

我愛羅秘伝

砂塵幻想

SHARARA
HIDDEN

NARUTO
-ナルト-

岸本奇史
小太刀右京

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Written by: Ukyō Kodachi

Illustrated by: Masashi Kishimoto

English Fan Translation by: Cacatua

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Section One: Sunagakure

Shinobi are those who endure.

They are those who endure even the most unreasonable circumstances.

This was fact.

One man held conviction that it was fact. His conviction came from living in a world where you could only survive if you endured.

Suna.

That was where he had been born, and it's scenery was one that he had become intimately familiar with.

At noon, the temperatures would soar to over 40 degrees Celsius. And at night, they'd drop to below freezing level.

It was a world that rejected the existence of living things. An absolute hell where even bacteria were denied the comfort to thrive, let alone plants or animals.

That was the world this man lived in.

And that was why he had to endure.

The man's name was Gaara.

In the corner of such a desert, a single oasis clung to existence: the village of Sunagakure.

The village's terrain was strangely shaped, sunk into the very earth. Nothing about it seemed like a natural occurrence. Eventually, people began to whisper of the legendary eras, of gods like Susanoo and Amaterasu forging the terrain with techniques beyond mortal knowledge.

The centre of the village held an incredibly plain-looking Kazekage's Office. Gaara, like most shinobi, did not have any interest in

extravagance. He thought it would be sufficient to wear clothes that most people wore, and have furniture that was generally used.

It was a manifestation of his abstinence from luxuries. It was also possible that it had something to do with the fact that as a young boy who was the previous Kazekage's son, Gaara had never wanted for anything or lacked any luxury. He had, however, tasted loneliness.

“Ahh...”

Gaara let out a sigh, and looked up at the sky.

Light from the evening sun fell softly on his hair, a shade that was closer to red than brown, and his face, fair and good-looking, like chiselled marble.

He wondered when he would finally be able to use his own will and freely soar away into sky.

Well, right now he had an opponent to do battle with: a mountain of paperwork.

Shinboi had all come together to fight the Akatsuki who had wanted to take control of the world. And the Akatsuki had been defeated, along with Ootsutsuki Kaguya.

However, their battle to save the world had not been commissioned by anyone.

Of course, most of the Daimyou financed the battle since it was technically linked to the national security of their nations. However, the Land of Wind had kept an ongoing limited arms policy for ten years now, so they balked at the sudden expenses from the war.

After all, it was a battle between you ninja alone. They stubbornly argued.

As if that reasoning makes sense. In the first place, isn't the protection we've given you the only reason you're still alive?

Sunagakure's shinobi were furious. It wasn't unreasonable of them to be so.

They weren't asking for money so they could have luxuries, they weren't asking for gold.

Sanitary maternity hospitals for the sake of infants, and construction of water wells so no one would be in a difficult situation. Prior investment into research centres so they could keep up with advancing technology. Pensions for shinobi who had been disabled by injuries sustained in battle, and the families who had lost their provider in the war.

For all of those things, the people of Sunagakure needed money.

And the job to retrieve that money from the Daimyou, well, that was currently Gaara's occupation.

That job didn't hold any flashy battles of ninjutsu, or adventures with blood spilling down flesh.

Rather, it was wrestling with straight-forward paperwork, inconspicuously laying the groundwork for future accomplishments, and boring mediation efforts between higher powers.

Those were the reasons behind Gaara's single sigh.

"Gaara, you here?"

The door opened with a clang, and a single young kunoichi entered.

She was a beautiful woman, her hair a golden colour that reminded you of the desert sand shining under the morning sun.

There weren't many people in the village who spoke to Gaara –who was, after all, the kazekage– in such a friendly, familiar manner. And, out of all the females in the village, only this one woman spoke to him so familiarly.

This one woman was Temari.

"What's happened?" Gaara asked, feeling his tense lips relax slightly.

When his elder sister came to the office by herself, it usually wasn't because of anything important. If it had something to do with work, his elder brother Kankurou would've accompanied her.

"Hehe..."

Just as he'd thought. Temari sat down to speak with him, but there was a wide, relaxed grin spreading across her face.

"It's nothing really," She said, "I got another letter from Shikamaru, you see."

"I see."

"He says he's writing everything on paper because he doesn't trust the security of the new electronic mailing system yet." Temari explained.

"It's a pretty odd and outdated method, but still, he does it because he's being careful."

Shikamaru was his elder sister's fiancée. He was an incredibly subtle and shrewd shinobi they'd met during Konoha's Chuunin Exams.

When Temari told Gaara about her and Shikamaru's relationship, he'd been very surprised.

But when Gaara told his brother Kankurou...

"Nah, it was really obvious."

"Is that how it was?"

Gaara had become extremely concerned after that conversation, and even read the love story 'Icha Icha Paradise' to try and understand what signs he missed. But, at the end of the day, he came to the conclusion that those who didn't understand were going to continue to not understand.

"There are very rapid developments occurring in the encryption system used in electronic mail. The details are in the THX-1138 file sent by the Raikage-"

"No, that's not what I'm talking about."

"...We weren't talking about electronic mail?"

"Ahhh..." Temari let out a very exaggerated sigh, shrugging her shoulder. "Gaara, I wonder why when it comes to stuff like this, you're just as bad as Konoha's Naruto."

"Is there something wrong with what I just said?"

"There is. There really is." Temari's tessen was being pointed towards him. "When a woman is talking about stuff like this, she'd prefer it if

you listened to what she's saying about the letter's contents. Understand?"

"Is there an emergency of some sort?"

"No, that's why I'm telling you..." Temari gave a strained smile, and looked like she gave up on explaining in detail. "It's the ceremony, the ceremony. The scheduled date for the ceremony."

"Ahh..."

The date for the wedding ceremony was, in fact, one of Gaara's unsolved problems, pinned to a corkboard inside his mind.

Temari was the Kazekage's sister and, in a similar vein, her future husband Nara Shikamaru was an authority figure in the village of Konoha.

Thus, when it came to the ceremony, politics were immediately involved. The details of the ceremony couldn't be decided only with the intentions of the couple getting married. If an error in judgement was made, over hundreds of shinobi could die.

Since ancient times, Konohagakure and Sunagakure's relationship has always run very deep.

In the very beginning, at the time when the Five Kage first came into existence, Sunagakure could only survive because Konohagakure had given them a plot of fertile land in a secret agreement between them.

After that, one would note that the southern village of Sunagakure targeted the far more bountiful plots of land owned by the northern village of Konohagakure.

Even back when Gaara and Temari had first met Naruto and Shikamaru of Konoha, they had been stuck inside a whirlpool of those schemes and tactics.

But, if you put it like that, then it gave the impression that Suna had always been the unjustified and lone aggressor. However, the shinobi world wasn't that simple a place.

The truth was that Konohagakure's side had carried out countless schemes to destabilise Sunagakure as well. For many long years, the two villages kept up the appearances of allied nations on the outside, while tension ran thick and fierce underneath.

It was precisely because of that long-running history that there was such huge political significance in the fact that Temari, the previous kazekage's daughter, was now marrying into Konoha's Nara Clan. It was an indication that the two villages didn't intend to have an alliance on paper only, but to have a genuine detente.

Gaara said, "It would be nice if Konoha's side said that they'd accept our proposed terms for the date of the ceremony."

"You're being unsentimental." Temari retorted, "How much do you think Shikamaru and I have been wracking our brains over this?"

"It would be nice if the security teams in both villages accepted them, too."

"You're really not cute at all. Just be honest and say you're feeling jealous." Temari said, leaning over and pinching Gaara's cheeks.

In the past, Gaara would have killed her on the spot for doing such a thing. Now, however, he didn't feel the slightest inclination to do so.

Rather, the opposite. Surprisingly enough, he thought that having your cheeks pinched by your older sister didn't feel bad at all.

On that note, it still didn't change how Gaara didn't really understand how this relationship of 'family' differed from the relationship between 'man and woman'.

All he knew was just this: when Gaara saw Temari smiling so widely it looked like her cheeks would break, or when he glimpsed the wondrous smile his close friend Uzumaki Naruto would send Hyuuga Hinata, this thought would enter his mind:

Something about it is definitely different.

Gaara's mother had died soon after giving birth to his jinchuuriki self.

His father never remarried.

Thinking back on it now, Gaara thought that maybe his father had done that to stay faithful to his mother.

"Anyway, if the village of Konohagakure just accepts, all will be well." Gaara said, getting up.

"Where're you going?"

“The Elders asked for a meeting with me about another matter. If I show up before they call me, it’ll put them in a good mood.”

“RUGOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

A vortex of sand was swirling and churning around, and in the middle of the sandstorm, the shape of a large human was forming.

It’s huge! Kankurou thought. Even though it was his enemy’s work, he couldn’t help but be overcome with admiration at the magnificent sight.

The morphing body had to be ten...no, twenty metres tall. The size of a small building.

It’d be one thing if it was a summoned spiritual animal who was this big, but it was incredibly rare for a shinobi to be able to transform themselves to such a gigantic size.

It’s different from the Akimichi Clan’s Multi-Size Technique...! Kankurou thought as he watched. I guess this is something that’s only held by A rank runaway-nin in the Bingo Book!

“Kankurou-sama! I’ll handle this myself!”

“!”

One of Kankurou’s subordinates, Amagi, had leapt out to the field.

“The enemy hasn’t made a move yet!” Kankurou barked, “It’s too early to make attack!”

“Sir, if we wait, it’s just giving the enemy time to gather strength for an attack!

Amagi was still young.

He had cleared the Chuunin Exam at 13, and come under Kankurou’s direct supervision at 15. He was a generation who hadn’t experienced the battle with Kaguya. Amagi was a young boy with androgynous features, like his cherubic chestnut brown hair, that sometimes had him mistaken for a girl.

“I’m heading out!” Amagi cried, and ten...no, twenty kozura* flew out of his sleeves towards the enemy. In the same instant, Amagi himself had also thrown several handfuls of daggers.

It was a very artistic show of Amagi’s skill, but even the jounin Kankurou would have the ability to create a timing that would let him deflect a barrage of small, sharp weapons in an instant.

“UOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!” The giant moved his arm to brush away the annoying projectiles.

But, that was what Amagi had been expecting.

“I’ve got you!” Amagi yelled, and the kozura he’d thrown suddenly pulled together like silver belts. They changed course in mid-air, deflecting the giant’s arm and heading straight towards his heart instead, rushing forwards like a meteor shower.

Ah, so he used chakra strings after all, Kankurou thought.

It was a specialty of Sunagakura shinobi to use the chakra that shinobi had and turn them into strings that could control puppets. Using chakra strings to control kozura’s directions, sort of like a homing device, was an original technique invented by Amagi.

But, like I said. He’s still young.

“RUOOOOOOOO!” The giant roared, gathering all his strength.

“!”

Amagi noticed something unusual was about to happen, and hurriedly moved to retract the kozura from their course.

But, he was one second- no, half a second too late.

It was lightning.

A bolt of lightning burst out of the giant’s body, and struck the area where Kankurou and the other shinobi were gathered.

“Amagi!” Kankurou yelled.

He and the other shinobi were fine. They’d only lost their footing from the impact of the thunderclap.

But Amagi wasn't. He had still been connected to the threads of his kozura, and received the full brunt of the electric shock from the lightning.

Amagi crumpled like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

“Ah...”

People say that the moment you die, you see bright, revolving lanterns.

Amagi had imagined his own death would be under more heroic circumstances... but reality hadn't turned out that way.

He'd survived countless battles after his first fight. Who would've ever thought that he'd be brought down by his own jutsu? He certainly hadn't, and it had been his downfall.

Am I just going to die like this? The thought threw Amagi into chaos. I still haven't...I still haven't done anything...

He could feel his consciousness slipping away, falling into a dark abyss.

“Hey.” Somebody said. They were holding him close, keeping a warm arm around Amagi.

“Ah...?”

For just a moment, Amagi thought the person holding him might be his father or his mother.

It wasn't anything to be ashamed of. It was a natural feeling that those in the battlefield would all have.

“So you're alive, huh.”

It was Kankurou. There was red kabuki makeup on his face as usual, and his kind eyes were looking down at Amagi.

“It’s basically a Magnet Release: Raijinga** technique.” Kankurou said to Amagi. He’d placed the young shinobi under the shelter of a relatively safe boulder. “Like the name suggests, you use your electromagnetic powers to absorb the mass around you, expanding your body’s scalar appearance, and take on the shape of a giant. In a nutshell, it’s a jutsu that creates a huge human form out of iron sand.”

Kankurou knew Amagi had already heard the explanation back at the briefing, but he was explaining it one more time to help Amagi get back to his senses.

Shinobi were special people who constantly put themselves out into the battlefield of missions, and receive various types of training. No matter how much blood has been spilt, no matter how much they fear death, if they just hear the details of their mission again, they instinctively start to calm down.

Kankurou didn’t know whether this behaviour was a blessing from being human or not.

All he knew was that right now, he didn’t want the young subordinate in front of his eyes to fearfully die. He’d applied first aid to stop the bleeding too.

“He does use Lightning Release for his expansion in size, but when it comes to his electromagnetic power, it’s a different matter.”

Kankurou continued. “The giant’s walking creates a piezoelectric effect where subterranean graphite is crushed, and electrical discharge is created. So, he takes that energy from the natural world surrounding him, and uses that instead of being limited by his own reserves.”

“...I’m sorry.” Amagi mumbled, tightly clinging onto Kankurou’s hand.

It looked like his mind was still a bit muddled, but Kankurou understood why he was apologising.

Amagi’s thoughts were probably along the lines of: I got in the way of the jounin I admire. Anyone would have those sorts of thoughts. Especially since this was the first A-rank mission Amagi had ever experienced.

Well, I guess the only person who'd remain unshaken after their first A-rank is Gaara. Kankurou's thoughts strayed towards his poker-faced brother.

Gaara's first A-rank, in other words, the first mission that pitted him against other shinobi of jounin rank, had been when he was twelve years old.

The A-rank mission hadn't been long after Konoha's Chuunin Exams had ended, and along with that, the end of Orochimaru's Konoha Crush plot.

Honestly, considering how one of the Legendary Sannin, as well as several kekkai genkai users had all been involved in the Konoha Crush, it had definitely qualified as an A-rank mission all on its own.

But, that being said, at the time Kankurou and the others had felt like the words 'A-rank mission' would apply to a mission with certain aspired qualities.

Back then, Kankurou had been fourteen, and his elder sister Temari had been fifteen.

Thinking back on the incident in Konoha now, Kankurou felt terribly nostalgic. That moment, in the middle of fighting, they'd met a person who was like a sun.

Uzumaki Naruto.

"Kankurou-sama, it's coming!"

One genin's calling voice pulled Kankurou out of his reminiscing.

"Okay, we'll be heading out soon." He said to Amagi. "This time, let's act according to the plan, alright?"

“...Yes.” Amagi was cooperative now. Even after thinking he could die in the middle of this dire mission, the child prodigy had managed to regain his strength.

The lightning-collecting giant took one huge step towards them, and Kankurou deliberately leapt out into the enemy’s path.

In a fight between shinobi and shinobi, jumping out and exposing yourself was, eight or nine times out of ten, an attempt to lure the enemy towards you and aim at their weak spots.

Well, people like Gaara and Uzumaki Naruto were exceptions to the rule, but exceptions were exceptions.

In this case, Kankurou was stepping out to lure the giant towards him, and their enemy naturally knew it too.

But, the giant still turned towards Kankurou anyway. Every footfall rang out with a great thud.

It looked like their enemy felt extremely confident about their Raijunga.

This feels familiar. Kankurou thought. He was being reminded of his younger brother Gaara.

Sand and electromagnets may look different, but at the end they both used ‘an absolute defense’ jutsu.

They protected their body with an invincible armour, and simultaneously used that armour as a weapon against others. If any difference was to be found, it was how Gaara didn’t use his jutsu in such a flashy and gaudy way to turn himself into a towering giant.

But then, being the size of a giant had its advantages beyond appearances.

He’s fast!

In the blink of an eye, the giant had already approached Kankurou.

People usually expect large things to move slow.

Be it whales or blimps, or monsters like the Ten Tails, huge things look like they’re moving slowly.

But, that was just an optical illusion.

When a creature's one step covered a large distance, then that creature was fast. It was something that'd be easily understood if one thought of a parent and child racing against each other.

Large things are fast.

Thinking that small beings could nimbly avoid large ones is nothing but a delusion.

The giant casually raised its foot over Kankurou. Just the underside of one foot was bigger than the roof of a small house. If one stepped on you, you'd be crushed to bits.

Tak, tak, tak.

Kankurou managed to leap out of the way three times in a row when the giant tried to step on him.

But, the fourth time, Kankurou didn't leap away. He leapt up.

He leap up aiming for the giant's own knee, intending to climb all the way up to his face.

Any shinobi of jounin class could quickly jump off scaffolding as meagre as leafy branches on trees. The giant's legs were beyond ideal footholds for Kankurou to jump his way up.

But, the Raijinga wasn't the giant's only jutsu.

Kankurou-sama! Amagi couldn't shout out loud, but his horrified shriek rang out inside his head.

The instant Kankurou had touched the surface of the giant's knee, the electromagnetic field that was the driving force behind the giant's movement effected Kankurou too, and the man's entire body literally scattered to bits.

The giant laughed.

Every single part of his body was a weapon to be used against others. That was his absolute and defense, or rather the offensive strategy of his absolute defense. Any person who attacked him would be destroyed to tiny pieces the instant they touched him.

The giant had probably never tasted failure in his life.

And that was why **Kankurou laughed.**

“!”

Kankurou didn't come out immediately. His continued existence had only been partially given away by the sound of his sneering.

As for 'Kankurou' who had shattered to pieces, his remains turned into countless sharp shards and flew back to pierce the giant's body, a sharp woosh sound piercing out as the sand of the giant's body was disturbed.

The place on the ground where Kankurou should've fallen held only his black cloak.

It was a rather simple trick.

The 'Kankurou' who'd seemingly leaped up to the giant's knee had, in fact, been the puppet that Kankurou carried on his back. He'd swapped places with the puppet at the last minute, diving underground himself as he sent the puppet up to meet the giant.

The trick itself was rather simple, but the impeccable timing and exploitation of a human's psychological weak spots were all Kankurou's originality. It wasn't surprising that the inexperienced Amagi had been fooled too.

Amagi, and the giant too. The giant couldn't possibly observe the goings on at his feet with much diligence. It was a weak spot from his eyes being too high up.

“GAUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUGHHHHHHH!” The giant shrieked as it writhed in pain.

From what Amagi could see, the giant was uselessly sending electromagnetic waves through the puppet's threads. Well, that was to be expected. Going by his writhing, the giant was in unbearable pain.

“He's not just suffering from being attacked by the fragments.”

Kankurou crowed as he watched the spectacle.

There was an extremely delighted look on Kankurou's face. It was the expression a performer would have after successfully pulling off a magic trick in front of a wide audience.

He was talking about the giant's Chakra Pathway System.

The cornerstone of ninjutsu was the Chakra Pathway System that carried living being's energy —ie chakra— through its pathways. Kankurou had unmistakably launched his own chakra-laden strings towards the giant in his attack.

He had, in a nutshell, turned the giant into a sort of 'living puppet'.

Of course, Kankurou didn't have a jutsu like the byakugan that'd let him perfectly see the chakra pathways of his opponents. But, if you studied the matter diligently enough, then you could easily send your chakra to invade the Chakra Pathway of your opponent, thus creating a countercurrent of chakra and throwing their jutsu into disarray.

Unable to maintain his Raijiga jutsu, the giant fell to his knees.

If he was an experienced shinobi, he'd be able to stand back up after a few seconds.

Their opponent definitely was an experienced shinobi, but, an unfortunate one.

The second he fell down, Kankurou sent three chuunin flying to dogpile on him, and the giant...or rather, the shinobi who used to be a giant, was instantly captured.

“‘Raijinga’ Kajuura, jounin terrorist from Ishigakure village, you’re under arrest.” Kankurou said, and not a second later, the runaway-nin Kajuura’s mouth and hands were covered in shackles.

It went without being said that the shackles were there to prevent the criminal from attempting suicide.

“We’re not going to kill him, sir?” Amagi asked. He had a vexed expression on his face. “He killed all three of his own students. And in the process, ten citizens.”

“Is that so?” Kankurou asked.

Kankurou was long past the stage where he felt emotionally overwhelmed with that number of deaths.

In the war, dozens and hundreds more shinobi had died.

“Do you want to kill him?” He asked Amagi.

“Yes.”

“Alright then, you can kill him.” Kankurou said, placing a kunai into Amagi’s hand, “But, you can only kill him if you can guarantee that you’ll be able to bring back the genin and citizens that he murdered. How about it? Can you do that?”

“Th- that’s...”

“If you can’t do it, then after you kill him, you’ll be killed as well. Putting aside what this bastard’s relations and village will do if you kill him, a dead shinobi doesn’t carry the secret techniques people want returned. A dead shinobi is just a pointless chunk of flesh. I don’t need a subordinate who creates such pointless things.”

“...I won’t do it.” Amagi said.

“I see.”

Amagi had given a good response. If he managed to survive a few more battles, he’d definitely become a good shinobi.

“Amagi,” Kankurou said. “When it comes down to it, I want to kill him too.”

“...Captain.”

“He’s a terrorist for hire, and even if we’re only looking at the number of victims we know, he’s killed over a hundred little girls. Of course nobody wants to let him live.” Kankurou was looking down at their captive as he spoke. Kajuura’s eyes were blindfolded as well, just in case he could use doujutsu. “But, if we kill him out of hate, then we’re not gonna be any different from him. We can’t be like this guy.”

“Shinobi are those who endure...” Amagi murmured.

“Exactly.” Kankurou said, and gave a broad grin. “Alright, let’s go home! You guys safely completed an A-rank mission today. It’s something to celebrate! I’ll treat you guys to a heap of roast lamb!”

“OOOOO!” The young shinobi all let out a delighted cheer.

“...And now I will mention the results of this strategy to capture Kajuura that was carried out three days ago. Kajuura’s interrogation has revealed the existence of a larger organisation behind him. Our intention is to carry out a mass-arrest in a number of days. The matter of Kajuura’s custody after that event will be discussed between the Five Kage.” Gaara finished reading the long report to the elder Counsellors lined up in front of him.

The leader of Sunagakure village may have been Gaara, but the really powerful influences were the elder shinobi who drew away from the frontlines.

They were a group of representatives from several tribes who organised the village, and Gaara couldn’t make a decision without running it by them first. The weekly meetings they had about reports were in reality occasions for Gaara and the Counsellors to come to mutual understandings on subjects.

“Ahum.” One of the elders spoke. “As expected of the kazekage. None of us have anything we’re concerned about.”

As he said that, the line of wrinkled faces nodded in unison.

“Ah, and now that you mention it...” Ebizou, the head of the Counsellors, gave Gaara a broad smile from where he sat in front of Gaara.

‘About time you got there.’ That’s likely what Gaara’s friend, Uzumaki Naruto would’ve said. He probably would’ve stuck his tongue out, too.

But, Gaara couldn’t say things like that.

He just thought ‘as I expected’, and let the slightest of furrows come between his brow.

“From now on, this is just going to be a friendly chat with some grandpas and grandmas.” Ebizou continued, “Alright, Kazekage?”

“Yes.”

‘Friendly chat’ my foot.

From now on, the counsellors were going to discuss the real reason behind the so-called report session.

Every incident Gaara had reported until this moment was already long known to the Counsellors. His 'informing them' was just for show, an empty ceremony.

The fact that they were about to ask the Kazekage for a 'personal' favour was just another show of how the Counsellors were the real power in Sunagakure.

It was absolutely ridiculous.

Sometimes it'd be something about how someone's genin grandchild was having bad luck in missions, and could he have a word with the chuunin in charge?

Or other times it'd be about how the sand piling up on the roads making things difficult, and oh can't you do us a favour and talk to the Daimyou about it?

In those cases, they were talking as influential people in the village.

Those cases were bearable.

It was when they started speaking as shinobi that the situation turned awful.

For example, 'My jutsu desperately needs a cactus that only appears every thousand years, but we don't have any. They say there are some medicinal stores in Snow Country that have them, so send some young ones to get them for me, will you?'

For example, 'Some shinobi from Amegakure have stolen a hidden scroll from us. We don't want to kick up a fuss, so, Kazekage, save our face and handle the situation behind closed doors.'

For example, 'Say that you're expanding the budget for medical users, and make a special jounin position for a few poison-users from my tribe.'

Everything the Counsellors asked of Gaara always had to do with dirty business or irrational personal favours.

Gaara used to listen attentively when he'd just become Kazekage, but lately he'd learnt how to deflect or ignore their requests.

If he just listened to everything they said, then his position as Kazekage, as well as the detente between the Five Great Shinobi Villages could both disappear.

I wonder what's in store... Gaara thought, filling his navel with chakra.

This was no joking matter.

Experienced shinobi were capable of loading chakra into their voices and instantly snatching away people's will. There were people who could use the skills of instant hypnosis or paralysis even at simple meeting places like this. For shinobi, the location of any negotiation was no different from another battlefield.

"Now, Gaara."

"Yes?"

"You've steadily grown, and reached the age of twenty, haven't you?"

"Yes..."

"You've quickly advanced." Toojuurou said from where he was sitting next to Ebizou, "As to be expected from a jinchuuriki child, a genius shinobi who was called Gaara of the Desert...!"

Toojuurou let out a great laugh.

Ebizou's health was weakening lately, and Toojuurou was being eyed as his successor, the Number Two of Sunagakure's Counsellors. It had been several years since he'd stopped working as an active shinobi, and as one would expect, his muscles had weakened, and his hair was white and balding. But, his power of insight hadn't weakened at all. The man was like a rock.

"During the 'Konoha Crush' that genius of yours was tattered to shreds and fluttering in the wind, wasn't it? Ahahaha, well I suppose even monkeys can fall from trees."

"The end of that matter was embarrassing."

In the past, Gaara probably would've killed them on reflex, but his present self had no intentions of doing that.

Gaara knew that a person's world was built on spoken exchange like this, and it was precisely because he didn't kill every person he came across that the present world his mother and Naruto loved existed.

For that reason, Gaara was even capable of lowering his head in apology.

The Elders are taking a long time with their introduction...just what do they want to say?

The looks on their faces didn't look like they had complaints about his work.

Rather, the atmosphere around the elders was very relaxed. The atmosphere was calm. Most likely, the topic they were going to bring up was something they'd already laid the groundwork for, something nobody disagreed on.

"Twenty is a very good age."

"I see."

"And that's why, Gaara..." Ebizou shook his head, and grinned widely. The smile was like that of a child's. "Take a wife."

"Hu...huh?"

My voice sounds idiotic. Gaara thought to himself.

He felt like he'd been attacked from a blind spot. He'd had a blind spot outside of his consciousness.

A person wasn't able to keep watch 360 degrees in every direction, but he'd still be able to tell if, say, a friend was approaching from outside his field of vision, or if a pet cat was playing at his own feet.

That was because a person's consciousness was able to reach out to their surroundings and 'see' what was 'unseen'.

Shinobi forged and improved that consciousness, using even their intuition, until they were roughly able to sense all their surroundings with all their six senses. To still have something you hadn't been able to sense despite that consciousness was due to not being able to so much as imagine what to look out for.

If you couldn't even imagine it, you definitely couldn't see it, and you couldn't sense it.

It was a blind spot in every meaning of the word. And Gaara had been attacked completely unprepared.

If Ebizou had been a genjutsu user, Gaara could've died in battle.

Cold sweat was running down Gaara's back. An ordinary person would've shuddered, but Gaara was a shinobi through and through.

I still haven't trained myself enough.

"With all due respect," Gaara said, "Why me?"

"You don't know?"

"...is this possibly about my sister Temari?"

"Yes." Ebizou nodded. "Listen well. Our previous Kazekage had three children. Temari, Kankurou, and you, Gaara. You, who carried the power of a Jinchuuriki then became Kazekage. I assume you understand the grave importance of such a bloodline."

"Yes..."

Most of the world of shinobi was built on heritage.

Of course, that didn't mean shinobi were never succeeded by people from another clan who showed talent. For example, the Sarutobi clan who held such high authority in Konohagakure village never had another clan-member as Hokage beyond the Third.

But, a large portion of jutsu used by shinobi was inherited, and furthermore, kept inside the clan as a guarantee of preserving their prosperity. And for that, one needed blood relations.

"Of course, if it's only to preserve the existence of the house-name, then even an adopted child or son-in-law would do. But, in the end, if it isn't a blood succession, then the people will not accept it."

"Sunagakure's roots lie in its tribes. And the tribes value blood ties."

"..."

Gaara didn't have anything he could use to retort to the elders' words.

If he argued carelessly, they'd immediately pounce on him with retorts. He could see that, and that's why he was listening silently.

Like an obedient grandchild.

“Now we come to the main point. Temari is marrying into Konohagakure’s Nara clan... this is fine. We, too, have deemed it acceptable.”

“However,” One of the elders, Ikanago, slammed her fan against her knee. “Let’s say that in the future, a misfortune befell you and Kankurou. Let’s say that Temari and Nara Shikamaru had a child at the time. In that case...that child would become the only remaining bloodline of the kazekage.”

“I understand what you’re trying to say.” Gaara said, “In that case, you would feel the need to approach the child, and bring them back here to protect the Kazekage bloodline. Isn’t that right?”

What disgusting words I have to force out my mouth. Gaara thought. Even though he himself had been cursed to be used as a tool by his parent, here he was talking about a child his sister hadn’t even given birth to yet, and rather than talking about congratulating her, they were talking about using the child as another political tool.

The seat of political power might be great and mighty, but it’s also a cold and desolate place.

“But, if that happened,” Gaara continued, “Then the Nara Clan would be paternal relations to the Kazekage. Then, naturally, Konohagakure would become deeply intertwined with Sunagakure’s affairs.... And this is the outcome that every single one of you elders fear. That’s what this is, isn’t it?”

“Exactly.”

“But, if I got married first, the tradition of marrying off the eldest to youngest would be disturbed. First, you should look to settling down my elder brother Kankurou.”

Gaara said that, but he wasn’t particularly looking to push this troublesome matter onto his elder brother. Kankurou had a smooth, glib tongue that Gaara didn’t have. The one who was able to hang out with younger shinobi and listen to their troubles was Kankurou, not Gaara.

Gaara had wanted to be able to do such things as well, but whenever he tried, things didn't work out well. The other shinobi respected Gaara a great deal, and didn't want to bother him by meeting his gaze.

"Of course you're not Kankurou. Gaara, you're you. I'm not Kankurou either, you know." Naruto had said sometime in the past, laughing. "Like, there are friends who you go out and play with, but there are also friends who stand by you during hard times, the kind you're really grateful for. Gaara, if you ask me which type you are, you're definitely the second type."

Those words might have been just part of an everyday conversation for Naruto, but for Gaara, they were like a salvation.

Above all else, Naruto thought of Gaara as a friend, and the fact that he said those words without any hesitation made him extremely happy.

But Kankurou did hold more popularity, and Kankurou did seem like the better option here. Nothing made Gaara think that other than his cool-headed disposition as a shinobi.

"We thought so as well. However, Kankurou refused."

"...Oh." Gaara replied after a pause. He had abruptly realised that Kankurou had been the one to push the troublesome matter onto him.

No matter how you looked at it, Kankurou was a very flighty person. Even though he had the same good looks as Gaara, Kankurou went to all the trouble of hiding it under makeup, and playing around.

Kankurou was the kind of man who hated to be tied down to anything. When Gaara and Toujuurou had nominated Kankurou to be head of the Anti-Terror division, they'd had a very hard time getting him to accept.

"He said that getting married while the Kazekage didn't have a wife would be a sign of disrespect and that we should get you married off first. His reasoning was logically sound."

"...Indeed." Gaara muttered.

"And that's not all. Several of the Daimyou have been saying things to criticise us about how you are still unmarried and without heir."

“You see, Gaara,” Ebizou’s yellowed eyes held just the smallest glimmer of kindness in them. “This isn’t just all about politics or jinchuurikis. We ended up causing you to live an immensely harsh life. We want to give you a family. We want you to be happy. Your happiness would be our tribute to those who have passed.”

“...”

Gaara no longer held any ill feelings towards his deceased father.

Those old feelings had been washed away by their second meeting brought about by the Edo Tensei, because he had found out that, even if it was just for a short amount of time, he had been born into this world loved by someone.

“So that’s how it is, Gaara. Everyone in the village...no, probably even your friends from other villages, as well, everyone wants this for you.”

“Your match has already been picked. She’s a nice girl.”

“Indeed, indeed she is.”

They even brought out a photograph.

It had already become clear that this wasn’t something he could run away from.

Kicking and screaming in the face of death was unsightly behaviour unsuited for a shinobi.

A shinobi had to face death and keep thinking about how he was going to live.

“...I understand.” Gaara said, and bowed his head. Cold sweat dripped down his forehead without him realising.

This was really just another mission, with just a different modus operandi.

“I respectfully accept the matter of having a marriage meeting,” Gaara said. “I would be pleased if you would pick a date and get into contact with the other side.”

He put all of his effort into saying those words.

Translator’s Notes:

*knives attached to sword scabbards, best seen rather than explained.

** Raijinga literally means ‘Lightning God Self’, but the jutsu’s frequently mentioned, so I felt like it read smoother with just the romaji instead of the full name.

Section Two: Hakuto

Shinobi are those who endure even the most unreasonable of circumstances.

Shinobi are those who endure. That’s what people say.

But then, there are also people who say that not going back on their word is their ninja way. Shinobi who say they live for the sake of sticking by what they’ve said.

Which saying was the right one?

The man didn’t know.

If he absolutely had to say something, then all he could say was just that he knew he couldn’t keep enduring the situation he currently found himself in.

Even if that meant taking a path where he would not be someone who endured his circumstances.

He just couldn’t do anything other than make sure his principles were not broken.

That sort of a man existed.

The marriage meeting was going to be held in a high-end hotel that was located in a crescent-shaped oasis a little distance away from Sunagakure village.

The oasis was a loud, flashy and gaudy place that was a gathering of eccentric rich folks who said they wanted to see the desert or tourists who wanted to experience the night clubs and gambling that weren’t available in the city of suna.

It wasn’t an area ruled by shinobi, but at the same time, it wasn’t completely under the control of the Daimyou either.

It was the perfect meeting spot for two families of shinobi.

Of course, it without being said that Sunagakure had already told the employees to reserve the entirety of the hotel. The hotel was being run through a dummy company by Sunagakure's leader precisely for situations like this anyway.

This was Gaara's new battlefield.

Tight and stiff.

Gaara was wearing a three-piece suit for the first time in his life, and this was his honest opinion on it.

"Bear with it, alright. It's for a marriage meeting after all." His elder sister said, tying a necktie around his neck. "Okay? You're the guest of honour today, so nobody can wear clothes of a higher level than yours. You understand the meaning behind that, right?"

"...Yes."

Important ceremonial occasions were places where you were supposed to flaunt your family's status. It wasn't something any Kage could say 'no' to.

'Sunagakure's Fifth Kazekage was a shabby, seedy looking man.'

If any rumours like that got spread around, then it would wound the village's image. And, if any of the young shinobi in Suna caught wind of it, there was the possibility of them going out and starting a fight, too.

At first, one might think it was strange for shinobi, who were constantly immersed in subversive activities or spying, could be bothered by rumours, however it was the very opposite of what one expected.

The activities that shinobi carried out couldn't be made public. So for shinobi, it wasn't evidence or corpses that showed how many missions they'd taken or how fierce a warrior they were, but their reputation. It was their reputation that decided their fate.

Most importantly, Daimyou could only assess a shinobi by their reputation, because there simply wasn't anything else.

And that was precisely why every single village was very careful about the level of mission difficulty they set, and the amount of information they realised in Bingo Books.

But. Still. The clothes were tight.

“I’m fine now, Temari. I’ll do the necktie myself.”

“Oh?” Temari’s eyes narrowed. “Gaara, do you know what kind of knot you’re going to tie?”

“Knot?”

“The tying method!” Temari said, and went back to tightly tying the necktie around his neck again. “You’re the guest of honour today, so you can’t just tie your necktie any way you like. You need to more composed, and give it a dimpled shape... Shikamaru doesn’t understand a thing about this kind of stuff either... I don’t know why all you men are like this... Alright, there we go!”

Gaara didn’t understand what he didn’t understand, or what his sister was happy about, but she looked satisfied with whatever she’d done.

“Let’s go with a silk handkerchief for your breast pocket. Silk has one of the ingredients for antidotes after all. But don’t bring it out unless necessary. There’s a meaning behind even the slightest crease in your handkerchief, you know.”

“Because of a secret code?”

“Because of etiquette!” Temari said, slapping her hands on Gaara’s shoulders, and turning him around to look in the full-view mirror.

Oh, I understand.

It was strange but, he definitely did look different from his usual, everyday appearance.

Gaara was handsome to begin with, but adding the dark blue material that had been specifically ordered from another country did indeed give him a special glow.

His shoes were leather, and polished well. They had indiscreet iron plates for kicking. There were small shuriken on his jewelled tie pin and cuffs, but they didn’t ruin the overall balance of his appearance.

He was, in short, a fine figure of a man.

“Alright, there we go.” Temari nodded, looking content. “Well, this could be the last sisterly thing I can do for you, so, try not to think of it as a pain, okay?”

To think that Temari had been doing everything with that mindset made Gaara feel happy.

There were so many people to give greetings to, it might’ve been a tsunami made of human or an army full of zetsu. When Gaara finally had the chance to slip away, he closed his eyes.

To think it wasn’t even the day of the marriage meeting yet, just a banquet held on the day before, made a person feel flustered.

At the end of the day, Sunagakure village was in the middle of the desert. The other side of the marriage meeting wouldn’t come all the way out here and expect to be greeted by nothing but the weather.

That was why they’d placed a sort of buffer on the days before and after the marriage meeting, sort of like an eve before an event.

“Gaara-sama, what an event.”

“If the Kazekage ends up getting married, it will be an occasion to celebrate.”

“When it comes to the wedding, please make it another grand event.”

It was a pain even greeting the wave of attacks from guests. It was thanks to Gaara’s great memory that he was able to memorise each person’s face, and speak to them tactfully.

Among the guests, there were also people who had been ordered by his father, back in the previous age, to get involved in his assassination.

Now, Gaara’s battlefield was facing all sorts of people with a forced smile on his face.

So when Gaara happened to spot the brother he hadn’t seen for a while at a bar on the other side of the crowd, Gaara felt relieved.

Kankurou hadn't taken off the usual hood on his head, however, he looked surprisingly at ease in his tuxedo.

"Yo," Kankurou greeted.

"Aa." Gaara replied.

"You look well." Kankurou said, holding out his alcohol filled glass for a little toast. Gaara clumsily clinked his own glass –full of cold tea– against his brother's.

"You're not drinking alcohol same as usual, huh?"

"It dulls my judgement. It hinders my speaking. It's also a burden on my internal organs. I don't understand why you choose to drink it."

"Well, it's that kind of thing, y'know," Kankurou wryly smiled, hitting back the amber liquid till there was none left in his glass.

"People feel the urge to do things they know won't do them any good."

"...That's true."

That was something that Gaara did understand. He wasn't a child who would deny that fact.

At the very least, he thought that he wasn't someone who was qualified to criticise the irrational actions of others, considering he used to be someone who would keep killing everyone he came across.

His position as Kazekage might've made things a little different, but that position was one who had to stick to a certain law. Gaara was no longer someone who could put his emotions first and high-handedly judge others.

"So just think of spending some time with alcohol as another part of a mission." Kankurou said.

"Is that...how it is?"

"Yeah." Kankurou grinned, and slid out a glass towards Gaara from somewhere.

Gaara brought the glass to his mouth.

"!"

It tasted awful.

Why do Kankurou and the others drink something like this so happily?

It seriously tasted terrible.

All it did was warm up your stomach, leave a bitter and stinging taste in your mouth, and no matter how you looked at it, it was awful.

Gaara thought maybe this was why he didn't like maron glace.

He'd eaten some bad tasting soldier pills on the battlefield, and gotten wild grass and mud in his mouth during practice, but this was on a different level. It would be one thing to inhale something like this for medicinal reasons, but willingly drinking it for the taste was a completely different matter.

"Is it bad?" His brother asked, grinning. He looked like he couldn't contain his amusement at the situation.

"It's not...good." Gaara replied.

"It's not supposed to be."

Gaara didn't understand what it was supposed to be, but Kankurou was nodding earnestly.

Then, Kankurou slid off his stool.

"...Are you already going, Kankurou?"

"In the first place, I'm only meant to hand over the security here, and briefly show my face. Everything after this is making sure the marriage meeting'll go smoothly, so I should be heading back. Temari will take care of everything else."

"Understood. Stay healthy."

"You'll do a good job, casanova."

He hadn't seen his sibling for a long time, and that was the entirety of their conversation.

But, it was the longest conversation they'd had in half a year.

The younger brother was the Kazekage and the elder brother was the head of the Anti-Terror division, so while that gave them many occasions where they talked business, their talks in private had quickly lessened.

The elder sister who used to stick to them like glue was leaving the village, and now those old days when the three of them would carry out missions like one unit already felt like a far away, fleeting dream.

Shinobi were running through the dark of the night.

Shinobi did use lightning trains* and steam trains or blimps when the situation called for their necessity, but they were simply faster at travelling by foot than other, normal people. Shinobi could go down a trackless path, and make a journey of a thousand miles without a single break. For them, their own two legs were the most reliable method of transport.

And there was all the more reason to go on foot when travelling in the desert, where no reliable roads were guaranteed. Shinobi were more tenacious than camels, faster than horses, and they flew across the seas of sand with ease.

The head of the group of travelling shinobi was Kankurou. By his side was Amagi, who had healed from his injuries sustained in his last battle.

They'd seen great improvements in the techniques used by their medical-nin, thanks to the engineering collaboration they had with Konoha. The results of the secret medical techniques passed down by the Fifth Hokage, Tsunade-hime, were remarkable, and Amagi had been able to return to carrying out missions after a few days, despite his entire body being scorched by lightning.

"...Kankurou-sama." Amagi spoke. "At the end, I don't understand it."

"Don't understand what?" Kankurou knew the answer, but he asked anyway.

The young ones around him –well, they weren't actually all that young– were all disgruntled about something. But, even if he knew what it was, he couldn't let it show that he did.

“Even if it is for appearances, was that sort of a luxurious celebration really necessary?”

“Nobody’d want it being called a shabby celebration, would they?” Kankurou said. “Sunagakure has to show its power to the Daimyou, and the surrounding tribes.”

“Even so. Sir.” Amagi sounded angry. “Our genin are dying in the midst of the Country of Wind’s limited arms policy, like they’re disposable. And in the middle of that situation, there’s this.”

“...” The shinobi gathered around them didn’t raise a single objection. Looked like everyone had the same thoughts.

“It’s precisely because we’re under the limited arms ban that we need to put on appearances.” Kankurou said.

“And will those appearances effect the Daimyou’s decision?”

It was a difficult question.

Shinobi had saved the world. It hadn’t been the least bit glorious.

But Amagi and the rest were young, and didn’t know about that battle. They looked at their revered seniors, Gaara and Kankurou, and when they saw that their efforts in the war hadn’t been rewarded, they started thinking that they wouldn’t be compensated for their actions either.

Right now, conflict between countries had dropped sharply, and there were no longer many opportunities for young shinobi to achieve distinguishments.

“Our roles are many, be it the anti-terror unit or hunting down runaway-nin.” Kankurou said, “Shinobi’s jobs aren’t just limited to finding missing dogs of cleaning Daimyou houses.”

“But I can’t see why we do those things for any reason other than trying to flatter the Daimyou and traders.” Amagi’s words were heavy. “I’ve heard about how we shinobi have always been existences who are more than capable of manipulating the Daimyou or ruling the country.”

“We leave politics to the Daimyou.” Kankurou said. “That’s the rule of shinobi. If we get entangled in politics, and drown in things like gold, alcohol, sex, then we won’t be shinobi anymore.”

“I keep the teachings of the Sage of the Six Paths close to my heart.” Amagi replied.

You’d find that one difference between the two chakra users, samurai and shinobi, was their method of receiving the teachings of ‘ninshuu’. Samurai had split off into a branch who were more spiritual and idealistic, while shinobi had taken a similar route to thinking ‘how can we use our chakra to keep people’s bonds alive?’

“Then,” Amagi said, “Isn’t it all the more true that flattering the government goes against the ninja way?”

“Amagi.” Kankurou’s tone turned low.

He’d allow general criticism.

That was Gaara’s policy. He thought that if he didn’t allow general criticism, then nobody would want to follow him, due to his homicidal past. He thought that allowing criticism would make cooperation strengthen, since criticism allowed the citizens to blow off steam and him to fix his shortcomings.

But, there was a limit to what Kankurou could allow.

“Gaara isn’t the sort of man who goes back on his word.” Kankurou said. “He’s fighting for the sake of Sunagakure. That’s a fact.”

“...I know that.”

It was true.

Amagi, and the other shinobi too, had placed their beliefs and hopes in Gaara, and that was why they’d signed up to be shinobi.

Gaara was a hero to the youth, someone who was changing Suna from a village that was ruled by other seniors in power.

And that was precisely why they couldn’t stand it when it looked like Gaara was intertwining with the government.

These young ones were really fastidious.

“Kankurou-sama, you risk your life in the front lines, so for us, you’re our leader.”

Kankurou didn't like how heavy Amagi's words felt.

They weren't spoken out of self-interest or calculation. It was just pure, simple faith.

That's exactly why I'm troubled by it.

Kankurou missed the days when all he had to think about was the mission.

The moon's reflection was shining on a lake's surface in the oasis.

It looked sharp and clear, and terribly cold.

Gaara was watching the moon from the roof of his suite room. At the end of the day, he hadn't been able to take a liking to alcohol, but it had been an unusual day where he hadn't had anything to do, so in a way he had relaxed.

Well, actually he'd wanted to try and find some work to do but...

"Are you an idiot?!" Temari had given a single roar that laid waste to the idea. "Listen, okay? A marriage meeting is figuring out what kind of a household you want to make. How would it look if a guy said he preferred thinking about work at that time? Think about it."

It was a long lecture. But, at the same time, it was also a fact that he didn't really mind entrusting others with work.

Gaara had an absolute defence.

In a nutshell, he could face a horde of enemy shinobi and still come out unscathed. It wasn't an exaggeration.

In the old days, he had never hesitated when it came to hurting others.

Now, it was the reverse.

Now, Gaara understood the bitter pain experienced when others who didn't have an absolute defence were wounded.

It might have been arrogance.

But, even so, when Gaara was forced to send someone to chase after death while he remained safe, he felt incredibly pained.

“So you were here, Gaara.”

Very few people called the Kazekage by name.

The middle-aged shinobi who showed up at Gaara’s side with a gust of wind, Baki, was one of those few.

He was a man like the desert granite that had been worn down by the wind for countless years, and unwaveringly loyal.

“Baki. What’s wrong?”

Baki had been Gaara’s superior when he was younger and a genin. Now, Baki was technically Gaara’s subordinate, but the truth that he was more of a guardian.

That was why there was no need for any troublesome greetings between them.

They had the trust of a teacher and student, as well as that of comrades in arms. There was no room for showy displays.

“Why was I called here to be in charge of security instead, and Kankurou told to return to the village?”

“?” Gaara turned his head. “Kankurou told me that that was the original plan.”

“I’d heard that Kankurou was personally handling the security since while this was a public official matter, it was also something that intimately concerned the Kazekage household. Then, I received word that I was suddenly replacing him.”

“....that’s strange....”

Even if it was family -no, precisely because it was family, strange happenings couldn’t be overlooked.

“Should I call Kankurou back?”

“It looks like it’s too late to do that now. My subordinates have already gone back. Either way, it looks like the chain of command was broken somewhere.”

“...if this is a plot, it’s a very poorly made one.” Gaara said. “As long as we check the order of command relay, the person responsible will immediately be exposed.”

“Of course, it could just be an error in communication.” Baki said.

Baki didn’t say that from optimism, or any intention of covering for Kankurou.

They’d lost a great number of key figure veterans during the last war, and every village now had a terribly wide ratio between the young and the old. As a result, the numbers of people who had the experience required for behind the scene work like office work or engineering adjustments had greatly decreased.

One mistake would create another mistake, and things could even end up in chaos.

Unfortunately, there isn’t a single human who doesn’t make mistakes, so rather than be unforgiving towards mistakes, they planned everything out with the assumption that there were already mistakes somewhere in there.

“It could be an error, Baki.” Gaara said. “But, it could also be a hastily made plot with people causing trouble before they’re detected.”

“Affirmative.”

“...The marriage meeting is personal business, but, it’s too late to reschedule it. Strengthen security, please. And investigate.” Gaara only hesitated for a moment before continuing. “Call the Konoha shinobi, too. And Temari, as well, privately.”

“Understood.” Baki disappeared.

For a while, Gaara stood there, running his hand down the gourd that he carried. His lips moved, but he didn’t make any sound.

The softly removed veil revealed beautiful, well-defined features that made you think if the wind took the form of a woman, this is what she’d look like.

She was a very beautiful woman.

It was far too plain an explanation for her looks, but unfortunately Gaara didn't have a spacious enough vocabulary for any more than that.

"I am Hakuto, of the Houki Tribe."

Her inky black hair shined like a black pearl, and came down to her shoulders. The kimono she wore looked simple and neat at first glance, but when you looked closer you could see the high quality of the material, and the smattering of just enough—but not too much—gems woven between thread.

Her skin was clear and fair, and she was slender but not too thin, and you could see faint outlines of muscle from a shinobi's training under her skin.

Beautiful.

That was Gaara's honest first impression.

There was no affection, or wicked thoughts.

It was a specialty of his to look at things without preconceptions. It was plain fact that decoration-less Hakuto's face looked as lovely as a golden rayed lily. She was in a league all her own.

The Houki tribe was matrilineal, so the entourage of relatives on her side of the room were all old women, excluding one. Both her parents had passed away in the war. Gaara's side was in a similar state.

Temari was his only attending relative. Gaara hadn't liked the idea of increasing the numbers, and disliked the idea of mediators.

"I am Gaara, successor of the Kazekage."

"I hope we get along today."

"Ah, yes...!"

They were seated in the private room of a restaurant that held a fine view of the lake.

It was the first time in Gaara's life that he'd sat across a lovely woman in a place like this,

She has a lot of openings in her stance...so, she's a medical-nin.

Medical-nin were precious assets in the front lines for saving lives, but they couldn't really be compared to a shinobi of Gaara's class,

because there would be an incredible difference in the skill of their taijutsu. Haruno Sakura of Konohagakure was the rare exception for that rule.

But, it was a different case when it came to the kunoichi wearing very thick glasses that stood behind Hakuto. The way she carried herself spoke of mastery and betrayed her to be at least jounin-class. In the middle of all the old women, Gaara and Hakuto were the youngest, but it looked like both their guards were about equal.

Well, anyway, since this is about marriage taijutsu isn't likely to be a problem.

At that thought, Gaara found his face suddenly turn red.

The idea that the woman in front of him could become his wife had finally linked to reality in his brain.

Well, it would only happen if the marriage meeting went well, but still, thoughts were spinning around his head.

"Well then, we'll leave you young ones to talk." One of the old mediators casually said, and everyone else got up.

This included the only relative on Gaara's side, Temari.

"Gaara." Temari said, moving to speak in his ear.

There was a method used by shinobi when whispering where you mouthed shifts in pronunciation to ensure no one else would hear what was being said.

"You know, the women of the Houki tribe don't show their face without makeup to any man except the one they're going to marry."

"...?"

"Ah, you're so thick." Temari teasingly wrapped an arm around her brother's neck. "I mean, you've got hope, do you understand?"

"Oh." Gaara said. "Ohh...!"

Across from them, Hakuto gave a smile.

According to ancient shinobi, there are younin who work out in the open, and innin who work under cover of camouflage.

Younin worked in wars of information, analysing the links between people or public knowledge to guess the enemy's intentions. Their work included Signal Intelligence and Human Intelligence.

Innin, on the other hand, infiltrated enemy territory or caused destruction. They'd also gain the enemy's knowledge and then guide them to act in a way that their side would find favorable. When people generally thought about shinobi tactics, these are the kind they thought of.

Of course Gaara, being a jounin, had seen various situations at various times. Experienced younin were capable of simply glancing at the iron and steel stock prices in an ordinary newspaper, and then figuring out on the spot whether the enemy was moving their soldiers or whether the rumours of the enemy building a new warship were true.

Thus, there were also shinobi who were experienced diplomats.

During A-B rank missions, there were many cases of making diplomatic negotiations between Daimyou, or large corporations, or negotiations for the release of hostages. And conversely, sometimes the diplomats sent by Daimyo were actually jounin class shinobi who were secretly gathering information.

However, there was a condition.

What allowed shinobi to do all that was the fact that their personal matters were not involved.

It was different from this moment, where a young woman was sitting in front of him and looking at him with a nervous expression on her face. How was he supposed to initiate contact?

Sunagakure village had a lot of kunoichi who adored Gaara.

However, he'd never developed a relationship with anyone, mostly because of Temari's stealthy handiwork in getting rid of 'unwanted admirers', and also partly because he was the superior of anyone who was interested in him.

To begin with, Gaara had never really had any intentions for relationships, and all his subordinates feelings were, to honestly be more accurate, the sort of longing you had for a far-off idol.

And that was why Gaara spent five minutes in silence, completely at a loss as to what would be a good thing to say to Hakuto.

This is bad.

If this was a battlefield, then his silence was the move that would lose him the war.

Shinobi who drained their emotional strength while waiting for the opponent to make a move weren't protecting themselves, they were driving themselves into a corner, and soon, they would die.

Gaara knew that fact well.

““Uhm.”” They both spoke up at the same time, words crashing into each other in mid-air, and both hung their heads again.

This is really bad.

His sister had given him a furious lecture full of advice before they came here, but somehow, at this moment, Gaara couldn't remember a single thing she'd told him.

It felt similar to that moment when he had fallen under the Infinite Tsukuyomi.

His mind wasn't under his control. But, this wasn't a genjutsu. It was completely different. Something else was affecting him.

But, Gaara was a shinobi. And not just any shinobi. He was one of the Five Kage who stood at the summit of the shinobi world.

He inwardly composed himself, using the concentration techniques he often practiced, and opened his mouth again.

“...uhm, what are your hobbies?”

It was an extremely unoriginal question, possibly so unoriginal that it would never leave the mouth of anyone but him, but he had also learned by watching Naruto that sometimes the most unoriginal and tiny breakthrough could help you change your situation in a battle.

“Reading,” Hakuto answered, “And...the harp, a little. And you, Gaara-sama?”

“Raising cacti.”

“Oh, that idiot.”

Temari was muttering from where she was keeping an eye on the proceedings in the ceiling.

“There’s a limit to how banal you can be. What part of that was encouraging to the other party? I told you, you listen to what the other person has to say, and then say enough to be encouraging, like passing a ball....” She muttered. “...Good grief, Shikamaru’s like that and Gaara’s like this, why is it that the men around me lose all common sense when it comes to these situations...?”

Of course, Temari was supposed to be talking with Hakuto’s relatives and other persons of interest, but, slipping away from their company had been a piece of cake. She didn’t feel the slightest doubt over whether she was qualified to say she had common sense compared to everyone else.

“Cacti...?” Hakuto asked.

“Yes, cacti.” Gaara said. “I started off with cultivating them in pots, but lately I’ve been thinking about making a greenhouse.”

Up in the ceiling, Temari made a hopeless face. That had to be the killing blow.

Who told you to talk only about yourself?! She thought. Let your partner speak! A man who holds a conversation well is a good man, I kept telling you that!

However.

“I’ve never been out of the village,” Hakuto said, “So I don’t know, but, cacti, do they need the help of people to grow?”

“Correct.” Gaara said, “Cacti may appear to be things of the deserts, but the truth is they’re plants that mostly sprout out of soil. Storing water is their specialty, but they can’t grow without water, so one must devise a way to give them enough.”

“Oh.” Hakuto looked surprised. “I always thought cacti could grow without being watered.”

“I used to think so too, and they ended up drying out a lot. It turns out they need enough water to ensure their soil won’t dry out completely. They grow slow, so just a little bit is fine. But, if you water them too much, the roots will end up rotting...ah, no, I’m sorry. I ended up speaking too much about my own matters.”

“No, it’s fine.” Hakuto laughed sweetly. It wasn’t fake or forced, “Before we met, I heard you were the feared ‘Gaara of the sand waterfall’, and I wondered how much of a frightening person you might be. But after hearing about your cacti, my impression of you has changed.”

Oh, ohh?!

Temari was momentarily stunned by the unexpected turn of events, but she immediately threw up a silent fist of victory.

Yes, that’s it! She thought. Keep going! Onwards assault!

The look on her face was very similar to a spectator at a martial arts tournament.

Things hadn’t gone according to her definition of common sense, but in this case, Temari thought that was a good turn of events.

“Gaara-sama, I’ve never seen a flowering cactus before, but...do they really sprout flowers?”

“Yes,” Gaara pulled out some sand from his gourd behind him, and made the sand take the shape of a cactus, with a large, indescribably

pretty flower blooming on top. “The flowers that bloom on my cacti look like this. I’ve heard of cacti that only bloom once every twenty years, but I prefer the ones I raise that bloom once every year or so.”

“It really is beautiful...”

“Thank you.” Like any horticulturist, Gaara’s face looked like a parent whose child had been praised.

The smile on his face was the same one he once used to give his foster-parent Yashamaru.

“After a flower has bloomed, you absolutely can’t move the cactus to another plot.” Gaara continued, “It’s given all of its power to bringing a new life into the world. But, that’s another enjoyable side to raising them...”

Hakuto said, “You’re really very kind, aren’t you?”

“Kind...?”

The word didn’t suit him.

His past self who had been so full of hatred towards the world would’ve never imagined the day would come where someone would call him kind.

Well, it makes sense. She’s a young noble lady from the Houki tribe who’s never left her village, so of course she doesn’t know about how Gaara used to be.

Human beings will form their impression of a person as they are now while dragging out the impression they had from the past.

The reason the people in Gaara’s surrounding were in awe of him was, as expected, a remnant of the days when he used to be cruel.

So it wasn’t that strange that Hakuto, who’d seen nothing of Gaara’s past, could look at the current him and easily, honestly call him kind.

If that was the case, Temari thought, then it was something to be happy about it.

It was something to be very, very happy about.

“After you became Kazekage, the Houki tribe’s daily lives became much more peaceful.” Hakuto said, “As you know, my tribe is a house that specialises in medical-nin and information gatherers. We’re called the people who work behind the scenes. And, until recently, none of us has ever been placed in the centre of Sunagakure’s government. You know why, correct?”

“Yes,” Gaara replied. “I heard it was because you were a clan who originally moved down from Konohagakure to Sunagakure.”

The reason such a clan was chosen as the partner for a possible marriage was due to Toujuurou’s strong insistence. The Houki tribe had shown deep loyalty for many years, and they were also on a neutral standing with most tribes, so their influence wouldn’t be overpowering either.

“Exactly. It’s because the Houki tribe is right between the boundary between the land of Fire and Wind that we’ve always been lead around between the two. But you didn’t hold any prejudice against us, and employed us.”

“...You’re making too much of it. I just employed who could be of service, nothing more.”

That was, again, a single fact of reality.

For the brittle Gaara, his political authority had felt like bonds of obligation tied to the past, and there hadn’t been a single resource at his disposal he was content with not using. As the Kazekage, he had been frantically working for his village’s sake, and the results of that had just happened to be fair... Gaara recognised this truth.

“Even if that is so,” Hakuto replied, “It’s certain that I thought I wanted to meet the person who had employed us.”

“Is that so?”

It was a very ordinary conversation, but Gaara felt a sort of relieved emotion he had never felt before.

He thought that this happiness was definitely because he had seen the benefits of the battle he'd kept fighting on the battlefield of politics. The joy felt similar to the first time he'd seen a flower bloom on one of his cacti.

Extra Translator Notes:

* This puzzle me quite a bit initially, because the kanji literally says thunder/lightening-car but there's no such kanji used to refer cars in rl!japan, so I initially just went with a verbatim translation. Later though, I figured it out. Train in Japanese is 'electric car'. Electricity in the nardyverse is powered by lightning. Thus lightning car = electric car = lightning train lol. A lightning train is the equivalent of a rl electric train basically.

Section Three - Moonlight

The man had kept enduring.

He endured for the sake of his family, he endured for the fate of blood.

He thought that not being able to marry someone you loved was something that he couldn't avoid, as a shinobi.

But the shadow that had appeared in front of him was too magnificent, too dazzling.

He resented the shadow who had everything they wanted, felt jealous of it, broke his heart over it.

Therefore, the man decided to stop enduring.

The name of the shadow was the Kazeage.

Suddenly, the sound of an explosion rang out.

!

Gaara instinctively leapt across the table, his arms reaching out for Hakuto and throwing them both to the floor.

“Take cover! Don't speak!”

The young man who had been so frazzled by a young woman was nowhere in sight now. Without the slightest bit of hesitation, he was carefully keeping her down on the ground.

The explosion...came from 200 metres to the West. It's probably a diversion, but...

There was no guarantee the next explosion wouldn't be inside the building.

Gaara let his sand flow out of his gourd, making a large wall to act as a shield. He had to put it up, not necessarily for his own sake, but so Hakuto wouldn't get injured during a shockwave's thunderous roars.

"Is it...an act of terror?" Hakuto asked.

"Most likely."

Hakuto looked a little pale from the shock, but there were no signs of panic.

You could tell she'd been disciplined to face situations like this.

But, she didn't look like she was ready for a fight. Her face was already turning green, and you could acutely feel how scared she was.

Baki and the others aren't supposed to go towards the explosion.

The problem with diversionary tactics was that even though you knew they were luring you out, you couldn't help but lose to the instinct to go and help.

When it came to terror, the offensive side had an overwhelming advantage. Gaara and the others were on the defense, concentrating on guarding all places at all times, whereas the enemy could freely target any one place they desired.

If it was his future brother-in-law Shikamaru, then he'd say:

It's like a game of shougi with an infinitely wide board, where the enemy's king can go anywhere he likes. And, what's worse, since he can see all our battle formations, he can place his own pieces wherever he likes to avoid them too. And on top of all that, you don't even know where the enemy's king is placed on the board.

That was their current situation.

What should I do...? Gaara thought. Should I keep holding up the sand barrier...?

That would be faint-hearted, he decided in two seconds.

The automatic protection he received from his sand was powered by his dead mother's chakra, so it would never stop occurring. However, anything more than the sand shielding him had to be powered by Gaara's own chakra. Movement, detection, counter attacks— Gaara was collecting the chakra necessary for all that right now. Right now.

It would be best to assume the enemy knows how my abilities work. An attack that can get through my absolute defence will not come.

In the last Shinobi World War, they'd gained many things, but they had lost things as well.

One of those things was the hidden aspects of their jutsu. Shinobi has exposed their hidden jutsu again and again in front of many shinobi from other villages. The results were that the advantages of most hidden jutsu were now a moot point, and Gaara's absolute defence was no exception.

"I..." Gaara carefully squeezed Hakuto's wrist. He did it because he vaguely remembered feeling comfort when Yashamaru, or maybe his mother, had done so in the past. "Am going to protect you."

He released the sand barrier around them.

At the same instance, a shuriken flew towards them. It came from outside the window.

"I predicted you'd do that!"

Gaara began gathering a wind release in the palm of his hand.

There were two figures outside the window.

"Don't separate from my side." Gaara said.

He kept hold of Hakuto with his left hand, and leapt towards the wall behind them. Then, with his right hand, he threw the shuriken they'd hidden beforehand towards the upper right, in a direction that was ninety degrees away from the window.

"Gugh!"

There was a short cry, and then a spray of blood.

At the same time, the two shadows outside the window fell away.

Just as he expected. It was a puppeteer's jutsu.

They had used chakra strings to control the puppets that were the shadows outside the window, and had planned to assault Gaara from behind when he turned to face them. It was an extremely see-through trick.

Gaara slid across the room, back under the shelter of sand.

Hakuto was light as a feather. She wasn't an obstruction to his movements, but, she made using his hands difficult.

The guards outside haven't come, so that means they've likely been killed.

He didn't get scared, and he didn't get angry.

He just came to terms with the facts that reality presented.

Death...was death.

I was careless!

Up in the dark corners of the ceiling, all of Temari's limbs had gotten tied up thanks to the chakra strings that had burst out of the darkness. Both her feet, her abdomen, her right arm and left hand were all immobile, and she couldn't move her jaw either. The most she could do was slightly move her left shoulder.

This was definitely karma biting her in the ass for spying.

"Hahaha...!" A ridiculing voice sneered from somewhere in the dark. The shinobi who was controlling the threads. "Keep struggling, just keep on struggling."

Shinobi only ever thought it was okay to give away their position when they were absolutely sure of their victory. Naturally so.

"Be afraid....and struggle on! But let me tell you, these threads have been made with the chakra of an ancient, giant spider. If you struggle, the threads tighten and steal your chakra. That mere wind release you bastards specialise in won't cut it, and won't unravel it."

Temari twisted her abdomen a little, and found her breathing hindered.

It didn't look like he was lying.

But...the bastard's too caught up in his own words.

There were a lot of male shinobi who got overconfident and ecstatic when they saw their opponent was a mere 'woman'. Conversely, there were also kunoichi who got ecstatic when they saw their opponent was a man, so there was no difference in people's stupidity.

But, the ones who took advantage of that fact were always kunoichi.

"Ugh...!" Temari grunted. "Just kill me quickly!"

She wondered whether her words sounded too forced, but she was still confident in her move. She made sure to will her voice to be pushed along with the wind so the enemy would definitely hear her.

"Ohh?" Just as she'd expected, there was a sign of movement in the darkness from the enemy.

Found the prey.

Now, all that was left was to reel him in.

Gaara, who'd gotten enclosed near the wall, didn't become aware of Temari's presence.

To begin with, even if he had become aware of her, he would prioritise Hakuto.

It went without being said that this wasn't because Gaara didn't love his sister, but because he had faith in her abilities.

At the moment, Gaara's thoughts were first making sure Hakuto lived, and then figuring out how he would live.

"Gaara-sama." Hakuto's eyes were looking at Gaara.

Her eyes were wet.

It wasn't surprising.

She had just seen a person die in front of her for the first time in her life.

Death in the battlefield was completely different from dying in a hospital bed.

Someone who had been moving just fine a moment ago suddenly went completely still, a look of regret frozen on their face. You saw that and then in the next moment you'd think: what if that happens to me too?

The fear felt in those circumstances was severe.

Fear was something brought about by the future you imagined, and the desperation of wanting to live.

In short, it was because you had hope and kept thinking about tomorrow that you felt afraid.

Gaara had seen many people who had past the brink of hopelessness to the point that nothing scared them anymore.

So Hakuto being afraid was a sign of good mental health.

But, this is a bad situation.

She may have been a medical-nin, but it was precisely because she was still at genin-level that Hakuto was a true amateur. The most frightening was the possibility that, inexperienced as she was, Hakuto could lose to her fear and make a movement Gaara didn't expect, and get hurt.

"I apologise for this!" Gaara said, grabbing Hakuto in his arms and leaping.

He was aiming for the window where the sniper was positioned.

The enemy should be expecting Gaara to make his escape from somewhere other than the window where a sniper had been positioned. There were most likely shinobi lying in wait there.

Gaara exploited that fact.

He kicked against the window sill, and jumped. Underneath him, he could see the hotel's garden blur away.

It was a poor move. He'd carried a charge he was meant to be protecting while jumping out into an open field where a sniper was waiting.

If this had been an exam at the Academy, he would've gotten zero marks.

But, that was exactly why the sniper took action just a second too late.

Right before his eyes, a kunai was rushing towards him with supersonic speed. It's speed was pretty much equal to that of a wind or lightning release.

If Gaara had been a normal shinobi, then his skull would've been pierced before he noticed it, and he'd have died.

But, Gaara's sand surged out of his gourd and casually deflected the kunai. His sand shield. It was an absolute defence concerned only with protecting him, one that wasn't even connected to his own will.

Gaara cleared the shock wave from the supersonic speed of the kunai with his wind release. Even if he was carrying Hakuto, he could manage the hand seal movements with just a bit of shuffling.

Gaara kicked off the top of a garden tree. He shaped the sand above him as a soft of glider, leaping towards the sniper's direction.

There.

There were two camouflaged shinobi lurking on the steel scaffold of a building in progress. They were most likely spotters, shinobi who were guards for the sniper that were also supposed to keep an eye on their surroundings. Gaara saw them fly into a panic when they noticed his approach.

Too late. You people always think the target's only going to try to escape.

Most assassins who made surprise attacks on other people never thought about the possibility of someone surprise attacking them.

That was something Gaara personally knew from surviving countless assassination attempts himself.

"Close your eyes," Gaara told Hakuto.

"...Yes."

He swooped down from above, a blade of sand beheading the spotters.

Getting rid of the spotters before you target the sniper was the usual practice so as to get rid of the sniper's protectors.

What kind of shinobi had they been? What kind of lives had they led? To begin with, why had they set out with the intention of killing him?

In this moment, Gaara didn't think about any of those things.

Those thoughts were left for when he turned back to being the 'kazekage'.

In this moment he was just a man who wanted to protect the terrified woman he was carrying. He wasn't some naive youth who was caught up in the feelings of experiencing love for the first time.

He was just a man who had a strong and unwavering will, like the wind that blew across the parched desert.

The sniper had found his mark.

Wind was moving.

They were preparing a Vacuum Wave.

It was a very fundamental technique where one formed a vacuum layer in the atmosphere with their chakra and then used the atmospheric differences to slice at their opponents.

One didn't need an elaborate jutsu for destroying a human body. Using a highly reliable jutsu instead was very good judgement.

If the sniper's opponent was a normal shinobi.

Gaara's sand shield easily deflected the Vacuum Wave.

If his shield had been made of sand and nothing else, it would've been destroyed by the Vacuum Wave, but every grain of Gaara's sand was full of chakra and soul.

In a way, his sand was alive.

The cloud of moving sand took on the shape of a hand, and firmly moved to cover the sniper's breathing tract.

Gaara didn't have any intention of killing him.

Dead bodies told no tales, after all.

"Are you alright?" Gaara asked as he put the pale-faced Hakuto down beside the steel frame.

“I am alright. You, Gaara-sama?”

“I’m...” Gaara broke off, furrowing his brow.

He broke off because the construction site’s elevator had started working. Two shinobi stepped out of it, with identical awfully smug grins on their faces. At first glance, they looked like completely normal young men of medium builds.

But, there was a presence around them that couldn’t be ignored.

The smell of blood.

“You’re the Kazekage, right?” One asked.

“And you are?”

“I’m Konjiki Etoro. This is my elder brother Konjiki Metoro. It looks like you’re having fun, so I’m sorry to say this...but please die.”

The man called Etoro had crimson killing-intent in his eyes.

It was something he’d been hoping to see.

“Hehe...you look like someone who’s sensible.” The shinobi said, approaching Temari with a lewd laugh.

Down below, Gaara had left the room, but the shinobi wasn’t bothered by it. So that meant his job was to get rid of any protection Gaara would have.

That being said, it was obvious that if she was defeated here, this shinobi would then go to face Gaara.

Well, she doubted that Gaara would be defeated by this kind of chakra thread user...but still, facing him would take Gaara by surprise.

Most importantly, it wouldn’t do if she ended up dying.

“Even though I act like this, I am a man who knows compassion.”

The shinobi said. He’d gotten so close she could feel his breath on the back of her neck.

Now!

Temari unhesitatingly moved so that left shoulder –the only part of her she could move– popped right out of its joint.

“!? You...!”

Of course, just because her shoulder had popped and slipped out of the threads, that didn't mean the rest of her arm was free. But, thanks to that, the threads that had bound Temari momentarily **warped**.

It was more than enough time for her to take out the explosive amulet she kept in her sleeve.

“Here we go!”

She wasn't thinking of doing something stupid like throwing the explosive at her opponent while she was tied up.

No, Temari's target was her own body.

The amulet exploded at point-blank range.

The man jumped aside.

But, he was too slow.

She could now move her right arm, waist, and left leg.

Just that much was more than enough.

Her whole body ached like it was burning, but that was proof that she was alive.

She avoided more threads the shinobi sent her way, and at the same time, used her right arm to slip her left shoulder back into its joint.

The shinobi attacked a second time.

Temari pulled out her war fan with her left hand, and released a blast of wind that repelled the threads. She was taking advantage of the thread's being light in weight.

She spun.

Her right leg was still immobile, but she treated it like dancing around a pole, and spun herself around the fixed point where her leg still hung.

While avoiding the third attack, she fluttered and jumped around, her war fan destroying the remaining threads.

“Now then...” She said. “I'm going to pay you back for the amusement!”

Even now, the enemy was focusing solely on using threads in his attacks, so while his threads had power, that meant he likely didn't have any other jutsu that were as effective.

But, just to make sure...!

It was hard to rely on her specialty wind attack or summoning since they were indoors.

Temari threw the shuriken she'd had on her body up into the air like one would throw flowers. The man pulled back his threads and formed a shield.

Temari swung her war fan downwards, aiming at the shuriken she'd thrown.

Fuuton, Flashing Fireworks!

Like a shower of meteors, the shuriken her war fan had struck were enclosed in wind, hitting the floor and then springing back up.

“!”

The man realised her true intentions.

But, he was too slow.

The ricocheting shuriken stormed back up through a blind spot in the man's shield, piercing his entire body.

Blood splurged out of the man, and he collapsed.

“Good grief...!” Temari muttered. She'd won, but her own exhaustion was overwhelming her. “I messed up...!”

Temari's vision was turning shaky and dark.

At this rate...I'm really going to look like an idiot...!

Somebody's arms were around her, supporting her exhausted body.

Eh...?

In the midst of her fading consciousness, Temari could make out the person's face.

“Ah!”

It was a very unexpected face. But, at least it was an ally.

“Sorry about this, but...” Temari said, “Can I ask you to look after Gaara for a bit?”

The two shinobi named Etoro and Metoro walked across the steel frame with flighty grins on their faces.

Furthermore, there was no more movement from the elevator, or any other killing intent in the surrounding.

It looked like all any other assassin had been subdued by Baki and the rest.

But, for these two to keep approaching Gaara anyway, that meant they were confident that they’d win.

“So you’re the ‘Konjiki Twins’ from Ishigakure, huh. I’ve seen your faces in the Bingo Book.”

“Heh,” Etoro said, “For the Kazekage-sama to know our names, that means we’ve become really famous, huh Metoro?”

“...”

Compared to his talkative elder brother, the younger brother Metoro seemed taciturn.

Anyway, Gaara understood that the one wearing the gaudy earrings was the elder brother, and the silent one wearing the flashy ring was the younger brother.

The twin shinobi frequently used their similar appearances as a factor in tricks. It would be good to assume there was another wide variety of factors used too.

“I have heard of you.” Gaara said, “The pair of cowardly runaway-nin who specialise in destroying buildings or merchant ships.”

“Haha. Well, we don’t lose to you when it comes to the number of people we’ve killed. Be they tankers or buildings, we’ve destroyed countless numbers of them.” Etoro smirked broadly as he touched his earring. “But then, you know, we don’t kill people like you do, Gaara of the Sand Waterfall*.”

“...!”

“We’ve heard of you too. We’re more or less from the same class, you know. We never got the chance to meet face to face since we became chuunin a little while before the Konoha Crush at the chuunin exams, but you were so famous...Sungakaure’s bloodthirsty devil. You killed anyone you didn’t like...you killed anyone who stood in front of you...you didn’t care whether they were an enemy or an ally. Well, compared to you, us brothers kill people with our own intentions, so we’re not totally the same!”

Behind him, Hakuto was trembling from fear.

She wasn’t just afraid of the two in front of them.

She was afraid of him, too.

In that moment, Gaara understood.

The things he had done back when he wasn’t loved by anyone, back when he thought love was worthless.

He understood the weight of those crimes now.

In the same way that the love he received would never disappear, the crimes he had committed would never disappear either.

Ever.

“Your boasting ends here.” Gaara said.

“Oh, what’s this? Did my words hit somewhere where it hurt, Kazekage-sama?”

He couldn’t say it didn’t hurt, but Gaara wasn’t one for idle chatter or debates.

He’d only been talking all this while because he’d been buying time.

Sand Binding Coffin!

The sand that had been lurking at the feet of his enemies now surged up, swallowing the two in one swift movement.

!

But, there was no response.

So they were bunshin!

Bunshin were an old trick, but what made the move brilliant was that they had combined the bunshin with a genjutsu.

But, when Gaara realised what they'd done, he spread out the sand he was going to use for the coffin, and used it as a sensor instead. Spreading out his chakra-infused sand over a large area allowed him to verify where there were moving objects. He couldn't identify what was moving, but in this case, whatever was moving would be the enemy.

Right above, huh.

Right overhead. The brothers Etoro and Metoro had taken a position where they were standing on top of each other above Gaara, the sun hitting their backs.

“Let's get to it!”

The elder brother used lava release to expand a ring of fire, and the younger used steel release to form a steel ball.

“We'll let you take a glimpse at it! The killing method of us Konjiki Twins!”

Even if they had created a giant steel lump of some kind, Gaara didn't think it would breach his absolute defence.

However, the person the twins were aiming at was Hakuto.

It was a very see-through move, but Gaara had no choice but to react. If the Kazekage lost his partner for marriage, his authority would decrease.

No, that wasn't it.

That wasn't the problem. That was just his official stance.

The truth was that even if Hakuto had been the unknown wife of some villager, or even if she hadn't been a woman, Gaara still would've protected her.

If someone without the power to fight wanted Gaara's protection, then they were already within the definition of 'those he would protect'.

I'm relying on you! Gaara thought, and his sand raised into a giant wall, forming a shield around both him and Hakuto.

“So you went with that option after all!” Etoro said. “It's a bit late to be acting like a hero now!”

The huge steel projectile was flung through the ring of fire, hurtling towards them.

It's speed wasn't as fast as Gaara had expected- for example, like the supersonic kunai from a while earlier. His shield would be more than enough for this kind of speed.

The mass of the projectile as well, it can be easily withstood...!

Those were the facts.

Impact!

The projectile had hit against the shield of sand, and stopped.

The chakra-laden sand shield repaired itself far faster than it was pierced. In the past, he'd even used his sand shield to cover the entire village when they were being bombed. Gaara could confidently say that his shield could stop even one or two tonnes of boulder.

But.

"Gaara-sama, danger!"

"!!"

Hakuto's warning allowed Gaara to react one second faster.

The projectile had changed shape.

No...it's melted?!

It was the effect of the Lava Release.

When the steel ball was flung through the circle of fire, fire had been sealed inside it, and that lava release flame had exploded.

The energy of the exploding fire inside the steel ball had released in a spiralling shape. The high pressure caused by the shock wave of that had melted the steel ball to a liquid, and, at the moment of impact, steel liquid had spurted past the area of impact on the sand shield.

And the same thing happened with the shockwave.

The steel ball had acted like a barrel head that had concentrated the shock wave onto that single pierced point in the sand shield.

When such a thing happens, what do you think will be the result?

"Take cover!!"

Gaara raised his sand. But, the flame of the lava release that was being concentrated on that one point had great power, and it was drilling through.

“Gah!”

The flame pierced through his sand shield, and the sand collapsed, scattering to their surroundings.

They didn’t receive a direct hit. But, the storm of flame covered Gaara and Hakuto.

Wind Release, Multi-layered Gale!

Thanks to the wall of multiple layers of vacuum that stacked on top of each other like a mille feuille, they barely avoided a direct hit from the scorching attack.

There was a burning pain in Gaara’s upper right arm.

It had been a while.

Pain always did teach him a lesson.

I hadn’t intended to underestimate their attack, but...!

“Hahaha! How was that now, how was that? Do you understand why we brothers are so famous now?”

Etoro’s scornful sounds were echoing on the other sound of the storm of dust.

“Indeed. The ninjutsu you use, it’s really overkill. It’s a ridiculously exaggerated jutsu just to kill one person.” Gaara said.

“There’s no body of mass it can’t break, you know. And for you, this had the same value as a castle.”

Of course it did.

Naturally, Gaara still had many options that would let him escape this situation. But, the problem was Hakuto getting hurt while he carried out those options. That was the one thing he couldn’t allow to happen.

Just a second would be enough, if I just had something to distract them...!

He'd expended too much chakra on their current defense. It was difficult to move for an aggressive attack when his opponents were two-on-one and both with jounin chakra.

It wasn't a problem of winning. It was a problem of how to win.

"If you're relying on your group of guards, they're not gonna come..." Metoro said. "There are about 20 very skilled people keeping them company. My group wouldn't even lose to the Akatsuki."

Lining their shinobi up with the Akatsuki was probably Etoro's exaggerating, but looking at the brothers' skill, there was no mistake that they were both very talented. Baki aside, if you compared the brothers to their chuunin subordinates, it would be sufficient to say they'd be evenly matched.

And there wasn't a doubt that these two had an assassin's large war potential. When their two kekkei genkai were combined, they could use it as a sort of pseudo-kekkei touta. You couldn't even dream up matching that sort of ability.

I can't rely on the reinforcements. I suppose I should make them suffer a hit, even if it's just one.

It wasn't desperation or anything like that.

All shinobi are realists.

He had decided that his reinforcements weren't going to cut it.

And the largest factor for his victory here, was making sure he protected Hakuto.

He'd sworn that he would. Doing anything that went back on his word wouldn't be his ninja way or anything worth mentioning.

At that moment.

A single shuriken ripped through the air and rushed towards Metoro.

It was a houshuriken**, a kind of iron rod with no blades around it. Its cutting abilities were less, but thanks to its weight, if it was a direct hit, it could even bring down a horse.

Metoro, who had reached out to brush away the houshuriken with his hand, hadn't fully appreciated the weight of the weapon.

It couldn't break the chakra-laden bone, but, thanks to its heavy weight, the houshuriken did cause Metoro's arm to go slightly numb. It doesn't matter who threw the weapon.

He believed it was an ally.

"Whatever will do!"

If he let this pass, he wouldn't get another chance.

Wolf Corner Sand Castle!***

Sand began to swirl around in a vortex that enclosed his surroundings.

Sand that had scattered from the previous attack was included as well.

He hadn't just been receiving the attack when his sand scattered.

He had deliberately let the sand scatter as a preparation for his counterattack

He'd just needed one second, one moment of time to make his move come before his opponent's.

In the middle of the whirling sand, several eyes suddenly popped open.

Every single one of those eyes were connected to Gaara's own optic nerve.

If it was a normal person, the huge surges of information coming in from those eyes would've made them go insane, but Gaara could take it.

Everything that was seen within the sand was immediately known to Gaara.

There was a certain tranquility in this action.

His tranquility was because Gaara's mother's soul resided in his sand. Her chakra operated the sand with her own will, separate from his own.

Gaara, who was connected to that sand, felt tired, but not pained, and that was proof that his mother was supporting his decision to protect others.

And that proof allowed Gaara to withstand the burden of having 10 or so fields of vision at once.

“There you are!”

Gaara’s technique lived up to its name, and Metoro and Etoro were covered by a hail of sand bullets from all sides.

“We’re in trouble, Metoro!”

The younger brother raised a steel shield to ward off the sand bullets. But, the attack couldn’t be stopped with just that.

After all, the sand bullets that Gaara had created attacked the enemy from all sides. He wasn’t just randomly firing them either. He was firing them in synch with what his vision could see, and that’s to that, the two were enwrapped in a war barrier of sand. Etoro and Metoro had their hands full with just barely avoiding taking a direct hit to a vital spot.

“I am here to give assistance.” A voice said, and a figure unfamiliar to Gaara’s eyes alighted next to him.

She was a woman.

The kunoichi was slim figured like Hakuto, in a way that reminded Gaara of a sharp crescent moon.

If you excluded the ill-matchingly thick glasses she wore, you could easily call her beauty first class.

That’s...

He remembered her.

She was the kunoichi he had seen escorting Hakuto.

He had the sort of impression that he might’ve seen her somewhere before, but he hadn’t thought there was anything to it other than the fact that she resembled Hakuto.

Either way, now wasn’t the time to think about it.

“I’ve been sent here to help by Temari-sama.” She said.

“...You really helped out.”

He didn’t ask how Temari had known where they were. He knew that either way it had been because she’d been worried about him.

“I am Shijima of the Houki tribe.” the kunoichi said.

Houshuriken had appeared like a sleight of hand trick, eight of them held in between her ten fingers.

She ‘struck’ with all eight of them at the same time.

It was fine to use the word ‘throw’ for a rough barrage of shuriken, but that terminology couldn’t strictly be used for this weapon. For a houshuriken, strictly speaking, one would use the word ‘struck’.

For houshuriken, one needed to concentrate on one point on their target and move swiftly with energy to ‘strike them’ and bring them down. It was a weapon that required killing intent, different from things like shuriken or smoke bombs.

The kunoichi who had introduced herself as Shijima unmistakably struck with all her houshuriken, brimming with killing intent.

All eight of her weapons flew like meteors towards Etoro.

“Don’t look down on me, don’t underestimate me!” Etoro looked angry. “Using mere steel things like this!”

Etoro’s flame melted the houshuriken.

!

Feeling a change in the atmosphere, Gaara gathered the wind around him.

It was just as he expected.

“Wh-what is this?!”

The eight houshuriken had exploded.

Their scattered fragments had pierced into Etoro’s entire body, and blood gruesomely spurted out of him.

So it was compressed air! She’s a wind release user who shoots houshuriken with large amounts of compressed air inside. If the houshuriken get destroyed by the lava release, then the compressed air inside breaks out, and the fragments of the houshuriken burst apart and take down the opponent!

“...Brother!” The silent Metoro gave a flustered yell.

Gaara wasn’t one to overlook openings in one’s guard.

“Where are you looking?” Gaara asked. “I’m here. Don’t take your eyes off your target, you scum.”

“!!”

Gaara’s storm of sand turned into a giant blade.

It stretched and slipped past Metoro’s steel shield like a giant snake, slicing Metoro’s body.

“MEOTOROOOO!” Etoro wailed, crying tears of blood.

Metoro’s body fell off the ledge of the building.

He fell from a height that was almost as tall as a skyscraper. On top of that, Gaara’s attack had sliced clean through his vitals. He had no hope of being saved.

“AHHHHHHH! MURDERER, YOU MURDERER!”

Etoro used up his chakra, firing countless flaming bullets.

He was no longer the cool-headed assassin who had come to kill Gaara.

He was a resentful elder brother whose younger sibling had been snatched away.

“You really have a selfish way of thinking.” Gaara said.

The brother who had lost his younger sibling soon ran out of flaming bullets. He was no longer any match for Gaara’s absolute defence.

While protecting himself and Hokuto, Gaara attacked with his sand.

“The buildings that you scum destroyed, and the ships that you sunk, they all had people in them as well.” Gaara said. “But you didn’t even consider that. That is your crime.”

“AH- AHHHHH- MO- MONSTE—”

A huge lump of Gaara’s sand swallowed the egotistical terrorist whole.

It wasn’t surprising that one would look at that spectacle and think it wasn’t the work of a human being.

“That’s right.”

Grinding.

Scraping.

Grinding.

It was a familiar feeling to him now.

A person's life got smudged into sand, and disappeared.

"You, and me. We're the monsters called shinobi. Murderers.

Crack. Crack.

Crack.

The thing that used to be Etoro, or maybe Metoro, was no longer moving.

"But we're supposed to open our eyes to that...to live while controlling our power. Somebody who can't do that isn't even a shinobi."

The body was gone.

There wasn't even a trace.

For Gaara, it was an everyday occurrence.

"Gaara-sama!"

The first thing Hakuto did when she rushed over to him was take out a beautiful small silk wrapper from the sleeve of her kimono, and move towards Gaara to use it as a make-do bandage for his arm.

"I'm so sorry...you were shielding me and..." Hakuto's eyes were wet. "At least let me give you medical care."

"No, this kind of a wound isn't a problem," Gaara said, "You don't need to trouble your hands with it..."

"That won't do!" Hakuto looked up with her wet eyes to give Gaara a glare. "When we're in the middle of a battle, I will act according to the Kazekage's orders. But, the fight is over now, so please listen to what the medical-nin is saying. If a burn is allowed to stay unclean, we don't know what kind of bacteria could get into it."

"A- alright..."

Hakuto's skill was excellent.

She used wind release to cool down the burn, then rinsed it with a sterile liquid she carried with her, and then used her chakra to heal the cells, while rolling the make-do bandage around it.

“This silk wrapped is custom made so it can double as a bandage as well,” Hakuto said. “It aids your cells natural healing, so please don’t unfasten it later.”

“...I’m sorry.”

“No,” Hakuto gave a sweet, reassuring smile. “Honestly speaking, I’m still shaking in fear. But, if I do something like this that I’ve practiced doing a lot, it helps me calm down.”

“Me too.”

“Eh?”

“I’m the same as well.” Gaara said. “If only during a time when you’re using a practiced, familiar ninjutsu to protect someone, it helps make you forget your fear. I’m- shinobi are all like that, aren’t they?”

Thinking that it was something Naruto would do, Gaara clumsily tried to give a smile.

He saw his smiling face reflected in Hakuto’s pupils, and when he saw Hakuto smile back at him, Gaara felt a sense of accomplishment different from killing the enemy.

“Continuing the marriage meeting...?”

Gaara felt bewildered by Baki’s report.

“Continuing would be the customary reaction.” Baki said.

Baki was completely nonchalant, like nothing at all had happened. Gaara had heard that over half the attacking shinobi had been decapitated by Baki. Even so, there wasn’t so much as a drop of sweat on his face. As to be expected by one of his skill.

“If official business comes to halt thanks to terror, then many people will become active.” Baki said. “It’s no different than dealing with yakuz threats. If you become faint-hearted once, then it’ll endlessly continue.”

“Well, but...I’m fine, but Hakuto could get injured.”

“Ohh?” Baki gave a wide, sly grin. “Does that mean you like her?”

“No, that’s...”

“But, you don’t dislike her.”

“...Well, it is something like that.”

Baki laughed and clapped Gaara on the shoulder. “Then that’s all the more reason for the marriage meeting to continue. Now, I wanted to talk about Kankurou.”

Baki’s eyes met Gaara’s. They were the eyes of a vigilant man who lived in a world of schemes.

Baki pulled out several photos. An unknown young shinobi was meeting with the counsellor Toujuurou.

“Toujuurou-dono?”

“The shinobi he’s meeting with is one of Kankurou’s subordinates, Maizuru. The past half-year or so, Kankurou’s been elevating in the eyes of young shinobi who’re dissatisfied with you.”

“...As the eldest son of the Kazekage bloodline?”

“Correct.” There was no emotion interfering with Baki’s words. His tone was that of one merely stating the facts. “Compared to Gaara, who only orders them to face death from behind, the more worthy one is Kankurou, who risks his life alongside them in the frontlines....That’s what they’re saying.”

“And they think Kankurou will turn betrayer?”

“You could say they’re considering the possibility.” Baki said. “In the first place, this talk of a marriage meeting could have been a diversion for the sake of taking you out of the village.”

“It was certainly a well-timed attack. If it wasn’t from the outside, but the inside...”

The foundation of Gaara’s authority wasn’t rock solid.

He had been killed by the Akatsuki once, and during the time his survival had been unclear, his title of Kazekage had been immediately dropped. That was most likely because of the trauma the village had

suffered when the previous Kazekage had been killed and replaced by Orochimaru.

That was why Gaara had no choice but to keep investigating conspiracies.

Even if, for example, he ended up having to deceive a dearly trusted ally.

Gaara had entrusted the matters of security to Baki, and was heading back to his allocated room, when he ran into Hakuto in the hotel corridor. Her guard, Shijima, was with her.

“This has all...somehow turned into an unheard of situation, hasn’t it?” Gaara said.

“Yes...I’ve never seen circumstances like this either.”

“My late father once said authority is like a staircase.” Gaara said, and then felt surprised at himself for repeating something his father had said.

The reason for his surprise was that while Gaara had believed his ill feelings towards his father had disappeared after their unexpected re-meeting in the Fourth Shinobi World War, he hadn’t thought he’d retained any specific memories of his father.

“A staircase?” Hakuto asked.

“The farther you go up, the more you’ll be able to see,” Gaara said.

“But, you’ll grow unable to see what’s under your feet.”

“I see.” Hakuto smiled despite herself. It wasn’t a discomforted smile at all. “But Gaara-sama, you have plenty of people who are willing to look underneath for you, so I think that’s something to be happy about.”

“!”

Gaara stared in wonder, and Hakuto bowed her goodbye and continued walking ahead in the corridor.

He stared after her figure, stock still like a puppet

“You’re doing pretty well.”

“Ah, Temari.”

His elder sister’s characteristic silhouette hadn’t changed at all when he came upon her at the corner of the hotel corridor, but when her figure came into sight, he saw that she was covered in bandages to the point that it felt painful to look at her.

“Are you alright now?” Gaara asked.

“The Houki’s medical-nin are really excellent.” Temari said, “I’m fine.”

“I see. Then, can I ask you a favour?”

“Hmm? Is it about Hakuto?”

“Yes.” Gaara wasn’t embarrassed or shy about it. He took out a letter. “I’m entrusting you with this.”

“I see. You’ve gotten to understand some things, haven’t you?” Temari’s lips curved into a smile.

“Does something amuse you?”

“You...you’ve taken after dad, too. I just had that sudden thought.”

“...Have I?”

“You have.” Temari looked up at the sky outside the corridor window. She looked up at the suffocating sky without a single cloud, and no rain.

Suna wasn’t blessed with trees or forests like the Country of Fire was. She was looking up at a sky that belonged to people who lived side by side with the desert.

“All three of us were born here,” She said. “As mom and dad’s kids. If Kankurou or I had just had the qualities necessary, then you wouldn’t have had to be burdened with Shukaku...”

“It’s alright, you know.” Gaara said. “Shukaku is a friend.”

“Thank you.” This time, Temari’s smile wasn’t sad. “Honestly, I worried a little bit. Over whether it was okay if I was the only one of us who got to be happy. But, I’m going to do as I like now.”

“Please do so.”

Gaara knew very well just how much Temari had sacrificed herself up until now, to support Gaara and the village. She was already overdue to pursue her own happiness.

“Alright then,” Temari said, “I’ll make sure to handle this letter well.”

“I’ll be relying on you.”

Gaara didn’t say anything more than that, and went to rest in his allocated room. Sleeping whenever he felt capable of sleeping was a habit that had come into existence after his possession by Shukaku.

Hakuto’s scent faintly lingered on the bandage around his arm, and something about it made Gaara remember something dearly missed from his past.

The remote memory was likely from sometime after he was born. Maybe he was remembering his mother, worrying over his premature self?

Or was he remembering his parental replacement, Yashamaru?

Or he could’ve been remembering something about Temari or Kankurou, or something about Naruto.

Eventually, Gaara drifted off to sleep.

“Something bad has happened.”

Baki’s voice interrupted Gaara’s pleasant dream.

The man had come inside his bedroom without permission and was standing by his bedside, so Gaara understood the urgency of the matter.

He didn’t expect to hear something small.

“What’s wrong?” He asked shortly. Their relationship meant it was fine to keep things short when they talked.

“Hakuto has been kidnapped.”

“!”

For a moment, just one moment, Gaara cursed himself for being incapable. Then, he looked at the bandage wrapped around his arm, and changed his way of thinking. It wasn't the time to think like that.

Both Gaara and Baki had thought the aim of the attack had been the Kazekage.

Shinobi didn't need regret.

What they needed was to endure, and carry on.

Translator Notes:

* Mixed up my kanji to write Gaara of the boiling Sand before lol, but nah, it's Gaara of the sand waterfall X'D

** Better [shown than described](#).

*** The kanji for this is 砂城狼角 which could literally mean both 'Sand Castle Wolf Corner' and 'Sand Castle Wolf Horn'. Corner seemed more fitting to me, since Gaara is pretty much 'throwing his opponents to the wolves' in a 'corner'

Section Four - Sandstorm

Dams and people's hearts are the same in one sense.

Once a certain limit is passed, they burst.

But, the man had endured so many ridiculous things until now, so he thought that he would be forgiven for his bursting heart. The woman thought so as well.

However...a shinobi who has stopped enduring, is no shinobi.

Then, what happens to a shinobi who is no longer a shinobi?

It's obvious.

They become prey.

“You’re going to go after Hakuto alone...?!” Baki couldn’t hold back his bewilderment and confusion at Gaara’s declaration.

It was because that wasn’t a normal thought for a leader to have.

But, Gaara was resolutely saying that was what he was going to do.

“At the very least, take two of my subordinates with you.” Baki said, “But, thinking of it from an investigative perspective, there should be three teams.”

“That won’t do.” The man who had once been Baki’s subordinate shook his head without hesitation. “If we do that, it’ll become a mission. We wouldn’t have any way of leaving it off public record.”

“...!” Baki finally understood what Gaara’s aim was.

If this matter got recorded, then it would get out to the public.

Of course, this matter wouldn’t be something that’d get out on the news on the tv or radio.

It was a matter that would get leaked to Sunagakure’s upper brass.

Even though there hadn’t been an official marriage ceremony, yet, the young woman from the Houki tribe was the woman who was likely to become the Kazekage’s wife. And he hadn’t been able to protect her. That would be a huge losing point, and a root for criticism.

Obviously, Gaara wasn’t the sort of small man who cared about his reputation. What Gaara was worried about was that if Sunagakure’s position swayed, then a milestone in the detente could also crumble. That was his only concern.

If you called that someone who was obsessed with power...

Then say whatever you want.

That’s what the resolute look on Gaara’s eyes said.

His face looked like that of a fully grown man.

“I understand.” Baki said. “Leave everything here to us. We’ll act as if nothing has happened. But only until morning.”

“Yes. I’ll bring Hakuto back by the time the sun’s out!”

“Are you setting out?”

The woman who had been waiting for Gaara around the exit of the oasis was the one who asked that.

She continued, “If so, please let me come too.”

She look at the Kazekage with a strong and resolute gaze behind the thick lenses of her glasses.

“I’m grateful for your intentions, but-” Gaara’s words were cut off by Shijima’s look.

“This is my mission to begin with.” Shijima said, “I’m supposed to go, since all the guards were taken down, and I received an injury.”

She showed him the wound on her side.

She was talking about how the three chuunin of the Houki tribe who had been Hakuto’s guard envoy had fainted without a sound. Shijima, who’d just barely held onto a bit of her consciousness, had been poisoned with a stinger, and defeated as well.

“You’ll be a hindrance.” Gaara said without pause, moving past her.

But, Shijima grabbed onto his sleeve with a steel determination.

“The poison has been taken out, and there isn’t any in my vital spots.” She said. “I’ve received medical care, so I am capable of functioning.”

“...”

Gaara had intended to shake off and continue on his way, but for some reason, he found that he couldn’t.

Ah I see.

He was remembering something.

The voice of shinobi who was willing to throw away their own body, while deeply thinking of someone.

He couldn’t look into Shijima’s eyes behind her thick glass lenses, but her words were full of sincerity.

“There’s a resemblance.” Gaara said.

“Pardon?”

“There’s an unconventional shinobi who says things the same way you do. He’s impossible to handle. The kind of person who’d keep moving even if they died.”

“I don’t really understand what you’re talking about.”

“...I’m saying it’s become troublesome to send you away.” Gaara said, and let out a small sigh.

But, he didn’t sigh because he felt discomfited.

“I see.” The elder spoke when he’d listened to the end of the report. He gave a very satisfied nod.

The elder was Toujuurou.

“To sum it up,” Toujuurou said, “Everything is going according to plan.”

“Yessir.”

The shinobi who was serving Toujuurou was one of Kankurou’s subordinates, Maizuru.

Toujuurou liked it when young ones grovelled in front of him. Even more so when it was a good looking young man like Maizuru.

It was because he was jealous.

In the past, he had been a taijutsu user who was called the strongest in Sunagakure.

And he hadn’t just been taijutsu he excelled at.

Be it wind release or summoning or genjutsu, he had stood above the rest in every sort of field. But more than anything, his lightly moving body had been his identity.

But now he was old.

His eyes could no longer capture the world as he wanted, his legs wouldn’t let him fly, and his fingers couldn’t move as he wanted them to.

Even so, people still praised him as a superhuman, as a hero who was still hale in his old age.

But, they're wrong.

That wasn't how it was.

Getting old meant **stepping down**.

Getting old meant slowly descending from his position at the top of the summit.

Various shinobi surpassed his abilities in his old body. What did that mean? It means that unlike his younger self, he could no longer go stand at the top. Just that was unbearable.

And that was why Toujuurou resented those with youth.

Because while they weren't as skilled as him now, one day, they were going to surpass him.

That's why I'm going to continue proving that I am someone this village needs.

Toujuurou gave Maizuru a few instructions, and then leaned against his sofa, satisfied.

Night in the desert was cold.

This was because the desert had no clouds or humidity, rivers or oceans or forests, that could serve as to conserve the heat gained from the sun shining all day.

That was why despite daytime being so hot you could fry a sunny side up egg on a rock, the night was cold enough to give you frostbite.

It's not that the Country of Fire couldn't conquer the Country of Wind. It's that we didn't want it.

The daimyou of the Land of Fire tended to say that. The words weren't unreasonable.

Right now, Gaara and Shijima were determinedly running through that freezing cold desert.

They weren't flying with Gaara's sand because he was worried about them being detected. Running also helped them follow the kidnapper's footprints more accurate, and it helped save up chakra.

"Look to the right of that sand dune. As expected, they're heading towards the border with the Country of Fire."

The shinobi who'd defeated Hakuto had been one.

You could tell by his footprints.

It'd be best to think of him as very skilled. The enemy hadn't so much as had to catch his breath while bringing down Shijima and the other guards. It looked like he was skilled enough to erase his footprints with wind release while he was running as well.

"It's his bad luck that I'm tracking him." Gaara muttered to himself, but not out of pride.

The sand of the desert lived alongside Gaara like family. If it hadn't been Gaara who had been tracking the shinobi, then they definitely would've gotten away, with no one being able to track him across the large desert. The technique the shinobi had used for getting rid of his footprints was first class.

As Gaara walked, the sand under his feet shifted with a rustling sound, and before you knew it, the grains had shifted away like they'd been sung to, revealing the footprints that had been covered. Sand didn't lie to Gaara.

"If he's heading towards the border, then he'll be passing by the Houki tribe's land." Shijima said.

"Ah, that's right. Your people were originally from the land of Fire, weren't they?"

"...yes." Shijima's face darkened a little bit.

"Don't be bothered." Gaara said, "I'm not looking to rebuke you. I'm just checking the facts. You'll be more familiar with the plot of the land. Is there any area ahead of here where someone would hide?"

"There's a place that's about an hour away with a shinobi's stride. It's the ancient ruins of a town. It's a cursed plot of land, so neither runaways nor thieves go there."

“I see.”

There were many ruins of ancient towns lying idle in the desert. It made a person wonder whether those towns had been built a long time ago, before the desert was a desert. But, there were no definite details. The theory was that the ruins had been left from the time of the Sage of the Six Paths and Ootsutsuki Kaguya.

“Alright, let’s take a break.”

“...Why, sir? We should be hurrying to return Hakuto-sama.”

In his head, Gaara went over the file on Hakuto that Baki had given him.

Most of her missions had been infiltration, assassination, and guard duty. Since she was involved in the Hokuto tribe’s secret, internal affairs, her file didn’t have many details, but...

She’s hasn’t had much experience in mission on the outside.

Gaara found a sand dune that looked like it would be good for resting, and, laying out a piece of cloth, sat down.

“Take a break.” He said. “Your body temperature has fallen lower than you’d think.”

“But-”

“Sit. This is an order from the Kazekage.”

Gaara didn’t like having to use his authority, but managing to bring Hakuto back was the most important thing.

“Understood.” Shijima sat down slowly, but a little reservedly, by Gaara’s side.

“It will be good for you.” Gaara said.

He took out a portable stove, and hung a small kettle over the fire. He added water from the canteen, sugar cubes, mint leaves, and tea leaves.

While waiting for the kettle to let out the pleasant sounds to show that it was ready, Gaara looked up at the stars.

He didn’t particularly like or dislike stars.

Stars were indispensable tools for confirming your location in the landmark-less desert by looking up to observe their position.

That was why shinobi of the desert like Gaara habitually looked up at to watch the stars.

The Country of Wind's sky was vast without end.

At ground level in the desert, there were clouds of dust and dirt, but the sky was clear and transparent. It was because there weren't any city lights, or any clouds to block the view.

Stars were like grains of sand caught in the sky. They were cold, didn't give off any heat to warm you, and just simply hung there, beautifully, without dirt.

Compared to that, us humans who keep fighting each other are the dirty ones.

The tea in the kettle had come to a boil.

Gaara poured the brewed tea into some portable tea cups from a height. He was doing so to make sure the dust stayed in the bottom of the kettle's foam. If he didn't pour it from a height, the tea would taste powdery. You had to drink tea without the dust from the leaves.

"Drink this." Gaara said, "Warm up your body."

"Yes sir."

When he passed the teacup to her, Gaara's fingers briefly brushed against Shijima's.

...They really look alike.

The stars gave enough light for him to see that, excluding her thick glasses, Shijima looked incredibly similar to Hakuto.

They're not just from the same tribe. Gaara concluded, but didn't assume any more than that.

His own family had been complex, and he'd gained wounds because of that, so Gaara didn't like asking about the family matters of others that didn't have anything to do with him.

"...It's warm." Shijima's glasses had fogged up a little from the tea's steam, and her voice sounded like she was comforted by the tea.

“As it should be,” Gaara said, taking a sip too.

The tea tasted like sweet sugar, tea leaves and mint.

It was a familiar taste that belonged to the desert.

“At night in the desert, human’s body temperatures fall quickly, and they lose the sugar in their body quickly too. What’s more frightening is that it happens without us noticing.”

“Without noticing? Had I been like that too?”

“Nobody notices. Myself included.” Gaara took one more sip of his tea. “The desert isn’t an environment where people can live. That’s why our survival instincts go out of control here. I’ve seen many shinobi from foreign countries who became unable to feel hot or cold, and died on the side of the road.”

Even Gaara, who was protected by his Absolute Defence, wasn’t an exception to that possibility.

His absolute defence would repel any attack that came his way, but naturally, it wouldn’t help him obtain victory.

“So that we don’t die like this, it’s necessary to cope mechanically. You take a break every two hours. While resting, you drink sweet tea. If you can do that resolutely, the break will stop you from suffering, and help you cope.”

The wind unfurled, and the desert changed colours again.

“The shinobi who took Hakuto hasn’t taken a break. But that kind of a forced march onwards won’t last long. Soon, he’ll have to abruptly take a rest. What’s necessary for shinobi to continue enduring isn’t idealism. It’s skill.”

“...May I ask you one question?” Shijima asked. She was gazing into her half empty cup of tea like her eyes were somewhere far away.

“What is it?” Gaara asked.

“Why are you doing so much?”

“For the dignity of Sunagakure.” Gaara said. “Because I’m the Kazekage that’s responsible for its future.”

“Is that all that it is?”

“Hakuto is important, of course. I have no intention of leaving her rescue to others.”

The order probably should’ve been switched so Hakuto came first, but Gaara was too serious of a man to let lies mix into his words.

“Why?” Gaara asked.

“...No. It’s nothing.”

“I see. Then, we should start going now. We should catch up with the shinobi.”

Gaara got up, gathering the tea leaves that had been left in the kettle into the small tea left in his cup, and then threw them with a series of exaggerated motions into the desert’s wind.

“...Is that some type of ninjutsu?”

“It’s a charm.” Gaara said, with a very serious look on his face.

“A charm?”

“My elder sister, Temari, taught it to me. It’s something that’s been handed down the Kazekage clan. It’s an incantation that lets you borrow the power of the desert’s spirits to save your lover.”

“Is that so?” A small, affectionate smile had passed over Shijima’s face. “Well then, I hope the spirit’s lend their power, and the wish is granted. I’ll dedicate the little power I have as well.”

“I’ll be relying on you.”

The pair’s shadows began to walk again.

I never thought things could get to this state so quickly.

Kankurou had returned to Sunagakure, and the look on his face at this moment was that of someone who’d bitten a sour lemon.

“Kankurou-sama.”

Around twenty young shinobi had come to see him.

Every single one of them had been brought up after the Fourth Shinobi World War, and raised under his care.

You could call them innocent. They were all teenage boys and girls.

“We’ve deliberated for a while, and in the end, we’ve decided that we can’t go along with the current regime.”

“Look at you guys pulling out such a big thing.” Kankurou shook his head like they were joking, but all their eyes were serious.

They really had pulled out something large, he thought.

“Under the pretty label of a ‘detente’, all that happens is that the budget is reduced, and we are no longer being given a place to work.”

“We can’t go along with the current regime, with Gaara-sama’s weak-hearted policies any longer!”

“While we’re forced to live a harsh lifestyle, he goes out and has a flashy marriage meeting.”

“We think that the one who should lead us is you, Kankurou-sama, the eldest son of the previous Kazekage!”

“...”

He could understand their feelings. The daimyou thought of Sunagakure’s shinobi as interchangeable tools. And response to the detente, they kept outsourcing their missions to other, cheaper villages so as to save on costs.

But of course, it was only right that those who were entrusted with the citizens’ taxes thought carefully about how it was used.

And, still, the agreement ever since ancient times was supposed to be that shinobi would protect the country, and the daimyou would supervise the country.

Gaara wasn’t incompetent.

His younger brother was thinking of a path that would let the people of Sunagakure, and the Country of Wind, and everyone in the entire continent to live their lives well.

And, step by step, he was walking towards that goal.

But, he couldn’t please everyone with that.

Gaara’s chosen road was that of ‘peace’.

It wasn’t ‘the prosper of Suna only’.

If another shinobi world war began, and Suna defeated other villages and took over their abundant and fertile land, then, yes, that might have compensated and rewarded the shinobi, just as the young shinobi said.

But, they would be prospering on top of a mountain of corpses, and they would have been achieving glory that was sustained by hatred.

And furthermore, what would they do if they lost the war? If Sunagakure was knocked down once more, then this time around, they might not be able to get back up again.

And that was why Gaara had chosen the road of 'peace'. Not because of any idealism, but because he had been thinking realistically for the good of his country.

Cooperation with other villages wouldn't give immediate results, but eventually, thanks to those reciprocal relationships, Sunagakure would prosper like it never had before.

Gaara had chosen this path thinking of that.

"Doesn't this mean," Kankurou said, "That you guys are intending to kill Gaara?"

"!"

Unrest spread through all the young shinobi.

Although none of them had personally witnessed the Fourth Shinobi World War, they all knew of Gaara's legendary fighting style. Gaara had gone through a fight on the level of gods with Ootsuki Kaguya and her family, as well as fighting the puppets sent from the moon. He was a Kazekage among Kazekage.

Even now, when they spoke of a coup de'tat, all the young shinobi's faith in Gaara was absolute.

"That's- we have no intentions of doing that."

"We're just thinking that Gaara-sama could take the position of a counsellor, and Kankurou-sama could become the Kazekage."

"We just want to pull Gaara-sama away from the field of politics."

I see...you guys have been thinking about this.

If the young shinobi did that, then it would be hard for external forces to see this as a coup. If the political changes in Suna were carried out in that way, then other villages wouldn't have a reason to lend assistance or intervene.

“Kankurou-sama!”

Sunagakure was a relatively poor village.

Of course, there were even poorer villages.

Kankurou thought the improvements that had come to Suna under Gaara's rule were incredibly great.

However, when the young shinobi interacted with other villages, they realised that Suna was still ‘poor’ in comparison. And thus, they began feeling resentment.

For example, if you asked Kankurou or Temari, then they'd say ‘compared to the time during the Konoha Crush, everyone's daily lives now are seriously so much better’.

But, the young shinobi only knew ‘now’.

“Kankurou-sama!”

“Kankurou-sama!”

“Please, tell us your decision!”

Twenty pairs of earnest eyes pinned their gazes onto Kankurou.

He had no choice but to give them an answer.

Gaara felt like he was seeing a mass of grave stones lined up side by side.

He could understand why even robbers didn't approach these ruins.

The sand here was a beautiful pure white, to the point that you wondered if they weren't the crystal remains of shattered bones. The concrete buildings that rose out of that sand had to be skyscrapers those old people had built.

Even now, you could feel that people used to live here.

Chairs that were no different now than they were then, metal pillars that had once been street lamps, awfully spacious roads, lightning trains* lying on top of rails with no one riding them, computers buried in the sand...

There was no way of knowing where the people who lived here had gone.

There was only the moonlight and starlight shining down, and the heavy feeling of death.

It was a dazzlingly white cemetery of sand.

In the middle of that landscape, there was Hakuto.

Next to her was an unknown shinobi.

If you had to guess his age, he didn't look much older than Gaara. He had a medium build, but one that had obviously been disciplined, with shorn back black hair. He looked similar to Gaara.

"So you're the one who abducted Hakuto."

Hakuto wasn't tied up, and she wasn't being carried.

Whether he could still call her situation 'abduction' was something Gaara hesitated over, but he had no other words to use.

One man, and one woman. You'd think it was a certain sort of situation.

However, there were words Gaara had to say because of where he stood.

"I am Shigezane of the Houki tribe." The man spoke without hesitation. He walked towards Gaara with a clear gaze in his eyes. His steps were firm on the sand, letting out thudding sounds.

"I've heard of you, the master of Metal Mining."

"It's an honour if you've heard of my name at all." Shigezane replied.

"I would be opposed if I was poorly skilled in the technique handed down to me by the Fourth Kazekage."

"My father used to praise your skill." Gaara said.

There were no lies in what he said. He hadn't met the man before, but 'Shigezane of the Houki' was known as a man who used a unique

ninjutsu to take out metal crystals from the earth below, a pro in mineral mining and fort destruction.

Similar to the magnet release, the technique also allowed the user to take out gold dust from the ground. It had been taught to Shigezane by Gaara's father, who'd been concentrating on the village's financial situation.

How ironic.

Gaara's jutsu had been influenced by his father as well, however it was mostly characterised by the ability to manipulate sand that he'd been born with as a Jinchuuriki.

The truth was that neither of the three sand siblings had inherited the Fourth Kazekage's jutsu.

That was why knowing the man in front of his eyes was his father's disciple made strong, strange emotions rise inside Gaara.

"I don't know who's instigated you to do this," Gaara said, "But what you're doing right now is being nothing more than a decoy. Do you really intend to uselessly die doing that sort of task?"

"...I'm fully aware of I'm doing." Shigezane's eyes were unwavering.

Only people who intended to walk right into the arms of death had that look in their eyes.

The look in his eyes was the same as Hakuto who stood next to him.

And with that, Gaara understood.

"Gaara-sama!" Shijima yelled, "I'll start ahead of you!"

"!"

Shijima was running towards them. She clutched houshuriken in her hands and, while creating a faint kage bunshin, kicked against the crystal powder-like sand, leaping into the air.

"Shigezane!" She yelled, "You who kidnapped the Lady despite being part of the Houki tribe, take your punishment!"

"Shijima?!" Shigezane quickly made a seal.

It was the water release.

That was a technique unsuited for the desert, with few users.

But, we're also scarce of techniques that can deal with the water release.

The sand beneath Gaara was shaking.

It's from underneath!

Gaara made a shield of sand, but he couldn't reach to protect Shijima.

The attack was made of water.

A column of underground water burst out of the ground beneath Shigezane's feet.

It was a high-pressured water blade.

Tunnels were full of combustible mine dust and gas, so such a technique was necessary for digging through bedrock without creating igniting sparks.

But it was also a fact that if you took a direct hit from a water blade, it would cut clean through flesh and bone.

Shijima's hoshuriken were pulverized by Shigezane's water attack.

The wind sealed inside her hoshuriken burst and exploded but, while it did weaken the water's pressure, the water attack still had enough power to cut and scrape Shijima's skin and clothes.

"Tch!" Gaara clicked his tongue, and started running.

He didn't want to see the kunoichi who'd come along to help him cruelly killed.

The correct action to take in this situation was probably to sacrifice Shijima so he could witness Shigezane's technique in action and see through it, but that kind of a 'correct' answer was a bullshit one.

Gaara had never, not even once, been a man who lived for doing the 'correct' thing.

He was a man who lived for the sake of love.

And love, love was holding out your hand for anyone at all, without expecting anything in return.

That was why Gaara ran.

"I'll be taking your life!" Shigazane sent out another geyser of water.

“But, that’s too simple an attack.” Gaara said.

He turned his sand shield at an acute angle, and rather than receiving the attack, deflected it to the side.

No matter how high-pressured of a water blade it was, if you gave an angle to its kinetic energy, then it lost its cutting efficiency.

The white sand surrounding Gaara shifted, like a blooming flower.

It almost looked like he was in the middle of a white rose.

Another rush of water, and another, and another.

The rushing water became a storm surrounding Gaara, but it was quickly soaked up by his sand and wind, and never managed to reach him.

A long-distance fight had a high likelihood of endangering Hakuto.

He’d be able to end things in close range combat, Gaara decided, and moved to close the distance between him and the enemy.

At that moment, Hakuto, who had been doing nothing until now other than watching the fight with a sad look in her eyes, let out a shout:

“Gaara-sama, Shijima, run!”

“Hakuto!” For a single instant, Shigezane looked over his shoulder, just as surprised as the others.

And with that instant, Gaara had time to get ready for the next attack.

Shigezane had been making a new seal. You could feel that he was gathering large amount of chakra.

A large attack, huh.

Gaara instantly started preparing to defend himself.

But then, with a low groan, the sand under Gaara’s feet starting to swirl.

Quicksand?!

Quicksand was a phenomenon that occurred when sand had become full of water, and thanks to that water saturation, started behaving like a faux-liquid.

His earlier water attacks had been a strategy to saturate the sand around me with water!

Like a ship being dragged down under a giant whirlpool, in no time at all, Gaara's body had sunk all the way to his abdomen. If he didn't do something to save himself, he was going to be swallowed up whole by the quick sand.

But, dealing with this kind of sand was tricky. He couldn't repel it with a shield of sand, because in this situation, the sand was his very enemy. The sand was being manipulated by Shigezane's chakra, so he couldn't regain full control of it either.

He's got me...this whole plot of land was a trap!

But, that didn't mean escape was impossible.

The truth was that he was perfectly capable of escaping. He could regain control of a small amount of sand, wrap it around himself and fly out.

But, Gaara didn't do that.

It was because he'd seen Shijima had been pulled into the midst of the quicksand as well.

Shijima had been injured in the previous attack. It didn't look like she could escape.

If she was dragged down into the sand, then she would inevitably die of suffocation.

Even if Gaara defeated Shizegane, he wouldn't be able to reach her in time. Even Gaara wouldn't be able to find her quickly if she sunk into such a large area of sand.

And so, Gaara used his sand to leap towards the sinking Shijima.

"Gaara-sama?!" She cried, "Why are you...?!"

"Don't speak." He said, grabbing her by the hands and pulling her to him. At the same time, he pulled a shield of sand all around them.

It looks like we won't be able to escape in time with flight...!

"Hold your breath." He said to Shijima, and the whirlpool of sand swallowed them both whole.

Gaara had enclosed the both of them in a dome of his own sand, and as they sunk down into the darkness, he frantically tried to maintain the air.

“I understand.” Kankurou said. He had come out of his careful deliberating to give a firm nod.

“Ahh!”

“Kankurou-sama!”

“Kankurou-sama!”

“When me and the others installed Gaara as Kazekage, we didn’t do it with any usual methods either,” Kankurou said. “You could say this is just a repetition of that, couldn’t you?”

“Thank you very much!” Their jubilant voices cried.

There was no turning back anymore.

“So, have you finished drawing up a specific plan?”

“Of course.”

Kankurou looked at the protocol he’d been handed, and inwardly sighed.

It was the exact same type of plan to seize control of a city that was taught in textbooks. It covered the main points, but there was no imagination.

More precisely, there was nothing accounting for surprise developments. Developments like, say, Uzumaki Naruto.

Kankurou altered a few things with a red pen, and handed the protocol back.

“I got it.” He said. “But, promise me this. No blood will be spilled. If any blood is spilled, there will be retribution. Until the very end, this is going to be a peaceful operation to suppress the upper brass, and take Gaara’s position.”

“Yessir!”

“Who drew up this plan?” Kankurou asked.

“I did.” Maizuru stepped forwards, looking proud. His cheeks were red.

“I see.” Kankurou said. “I’ve understood all your feelings well. You’re not going to do anything bad, will you?”

In the middle of the second round of their cheering, Kankurou looked up at the ceiling, searching for a sky he wouldn’t be able to see.

He couldn’t return to those peaceful, easy days anymore.

.
. .

Darkness.

.
. .

Deep darkness.

Something thick and red was spreading around him.

Blood.

The smell of blood had always been surrounding the young Gaara.

“Why...am I different from everyone?”

He had been born as a Jinchuuriki. He had been the child of the Kazekage, but even though that person was his father, he had tried to have Gaara assassinated.

And so, Gaara didn’t know any other way of interacting with people besides hurting them.

He wondered how many people he had killed.

There were people he’d killed just because he didn’t like them, and there were people he’d killed en-route to a mission.

His uncle Yashamaru had been like a parent to him, but then he had become an assassin, and Gaara had killed him. He had killed others like him too.

Gaara couldn't judge between good and evil.

He just...killed.

He killed and killed and killed, and built up a literal pile of bodies in streams of blood.

He thought that...had been loving himself.

When Gaara woke up, he saw the face of a beautiful woman in front of his eyes.

"...Hakuto?"

"Have you woken up, Gaara-sama?" Shijima was the one who was nursing him.

"It's you, Shijima. I apologise."

Mixing up the face of one woman with another could be taken as insincerity. Even Gaara, as ignorant of the ways of the world as he was, knew that.

"No, it's fine..." Shijima said. "You regaining your consciousness is more important than anything else."

It looked like he'd used up a surprising amount of chakra.

His body felt very heavy.

"Where are we?"

"It looks like an underground cavern." Shijima said. "It seems the sand has streamed down to the cavern where the underground water came from."

Gaara's eyes finally adjusted to the darkness.

Shijima had an emergency light stick in her hand, and he could see the shapes of ancient buildings surrounding them in the glow it gave off.

He couldn't see the sky. It looked like they'd been dragged down somewhere very deep.

"How much time has passed?"

"Around three hours."

"I see." Gaara adjusted his breathing, and began to wait for his chakra to restore.

Hakuto hadn't looked injured. She likely wouldn't be killed straight away, right?

There was still time until dawn. He had to stay calm.

Shijima spoke, "May I ask you something?"

"If it's something I can answer." Gaara said.

"...Why did you save me?" Shijima was genuinely puzzled.

She had probably expected him to abandon her back there. She wouldn't have gotten sad about it either.

That's what shinobi were like, after all. First, there was the mission, and then, there was yourself. It was natural to think that way.

"No reason." Gaara said.

"No reason...?!?" Shijima exclaimed. "You saved me by abandoning not only the Lady intended to be your wife, but your own well-being—there isn't any merit in that! I'm just a shinobi-!"

"Oi." Gaara felt a little irritation rise in him at those words. "Don't speak as if the value of life changes according to the person in question."

"Eh?"

"No matter whose life it is, the value of it is the same as any other. Not to mention, if you're a citizen of Sunagakure, then you're part of my family." Gaara himself didn't understand why he felt so angry.

"Certainly, there are times when a higher-up has to order his subordinates to die, but that's while hoping to the very last moment that they have a possibility of living. Facing certain death is different from suicide, and entrusting someone you believe in with a difficult mission is different from standing by and watching them die."

“I understand that.” Shijima said, “But, this was a fight with your honour on the line. If it comes to light that you let the woman you were going to marry be snatched away-”

“I know. The colleagues who think poorly of me will use this for their propaganda -no, they probably plotted this for that purpose to begin with.”

“Then why?”

“Because I I wanted to save you.” Gaara turned so he could meet Shijima’s eyes through her glasses. “...A long time ago, in the middle of the fighting during the ‘Konoha Crush’, I met a man. Uzumaki Naruto. He was an incredibly strange shinobi.”

“That legendary...?”

“His techniques, and his knowledge were both awful.” Gaara said, “Different from me, allowed to live like a human being despite being a jinchuuriki...I thought he was a complete idiot.”

He had still been young, back then. It was a memory from the chuunin exams. At that time, Gaara had been sent to participate in the chuunin exams as a spy to crush the village of Konohagakure from within.

“But...” Gaara said, “That Naruto came to fight me face to face. What it meant to live, how much merit there was in pain...and what it meant to love someone, those are all things that he taught me.”

It was a very precious memory.

And it hadn’t just been Naruto.

Rock Lee. Haruno Sakura. Nara Shikamaru, who would eventually become his brother-in-law. Temari and Kankurou, who had supported him even when they were afraid of him.

Everyone had been so young.

“I met him, and I learnt how to love a world beyond myself...And, I wanted to one day love someone the way my mother and brother and sister had loved me. The reason I was able to think like that...was because Naruto existed.”

A light that had illuminated that deep, eternal darkness.

That light had been Naruto.

There was a dream that Gaara still remembered to this very moment.

The dream he had seen in the middle of the Infinite Tsukuyomi.

His father, mother, and Yashamaru had been there. He had been there, young and unstained with blood. And there was also Naruto, his friend.

Curiously, he hadn't seen any things like a lover, or a high status, or glory as a shinobi.

He had just felt terribly, terribly happy.

Gaara didn't regret throwing away that dream.

He believed that living as they did now, not in dream, but in reality, was the future that they had picked for themselves.

But, the one who had made it so Gaara's dream was so blissful had been Naruto. If he hadn't met Naruto, he wouldn't have been able experience that genjutsu with the bliss of friendship.

Plus, it was a certain fact that right now, Gaara really did have friends and family by his side.

"Naruto had nothing to gain from what he did. It would've been good if he'd killed a hateful enemy like me. But, he didn't. That's why..."

Gaara gave a wry smile. "I thought I wanted to try and do something illogical too."

When he said it out loud, it certainly sounded silly.

But, it also sounded strangely refreshing.

"Something illogical?" Shijima asked.

"Yes. Like the wind that crosses the desert. Not restricting anything, and loving everyone...the truth is, I thought that I wanted to try living in that manner."

“...yes, I see.” Shijima nodded, her eyes looking like she was looking at something very far away.

“But, I can’t really do it.” Gaara said, “I have too many things I can’t throw away, and far too many things I have to protect.”

“You are the ‘Kazekage’, after all.” Shijima said. She smiled.

Shijima’s smile was different from Hakuto or Temari’s.

For a moment, Gaara vaguely felt like it resembled his mother’s smile which he’d seen so long ago. Then he wondered whether this wasn’t the ‘mother complex’ that Temari talked about.

“I’m like that as well.” Shijima said. She lifted a finger, tracing the edges of her glasses. “I....”

Shijima took off her glasses.

Her eyes were closed.

She looked just like Hakuto, but, Shijima’s smiling face it was filled with much more sadness.

“I sacrificed myself,” Shijima said. “For the sake of researching how to replicate the secret ‘Sharingan’ of Konoha.”

“...Was it Orochimaru?”

“Yes.”

Orochimaru was a legendary shinobi of Konoha who had fallen onto an evil path. He had killed Sunagakure’s Kazekage and pretended to be him for a period of time, while carrying out awful experiments. The details of what had happened back then hadn’t been clarified to this day, but to think that one of those test subjects had been right next to him.

“The experiment ended in failure...and I put a seal on my own eyes.” Shijima said, “I had to, because I didn’t have the jutsu to restrain the Eye Technique. And I entrusted the matter of becoming the clan successor to my little sister, Hakuto.”

Shijima put her thick, bulky glasses back on again.

So that was the reason. Now Gaara understood why Shijima wore those glasses so unsuited for the battlefield. They were a restraining tool used to curb the unrestrainable doujutsu.

“Why...did you tell me that?” Gaara asked.

Even if they were from the same village, one should never carelessly reveal details about their own jutsu.

That was an iron-clad rule of shinobi.

Because revealing the secrets of your own jutsu to someone was no different than entrusting that person with your life.

“I, too...wanted to try doing something a little illogical.” Shijima said, smoothly standing up. “Is that bad?”

Her figure was dimly illuminated by feeble light. She looked terribly beautiful.

“No,” Gaara stood up too, “It’s not bad at all.”

“We can find the path to getting out of this cavern with wind release.” Shijima said, “I’ll guide us out.”

“I’ll be relying on you.” Gaara said, “I want to conserve as much chakra as possible.”

His fatigue had gone somewhere very far away.

It was time to continue their pursuit.

Extra Translator Notes:

* This puzzle me quite a bit initially, because the kanji literally says thunder/lightening-car but there’s no such kanji used to refer cars in rl!japan, so I initially just went with a verbatim translation. Later though, I figured it out. Train in Japanese is ‘electric car’. Electricity in the nardyverse is powered by lightning. Thus lightning car = electric car = lightning train lol, which is the same as an electric train in the real world.

Section Five - Chance Meeting

Every thing in this world is part of a pair.

Man and woman, night and day, yin and yang, shadow and light.
The, there are beings that live in the space between those pairs.
Those beings are shinobi.

Gaara and Shijima found Hakuto and Shigezane near the border of the Country of Fire, in a region where the desert came to an end.

Rather, prairie would be a more accurate word than desert. There were short trees growing here and there, a telling sign that this area was blessed with rain.

It might have been a dreary sight for people from other countries, but for those who were born in the desert like Gaara and the others, anywhere that simply had rainfall was like a paradise.

Over the horizon, you could faintly see a dark green forest. In short, that meant the people who lived there were blessed with plenty of water, and didn't hate the sun as if it was a red hot demon.

Shigezane and Hakuto were holding each other's hands, staring at the approaching sunrise over the horizon.

It was almost like they were looking a hopeful future that lay ahead of that sunrise.

Should I just turn a blind eye?

Just for a moment, that thought entered Gaara's head.

But, at the end of the day, Gaara was Sunagakure's leader.

And he couldn't stop being their leader.

"Shigezane. We will have you return Lady Hakuto." Gaara pulled the injured and exhausted Shijima slightly behind him and called out from behind the pair, severing all his hesitation.

He refrained from making a surprise attack out of respect for Hakuto.

“Gaara-sama?!” Hakuto’s voice was bewildered and also had traces of a guilty conscience.

“Hakuto, get back.” Shigezane said, stepping forwards.

His face didn’t look as composed as it did last time.

As it should be.

They had run all the way to the country border without any breaks.

And then there’d been the quicksand that had covered the ruins.

His body couldn’t put up with all that.

Gaara didn’t see him as unsightly.

A shinobi who had lead around the Kazekage by the nose couldn’t be seen like that.

All Gaara thought of was how much he regretted not being able to find his talent earlier.

“You have magnificent skills. As the Kazekage, I feel very proud of you. You don’t have any intention to return to Sunagakure?”

He wasn’t pretending to aid the enemy to move along his own agenda. Those were Gaara’s true feelings.

From the bottom of his heart, he thought Shigezane’s talent was precious.

And even more so when Gaara saw the resolute look in Shigezane’s eyes, and understood he wasn’t intending to kill a target for money like the group of assassins from before.

“I’m honoured to hear that.” Shigezane said, and gathered water release shuriken inside the palm of his hand.

So that was his answer.

Well, it would be, Gaara thought.

Shigezane was that kind of a man, and that was why things had come to this.

“Gaara-sama!” Hakuto was walking towards them, looking like she couldn’t stand this any longer.

“Hakuto?!”

“Gaara-sama, please, somehow, stop what you’re doing!”

Hakuto’s eyes looked desperate.

Like Naruto, back on that day.

“Shigezane is my—”

“You don’t have to say it.” Gaara said, cutting Hakuto off.

Even Gaara understood that the relationship between Hakuto and Shigezane was that of a man and woman.

The plot may have been drawn up by someone else, but the two who were caught up in that scheme were in a relationship.

In the same way that Gaara had his own life, Hakuto had hers too. You couldn’t learn about a person’s life in just one or two days of acquaintance.

“Shijima and the rest weren’t attacked at full force. And Shijima wasn’t killed. Your footprints in the sand as you followed Shigezane were neat and calm. All of those signs point to the fact that you knew you were going to be to be ‘kidnapped’.”

Gaara had decided to play the role of the bad guy.

“I don’t know who instigated you, but they moved things along until there was a talk of a marriage meeting. You were to take on the role of my betrothed in the public eye, and then elope. It would be a great blow against the Kazekage’s authority. Hakuto, who had never stepped out of Houki tribe’s lands, was going to run away with the Houki tribe’s Shigezane and disappear. That’s the general gist of it, isn’t it?”

“Why would come after her while knowing all that?”

Shijima was the one who asked that question.

“I told you.” Gaara told her, “I’m the ‘Kazekage’. I can’t be anything other than that.”

“.....”

“That’s no different from how I couldn’t do anything else other than act as a Lady of the Houki Tribe,” Hakuto said. Her eyes were wet as she looked at Gaara.

It wasn't a lie that she had cared about him.

It was just that she cared about the man by her side, Shigezane, more.

"So I could leave the place I was born and raised in, so I could be free, I didn't have any chance other than being your marriage partner. I apologise for using you. But-"

"Leave the apology." Gaara said, sand shifting out of his gourd.

It was a signal that he was ready to fight.

"I have no thoughts of interfering with your romance." Gaara said, "We never agreed to an engagement. It just publicly looked like we did. I'm not someone with the right to tie you down. However..."

The sand from Gaara's gourd morphed into a sword.

"I cannot turn a blind eye to shinobi who abandon their village." He said, "Shinobi who use their power without following the law...they'll eventually harm more and more people."

Gaara knew this for a fact, from his personal experience of fighting the terrorist Akatsuki.

One single shinobi could destroy a fortress, a whole city, if they only felt like it.

It was because that fact restricted them that Shinobi had come to coexist with society. No, they had no choice but to coexist.

And that was why.

"Now... I'm coming for you!" Gaara said.

"Come." Shigezane replied.

The land under his feet was full of pebbles.

His opponent could no longer make quicksand.

However, Gaara couldn't afford to use large, eye-catching techniques either. It was because he couldn't afford this fight being noticed by the public. If he used flashy, wide-area attacks, then naturally it would raise unnecessarily alarm in the foreign shinobi in this region.

In a nutshell, they were both equally handicapped

A water blade pierced through the dark towards him.

But Gaara had already understood everything about that technique.
“It’s useless.” He told Shigezane.

Gaara’s shield of sand deflected the attack completely, or absorbed it.
No matter how much water you had, water wasn’t superior to sand.
It was the same as how an underground channel couldn’t water the desert.

Shigezane’s storms of water attacks kept disappearing in front of Gaara.

The sad look Hakuto had every time it happened did not pain him.

“There’s nothing that sand cannot do.” Gaara said, closing the distance between him and his opponent.

If he got in close, he should be able to put an end to this with taijutsu.
He thickened his shield, moved forwards, and it was at that moment...
A particularly huge water javelin was launched towards him.

Gaara twisted his body aside.

“!”

A burning pain ran through his side.

The water javelin that had broken through his sand shield had pierced through.

I didn’t think he was to this level...!

Shigezane wasn’t the first person to have pierced Gaara’s Absolute Defence. However, he could count the number of people who had managed to pierce through with such sharpness.

“Why...!? Why could you avoid it...?!”

It looked Shigezane had been very confident in that jutsu. His voice was confused.

The reason those sorts of words could come out of Shigezane’s mouth was that no matter how much of a master Metal Miner he was, he wasn’t a soldier of his skill.

That was the difference between the world’s Gaara and Shigezane lived in.

It didn't mean that one way of life was better than the other, but it was a deciding factor when it came to survival of the fittest on the battlefield.

"It was Hakuto." Gaara said.

"Huh...?"

"I was looking at Hakuto's eyes."

"What are you saying?!" Shigezane's tone was coloured in confusion and jealousy.

Well, that was natural.

But, Gaara hadn't been looking at Hakuto's eyes out of any lingering feelings or regret.

Shinobi are those who will fight on the battlefield while noticing, observing and analysing every piece of information.

"The look on Hakuto's eyes changed when you threw that last javelin. She looked like she was afraid of someone's death. For her to feel that while she knew about my fighting style meant that she believed your jutsu, Shigezane, would defeat my Absolute Defence."

"So that's how you avoided a fatal wound...!" Shigezane looked markedly in awe.

"I am the Kazekage." Gaara said, "The wind and sand that run over this desert can't be caught by anyone...!"

Gaara stepped forward like a god of death that had taken on human form.

"Troops have been deployed to the main facility."

"I see." Toujuurou listened to Maizuru's** report, and gave a satisfied laugh.

He'd thought Kankurou might've noticed something was up when he made alterations to the plan, but it didn't look like he had.

How ironic, that the shinobi Gaara had trained and raised for rebuilding Suna would sweep the rug from under his feet.

The sweet irony made Toujuurou very satisfied.

“–But I, on the other hand, am not going to explain about how I broke through your shield!”

“I wonder,” Gaara said, avoiding another water javelin by sliding to the side.

Since he knew the water javelin were being aimed at his body, all he had to do was make sure he wasn’t anywhere expected. Gaara’s level of taijutsu allowed him to do that.

Of course, Shigezane was also throwing the water javelins while expecting that Gaara would avoid them in that manner.

But, none of his throws ever hit the target.

It was because thanks to his sand that he’d stretched and laid out across the ground, Gaara could sense the movement of water underground before they burst above.

If you knew where the attack was going to originate from, you could also make a rough guess as to where it could land. As long as he quickly evaded them while mixing in some feints, it would be fine.

Gaara drew closer.

Closer.

Avoided a water javelin.

Avoided another.

Closer.

He jumped back.

The he drew forward again.

Forwards, avoid, forwards, avoid avoid avoid, forwards, forwards, forwards, slide, leap, run, avoid, advance forwards again, jump back in avoidance, turn around, jump forwards, advance forwards,

forwards, close, closer, deflect an attack, avoid, closer, closer, avoid, deflect...!

“Gaara-sama, please stop!” Hakuto yelled.

He couldn’t afford to stop.

He shouldn’t stop.

He wasn’t able to stop.

For the sake of remaining himself, he couldn’t bend his principles.

Gaara swung a blade of sand down towards the man who was beloved to a woman he’d once thought he wouldn’t mind marrying.

“Gr, but!” A stream of water burst out in a javelin shape from underneath Shigezane’s feet, along with a shrill battle cry, “If it’s at point blank range, then-!”

The water javelin split apart into several other javelins.

He couldn’t avoid them.

But, Gaara’s sand shield deflected every single one of those javelins. It was because this time, Gaara had used the magnet release he had inherited from his father. His shield had faint, sparkling bits of metal compromised in it, that had let it deflect the javelin.

Gaara had known the secrets of his sand shield technique had been exposed. One of his countermeasures to make up for that weakness, was this: his father’s technique. He hadn’t used it at all until now, but when he did, he used his father’s magnet release along with the sand his mother had given him to make his current shield.

“Wha-?!”

“My principle is to act before I boast.” Gaara said.

A sword of sand stretched out of his shield, standing against the back of Shigezane’s neck.

“I’ve theorised as to how you managed to pierce through my shield,” Gaara said, “But I didn’t have time to confirm it. Either way, the fact that you managed to break through is something praiseworthy.”

“I take out hydrated calcium and volcanic rock from the underground water, and mix it with the water javelin. When it hits your sand, it

changes the sand into concrete, and then I can break through your shield,” Shigezane said, both pride and envy in his voice, “It’s a technique the Fourth Kazekage came up with, and yet you...”

“Is it a technique my father came up with to kill me?”

“...It is. In the end, he never used it since a more efficient solution than using the magnet release was found, but...”

“.....”

Gaara no longer had any intention to condemn his father.

The dangerous potential of a jinchuuriki was endless. It was natural to prepare a jutsu to stop one in case they went on a rampage. Flames were useful, but you had to prepare water, just in case a wildfire broke out. Gaara and the other jinchuuriki were like sentient flames.

“If it was the old me, it probably would’ve killed me. But you can’t kill the current me with that..”

“Why?” Shigezane’s voice was so heartbroken, it sounded like he was wringing blood from his heart. “Are you saying the Kazekage bloodline is special? Is the chakra of jinchuuriki and the chakra of us normal humans so different? Are you saying that no matter how hard we try, those of us with weak bloodlines have no right to be happy?!”

“Blood has nothing to do with it.” Gaara’s voice was hot like sand, and cold like sand.

It was true that in the shinobi world, there were many situations where bloodlines meant everything.

The technique Gaara had just used to defeat Shigezane’s technique, the ‘metal release’ was one of those situations. The magnet release was a kekkai genkai he’d inherited from his father, and if he hadn’t had the genes for it, he wouldn’t have been able to use it. It was using that kekkai genkai that Gaara had been able to change the nature of his sand and defend himself against the attack that would change his sand to cement.

It wasn’t something he could say he’d mastered, but it was more than enough for when two clever tricks were facing off against each other.

But then, take Konoha’s Haruno Sakura for example. She didn’t come from an unusual bloodline, but her strength made her an

outstandingly great shinobi. In fact, there were a great number of normal people who, by polishing their techniques or with pure strength alone, had surpassed others.

Gaara had seen many people who had relied only on their bloodline, and yet been unable to produce any real results.

Siblings who were all excellent shinobi like Gaara, Temari and Kankurou were few in number. And it wasn't the result of luck, but their own hard work.

And then, more than anything else...

"Bloodlines are chains that tie down people like me or Hakuto. They aren't a blessing." Gaara said, "Shigezane, don't you already know that?"

"That's-!"

"...I never wanted this power." Gaara said, "What I wanted was the power to be friends with someone as equals. What I wanted was the power to just spend time with my family. People like you, who weren't born into the Kazekage line, who weren't made jinchuuriki...from where I'm standing, it's you who feels like a special chosen one. "

He had honestly spoken from his heart.

Gaara himself didn't understand why he ended up saying all that either.

It was just that he thought it was common courtesy to fight someone honestly.

"We've taken control of the communications department."

"The lightning train station* is under control. Dispatch."

"The Sixth Ninja Weapon Workshop has been taken over. Dispatch."

Several monitors were placed around a dark room, showing the situation as the young shinobi led by Kankurou slowly took over important locations in Sunagakure.

Things were progressing even faster than Toujuurou had expected. But, Toujuurou didn't attribute that to the excellence of the young shinobi.

Instead, he was deliriously proud, thinking that it was all due to the plan that he had drawn up.

"Now, all that's left is...!"

"It could very well be...that normal people are the chosen ones. However, sacrifices are needed for happiness." Shijima said from behind him.

Gaara could feel indications that she was getting ready to attack him. He wasn't surprised.

As I thought, was the only thing that crossed his mind.

"Stop what you're doing."

Gaara had known from the start that Shijima had helped Hakuto and the others escape.

The guards hadn't been killed. And then Shijima's guidance had lead them to that trap of quicksand. If he looked, there was far more evidence to be found.

But, more than anything, he had known the truth because Shijima was Hakuto's elder sister.

"Gaara-sama, prepare yourself." Shijima said.

"You won't be able to beat me with your techniques." He told her.

"That's certainly so." Shijima agreed. She dropped her houshuriken. They rolled across the earth with dry, rasping sounds. "If it's a jutsu I need, then I know which one."

Shijima raised her hand to her glasses.

"!" Shigezane yelled, "Shijma, don't do it!"

"That's- you can't do that, big sister!"

The sound of Hakuto and Shijima's voices had changed.

It was very likely that Shijima was about to use a technique that would risk her life. No, not a technique. Something more basic that would put her life at risk...

The doujutsu!

Shijima took off her glasses.

Shijima's pretty, bare face was finally out in the open with nothing to obscure it.

So that was who she looked like.

Gaara finally realised who Shijima so strongly resembled.

She looked like Yashamaru.

The man who had raised Gaara like a father would. The man Gaara had loved more than anyone else, and who had been ordered to kill him precisely because of that reason.

Shijima's face looked just like Yashamaru's had, back in that critical moment. It was full of the same hope, and resignation, and something else that Gaara still didn't understand.

Her eyes were open.

Those eyes weren't a human's.

They were a whirlpool of nothingness, that shined with seven prismatic colours.

Her control over the doujutsu was disordered because of the artificial measures put in her chakra channels. It was a mark of her crime in unnaturally altering herself in the past to become something inhuman, similar to that of Orochimaru's other subordinates, and Sasuke.

My body...it's feverish...!

It was far stronger than he'd expected.

Gaara felt like his consciousness was being pulled out by the roots by that cavern of emptiness.

Sand rolled around him.

It was moving beyond the scope of Gaara's control.

No, maybe it was even beyond the control of his mother's chakra, embedded within the sand.

But, even still, Gaara didn't undo the sand blade he held at Shigezane's throat. If he let him go now, everything would've been for nothing.

"At this rate...!" Shijima said, "My and Gaara-sama's chakra will both go completely out of control, and we'll die from the strength of both our jutsu...! That is my last power....!"

"You could call it a sort of parting gift from Orochimaru, huh?" Gaara replied.

The activator of the jutsu, Shijima, looked like she was in far more pain than Gaara was.

Gaara had already died once. He was used to physical pain.

Physical pain wasn't what was frightening to him.

Just sadness was.

The seven colours of nihility reflected in Shijima's eyes looked like tears to Gaara.

"Do you intend to die for your sister?" Gaara asked, his voice staying calm to the very end.

It wasn't that he didn't feel pain. His whole body was enwrapped in pain, like all the meridians in his body were being ripped out, like his teeth were being pulled out without anaesthesia. He was desperately burdened with how his insides felt fevered, like he was about to explode with his own chakra.

But, Gaara was the 'Kazekage'.

Even if they were runaway-nin, he couldn't forgive himself for doing something as unsightly as wailing in pain in front of his subordinates.

"If I...hadn't been taken in by Orochimaru's cajoling..." Shijima answered, "If my little sister hadn't been forced to become the clan head, then she wouldn't have been put in a position where she was faced with giving up on her love...!"

"So then why," Gaara asked, "Didn't you kill me back in the cave?"

"I"

For one moment, the doujutsu became disturbed.

It was natural that he would ask Shijima that question.

At that time when Gaara had collapsed, Shijima must've thought countless times about giving him a killing blow.

While Gaara's defense operated even as he slept, if Shijima had activated her doujutsu, she would've been more than enough of an opponent for him even while he was awake. Even if she couldn't give him a fatal wound, she could've injured him enough to make his pursuit impossible.

There could only be one reason that she hadn't.

Shijima had likely seen Gaara cry while he was asleep.

If a young man risked his life to save you, and tears leaked out of his eyes while he lay unconscious in your arms, of course you couldn't kill him.

Killing him would've been going against the last principle that Shijima believed in as a shinobi.

That was why.

"Because that's my ninja way." Shijima answered.

"I see."

Gaara was content with that answer.

Other people may have called it grotesque, but for Gaara, the Shijima who had sacrificed her own body for a cause was very beautiful.

The fact that someone as noble as that, as high minded as Naruto was, had been born in the village of Sunagakure made Gaara think that all his efforts as the Kazekage hadn't been in vain.

Because in his village, there was a person who would sacrifice themselves for someone else.

Shinobi are no longer just machines who carry out missions.

“In that case, your principles shouldn’t be twisted.”

Gaara rolled up the sand that he had laid out under Shijima’s feet. It encased her body, restricting her.

“No way...!” Shijima gasped.

Gaara turned towards the restrained Shijima, and stretched out his left hand.

“Ever since I was born, I have always lived fearing that Shukaku would take over my consciousness, and fought against it constantly. Compared to every other shinobi in the world...I have had the most practice in retaining my consciousness.”

A tiny glimpse of the large chakra that lay within Gaara had woken up.

Shijima finally, truly understood what she had- who she had come up against in battle.

In the same way the wind couldn’t be tied down, the Kazekage would not be dominated into submission again.

Never again. By anyone.

“This is goodbye.”

Gaara’s blade of sand flashed out like a needle.

Sunagakure village was silent as death.

Nobody noticed the shinobi who had taken it over from the shadows.

Now all that was left was for Kankurou to give the signal.

“Kankurou-sama.” Amagi was muttering in Kankurou’s ear as if he couldn’t bear staying silent anymore. “Sir, is this truly what you want?”

“What are you saying now?” Kankurou asked, “Didn’t you have the same opinion as the others?”

“I don’t know anymore.” Amagi lightly shook his head. “You’re the one who taught me that shinobi must endure. It somehow feels that what we’re doing might be something that can’t be undone.”

Kankurou wondered what he should say, but decided to just give a strained laugh.

The things he was thinking about inside his head weren’t simple enough to be spoken out loud.

It wasn’t easy to say the things he thought in his head out loud. He didn’t want to think that he’d gotten so old that he’d one-sidedly lecture someone when they’d finally stepped towards the right path by themselves.

“It’s gonna be alright.”

“Sir?”

“Well, just leave it to me.” Kankurou said. He swallowed down the words: leave it to Gaara.

“U...ugh...”

Blood had sprayed across the desert.

Drip, drip, it fell, staining the parched desert floor.

“Gaara...sama...?!” Hakuto was stunned too. It wasn’t a surprise that she was.

Gaara hadn’t pierced Shijima with his blade of dand.

He had pierced the small lump of sand that was behind her.

It was from that lump that human blood was spraying out into the air.

“Why...did you...know I was...there...” The person who crawled out of the sand and said that in a pained voice was none other than one of the siblings who had attacked the marriage meeting: Metoro.

His whole body was covered in bandages and he was suffering from a life-threatening injury, but Metoro was still alive.

Most likely, after that fall, he had pretended to die while following Gaara around the whole time in order to take his revenge and indict this scandal.

“I knew you were following me,” Gaara said, “I just didn’t want you to know that I knew.”

Scattering sand during their break, as well as scattering the sand during his large techniques while fighting Shigezane, they were all for this purpose. Thanks to being able to sense things through his sand, Gaara had been able to roughly pinpoint Metoro’s location as he watched Gaara, Hakuto and the rest.

And then just a while ago, Gaara had decided that rather than waiting for Metoro to launch a surprise attack, it would be better if he pierced him while pretending he was subject to Shijima’s doujutsu.

“Was it Toujuurou who instigated you?” Gaar asked.

Metoro’s body seized up with a jolt. That was answer enough.

The taciturn shinobi seemed to have finally realised that he had been the one who had been drawn into a trap.

“So, it was him after all,” Gaara said. “He intended to instigate Hakuto, draw me away from the village, make up a scandal and then premeditatedly kill me. It’s just what an elder would think of.”

“I’ll take...revenge...for my brother...!” Metoro kept persistently trying to move his body.

He let out a scream when Gaara’s sand enwrapped him.

He was still under the influence of Shijima’s doujutsu, so being in in control was hard. But, when it came to simply imploding the sand and crushing someone, it didn’t require much effort.

In one instant, Metoro’s body had disappeared without so much as a bone left behind.

“Ah, ahh...”

After witnessing such an overwhelming sight right in front of their eyes, Shijima, and Hakuto and Shigezane too, had already lost their fighting spirit.

This was what the Kazekage was.

He'd taken on two jounin opponents, on top of that, he endured Shijima's doujutsu while injured, and in the midst of all that, he killed another hidden jounin.

His talent, his strength, his fighting experience. He exceeded them in everything.

Just who did we pick a fight with?

As dawn approached in that moment, under the desert sky, Gaara was the exact embodiment of a god of death in human form.

Gaara picked up Shijima's glasses from the dirty ground, wiped them, and put them back on her face.

The sand restraining Shijima relaxed, and let her loose.

Then, he turned back to Hakuto and Shijima.

"Gaara-sama..."

Hakuto and Shijima weren't attempting to hide their feelings anymore. They held hands, looking at Gaara with facial expressions that expected the worst.

"..."

Sand slowly wrapped around the pair.

"Stop, please stop!" Shijima threw herself to cling at Gaara's body, "It's already...the winner of the battle is already clear. There isn't anyone watching, either."

"I told you, Shijima." Gaara replied, "I can't turn a blind eye to runaway-nin. And Hakuto and Shigezane don't want to return to the village."

And, more than anything, Gaara didn't want Hakuto to return to the village and become a caged bird again, much less be forced into becoming his wife.

It wasn't because he thought she was a bad person.

Rather, it was the opposite.

It was because it was the opposite, that Gaara couldn't swallow the idea of forcing her back.

"People who are swallowed in my sand...not even a bone will be left of them." Gaara said, "The Sand Waterfall Funeral sends people to the other side without even the slightest pain."

His sand began to wrap around them but-

"Being straightforward, and never going back on our word. That's **our** ninja way...!"

That was true.

Gaara's promise to protect Hakuto hadn't been a lie.

"Ah..."

At that moment, Shijima clearly saw it:

Hakuto was smiling.

Her little sister was smiling like they she going to be released.

It wasn't because she'd given up.

It was because she had faith.

It was the same thing that had happened when she, Shijima, hadn't killed Gaara.

Hakuto had seen that warm something inside Gaara's eyes.

Those eyes that made people trust him.

And so, that day, all Shijima had to do was see her off her little sister.

The entire village of Sunagakure was now already under the control of Kankurou's subordinates.

Toujuurou was very, very satisfied with the reports streaming in from the monitors and communications systems. He was nodding to himself in satisfaction.

"Alright, and now, all that's left...Maizuru. Go and arrest Kankurou."

"Pardon?" As expected, Maizuru looked surprised.

"It's obvious, isn't it? We can't let the leader of a Coup get away."

Toujuurou said, "Arrest him, and exile the rest of the members of the Kazekage clan. And then, after that, we just need to make you the Kazekage, and the reform will be complete."

"You tricked Kankurou-sama?"

"It's nothing new for shinobi to use every trick up their sleeve. Sometimes, you have to trick your allies, too. Although, in this case, you couldn't really call me that guys ally...Either way, this is a fitting stage for an old-fashioned puppeteer like him."

"Isn't it just?"

Suddenly, Maizuru's body **crumbled**.

His limbs, his neck, his abdomen, they all crumbled into pieces and fell to the floor along with his clothes.

"Wha-," Toujuurou stuttered, "Wha- wha- what-"

"What's this about, you ask?" A relaxed voice came out of the darkness. A shape was moving in the shadows.

White face. Red markings.

Kankurou.

"Im-impossible," Toujuurou was stunned.

The monitors were clearly showing that Kankurou was taking control in the Kazekage office.

But, the Kankurou in front of him wasn't a genjutsu. He wasn't supposed to be here. No matter how old he was, they shouldn't be able to trick a jounin's eyes.

“Obviously, it’s not a genjutsu.” Kankurou said.

“Puppets...?!?”

“Bingo.” Kankurou gave a sly, wide grin. “Thanks to the reports about that group from the moon, I got a lot of new ideas. I used threads too thin to see with the human eye, and suckered you in with a long distance puppet manipulation technique. There never was a shinobi named Maizuru. You were having a ball talking to my puppet this whole time. Thanks to that, I was able to collect plenty of evidence and testimonies on you.”

“A jutsu I don’t know...you say...?!?”

Toujuurou was backing away.

He was feeling something he had forgotten about for a long time: fear.

“Th-then Gaara as well...?”

“Obviously, he knew about it from the start.” Kankurou said, “If he didn’t how do you think I could’ve gotten made such good fake videos?”

“Fake...!? Then, it is a ninjutsu...?”

“It’s more science and technology than a ninjutsu. Though we do have to use lightning release to power it.” Kankurou said, and then snapped his fingers with a theatrical flair.

Amagi appeared from behind him, and restrained Toujuurou.

“As for your forces at the oasis,” Kankurou continued, “Temari’s contacted me to let know that Baki’s crushed them completely. In a word, I guess you could call this checkmate, huh?”

“Times have changed...is that what it is.” Toujuurou heartbrokenly hung his head.

He hadn’t been able to admit it.

Time had passed, and people had changed. Ninjutsu he didn’t know had been created, shinobi he didn’t know had been born.

That was certainly because he was old.

“...I won’t resist.” Toujuurou said, “I understand it now.”

“Understand what?”

“That Sunagakure is heading out to meet a new future. I always kept looking back at the sight of the previous Kazekage’s back, so I never noticed how you were all growing behind me....I’d intended to make Gaara the Kazekage and manipulate him but this is how everything turned out...But,you know,” Toujuurou lifted his eyes sharply, fire burning within, “One day, you too will feel the sting of time’s passing. One day, new shinobi are going to surpass you as well.”

“Well you know,” Kankurou clapped a hand on Amagi’s back, a big, proud grin on his face, “I’m really looking forward to that!”

Ten or so shinobi had collapsed around Baki’s feet.

They were all Toujuurou’s subordinates. Every single one of them had arrived with the intention of aiming for Gaara’s life.

And every single one of them had bowed down to the earth thanks to Baki’s sword.

To think that Gaara would even play dumb in front of me to pull of a trap...

He didn’t feel the slightest bit angry about being left in the dark.

Rather, he was happy.

The era was really changing.

Fourth...it looks like my job is finally over.

Baki started seriously considering the old offer people had repeatedly giving him to be inaugurated as a counsellor.

“Alright,” the Konoha shinobi who’d been staying in the shade of a rock came out into the open, “It’s over.”

“Finally.” Gaara replied.

Shijima recognised the Konoha shinobi’s face too. She’d seen his photo in documents.

Nara Shikamaru.

He was the fiancée of Gaara's sister, Temari.

It went without being said he was also the recipient of the letter that Gaara had entrusted to Temari.

"Good grief..." Shikamaru grumbled, "You call people out to help you at every little thing. It looks like I've gotten myself a troublesome little brother."

Shikamaru scratched his forehead, his face so relaxed that you'd never think he was an authority over at the Shinobi Union.

Shikamaru had been the one to rescue Temari back at the battle at the venue of Gaara's marriage meeting. He had also received Gaara's letter from Temari, and started making preparations. It also went without being said that Gaara's letter had anticipated trouble and asked for his help.

"You'd been watching over my marriage meeting right from the start, hadn't you?" Gaara replied, "So that makes us even, elder brother."

"Tch..." Shikamaru must've been holding himself back a lot during his hidden surveillance, because he took out a cigarette and started smoking. "The runaway-nin Shigezane, attacked and killed Lady Hakuto. You Gaara, killed Shigezane in return, and mourned for the Lady's loss...well, it'll be sufficient if we keep the story like that."

"Your quick-thinking has been very helpful."

"It's a common story." Shikamaru said, exhaling. The white tobacco smoke drifted up into the morning sky. "The minute I heard what was happening from Temari, I guessed something like this could be the cause."

"The Sand Waterfall Funeral doesn't leave anything, even bones, behind. That, along with your testimony about what you saw 'happen' from where you were watching, brother, will make sure that nobody objects." Gaara said, "...And, after that, if two new shinobi came to exist Konoha, that wouldn't have anything to do with me."

"It definitely wouldn't." Shikamaru replied to Gaara's words with a broad grin.

"Ah..." Shijima looked like she was near tears.

It was because she could definitely see the two people moving under Gaara's sand.

The sand was simply wrapped around them to hide them from plain sight.

"This is an old tactic of subterfuge," Gaara said, "I'm a little embarrassed for you to see it."

"Established strategies are things to be used when the circumstances call for them," Shikamaru replied. "There isn't anyone in the Houki tribe who's seen Hakuto's face without makeup, so that won't be a problem. We will have to change Shigezane's face a little bit though."

"Since that's so, we'll leave that to Hakuto."

"That's true."

"And if you can, take Hakuto to my sister...to see Temari. The customs and ways of life in Konohagakure and Sunagakure are different. Hakuto will feel relieved to have someone she knows around."

"I get it already, I get it. I won't do anything poorly, you know." Shikamaru said, quickly turning around.

That was his way of saying 'leave everything else to me'.

"Let's go, Shijima." Gaara said.

"Eh..."

Shijima didn't know how to answer.

I'm a betrayed, so won't I be erased? No matter what, that thought hadn't been erased from her head.

It wasn't that she didn't trust Gaara.

It was just that she hadn't ever known a world other than the kind where traitors were gotten rid of, she she honestly didn't know how to behave towards Gaara.

"....."

Gaara looked at Shijima's state for several seconds, and then scratched his head like he was troubled.

He suddenly noticed that Shikamaru was constantly sneaking peaks towards him and Shijima, with a strangely delighted grin on his face. It looked like hearing gossip had made him curious.

Gaara sighed, and kept talking.

“What’s wrong? You’ve achieved your mission,” he said, “Returning to the oasis before sunrise.”

“Is that really okay?”

“The ‘truth’ is what we’ve just stated earlier. If I were to get rid of you here, it would contradict that ‘truth’.” Gaara’s tone wasn’t cold. Rather, his words were warm. “Sunagakure needs shinobi like you from now on, too.”

“...Yes, sir.” Shijima took off her glasses, bowed with her eyes closed, and then, once more, looked at him from behind her sealed and closed eyes.”From now on, I’d like to serve the Kazekage, if I could. I’ll stake my life.”

“I’ll be relying on you.”

Gaara said only that as a reply, and leapt onwards.

Shijima leapt forwards too, following him.

After watching the pair head off in clouds of dust, Shikamaru had a satisfied look on his face as he started his work to break through the sand barrier that was hiding Hakuto and Shigezane so the two could get out.

“It’s finally over, huh.”

The three siblings were standing on a hill that overlooked all of Suna, watching over the village that had finally regained its serenity.

Processing the uproar after the coup had gone fairly smoothly.

Kankurou had ordered his subordinates to suppress any other elders who sympathised with Toujuurou, so in a way, it felt like an infection had been purged.

After that, Gaara had just silently carried out the village's law. Toujuurou and the rest had acquired names and been driven out of the village's centre.

"Ugh man, I really wanna sleep." There were bags under Kankurou's eyes that had nothing to do with his makeup. He'd spent his time after the fake coup constantly giving orders to his subordinates.

"You're not going to say something Shikamaru-like?" Temari asked.

The face that Kankurou made was so hilarious that Temari pointed and let out a laugh. Gaara gave a small smile too.

Something about the three siblings' smiling faces looked alike.

Bloodlines may be chains that tie people down.

But, they were also bonds.

Even if they separated, they were still siblings, and he was gaining a new brother. And before long, a nephew, a niece, he would be able to go and meet new family members like that, too.

"You two don't ever change, do you?" Gaara noted.

"Che." Kankurou grumbled.

"Fufu, could be." Temari replied.

There were many things that changed. But, there were also things that didn't change.

Like the desert, Gaara thought.

The wind was constantly blowing in the desert he'd been born in, creating new forms all the time. But, it was still the desert.

Gaara believed that they would be like that, as well.

Shinobi are those who endure.

They endure absurdity. They endure hardships. They keep fighting.

And, shinobi prevail under the most impossible of circumstances.

Even if swords rain down on them, their spirits never disappear.

That was enduring.

That was a shinobi.

And that, was Gaara.

And that was why from now on as well, the wind that blew over Sunagakure was always kind.

Translator's Notes:

*So, after puzzling over the term 'raisha' literally 'lightning/thunder cars' for almost the whole novel, i finally figured out what it meant. Train in Japanese is densha 'electric car'. The Nardy universe probs uses lightning instead of electricity. Hence, lightning/thunder car = electric car = lightning train = ELECTRIC TRAIN! I admit I'm a bit sheepish as to how long it took me to figure that out lol.

**Some of you might've noticed that the other chapter I made a few typos on Maizuru's name (in my defence I was sleepy, but I apparently wrote Maizuru and Maijuru in rotation lol) but yeah, the correct version's Maizuru. Apologies for that XD

And, here's an extra explanation for anyone who missed out the clues that resulted in that AWESOME TWIST.

Remember the 'unexpected ally' who saved Temari in chapter three? We thought it was Shijima because she said Temari told her to go help, BUT NO, IT WAS SHIKAMARU. Shikamaru who is apparently such a worrywort over his brother in law he was secretly keeping an eye on the marriage meeting the whole time just like Temari wow you two wow. Match made in heaven X'D So yeah, Shikamaru saved Temari from collapsing, and he probably helped her get back to her senses before she went looking for Shijima and asked her for help.

Second, the letter Gaara entrusted Temari with wAS FOR SHIKAMARU. That's why she made the 'you've gotten to understand some things' comment because sHE KNEW HE KNEW SHIKAMARU WAS THERE, MY DAYS.

Third, the comment Gaara made about 'having to decieve a trust ally' wAS ABOUT BAKI. BECAUSE GAARA WAS IN ON THE PLOT WITH KANKUROU THE WHOLE FREAKING TIME.

I'm just. smh. SMH THAT TWIST WAS BRILLIANT.

And, since there seem to be a few people who were confused about this, Gaara stopped his sand waterfall funeral technique at the last moment, and wrapped the sand around Hakuto and Shigezane to hide them from plain sight instead. His conversation with Shikamaru was about sneaking Hakuto and Shigezane into Konoha so they could live there from now on, while telling everyone in Suna that they'd 'died'.