that the village had. It was a very simple-minded way of counting.

Of course, that meant that Lee's path also included jumping over fences, hopping from tree to tree, and running over the roofs of closely packed houses. It wasn't anything out of the ordinary, for a shinobi to take unusual paths like this through the hidden village. In fact, it was incredibly common, so much that the normal citizens no longer took notice of it.

So there wouldn't be any landlords complaining about Lee running over the roofs. At most, one person would maybe send one complaint in the morning: "Some man with thick eyebrows was yelling 'KUUAAA' as he ran across our roof at dawn, he was really very noisy."

And so, under the watchful eyes of the previous Hokage's faces all carved into the mountain overlooking Konoha, Lee jumped and ran and leaped all across the village.

He kept that up the whole night without a single new idea occurring to him.

And that is how Lee found himself greeting a new day's dawn without a single wink of sleep.

At this time, the light of sunrise was now reaching out to touch the carved stone faces on the Hokage Monument that stood in the city centre of Konoha.

"Eight...hundred...and sixty...four..."

Lee's breathing was coming out in hoarse wheezes and puffs as he gasped out that number.

His running had deteriorated to a delirious staggering, to the point where anyone walking would be faster than him.

He had finally reached his limit.

Lee's legs buckled from underneath him, as he helplessly pitched forward and collapsed. He didn't even have the strength to try and soften his landing, falling straight onto the ground with a sudden thud.

Lee lay unmoving on the ground, face down in the dirt, and wondered where he had gone wrong.

First, there was the idea that his mind would clear if he moved his body. Had he been wrong about that? No, that wasn't possible. It wasn't wrong. Lee quickly rejected that thought.

Then, was it that idea to do a handstand run in the middle of his run around? He had thought it would help give him a different perspective to think from, but had that been a bad idea? No,

sometimes you needed to do audacious things to produce new ideas. Not to mention doing one handstand run around the village was part of his normal training schedule. That couldn't have been where he went wrong either.

Could it have been that uncommon method he'd tried of running backwards? No, that was a perfectly fine method of exercise.

He had done absolutely nothing wrong.

But then, in that case, why had he been unable to think of anything...?

Lee gazed numbly at the ground in front of him. His body had been burning hot just a while ago, but it was now getting cold in the chilly morning air. The sweat covering his body turned freezing cold, and Lee's body started shivering. But he'd exerted every single muscle in his body past the point of caution, and no longer had the energy to get up.

*Even though it's for a dear friend, even though I said I'd put my heart into getting a wedding present. To think that I haven't been able to come up with one good idea. Why am I so incompetent...?*

Lee squeezed his eyes tightly shut, angry with himself for being such a disappointment.

However, he couldn't just let things end by saying he was incompetent and useless. He had decided to find a worthy gift even if he had to put his life at stake, so he couldn't possibly just stop and give up here.

The fatigued and exhausted Lee let his eyes snap open again, flames of determination burning within them once more.

However, once he opened his eyes, Lee came to realise something:

Someone was standing in front of him.

When had that happened? There was a pair of legs in Lee's vision, with a familiar looking uniform. Lee was surprised that he hadn't noticed the person until now. They seemed to be watching him.

Lee slowly raised himself off the ground, and looked up. To see. That person.

"Neji..." Lee quietly murmured.

Maybe he was an illusion or maybe he was a ghost, but there he stood: his deceased friend, Hyuuga Neji.

"Running without a break until you collapse." Neji said, watching him with his usual calm gaze.  
"You're still the same as ever, Lee."

Lee had no words.

There were hundreds upon hundreds of things Lee wanted to tell Neji the next time they met. But with Neji in front of him, he found himself miserably unable to make a single sound.

But even if he didn't say anything, Neji understood it all.

For some reason or another, that was the thought that entered Lee's mind as he looked up at Neji's always all-knowing eyes.

Neji crouched down next to Lee.

"There's something that I really have to tell you..." Neji said, putting a kind hand on Lee's shoulder.

Neji's hand felt warm and encouraging. Lee suddenly thought it was likely that Neji had appeared because he was concerned over how much Lee had been pushing himself.

"Neji...I..."

"I know. No need to say it." Neji smiled, his long hair swaying slightly. "Lee, remember this well. More than stamina... physical strength. And, the Hyuuga..."

Neji paused. It was unclear whether he was finished with what he was saying or not. His figure got wrapped up in the morning mist, and disappeared.

"....eh?"

The wind was blowing swiftly, rustling the nearby trees and pulling away the morning mist.

"Eh- wait- Neji...? Neji?!"

Lee looked left and right, desperately searching his surroundings, but the only thing that met Lee's bewildered voice was the morning silence.

"EEH?! We-weren't you going to give me some advice about the wedding presents I've been so frantic about...? Isn't that why you appeared? NEJIIIIIII?!"

"NEJIIIIIII?!" Lee got up with a start as he shouted for his friend.

It was now morning. Pretty early on, but late enough that the majority of people had already woken up and started preparing to greet the new day.

Lee dazedly looked around, trying to take stock of his current situation. Somehow, it looked like he'd fallen asleep right in the middle of a road. It was a good thing that he hadn't passed out on the village boarder.

"So it was...a dream..." Lee murmured to himself, his mouth dry and parched for water.

A short, fleeting dream.

Lee sat numbly on the road, and hung his head.

Neji's death had been a long time ago. A handful of years had already passed.

But even now, Lee still occasionally saw Neji in his dreams. They usually came in those hastily taken naps in the middle of an extremely difficult mission, or when Lee was having a hard time thinking over something.

But only occasionally. Most of the time, no matter how much Lee wanted to see him, Neji wouldn't appear.

When Neji did appear, Lee's dreams were usually about going through vigorous training with Neji, or heading out on a dangerous mission with Neji, the two of them together against harsh odds.

There had been very few dreams where Lee could actually face Neji and talk to him.

Most of his dreams were about things that had already happened. Training, or fighting against an enemy, or strategizing on a mission. It would be Neji calmly talking about one strategy or another, and Lee standing next to him, listening intently.

Whenever Lee woke up from those dreams, phrases would spill out of his lips.

'Let's make a more dynamic frontal assault!' or 'I'll go out in the front, so please watch out for our surroundings!'

All things he couldn't say to Neji inside his dreams.

*If I said this to Neji, what sort of a face would he make? How would he reply?*

Lately, it was getting harder and harder to imagine how Neji would have reacted.

Lee was terribly, keenly aware of that fact.

A strong voice suddenly rushed out at Lee's slumped back.

"Lee, that's some nice youth you've got this early in the morning!"

Lee looked over his shoulder to see a man behind him, smiling widely so the white of his teeth showed, his hand raised in a thumbs up.

It was his teacher of spirit, Might Guy.

However...

"Ga-Gai sensei..."

Lee found himself at a loss for words. The reason was that Gai, who had been restricted to living his life in a wheelchair, had somehow gotten himself and his wheelchair onto the roof of a nearby toolshed.

During the Fourth Shinobi World War, Gai had put his life at stake during his battle with Uchiha Madara, and opened the Eight Gates. His life at least had been saved thanks to Naruto, however his right leg had lost its ability to function.

From that day onwards, Gai had lived his life in a wheelchair. However, he hadn't changed his hot-blooded ways, carving the word 'youth' onto the cast on his right leg, and still encouraging and guiding Lee as he always did.

Lee had been stunned speechless because he couldn't fathom how his teacher had possibly managed to get onto the toolshed's roof with his wheelchair.

Suddenly-

“TOU!” Gai gave a great battle cry, launching himself and the wheelchair off the shed’s roof. He somehow managed to angle the wheelchair for a smooth landing, if with a very loud BANG. Lee rushed over to his sensei, flustered and worried.

“Sensei, that was very dangerous! Why would you want to do something like that...”

“There has to be a great number of people in the world who think you can’t fly in a wheelchair! So I’ve decided to prove them wrong with my own body.” Gai spoke of such a terrifying notion with incredible ease and calm.

Such a feat would’ve been absolutely impossible for anyone else, anyone who didn’t have Gai’s exceptional control over his body and fit physical state.

“Everyone in the village, Kakashi and Ebisu and Genma too, they still treat me like a shinobi. That makes me happy. Even though I should’ve retired long ago... So, because of that, I’ve decided to keep on proving the impossible to be possible, and show my usual self to you guys!” Gai said, giving his Nice Guy Pose. “That’s my youth, after all!”

Gai’s words deeply touched Lee’s heart. They had always been like that. When Lee was suffering, when he was in pain, when his heart felt like it was going to break into pieces, every single one of Gai’s words had saved him, time and time again.

Even now, Lee took courage from hearing Gai’s words.

He wanted to someday become a magnificent man like Gai. He wanted to become a man who would warmly encourage another lost and confused soul like himself.

That was a dream Lee held onto even when he was awake.

“By the way, Gai-sensei, what are you doing here?” The question suddenly occurred to Lee, and Gai replied with light chatter.

“My morning training of course. I thought that I’d spend today travelling back and forth all around the village. How about it Lee, would you like to join me?”

“Thank you, I’ve already done such training.”

“Impressive. However, the matter that’s bothering you still hasn’t been settled, has it?”

Lee’s eyes opened wide in surprise at Gai’s sharp observation.

“Ho- How did you know?!”

“It only took one glance at you to realise you’d spent all night training and worrying about something. How many years do you think I’ve been spending youthful time with you? That’s why from the very start I said to you ‘nice youth this early in the morning’.”

It was only after Gai said that that Lee realised how awful he looked. He was covered in mud, and absolutely unsightly in appearance. He had stumbled a few times in his fatigue, falling and rolling on the ground. It was all the dirt left over from those runarounds.

“And it’s very likely that you’re concerned over the matter of wedding gifts, isn’t that right?”

Lee got panicked by Gai’s even shrewder question.

“Gai-sensei, can you read my mind?!”

“No, it’s because I’m invited to the wedding as well...”

Gai was concerned over the wedding gifts too.

All would be well as long as the wedding present wasn’t ordinary.

However, the problem lay in making sure the present wasn’t too strange, either.

Wasn’t there a wedding present that combined the feelings he wanted to convey, something that radiated the feelings of victory, friendship and hard work?

Lee and Gai were both racking their brains for an answer.

What kind of a present would embody the passion of youth?

Was there really any such present in this world?

Well if anything represented youth, it would be how they both wore their smart looking tight green jumpsuits.

When you said ‘burning youth’ the first things to come to mind would be sweat and tears, right?

Could sweat and tears be turned into a gift somehow? No?

To begin with, people were living off nothing but will power, weren’t they?

What kind of curry was better, bland or extra spicy?

Their conversation reached its climax.

“No, after all,” Lee heatedly said, “The me of today definitely thinks that Curry Pilaf is better-“

“Wait, hold on Lee.” Gai held out a hand and interrupted him. “We’ve gone off subject too much. In matters like this, one must concentrate. We should retrace our steps back to the root of this conversation.”

“So we should return, to the root...?”

“Yeah, originally, this problem of a wedding presents is all about the wedding itself, right?”

Somehow their conversation had turned too philosophical.

When Lee failed to contribute more to the talk, Gai asked another question.

“Let’s think about it like this: what is the one thing that you absolutely must bring to a wedding?”

Lee’s gaze focused as he thought seriously about it.

What was a wedding? Something necessary for a wedding...

A wedding was a ceremony where two people who loved each other became husband and wife. In that case, something absolutely essential to that ceremony would be-

“It’s...love...” Lee said, looking straight at Gai despite being somewhat embarrassed at the subject. “That’s what’s necessary isn’t it?”

“That’s very poetic. But Lee, wouldn’t the answer be the bride and groom?”

Lee felt like lightning had hit him along with Gai’s words. His entire body stiffened like he’d just been hit with a lightning release jutsu. Unconsciously, a loud “AHH!” leaked out of his mouth.

“Th- that’s right...!” Lee said, “If the bride and groom aren’t there, there can be no wedding ceremony...!”

“Right? A wedding ceremony without the bride and groom would just be a plain ceremony, not a wedding. A useless ceremony without any meaning!”

Lee had been blind.

Gai may have seemed like an impulsive and clumsy person, but he really was a thoughtful person. He had the ability to see beyond the surface and into the root of the matter. For Lee, that had always been something about Gai that he looked up to and aspired to also do.

“In that case, we need to think about this from the perspective of the bride and groom, and bring gifts that they would be happy to receive. That would be best, wouldn’t it?”

“Exactly.” Gai said. “Yosh, then I’ll think up a present for the groom! Lee, you think up one for the bride!”

“Roger, Gai-sensei!”

“Let’s think about this not from our perspective as the givers, but from their perspective as the receivers...!”

The two men faced each other with their bowl cut hair and bushy eyebrows, and clasped each other’s hands, thinking seriously about the matter. It was quite a spectacle in the early morning.

Lee was desperately trying to think from the bride’s point of view.

*If I was a bride, then...I’d be dressed up in the bridal clothes and going to my wedding... And after that...*

*Wedding, childbirth, housework, nursing...*

Words and images flashed across Lee’s mind in successive order.

*Going shopping with the baby in my arms.*

*Keeping an eye on the baby as I clean its room.*

*Carrying the baby on my back as I open the Seventh of the Eight Gates...the Gate of Shock!*

*Having a baby is a surprisingly serious matter.*

*To raise and look after a child, then undoubtedly, you need both physical and economic strength, right?*

In that instance, an image entered Lee's mind. He could imagine Hinata tenderly holding a child, and Naruto gazing at the both of them.

And suddenly Lee realised that this whole time he had been thinking only of what to give *Naruto* as a wedding gift. It was only deliberately trying to think of the bride's feelings that let him realise that. A wedding wasn't something you did by yourself.

That said, the best gift for someone who would eventually be a mother-

*Lee, remember this well. More than stamina... physical strength...*

Neji's words from that dream came to mind.

*I finally understand Neji. You were worried about Hinata, weren't you?*

Lee nodded to himself, and then...

"I know what it is...!" Lee peacefully said. "To protect one's house and family, physical strength is needed...And on top of that, the highest possible level!"

Gai nodded, answered as well. "Right now, I thought all the work that goes into fixing up faults around the house. Pest control and plumbing and carrying groceries. One must skilfully develop their arm muscles for such tasks...In that case, the answer we both came up with must be the same. The gifts that we should bestow are..." Gai grinned at Lee with delight.

"...Dumbbells!"

Lee became aware of a tear leaking out his eye.

"I too..." Lee sniffed. "Right from the start...from my second round across the village...I thought of that as well...!"

Tears were rolling uncontrollably down Lee's face now.

"Gai sensei! Gai senseeeeeeeeiii!" Lee sobbed, and threw himself to embrace his teacher.

Lee was ecstatic. His thoughts had not been wrong. His sensei had approved his idea. His joy was pure and simple.

Gai was crying too. As tears leaked out his cheeks, he tightened the hug. “Lee! You get the dumbbell for the right arm, and I’ll get the dumbbell for the leeeeeeeeeft!”

Gai yelled up towards the heavens. “UOOOO! I’LL GET THE LEFT DUMBEEEEEEELLLLL!!”

For a long time, the two clung to each other and cried.

Thanks to Gai, Lee had finally found a wedding present that suited his feelings for the couple. His heart felt light and clear.

Very soon after their revelation, the two had gone to buy dumb bells straight away. The merchant was very surprised to sell two dumb bells so early in the morning.

*Please have a look at this, Neji. I'll show you the wedding present I got. These dumbbells...!*

Gai grinned at the strong look in Lee’s eyes.

“Lee, with this our preparations for the wedding are fully complete!”

“Yes! These weights we carry...they will definitely be the best wedding presents!”

“Yosh, let’s have a race while holding onto them then! Here we gooooooooooo!”

The minute those words left Gai’s mouth, he started fervently turning the tyres on his wheelchair, zooming ahead of Lee in a sudden gust of dirt and wind.

Lee was left staring at the slowly disappearing sight of his Sensei’s back in the wheelchair.

“Wait for me please, sensei!!”

Today as well, Konohagakure was full of a very youthful sort of weather.

On that note...

Afterwards, Kakashi did in fact receive several complaints, all along the same lines:

“Early in the morning, two strange men were crying and screaming about something behind my house. So noisy!”

\* No, that's not a typo. The A-N written on Konoha's gates does sound like aun, which is, not-coincidentally, the sound you make when you open your mouth to eat or yawn. Besides that awesome punnage, in Japanese culture, 'a' and 'n' are the first and last sounds of the Universe, so the gates also carry the symbolism of marking Konoha as a sort of sanctuary.

## Her Everyday Life

KA! KA! KA!

The sounds splitting out with every hit were pleasant to Tenten's ears. She was at the usual training grounds. Her usual marks. Her usual training method.

Her feelings, however, were just a little bit different from usual.

"Wedding gifts, huh..."

As she muttered to herself, she raised back the kunai in her hands, and smoothly threw it. Another KA! rang out, her kunai lodging right in the middle of her prepared marks. It was marvellous marksmanship.

But then, for someone as well trained in weapons as Tenten, hitting the bullseye of a non-moving target from where she stood was nothing, a piece of cake.

Tenten usually headed out to training before she ate her breakfast.

On days she didn't have missions, she always preferred to do this. She'd head out to the training grounds in the early morning, practice with kunai and shuriken until her body felt warmed up, and then go and eat breakfast.

She usually ended up eating breakfast on the training grounds, though. Her usual pattern for breakfast was eating the steamed meat buns sold by a nearby shop, and washing it down with green tea.

"What should I do..." Tenten murmured to herself again, and threw out her arm once more.

KA KA KA!

A handful of shuriken were flung from her hand this time, perfectly encircling the kunai that she'd thrown and pierced the bullseye with.

Again, it was a show of skill so easy and simple for her that she could do it with her eyes closed.

But then, it wasn't something easy for just Tenten alone.

This level of marksmanship in practice was something that anyone who called themselves a shinobi was well-versed and well-practiced in doing.

In fact, it was something students soon learned to master after entering the Ninja Academy. It was also very normal for students who came from renowned shinobi households to have the skill taught to them by a parent or sibling even before entering the Academy.

To put it simply, what Tenten was now practicing was one of the most basic techniques.

If you asked why Tenten was still practicing such a basic skill, the answer would be that she'd been influenced by her teacher, Gai, and his words.

"Anyone who neglects their basics won't see tomorrow!"

Those were the words Gai had said when she'd first started being taught by him.

His words had made a very big impression on the young Tenten. Lee who was standing next to her, was so deeply affected he started crying, and naturally ruined the moment.

But, Tenten still took Gai's teachings to heart and continued to diligently practice her basics to this very day.

To begin with, Tenten had never been a ninja with mastery over a wide variety of jutsu.

Ever since the old days, while she did have a talent for space-time jutsu, her chakra control was worse than other ninjas. She'd realised early on that she'd never be the sort of ninja who could pull out large scale or complicated jutsus.

However, just because she had noticed that early on, that didn't mean Tenten had gone and given up on being a strong and impressive kunoichi. She didn't have that sort of weak mindset.

In Tenten's case, it had been a good thing that she had been able to realise what she was suited for and what she was bad at while she was still young. Because as soon as Tenten knew what her limits were, she started to frantically think about what field would be best suited for her as a shinobi. And when she found the answer, she was quickly able to resign herself to that path, and pursue it full-heartedly.

The answer Tenten had found was: Ninja Weaponry.

Handling weapons like shuriken or kunai was the norm for anyone who called themselves a shinobi, but there was no one who specialised in weaponry –let alone someone who mastered it.

That was what Tenten devoted herself to. It went without being said that she aimed to be more skilful than any other shinobi when it came to common weapons, but she also trained herself to fight with weapons that other shinobi rarely ever used, weapons that other shinobi wouldn't even recognise on sight, weapons of every kind and variety.

Tenten forged herself a unique path to walk on.

When it came down to it, the reason she'd had such thoughts was most likely because of her teacher Gai, and her teammates Lee and Neji. They'd influenced her greatly.

Gai's name was renowned for being the best Taijutsu user in the village. Lee admired him, and simple-mindedly trained to be just as he was. And Neji had always been called a genius in the jutsu of the Gentle Fist passed down in his renowned family, the Hyuuga.

Tenten had spent time with them, trained with them, occasionally sparred with them and gained a considerable grounding in taijutsu. To begin with, before ninjutsu or genjutsu came into the picture, taijutsu had been the groundwork of shinobi accomplishments.

Tenten learned taijutsu fiercely under Gai's tutelage, and she did well. However, Lee and Neji were both learning and training along with her, and Tenten eventually came to realise that she was never going to reach their level of stamina or physical strength.

Team Gai had the highest level of taijutsu competency in the entire village, and by training under Gai and sparring with Lee and Neji, Tenten's level had come to the point where her taijutsu was superior compared to every other shinobi but her teammates.

In the midst of all her training, part of Tenten couldn't help but unconsciously compare herself to Lee or Neji, or even Gai.

*I'm the most incapable within this team.*

That was the thought that nagged Tenten every second of her training.

However, that thought was what had spurred her onto her unique path.

Gai and the rest could break a boulder with their bare fists. Tenten didn't have the ability to so much as consider doing that with her own hands.

That was why she armed her hands with kunai.

So she could be equals with Lee and Neji. So she could walk alongside them.

In time, Tenten did end up polishing her talent for space-time jutsu, and learned how to summon endless varieties of ninja weapons using scrolls.

By that time, partly due to all her days spent learning about various weapons, Tenten had become completely enraptured by the charm of Ninja Weaponry. She looked twice at the weapons she held in her hands, and marvelled at their beautiful simplicity.,

Back in her Academy days, she'd had female classmates who said that kunai were plain and dull. They didn't understand a thing. It was *because* a kunai was plain and dull that it was so charming.

Tenten hadn't said her thoughts out loud back then, but her current self would. Her current self was continuing to train with the goal of becoming the number one master of Ninja Weaponry, after all. Her thoughts were devoted to Ninja Weaponry more than anyone else's.

Even the crudest blade had a beautiful side to it.

Ninjutsu and Genjutsu, and even Taijutsu, none of them could win against the beauty of Ninja Weaponry.

Of course, while she *would* say her thoughts out loud if she wanted, that didn't mean Tenten went around unnecessarily lecturing people about them.

She expressed her thoughts with her actions, not her words. The sight of her kunai smoothly slicing through a target, for example, was far better than any worded explanation. That was how Tenten thought.

But she had to make sure her aim was superb, or there would be no point. That's why Tenten didn't skip a single day of practicing the basics. Every day, she silently polished her weapons, readied them for practice, and hit her targets.

Lee and Neji... Tenten watched their hardwork and talent more close than anyone, and they were why she put every effort into her training. Because no matter how strong those two got, they never neglected their basics either.

All of that was why...

Even though these basic skills were things that anyone could do, that anyone could manage to do well as long as they had good instincts, even if they didn't practice much, even so Tenten still practiced tens and thousands of times, repeating the motions again and again.

Her body, her arms, even her very fingertips, she was going to practice and practice, and instil instinct into every inch of her.

In actual combat, the mark wasn't going to just kindly stay still for you. She wouldn't have the luxury of aiming from a standstill either. If you stand still, you're going to die.

But Tenten still always started out practicing by throwing kunai into the middle of still targets.

She eventually ends up throwing the kunai hundreds and hundreds of times, repeating the motions over and over again, and then eventually...

Eventually, even when her targets are moving in complex patters, for a single instant, she can feel like they're still. Be it kunai or shuriken, they fly from her hands and sink into the targets like the mark is calling for them.

To constantly practice a basic skill that anyone can do, every single day, without skipping it once, repeating it over and over again...that dedication was something not just anyone could do. The world had to be able to see that.

And so her dedicated training eventually bore fruit. Her skill increased to the point that if you now asked any of her comrades who the best weapon user was, their answer would be immediately be "Obviously, it's Tenten."

It was a natural result of her hard work, but it was something that made her extremely happy. Of course, she felt proud about it too. But today, devoting all her thoughts to Ninja Weaponry was something that was causing her a bit of trouble.

"Argh- this- I can't think of anything!"

Several loud thuds of ZUGAGAGAGA accompanied Tenten's annoyed voice, and a bunch of shuriken thudded into their targets, the loud noises echoing across the empty training grounds. She was surrounded by targets that were covered with kunai and shuriken. Of course, not a single one was off-mark.

When Tenten had first heard about the wedding gift business, she'd immediately thought to herself, '*Alright, I'll give them some custom-made kunai!*'

She had made her decision, was satisfied with it, and the whole thing should have been over with right then.

However, that night...

Tenten had been lying down in her futon, looking listlessly up at her ceiling. She was almost on the verge of sleep when a single thought broke into her mind:

*Other than a kunai, I wonder what sort of a gift would be good.*

Tenten was shocked when she couldn't immediately think of anything. She ended up spending the rest of the night growing more and more agitated when she couldn't find the answer.

Thanks to that, she hadn't gotten a wink of sleep.

Stifling a yawn, Tenten moved forward to collect her shuriken and kunai from where they had been embedded on the many targets.

There were lots of posts sticking out on the training grounds that Tenten frequented. Some of them were as tall as a normal person. Other users usually used the stakes for when they were training in taijutsu, for kicking and punching. Tenten, on the other hand, used the stakes to mount the targets that she brought along.

She approached those targets, firmly and quickly pulling out the embedded kunai and shuriken in each one. For a while, she repeated the motion with each target, wracking her brain with thought the whole time.

She was no longer thinking about buying weapons as a gift, kunai or otherwise. Her train of thought had long left that option behind.

The thing was that, if you asked Tenten, a gift of any Ninja Weaponry was something she'd happily receive.

So naturally, everyone would expect that her gift to the couple would be a Ninja Weapon as well. There was nothing strange about it.

But, see, wait! Wouldn't that just be too predictable and ordinary?

Ever since last night, for some reason or another, thoughts like that kept circling around her head. Something was nagging at her.

What was bothering her? The truth was, she already knew the answer.

"Marriage, huh...well it's a nice thing..."

Tenten exhaled, leaning against one of the stakes. Her hands silently played with one of the kunai she'd collected.

This was what had been bothering her. Naruto and Hinata were getting married. It was a happy occasion.

Tenten herself had always been getting caught up in thinking about shuriken or kunai or flying guillotines, so she'd never had a boyfriend. She lived her life without any thoughts for romance or femininity. Hearing about someone close to her getting married suddenly made one disturbing thought fly into Tenten's mind and refuse to leave:

*Was it really okay for her to be like this?*

From morning until night, it was always Ninja Weaponry, Ninja Weaponry, Ninja Weaponry... Was it really okay for a young woman to be like that?

On that note, the most recent feeling of 'love at first sight' for Tenten had been for the flying guillotine. She only had to hear the weapon's name before deciding she liked it, and then gone and bought it. But well, how could she not?

And her latest favourite fashion was definitely wrist accessories. There was a device you could wrap around your wrist, and with one single pull, roll out a scroll for summoning weapons in an instant. The convenience was brilliant. You could carry out an assassination anywhere, any time. It was the latest in cutting edge technology.

But...was it really okay for her to be like that?

She'd collected a large and varied enough collection of Ninja Weaponry to open her own store if she wanted to, but she somehow always ended up buying new kunai before she even realised what she was doing.

Kunai really were the basics of Ninja Weaponry. Tenten had strong feelings about them. She had collected both common and rare weapons, but at the end of the day, kunai were always the best. She collected both common and rare types of kunai.

Well, that was fine, wasn't it? You could never have too many kunai.

First there were those rare kunai with engravings on it. She couldn't carry those on missions. They were a work of art. It would be best to keep them on display at home. But then, because of those kunai being at home, she needed to buy a few more kunai for mission supplies. And if those ended up running out too quickly, she'd be in trouble, so she had to buy a lot of spares as well. And then, well, since she was out shopping for kunai anyway, it was best to buy a lot of different varieties at once to save time, right...?

That was how Tenten ended up unconsciously covering an entire wall in her house with her kunai collection.

She was incredibly pleased with it. She'd gaze at it in satisfaction and think 'alright, on tomorrow's mission I'll be able to smoothly hit all my targets'.

But... Was it really okay...for her to be like that?

...It wasn't a good idea.

If she went on like this and, for example, gave those custom-made kunai as a present, then it was doubtless that everyone would say this:

*"Kunai, again...?"*

*"Well, it's Tenten... "*

*"Tenten's always all about kunai... "*

The images of everyone saying that popped into Tenten's mind.

It vexed her.

*I'm not just some kunai woman. I have a flying guillotine too, you know. You're wrong. That's not all I am.*

Tenten started sharpening another kunai as she brooded.

If she could find a wedding gift other than a custom-made kunai, something suitable and elegant, then...

*"So you weren't just all about kunai...!"*

*"Wow, as expected of Tenten!"*

*"You know, Tenten is someone with a great sense of aesthetic beauty!"*

Those reactions would be good. What kind of a wedding present would get those kinds of reactions?

The wedding was coming up soon, so she had to go absolutely everywhere to try and find a good gift. From shops she'd already been to before to smart-looking general stores, she thought she should go and have a good look.

*"Ughh, but my funds are limited... "*

The flying guillotine had been expensive. But it had been one of a kind – she couldn't *not* buy it.

'If you're wavering, buy it.' That was Tenten's rule that had gotten her to make such a large weapon collection.

*"Well...then to sum it up..."* Tenten closed her eyes, and tried to go over all the details in her mind.

Realistically speaking, she had to think of her budget first. She had to properly manage her finances if she wanted to buy a gift. Next, since she wanted to think of a gift that wasn't a custom-made kunai, she had to think about the features of a custom-made kunai, and think of gifts that were the complete opposite. That way, Tenten concluded, she'd think of something good.

Then, in that case, that limited her options for a wedding gift to...

Tenten calmly opened her eyes.

“Something that I can afford with my limited budget. Something that gives off the feelings of a young woman. Something that doesn’t kill people...”

That would be...!

“*I have no idea what that is!*”

It was no good. Her head was a mess. *She* didn’t even understand what she was trying to say anymore.

The kunai she’d been unconsciously sharpening in her hand was now dull but shiny. She hadn’t been paying attention and done a bad job.

The thought of having to admit she was a woman with no merit besides Ninja Weaponry made Tenten feel awful. If she didn’t do something, she was going to have to...

There had to be something, something else, wasn’t there *anything*...?

And, at that moment-

“Tenteeeen! Tenteeeeeen!”

She heard someone’s voice calling her name from a distance. The person sounded like they were getting slowly getting closer. She knew who it was even before they came into her field of sight. The only person who’d be running around with such a loud voice this early in the morning was Lee.

But when Lee’s figure finally approached the training grounds, Tenten’s eyes grew wide at the state of him.

“Tenteeeen!” Lee waved enthusiastically as he ran towards her with a smile. “Have you already decided on the wedding gift?”

“Lee?!” Tenten burst out. “What on earth are you doing?!”

Lee was unmistakably dressed like a woman.

A housewife, in fact. He’d even gone as far as to wear an apron over the dress. He looked like a middle aged housewife coming home from shopping.

Was that makeup he’d tried to put on his face? He’d overdone the powder- his whole face looked unnaturally pale. And was that red smear on his mouth lipstick? He’d even made his eyebrows larger -no, on second thought, the eyebrows looked about the same.

Either way, it was a sudden and unexpected appearance that Tenten absolutely didn’t understand.

There wasn’t anything strange about being surprised by the way Lee looked. If it hadn’t been Tenten, but someone who didn’t know Lee, they probably would’ve screamed at the sight of him.

On top of everything else, for some reason Lee was carrying a dumbbell in one of his hands.

It was beyond understanding. At this point, it wasn't so much confusing as it was frightening.

"Wh-what is this?! Why in the world are you-"

"I got it for the bride, and Gai-sense got it for the groom!" Lee gushingly answered, practically shaking in excitement. "And my clothes had gotten dirty from running so I thought I should listen to Gai-sensei's teachings and think more about the feelings of a bride! So I dressed up like this! And after doing this I really am extra sure that dumbbells were definitely the right choice!"

"You gave me an explanation but I didn't understand a single thing!" Tenten retorted.

As a matter of fact, she was only more confused.

Why the cross dressing?

Why dumbbells?

It was all incredibly strange.

Lee lifted up the dumbbell and cheerfully declared:

"Gai-sensei and I have decided to give dumbbells as wedding gifts! Tenten, what are you going to give them?"

In that instant, something inside Tenten cleared away.

She didn't understand, and yet she did understand. She didn't comprehend how Lee had ended up wearing a housewife's clothes, but she did understand that he and Gai both seemed to intend to bring dumbbells as gifts to the wedding.

And in that moment, all the things she'd been worried about suddenly seemed insignificant. The inside of her head suddenly felt clear, like a mist had disappeared.

"I came to make sure our idea wasn't the same as yours," Lee explained, smiling through his lipstick smeared mouth.

"No, it isn't the same at all..." Tenten tried to keep a straight face.

"Ah, is that so? I'm glad! Well then, I'll be continuing with my training!"

"With that get up?!"

Tenten failed to keep a straight face. When it came to Lee and Gai's antics, it was barely possible.

She watched Lee run out of the training grounds with the same energy he'd run in with.

Tenten stretched, and let out a groan.

And, with that...

"Custom-made kunai it is!"

She didn't have any more doubts. Tenten was very confident.

Why in the world had she been worried? Compared to dumbbells, her gift was excellent.

She felt relieved.

She was fine just the way she was, after all.

“Alright then, back to training, training~”

KA!

KA!

KA!

The pleasing sounds of weapons hitting their targets started to ring out again.

The usual training grounds. The usual targets. The usual training method.

And her usual feelings.

This was Tenten’s everyday life.

## Meat and Steam

The flames shimmered, flickering and swaying from side to side.

*I wonder why people always find it so calming to watch fire.*

That curious thought suddenly entered Nara Shikamaru's head.

It was probably something that had started generations ago, back when people were still waiting on civilisation to happen. In those days, fire had always been a constant companion to people.

Fire had illuminated their surroundings and held the darkness of night at bay. It protected people from both the cold and foreign invaders. It had also been used as a signal, to find the location of your comrades, and the way back home.

Years and years of those activities had bled into people's genes, and surely been passed onto Shikamaru himself. That was why, sitting in front of the warm flames, he felt such a soothing feeling.

That feeling was passed on in Konoha's 'Will of Fire'.

From parent to child. From child to grandchild. From teacher to student. From friend to friend.

Your feelings were tied to each other. Connected.

Maybe that Will of Fire had started out as a small flame that anyone could easily put out.

But it hadn't disappeared. Even now, it was still being passed on, from person to person, and still burning bright.

It was those connections spanning generations that made fire so soothing. No matter how much time passed, every single cell in Shikamaru's body was marked with the memories of those who had come before him, and found fire to be such a comfort.

People would use fire to cook food and sit around it, gazing into the flames as they ate. Before they realised what was happening, they'd gather around it in groups of loved ones.

Back then, and now, that was a sight that never changed. In fact, in this moment, Shikamaru was sitting in front of a warm fire and eating a meal with his best friend, Akimichi Chouji.

Chatter. Laughter. The sound of clinking tableware. Most of all, the sound of sizzling meat as it cooked.

Yakiniku Q.

It was the usual place for Shikamaru and the rest.

When it came to barbecue restaurants like this, people usually expected them to be crowded at night only, and not be all that busy during the day. Yakiniku Q was an exception, always bustling with people during noon and the night. Their meat was cheap, and on top of that high quality, so the restaurant was very popular.

And that meant that right now, at this very lunch hour, Yakiniku Q was no different from a battlefield.

Orders were being called out from seats on every side, calls for beer or oolong tea or utensils all being met by the hurrying restaurant workers. They were hurrying around the store, circling around all the customers in a rush. The place was hectic.

Shikamaru was watching the frantic state of the workers out of the corner of his eye as he put a single piece of meat onto the grill.

The deep red colour of the meat almost seemed to shine, the fat glistening like a pearl. Proof that it was fresh. The mouth-watering sizzling sound mixed in with the delicious smell wafting through the restaurant.

Shikamaru and Chouji had decided to have lunch here at the usual place.

The decision itself had happened just a while ago.

Shikamaru had headed out to do some shopping, and bumped into Chouji in the middle of the road. They'd gotten to talking.

Then Chouji said, "It's about to be lunchtime anyway, so how about eating some meat together?" and here they were at their usual hangout of Yakiniku Q.

Shikamaru had entered the shop with the intention of stopping by briefly, like one would do at a tea shop, but Chouji always did this.

'Some meat' he'd said- as if! Chouji never sat down without the intention to dedicate himself to eating all he could.

Shikamaru's piece of meat on the grill was starting to get nice and juicy. He reached out with his chopsticks and flipped it over. The underside had been grilled beautifully.

If the meat got grilled for too long, it'd get too hard. You had to keep careful watch to make sure it didn't get over-cooked.

Most people liked to let their meat cook for a period of time decided by instinct alone, but a recent research study had concluded that those people usually ended up cooking their meat for too long.

...Or at least, that was what Chouji had told Shikamaru while they were talking.

Chouji himself, right in the middle of criticising those over-cookers, ate a piece of meat off the grill that didn't look anywhere near cooked yet.

Chouji had a tendency to eat meat when it was still too close to raw for comfort. Shikamaru thought it was better to grill meat a bit more.

His piece on the grill looked like it was about ready to eat. Just as Shikamaru reached out with his chopsticks, his meat was snatched away before his very eyes.

Chouji. He had grabbed the piece and stuffed it into his mouth with a large sound of content.

“That was...my meat...”

“Huh? Ohhhh, sorry Shikamaru. I saw it was ready to eat, and before I even realised, my hands just...” Chouji looked apologetic as he realised he’d snatched up the wrong meat.

“Ah well, it’s alright. There’s still plenty more meat to eat, after all.”

So saying, Shikamaru put another piece of meat on the grill. He turned back to Chouji with a broad grin, and said:

“After all, better you eat it than having it burnt to a crisp, right?”

Chouji grinned back at his friend, and then returned his focus to chewing the contraband meat in his mouth, adding some rice too.

“This meat is really good.” He mumbled as he chewed.

Shikamaru stared, wondering if Chouji had noticed the despicable timing of that comment.

“Cooking with a charcoal-powered grill is really hard for amateurs.” Chouji continued. “So when it comes to cooking and eating a lot of meat at the same time, gas-powered grills are the best. They really chose a great method for cooking good meat.”

Yup, Chouji was blissfully ignorant. His comment had been about the meat’s cooking method being good.

While Chouji talked, he kept guzzling down more rice, too. Oh man, at this rate the bowl was gonna get empty in no time.

Shikamaru somehow managed to flag down a restaurant worker in the chaos and ask for another serving of rice.

The thing about Chouji’s unapologetically large appetite was that it felt nice to watch him eat. Watching him eat somehow made Shikamaru feel full too, even though he hadn’t eaten all that much, and even got his own meat stolen from right under his nose.

It was because of this that Shikamaru somehow always found himself unnecessarily meddling to make sure Chouji ate well. In the end, he pushed the second piece of meat he’d put on the grill towards Chouji as well.

Chouji handled his chopsticks with frightening skill, and the meat disappeared in the blink of an eye. One by one, rows of barely cooked meat all disappeared into the insides of Chouji’s mouth.

Chouji looked incredibly happy after eating so much meat. On top of that, somehow he’d lately started looking dignified while eating as well.

Meat, rice, meat, rice, meat, rice, meat, meat, meat... Chouji continued eating nonstop, and as Shikamaru watched the spectacle, he concluded the new impression of dignity was because of Chouji’s goatee.

Lately, Chouji’s overall appearance had changed a bit.

The first thing that caught people's eyes when they looked at him was the goatee. It wasn't grown ridiculously long either, but kept nicely short and well maintained. That wasn't all. Chouji's hair had been cut a little shorter as well, and swept neatly back. It gave his overall appearance a clean, tidy, and composed look.

There was no doubt about it. It was the goatee. When you had that coupled with his hair and the other differences in his appearance, then Chouji looked like a respected adult, even to Shikamaru who'd known him for years. That was why there was a new dignity to how Chouji looked when he ate as well.

"Maybe I should grow a goatee too..." Shikamaru muttered as he leaned against the back of his chair.

"Eh? Why d'you wanna do that?" Chouji momentarily looked up from his frantic eating.

As much as he looked like he lost himself in his food, Chouji always listened carefully when Shikamaru was talking. Shikamaru recognised that fact, and kept talking,

"Unlike you, I look like I haven't changed at all since I was a kid, don't I?" Shikamaru said, touching the ponytail on top of his head.

Shikamaru had always kept his hair like this, ever since he was a kid. It was a simple ponytail, his long hair gathered and tied up above his head. It wasn't that he had been determined to keep his hair like that or anything. It was just that for someone as inherently lazy as Shikamaru, this was the easiest way to deal with his hair.

If you had to say he was determined on anything, then it was probably that he was determined to keep his hair and clothes as simple and easy as possible.

But then, it wasn't like he was determined to struggle to keep things easy till the bitter end, or anything like that. So you couldn't really say it was because he was determined for things to be easy, either. It just turned out that way because he didn't really care.

Shikamaru didn't understand people who went to ridiculous lengths to change the way they looked, the kind who went to so much trouble to carefully pick out their clothes or put on airs. He thought the best kinds of clothes were those you could carelessly wear anywhere, anytime, the kind that let you comfortably watch clouds or take a nap.

When he was a kid, Shikamaru used to think 'if I could, I'd like to spend every day just sitting in front of the fire and watching the flames'.

A kid like that was clearly different than those who cared about what the world or society at large thought of them. So it wasn't surprising that he usually didn't concern himself with his hair or clothes.

But seeing his best friend of many years suddenly looking like such a dignified adult gave Shikamaru something to think about.

Shikamaru had been made a chuunin at quite a young age, and similarly gotten involved with a lot of jobs to do with the administration of the village. For example, he'd been made a supervising

examiner of the chuunin exams, and that had him attending a lot of meetings about them, intervillage and otherwise, and in every single one of those meetings he'd naturally been surrounded by people who were older than him.

Since he found himself tasked with duties like that, Shikamaru often found himself thinking 'look at this like an adult' or 'be composed as an adult' or 'you have to be firm in your attitude like an adult should'.

Shikamaru already possessed every possible characteristic associated with 'behaving like an adult', but at this moment it had suddenly occurred to him to compare himself, who hadn't changed a bit in looks since he was young, to the mature looking Chouji in front of him. And that had resulted in Shikamaru's comment about getting a goatee.

"People always tell me 'you haven't changed at all' when they see me..." Shikamaru grumbled in complaint, still eating.

Chouji looked up and tilted his head in confusion.

"But, when they say that, they probably mean your hair right?" Chouji paused, looking down at his empty plate. "Ah, obachan, one more serving please!"

After calling out his order, Chouji wiped his mouth, and looked back at Shikamaru. "If you ask me, you've changed a lot since old times."

"Really?" Shikamaru asked. "Do I look like an adult?"

"Yeah. Maybe it's because you've come out of so many important Shinobi Union meetings. Compared to the old you, your face has really changed. I think you look a lot more steady and capable now. I'm the one who's saying it, so it can't be wrong."

Chouji had given him a huge seal of approval.

"Ah, now that you mention it, a lot of people do tell me that I look like my old man."

Maybe Shikamaru himself hadn't noticed it because he saw his face in the mirror every day.

But still, he couldn't help but think that if he had a goatee he'd look a little more dignified...

Shikamaru put a hand on his currently clean-shaved chin and kept thinking about the matter. As he did so, Chouji's ordered serving of meat appeared.

It was a huge plate, but most people would be surprised to hear it wasn't for the both of them. Forget the both of them, it was a serving just barely enough for Chouji. That usually surprised people too. But then, both the workers and regular customers here were used to Chouji's eating habits by now, so nobody would be surprised.

*When we all came here for the first time, we ordered this huge serving then too, didn't we...*

Shikamaru's thoughts went back to the time soon after he had become a genin.

His team had to celebrate here when their first mission had ended safely as well.

And after that, after the end of every mission, they often came to this restaurant.

The four of them would eat at this same table, and Shikamaru would sit in this very seat.

~

*Chouji was being yelled at by their teammate Ino.*

*“Hey?!” She yelled, “Chouji, you ate my meat!”*

*“Shut up...” Shikamaru grumbled at the loud noise she was making.*

*It was a mistake. Ino immediately turned to glare at him. “What do you mean shut up? It’s my meat! Then are you saying you’re going to cook the meat?”*

*Now he’d become a target. This was outrageous.*

*“What is this?” Shikamaru complained under his breath, putting meat on the grill. “Why am I the one who has to cook everything again? Ugh, troublesome...”*

*Why were women in general so pushy? Shikamaru thought about the matter as he overturned the meat.*

*To start with, there was the woman closest to him: his mother. She was pushier than even normal women were, to an abnormal extent.*

*What in the world had made his old man look at such a frightening woman and think ‘I’m going to marry her’? Shikamaru absolutely couldn’t understand it.*

*“This should be enough, right?”*

*The meat was just about cooked. At Shikamaru’s comment, Ino reached out with her chopsticks, a satisfied air around her.*

*But the meat suddenly disappeared.*

*It wasn’t a supernatural phenomenon. It was Chouji. Ino threw down her chopsticks and started screaming.*

*“On purpose, right?!” She shrieked, “You’re doing this on purpose!”*

*“Huh- I just- I saw the meat, so...” Chouji stuttered.*

*“Don’t think you’re going to get out of this by making vague comments!”*

*Ino grabbed Chouji by the collar, still shouting. Bewildered as he was, Chouji still didn’t let go of his bowl or chopsticks. Shikamaru grumbled that he was going to end up grilling the meat again anyway, and started putting more meat on the grill.*

*It was the usual scene for their team. And then...*

*There was a person happily watching over the three of them.*

*Asuma.*

~

Shikamaru came back to the present, and looked at the place Asuma once used to sit.

Shikamaru, Chouji, Ino, and Asuma. The four of them used to come to this restaurant after every mission, and crowd around this table.

In the past, Shikamaru had thought life would always continue like that.

It had been absurd to imagine everyone in a constant loop of youth, but somehow Shikamaru's past self had still thought that way. He hadn't been able to imagine what he'd be like when he grew up.

But, time had passed despite all that.

Ino had become more feminine. Chouji's appetite hadn't changed, but he'd grown a beard. Even Shikamaru had changed before he realised it. And Asuma...wasn't here anymore.

The four of them couldn't be together again.

This restaurant, this seat, everything was deeply dyed with the memories of those happy times that Shikamaru couldn't return to.

It was because he didn't want to forget those memories that Shikamaru kept stopping by the restaurant, even now.

When Shikamaru was surrounded by the familiar fragrance of cooking meat, he could fall into the hallucination where that same smell of tobacco was hanging around as well.

Asuma had been an adult.

His goatee had always smelled of tobacco from all his countless cigarettes. No matter what the situation was, he had always been calm. Calm and easygoing.

Asuma had gone on many travels when he was young, so he had a lot of knowledge, and his skill as a shinobi was even greater. He was like a father, and he was like an older brother. He'd always treat Shikamaru and the team out to meat.

Come to think of it, he'd always slowly turn pale in the face of Chouji's voracious appetite, and frantically rummage around in his wallet to make sure he had enough.

Now, Shikamaru and the rest paid for their meals out of their own wallets, with the money they'd earned by themselves.

Shikamaru wondered if he'd been able to become an adult that was just a bit like Asuma.

Shikamaru took the menu into his hand, turning the pages and calculating how much he and Chouji's bill would come up to. It would be too expensive to treat him. If they split the tab, then he could comfortably afford it.

*Oh man, I should eat a bit more while I can...*

Shikamaru eyed Chouji's ferocious eating speed, and reached out for some meat of his own.

"...chomp, chomp, chomp...Obachan, another serving!" Chouji called out, his mouth full of chomp- no, er, beef.

Chouji eventually stopped eating, for the time being at least. He looked satisfied, gulping down a cup of oolong tea in one go. When he was certain Chouji had started breathing again, Shikamaru spoke.

“So, about what we were talking about before, what are you gonna do?”

“Huh? Dessert?”

*We never once talked about dessert, Chouji.*

“...About Naruto and Hinata’s wedding presents.”

“Ohh, yeah, that.”

Shikamaru sighed. Had Chouji forgotten?

In the first place, Shikamaru had gone out onto the streets with the intention of buying a wedding present. He’d bumped into Chouji by chance, and then they’d gotten to talking about what they should give.

Shikamaru was still undecided on what he would give as a present. After all, he had to think of something that both Naruto and Hinata would be happy with, and he was coming up pretty blank.

Shikamaru wasn’t just inexperienced with wedding presents, he was a stranger to the practice of giving gifts in general.

In that case, it would be best for him to talk to someone who didn’t neglect social frivolities like that. And while he was at it, it would be best to hear a woman’s opinion. Thus, Shikamaru had gone to visit Ino.

Yamanaka Flowers. That was the name of the shop that Ino’s family ran.

When Shikamaru went to talk to her about the matter, Ino had immediately started boasting that she’d already decided on her gift. As to be expected of Ino. She was very well informed when it came to the latest trends and fashions.

*As to be expected of a comrade from my team,* Shikamaru thought, and felt relieved.

“If that’s the case, then it’ll be fine if I buy something from the same store as you.” He said to Ino. “Can you tell me where it is?”

“Eh? You can’t copy the store. Forget it.”

And thus, even though they were comrades who had faced fatal battles together, Shikamaru was immediately abandoned.

After that...

“I give up...” Shikamaru had grumbled as he wandered around, surveying the village shops. He’d bumped into Chouji at one of intersections, and found himself where he was now, at Yakiniku Q.

But apparently Chouji had forgotten the whole story in his meat-craze. Even now, he was eating some ice cream. When had Chouji ordered ice cream? Shikamaru didn't even try to figure it out. There were some things about Chouji that were beyond comprehension.

Honestly, when it came to the topic of finding a wedding present, Chouji's opinion might not be as reliable as Ino's.

However, where Shikamaru was worried about the wedding present, Chouji was perfectly at ease.

"Actually, I've more or less decided..."

Chouji's response was so unexpected that Shikamaru shot up in his seat.

"You've really decided?! What're you getting them?"

"Yeah." Chouji said, slipping out a thin, rectangular piece of paper. "I'm thinking of giving this to them."

Chouji slid the item across the table, and Shikamaru picked it up so it wouldn't get wet.

"This is..."

Shikamaru couldn't believe his eyes. This was a complimentary ticket for a meal to one of the most expensive Ryotei restaurants in Konoha.

"Young adults like us don't usually go to places like that," Chouji said, with a grin. "But since it's a wedding gift, it works."

It was exactly as Chouji said. This restaurant was extremely formal and extremely expensive, so many young adults didn't usually go there. But a complimentary ticket for a meal there, as a wedding gift, was a thing of pure brilliance.

It was a chance for the couple to go somewhere they didn't go often, and it was a thoughtful wedding gift that they would both enjoy. There couldn't possibly be another wedding gift as thoughtful as this.

But while it might have been an amazing wedding present, how could Chouji so easily let of a meal, and a high class one at that?

*Chouji, are you really the same guy I knew...? You've really become far more of an adult than I'd ever realised.*

Shikamaru was staring in turns at the elegant ticket in his hands, and then to Chouji's face as he happily ate his ice cream. He was dumbfounded.

Chouji continued eating his ice cream without being aware of his friend's staring. Soon enough, he'd started on a second bowl.

"Plus, it came with such good timing," Chouji said as he licked. "That meal for three..."

At first, Shikamaru didn't understand the meaning behind what Chouji had said. A moment passed, and comprehension dawned. Sweat appeared on Shikamaru's forehead.

“You couldn’t possibly...” Shikamaru meekly asked, feeling shocked for a completely different reason. “You’re not going to....eat...with them...?”

Chouji looked up from his ice cream with a great laugh. “No way. Even if it’s me, I’m not about to intrude on a meal between two newly-weds.”

“R-right...yeah, that would be....”

“I’m going to ask a favour from the owner, and eat at a separate table.”

“...Seriously?”

Without thought, Shikamaru looked up at the ceiling. The ceiling fan was spinning around without stop as always.

The ceiling fan that continued to steadily spin around in silence. Chouji continued to quietly but determinedly eat his ice cream.

Soon, lunchtime had already passed, and the customers in the restaurant became sparse. Peace had returned again to Yakiniku Q.

Listening to the faint sound of the whirling ceiling fan in the now quiet store, Shikamaru continued worrying by himself.

A complimentary high class meal.

That was the present Chouji had prepared. It definitely didn’t have any bad sides to it.

But...

While it might not have had its bad side, why in the world was it for three people? That ryotei restaurant should’ve thought about how frequently couples would want to go and be alone, lovers with no interruptions. Had that ryotei no sense? If it was three people, then of course Chouji would end up going...!

Shikamaru inwardly criticised the policies of a restaurant he’d never been to with a sour look on his face.

His mind imagined Naruto and Hinata getting a little dressed up for the uncommon chance to eat at a high class ryotei restaurant.

And, then, in the seat behind them. Chouji. Ordering a second serving of his food as he attentively watched over them.

...would that really work out okay...?

No, right now, Chouji was fine as he was. In a way, it was a very Chouji-esque gift. Right now, the bigger problem was Shikamaru himself, who’d still yet to think of anything. He had to devote his thinking process to coming up with something.

Shikamaru straightened in his seat, and silently closed his eyes.

Whenever Shikamaru was thinking deeply about something –for example, his next move in his favourite game of shougi, or a complicated strategy in the middle of a mission– he had the habit of sitting in a certain way as he thought. He didn't purposely try to get into that position. It happened naturally. It was the position that he could think best in.

On that note, nobody would've ever expected Shikamaru to end up resorting to his thinking position in the middle of Yakiniku Q. He himself hadn't even expected that things would come to this.

Shikamaru gathered his thoughts inside his head. Something that would be suitable as wedding present...several possibilities and options floated across his mind.

First off, it would be best if the gift was something practical and helpful. Kitchen appliances, or cookware. A good present would be something that the couple didn't already own.

Dinnerware was popular lately, wasn't it? Matching bowls for a couple to use were a good possible option.

Watches maybe, or a picture frame for the wedding photos, too. They seemed to fit the standard. Presents that could serve as happy memories of their wedding were good. But they also had to be presents that would hold interest to both of them.

Either way, he couldn't get the same present as another person. After all, Ino had kicked up such a fuss over even getting something from the same shop, so getting the same present as someone else was logically just as bad, if not worse.

The wedding was soon, so maybe getting a large bouquet would work as a gift? In its own way, it was a very wedding-gift-like thing.

There was also the option of getting them foodstuff. High class ingredients, like pastries or tea, those would be happily received wouldn't they? But then that seemed like it would end up being similar to Chouji's gift of a high class meal.

But no, honestly it would be fine if he ended up giving them a gift certificate of some kind like Chouji had, wouldn't it? He could earn a gift certificate from a department store. He'd just have to buy enough things that he liked, and it would be easy to choose things he liked... But then how would he afford buying enough to earn a gift certificate... Money was...money...

Shikamaru slowly opened his eyes. Chouji was still eating ice cream.

What to do...

At the end, one word had come to float pragmatically at the front of his mind: money.

It was a good angle to focus on. Rather than getting the couple something they couldn't use, or something that was similar to someone else's gift, it was far better to give them money to spend on anything they liked.

But then, there was the thought of how it would look if everyone else gave Naruto and Hinata gifts, and then Shikamaru just went 'here you go' with an envelope of money.

*Since it's me, then they'd probably think that I thought shopping for a gift was too troublesome, and resorted to giving money out of laziness, wouldn't they...?*

He was worried about that possibility.

In reality, it was likely that nobody would think such a thing. But honestly, giving money was an incredibly wearisome gift choice. It felt like it didn't have any sincerity.

*It would've been okay to give it to someone I barely knew, but to them...it wouldn't be okay, would it?*

Shikamaru was still worrying without an end. Similarly, Chouji was still eating without an end.

“You’ve eaten a lot.” Shikamaru suddenly noted the countless bowls of ice cream piled up in front of Chouji. “You don’t feel cold at all?”

“It feels nice and cool after eating all that hot barbecue. Plus, I’m the kind of guy who’ll be travelling in Snow Country and still go and buy ice cream to eat. My appetite doesn’t lose to the cold.” Chouji grinned at his friend, and as he finished his latest bowl, finally seemed content. “Gochisousama\*.”

Wait. Wait a minute. Now. Just now, something had sparked inside Shikamaru’s head.

“Chouji...what did you just say?”

“Huh? Well, I said gochisousama...”

“No. Before that. About travelling in Snow Country.”

“Ah, yeah, I said I’d still eat ice cream even if I was travelling in Snow Country. But you know I was just giving an example?”

“That’s it.” Shikamaru looked delighted as he pointed at Chouji. “Travelling. A trip. That’s good, isn’t it? A trip for their honeymoon...!”

Shikamaru and Chouji left Yakiniku Q without any particular next destination in mind. They were just aimlessly walking around. It didn’t matter if they did or didn’t have a goal in mind. Shikamaru was finally free of his worries on what to get.

“I get it, you’re going to give Hinata and Naruto a honeymoon trip as a gift, right?”

“Yeah, Chouji. Thanks to you, I finally thought up a good idea.”

Now, all Shikamaru had to do was select the destination. Then, go and give it the once over to make sure everything was of good quality.

Ah. He was going to have to ask for a woman’s opinion again, wasn’t he?

Where would he be able to find Ino? According to what she’d said when he visited her earlier about thinking of a gift, she would probably be on her way to buy her wedding gift...

As he and Chouji walked around, Shikamaru started glancing around storefronts.

“Are you looking for someone, Shikamaru? I can help.”

“Yeah, I need to hear a woman’s opinion. Ino would do if she was around.”

That being said, Konoha was a huge city.

The fact that Shikamaru and Chouji had managed to meet up while just walking around without the same destination in mind had been a great coincidence. If they now managed to bump into Ino, then it’d be a coincidence on top of a coincidence for all of Team 10’s combo, the Ino-Shika-Chou to be gathered in one spot.

The chances of them bumping into each other without any communication beforehand were, obviously, pretty much zero to none. Even if such a coincidental gathering of friends had happened in a fictional play or movie, the audience would have criticised it severely, calling it a series of impossible coincidences.

Just as Shikamaru thought that, Chouji let out a murmur.

“Oh, look who’s here.”

“*You’re kidding me right?!*” Shikamaru’s voice rose to a hysterical volume in his surprise.

Reality was indeed an amazing thing. Surprising coincidences that seemed to come out of novels, like randomly meeting teammates, happened all the time.

However, the sight that greeted Shikamaru after he let out his yell of surprise was a coincidence that was going to stun him even more.

Shikamaru’s line of sight had him looking at the back of a woman’s head. Her hair didn’t reach down to her knees like his teammate’s did. This woman’s hair was somewhat short, and tied into two bundles. She was a completely different person, and the sight of her made Shikamaru’s eyes widen despite himself.

The woman in front of them was a jounin from Konoha’s ally Sunagakure...Temari.

Many people were always coming and going from Konoha, not just shinobi from other villages like Temari. There were shinobi coming to receive missions, shinobi returning from missions, clients who gave missions, and a great many variety of people. There was a continuous stream of visitors coming and going.

Of course, that didn’t mean just anyone could come in. Those at the village gates always kept an eye out for suspicious looking people or dangerous objects, inspecting and questioning visitors.

Temari, for example, was a shinobi from another village who carried a large tessen on her back. It was her favourite weapon of choice, a war fan that let her create a devastating gust of wind with one swing.

But dangerous as her weapon was, Temari was a shinobi from an allied village, and there had been years of trust and cooperation between her and Konoha, so she was naturally given a permit to bring her tessen within the city limits. She’d also easily passed through the interview to get a visitor’s pass, and had been issued one a long time ago.

This very same Temari now turned around at Shikamaru's surprised yell, and noticed the two. Her eyes met Shikamaru's.

"What, so it's you who yelled. What're you doing?"

Shikamaru had let out such a hysterical yell because he'd been surprised at the coincidence of Chouji supposedly finding Ino.

Now, he did his best to answer Temari's question in a serene, unruffled tone, despite how the insides of his heart felt like they were jittering.

"O-oh yeah. We were just eating lunch and then... well, that aside, what're you...?"

"I'm going around giving my greetings prior to the Chuunin Exam meetings."

"Chuunin exams? We still have a way to go until they start, don't we?"

"Well, you could say that this year we're having meetings about the meetings." Temari gave a wry smile. She had a lot of troublesome duties to carry out.

Temari was the Yondaime Kazekage's daughter, and the current Godaime Kazekage's elder sister. She was a sharp and capable person who aided her younger brother with her flourishing activities in diplomacy with other villages. Like today, she would casually come and go from Konoha to participate in meetings planning for the Chuunin Exams.

Shikamaru drew a little closer to Chouji so Temari wouldn't hear, and hissed into his ear.

"Oi, Chouji! Why'd you go and say 'look who's here'? I thought it was definitely Ino so I ended up..."

"But you said a woman's opinion, so it doesn't make any difference, right...?"

"Th-that's technically true, but..." Shikamaru glanced back at Temari.

Temari was the best wind user in Sunagakure. No, she was probably the best wind user in the whole world of shinobi, or if not, second. She stood out for her accomplishments in diplomacy and rearing shinobi in non-combatant areas, but her personality was militant. She was audacious and bold at heart, and generally suited to the battlefield with her belligerent attitude.

It was likely because her personality was like that that she did so well in politics, but would it really be okay to ask Temari, a woman who woke gale after gale to do away with enemies on the battlefield, her opinion on a honeymoon for Naruto and Hinata? Her personality was completely different from Hinata's.

Temari was strong-willed and constantly looking after others, and both those qualities made her the same type of woman as Shikamaru's mother. It wasn't likely that she would think of something that someone meek like Hinata would like.

On that note, Ino's personality was different from Hinata's too. But, Ino had been classmates with Naruto and Hinata since childhood, so consulting with her seemed easier.

Ino would probably gladly give a consultation about Naruto and Hinata's honeymoon. She was the type to point out all the latest trends and all.

But *Temari*'s reaction to being asked to consult, that was something Shikamaru couldn't imagine.

*"What, a honeymoon?" Temari said with scorn, her eyes losing their warmth. "You're sure asking me about something trivial."*

That was the only reaction that was coming to Shikamaru's mind.

"What're you two sneaking around for?" Temari had a doubtful look on her face. "You look suspicious."

He quickly had to somehow mend the situation but-

"Shikamaru wants to ask you about something."

But Chouji acted first.

"Well...you..." Shikamaru got flustered as Temari turned her gaze to him.

He couldn't possibly say something like 'it would be unreasonable of me if I asked you about planning a honeymoon, right?'. There was no choice but to be frank about it.

"Well, that's, I mean..." He kept stuttering.

For some reason, he'd gotten tense. Shikamaru felt strangely embarrassed. He couldn't even look Temari in the eyes. Finally, he blurted out:

"...I've been thinking about it, but, for a honeymoon, where do you think is good?"

"Eh?!" Temari let out an incredibly stunned sound.

"What?!" Startled at her reaction, Shikamaru could look her in the face now, staring.

"You- tha- ho- honeymoon...?!"

Temari wouldn't look at him.

See, he'd been right after all, asking her was rude and offensive. Of course Temari would be troubled if he asked her to help with picking Naruto and Hinata's wedding gift. Even Shikamaru had been having trouble with it, and he was their classmate...

*Ugh, Chouji, you shouldn't have meddled.* Shikamaru glared at the man with several grudging comments on his tongue. Chouji pretended not to notice and averted his gaze to look in a shop window.

While glaring unpleasantly towards the man, Shikamaru tried to switch the situation around.

The end result was that the damage was already done, so he might as well hear her opinion.

"Sorry." Shikamaru apologised. "I know it's unexpected, but I want to hear your thoughts."

“Wh- why ask about th- that to me?” Temari looked incredibly bewildered and flustered. It was perfectly understandable.

“Well, I guess because I thought asking you would be best...”

Well, he couldn’t say ‘anyone would do as long as they’re a woman’ when she looked like she was seriously considering it. That would be incredibly rude. Even Shikamaru knew that.

“A-asking would be best...” She repeated.

For some reason, Temari was looking down and uneasily fidgeting. Shikamaru was convinced it was because she was troubled by the question. This wasn’t good. At this rate, there would be no progress. It would be best to offer his opinion first.

“I think it’d be good to relax at a hot spring inn, but what do you think? It doesn’t sound too old fashioned?”

“I...it seems fine...”

“Alright, great. I’m glad. An inn by the hot springs with good food is the best, huh.”

Temari had approved his idea. Shikamaru could feel all his worry draining away. He’d been worrying all morning, and now he finally gave a relieved smile. It would be a fine wedding present for Naruto and Hinata.

Temari, on the other hand, looked like her composure had been disturbed.

“Don’t tell me you still have some business to take care of...?” He asked.

That was likely it. Temari had come here on business after all. She was probably bothered because he’d kept her busy with this consultation.

“Ah, no, I’m done for today... I was about to go home.”

“...?”

She didn’t have any duties to carry out, but she was restless. Shikamaru tilted his head, confused at her response. Temari was acting odd today. What could be causing it...?

“It’d be best to check out some inns later, right?” Chouji suggested, and Shikamaru pulled himself out of those thoughts to concentrate back on the gift problem.

“That’s right.” Shikamaru nodded. “It’d be best to go and take a good look as soon as possible.”

“It’s still pretty early, so even going today would work, right?”

“Yeah. It’d probably be best to do that.”

“Then,” Chouji said, “I’m going to head off to eat some sweet chestnuts, so you two should go check it out.”

“Eh?!” Shikamaru and Temari both exclaimed at the same time.

Flustered, Shikamaru looked at his friend.

“Cho- Chouji...! What do you mean you’re not coming with...?!”

“Mmm, sorry Shikamaru. I have to eat dessert after meals.”

“You just ate!”

“I have separate room for dessert.”

“I’m telling you, you just ate dessert!”

As they kept exchanging retorts, Shikamaru glanced at Temari. She was probably angry at Chouji’s sudden selfish behaviour too, because her face was slowly turning bright red.

*Oi, oi, oi, this isn’t the time for jokes. Chouji, change your mind. Women aren’t to be made angry, it will always end up turning into a troublesome situation, I learned that way back when I was a kid!*

Shikamaru was desperately trying to communicate these pleas with his eyes, but Chouji wouldn’t change his mind.

“You’re checking it out for a honeymoon, so it’d be better if you two went by yourselves.”

Chouji said such a thing with a wide grin.

It was too reasonable for Shikamaru to argue against. Anyone would agree that it would make more sense for a man and woman to go check out an inn beforehand, rather than two men. That way, you got both the bride and groom’s point of view.

But, right now, with Temari reacting in ways Shikamaru didn’t understand, and her face looking bright red with what had to be rage, going alone with her would be...

Shikamaru felt his face drain of colour.

“Well then, I’ll see you two later.” Chouji said, starting to walk. “I’m heading off.”

“Ah...” By the time Shikamaru could make a sound, it was too late.

Chouji merely glanced over his shoulder at his friend, waved a hand, and then disappeared into the crowd.

Shikamaru had gone completely and utterly still in utter dumbfoundment.

*Why Chouji...? Why did you want to eat sweet chestnuts that much...? Even though you ate that much ice cream, why...? Does your stomach hold no end...?*

Those were the thoughts streaming through his numb, stunned mind.

Even though the streets of Konoha were always bustling with activity, the place where Shikamaru and Temari stood seemed strangely inactive. It was almost like they had a barrier around them. They were both wrapped up in a dense silence.

Shikamaru was too frightened to look Temari in the eyes.

“Uh...” His mouth moved despite himself. “How should I...what do you want to do...?”

Those were the words that came out of his mouth.

*I'm an idiot.*

But, just then...

Shikamaru felt an abrupt tug on his sleeve.

“...We can go.” Temari quietly said, not looking at him.

*How did the atmosphere get like this?*

In a short while, Shikamaru and Temari had made their way to where Konoha's hot spring town was.

On the way, they hadn't talked much.

Shikamaru had tried to bring up small talk to see how she'd react, but Temari's replies had been short and curt, and the unsettling atmosphere between them had continued.

*Why is there such a puzzling tension...?*

Shikamaru averted his eyes to look forwards so he wasn't meeting Temari's eyes, feeling sweat perspiring against his forehead. He tried to objectively, and calmly analyse the situation.

To start with, it wasn't unusual for him and Temari to be alone together. Rather, it was common. In the past, he had guided her around the village, and they had gone to meetings for work together. He'd even gone outside his usual behaviour and asked her on a date.

Well, he said date, but in the end they'd done the same things as usual, talking about light things until they somehow started talking about work without noticing. But, at that time, thing hadn't been anywhere near as tense as they were now.

On the contrary, the whole day of their date hadn't been bad at all.

Despite all that, why were things so tense today? Why did the atmosphere feel so strained? Why wasn't Temari talking to him?

Shikamaru desperately wracked his brain for answers.

The most likely cause was that deep down, Temari felt fed up from being dragged into a troublesome matter. He'd prompted her about her plans for the rest of the day, and after saying she had none, there had been no way for her to politely refuse to come, so now she was irritated at the trouble she had to go through. That was why things were different today. That was why she wasn't talking much.

But, if you looked at the root, this was all Chouji's fault. Chouji and his stomach's sudden, unexplained craving for sweet chestnuts. And moreover, it was Chouji's fault for bringing up the meddlesome suggestion 'it would be best for you two to go together' and then disappearing. If he hadn't done those things, then at this time he and Shikamaru, or just Shikamaru himself, would've been doing the check up on a random inn.

*I'd never thought I'd end up coming here with Temari...*

It was a turn of events he'd never have been able to imagine happening this morning. He'd never thought he'd eat yakiniku with Chouji, and then bump into Temari, and then end up in this situation.

There might've been that saying about how "shinobi should look underneath the underneath" but this wasn't something anyone could've seen coming. Good grief, the world was beyond predicting.

While Shikamaru brooded, he and Temari crossed over a wooden bridge. There was a river streaming beneath it, with a light layer of steam rising from it. It was a river from a hot spring. There was a slightly cloying smell to the water, kind of similar to eggs. It was the hydrogen sulphide that was blended into the hot spring water.

The source was the volcanic belt Konoha was located atop of. A good large quantity of hot springs were present in this area, so much that in the old days the hot springs had been known as a healing area for injured shinobi. Now it was a tourist hot spot for attracting people from and outside the village.

They were passing a lot of such tourists as they travelled.

Most of the tourists were usually dressed in yukata, with geta wooden sandals or leather soled sandals, and clothing that had the name of the inn or institute they were staying at. That seemed to be the general dress code of the town. It was good for visiting the hot springs, or just walking around.

Health and entertainment. The town had obviously developed by combining those two things, and many things other than inns could be found. Restaurants, game centres, souvenir shops, and various other shops were lined up all around. Another enjoyable side to this town would be just walking around and visiting all of them.

Shikamaru and Temari had passed by a lot of such stores. Most of the storefronts had wicker baskets where meat dumplings that had been cooked with the steam of the hot springs sat in rows, looking nice and pretty. Souvenir shops had postcards and wooden carvings aimed at tourists, along with shinobi goods. Here and there, you could see bags and bottles that were stuffed with hot spring mineral deposits as well. The hot springs were a truly valuable source of income for the town.

Shikamaru was looking for an inn to check out amidst all the establishments. The sun was already setting in the west, and in a short time, night had fallen.

The lanterns in front of the stores and buildings started to light up, one by one. Their lights were the only illuminations in the town after the dark had fallen, and the sight of all those brightly lit lanterns amidst the darkness and wisps of steam that enshrouded the town was pretty breathtaking.

"It looks amazing..." Temari murmured.

“Yeah...” Shikamaru quietly agreed. Then, he turned to her. “...Hey, we took all the trouble to come here, so how about we drop by the town shops?”

Temari had finally spoken of her own volition when she’d commented on the scenery. The town’s beautiful scenery seemed to have eased away the tension. Shikamaru wanted to take advantage of that and get rid of the tension completely. They’d taken all the trouble to come here, after all. They weren’t about to get punished from above for dropping by a store or two.

“You’re right.” Temari said, looking around. “Then...how about that shop?”

The shop she was pointing to was a small one, with a sign that said ‘target practice’ at the front. It looked like the sort of place that had three wooden kunai for you to throw and hit several prizes on shelves, and if you could knock a prize over, then you could have it.

“You sure you’re fine with that?” He asked.

“Yeah. I wanted to try that kind of thing just once.”

*I don’t really understand, but it looks like her spirits are back to normal...*

Temari’s eyes were shining as she ducked under the wooden sign in front of the shop’s entrance, and Shikamaru felt relieved at the sight of her. He followed her in.

The inside of the shop was surprisingly crowded.

Passing his eye over the other customers, they were likely mostly lovers, a lot of young men and women. For some reason, Shikamaru couldn’t quite get back his usual composure.

Temari had already picked up a wooden kunai and thrown it. It barely grazed the side of the targeted prize, slipping away into the darkness behind it. She picked up another one, and threw once more. This time, her aim was off much more, not even coming close.

“Hm?” Temari was tilting her head in puzzlement.

“Oi, oi, what’s up?” He asked. “It’s rare for you to miss a target.”

Forget playing target games, both Shikamaru and Temari handled kunai in their usual everyday lives. And furthermore, those were real ones. It was impossible for her to miss twice.

“No, the thing is they’re too light to throw well.” Temari said, handing the wooden kunai to him.

*Ah, I see they’re way too light. Far more different than the usual ones. It’d be hard to throw this.*

Shikamaru understood the second he felt the wooden kunai’s light weight in his hand.

“But, if that’s the problem,” Shikamaru said, handling the wooden kunai, “Then if you just find the centre of gravity and adjust, you should be able to throw it, like *this!*”

He threw the wooden kunai. He threw it with much more force than he did his usual kunai.

It missed completely.

“Hm?”

Now Shikamaru was tilting his head in puzzlement, too.

After their target practice had ended, the two of them were back to searching for the inn.

Temari was carrying one small daruma, and another equally small cat figurine. They were the only two prizes that Shikamaru had managed to drop after several more pay-as-you-go tries.

But to think that after all that those attempts, only these two tiny prizes were gained. Shikamaru couldn't help but feel like that cost-effectiveness of that shop was in question.

But, Shikamaru was still a pro. Throwing the wooden kunai again and again had helped him get used to the weight. Even with all the practice, those wooden kunai were unbelievably tricky. You couldn't possibly hope to practice enough to hit a big prize without paying a big amount of money too. Shikamaru had realised that very quickly. No, in fact, you could spend as much money on practice as you wanted, and it would probably still be impossible to hit the big prizes.

Shikamaru felt sorry for all the couples at the shop he'd seen, letting out sounds like 'kyaa!' and 'awww' as they aimed at prizes they were never going to be able to hit.

If they'd just been a little heavier...well, to sum it up, the wooden kunai were so far from real kunai that it was almost impossible to knock over anything with them.

If possible, Shikamaru would have liked to throw a real kunai.

At the shopkeeper.

But either way, seeing as he wasn't allowed to use a real kunai, he'd thought it would be better to hit what he could rather than to keep aiming for the impossible and go away with nothing.

'What he could' being the small daruma and cat figurine\*\*. They had been the smallest prizes in the shop. Their loss wasn't any great blow to the shopkeeper's stock. The shopkeeper really had a brilliant strategy.

“Sorry...” He said to Temari, “I couldn't get anything other than those...”

Speaking of which, it'd be really bad if he'd gotten so used to throwing the light wooden kunai that his aim with real kunai got affected.

“Heh, they're the perfect size for carrying back home.” Temari replied with a grin.

She wasn't being sarcastic. Those were her honest feelings. Every now and then, Temari had times she smiled innocently like this.

“These'll be great souvenirs for my brothers.” She said.

Come to think of it, she was right. The number of prizes was just right. But, that brought up the question...between Gaara and Kankurou, who would be given the daruma and who would be given the cat figurine? He wasn't sure, but either way, it'd be something to smile at if you saw it.

Temari always did think about her brothers.

Temari was humming something under her breath as she looked at the prizes in her hands. She looked like she was in a good mood.

“Alright then...we should get around to picking an inn, right?” Shikamaru said. “Oh, how about here?”

Shikamaru had come to a standstill, looking up at a nearby inn. It was magnificently structured, with a very historic feeling. The paper lanterns glowing faintly at the sides of its gates felt like they were giving a gentle welcome to guests. It looked like they had a pretty large pond too.

From the outside, everything looked fine, but the main focus of their visit was the hot springs and the meals. It’d be a problem if everything just looked decent but was actually bad quality.

“Yup, best to go in and have a look.” Shikamaru nodded. Just one quick overall assessment would be enough.

He turned to go towards the inn, but at that exact moment, Temari’s footsteps stopped.

“What’s wrong?” He looked over his shoulder to check on her.

“Ah- well- after all- how to say this...” Temari was looking down and uneasily fidgeting.

Again? Just when he’d thought that the usual Temari had returned. What in the world was going on?

“So it’s just- at the end- I’m not yet- I’m not mentally prepared...” She muttered, not looking at him and fiddling with the daruma and cat figurine in her hands.

Mentally prepared? For what?

Maybe she felt awkward in front of such a fancy looking place?

If such a high class place had prices that were too high for him to afford, then of course Shikamaru was going to give up. He’d think it was a shame, but he would. But they wouldn’t ever know without going in and checking the place out. Whether his decision would be to go for it or pass, he’d still have to look at the rooms and hot springs. He had no way to work around it. It was going to be a problem if they just gave up right in front of the place’s doors.

“Temari, for now how about we just go in, and then you can think about it. Okay?”

“I- it’ll be too late to think about once we go in. I could get carried away with the atmosphere, so...”

“What do you mean!?”

He absolutely couldn’t understand what Temari was saying. Shikamaru was at his wits’ end.

What on the world was going on? The atmosphere? Did she mean the old-fashioned atmosphere of the inn? Carried away? Swept away? Was she talking about the pond? He didn’t understand a thing.

However, he knew one thing for a fact:

*There's definitely something wrong with Temari today.*

Shikamaru looked carefully at Temari's face, staring as he gave her a once over. Temari hurriedly looked away from his gaze. As she did, her face was turning bright red.

"You..." Shikamaru slowly said. "Don't tell me you..."

He put his hand on Temari's forehead. She let out a startled sound, her whole body shivering with a jolt. It was probably because his hand was cold.

"You're burning up, aren't you?" He asked.

Temari's forehead felt slightly warm. But, it didn't look like a fever. On the other hand, she had turned bright red up to her ears.

"I-I'm heading home, so..." She stiffly said, awkwardly moving away and turning to go back.

She was clearly acting completely different than usual. For the usual lively Temari to suddenly be so frail-like, it had to mean that while she may not have had a fever, there was something wrong with her health. There wasn't any other explanation.

"Oi, oi, do me a favour and wait. It's already dark out, and if your physical condition is bad then that's all the more reason you should rest here for just one night. It's alright. I'll quickly set out the futon for you."

Shikamaru had said that because he was worried about Temari, but it looked like he'd said something he shouldn't have, because Temari suddenly started running away from him at full power.

Shikamaru stared, dumbfounded, at the sight of her running full throttle.

Well, at least her health seemed fine after all. But wait, he had to catch up to her!

Shikamaru started running, too.

He'd finally been able to come all this way with her, if they went back right at the doors of the inn, then there'd have been no point. He absolutely had to get Temari's advice on what would make for a better honeymoon trip.

After all, it wasn't just for Naruto, it was for Hinata too. Just a man's point of view wouldn't be enough. He had to have a woman's point of view. He had to hear the opinion on the women's side of the spa, on the yukatas, on the service given to women, all sorts of things that a man couldn't judge on his own.

Shikamaru put his full concentration into chasing after Temari's back. He reached out to catch her with a hand.

*This isn't gonna work if I'm by myself, this isn't gonna work by myself...!*

Shikamaru's hand reached its mark. He'd managed to catch Temari by the arm.

Tightening his hold on her, Shikamaru yelled, “Please just wait! I need you!”

Temari had forcibly come to a stop, and now looked over her shoulder at him. For some reason, her eyes looked a bit wet.

They were both panting, totally out of breath. The dim light of nearby lanterns illuminated their faces slightly, Shikamaru’s shadow falling on Temari.

Maybe she’d calmed down, because her face wasn’t red anymore. Her face, illuminated by the light given off by the lanterns, looked more mature than usual.

Shikamaru unconsciously ended up gazing at Temari’s face.

He was enveloped in a mysterious feeling. Like being in the middle of a dream.

“Is it really alright...if it’s me...?” Temari quietly asked.

Those words pulled Shikamaru abruptly back to his senses, and he gathered his wits again. He nodded firmly.

“Yeah, it won’t do if it’s not you!” He said seriously, “After all, I can’t go into the women’s side of the hot spring!”

“...ha?” For a brief moment, Temari’s jaw dropped. “Uhm...? What are you...saying...?”

Shikamaru was bewildered by the look she was giving him, like she was suddenly suspicious of him. It was a strange reaction to his reply. But for now, it was best to verify what they both were thinking.

“No matter how you look at it, I won’t be able to go to the women’s side of the hot springs, right?”

“Obviously!” She sounded a little indignant. “What are you suddenly...”

She was well-aware of the situation, good. As expected of Temari.

In that case, he just had to carefully explain the rest...

“I can’t go into the women’s side. Since I’m a man. So I need you to go to the women’s side. Since you can go in. Like you said, it’s obvious. When you come out of the women’s side, I need you to tell me the state it’s in, just in a few words. That’s all that’s needed. Okay? It’s a really simple thing to do, right?”

“What exactly...are you talking about...?” Temari asked, in an incredibly calm voice.

She wasn’t looking like she was suspicious of him anymore. Now her eyes were just plain confused.

What was this all about? He’d explained it very simply and clearly, but she still didn’t understand. Shikamaru didn’t know how to fix this.

What in the world was Temari not understanding? Just a while ago, she’d agreed that he couldn’t go into the women’s side of the hot springs...

“To begin with,” Temari said. “What, exactly, are we talking about?”

Was that the root? To think that all the things he’d been saying hadn’t reached her at all...

“What do you mean what?” Shikamaru asked. “We’re talking about selecting an inn for a honeymoon for a wedding, aren’t we?”

“Exactly, whose wedding?”

“Naruto and Hinata’s, obviously. Huh? Didn’t I tell you that? That’s odd...”

It seemed like they’d had some sort of a misunderstanding. The whole time, Temari had been thinking of some wedding other than Naruto and Hinata’s. Shikamaru finally realised that fact at this moment.

Temari was of a superior excellence to other people. She would hear the beginning of an explanation, and immediately deduce the rest. He wouldn’t have to say it out loud for her to realise they’d had a misunderstanding as well, she’d catch on just as quickly as he did.

*So that’s how it was,* Shikamaru thought, finally understanding. *There had been a misunderstanding.*

Temari seemed to have worked it out, too.

“Hmm, so that’s what it all was....” Temari said. She was smiling, calm and at peace.

“No, but wait, then....*Ah!!*” Shikamaru inadvertently let out an exclamation.

*It was possible that Temari’s misunderstanding had been....*

“No, right?” He asked her. “Hey...it wasn’t that...”

When he asked that, Temari silently took her tessen off her back, holding it in hand.

“H-hey...what is it?” He asked. “Why’re you suddenly taking that out...? Wh- what’s up with your chakra...?!”

Temari grinned affectionately at him.

Shikamaru was captivated by the sight, and found a smile forming on his face, too.

Smiling at each other like that, they looked like the very picture of an intimate pair of lovers.

That night in Konoha...

One sudden, out-of-season gale swept over Konoha’s hot springs, and lasted the entirety of the night. The residents and tourists spent the whole night awake, too frightened to go to sleep....

## One Bowl Full of Soul

These days, naruto\* [fish cakes served atop ramen] was incredibly popular.

When did it happen? In the blink of an eye, naruto had risen to number one in the Popular Toppings list. From children to adults, people of all types and ages loved naruto.

More naruto would be served on dishes, and then before you realised what'd happened, they'd have finished and run out.

Even the local mothers had started saying that if children ate naruto then they're grow up to be healthy, energetic, and strong.

Ahh, naruto. You scruffy-looking fish cakes, with your pale white background and pink swirling whirlpool in the middle. But, if you weren't here, people would feel so very lonely.

Teuchi, the owner of Ichiraku Ramen, was cutting up more naruto fish cakes today.

Now, ramen would be made by smoothly adding in boiled noodles to various soups, and then then skillfully, artistically adding several toppings on top. The finishing touch of just that tiny bit of naruto added a firm flair to the whole bowl of ramen.

As the popularity of those naruto toppings grew, so did the turnover that Ichiraku's made. These days Teuchi was continuously setting out extra tables in front of the place, but even those would immediately fill up.

It certainly hadn't been like this in the old days.

Ichiraku Ramen had opened shop in Konoha a good many years ago. Back then, a good number of people were grateful for the cheap and quick ramen, but the turnover had barely been enough for Teuchi stay out of the red. He'd thought that he'd keep scraping by like that until the bitter end.

And back then...

Back then, naruto had always been the least-liked. The 'Popular Toppings' board which stood outside the shop would always have naruto scrawled at the very bottom. Nobody really cared whether it was there or not.

The reason nobody cared was the existence of other toppings

Simmered bamboo shoots, loved for the texture as people chewed on them.

Roast pork cutlets, carefully cooked and greatly recommended.

Half-boiled eggs, drowning in their own lovely flavour.

Seaweed, and their incredible surge of popularity as an optimum highlight on ramen.

Every single one of them were strong competitors for the place of number one topping.

Seaweed in particular had always been a tough opponent. While naruto was always stuck at the bottom, seaweed hovered constantly at top in ranking. You could say that seaweed had always been the greatest obstacle that naruto could never pass in popularity.

The reason was likely because nori had so many devoted customers.

Shinobi seemed to have a certain inclination towards seaweed. Seaweed never stood out, and never showed off. It clung to the sides of the bowl, or floated around in groups in the soup. It was like a shadow.

Compared to the pointlessly exuberant naruto, with its bright pink spiral on white that never failed to stand out, seaweed had a completely different atmosphere about it.

It would be exaggerated to say shinobi had fellow-feelings for the seaweed in their ramen, but it was true that they felt a sort of familiarity towards it. Seaweed had such popularity that it had likely never been declined by any customer.

To think that naruto had finally surpassed seaweed- no, not just seaweed, but bamboo shoots and pork cutlets and eggs as well. It had surpassed them all, now sitting at the very top of the Popular Toppings board.

Teuchi looked at the proudly sparkling naruto, and felt emotional. He thought about how eras would change and ramen would be continued to be made and great changes like this would still take place.

When you thought about it, naruto was made of minced fish after all, and it contained various nutrients shinobi needed. And then, more importantly, the swirling pink whirlpool pattern looked pretty similar to the mark of Konoha carved into the hitai-ate of Konoha's shinobi. One could even say the jagged edges of naruto looked similar to shuriken.

The naruto hadn't been popular up to now, but the tide had turned, and in the present, naruto was mysteriously and deeply appreciated by shinobi. There was some curious sort of fate between shinobi and naruto. One could say that naruto was a foodstuff that seemed like it had almost been made specifically for shinobi to eat.

But as for the question as to why naruto was suddenly so beloved by so many shinobi, well, that was all thanks to another Naruto. His regular customer, Naruto.

The popularity of naruto today was all thanks to that Naruto.

Well now, from now, we'll be focusing on the story of that customer Naruto, instead of the topping.

Uzumaki Naruto...he had been frequenting Teuchi's shop ever since he was a child, a regular among regulars.

Teuchi had been invited to his wedding ceremony. Although Naruto had told him he was getting married, Teuchi hadn't imagined he'd even be invited to the wedding. He had to think of a good wedding gift.

*To think that little kid's now getting married...*

Coupling that with naruto's amazing climb to the top of the Popular Toppings list, Teuchi had many things he felt emotional about.

It really made him acutely aware of how time kept flowing and passing.

Teuchi's memories took him back to the first time Naruto had come to his store...

"Heyo, lad. Do you wanna come over and eat something?"

Teuchi had called out with a smile on his face, but the young boy jolted with a start, his whole body shaking.

It had just passed dinner time, so the shop was empty. Teuchi had noticed the child constantly sneaking glances towards Ichiraku's as he wandered aimlessly on the streets.

He hadn't just seen the boy today, either. The kid been wandering around here a lot the past few days, and Teuchi had gotten used to the sight of him. He would always walk hesitantly towards the shop, and then walk away, back and forth without ever actually coming in.

Sooner or later, Teuchi had found himself getting curious about the young boy always wondering around his field of vision.

It was because every time Teuchi saw him, the child was all alone.

Today as well, the boy was hunching his shoulders against the cold weather, sneaking quick peeps inside the store every few minutes. There weren't any other customers around to deal with anyway, so Teuchi just instinctively called out to him.

The child approached him slowly, trembling with nerves. But Teuchi slid out a bowl of ramen towards the boy, and that tiny, frightened face instantly lit up.

What was the little one doing, outside at this late hour all by himself?

Just what was his family doing? His parents?

Those thoughts passed through Teuchi's mind, but he didn't ask the child any questions. He just watched over him as he ate. It looked like he was enjoying the meal.

Soon enough, the child had lifted the great bowl to his lips with his tiny hands, tipping it back so as to slurp up all the soup he could and not leave a single drop behind.

The bowl so large compared to him, that his face disappeared completely out of sight.

When the child lowered the bowl, he looked happy and content.

His eyes met Teuchi's, and the kid grinned so wide that his teeth showed.

Teuchi found himself grinning back.

"You eat really well," he said, "Alright, lad. I've decided it'll be the shop's treat for your meal today."

When Teuchi said that, the child's grin turned even brighter. He said thank you, and introduced himself.

The kid's name was Uzumaki Naruto. Teuchi had privately thought to himself that it was a name with a nice, shared fate with ramen.

That was how he'd first met Naruto.

After that day, Naruto would often show up to come and eat and eat at Teuchi's shop. Teuchi heard from his other customers how Naruto didn't have any family. He also heard about the unpleasant treatment Naruto received from most of the villagers.

*So that was what his constant, nervous back-and-forth in front of the shop had been about.*

One of Teuchi's other regular customers told him this:

"Why do you let that kid into the store? All the other stores ward him off. Your sales are going to suffer. You'll lose money, I'm telling you now."

The words themselves hadn't seemed to come from a bad place. The man had likely been honestly worried about Teuchi's store.

But still, somehow, Teuchi found himself losing his temper and letting loose a furious lecture.

Oh, he didn't know anything about the world of shinobi, that was true, he told the customer. He understood there had to be many circumstances around Naruto's situation.

But why in the world would he turn away someone who liked ramen, who came all the way to his store in the hopes of filling his stomach?

For that little kid with no parents or siblings, it was very possible that Teuchi's store was the only place he could eat a warm meal made just for him.

It's possible might have been conceited for thinking that way, perhaps placing more importance on his store's existence to Naruto than was due, but it all came down to this:

Teuchi might not have known a thing about the world of shinobi, but the world of ramen was one that he understood perfectly.

When it came to ramen, the bowl in front of you was everything.

Teuchi concentrated wholly, devotedly on every bowl of ramen he prepared, silently and without compromise. He put his pride as an artisan on the line, and gave his everything to make each bowl of ramen.

So a child who found that bowl of ramen so delicious, who ate his food looking so ridiculously happy- how could Teuchi possibly turn him away? It wasn't possible. Any ramen store worth their salt would say the same.

You're supposed to sit down, and eat the bowl of ramen in front of you, Teuchi snapped to the customer. The circumstances of the person sitting next to you shouldn't matter. The person

sitting next to you was just someone who had come to eat ramen just like everyone else. It was that simple, so what exactly was the problem?

If there was any wrong to be found when a customer was glancing nervously to stare at another one, then it was the ramen. The ramen had been cooked badly.

Because if you cooked really good ramen and set it in front of someone, then they wouldn't be able to think about anyone else. They'd just be transfixed by the bowl in front of them, and happily eat without a care for whoever is around them.

"-and if there's anyone who doesn't like our store because of that, then I'd be pleased if they *did* get lost." Teuchi had said as he finished the rant he'd unleashed on his regular customer.

"I'm sorry, Teuchi." The regular said to him, "I...I didn't mean it like that..."

"I understand. You said that because you were concerned about the state of my store, right?" Teuchi gave him a friendly smile. "Come again, alright?"

From then onwards, regular customers continued to visit Teuchi's shop, and Naruto became part of that group, too. He came almost every single day to eat.

Until, at one point, things changed.

One day, Naruto stopped coming to Ichiraku Ramen.

Teuchi told himself it was a strange series of incidents to do with a complicated situation. That's why Naruto couldn't come.

Naruto, who would come to eat lunch at noon, and then come again to eat dinner at night.

Naruto, who would buy huge amounts of cup ramen to keep himself full with, but then still show up in the early hours of the morning.

That was the sort of person Naruto was, and yet one day, he suddenly stopped coming.

Someone who always came was suddenly absent. Someone who should be present was nowhere to be found.

Was is still really okay to call it a strange series of incidents?

Teuchi felt incredibly uneasy in those days following Naruto's absence.

Come to think of it, he'd gone through this pattern various times.

The reason was that while he served many villagers ramen, he also had a lot of customers who were shinobi.

"I wanted to eat your ramen just once before I head out on a mission." His shinobi customers would say such delightful things.

Teuchi would think fervently to himself as he cooked their ramen: *I really hope you come back and eat my ramen again.*

It wasn't because he wanted to sell them more ramen.

It was because he wanted them to come back safe.

*If you could come back safe, eat my ramen, and show me that smiling face again, it would be far more happiness than any artisan could ask for. I won't even charge you.*

Of course, it was a bit idealistic of him to ignore the fact that if he didn't charge for their second meal he would have a hard time paying the bills for the ingredients of said meal.

But at the end of the day, Teuchi had gone through many years at his shops where shinobi customers suddenly stopped coming. They hadn't come almost every day like Naruto had, but they had still come frequently throughout every year.

"I've got a mission after this. When my mission ends, I'd like to come back and eat your ramen again." They'd say with a smile, and head out.

They would head out, and never come back.

Teuchi waited for months. He waited for years. They didn't show up.

Teuchi didn't understand anything about the world of shinobi. But he did know that death chased every single one of them.

It was thanks to those shinobi who put themselves at risk and protected everyone in the village that Teuchi and the other villagers could live peacefully.

That was why...

Every night, Teuchi would prepare the ingredients for the next day of work at Ichiraku's. At as he did, all the faces of his missing shinobi customers would come to mind.

*You were careful, right...?*

*You just got fed up my ramen, right?*

*You just found another, better store, right?*

*Right?*

*That's the case, Teuchi tried to tell himself, trying to cheer himself up. That's definitely the case. Who knows, I may even see them tomorrow. In that case, I'd better make sure tomorrow's ramen is better than ever!*

He spent his nights staying up and preparing ingredients with fervently hopeful thoughts like that.

That was how Teuchi continued making ramen, day in and day out.

Several months after Naruto stopped showing up, Teuchi heard that the shinobi was just out of the village for an extended training trip.

He felt relief surge through him from the very bottom of his heart.

It was true that the last time Naruto had stopped by the shop, he'd mentioned going on a long trip. Teuchi had assumed it was for a mission of some sort, but he couldn't have imagined Naruto would be away for so long.

Shinobi had such harsh training ethics.

When Naruto came back from his two-year-long training trip, he'd grown taller and looked just like a grown man. It was funny, how Teuchi wouldn't have noticed those drastic changes if he'd seen him every day like he used to.

Teuchi didn't talk about a lot of things. He just put a bowl of ramen in front of Naruto for him to eat.

It was one bowl full of soul.

Naruto might've grown, but the bright grin he gave Teuchi after eating his ramen hadn't changed at all.

For some reason, that fact made Teuchi so happy he grinned back even wider.

Naruto's characteristic bravado and inability to give up would eventually help him save the village several times, and soon enough he was being called everyone's hero.

A handful of years later, and the little boy who had been so isolated was now loved and acknowledged by everyone.

The name 'Uzumaki Naruto' passed across a great many people's mouths. And every time someone repeated his story, people would find themselves feeling a sort of affection towards the naruto topping. Dozens of Teuchi's customers would ask for additional orders of naruto, and eventually there were so many requests that it almost became a craze.

Embarrassingly, there were quite a few people going around and calling 'Ichiraku Ramen' by the name 'Hero's Ramen' instead. Teuchi felt uneasy when people starting eating the ramen and murmuring 'if I eat this, I won't fail on my mission!' or 'please let me come back safe and alive' under their breath, but he couldn't heartlessly tell them to stop, either.

All the shinobi and kunoichi who frequented his shop and said things like that were the protectors of the village, those who would go out and be chased by death on cruel missions almost every day. It was human nature to want the comfort of charms that would protect them.

And then, there was the undeniable fact that Teuchi himself had always been praying in a way, too, every time he cooked for shinobi about to head out on missions. His constant thoughts of

‘please come back and eat again’ were really no better than the murmured wishes of his customers.

‘If I eat this ramen I’ll become stronger’, or ‘if I eat this ramen I’ll become a hero’...it wasn’t happy circumstances which lead to those kinds of wishes.

Even the thoughts and prayers of one person could help you change. Teuchi had learned that very well in the past.

*Yes, that incident had been on a cold, cold night in the middle of winter. That night was when Teuchi had decided to open up his first shop, the night he had experienced his life’s latest tri-*

Ah, the broth in his stockpot had started to boil. The steam had risen up along with the bubbling sound, and snapped Teuchi clean out of his reminiscing.

“Oops, I got too caught up in thinking about the past.” Teuchi muttered. Good grief, he was getting old.

He briskly moved onto making the ramen. The boiled noodles were gently put into the soup. He carefully added the toppings, arranging them in a pleasing manner. And then, yes, the final topping of naruto.

Teuchi had broken away from his train of thought for the sake of concentrating solely and only on making the bowl of ramen that had been ordered.

*What had he been thinking about...?*

He’d completely forgotten. Teuchi usually forgot things these days, and didn’t remember them straight away, but he didn’t mind.

It was enough to live each day one ramen bowl at a time.

What else would the owner of a ramen store wish for? That much was enough. It was because Teuchi loved ramen so much that he’d decided to enter the world of ramen, after all.

Besides, if he’d been thinking about something very important, he’d remember it straight away.

Ahh, that’s right, he’d been thinking about a wedding present. His brain knew how to hold onto important things after all.

Both Naruto (the person) and naruto (the topping) had helped Teuchi out a lot. He wanted to show his gratitude in return, but unfortunately the things he could do were limited. What Teuchi could is what he always did: make ramen.

*But then, that wasn’t a bad thing,* Teuchi thought.

The relationship between Teuchi and Naruto was that of a shopkeeper and his most regular customer. When it came to what Teuchi knew about Naruto...well, he knew the boy loved Teuchi’s ramen with a deep and pure passion...

At the end of the day, despite knowing each other for years, Teuchi and Naruto had been mutually impeded from talking about anything else since they both wholly devoted themselves to concentrating on the ramen on the counter between them.

Since Teuchi was like that, and Naruto was like that, it was already clear that the only gift he could give was ramen, right?

Teuchi reached out to the memo pad he kept nearby, and wrote three words on it:

### **Free Ramen Pass**

It was a voucher that would let Naruto eat all the ramen he liked from Ichiraku's for free. Surely, he'd be delighted with this gift.

*No, hold on a moment.*

Teuchi scribbled a few more words.

### **Free Ramen Pass - Valid for One Year**

*There we go.* Teuchi nodded in complete satisfaction.

Wedding presents were all well and good, but that didn't mean money grew up trees. Teuchi feared his shop would end up disappearing from the strain of unpaid noodles if he went too over the top.

Either way, Naruto would be delighted with this gift, since he could eat all the ramen he loved. He loved ramen a lot, so he'd probably come over every day.

*Every day. From morning till night.*

*He'd bring along his wife and say "Alright, I'm gonna eat ramen until every cell in my body is made of ramen!"*

*And then he'd eat.*

*And eat, and eat, and eat, and eat, and eat...and Teuchi's store collapsed.*

*Inside Teuchi's mind, he could see his daughter Ayame going absolutely stiff with shock and staring at their collapsed store. Ayame, who worked so cheerfully and energetically to attract customers to their store was staring sadly at its tattered remains.*

*Teuchi didn't know what to say to her, and stayed stock still in shock.*

*"One year...is a long time..." Ayame whispered, a large tear falling down her cheek.*

*It was a nightmare. How had this happened? Why had the store collapsed? They'd only been making ramen...*

*"Gah..." Teuchi frantically shook his head to rid himself of the frightening images.*

*Calm down. Calm down, Teuchi. Be cool-headed. Indeed, a year is too long...*

### **Free Ramen Pass - Valid for One Year Half a Year**

*Half a year... No, no that wouldn't do either.*

The pen in Teuchi's hand squeaked from strain as he gripped it far too tight.

### **Free Ramen Pass - Valid for One Year Half a Year One Month**

Teuchi let go of his pen, nodding.

This would do. Wait no, he still felt a little frightened...

### **Free Ramen Pass - Valid for One Year Half a Year One Month One Week**

Teuchi's breathing had gotten a little laboured. When had that happened?

He was picturing Naruto's reaction...

*"One whole week?! Alright, then I better eat ten bowls of ramen every day!"*

*It was no good!*

Teuchi put the memo pad far away from him. How could he think this was the solution? Vouchers would only bring misery and destruction. It would wreak havoc on him and his daughter.

"Ohhh...oh no..." Teuchi was crying at the horrific images his imagination brought to life.

Thanks to his carelessly written voucher, Ayame would be out on the cold, dark streets. She'd meet some shitty man and get married to him!

*Ayame, how could you do this to me? To marry a buckwheat noodle maker's son! You don't have the right to call me 'father'. Leave. Leave my sight or I'll dump ramen over both our heads!*

"Nooo....oh no, nooo..." Teuchi groaned, cradling his head in his hands.

A free pass was impossible. If he did that, he wouldn't be able to make a livelihood.

Then, what should he do? He had to put a time limit or number of bowls limit, otherwise it would be a disaster. Even if he told Naruto 'only eat as much as common sense allows', Teuchi's common sense and Naruto's common sense weren't the same thing.

That being said, any gift he could give that wasn't ramen felt like it wouldn't have any meaning. It was an impossible situation.

"Good afternoon," Teuchi called out to a new customer who just came in.

"One large serving of ramen, please." The customer said, "Ah, and extra naruto."

Naruto really has been popular lately. It used to be that it barely sold, but nowadays Teuchi was stocking up ahead of time to make sure he never ran out.

Teuchi switched over his distraught feelings for professionalism as he started making the ramen. As always, he devoted himself entirely to the task, and added the naruto topping at the very last stage. He put in the extra naruto too, arranging them nice and careful.

It looked like naruto's place at the top of the Popular Toppings list was safe for quite a good while.

"Here you go, order up!" Teuchi slid the ramen towards his customer, and went back to worrying.

He pulled back the memo pad, opening a new, blank page. The customer was happily munching on the naruto in his ramen. It was alright even if he asked for more helpings of the topping. Teuchi had a whole mountain-full of them already cut up and ready.

Teuchi looked at the mountain of cut-up naruto that he'd arranged on a tray in his work area.

The memo pad's new page was white, just like most of naruto was white. But naruto wasn't just white. It also had that lovely spiraling whirlpool pattern.

*Those naruto were good things.* Teuchi thought.

Teuchi's mind was blank, and the memo pad he had in his hand was blank, but the naruto wasn't, because it had that lovely, fascinating spiral. For a while, Teuchi continued to silently stare at the mountain of naruto.

And then...

### **One Free Serving of Naruto**

Before he even realised what he was doing, Teuchi had written that line on the memo pad. He put down the pen. Then, just as quickly, he picked it back up.

### **One Free Serving of Naruto**

This wouldn't do either. It was too small a gift, he was worrying too much. Teuchi kept trying to think of a gift option that wouldn't let his worst fears come to life.

It was thanks to Naruto (the person) that naruto (the topping) had gotten so popular, so Teuchi couldn't behave so small-mindedly.

But, as important as a wedding gift was, if he acted too recklessly, then his imagination taunted him with images of Ayame out on the cold streets, marrying some irresponsible bastard.

What he needed was something with perfect balance. It had to be something that carried a deep love of ramen, but also something that wouldn't put the store in danger of bankruptcy, some kind of splendid gift that combined both those factors.

Teuchi's thoughts started churning again.

*It's thanks to Naruto (the person) that naruto (the topping) is so popular. So in that case...*

Teuchi found his resolve, and wrote out a new sentence on his memo pad.

As he did, he thought of how Naruto looked when he ate his ramen. That look the boy always had, of being so happy he couldn't even speak.

That grin of Naruto's was unfair. It was underhanded. Any owner of a ramen store would turn to mush when they saw it.

Whenever he thought of that look, Teuchi couldn't help but think:

*I always want to see this face.*

"Alright." Teuchi gave a satisfied nod. He'd finally found the right wedding present.

### The Relationship between Them

With just one glance, Haruna Sakura knew that this gift was The One. *This is it*, she thought, *there's no better wedding gift than this!*

She had been browsing for gifts inside her favourite fashion-conscious store when her eyes landed on a marvel: a one-of-a-kind photo frame.

The colour, the shape, even the tiny details carved into the design, everything about it fit Sakura's tastes perfectly. It almost made her feel like the frame had come into existence just so it could be bought by her.

Sakura was the type who absolutely had to buy one-of-a-kind items. She'd decided that it wouldn't do if she bought a gift that she wouldn't have wanted for herself. If you didn't like the gift you were buying yourself, you couldn't really be confident in giving it to others, could you?

*Ahh, if I could, I really would like to decorate my room with this.* She couldn't help but think, *If I had something pretty like this in my room, I'd look forward to coming home every day...*

But honestly, the biggest reason Sakura had liked the photo frame was because it was one-of-a-kind. There were no other duplicates. It was the only one in the world, something nobody else would have.

It was a wedding gift after all, so it'd be disastrous if anyone else bought the same thing as her. But as long as she bought this one-of-a-kind photo frame, she wouldn't have to worry about anyone else buying the same gift.

Even if someone else did happen to give the couple another photo frame, it wouldn't be the same design as this one, and her gift would still be superior in its uniqueness.

On that note, as far as she knew, nobody else was thinking about buying a photo frame for the couple.

Captain Yamato, for example, had the hobby of reading books about architectural design and construction.

*"Furniture to match their new home..." Yamato had mumbled with his usual blank expression on his face, "Or, no, maybe it's the new home itself that I should..."*

Then there was Sai, who had a talent for art. He'd been unusually enthusiastic, talking about how he spent his nights staying up to paint the couple a wedding gift.

She'd actually run into Sai this morning. She happened to catch sight of him standing absolutely still in the middle of the street, staring in numb, dumbfounded horror at the white scroll in his hands. His art had disappeared entirely.

*"Sakura..."* Sai had dazedly said. *"The bird flew away...into the sky..."*

How in the world had his chakra ended up spilling over into his ink? Sai had been a bit *too* enthusiastic, if you asked Sakura.

Anyway, at the end of the day everyone was gathering gifts that reflected their own hobbies or skills. So Sakura herself decided to buy a stylish memento as a gift, something that would suit her feminine nature. And thus, her eyes had come to rest on the aforementioned photo frame.

A photo frame was perfect. It was a gift that would definitely become a treasured memento, something that couldn't possibly be left unused. On top of that, you wouldn't even have to make a choice about the most important part of the photo frame: the photo that would be displayed inside. That choice was left up to the recipients.

Sakura imagined the photo frame standing proudly in a corner of Naruto and Hinata's room. They could put frame their wedding photo in the frame, or maybe one day a photo of their newborn child. Either way, it would be lovely.

The happy memories preserved in the photo frame would watch over their future happy life. The couple would be smiling in their photo, and smiling in real life whenever they looked at that photo.

For some reason, just thinking about that made Sakura feel happy as well. Her cheeks curved with a smile.

This was definitely the one. It would be the best wedding gift.

Sakura reached out for the photo frame, and-

Found another hand had landed on the other side of the photo frame.

Sakura abruptly tried to pull the frame out of the other person's hands with a great heave. However, the other party had tried to do the very same thing at the very same time.

The photo frame trembled between them, not moving from the equal but opposite directions of force.

Sakura's eyes followed the interloper's hand to look into the face of its owner.

Her eyes met Yamanaka Ino's.

"Ino, let go of that...!" Sakura grit out, pulling with all her might/

"*You* let go, Sakura...!" Ino was pulling with all her might as well.

Sakura and Ino were very close friends. Ever since they were children, they had been friends, and they had been rivals.

Just the other day, they'd been put on a mission as a team. It had been a very sudden assignment, but they'd worked together perfectly, with flawless cooperation. They practically breathed in sync.

But to think that they'd come to the same store at the same time, and reached out for the same item in the same instant...it was like fate was pulling a prank on them. They couldn't have pulled off the timing better if they'd planned it beforehand.

Maybe they really *were* breathing in sync.

If they'd been a man and a woman, they might very well have fallen in love. Maybe tiny hearts would've been popping and flailing around them.

Unfortunately, the only thing Sakura and Ino were giving off in this moment were flames and sparks of an imminent war.

It only took one glance at Sakura's face to realise that her intentions were the same as her own. Women were good at noticing those sort of things. Ino had likely realised it too.

*We both want to buy this as a wedding present...!*

Each woman understood the others intention immediately, and a fierce struggle began.

"I- found it- first...!" Ino said through clenched teeth.

"I was- quicker- thank you....!" Sakura retorted, putting all the strength she had into pulling.

Whenever she and Ino got like this, she couldn't help but feel the fierce competition from their childhood friendship flaming to life.

The photo frame started to quake between them from the pressure of the equally fierce strength being exerted on either side.

*But, I grabbed it with my right hand!* Sakura thought to herself, inwardly cackling in glee.

The chances of victory were hinging on their positions. Sakura had grabbed the frame with her right hand, and Ino had grabbed it with her left.

*There's no way the frail grip of Ino's left hand can withstand the overwhelming power of my right hand!*

"Shannaro!" Sakura yelled, and put all her force into her right hand. The photo frame slid out of Ino's grip in one smooth movement.

"Ahh! Wh- what're you doing?! Give that back!" Ino fiercely protested.

But Sakura was a grown woman. She ignored Ino's shrilly complaints with an air of mature composure.

Talk of them being rivals or anything was long past now. Now, Sakura had surpassed Ino in everything. Sakura held the photo frame in her hands and felt the glow of victory swell up in her chest.

"You're such a brute!" Ino said, "An idiot with brute strength!

"Who are you calling an idiot?!" Sakura was incensed, unconsciously clenching her hands around the photo frame in her hands.

Sakura tried to regain her composure and act like a cool-headed, mature, grown woman.

"H- haha. Ino, you do know that I'm the best medical-nin in the entire village, right? The high-grade medical jutsu I use require very precise chakra control. To call me an idiot would be a little off...it's because I excel so much in chakra control that I can bring out a strength superior to others. My strength proves just how much of a terribly excellent medical-nin I am. But well, Ino,

I suppose that even if you used shintenshin jutsu and entered my body, you'd never be able to pull that level of chakra control off, huh?"

"Ugh..." Ino took one step back, making an angry sound in the back of her throat.

*I win.* Sakura thought, *That's right Ino, it's best for you to retreat now.*

Sakura turned her back on Ino to head for the cash register, and in that moment-

"Oh, by the way, Sakura, you're surely not thinking about giving that photo frame to Naruto and Hinata as a wedding gift, now, are you?" Ino called out with a terribly sarcastic tone. "You're not, right? You couldn't possibly think of giving them such a **lame** gift."

"Wha-?!" Sakura stopped in her tracks, turning back to stare at Ino without thinking.

But, the minute she saw the sly grin on Ino's face, Sakura saw through her completely.

*Ah, how naive, Ino.*

Sakura was familiar with Ino's usual tactics. She was degrading the photo frame so Sakura would decide against buying it. Ino had seen she couldn't win against Sakura's brute strength, so now she was trying to win with words.

However, that move wasn't going to work.

"What're you saying?" Sakura retorted. "You were desperate to buy this just a minute ago!"

"Eugh...th-that's..."

*Weak. Really weak, Ino. You're always like that, if someone points out the smallest flaw in what you've said, you get all flustered straight away.*

"That's some awful fashion sense you have there, trying to desperately buy something you thought was lame." Sakura said, giving the final blow.

Ino had miserably gotten stuck in a trap of her own making.

"I- I didn't particularly say I was going to buy it...!" Ino protested.

"Then why were you holding onto it so frantically?"

"Th- that's...trash, yeah, trash. I thought it was something someone had thrown away and wanted to throw it away!"

"What a see-through excuse! Please, as if there would be trash on a shelf in the middle of a store?!"

Sakura suddenly became aware of a store employee coming between them.

"Uhm, honoured customers," The employee spoke politely, "I'm very sorry, but you're disturbing the other customers..."

Ack, somehow she'd raised her voice without realising. Sakura quickly turned to apologise to the employee

“I- I’m so sorry...” Sakura poked Ino’s side with her elbow. “Come on, Ino, you apologise too. Thanks to you, we’ve been a bother...”

“*Excuse me?* It’s your fault for raising a ruckus and shouting, isn’t it?!£ Ino shoved Sakura back. “Watch what you say!”

Sakura and Ino glared at each other, and in the next instant, they had both lunged at each other. Their hands grabbed and pulled at each other, hair and clothes alike as they struggled.

“In the first place, things turned out like this because you butted in!”

“I keep telling you, I found it first!”

“Honoured customers!” The panicked employee tried to come between them. “Please, desist, honoured customers!”

Ironically, this was the only moment where Sakura and Ino got along.

“SHUT UP!” They both shrieked at the employee, fierce, demon-like expressions on their faces.

A deathly silence fell on the store. It felt like time had stopped.

The employee who’d tried to interfere between them had dropped their jaw.

But in the next instant, her features hardened.

By the time Ino and Sakura came to their senses and apologised to her in very small voices, it was already late.

Both of them were thrown out of the store.

But...just because they were thrown out, that didn’t mean their arguing had stopped.

“Look at what you did! I can’t believe I actually got thrown out of the store!”

“Look at what you did! Even though I’d *finally* found a good wedding gift!”

Sakura and Ino were arguing with raised voices in the middle of the street, uncaring of any curious eyes who’d stop to see what the fuss was about.

“Found?” Ino scoffed, “Oh, that’s a nice way to put snatching something out of someone’s hands with your brute strength! In the first place Sakura, you can never compromise on anything! You don’t have a heart or willingness to compromise, just that brute strength and nothing else! There’s really no helping you!”

“*Excuse me?* Having a heart has nothing to do with this! Do me a favour and stop saying random things just because I exceed you at everything!”

“*Excuse me?* What do you mean, you exceed me at everything? When it comes to which one of us is more feminine, I’m definitely the one who exceeds you!”

“Femininity?” Sakura scoffed. “Where? You’re just gaudy and flashy!”

“Ah, what a sore loser!” Ino crowed. “When it comes to looks, fashion sense, flower arrangement, and cooking, I’m better at everything single one of those things! Oh, but when it comes to having inhuman strength, that’s certainly your victory.”

*Ino, you pig...!*

A vein was throbbing in Sakura’s forehead. But, she hadn’t lost yet.

“Oh? I can cook just fine, you know? And when it comes to things like looks or fashion sense, those’re stupid things to concern yourself with. You know, it’s because stuff like that is all you think about that you’re not good.” Sakura gave an exaggerated, dramatic sigh, shaking her head in faux-disappointment. “Just because people will never look at you and see an intelligent woman like they do with me, that doesn’t mean you should lash out at me.”

Ino didn’t so much as flinch.

“Ahh, actually Sakura, come to think of it, I just had this thought today. Someone who’s got a big head when their only redeeming feature is brute strength, that kind of woman will never get proposed to, right? That’s so pitiful...”

“Never get proposed to?! That’s what I should be telling you!”

“Eh? Oh, I’m sorry, Sakura. I didn’t say that about you in particular, but I guess I accidentally hit the bullseye, huh? I’ll apologise if I hurt your feelings~”

“You...”

Maybe Ino had brought up such an incredibly sensitive matter since their argument was originally about wedding gifts, but that was just too far. It was a low blow.

“But well,” Ino continued. “I guess it *is* kinda obvious that just a good head and brute strength aren’t enough to guarantee you’ll be a bride.”

*What are you, a master of sarcasm?* Sakura thought, but replied without cowering.

“I keep telling you that I can cook! And my cooking is sure to be at least better than yours, Ino.”

“Pardon? Sakura, you don’t seriously think someone like you can beat me at cooking, do you?”

“Obviously I do. I’m confident I couldn’t possibly lose to you!”

“Fine then. Let’s see who’s really better!”

Ino and Sakua glared at each other.

Somehow, the outcome of their pride and stubbornness had turned into a cooking competition.

Wedding presents, the photo frame, everything else had been thrown out the window and forgotten completely. Neither cared about how things had come to this.

The only thing that fueled both women was to do everything in their power to wipe that smug smirk off of their rival's face.

Sakura and Ino.

The cooking showdown that would put both their womanly prides on the line had now begun.

The star dish of the showdown: soldier pills.

Soldier pills were small, transportable masses of preserved food that shinobi liked to use.

Foods with high nutrient balances were kneaded and dehydrated into round balls. They were very well known and widely used in all parts of the shinobi world as a standard military ration.

However, the world of soldier pills was unexpectedly deep.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that there were the numbers of different types of soldier pill were equal to the number of people who made them. This was because the ingredients used in the solder pills, as well as their size, varied from maker to maker.

For example, there were those who made soldier pills using ingredients listed in a secret recipe that had been handed down in their clan for generations. And there were also those who make them so big that they were about the size of a rice ball. And then there were those who made soldier pills for animal consumption, not humans.

Soldier pills were a type of food whose contents were changed by many, many factors. The family tradition for the recipe, preferences, physical condition, tactics, mission length, weather conditions...all these factors went into the making of a single soldier pill.

That was why Ino and Sakura had decided the the soldier pill would be the dish for their cook-off.

It was quick to make, and easy to eat. The wide range of its recipe also allowed both Sakura and Ino to display their different personalities and skills, and quickly and easily determine which was superior.

Sakura had bought her ingredients, gone home, and immediately gotten to work on creating her soldier pill.

She'd poured all her ingredients bowls, and put all her concentration into mashing them with a wooden pestle. First, there was sesame seeds, almonds and walnuts. All ingredients that were commonly used in Konoha.

"Just you wait and see!" She muttered as she grinded the ingredients to powdered dust. "I'll show you that when it comes to cooking, my ability is definitely higher!"

All the ingredients used in soldier pills were generally prepared the same way: grinding them until they'd become a powdered dust.

Sakura added in more often-used ingredients, honey and rock candy, continuing her work. As she grinded the ingredients together, her thoughts went back to her Academy days.

The academy's Kunoichi Classes including teaching the young kunoichi about things like flower arrangement and tea ceremony. You had to learn a wide range of information about culture and behaviour. The classes existed so that kunoichi could easily infiltrate enemy territory undetected, so their behaviour and knowledge wouldn't betray their inner nature. You couldn't grow to be a successful kunoichi if you didn't know how to act like a normal woman.

And those many Kunoichi Classes had, of course, included cooking.

Ino had shined brilliantly within cooking class, always carrying out her recipes to the letter.

Sakura, on the other hand, couldn't follow them as easily.

Back then, Sakura had looked with yearning aspiration at the ever-popular Ino.

*But now, things are different.*

As a kunoichi, and as a woman, Sakura had continued to grow and improve her skills. The person she used to admire from behind then became someone she could face head on, side by side. And now, Sakura had taken one step after another to move forwards, further than Ino had.

"Ino...in cooking, and in whatever else that comes my way, get ready to take a good look at my back!" Sakura furiously said, full of fighting spirit as she grinded away with the wooden pestle.

Ino had said she'd never become a bride- well, Sakura wasn't about to take that lying down. She absolutely *could not* afford to lose in this battle. In the first place, Ino was just getting carried away in the the bliss of getting along well with Sai lately. Sakura wasn't going to lose against that fickle bliss.

*You're going to get a good taste of a blossoming woman's wrath!* Sakura darkly thought.

Cooking might've been a little different than the actual matter that had sparked her rage, but either way it was a win. And Sakura had prepared a plan that would guarantee her victory.

"Fufufu...this is it." Sakura let a wicked grin creep up her face, holding up the ingredient that was key to her success.

The ingredient in question was pudding.

Sakura had associated with Ino since childhood. She knew all about Ino's great love for pudding. In fact, she knew all of Ino's likes and dislikes.

For shinobi, information was everything. It wasn't arrogant for Sakura to think she'd win when she had perfect knowledge of Ino's tastes.

Brimming with overconfidence, Sakura threw the pudding into her soldier pill paste. Cackling, she mixed it in with a gleeful grin.

"With, this my victory is guaranteed!"

All that was left after this was to mould the paste into a suitably sized ball and dehydrate it.

In a short time, Sakura's special pudding-flavoured sweet soldier pill was complete.

Sometime later, nearby the general store they'd been kicked out of...

Ino was already standing at the place they'd promised to meet on one of Konoha's main streets.

Sakura's eyes met Ino's, and Ino let out a wide grin.

"So you showed up after all, Sakura." Ino said, "And here I was beginning to think you'd realised you were no match for me and ran away."

*I'll bet anything she purposely showed up early just so she could say that line to me...!* Sakura inwardly thought, clicking her tongue.

The reason she thought that was because Sakura had arrived exactly at their promised time to meet. She had decided she was never going to be a late-arriver like Kakashi-sensei.

*What a pointless thing to do...*

But, Sakura wasn't going to be provoked by petty tricks like this. The victory to this match was within the palm of her hands. Ino could boast while she could.

"Victory comes to those who take their time." Sakura said as she faced Ino. Her composure was magnificent, and she was fully confident in her impending victory.

"Alright then, our match has begun." Ino serenely said. "So, to make sure the match is fair, let's take our soldier pills to a third party who'll judge which one is most delicious."

"HUH?!" Sakura gaped. "You're not going to eat it?!"

In a single instant, the victory held in Sakura's hands had crumbled into dust and rubble.

"Obviously not." Ino's eyes were wide in surprise at Sakura's reaction. "Even if we both ate the other's dish, there's a high chance that neither of us would be willing to hand over the victory. That's why we need an objective third party to be the judge."

Ino's reasoning was sound. Sakura had had a blind spot. To think that Ino wouldn't eat the soldier pill... Going out of her way to buy pudding had been pointless. Going to the trouble of making the soldier pill Ino's favourite flavour was now completely, utterly pointless.

"Judging by your reaction, Sakura...don't tell me you..." Ino was fixedly staring at Sakura, a furrow between her brows. "...You didn't put poison into the soldier pill, did you?"

"As if I'd ever do a thing like that!"

Now that was just too much. How could Ino doubt her own best friend?

"I wonder..." Ino said, "Well, anyway, fine. So anyway, I think we should have Chouji be the judge."

"W- Wait a minute! Chouji's your teammate!"

"It's Chouji, so when it comes to food, he'll never lie, y'know? He's not going to skew the facts to take my side. So when it comes to this, Chouji would be the most reliable judge, wouldn't he?"

Well, when she put it that way, anyone would agree. Sakura found herself coming round to Ino's reasoning.

"Alright then, I'll go and bring Chouji. I saw him around here somewhere just a while ago." Ino said, and disappeared.

Soon enough, Sakura could hear her coming back, most likely with Chouji in tow since she was constantly spouting things like 'just come on and hurry!' or 'this is a chance to eat some nice home-made cooking, y'know!' and other things.

It sounded like Chouji was putting up some resistance to the position of judge.

Sure enough, Chouji slowly came into Sakura's field of vision, his giant form being dragged forwards by an insistent Ino. His face looked incredibly gloomy. Ino was definitely forcing him to participate.

"Just wait, Ino." He was protesting, "I came down here to eat ice cream."

"It's fine, it's fine. You always say you have a separate stomach for desert, don't you?"

"Yup. That's why I'm telling that I've already eaten dessert...Oh, Sakura." Chouji's eyes landed on the other girl, and he immediately began to plead for help. "Ino doesn't understand me very well. She wants to make me some kind of guinea pig for a soldier pill. Save me, please."

"So, Ino," Sakura said, "Which pill do we give him first?"

Sakura had expected Chouji to say something like "*Oh shit, you were in on it too!*" but instead, he turned meek.

"Oh well, I suppose I'll have a separate stomach for soldier pills too..." Chouji said such a reliable sounding thing.

Sakura felt reassured. Ino was right. Chouji would definitely be a fair and impartial judge to both of them.

Besides, even if Ino didn't eat the soldier pill, that didn't change the fact that the pudding would make it taste sweet and delicious. She'd still be able to win. Sakura clenched her fists tightly.

"Okay so, Chouji, can you eat both pills and tell us which one is more delicious?"

Ino handed Chouji the soldier she'd made, and Sakura did too.

Chouji looked down at the soldier pills he held in both hands, his eyes flickering from one to the other. He raised Sakura's soldier pill to his mouth first, and took a bite. He was judging, so rather than eating the only thing, he only bit half of it.

"Thi...this is..." Chouji's eyes had grown wide as dinner plates.

Sakura waited for his reaction and...

“Delicious! This is really delicious! It’s amazingly sweet, and it’s chased away all my fatigue completely!”

Chouji was so delighted, he immediately threw the other uneaten half of the soldier pill into his mouth. He didn’t stop there, even plucking the extra soldier pills Sakura had made from her hands, and gobbling some of them up too.

“Alright!” Sakura hooted, raising her fist into the air.

*Take a good look, Ino. This is a display of my real abilities!*

Chouji’s positive reaction had been obviously unexpected. Ino was glaring at him with a horrible look on her face, and Sakura could hear the woman’s molars grinding.

“How about it?” Sakura asked her, “Maybe you should just accept my victory now?”

“Cho-Chouji,” Ino was flustered. “Come on, hurry up and eat mine too.”

Chouji’s cheeks were still stuffed full with Sakura’s soldier pills, but he quickly popped in Ino’s soldier pill as well. He threw in the whole thing, not doing it by halves this time.

He stuffed three, four more of Ino’s extra pills in as well. Maybe it was so he could taste it properly, since some of Sakura’s soldier pills were still in his mouth.

“Yes...yes...yes...!” Chouji’s eyes were wide as saucers, and he was nodding fervently.

“Amazing! These ones are really sweet and delicious too!”

Chouji swallowed his cheeks full of soldier pills with a huge gulp. An incredibly satisfied grin drifted across his face.

Ino had gotten incredibly worked up and excited, pressing him for answers.

“So, which one is it? Which one is more delicious? Come on.”

“Hmm...they’re both really sweet and delicious, so it’s really hard to say which one’s better.” Chouji mumbled. He tilted his head to the side in puzzlement, crossing his arms as he chewed.

One after another, more of Ino and Sakura’s spare soldier pills popped into his mouth, being carefully chewed and judged.

“Yeah, I think they’re both great. They’re both sweet and delicious. Yup, really delicious. Delic—geugh.” Chouji’s legs crumpled from underneath him, and he collapsed. Blood was trickling down from his nostrils.

“Oh no!”

“Wh- wait- what’s wrong?! ”

Chouji had gone completely limp on the ground, his eyes wide. A single soldier pill spilled out of his limp hand onto the ground, and upon seeing that it was one of Ino’s, Sakura let out a shriek.

“Poison!” She shrieked. “Ino, you! You put poison in it, didn’t you?!”

“As if I’d ever do that! What kind of a person do you think I am?!”

“E-either way, we need to give him medical aid! Chouji, come back to your senses!”

Chouji’s mouth creaked open at the sound of Sakura’s voice.

“Even I got to make...many...great comrades...” He incoherently mumbled, blood leaking down his nose.

“What’s happening?! Is your life flashing before your eyes?!”

“Noooooooooo, Chouji don’t die!” Ino cried, “Sakura, quickly, do something!”

Ino was crying, but Sakura didn’t even understand how Chouji had gotten like this. Examining Chouji, he seemed to be in perfect health. The only possible cause for his state was unmistakably the soldier pills he’d eaten.

“Do...don’t tell me...” Sakura swallowed. “An unknown...poison...?”

Sakura was staring fixedly at Ino with a hair-raising look on her face.

“Why are you suspicious of me?!” Ino shrieked.

“He became like this after eating your soldier pill...”

“It’s possible the effect of your pills just kicked in!”

“But I wouldn’t put in any poison!”

“I have made...so many...comrades...” Chouji deliriously mumbled.

“This is bad! Chouji’s life is flashing before his eyes again!”

“We don’t have time to argue about this...!” Sakura said to herself, and gathered her determination.

She reached out for one of Ino’s soldier pills.

“What’re you gonna do?!”

“I need to figure out what’s in this, and this is the best way to do it,” Sakura said, and carefully pulled the soldier pill closer to press it against her tongue. “If there’s any poison in this, then my tongue would probably go numb...”

Rather than eating it straight away, it was best to taste it and check first.

“I keep telling you I haven’t put any poison in it! Ugh, honestly!” Ino reached out a grabbed a soldier pill too, except this one was Sakura’s. She licked the pill as well. “It’s possible yours is the one that’s weird!”

Sakura carefully tested the soldier pill, keeping it against her tongue. Cold sweat broke out against her forehead, but she kept the pill in place in earnest.

For a while, things were silent.

Sakura carefully broke the soldier pill in her hand to tiny pieces. Seeing her do that, Ino timidly did the same. They both put very small bits of the soldier pill onto their tongues, rolling them around.

“...it’s delicious.”

“...yeah.”

Both of them flung the remainders of the soldier pills unto their mouths, unable to hold back.

“What is this...this flavour, it’s incredibly delicious!” Sakura couldn’t even try to hide her surprise as she chewed.

“Mine too, I love this flavour!” Ino couldn’t hide her surprise, either.

There wasn’t any poison at all. Rather, Ino’s soldier pill was Sakura’s favourite flavour: white ball anmitsu. In other words, it was just a sweet, the same as Sakura’s was.

*Then, why in the world...?*

Just as Sakura was thinking that, Chouji had suddenly gotten back on his feet.

“Chouji, are you okay?!”

“Ahh, that surprised me.” Chouji said, wiping at the blood that had spilled down his nose. “My blood sugar suddenly rose....huh, to think I even got a nosebleed.”

So that’s what it had been: blood sugar. Now that Chouji said it, Sakura understood too.

It was true that both soldier pills were incredibly sweet. And that was just an individual soldier pill. Chouji had eaten large amounts of both, and all at once on top of that. No wonder the sudden sugar in his system had affected him badly.

And he’d mentioned eating ice cream before this, too. No matter how much of a big eater Chouji was, getting far more sugar than he needed all at once was bound to affect him badly.

“Ahhhhh, I’m so glad, so that’s what it was...” Ino let out a huge sigh of relief. Sakura glanced back at her, and the woman looked like the weight of the world had come off her shoulders.

“Yup, that’s all it was. But y’know, after eating those soldier pills, I really feel like I’ve eaten real pudding and white ball anmitsu. Hmm, after this, maybe I’ll go and eat some sweet chestnuts?”

Sakura and Ino stared at Chouji, dumbfounded.

“Chouji, you know you’re gonna kill yourself like that?!”

“It’s fine.” Chouji replied. “The stuff I just ate has already been digested by now.”

“That’s something that wouldn’t normally be possible...” Ino stared at Chouji, stunned.

“Chouji, you’re really amazing....”

“But hey, Ino.” Sakura turned to ask the woman. “Why did you go to the trouble of making the soldier pill my favourite flavour?”

Ino was the one who'd said they should make an impartial third party taste the soldier pills to be fair, so what on earth was this about? Sakura was really curious about the answer.

Ino had an uncomfortable look on her face.

"No particular reason...I just thought maybe it'd be good if I gave you some to eat sometime maybe..."

*Pff, as if.*

Ino had thought along the exact same lines as Sakura, and given the soldier pill the same flavour as her opponent's favourite food.

So, in the end of the day, their argument that had started from reaching for the same photo frame, had ended up in them plotting the exact same cooking strategy.

Thinking the ludicrous coincidence, Sakura couldn't help but start laughing.

"Ahahahaha, what's with that? At the end, you even had the exact same strategy as me."

Ino got caught up in Sakura's laughter, and started giggling too.

"Fufu, well, we've been hanging out together for a long time after all. Just how many years have we spent together? I think everything you think."

"We both do." Sakura added.

They were both facing each other and laughing so hard they were clutching at their sides. Eventually, Sakura calmed down, and wiped her fingers on her trousers.

"Okay then, as someone who thinks the same way you do, can I say something?"

"What?"

"Don't you think that if we both looked for a wedding present together, we'd be able to find something far better than a photo frame?"

"Naturally. If we combined my fashion sense with yours, nobody could possibly stand a chance!" Ino said, with a wink and a grin.

"Alright!" Sakura threw an energetic fist into the air. "Then let's both go and find the best wedding present ever!"

Ino smiled at the sight. "Honestly, Sakura...you've really become a force to be reckoned with." She was looking at Sakura with a suddenly wistful and serious look on her face. "You used to be such a crybaby back in the old days...People were always calling you 'forehead girl' or 'forehead revolution', and you started crying straight away everytime..."

"Hold on, Ino!" Sakura exclaimed. "What do you mean 'forehead revolution'?! Don't just suddenly make up named that a person was never called! Come to think of it, you just thought that name up now, didn't you?!"

Ino stuck out a tongue at her.

“Wha- You! Get back here right now!”

“Ahahaha, learn to take a joke!”

Both of their voices mingled and mixed into the chaos of Konoha’s, but they sounded unmistakably happy.

Sakura and Ino.

The two of them would always be rivals. And, always be the very best of friends.

## The Legendary Teacher

*I'm glad I chose this job.*

Until you were able to have that thought with pride surging through your chest, then your life wasn't truly a happy one. This was because a job was something you chose to live through for your own sake, as well as the sake of others.

Or at least, that was the way that Umino Iruka thought.

And, right now, Iruka was extremely happy. His chest was bursting with pride when he thought about it.

The trigger for this sudden burst of joy was simply this: he'd glanced the three syllables on top of Ichizoku Ramen's Most Popular Toppings list: Na-ru-to.

Just glancing at it made Iruka immediately think of Naruto and Hinata's upcoming wedding, and before he knew it, he was overwhelmed with emotion.

It wasn't because he was easily moved to tears with his old age. It was because the emotion overwhelming Iruka was likely something very close to parental love and affection.

And a certain something had happened to make him even more overwhelmed.

The other day, Iruka had been in the Academy's staff room as usual, working through some documents. Naruto had come to see him with an incredibly deferential look on his face. He said he had something to ask Iruka, something about the wedding.

Iruka had already let Naruto know he was definitely going to come to the wedding, so he didn't have the faintest idea what he wanted to ask.

Iruka asked him what he wanted to talk about, and Naruto abruptly blurted out:

*I'd like it if you'd come to the wedding as my dad.*

The second Iruka heard that, a giant grin spread over his face. He answered immediately: *Leave it to me!*

Iruka even cracked a joke as he was seeing Naruto off outside: '*You came in with such a serious look on your face, I thought you were gonna ask me to treat you to ramen again.*'

The minute Naruto's figure disappeared out of his sight, Iruka found himself publicly bursting into tears.

In all his years of being a teacher, nothing else had ever made him feel this happy.

*The path I chose wasn't wrong*, Iruka thought as he wept, his tears overflowing seemingly without an end.

And now, even when it was just seeing the word 'naruto' written at Ichiraku Ramen, Iruka felt his eyes starting to burn again. He even found himself ordering another topping of naruto.

It was because Naruto was a dearly beloved, special pupil to Iruka.

Of course, Iruka wasn't the type of teacher who gave special treatment to one pupil above the others. He never played favourites. But that being said, Naruto wasn't just his dearest pupil. Even amongst all the people Iruka knew, Naruto was a special existence for him.

Although, it hadn't always been like that.

When Iruka had first become Naruto's class teacher, he'd had mixed feelings.

Whenever Iruka looked at Naruto's face, the faces of his dead parents would never fail to come to mind as well.

Iruka was an excellent shinobi. His parents had been excellent, as well, and that was partially why when Iruka was still young, they'd gone out to the battlefield and never come back.

When the village was being attacked by the Demon Fox, Iruka's parents had headed to the frontlines to protect Iruka, and everyone else, from the assault. They'd fought without rest until their very last breaths.

And ever since then, Iruka had lived through the rest of his adolescence without anyone to praise him, without anyone to acknowledge him. Every single time he returned to a pitch black home with nobody else inside, he'd think of his parents.

The years passed, and Iruka became a teacher. And who would appear in front of him as a student but Naruto?

Iruka knew that the Demon Fox, the Nine Tails, was sealed inside of Naruto. And he was also perfectly aware that Naruto hadn't done anything wrong, and had nothing to be blamed for.

Even though he understood it...even though many years had passed and he should've been able to accept it... his head understood, but his heart was discomposed.

*His father had been a silent and severe man. His mother had been a composed woman, family-oriented and reliable. They had both been jounins who were deeply trusted by many people.*

*Whenever Iruka had hung out with his friends, he'd never stop talking about his parents with a deep glow of pride. He wanted to quickly grow up and become a fine shinobi too, so he could support them.*

*But then, in the blink of an eye, the Demon Fox appeared in the village, with a blood curdling howl that sounded like it could pierce the very heavens themselves.*

*His mother had sustained injuries trying to protect him. His father had every inch of him covered in blood, but he was still scrambling to try and fight.*

*His parents' worn and weary figures would start fading and slipping away... and then Iruka would wake up with a start, back in the dark of his room.*

It was a nightmare he'd see every now and then, ever since he was young.

But after Naruto was made his pupil, Iruka started seeing that same nightmare every single night.

The nightmares made him completely emotionally drained, and Iruka found himself starting to unconsciously avoid Naruto.

Naruto would constantly pull pranks, and that made his other classmates dislike him.

But your classmates were supposed to be your comrades.

But Iruka couldn't bring himself to do anything. All he could do was watch.

His confidence as a teacher crumbled away.

He was completely useless.

Until one day, Iruka realised a certain fact:

*Naruto is the same as me.*

*The pain of living day in and day out with no one to praise you, no one to acknowledge you– I know that pain better than anyone, so why didn't I notice this until now?*

After that realisation, Iruka never found himself avoiding Naruto again. Soon, his nightmares disappeared as well.

*But what if...? What if I hadn't had that realisation?*

Even now, the thought occasionally bothered Iruka. If he hadn't had that realisation, then it was very possible that Iruka could've become someone who thought about nobody but himself, who believed he was the only one in a pitiable circumstance. He could've become the lowest of the low, an idiotic bastard who didn't notice the pain of anyone but himself.

Iruka believed it was thanks to Naruto that he'd escaped that fate.

Meeting Naruto had been something that had changed his life.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that Naruto was the reason Iruka had decided to work as a teacher for as long as he lived. That's how important Naruto's existence was to Iruka.

At that moment–

It was because he was thinking of old times. A certain man's face flashed briefly before Iruka's mind.

The man's name: Mizuki. He'd been a man who held high grades, and been blessed with a talent for ninjutsu.

Mizuki was someone Iruka had known since childhood. They'd applied for the teaching examination together, worked as teachers together, and helped each other. Mizuki had always been smiling and soft-spoken, unlike Iruka and his tendency to nag, so he'd always been a popular teacher amongst the students.

But, Mizuki had another side to him, different from the smiling face he showed their students.

He had been full of deep jealousy, a man who couldn't believe in himself.

*Nobody truly grasps the real me. The real me is far more amazing. I'm not all that I appear to be. I'm not some small human to be pushed into a tiny corner like this. Everyone in the village is underestimating me.*

Mizuki only ever let those words spill past his lips around Iruka.

In a nutshell, Mizuki was another person who was troubled because he had no one who would acknowledge him.

That was why Mizuki turned into someone who viciously pursued things, only caring about the end results and nothing else. When things didn't go well, he blamed others. He grew jealous and resenting, and he didn't sever the wicked feelings that were leading him astray.

In the end, Mizuki had taken the wrong path as a shinobi.

*Mizuki*, Iruka thought, *when it comes to being a teacher, there's no such thing as instant results.*

*Any results from your teaching will be seen in five or ten years- no, for some cases, they may need even more time. It depends on how those children are taught and raised, and what kind of adults they grow to be. The results from teaching are seeing the lives our students live when they grow up.*

*But, if you couldn't see even that, of course you wouldn't understand.*

Now, Naruto was so famous that there wasn't a single person in the village who didn't know his name. Everyone acknowledged him.

Naruto, who had been bullied and laughed at ever since he was a child, who had lived his days isolated from everyone else. Naruto.

Would Mizuki have been able to predict this future for Naruto? No, he wouldn't have.

Someone who had hadn't spent their years as a teacher would never be able to see what Iruka was seeing now, the future of a student unfolding before his very eyes. This feeling, these emotions, nobody else could possibly understand them.

*I had wanted you to feel this emotion as well...Mizuki.*

By the time Iruka left Ichiraku's, it was already dark outside. He hurried on his road home, feeling the night wind pushing at his back.

The wedding present he'd bought for Naruto and Hinata was inside his vest's front pocket. It was nice to feel the heavy weight of something so important against his chest.

He thought that he really was a happy man. It wasn't just Naruto who still felt affection towards Iruka after graduating, but many of his other students as well. There wasn't a happier feeling in the world than that.

Naruto especially would frequently come to see Iruka, asking if they could go and eat some ramen together. But, in the future, Hinata would probably be making meals for him at home, so if Naruto still went out to eat as frequently, she'd probably get mad at him.

Thinking about that, Iruka couldn't help but laugh. His good mood continued the journey home.

Iruka entered pitch-black house with nobody inside, and turned on the lights.

There was a single toothbrush sitting in the cup beside his sink. He thought he might have to replace it soon.

A half-drunk cup of tea lay, forgotten, on his coffee table.

Iruka realised he'd forgotten to bring his laundry back in from where he'd hung it out to dry, and moved to bring them back in. His underwear in particular was now freezing cold from hanging out in the night air.

There was a faint '*splash*' as a drop of water fell from the kitchen sink's faucet.

It was a quiet night.

Iruka let out a sigh, looking up at the low ceiling.

*It might be about time that I start seriously looking for a life-partner too...*

For some reason, the thought that entered his mind felt particularly strong today.

Iruka made a small fist, and murmured to himself:

"Alright, let's not lose to Naruto...!"

It was a very quiet declaration.

As for what happened with that matter, let's leave that for Iruka to find out.

### The Final Mission, beginning

Lee and Tenten had been talking at the training grounds.

Shikamaru and Chouji had met up by chance.

Sakura and Ino had faced each other in their favourite store.

Sai had crumbled on the spot as he stared up at the sky.

Iruka had been humming as he hung his laundry to dry.

And Ichiraku's had been busy with work as usual.

Not a single person had noticed the tiny insect flying near them.

It was only one insect. It was flying restlessly around the village of Konohagakure.

It was a very small insect, so small that nobody paid any attention to it. And even if anyone did become aware of it, they'd soon lose sight of it in the clear and bright, sunny weather. It was difficult to keep watching a tiny bug that was flying restlessly round and round.

However...

Suddenly, the insect stopped moving. Or rather, to be more accurate, it had taken a break to rest its wings.

When an insect stops its movement anywhere near you, it becomes much easier to see.

Aburame Shino looked intently through his sunglasses at the winged insect that had stopped atop his fingertip.

“... You've worked hard.” He said, thanking the bug in a quiet voice.

As he did so, the bug on his fingertip walked down into his palm, and then very calmly and naturally disappeared into Shino's sleeve.

A bug had just gone inside his clothes, but Shino wasn't flustered. Rather, he had a very calm look on his face.

That was only natural.

The reason was that Shino was a shinobi who had been born into the Aburame clan, which was a line of insect users. The people of his clan would allow insects called Kikaichuu to reside inside their bodies. Afterwards they would command those insects as they liked, and in return allowed the insects to feed on their bodies' chakra. This is how their contract continued.

And the very bug that had gone into Shino's sleeve a moment ago, was simply another Kikaichuu that Shino manipulated.

It was very natural that Shino had remained calm, because all that had happened was that the insect had returned to its next.

In their contract, the insects were mainly used out in the field during missions, but they had a wide variety of uses. Besides attacking and defending, they helped seize the enemy they were hunting down, doing things such as chasing and or searching. They were used for pretty much every scenario. A large number of insects could even take on the shape of a human and use your own jutsu. In this way, the Aburame clan who lived side by side with a large number of insects since the day they were all born became familiar with the nature of those insects, and perfected the jutsus they used when they fought alongside them. They were a hiden clan.

And, this day Shino had been using one of his clan's hiden techniques to spy on the activities of his comrades. As for why he'd do such a thing, the reason lay in the man who was standing near Shino.

"So, how'd it go?" Inuzuka Kiba asked as he played with the ninja dog, Akamaru.

"As expected, it looks like everyone's working to obtain wedding gifts..." Shino replied from where he stood, a high ground that allowed him an unbroken eyes view of the village.

"Just like I thought," Kiba said. "So, has anyone already decided what they're gonna get?"

"Most of them haven't yet. It looks like they're mostly meeting up to consult with each other."

Kiba let out a whoop at Shino's reply. "Yahoo! Just like I wanted!"

As Kiba spoke, he brushed the goatee growing on his face. Lately, Kiba looked like he'd grown very fond of it, and touched it whenever he could. It looked like it was becoming a habit.

"It's our chance to act while everyone's worried. It's finally my time to shine."

"More accurately, 'our time'." Shino corrected.

Kiba let out a laugh, "I know thaat. Right, Akamaru?" Kiba said, patting the ninken whose length was longer than Kiba's own height.

Kiba had been born into the Inuzuka clan who was a clan of ninja dog users, so for him, Akamaru was a partner he had been eating and sleeping alongside ever since his childhood. It was the same for Akamaru, and even now when he had past 10 years of age, Akamaru still continued to accompany Kiba on missions every day.

Akamaru immediately barked twice as a reply to Kiba's question.

"Yeah, that's right." Kiba said. "We're gonna find a present that nobody else has given, one that comes only from Team Eight."

*Team Eight huh...*

Shino thought as he watched Kiba and Akamaru play together.

His thoughts were going back to the first day he had been put on the same team as Kiba.

The silent Shino, the action-loving Kiba and Akamaru, and the withdrawn and thoughtful Hinata.

Those three people and one animal had been the members of Team Eight. They were comrades who had trained together, supported each other, and always been together. However, while the mature Hinata had been one thing, Kiba had been boisterous, reckless and extremely prone to grabbing leadership to himself. When Shino had been put on the same team as Kiba, he'd found his different character and way of thinking to be extremely tedious, and had spent every day sighing to himself and lamenting the difficult future that was no doubt in store.

*"I don't think I'll be able to get along with you well. The reason is that we—"*

Even now, Shino could clearly remember his past self who had said those words. On that note, his words were cut off because at that moment in the past Kiba had shouted: *"What the hell's with you? You're really gloomy!"*

Kiba really had been crass ever since the old days, always speaking in a loud voice like an idiot.

"Kiba...do you remember what I said the first time we were put on the same team?" Shino suddenly asked that question without any real reason. Impulsiveness was Kiba's department.

But, Kiba most likely wouldn't remember it.

"The first time...?" Kiba asked, "Oh yeah, that time when we were eating lunch at the training grounds."

Kiba kept petting Akamaru as he thought, looking up at the sky. Then,

"Right, it was... 'only my lunch box has bugs in it' or something like that—"

"I never said such a thing." Shino said.

What in the world? Forget remembering it, Kiba had even fabricated a senseless fake memory in its place. Shino fixed his stare on Kiba, feeling the anxious feeling he had back then still lingering in his insides.

"Wha-what? That wasn't what you said?" Kiba looked flustered by Shino's stare for a moment before recovering, "Well, forget about the small details. The wedding gifts are more important. Right?"

Kiba grinned widely so his canines showed. Shino thought that Kiba's ability to quickly switch moods wasn't a good, but a bad quality of his.

In that moment:

"You know, Shino," Kiba's tone of voice had changed. A hard wind blew between the two of them. Kiba continued speaking with a serious look on his face. "I was happy that Kakashi-sensei called this thing a mission. Even I can get that Kakashi-sensei and everyone else are just calling a mission in name only. Since he's someone who's got eccentric judgement. But, for me, I really think of this as a mission. I'm thinking this is gonna be the last mission for us members of Team Eight..."

Shino didn't even let out a sound of agreement, calmly, silently listening.

“It’s like we’ve been given this last mission, this last mission.” Kiba continued. “Like maybe Kakashi-sensei could have specially arranged this for that purpose? ...Or I could just be overthinking things...”

Kiba stopped talking and looked away, laughing like he was embarrassed.

“No, you’re not overthinking...” Shino said.

Shino understood Kiba’s feeling so much it hurt. It was because he’d been having the exact same feelings too.

Hinata was currently busy getting ready for the wedding. Kiba and Shino both went out on missions a lot as chuunins leading their own teams. The four of them hadn’t been able to head out on any missions as Team Eight lately. And, most likely, after this they’d—

“Team Eight’s last mission for Hinata, huh...”

Nobody else would be involved. This was something that only people who had been on their team every since they were young, who had been through all the happiness and sorrow with them would ever understand.

Kiba and Shino, and Akamaru as well... It was definitely something nobody but Team Eight could do.

That was why Shino had sent his Kikaichuu to fly and investigate the states of their other comrades. So Shino and Kiba could give a more magnificent present than anyone else. so they could make Hinata happy.

“So, what are we going to do...?” Shino asked.

Kiba fell silent. He was staring at nothing in particular without saying a single word.

Silence continued between the two. Akamaru restlessly moved around, uneasily letting out a whine as he looked up at Kiba.

Shino couldn’t tolerate the unnatural silence coming from Kiba.

“Is it possible you haven’t thought of anything yet?”

Kiba silently nodded.

He’d said all that, but at the end he didn’t have anything but his enthusiasm to show for it. as expected, Kiba was always Kiba. This side of him hadn’t changed ever since the old days.

“For now, we have to think only of things that Hinata likes. It can’t be beyond the things she likes. The reason is that if we give her something that, for example, we didn’t know she disliked on her long-awaited wedding day, the atmosphere will turn bad.”

They gone through missions with Hinata for many years. It was enough to say they were comrades who’d eaten out of the same pot. There was no doubt they knew what Hinata liked better than anyone else.

“Stuff that Hinata likes is, well, there’s zenzai...” Kiba said.

Shino thought over this. It was true that Hinata definitely loved that soup made of Azuki red beans. Whenever they were taking a break in training or on a mission and they'd stopped by a tea shop, Hinata's eyes would shine if she saw any zenzai.

"And then there's...yeah, pressed flowers." Kiba said, "She really likes making pressed flowers. Man, she has such simple hobbies."

Zenzai and pressed flowers...neither of them would do for a wedding gift. Come to think of it, was there anyone in the world who'd give soup as a wedding present?

Shino wracked his brains.

"Ah, wait that's right. Naruto, he always loves eating ramen, right?" Kiba suddenly said.

"Yes," Shino said. "Ramen is something he eats often, isn't it?"

"And, you know," Kiba said, "This is something really surprising that not everybody knows, but, Naruto really likes oshiruko."

"Oh, is that how it was? Now that you mention it, I have seen him drinking that soup out of a can before."

"Right? There's something even more surprising than that. Naruto has a hobby of watering plants. And it's not just watering them either." Kiba had a gleeful look on his face as he lowered his voice to murmur. "Naruto, he likes talking to the plants while he waters them. Of course, just when he's the only one in the room. Akamaru and me just happened to be walking by the front of his house when we heard him, talking to one while he watered it. He's got an odd side, talking to plants. Right, Akamaru?"

Akamaru let out one vigorous bark in reply. Shino didn't understand most of what Akamaru said, but he knew that this reply meant 'Exactly!'.

"That definitely is unusual." Shino said. "Talking to bugs is normal, but that isn't so for plants. He might have just been feeling really bored, but there's also the other possibility... Well, just to be sure it'd be best to go and see the situation ourselves..." He crossed his arms and nodded.

Naruto did have certain odd sides to him. Come to think of it, in the past Naruto had even played poker with his own kage bunshin. Well that was what happened when you didn't go to play with him, Shino thought.

"But you know," Kiba said, "When you rethink it all, it's pretty amazing."

"...What is?"

"Y'know, the stuff they like. Like, zenzai and oshiruko\*\*? And then pressing flowers to preserve them, and watering plants to take care of them, stuff like that. No matter how you look at it, the stuff they like and their hobbies are pretty similar, aren't they?"

"I see, you're right about that. But Kiba..."

"Mm? Wha?"

“The most important subject is the wedding present...”

“Ah, yeah. What should we do...?”

Silence covered them for the second time. Kiba sat down, absentmindedly stroking Akamaru. Shino stood still as usual, staring down at the ground.

“Then let’s...ask somebody...”

This time it was Kiba who’d been unable to endure the silence.

“Everybody was asking everyone else too, right?” Kiba said, “Let’s do that too...yeah?”

*Where did the Kiba who was so enthusiastically talking about Team Eight’s last mission go?*

That’s what Shino thought as he looked down at the line of ants marching past his feet.

He thought it, but he didn’t say it, because Kiba had now given him a much better idea.

“I suppose we also have no choice but to go and consult someone...”

“Alright! So, who’re we gonna ask? Your dad? I’m saying this just in case, but my mom and sis won’t do, yknow? They’re completely different types compared to Hinata.” Kiba said, getting to his feet.

Good grief, he was so impatient.

“There’s someone who’s very suitable for Team Eight’s last mission.” Shino said. “If you ask who, then that person is—”

“I gotcha, that’s who you mean! Alright, let’s go Akamaru!”

Kiba had instantly understood what Shino meant before he could even finish speaking. He rapidly started running off with Akamaru. Both their figures slowly started getting small with the distance.

*He doesn’t have even the slightest sliver of calm in him...*

Shino thought, and began walking after Kiba.

By the time Shino finally arrived at their intended location, Kiba and Akamaru had already made themselves right at home.

Akamaru was lying down on the carpet, and Kiba had sunken comfortably into a chair.

Shino calmly entered.

“Oh hey, you’re late.” Kiba said, a teacup in his hand.

Kiba sat far too comfortably, like he was sitting in his own house. Really, the word ‘restraint’ was probably completely foreign to Kiba’s brain.

“You’re too relaxed, Kiba.” Shino said, silently sitting down as well.

As he did, an infant came running from another room, throwing herself on top of Akamaru.

“Akakiba! Akakiba!” She said, pulling at Akamaru’s ears.

Akamaru lifted his neck, looking a little annoyed, but then lay down again and let the child continue with what they were doing.

“I keep tell you, *I’m* Kiba, and *he’s* Akamaru.” Kiba said with a very put-upon tone. It sounded like they’d kept repeating this conversation many times.

The child let out squeal of delight, enjoying herself and laughing. “Akakiba and Kibamaru!”

“You’re mixing them up now, mixing them together huh...Please spare me, Mirai...”

The child’s name was Sarutobi Mirai. She was the daughter of the deceased Sarutobi Asuma.

“Why’re you like this...? Is it because Akamaru’s fur is white, \*\* so you’re confused...?” Kiba murmured, throwing a seriously thoughtful look towards Mirai, who had smushed her face affectionately against Akamaru’s.

It was true that Akamaru was completely unlike his name, white-furred as he was. Kiba had given him the name ‘Akamaru’ because after eating the special soldier pill that Kiba concocted, Akamaru would become covered in others blood in battle.

But, Shino thought it was unlikely that the colour of Akamaru’s fur had any connection to this.

The reason he thought so was that Kiba and Akamaru frequently came to play with Mirai during their walks.

If she hadn’t seen them often, then it would be normal for Mirai to not remember their names, but that didn’t apply to Kiba and Akamaru. And yet, Mirai mixed up their names.

It was most likely because Kiba and Akamaru were so close and so often together that she did that. Actually, Shino sincerely hoped that was the case.

“Looks like she still doesn’t remember the difference even though you come to play with her a lot.” Shino hadn’t really meant for the words to come out, but they had.

Kiba dejectedly hung his head. “It doesn’t bother me.” He muttered. “Little kids do that a lot.”

“It’s uncle buggy!” Mirai suddenly said, pointing at Shino.

Shino felt a painful feeling come over him, and Kiba who had been dejectedly hanging his head until just a second ago, suddenly let out a loud, booming shriek of laughter.

“I...I am big brother buggy...” Shino said, unable to hide his shaking. “The reason is that I am still too youn-”

"I heard what was happening from Kiba," A voice behind him said.

Shino turned his head to see a woman with lustrous black hair. Mirai's mother, Sarutobi Kurenai had come in with tea and some food.

She had been through pregnancy and childbirth, and was now going through housework and child care, but for Kiba and Shino and Hinata, she was always their teacher who had been in charge of their Team Eight.

Shino and Kiba had both thought that if they wanted to ask anyone for advice about Team Eight's last mission, then it would be her. That was why they'd come here. But...

"A present for Hinata, huh..." Kurenai said, leaving the plate –it was mostly full of snacks– on the table and sitting down. "But rather than me, don't you think it would've been better to ask Hanabi?"

"No, well, I mean yeah but..." Kiba mumbled, his hand stopping mid-action as he'd reached out for his favourite snack, beef jerky.

Hanabi was Hinata's little sister. Compared to the plain and not very fashionable Hinata, Hanabi was a far more fashionable young woman and extravagant in her tastes.

"We thought that it might be best...not to involve her family members..." Kiba awkwardly tried to speak in a polite way he was unaccustomed to.

Lately, Kiba had been trying to speak politely to Kurenai. It was most likely the fact that he'd realised you couldn't speak to your old teacher like you were best friends after a certain age was past.

"A-and then, of course, well...we are not that...intimately acquainted...with her." Kiba stuttered.

While they had gone to the Hyuuga house a few times to meet up with Hinata and such, neither Kiba nor Shino had met up with Hanabi outside of that. It'd feel awkward to suddenly go and ask her to consult with them about wedding gifts. Plus, like Kiba said, if they involved her family members, then there was the chance that the talk of wedding presents would reach Hinata's ears.

"Hmm, you're right..." Kurenai crossed her arms and thought.

In the meantime, Kiba finally laid his hands on the beef jerky, chewing on it furiously while muttering "The feeling when you chew it is really important...the feeling..." like it was a magic spell.

There was another reason for Kiba to get so upset when the subject of Hanabi was mentioned. Shino knew a little bit about it. The incident had happened on the day when they'd been told that unbelievable news about the moon possibly falling.

The memories of those days when meteorites were raining down on the Earth and it really felt like the last days of their existence were still fresh in Shino's mind. Most of the village had been repaired by now, but if you took one step outside the village, you'd see the leftover scars from that time still remaining. No matter how many months or years passed, you still wouldn't be able to perfectly restore all the trees that had been moved down by the meteors, or the meteor craters left behind.

Shinobi had gathered to protect the village from the meteors raining down on them, and in the midst of this a team had been assembled to rescue Hanabi, who had been kidnapped by the mastermind behind the occurrence.

It was a team assembled to find the hideout of the mastermind as well as rescue Hanabi.

A mission like that was Kiba's specialty, since he was a ninja dog user with his own keen sense of smell. He'd been brimming with confidence, saying how likely it was that he'd be picked due to his connection to Hinata via Team Eight.

But, Kiba's name hadn't been on the list of those selected for the mission.

Kiba had become incredibly depressed about that matter.

"What aren't I on it...? If it was me, I could find where Hanabi was straight away...I could definitely help out...I really wanted to find the creep's hideout and whoop his ass with my new jutsu...I wanted to help stop the moon from falling..."

Even now, Shino could clearly remember Kiba's endless grumbling about the subject.

"It's over, it's over..." Kiba had murmured in despair, and Shino remembered telling him, "Well, the whole world may be over soon..."

Why did he remember that? Probably because Kiba had ignored it.

But, Shino thought that Kakashi-sensei had chosen the right teams for the right occasions.

Kakashi-sensei was the Rokudaime Hokage, and he had to make his decision while thinking of saving everyone's lives, so instead of putting Kiba on the team that was sent to rescue Hanabi, he put him on the life-saving team in the village. Kiba's mission had been to quickly find and save the people who were buried under the rubble of buildings that had collapsed after the meteors hit.

It was an important mission that was only possible precisely because of Kiba and Akamaru's keen senses of smell.

And Shino had also been sent out as part of the life-saving team along with Kiba. It was because his bugs were able to slip into small cracks in the rubble that people and dogs couldn't go through. As Shino and Kiba hurried around the village while riding on Akamaru's back, they had managed to save many people who hadn't managed to escape before the meteors crashed.

And furthermore Kiba hadn't taken refuge in the shelters, instead staying outside to help the people who still believed that tomorrow was going to come, the village shinobi as well as ramen Ichiraku's owner Teuchi who was preparing ingredients for tomorrow's ramen. He even boasted

about how it any meteorite came falling towards the store, he'd destroy it with his new jutsu. He'd put a stunning amount of effort into his activities.

Kiba's stroke of bad luck was that the only one to see his efforts had been Shino who was constantly beside him. And Shino hadn't ever told anyone about what happened that day. Shino thought that good deeds like that weren't the kind that should be displayed to the world.

Shino was intently watching Kiba jerkily tearing into his beef jerky.

Shino thought it was likely that Kiba's bitter memory of not being picked for the Hanabi Rescue Team had resurfaced when he heard her name.

However, Shino knew.

He knew that when push came to shove, Kiba was a reliable man. He knew that Kiba had gone running around the village with Akamaru and saved many people's' lives. He knew Kiba had even protected Ichiraku Ramen while he was at it.

Only Shino knew those things.

Wasn't that just fine? Although Shino hadn't really been able to hear the name of Kiba's new jutsu when he used it since the sound of the meteorite being destroyed had been too loud, but still, it was just fine to leave things that way, wasn't it?

"Ahh, instead of tea, I'd have liked to be able to drink shouchuu..." Kurenai murmured, bringing some snacks to her mouth.

Kurenai had been famous for loving alcohol ever since the old days. On top of that, she loved the strong stuff, and drank a lot of it. She was a heavyweight drinker.

It was impossible for Shino to imagine drinking as a hobby since he didn't touch a drop of alcohol himself.

Alcohol was not good. It got his bugs intoxicated. Shino avoided anything that so much as had a strong smell. Be it something you ate or something you drank, or even medicine, if the smell was strong or the ingredients were fiercely affective, they'd influence the bugs inside him. For insect users, that was a life-or-death situation. At that was why Shino liked to eat things that were soft on both humans and insects, like salads.

"Ah, actually, speaking of alcohol, do you two know about this story?" Kurenai said, taking her eyes of Mirai and Akamaru to look at Shino and Kiba, "In the old days, the forest's Senjuu Clan used to give honey wine as a wedding gift."

"Senjuu? I think I heard of that name in history class..." Kiba tilted his head in puzzlement, tugging at his goatee.

Shino shook his head in exasperation.

“The First and Second Hokage.” Shino said.

“Ah, yeah! No, of course I knew that yknow?” Kiba said.

Kurenai smiled as she watched them.

“Watching you two talk like that reminds me of old times,” She said.

Seeing Kurenai’s smiling face made Shino think of old times too.

Honestly, Kurenai had been a really relentless teacher.

Strong-minded...was a rude word to use, but she was an extremely sensitive genjutsu user.

She’d been especially fond of frequently using dizzying genjutsu during their training, and even remembering it now made Shino recall the nausea along with it, that’s how severe she had been. Of course, it had been Kurenai’s way of showing her love, and it had definitely toughened up the members of Team Eight, but still, one couldn’t help but think about how incredulous it would be for someone like that to simple mellow out after becoming a mother.

“Look at you shamelessly brooding with a goatee. Back in the old days your face used to be slippery smooth.” Kurenai said, grinning as she pinched Kiba’s cheeks with both hands.

“Owwww, pwease stowp thwat Kuwenai-senswee...!”

Kurenai looked like she was having a lot of fun.

Maybe she hadn’t really mellowed out.

“So, sensei, the story about the honey wine of the Senjuu clan?”

Helping a friend in need...wasn’t Shino’s motivation. He just wanted to hear the rest of the story.

“Ah, yeah. The forest’s Senjuu clan, just like their name implies, lives in the forest,” Kurenai said, letting go of Kiba’s cheeks. “There are bears in forests, right? And you know how bears will knock down beehives to try and get to the honey inside, right? People say that the origins of honey wine were in those knocked down beehives that happened to have rainwater mixed in with the honey. It was found in ancient times by the Senjuu clan who lived in the forest. It was a wondrous drink for them, something that had the nutrition of honey and made them energetic. So naturally, after that, the making of honey wine slowly became part of their culture.”

“Why did they give it as a wedding present?”

“Well first off, it was because at the time the recipe for honey wine wasn’t perfect, so it was rare. But most importantly, it was because of the high nutritional value. The theory was that the honey was abundant, so drinkers of it would share its fertility. Either way, it all comes down to the fact that alcohol’s always been used to celebrate happy occasions since old times.”

“But, that Naruto doesn’t drink alcohol, yknow?”

“Naruto prefers to drink ramen soup and oshiruko.”

Kurenai sighed deeply when Kiba and Shino said those things. “That kid’s eating habits are so biased.”

Shino and Kiba simultaneously shuddered as they remembered going to Naruto’s house in the past and finding the kitchen empty of anything but ramen. Lately Naruto had been boasting that he’d started eating vegetables too, but even that was just to the degree of him occasionally buying a few cherry tomatoes.

“Shouldn’t he be dead by now?” Kiba said, which was a fine comment considering Kiba himself ate nothing but meat. You couldn’t help but think that Hinata would have to do something.

“But well, at any rate, honey wine can be used as a medicine, and used in cooking too. If it’s Hinata, then I’m sure she’d be able to find a good use for it. Plus, she probably wouldn’t use it straight away. Isn’t it a wonderful and romantic idea for her to open a jar of honey wine one day and think back to her wedding day?”

“I see, thinking of it like that, a wedding present that’s mentioned in history and legends is a really good idea.” Kiba said, “And on top of that, it’s something used by the clan of Konoha’s founder. It’s definitely a fitting gift for me to give, as the future Hokage.”

Kiba was nodding with his eyes closed now. He was probably imagining his future Hokage self.

Shino, on the other hand, was quietly thinking. Something was bothering him a little.

Honey wine was an idea they’d gotten from the alcohol-lover Kurenai-sensei. Shino and Kiba hadn’t thought it up themselves. But, no matter how disinterested Shino was in alcohol, he did have a basic understanding of the variety of alcohol sold in the stores and bars of Konoha.

“Hey Shino, let’s hurry up and go out to buy it!”

Kiba was in high spirits, but Shino never remembered seeing honey wine around the village.

“Is such a thing sold?” Shino murmured, “I’m hearing about it for the first time in my life...”

Kurenai easily answered, “It isn’t sold.”

“Huh?” Kiba let out an idiotic sounding voice at Kurenai’s comment.

“If it was being sold, I’d have bought it already. That stuff is really rare to find in our village.”

“Uhm...the-tehn what do we do?!”

“That legendary honey wine is something that I only got to taste once, many years ago. That’s all that I can say.”

“Oh no...”

Kiba’s face looked like the end of the world was coming. In fact, Shino thought he looked worse than he had when the moon had been falling. Kiba really had an endless range of facial expressions, Shino thought as he stoically watched.

“The honey wine that I drank was given to me by a travelling merchant. It really delicious, so I asked him where it came from. I was thinking of going and buying it too. And, what do you think he said as a reply?” Kurenai paused, her face turning grim. “He said he bought it in the Soraku.”

“You mean those black market guys...?!”

Soraku...a group of renegades unreachable by any country or village. People said the village itself looked like a perfectly normal place nobody would glance at, but in fact was the hometown of a clan of black marketers. It was a place nobody heard good rumours about, the kind that got their hands on hard-to-find weapons that had been banned everywhere else.

“To be more accurate, the merchant said that he’d gotten the honey wine from a beekeeper who lived in Soraku.”

“So they even have beekeepers?”

“Well the black marketers who settled there aren’t just gonna live off of weapons and money, you know, so there must be an original community there who supplies life necessities.”

Since the merchant who had sold the honey wine had gotten it from Soraku and then visited Konoha, that meant that there had to be some way of communicating with the community inside Soraku.

“I wasn’t able to find them, but you guys are Team Eight, specialised in hunting people down, aren’t you?” Kurenai said with a mischievous smile on her face. She looked pretty serious about it.

“Just leave it to us,” Kiba said, “As long as me and Shino and Akamaru are there, it’ll be a piece of cake!”

Kiba stood up at the end of his declaration, and Akamaru who had been letting Mirai do as she willed now stood up as well without any prompting to go next to Kiba.

Mirai watched Akamaru leave her, and said in a voice that showed how reluctant she was to say goodbye:

“Shinomaru’s going?”

“I always tell you, he’s Akamaru! And come to think of it, you’ve really mashed all our names together this time, haven’t you?!”

Shino had been watching the usual exchange, when Kurenai prompted him to turn towards her.

“Hey, Shino...” Kurenai said in a very quiet voice so no one else would hear. “Kiba doesn’t have very good judgement. You understand what I mean, right?”

Shino silently nodded, meeting Kurenai’s eyes.

*While you’re at it, buy some for me as well...!*

That was the message Kurenai wanted to impart.

“There won’t be any problems.” Shino said, leaving as well.

From branch to branch. They were flying through the thick greenery of trees.

Shino and Kiba, and Akamaru, were heading out of the village as one team to retrieve Hinata's wedding gift. Soon enough, they'd already put the distance of one mountain between them and Konoha.

Kiba was wearing a jacket over the slightly improved Konoha vest. It was a crudely designed jacket, with fur on the inside. Shino wore his favourite long coat over his own vest, and had raised the hood attached to it over his head.

This was their usual attire for missions.

In other words, they were clothes that perfectly suited Team Eight's Last Mission.

The improved Konoha vests no longer had the double pouches for scrolls that used to be on both sides of the chest, favouring ease of movement over anything else.

What was surprising was that they were lighter than the old vests, but more durable. Such a thing would've been unthinkable during the old days. It was an amazing sign of progress in technology. It really made you feel aware that time was passing. The village and people and things as well, they were all changing one by one.

Thinking that he'd reached an age where he could feel that times were changing made Shino feel a little sad. And then he thought about the next generation of Konoha, which made him think of Mirai. Which made him think of what Mirai said.

"Do I...really look that old...?" Shino spoke without thinking.

Kiba looked over his shoulder at him in mid-air. Akamaru had gone ahead of them, so it was only them two leaping across the trees. In a way, they almost looked like they were flying in mid-air. They chose this method of transport over running on the ground because it was faster. With every leap, their surroundings blurred and were quickly left behind. For a while, they'd moved in silence, until Kiba noticed what Shino had said.

"Oi, oi, don't be bothered by stuff like that." He gave a wide grin. "Uncle buggy."

"I am not bothered. Shut up, Idiotmaru."

"It's Kibamaru! No, it's not Kibamaru either!"

That was the topic of their conversation as they flew over trees. The smell of earth and greenery was strong, and bugs were moving everywhere. It was a nice day with clear weather. It was surprising and incredible, far better than he'd expected going on the strong winds from last night. Beautiful butterflies were dancing around in the peace of the morning.

After a while of silence, Shino opened his mouth again.

“I’m not old enough to be called an uncle yet, but if I am called one, then you should be called one too, Kiba, because we’re classmates of the same age...”

“You really are bothered by it!”

“Yes, it bothers me. Kiba...do I really look that old?”

Kiba grinned at Shino openly speaking about his feelings.

“Well, well, look at that. Compared to when we were kids, you’ve gotten a lot more honest.”

Kiba’s all-knowing grin grated on Shino’s nerves.

Shino deliberately looked the other way when he said, “I’m asking you because we’ve known each other for a long time. So, do I really look that ol–”

“You’re really serious about this! Asking twice! Alright, I get it already. You’re fine! You look just right for your age!” Kiba ran a hand through his hair, his voice strengthening. “You’re taller than me, and you’re always quiet and wear those sunglasses all the time, so of course you look mature! Come to think of it, for a tiny kid like that, we all look old!”

“Really? So, I’m really okay...?”

“You’re so persistent... Look, you don’t even have to wear sunglasses anymore. You’ve gotten pretty good looking. Not even a little bit, definitely better-looking than Naruto’s stupid face, so don’t worry!” Kiba bluntly said, then confidently pointed a thumb at himself, “Well, of course when it comes to good looks, you come in second after me and Akamaru.”

*After Akamaru...I don’t really understand that, it’s strange...*

Shino stared fixatedly at Akamaru’s tail some distance in front of him.

### The Final Mission, end

“Now then....it’s finally time to get started.”

“It’s Team Eight’s Last Mission! Let’s go, you guys!” Kiba loudly raised his voice like he was yelling out a battle cry.

After a long journey, Shino, Kiba, and Akamaru had finally arrived at the entrance of Soraku.

They passed under a stylish Japanese gate held up by thick, scarlet pillars, and walked into the town.

In the next moment, every single one of the party gulped at what they saw spread out in front of them. Even Kiba, who had been incredibly boisterous just a minute ago, looked meek all of a sudden. It was beyond what they had imagined.

Countless buildings were huddled together, walls that had broken apart and crumbled, slanted store signs with faded paint, and numerous shops with broken glass windows, lined up like they were trying to compete with each other.

Of course, there was no one inside the town. The uninhabited and abandoned ruins had obviously stayed that way for a very long time.

The centre of the city had a lot of tall buildings around, a telling sign of how a considerable number of people used to live here.

Neither Kiba nor Shino knew how Soraku had gotten into this state, or where its former residents had gone.

But before they realised what they were doing, they were imagining the long-past scenes of bustling activity that could no longer be scene.

Parents and children had been here. Siblings. Friends. Lovers.

There was no doubt that there used be happenings here that were no different from those of Konohagakure’s.

The entire neighbourhood was quiet. There wasn’t a single sound. But, occasionally, you could hear the sound of the wind. It was most likely the sound of wind currents blowing through the broken windows and inside the buildings.

It felt like the wind that blew so vainly in the quiet stillness was the sound made by the abandoned town screaming.

*The vicissitudes of life.* That phrase came to Shino’s mind.

But then, was it really acceptable to sum up something like this with that one simple phrase? He hesitated, because the sight looked too sad for those words.

“It’s a desolate place.” Shino murmured. “Do any people really live here...?”

Kiba’s nose twitched, moving. “There’s no mistake...” He said. “There are definitely a few people here, somehow.”

Kiba walked into the building that stood at the front, saying, "This way,"  
Shino and Akamaru followed.

The inside of the building was just as jumbled as the outside. The two men and animal carefully made their way down a long and dark corridor. It got more and more complicated as they headed in, like a maze. Pipes of some kind clung to the walls, though it was hard to tell whether they carried water or gas.

Judging from the appearance, it looked like the building hadn't originally been structured like this, but rather that several additions had been made to it over the years, and that had resulted in such strange pathways forming.

*It's most likely a countermeasure against intruders...* Shino thought, staring at the differently coloured walls.

"It stinks of mould in here," Kiba commented from ahead of him, "This place sure is depressing."

At that moment-

"Well -*meow*- I'm so sorry it's depressing."

A cat had sprung out from one of the broken air ventilator ducts.

"What the...?!" Kiba was discomposed by the sudden appearance of the cat. It was because he hadn't been able to sense it with his nose.

Akamaru went on guard, letting out a low growl. In an instant, Shino was on the alert as well.

"Those hitai-ate... *meow*, Konoha shinobi?"

The cat was talking. It didn't look like there were any other cats around. It was mostly grey-furred, with white fur at the tip of its nose, and mouth. It was glaring at them with sparkling eyes.

"One sinks of dog. One stinks of bug. One *is* a dog." After looking them all over, one by one, the cat muttered such abusive language. "Seriously, *meow*, you're such a bunch of good for nothings."

But Kiba didn't mind that at all. He was looking at the cat and showering it with words of praise.

"This one's a surprise." Kiba said, "Completely without scent. This cat's a big deal...!"

"Ninja cats completely remove our scent when we're self-grooming our bodies, *meow*. We're different from normal cats."

"One of those rumoured ninja cats huh...?"

Shino fixed his eyes on the cat in front of him.

It looked like any other cat you'd find just about anywhere. Its movements were very cat-like as well.

The difference was the kimono it wore, and the human words it spoke.

Soraku had another side to it, as a paradise for cats. Many cats had come to live in the abandoned town. Most of them were normal cats who couldn't speak the human language, but among them were these miraculous ninja cats who had learnt how to speak like human and use ninjutsu.

These ninja cats had served the black marketeer clan here for generations. Calling them a substantial authority in this town wouldn't be exaggerating. Ninja cats cooperated with normal cats so that be it day or night, they were always keeping a watchful eye on the town. And, that included swiftly dealing with intruders.

It looked like the pipes that clung to the walls and ceilings were actually a secret pathway for the cats. The whole building was probably- no, the whole town was probably the same. They'd likely manufactured the whole area so that you wouldn't be able to go anywhere that was out of the reach of the cats.

It was thanks to the ninja cats that this area remained secure.

However, Shino and the others had only come desperately looking for honey wine. It would be terrible if there was a misunderstanding that they'd come with bad intentions. And so, Shino began to speak as gently as he could:

"We aren't people to be suspicious of." Shino said, "We're looking for someone. We're just searching for information."

"A man who wears sunglasses, a long coat, and a hood that covers his eyes...! You're most certainly suspicious, *meow*."

"Well, you have a point..." For some reason, Kiba agreed with the cat.

Shino felt a little irritated by that, and raised his voice. "You can't call people suspicious just because they wear a hood and sunglasses. The reason being that I am not someone who's suspicious. And furthermore, people you should truly be suspicious of are the types who try to hide their suspicious nature by not looking suspicious at all and..."

"Calm down, Shino." Kiba said. "It's not going to help if you raise your voice at the cat."

"I really can't bear how much you stink of dog, *meow*. It makes me want to throw up"

"**EXCUSE ME!?** HEY, YOU CAT BASTARD SITTING OVER THERE!!!"

"Calm down, Kiba. Remain calm. Follow my example."

"It'd be better if you quickly left, *meow*. If you don't, you'll be ripped limb from limb."

Faced with the repeating provocations from the ninja cat, Kiba finally sapped.

"Heeeh, that's just fine with me. We can get our information just as well by tying you up, can't we?" Kiba glared at the cat with sharp eyes. He cracked his knuckles, then rolled his neck around, lightly loosening his body. And then-

“Let’s go, Akamaru!” Kiba leapt up from the floor, and Akamaru rushed forwards at almost the exact same time.

“You foolish human, *meow*.” The cat looked up at the ceiling, not looking particularly concerned at all. It moved its back legs one by one to stretch them out, and rolled the joint of its own eck as well.

“*Gyan!*” Akamaru let out a high-pitched yelp, and collapsed next to Kiba.

“What’s wrong, Akamaru?! Wai- this is-?!” Kiba suddenly collapsed next to the writhing Akamaru as well. “Ah- wait- ha- gah- hya- kaa- ku-”

Akamaru and Kiba rolled around on the floor, letting out strange noises. They seemed to have completely lost themselves, pulling at their hair and hitting their clothes.

Shino’s skin perceived the tiny little attackers that had jumped off the ninja cat’s body.

“Ohh, so they’re fleas...” He said. “You sent out fleas as an attack. As expected of one who carries the name of a ninja cat. This is really rare. I guess you could call it something like Ninpou: Flea Shuriken...”

“D-don’t just c-calmly analysEEEEEE.” Kiba yelled. “Quickly d-do something sHINOOOO!”

It couldn’t be helped that one would feel incredibly itchy when they’d been covered by such a large number of fleas. Kiba’s aggrieved yelling and Akamaru’s pained whines were echoing in the corridor.

In order to aid them, Shino kneeled down on one knee and made the signs for a hand seal.

“Insect Gathering Technique!” Shino yelled, and placed his hand down on the floor. As he did, a pattern of blue chakra shaped like a spider’s web emerged. It spread out from his fingertips like a fan.

As he did that, the fleas that had covered Kiba and Akamaru jumped towards the blue chakra webs, gathering inside them. The Insect Gathering Technique worked just as it name suggested, luring out bugs near the user and gathering them in one place. It was a fundamental technique for the Aburame Clan that every one of their members could do.

On that note, this had originally been a technique used for collecting insects of investigating ecology.

“W-we’re saveeee...” Kiba must’ve been in a lot of pain. He was trying to even out his disordered breathing as he got up.

Akamaru looked like he still felt disgusted by the ordeal, shaking his whole body like he would when he’d gotten wet.

“To think you couldn’t even win against fleas. There’s a limit to how pathetic can be, you mutts, *meow*.”

“You shitty cat, looking down on us...!” Kiba lunged towards the cat who had been calmly watching them.

“Gotcha!”

Kiba had firmly grabbed hold of the cat in his hands. However, the second he’d touched it, the cat’s body crumpled into pieces like stone.

“What the?!”

Pebbles? No, that wasn’t what they were. They were crunchy bits of cat food. The cat had definitely been there a moment ago. When in the world had it switched itself with a fake made of cat feed...?

“I see, so it’s a Cat Feed Bunshin...” Shino murmured.

“Is this really the time to be praising them?!” Kiba snapped.

“It’s really about time you get going, *meow*.” The cat spoke from a room inside the passage, its eyes shining in the dark, “Even a cat will only turn the other cheek three times. From now on, it’ll be time to bring out the claws, *meow*.”

It was like this that the ninja cats turned away intruders. For the sake of protecting the town and the Black Marketeer clan. However, it should be that if a merchant stops by, they don’t turn them all away. That’s what Shino thought.

However, he didn’t know what to do that would make the cats stop fending them off.

“Ugh, fuck this!” Kiba howled irritably, “We can’t catch the cat, we can’t get information from the cat, there’s nothing we can *do*!”

“If you want information, then you exchange it for matatabi\*. But that’s impossible, since you lot don’t have any matatabi. You understand now? You really stink of dog, so we really want you to hurry up and leave.”

So that was it. Matatabi could be traded for a pass to get inside. They’d been thoughtless. Their opponent was a cat after all.

“This is bad, Kiba...” Shino said. “At this rate, we’ll make no progress. The reason is that we didn’t bring even a little bit of matatabi...”

Shino leaned in closer to Kiba, whispering so the ninja cat couldn’t hear. “Since the situations turned into this, I’ll use my bugs to-”

“Hold on, Shino. Leave this to me.”

Kiba took out a soldier pill from the pouch on his belt, and tossed it towards the ninja cat.

“Alright, cat. I’ll give you this. Let’s make it a trade. That for information on the beekeeper’s location.”

“Are you making a fool out of me? No matter how you look at it, this isn’t matatabi, *meow*. Matatabi is...” The cat trailed off, stopping its curses about the soldier pill. It started to lick the soldier pill, its pink tongue flashing in and out. “What? What is this? Does this have matatabi in it?”

The cat slowly sunk down to lie down on the floor. It was the typical lounging behaviour shown in cats after they licked matatabi.

“So, how’s that?” Kiba grinned widely. “We can do business now, right?”

“What’s this about, Kiba?” Shino asked. “Do soldier pills have matatabi in them?”

“Nah, the soldier pill has inukekka\*\* inside. It’s something similar to matatabi.”

The Inuzuka Clan’s special-made soldier pills were usually aimed at dogs. He’d never have thought that one of those soldier pills could have things that cats liked too. As expected, Kiba was a reliable man.

“Gnnn.” The cat sounded vexed even in its soldier-pill induced daze. “To think that I’d curl down to the floor like this because of some dog-stinking jerk, *meow*. My pride can’t forgive this, *meow*.”

The cat said that, swallowed the soldier pillow in one gulp, and took off running.

“Wha- HEY! DON’T YOU GO STEALING FROM ME! YOU SHITTY CAT!”

The cat dashed off like a hare- or maybe he should say, like a cat? Either way, Kiba had run after the runaway cat at full speed.

“JUST YOUUU WAIT!” Kiba’s enraged shouts echoed furiously through the halls.

Shino and Akamaru looked at the sight of Kiba’s back as he chased the ninja cat, and started running too. As they chased the nimble ninja cat, they ran down countless twists and turns, corridors curving left and right like a maze.

Shino had just turned after another curve in the path when he saw Kiba up ahead of him. He had frozen in place, completely stock still. Shino came to a panicked halt in his running so he wouldn’t run into him.

“What happened, Kiba...Did you lose sight of it?”

Kiba didn’t turn his head even at Shino’s question.

Shino peered around him and saw that there was a woman standing in front of Kiba. The ninja cat from before was being held in her arms.

She was a young woman with beautiful, chestnut brown hair, and lovely wide eyes. Her age seemed to be around the same as theirs.

Kiba and the woman had locked gazes, staring almost as if they recognised each other from somewhere.

The woman then noticed Shino’s presence, and, looking him up and down, started to shrink away.

“Wait, I am definitely not a suspicious person...” Shino spoke before he could be told anything, beating assumptions to the bunch. “I’m the comrade of Kiba here.”

When he said that, the woman's facial features relaxed.

"Oh, so that's what it was. You suddenly ran in so suddenly that I was surprised." She said, and smiled.

"Let me go, *meow!*!" The cat was struggling to get out of the woman's arms, but couldn't get free.

Seeing that, Shino asked, "Could it be that you're...this cat's owner?"

The woman looked surprised as she answered. "Yes. Uhm, did our cat do something...? I heard a really loud voice."

"We're looking for someone." Shino said, "We gave a soldier pill as payment, but the cat took it without saying anything."

"Ahh, I see. Tsk, I always tell them to do business properly."

"I'm sorry if I won't do business with someone who stinks of dog, *meow!*" The cat hissed as it struggled.

"Stinks of dog...? This person?" The woman turned to look at Kiba.

Shino turned to examine his friend's state as well. For some reason, Kiba had been standing stiff as a statue with his mouth open for a while now.

"Uhm, I'm so sorry. Our cat has been incredibly rude..." The woman said, "Ah, my name is Tamaki. We own a weapon's store. And this little one is Momo. He's always protecting me."

So the woman was called Tamaki.

"So he's called Momo." Kiba suddenly said, "My- my, what a coincidence. Our dog is called Akamaru,ahaha."

Kiba was saying things that made no sense.

What in the world had been a coincidence? Shino was troubled by not knowing which component in their conversation made it a coincidence.

Even Akamaru had an absolutely stunned look on his face. And of course he would, to see his owner acting like a completely different person right in front of his eyes.

"So you're a ninja dog user?" Tamaki asked, her eyes shining, "That's amazing."

It was then that Kiba started acting incredibly strange. He would fidget. He would look left and right. Run his hand through his hair. Tug on his goatee.

"No, well, heh, I'm not that big a deal..." Kiba said, "Ah- you know, see, amazing is a different thing, right? Like how I'm at a level where I could be considered a candidate for the next Hokage, like that."

"What is such an amazing person doing here?!" Tamaki was astonished.

Akamaru hung his head and let out an upset-sounding whine.

Shino didn't say anything. Just a few moments ago, Kiba had been furiously yelling 'SHITTY CAT!' Shino wondered where in the world that Kiba had disappeared to.

"—Ah, I see," Tamaki said, "You're looking for the beekeeper."

"Yeah, for a friend's wedding present." Kiba said, "We were thinking of giving honey wine."

"Ahh, that's a very good choice."

Shino watched Kiba and Tamaki as they talked. Somehow, Kiba had finally managed to get to the point. Kiba and Tamaki were holding the conversation by themselves.

Shino was silently patting the head of Akamaru, who was also not participating in the conversation.

Akamaru had looked like he'd been upset by something, but when Shino petted him the dog seemed to feel better, looking up at Shino with his eyes crinkling. Shino would never have imagined that despite being a bug user he'd end up spending such a long time with a dog and learning to read its heart.

"—Then, I'll guide you."

"Ah, you know where it is? We'd be really grateful."

It looked like Kiba and Tamaki's conversation had ended. She was going to guide them.

"It's easy to get lost in this town," Tamaki said with a wry smile as she and Kiba walked side by side ahead. Shino and Akamaru silently followed.

They walked through a very complex route. Shino thought they were going to go outside, but they went inside a building again. Then he thought they'd be outside, but this time they headed down an alleyway that had more similar looking buildings.

"So, this beekeeper," Kiba asked, "What kind of a guy is he?"

"Hmm," Tamaki said, "Well I've never seen his face, so..."

"What do you mean...?"

"I've never met him, but I know where he is."

“What’s with that?”

Shino kept walking as he observed the harmonious atmosphere between Kiba and Tamari who walked a little ahead.

He was very grateful for the guide. If they hadn’t asked a resident to show them how to navigate through these complex streets in the town, then even with Kiba’s nose and Shino’s bugs, they’d have had an incredibly hard time finding their target. And ever since a while ago, all they’d come across were cats, and not a single human being.

They were on top of crumbling walls, in the crevices of rubble, inside shops with broken windows. He could feel the cats’ eyes on them from every possible hiding place.

When you looked at the cats, they were either lying down or licking their paws, but they most certainly never let Shino or the others out of their sight.

While observing those surroundings, Shino had a sudden feeling.

This abandoned town, and the cats who lived there, basking in the sun...it almost felt like one day, all the other humans had suddenly disappeared off the face of the Earth.

Here, people were the outsiders.

If it wasn’t for Tamaki and the ninja cat Momo, they’d probably be surrounded by now.

Speaking of Momo, the cat was walking alongside Tamaki with a sour look on its face. It looked like it wasn’t pleased with how cheerfully Tamaki and Kiba were chatting to each other.

Kiba was making large and exaggerated motions with his hands and arms as he talked, and laughter was streaming from Tamaki.

Shino stayed quiet as he usually did.

Akamaru was ducking away from the unflinching stares of the cats as he walked.

In that manner, the three of them eventually came to the town’s outskirts.

As they came to that point, the number of crumbling buildings lined up side by side had steadily decreased until only not even one house remained. Instead of that, what they saw was—well, instead of that, a thick fog had descended. Their field of vision was impaired.

This wasn’t a trivial matter, Shino thought to himself, and gathered his concentration. He focused on carefully watching their surroundings.

Ahead of him, Kiba and Tamaki were continuing their trifling conversation. Even though they’d soon be arriving, something was different about Shino’s mood and the mood between the two in front of him.

Tamaki was continuing, unbothered by the fog.

“Eh? Come to think of it, have we not met before this in Konoha? I recently moved there. Though I still come back here pretty often to visit my family. But yeah, that’s it, before this, my grandmother was completely naked when a group of cats—ah, here we are.”

Tamaki suddenly came to a stop.

While wondering what on earth her grandmother had done, Shino came to a halt too.

You could vaguely see a bamboo grove in the fog ahead of them.

“This bamboo grove...should be the right place.” Tamaki said.

Those were some ambiguous words from someone who said they’d guide them.

“What do you mean should be?” Kiba asked.

“Well, in a nutshell, nobody’s ever met him.”

“Then how do you know this is where he lives?”

“Please take a look at this,” Tamaki indicated a pair of stone monuments that were erected ahead of the bamboo grove.

Seeing the rotted rope that was wrapped around the stone monuments, Shino murmured:

“Traveller’s Guardian Deities.”

“That’s correct.” Temaki said, “People come here and place an offering, things like vegetables and the like, near the statue. When they come back the next day, the offerings will be gone, and a small container of honey or honey wine will be in its place. And so, we call the person who leaves honey, whoever they are, the ‘beekeeper’.”

“Why hasn’t anyone tried to go see him...?” Kiba asked, looking incredibly surprised.

“Normally, wouldn’t you be curious about what kind of a guy he is?”

Well, that certainly was what you would think. ‘Normally’.

But, this was Soraku.

The possibility that whoever lived here wasn’t someone upright was 200% percent. As long as that person did their business properly under the watch of the cats, then nobody would care whether they were a traveller or a fugitive.

“As you can tell by the Traveller’s Guardian Deities, these are sacred grounds. But the people who live in Soraku don’t bother looking around. We have no business here after all.” Tamaki said with a laugh.

The fact that the beekeeper was living on sacred grounds didn’t seem to be something upsetting.

As expected, the people of Soraku have a unique way of thinking that’s a little bit different than others.

“But we *do* have business here, you know...” Kiba said, “We can’t just sit around in a daze for who knows how many days while waiting for our offerings to be exchanged with honeywine.”

“Either way, you jerks won’t be able to find it, *meow*. Even cats get lost in that bamboo grove, *meow*.” Momo gave a sadistic laugh.

He'd thought the cat had finally decided to say something worthwhile only for something like that to come out of its mouth.

But Kiba wasn't perturbed.

"We're shinobi. We won't get lost." He directed the words at Momo, and then turned to walk towards the bamboo groves shrouded in mist.

After parting with Tamaki and Momo, the party had started walking through the foggy bamboo grove.

Shino turned his head and looked back. The rest of the town was already out of sight in the fog. So, that's what Momo meant by getting lost. If this was the state of the food, no wonder Tamaki and Momo and the other people of Soraku had never gone in here.

Either way, since they were looking for someone whose face was unknown, it would be an impossible task to accomplish if you didn't have shinobi with high senses of perception like Kiba and Shino. This wasn't somewhere for non-shinobi like Tamaki to be.

But, that being said, it was possible that this wasn't somewhere for *shinobi* to be either.

Those statues of Traveller Guardian Deities were placed as a marker to separate the world that humans lived in and the world that gods lived in. In other words, they were now walking on territory that didn't belong to humans, but gods.

They already hadn't been able to see well in this fog, but Shino felt like it had gotten even thicker.

"Alright...this should be a good spot for the first one." Kiba said, and threw a kunai into a nearby bamboo pole.

He was doing it for the sake of placing a marker near the entrance of the bamboo grove. He'd do it again after they covered a bit more distance. They'd repeat that for a while as they continued. This way, they'd be able to find their way out when they left without puzzling over it too much.

"First we'll find him with my nose, then when we do, you'll call your bugs and...*achoo!*" Kiba sneezed suddenly. He sniffled, and then said, "Heh, maybe that girl's talking about me..."

"...Have you fallen for her?" Shino bluntly asked.

"HUH?! No, you idiot! There's absolutely nothing like that!"

Kiba was incredibly flustered. He was yelling his denials using a much louder voice than usual.

"Was I...interrupting your romance...?"

"I'm telling you you're wrong!"

“Hinata’s getting married soon...Kiba, when you get married I’ll end up finally being alone. When you do get married, leave Akamaru to me. The reason is that he is the only one who understands me without words...”

“Excuse me? I’ve got no clue what you’re saying! What do you mean you’ll be alone?!”

As Kiba was barking in a fluster, Akamaru looked up at his owner and barked too.

“Woof!”

“What the- Akamaru?! Why’re you saying stuff like that, too?! And leave my goatee out of this!”

Even though Akamaru had only given one bark, it appeared he’d conveyed a long string of words. Kiba was ranting back, his face going crimson all the way to his ears.

Was his face red because of anger or embarrassment? Shino silently thought. Most likely both.

Kiba suddenly gave an exasperated shout. “Arggh, that’s enough! Let’s just keep going without getting into stupid conversations like this!”

He turned his back on them both, stomping ahead.

“Seriously...the strong smell of bamboo makes finding things hard, ugh!”

It looked like he was much more irritated now that he’d been a while ago.

But, Shino was pleased to see it, because Kiba was far easier to understand when he was like this. Of course, while he might’ve been pleased now, that was only ‘now’.

When he’d first met Kiba, there had been many times when he’d gotten irritated at his personality that was the complete opposite of Shino’s.

During break time at the Academy, Shino would let his bugs take walks on the top of his desk, while Kiba would run around the corridors and playgrounds with other classmates, yelling loudly. In class, Shino would silently listen to the teacher, while Kiba would either be asleep or making a racket.

To sum it up, Kiba was second to Naruto when it came to...forget second, after all, the boy in question had never been the type to be content if he wasn’t first place...Kiba was at Naruto’s level when it came to causing a ruckus. He had been a complete problem child.

Back then, Shino had wanted to be assigned to a team with anyone but him.

But now, Shino went on missions with that same problem child.

When had being alongside Kiba become something completely natural?

Life was really impossible to understand.

For some reason, Shino kept thinking of the old days as he walked.

His field of vision was still hindered by the fog. The scenery never seemed to change, always the same. Clusters of bamboo with thick fog hanging between them. Shino thought his surroundings right now looked like a painting.

“Hold on a minute. This is strange...” Kiba suddenly muttered in a low voice. “This isn’t the smell of bamboo... What is this, this faint, sweet scent...?”

Kiba looked around, his nose twitching.

Of course, Shino had no way of smelling whatever Kiba could. It was that faint of a scent.

However, Shino *did* immediately notice the very strange thing right in front of his eyes.

“Kiba...Look at this...”

Ahead of where Shino was pointing, there was a pole of bamboo...with a kunai sticking out of it.

It was the kunai that Kiba had thrown in as a marker near the town outskirts from where they’d entered.

A long time had passed since they’d placed that marker, and they’d continued walking forwards only. They shouldn’t be seeing the marker.

“Is it a genjutsu...?”

While feeling uneasy, Shino shifted the chakra flow inside his body, making the insects inside him uncomfortable. He’d shifted his chakra for the sake of breaking the genjutsu.

However, absolutely nothing changed.

By all rights, the kunai that should be a long distance behind them. But it was still in front of them.

“*Shit*, we can’t break out of it...What is this?” Kiba lowered his voice, his eyes glancing sharply around their surroundings, “Is it the Sly Mind Affect Technique?”

“It feels similar to the Demon Illusion Double False Surroundings Technique too, but...it’s not either of them...”

They were a pair who’d been raised under Kurenai, the leading genjutsu user in Konoha. To be honest, they were confident that their knowledge in genjutsu was higher than other ninjas. Of course, that included breaking out of them too.

But, they’d never heard of a genjutsu like this. To begin with, if it was a genjutsu, then it would’ve been cancelled by now. Which mean it was something different than but similar to a genjutsu which would be...which would be what?

“We have no choice, huh.” Kiba said, “For now, how about we continue with me and Akamaru using the Fang Rotating Fang technique?”

Kiba had found a very simple solution. Rather than following a set course while avoiding bamboo, they’d just disregard that and cut through in a straight line.

Shino silently nodded.

“Alright, then let’s go Akamaru!” Kiba looked around. “...Akamaru?”

Kiba began restlessly turning his head left and right. Shino searched around his surroundings too, straining his eyes to see past the fog that surrounded them.

But no matter how much they searched, despite being right next to them only a moment ago, Akamaru was nowhere to be found. Akamaru had disappeared without a sound or trace.

“This can’t be right...Akamaru! Hey, Akamaru! *Wh-What is this?! Akamaru’s smell is gone!*”

Kiba completely lost his head. He leapt through the fog, still yelling.

“WHERE ARE YOU, AKAMARU?! ANSWER ME! AKAMARU!”

“Wait, Kiba! Calm down!”

Shino ran after the panicked Kiba. As Kiba ran, calling for Akamaru, the fog grew denser around his figure. He should’ve been very close by, but Shino couldn’t tell thanks to the fog.

Shino ran, and ran, but he couldn’t catch up to Kiba. And soon, Kiba disappeared from his sight, too.

“Shino...this smell is really strong.” Kiba’s voice floated towards him from the middle of the fog. “You should get what this is now too. It’s the smell of honey...this sweet smell...it’s unmistakably...!”

At that moment, all traces of Kiba disappeared completely.

“Kiba...!”

In that moment, countless numbers of Kikaichuu appeared around Shino.

He swung up both his arms, countless Kikaichuu streaming out of his inner body in all directions. Some went above to the sky, others flooded his surroundings, and his Kikaichuu looked almost as thick as the fog.

But all the Kikaichuu who had been released didn’t behave the way Shino expected.

They immediately came back to him, reporting that they could find nothing.

“Can’t be...”

He tried a second time, and a third, but no matter how many times he released them, the same result happened.

The Kikaichuu went through the crevices between the bamboo that grew around him, but always came right back without finding anything.

Watching the insects fly idly about him covered Shino in a cold sweat.

His Kikaichuu responded to chakra. For them to not be finding anything despite that meant that Kiba, who had been here just a moment ago, had truly and totally disappeared. It wasn't that he just couldn't see him in the thick fog.

*This is impossible...*

Shino frantically tried to think. He recalled the last things Kiba had said. He'd talked about a sweet smell getting stronger, and said that it was the smell of honey. He'd said that Shino should be able to know what it was too, which meant it had been very strong.

But, no matter how much Shino strained his senses, he couldn't smell even the faintest scent of sweet honey.

However, as he sharpened his senses and concentrated, his efforts bore fruit in another way. Surrounded by the buzzing of his returned insects, Shino became aware of another, different buzzing in the background.

He suddenly looked up, and saw several figures flying out of the fog. They were enormous compared to his Kikaichuu.

Black and yellow in colour.

Hornets. And they were flying towards him in a straight line, aiming right at Shino.

He immediately used his insects to defend himself and mow down the hornets. His swarm of Kikaichuu took on the shape of black sword, flying freely through the air.

When they did, the hornets' bodies suddenly started melting into a strange viscous liquid. And that liquid started enshrouding the attacking Kikaichuu.

“What is this?! This technique...!”

As the liquid wrapped around his Kikaichuu, great drops of the thick liquid fell around Shino as well.

*Honey...?*

The sweet smell of it mixed in with the fog, just like Kiba had said. For the first time since they'd entered, Shino could finally smell it too. In fact, the smell was steadily growing stronger.

The hornets made to assault Shino once more. He used his bugs to defend himself again.

*The bamboo is in the way...*

If he just had some time, he could smash down the bamboo in a few seconds.

The hornets attacked, skillfully flying in and out of the bamboo and using it as a shield at the same time.

It was at the moment Shino gave his attention to them that it happened.

Right near Shino's feet, the honey that had fallen to the ground began to take on the shape of hornets again.

*I've done it now...!* Shino thought as the re-formed hornet flew straight towards him on ground level.

The hornet's stinger mercilessly stabbed at the back of Shino's neck.

His body swayed terribly.

This wasn't a normal hornet sting. The hornet's poison had been specially prepared to be strong enough to take out two shinobi at once.

The hornet's manipulation of him, and their specialised toxic stings, they all pointed to a very skilled insect user. A user of hornets and wasps and bees. The people of Soraku had named that person well as the beekeeper.

Just as Shino became convinced he knew the true colour of the enemy they couldn't see, his body collapsed on the spot.

After some time passed, the beekeeper appeared out of the fog without a sound.

Step by step, they slowly approached Shino.

It was a very strange sight.

You couldn't see their face, because it was covered by an anbu mask in the shape of a bee. And it wasn't just their face you couldn't see. Every part of the beekeeper but their masked face was covered in a swarm of honey bees.

No, rather, it would be easier for you to picture if it was said that it was almost like the beekeeper's entire body was made of honey bees.

This was the beekeeper of Soraku, whose face no one had seen.

They slowly stepped forward.

"Konoha's Aburame Clan..." They murmured, while looking down at the fallen Shino. Their voice was quiet, but clear. It sounded like a young boy's, but at the same time, like a frail-nerved young man. It also sounded like a calm woman's. It was a mysterious, androgynous voice.

"Exactly." Shino answered **from behind the beekeeper**.

The Shino that had collapsed onto the floor broke apart and scattered. It had been an insect kage bunshin made of thousands of bugs.

"To think that you'd trick me..." the beekeeper said, "You're a rare one..."

The beekeeper didn't have any particular emotions in their voice as they looked around.

The insects that had been pretending to be Shino joined the rest of his Kikaichuu, and in no time at all, the beekeeper was enshrouded in Shino's insects.

The honey bees on the beekeeper's boy buzzed and jostled in agitation, sensing their owner was in danger.

"But, why..." the beekeeper wondered, "The poison..."

The beekeeper was talking about how Shino should've been stung by the hornets and allen to their poison.

The truth was that Shino had indeed been stung. He had let himself be stung, because he knew that his opponent would never come out into the open if he wasn't down.

And that's why Shino willingly let himself take the poison sting. He had enough confidence and faith in himself to do it.

"I was poisoned." Shino confirmed. "But it wasn't a problem. The reason is that this amount of poison won't kill me."

Thanks to the insects inside his body, poisons up to a certain level could be neutralised.

Shino in particular had studied the small, venomous Rinkaichuu bugs used by his now-deceased clansman, Aburame Torune, and then raised his own insects to resist poison thanks to that research.

That was why it was possible for Shino to neutralise strong poison in mere moments. You could say it was something he'd inherited from Torune, who had been raised alongside him when he was young, and been like a sibling to him.

"Well, I'm well and truly beat... This is my loss." The beekeeper said, realising they couldn't retaliate. They didn't struggle, "You're after my life, I suppose. Well, I'm content to be killed by an insect user of such skill..."

"No, I'm after...honeywine..." Shino spoke into the tense silence. "I'd like...about two bottles..."

Maybe it was because Kiba wasn't around, but the silence suddenly felt *too* silent.

"Would you come to my home...?" The beekeper asked, turning their masked head.

It turned out the beekeeper was originally a shinobi from Iwagakure, who had settled down to live here peacefully while simultaneously fearing their pursuers would come to find them.

In short, Shino had been mistaken for one of the beekeeper's pursuers, and that's why the beekeeper had attacked him.

“Kiba and Akamaru...” Shino said, “A dog-loving human and his adored dog, they were here, but, what happened to them...?”

“Don’t worry, they’re safe. They’re just wandering around in the fog.” The beekeeper answered. They were talking as they headed towards the beekeeper’s home.

“Earlier, why did you target me...?”

“Because if you don’t strike first against an insect user, you’ll be in trouble later.”

“I see...”

They continued quietly conversing in that manner. Shino thought they were having a rather lively conversation.

Shino had known of the insect-user clan of Iwagakure. It had been a clan of mainly bee-users, which was now destroyed. The beekeeper was a descendant of that clan.

“Here it is...”

The beekeeper came to a stop, and Shino could see a small house appear in the thick fog ahead of them. It was a simple house with a thatched roof. The garden was most likely the breeding area for the bees. There was a basket made of bamboo next to it.

The thatched house inconspicuously existed within the bamboo thicket enshrouded with fog.

The atmosphere felt like one of those ninja refuges you heard about in stories. Actually, a runaway-nin was in fact secretly living here, so a ninja refuge was exactly what it was.

While Shino had been looking at the house, the beekeeper had brought honeywine. As he passed it to Shino, the shining, beautiful amber liquid swayed gently inside its container.

“Thank you. How much...?”

“I don’t need money.” The beekeeper calmly answered, “It wouldn’t be of any use to me even if I had it, so...”

It looked like they’d always been living in this place alone. They seemed to be leading a lifestyle that was completely self-sufficient, without any need for money.

Shino let out another short “I see...” and put the honey wine in the sack the bee keeper gave, “Which reminds me, I’ve be very grateful if you could teach me the way out. The fog is really thick...”

“There isn’t one.”

The beekeeper unhesitatingly gave that sort of reply.

“What do you mean?”

“There isn’t a path back...that’s what I mean.” the beekeeper sat atop a nearby boulder, looking intently at Shino with the eyes behind their mask. “This bamboo grove is a bit like a kekai

barrier. Once you step in, you can never get out. You'll keep getting lost in the endless fog. That's the kind of jutsu this is..."

"You can't undo the jutsu?" Shino asked.

"I'm sorry, but it can't be undone. It's a jutsu I tied to myself..." the beekeeper didn't sound very sorry about it. Their voice was as emotionless as it had always been. You could say they were calm, but it was more like their voice was completely flat.

"For example, even if you killed me, the jutsu wouldn't come undone..." the beekeeper continued, looking up at the sky. "This fog was originally made with unique ingredients that cause humans to become confused and lose their paths. I used just a little bit of that fog's essence to create the jutsu..."

Shino looked again towards the misty fog. To think there was that sort of ingredient within it... Was that really possible? Well, he couldn't say it was impossible.

He couldn't feel any hostility from the beekeeper, nor from the honey bees that swarmed them.

It didn't look like the beekeeper was lying.

And Shino remembered the mysterious story he'd heard from his father, Shibi.

Kumogakure was apparently the owner of a mysterious waterfall. It was huge, his father had said, falling down fiercely and giving off huge waves of spray. Apparently, if you faced the falls, your inner self, your true self would be reflected.

At the time it'd been hard to believe, but there indeed was such a place in the world. In that case, it wasn't too strange if a fog that made humans lose their way existed. It wasn't a genjutsu, but the fog that had been to blame for everything.

Shino walked towards the outskirts of the beekeeper's house.

A never-ending fog. And never-ending bamboo, bamboo, bamboo...

The unchanging scenery continued without end.

As an experiment, Shino walked in a straight line, his insects flying around him. He soon found himself arriving at the beekeeper's house once more.

He tried again, walking more carefully, only to come back to see the beekeeper still sitting calmly on his boulder.

*Thanks to the composition of the fog, even my bugs get lost, is that it?*

His bugs couldn't help him. There was no exit. He couldn't find Kiba and Akamaru. He was in a really tight corner.

But Shino still kept investigating his surroundings.

"I got lost my way in life and found myself here..." The beekeeper said, "But, that doesn't mean that this is a bad way of life. Rather, I'd wanted to live like this. Here, there is nothing but the

present. There's no past, no future. Just now. I'm living in the present. Don't you think that's more than enough...?"

The beekeeper's words were calm, slow, and even as he continued sharing his thoughts. "I've always been running. Running from fights, and from the path of a shinobi. From the start, I never thought the shinobi life agreed with me. But I was born and raised into a clan of insect users. I didn't have any other choice but to live as a shinobi... That's why I threw everything away, and ran away to this place. If I have no other path to live but that of a shinobi, then all I have to do is keep getting lost and never go down it..."

The beekeeper's slowly flowing words disappeared into the pure white fog.

Shino silently listened to it all.

"All people are lost." The beekeeper said, "Not just me. Be it shinobi or merchants, man or woman, everyone. And that includes you. You're lost as well. That's why you're wandering, confused, through the fog like this." He pointed out.

"You're saying I'm...lost...?"

When had Shino's mouth gotten so dry? Shino swallowed, and held his breath.

And, for some reason, memories of Hinata and Kurenai rose into his mind.

He remembered the time he'd spent training with Hinata.

He remembered the days of missions he'd done under Kurenai's supervision.

He had finally made a friend in Hinata. Kurenai had understood him even though he was quiet.

But...

Hinata was getting married soon. Even now, she was busy preparing for the wedding ceremony.

Kurenai was busy raising her child. Now, she was behind a certain line.

The two of them had already started down their own paths. And Shino silently watched the sight of their two backs.

They'd never be able to go back to how Team Eight used to be. Forever.

Shino tried to stay calm, but his breathing was getting harsh and laboured. The fog was filling up his lungs.

*Is this what he meant by my being lost...?*

Hinata and Kurenai, and everyone, they were heading down their own paths, but Shino was the only one left behind where he began. That was the feeling he'd fallen into.

He wasn't heading towards anyplace, and he wasn't settling down anywhere. He felt like he was like the wavering fog, always being the only thing that was left behind.

Were those feelings a deception created by a fog...? No, that wasn't it.

He'd always, always felt like this.

After they came to this place, and before as well. He had always kept feeling lost...

And, the thought had occurred to him. From some tiny corner of his heart. He hadn't even noticed it himself, but he'd thought...

*I want to go back to those days.*

He wanted to go back, just one more time, back to those days when everyone had stuck together as Team Eight.

"You hadn't even noticed...that you felt lost, had you...?" The beekeeper said, looking at Shino.

Shino was standing stock still in place. He couldn't move a single step forwards. No matter how much he tried to move forward, he wouldn't be able to reach the exit anyway, so why bother? He couldn't even see anything in front of him anyway, thanks to the fog.

"You don't have to keep pushing yourself forwards." The beekeeper said. "You can just leave everything, and live here, and it'll be fine..."

The fog, along with the beekeeper's kind words pierced through Shino.

*That might just be best.* Shino thought.

If he couldn't move forwards, and if nothing was waiting for him even if he did move forwards, then he wanted to just stay here and live his days without changing anything. That could very well become his happiness.

The beekeeper held out a hand. The honeybees that surrounded their arm drew away to reveal a milky-white hand.

"If you want," the beekeeper said, "Then you could stay here with me."

Shino looked at the offered hand.

And then, suddenly...

*"It's Team Eight's Last Mission! Let's go, you guys!"*

He suddenly remembered Kiba's words. That battle cry of his resounded inside Shino's mind.

*That's right, this is...Team Eight's last mission!*

In that instant, it felt like the darkness around Shino's field of vision disappeared completely. His dazed mind became crisp and clear.

For some reason or another, the fog around his surroundings had drawn back.

"I can't just stop in a place like this. I have to hurry and go back to the village. The reason is that I absolutely have to attend a precious friend's wedding ceremony...!"

Beneath his sunglasses, Shino's eyes were resolute as he looked firmly ahead.

That moment, he suddenly noticed a nearby bamboo pole with a kunai embedded in it.

It was unmistakably the kunai that Kiba had thrown into a bamboo pole near the town. He hadn't noticed it at all until now. And the fact that it was here meant that...

Shino turned his head, and sure enough, he could see the entrance to the bamboo grove ahead of him. His eyes could even make out the states of the Traveller's Guardian Deities. It was definitely the place that Shino and the rest had entered.

"The entrance...no, the exit is there..." He said to the beekeeper, pointing.

"...? I don't see anything...there's nothing but fog..." the beekeeper tilted their head to one side.

The tone of their voice sounded like they genuinely couldn't see the exit.

And Shino finally understood the situation. It was a pretty simple thing.

The fog made humans lose their way. The jutsu used the fog. People lost the paths of their lives inside the fog. Here, there wasn't any present or future. That's why there was nothing but an eternal 'present' inside the fog. That's what it was.

But, that was only the case if you were running away from your past and had thrown away your future.

Just like the beekeeper had said, no matter how much someone trained as a shinobi, no matter how many years they'd lived, anyone who lived life had times when they felt lost. But for those who didn't give up and kept moving forward and believing in the future, this fog didn't have any power at all.

If you firmly, steadily, built up hope and belief in yourself in your heart while walking forwards, then even if you did get caught in the middle of a thick fog, you would eventually find your way out.

Shino gave a wry smile. He couldn't help but think that in a way, the fog was very similar to life.

"I see...So you saw the road ahead with the Traveller's Guardian Deity..." the beekeeper hung their head. They quietly murmured, "It's best that you go quickly then. Before you lose the path again..."

As usual, the beekeeper's tone was even and without emotion.

But, something about them seemed lonely as they sat on that large boulder. Or maybe Shino was overthinking things.

No, that wasn't it.

The fog wrapped around them, the neverending bamboo thickets, the small house without people, the honey bees that surrounded the beekeeper, the anbu mask they wore and hid their face with, every single one of those things was like another barrier to the beekeeper. Shino understood that very well.

The reason he understood was that Shino hid himself too, in his long coat and hood.

*This is a shield to protect myself. Not physically, but emotionally.*

Shino understood those sorts of feelings so much it hurt.

That's why he wavered over whether he should step over the boundaries of a person's barrier.

People got lost over even things like this. But...

If he just left the beekeeper behind in this thick fog, he wouldn't be a shinobi. The beekeeper was a fellow shinobi who'd also been born into an insect user clan. If Shino held himself back by thinking he was overstepping his boundaries or meddling in someone else's business, and just turned his back on them and left, then he knew he was definitely going to regret it.

At times like this, rather than regretting what you didn't try, it was better to try your luck and see. The reason for that is...

"You said you're living in the present." Shino said, "But I can't help but wonder if that isn't the wrong choice."

...the reason that is that it's what Naruto would do.

"Can a person really live in the present when they're running away from everything?" Shino asked. "Someone who's constantly dragged down by their past and unable to see their future, are they really living in the present? Today will one day be in the past, and someone who lives eternally in that present will never be able to see their future, will they? At least, that's what I think..."

Shino shifted the sack on his back full of honey wine that the beekeeper had given. Until now, he'd never resented himself for being bad at words.

When he was lost in the fog, he really had thought that he'd be able idly living day by day.

"You're really a gem..." the beekeeper finally spoke after the listening to Shino's lecture.

"Really unexpected. I thought you were a really quiet man, but it turns out that while you may not show it in your words or your facial expressions, you're quite passionate on the inside...I feel like I just got lectured by an eager teacher."

The beekeeper was calmly speaking. Their tone was as even as it always was, and thanks to their mask, Shino couldn't see the look on their face.

However, he felt like the beekeeper was definitely giving a wry smile.

"A teacher, huh? I've never really thought about that, but my partner is a problem child after all..." Shino replied, the faces of his comrades coming to mind, "Lots of my classmates were problem children. A constant complainer, a huge glutton, a young prankster...The one who behaved properly was always me. But still, every one of those classmates have now become splendid adults. They lived eagerly in the present without running away, and that's why they could arrive at this future..."

Shino paused, and gestured towards the sack of honey wine he carried. “Thank you for this. I’ll be going now.”

“What are you doing to do about that dog-loving child...?” the beekeeper asked from behind him, “What if, unlike you, he doesn’t make his way out...?”

Shino didn’t even have to think about his reply to that question.

“That one’s far more honest than I am.” Shino said, “He won’t lose his way.”

Full of conviction, Shino turned towards the exit and started walking.

When Shino came out of the fog, the wide, blue sky greeted him. He put his hands in the pockets of his coat, and waited in front of the Traveller’s Guardian Deity.

A line of ants were marching near his foot, and he watched them to pass the time.

After a while, he heard a voice from the midst of the bamboo thicket.

“Yahoo! We finally found the exit, Akamaru!”

The voice was immediately followed by a very familiar sounding bark.

Kiba leapt out of the bamboo grove, covered in mud.

“You’re late...” Shino called out, when a mud-covered Kiba leapt out. “Kiba.”

“WHA-” Kiba jumped back in surprise when he saw Shino suddenly standing beside him, “I know it’s you by the smell, but you could at least give some warning before you suddenly make an appearance!”

Kiba pulled out a hand towel to wipe off the mud on his face, grumbling about how Shino’s abrupt appearance had almost given him a heart attack.

“You look like you went through some hardships...” Shino noted.

“I did not! Everything was fine!”

Kiba was someone who liked to act tough. He was easy to understand.

He must’ve gotten lost too, in his own way. Just like Shino, Kiba had probably faced his worries and anxieties for the future, too, in that genjutsu-like bamboo grove. But, Kiba had still made it here.

*What in the world had Kiba been worried about? What kind of a future was he going towards...?*

Shino felt a little curious, so he wanted to prod for answers.

“Are you going to confess to that woman...?”

Kiba's face had turned scarlet at the sudden question. "Wha-? What is this?! Why is it that even you're bothering me about Tamaki?!"

"Hmmm... 'even me', huh..."

Kiba really was an incredibly easy to understand man. But, that was one of his good points.

"Listen, you're totally wrong! You know, Shino, you really don't get it...It's probably because you're not super popular. Listen, a man can't be too greedy."

Kiba was trying to play it cool as much as possible, but his face was still red.

"Then, what should a man do...?"

"Well...the first step is obviously...uhh...you know...that thing." Kiba was flustered, cold sweat dripping down his forehead, "Uhm- yeah, letters! Exchanging letters seems like the best place to start, right?"

"Seems like'...?"

"No, it definitely is! Popular guys start out things like that by exchanging letters! Right Akamaru?"

Kiba must've been very flustered, appealing to Akamaru for help. Akamaru averted his eyes.

"Anyway, more importantly, we've gotta go and find that honey wine." Kiba changed the subject. "The sun's gonna set soon!"

"I've already gotten some." Shino said, "So let's go home..."

"You're kidding, right?! I didn't even do get to do anything!"

Shino gave the astonished Kiba one backwards glance before starting the walk back. Akamaru looked up at Kiba, who'd frozen stiff in shock, gave one bark, and briskly followed Shino.

"Wa- wait just a minute!" Kiba followed after them, full of complaints, "Good grief, first Naruto, now you, why is it that you guys always get the good parts! I did a lot of work inside that fog too, you know!"

It looked like the only one who knew what Kiba had gone through in the fog was Akamaru. Akamaru himself seemed to be keeping his lips sealed, so he probably wasn't going to go talking about it.

Shino was thinking about that as he walked, when-

"Hey, Shino, look at that!" Kiba yelled.

Wondering what he was yelling about, Shino turned his head to look back and...

The fog surrounding the bamboo grove had lifted.

In full sight, the bamboo grove wasn't all that wide at all. Just normal-sized, like any other bamboo thicket.

“Shit, what is this, why is it just clearing up *now*...I got so lost in there...”

Kiba had apparently forgotten about how he’d bluffed that everything had been fine inside the bamboo grove, complaining openly now. So he had gotten lost in his own way.

But, Kiba didn’t know the true meaning of that fog.

The fact that the fog had lifted so completely meant...

“I see...so you worked things out...” Shino murmured to himself.

In that moment, Kiba glanced at Shino’s face. What he saw made his eyes go wide.

“Shino...this is rare...you hardly ever smile like that...”

“Hm? What are you talking about, Kiba?”

“Huh?” Kiba started blinking. “Was I seeing things...? That’s strange...”

Shino turned his back on him and kept walking. “We have to hurry up. The reason is that Kurenai-sensei is waiting for us.”

The atmosphere felt refreshing. The sky was clear, and the fog was gone.

Kiba hurried to catch up to Shino, and then squinted his eyes as he looked up at the sun to tell how much time had passed based on its angle.

“Gahh, I really wanted to find a wedding present before anyone else did.” He muttered.

“Seriously. We ended up whiling away so many hours...”

“But then hey, our wedding present is definitely the best one!”

“Obviously. You, me, and Akamaru all achieved this gift by working together, after all.

After a while, the old buildings of the abandoned town started to come into sight again. There weren’t as many cats in the area now.

As expected, the cats had shown up to keep an eye on them. They’d probably decided Shino and the rest weren’t a threat and gone back now.

That, or they’d seen them walking with Tamaki and Momo, and decided they approved of their presence.

Somehow, it felt like the abandoned town itself had given them its seal of approval.

As they entered a complicated looking alley-way, Shino took out one insect.

Just in case, he’d told this one insect to memorise the complicated journey back.

Kiba saw the insect and immediately understood, letting out a whistle.

“You’re really sensible,” He said, “Thanks.”

“If we follow it, we’ll head to the exit soon.”

They followed the insect as it flew through the roads without hesitating once.

“And with this,” Shino murmured, “Team Eight’s Last Mission...is complete...!”

For some reason, he’d wanted to say the words himself. He didn’t want to hear them from someone else. He wanted to hear them come out from his own mouth.

Of course, if he did that, the self-declared leader of Team Eight -aka Kiba- wasn’t going to let it slide.

“Why are you the one who’s declaring that?! And you know, the mission isn’t gonna be finished until we head back to the village!”

“Of course.” Shino obediently nodded, continuing to think about what he’d been considering earlier, “We’ll go back to the village, and make sure to ascertain the beginning of Naruto and Hinata’s future with our own eyes.”

“Hm? What’s this? You’ve turned into a real poet today.”

“Have I?”

They kept talking as they walked.

Shino remembered the day he’d first been put on the same team as Kiba.

*I don’t think I’ll be able to get along with you well. The reason is that we—*

Kiba hadn’t let him finish that sentence.

Back then, he’d been filled with nothing but anxiety about the future. Every day, he’d felt depressed about it.

But, look at how things turned out.

Right now, Shino had a partner he trusted more than anyone else walking beside him.

He had a best friend who listened to what he had to say.

If he was able to tell his past self about how things would turn out, what kind of an expression would his younger self make? He’d probably think the future wasn’t all that bad after all.

But, there was one thing Shino clearly knew:

*The present isn’t all that bad.*

Even if he walked on a different path on the future, the memories of this time wouldn’t disappear.

And when it came to what lay beyond his memories, when it came to the future that lay ahead of this present contentment, Shino had nothing to be afraid of.

*The reason was...*

Shino suddenly remembered something, and turned to ask Kiba.

“That being said, Kiba...you said you were being considered a candidate, but when exactly will your Hokage Inauguration ceremony take place?”

“Sh-shut up! I’ll work hard so it happens!”

*The reason was: these bonds.*

*His bonds with his comrades were for life.*

## Perfect Weather for a Wedding

The weather was very clear today.

Under the watchful eyes of the past Hokage carved into the mountain, many people gathered in the centre of the village.

Everyone was in formal attire, their clothes a little more adult-like than usual.

Kakashi hectically rushed around as he took care of every possible factor, from readying the venue to checking on security measures. After all, the people attending included Gaara the Kazekage as all the Kage from the other villages, Kumogakure's Killer Bee, and more.

Yamato was moving around in a frenzy too, acting under the supervision of Kakashi, who was handing out instructions while getting advice from the previous Hokage, Tsunade.

Kakashi had asked Yamato for a few favours. But somehow, before Yamato could notice what was happening, he'd ended up being burdened with many tiresome tasks.

Kakashi had said 'I'll be relying on you' with a smile, though, so Yamato didn't have any harsh feelings.

Rather, Yamato, whose facial expression was usually so unchanging along with his mellow character, was in excessively good spirits, carrying out his chores with a content smile. He had that look on his face because Kakashi was a senpai Yamato respected from the bottom of his heart.

Lee and Gai showed up with dumbbells in tow, and threw everyone around them into a great shock.

*They're even training on a day like this...* Everyone thought, half-scandalised. Nobody knew yet that they hadn't brought the dumbbells so they could train with them.

Tenten was acting like she was both the hot-blooded men's guardian, scolding them on how to behave while doing this or that. She was muttering complaints like she was burdened with looking after them, but deep down in her heart, she was having fun.

Shikamaru was talking to Temari about something. It appeared to be a complicated discussion about work, but both of their faces were bright and cheerful, and every now and then, their laughter would mix together in the air. They were smiling naturally, spontaneously, and seeing them stand side by side didn't feel out of place at all. They were a well-matched couple.

As he watched the two of them, Chouji smiled as well.

While he was thinking he didn't want to disturb the nice mood those two had, he was also preoccupied with something else inside his head. Chouji was looking for a solution to solve his dilemma: how he was going to manage to eat every single one of the many dishes laid out in the venue.

He thought that he would need a secret plan, something like what Shikamaru would cook up, but no matter how much he thought and thought, no amazing strategies occurred to him. Chouji

settled on the idea that he'd just start from one side of the banquet and go all the way to the other. After coming to this conclusion, he gave another smile.

Speaking of nice moods, Ino and Sai were like that too. They'd entered the venue holding hands. Even while everyone around teased them, all "Things are heating up!," the two looked blissfully happy.

Nearby them, Kiba had been constantly asking Kurenai questions for a while now.

Kiba had burst into the venue triumphantly holding up honeywine, boasting about how 'we've brought something for Naruto from the history of the Senjuu clan'. But, it looked like Kiba's actual knowledge of history was vague, and now he was bothering Kurenai with constant questions about it.

It seemed like Kurenai had finally decided to give him an impromptu history lesson. Kiba listened intently as she talked, noting things down on a memo pad, probably so he could use the info properly later.

Nearby, Mirai was all dressed up and riding on top of Akamaru, playing around.

Shino was watching, wondering if it still counted as playing horsey if in fact you were riding a dog.

Then, while looking at Akamaru and Kiba, Shino wondered when it would be best to give Naruto and Hinata the honeywine. It was their trump card, so perhaps it should be saved for last. Or, maybe it should be given first.

*It was something to be concerned about. The reason was...*

Shino kept worrying silently in his head over the matter.

One by one, the venue was slowly filling up with more and more friendly and familiar faces.

Ichiraku Ramen's owner Teuchi came, as well as his daughter Ayame, who was an attraction for guests to come to the ramen store.

Iruka was already being overwhelmed with emotion from the moment he stepped inside.

The weather was very clear today.

Sakura looked up at the sky, alone.

As she did so, she thought about a certain someone who was under the same sky, continuing his travels even now. Just thinking that made her insides feel as bright and clear as the sky above her.

She had someone she was sending her thoughts to.

Just that was enough to make her feel blissful.

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It was a beautiful day, as if the heavens themselves were giving their blessing.

And, of course...

Hyuuga Hinata's thoughts had wandered over to a place beyond the sky again.

*Neji nii-san...*

Glancing out the waiting room's window, she could see the blue sky free of any clouds.

*I'm getting married.*

She whispered those words inside her heart, and turned to look at the young man standing next to her.

Looking at the intense look on his face, her heart started thudding despite herself. Even though she'd always been looking at him, just being with him like this made her pulse rate pick up like it had the very first day she'd met him.

Naruto's unflinching eyes were looking at the Hokage Monument, the faces of previous Hokage carved into rock.

Or rather, to be more accurate, he was looking at the carved face of Namikaze Minato. His dad.

Just looking at him as he did that, Hinata felt so full of emotion, her chest could burst.

*Ahh, she thought. Right now, this second...*

Standing next to the person she loved like this made her feel unbearably happy. She was so happy, she couldn't even hope to express it with words.

*This moment is bliss.* Hinata thought, simply, honestly.

As she did, maybe he noticed she was looking, because his eyes turned to meet hers.

Hinata's face turned red. She ended up fidgeting a little.

He gave her an embarrassed grin too. The serious look on his face turned into another one, innocent like a young boy. She adored every single one of his facial expressions.

Her father Hiashi and little sister Hanabi entered the waiting room.

It was almost time.

Hinata took Naruto's arm, and held on tight.