

Out For Karma: Naruto

#Chapter 01: A story always starts somewhere - Read Out For Karma: Naruto Chapter 01: A story always starts somewhere

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Konohagakure, the village hidden in the leaves. More often than not simply called 'Konoha' if not always.

Konoha. The very first shinobi village created in the whole continent of the Element Nations. Born out of the blue or to be more specific out of a miracle. Enemy shinobi clans stopping their blood feud to make peace and break the cycle of war? During a time where war was all around and considered the most bloody times of recorded history? So bloody that they called it the 'Era of the Warring States'?

Miracle. Yes, the word was fitting.

In a time where the life expectancy was around fifteen, where children below ten were sent on the front to murder and be murdered, two men said: 'No, no more'.

Senju Hashirama and Uchiha Madara, leader of their own respective clans, agreed to peace despite incommensurable loss due to the other's clan. From clansmen and women to direct family. They simply got tired of seeing their young ones die for nothing. They got tired of the pain, of the hatred and of the grief.

Fortunately for them they were, perhaps, the two strongest shinobi in a world where strength meant everything. That helped in the birth of Konoha. A haven for allied shinobi that wanted peace. That wanted their children to live and reach adulthood and have happy lives. Of course it wasn't so simple. The alliance of the two most powerful clans put fear in other clans all across the globe. Some joined them, some, geographically too far or simply not interested in what the two men were selling, made their own villages.

Over time, many things happened. Among them? Three Shinobi World War. And everytime Konoha came out on top. Sometimes easily, sometimes not so much and sometimes barely to the point that it couldn't really be said they won the war. Not when they send children to fight in them and betraying the very fundamental, the very philosophy on which Konohagakure had been built on.

The Will of Fire.

The compulsion to fight, to defend your home, to protect the younger generations so they could know peace. It was what pushed the Shinobi of the leaf, as they were called by their enemies when they were 'nice', to go past their limits and vanquish their opponents.

Regardless, the Will of Fire had been betrayed but everyone understood why and conveniently ignored it. The last war had been so bad that they had to enlist children into the shinobi corps after a grueling but short training. No one would deny that. Ninja were pragmatics first and dreamers or idealists second. If they were not, they would die pretty quickly.

Still, a shinobi village needed shinobi. That was why Senju Tobirama, little brother of Senju Hashirama, had created the Ninja School or more commonly called the 'Academy'. It had been more of a necessity than anything else but it has proven very useful and the right thing to do. Children, from clans or civilian backgrounds, were all taught the same ninja arts. That created a cohesion among the shinobi forces that triumphed over any hidden village willing to pick a fight with Konoha. So much that those same hidden villages had created their own academy too in the end.

Located at the very base of the Hokage mountain, where the face of every leader, every Hokage, had been carved into the very stone, the academy was currently hosting multiple classes of children from eight to twelve years old. One particular class, looked at with scrutiny by most of the higher ups of the village because of the number of clan heirs in it, was outside in the training yard practicing the shinobi arts of hand to hand combat. Taijutsu.

"Winner: Riku!"

The voice of the academy instructor, Umino Iruka, had been loud, clear and firm in presenting the result of the taijutsu spar that had happened under his eyes and every one of his students', watching from outside the sparring ring. Multiple girlish cries of outrage and insults were heard at the results and sent towards the young boy that had just won.

From the above average height of his twelve years old body, Warudo Riku looked down on his sprawled on his back opponent. With his gray blue eyes and through the bangs of his dirty blond hair, Riku observed Uchiha Sasuke, holding his bloody broken nose

with one hand. The hatred and murder in the loser's eyes couldn't be missed by any one who was paying attention, meaning everyone but the fan girls.

As Riku released his tiger stance, he made the sign of reconciliation with his hands. A sign indicating that, despite the spar, they were still comrades. Regardless of what one truly thought of their opponent, it was a tradition and would be seen disapprovingly if not respected. Especially in Riku's case. He couldn't afford to not be the perfect model student in front of a military superior even though he loathed the Uchiha with every fiber of his being and never considered him a comrade.

Anyone that knew of Riku's life up until now would simply say 'that was expected of him to think like that.' After all, Uchiha Sasuke had almost everything going for him. He was the heir of one of the founding and strongest clans of the village, rather handsome, smarter than average and had a lot of potential in the Shinobi arts. The mass slaughter of his whole clan four years prior by his older brother, leaving only him alive, had attracted the sympathy and support of the most influential people that sucked up to him in the hope of gaining favor.

In simple terms, Uchiha Sasuke was the 'tragic prince' of Konoha and everyone kissed his ass. Especially the fan girls in the academy who were more interested in being the next Matriarch of the Uchiha clan than being a proper Kunoichi. Many of them were there because their parents subtly pushed them to be, in the hope they would catch the eye of the heir of one of the most wealthy and influential families since the founding of Konohagakure.

Riku on the other hand?

Riku had nothing. Nothing but a bad reputation for something that wasn't even his doing but of his mother. Chunin Warudo Sora was caught as a spy for Orochimaru, one of the most infamous traitors of the Leaf village, when Riku was five. Orochimaru, former beloved student of the current Hokage, Sarutobi Hiruzen, had been caught nearly a decade prior doing illegal and monstrous experiments on kidnapped children and escaped the village. To say that anything or anyone related to him was treated harshly was an understatement.

When Sora was executed for treason, her husband, Kaito, had taken his own life without a spare thought for their son since he hung himself right in front of him.

As a result Riku became an orphan at five, dealing with the fallout of his parents' passing and actions by his lonesome. With people constantly looking at him with scorn or loathing as if he was the one responsible, growing up had not been easy. The caretakers at the orphanage he ended up at, had not been nice to him and turned the other children away making him some kind of a pariah. They had not been verbally or physically abusive in any way but that did plenty of damage to the traumatized young boy.

The consequences were drastic. If any semblance of childhood could have been salvaged had Riku received proper support, it was now gone. He understood very quickly that the world was against him and he could either fight it or follow in his asshole of a father's footsteps.

That had been an easy choice for the young boy. He would fight and he would make all the villagers look down in shame once he was at the top. The only way for him to do that was to become the Hokage. The most respected and revered person in the whole village. That meant he needed to become a shinobi and become the best. The first step happened when he turned six. He had unlocked his chakra which allowed him to start 'training'.

Training.

A big word for what he actually did. He didn't learn any jutsu at all from any of the three main schools of the shinobi arts. How could he when every book about them was under key in the village library? Simple, he could not. What he could do however was observe. He watched with a laser focus attention some of the academy students' practice sessions as he passed near the academy from time to time. He didn't bother with anything practical, like taijutsu or shuriken jutsu. There was no point, they were beginners practitioners and trying to imitate them when they were learning themselves would have been the height of foolishness. Any mistakes they made, he would have made, believing he did right. He could have watched the instructors but that would have meant spending more time in his spying and that was unsafe.

No, what Riku trained in was chakra control. At first he practiced the basic and first exercise: sticking a leaf on his forehead for a minute. Once the exercise was completed and above all mastered, he gave himself another challenge that was a bit harder. Two leaves, then three. Then more leaves but on other parts of his body, then making them spin in one way then the other, then both ways with different leaves. So on and so on. He never stopped training how to manipulate his chakra.

That wasn't technically the only thing he did though. Chakra was the combination of spiritual and physical energy so he had to fill his head with knowledge and keep his body in shape. He didn't do anything too strenuous; again, he was six. It was more than enough to be ready for the academy when he turned eight. Far more than students from a civilian background. More than students from a regular shinobi background. Slightly more than all the clan heir that was in his class.

The moment he began his school days, he gave it his all. Physically, mentally, he trained and studied at the limit of exhaustion. More and he would have simply hurt himself. Such dedication to his goal to become Hokage left very little time to make friends. Not like he could have. Parents had been clear with their children about staying away from him. He had expected that after the two years spent at the orphanage and walking down the streets of the village. That was nothing new.

What was new however was the clear favoritism he had been confronted with. Riku had aced all his written tests. Came first in all the practical ones. Yet, for three consecutive years he had come second. Second behind none other than Uchiha Sasuke. He had caught on pretty quickly the bias of the instructors against him when the results of the mid-term exam came in. His score had been lower than what he actually was. He had protested to his sensei at the time but was rebuffed and threatened with expulsion from the shinobi program if he insisted. The rage he had felt at that moment had been immeasurable but he didn't let it out, instead he channeled it to train, not harder but smarter. As an academy student he was allowed to visit and read books on the shinobi arts of his level at the Library. There wasn't much, he learned everything he could. After all it was the basics and strong asics were the fundamentals of a good ninja. Without them he would be just like the dead last of the class: a failure.

Fortunately for Riku in this last year of the academy, his new instructor had proven himself to be a fair man. He wasn't interested in wealth or in favors. Only in making sure that his students were trained properly to become outstanding leaf-nin. There was no favoritism. There was no discreetly kissing Konoha's tragic prince's ass. As such, Riku was not second but first. On his way to be the Rookie of the year next week at the final exam.

And that pissed the emo prince more than anything in the world.

Because he had everything, either from his clans or from the sycophants that wanted to use him, Sasuke had started to have a huge ego. Thinking that he was the best and everyone was beneath him. That a clanless orphan loser kept on beating him enraged him to no end. In his eyes, Riku should be just like the other clanless orphan loser of the class: Uzumaki Naruto. It should be someone that no one cared about and that wouldn't amount to anything above mediocrity. That if he died, nobody would shed a tear or even have a thought about him.

That was why the Uchiha looked with pure hatred at his opponent.

Forgoing the sign of reconciliation and leaving the ring, Sasuke went to the infirmary to have his nose fixed. Not caring one bit about Iruka's reprimand for breaking tradition. It took Riku all he had to not smile smugly at the retreating back of the defeated heir.

"Alright, that's it for today. Remember to study for the final exam this Friday."

Iruka's words indicated the end of the day and most students went back to the classroom to take their school bags in a rush to get out of there as fast as possible. Riku ignored the murderous stare of Sasuke's fangirls, especially Yamanaka Ino, and made his way back leisurely.

"Riku."

Stopping in his tracks on the spot. The dirty blond turned around to look at his sensei.

“Yes, Sensei? Do you need anything?”

“Was it really necessary to break his nose?” the chunin instructor inquired with his eyebrows furrowed.

“Was it necessary for him to look down on me because of my situation?” Riku asked back and went on before Iruka could say a single word. “ For the first three years he’s been sabotaged by unprofessional instructors, giving him an ego too big for his own good. This year, despite your fairness, he learned nothing about it. Sensei, there comes a time when you need to punch someone in the face to wake them up to reality. It’s better for him to be put in his place right now than in the field where he could get killed or worse get his teammates killed.”

“... That’s true.” the man agreed. “But you won’t convince me that you didn’t take pleasure in doing the punching yourself.”

“I won’t even try, sensei. You’re right and I’m not going to lie about it.” he replied with a shrug. “There is also nothing wrong with that.”

“Some would say you are vindictive.”

“Some would say I’m retaliatory and Sasuke is the vindictive one. I never went after him, nor cared what he did as long as he left me alone. You can’t say the same about him. I worked hard to prove that I’m the best by improving myself and not by putting down others to feel better about myself. Can you really blame me for taking satisfaction in clocking the face of the one that bullied me for the past year because his fragile ego couldn’t take the fact that I was better? Can you say that you never did the same thing?”

Letting a tired sigh escape his mouth, Iruka shook his head which made Riku smile.

“No. I unfortunately can’t.”

“Besides, it’s just a broken nose, sensei. If he can’t deal with that when he’s three days away to become a shinobi then maybe despite all his talent he shouldn’t become one.”

“...You’re way too mature for your age, Riku.”

“I know. Not really my fault. It was either maturing fast or being a second Naruto. That was an easy choice.”

“Naruto is not a bad kid.” Iruka defended his favorite student with a bit of steel in his voice.

“Never said he was. He’s quite the good guy in my opinion. He’s just an idiot.” Riku replied and quickly added up some more words. “Not in the sense that his IQ is low. Quite the contrary, his pranks are very clever after all. I meant in the sense that... he’s ignorant, knows about it and does nothing to correct it. In my opinion, Naruto has the

greatest potential by far of everyone in class and he wastes it because to him the lectures are either boring, not flashy enough or 'lame'. The worst is that he's too bullheaded and prideful to admit he's wrong and change, persevering in... whatever it is he's doing. Yes, he never gives up and that is an admirable trait, I commend him for that but never giving up on crippling yourself is just idiotic."

With that said, Riku entered the classroom and fetched his bag. Coming out, he thanked Iruka for the lessons of the day, wished him a good evening and left. All the while the chunin looked at the back of the best of his students in contemplation, thinking about his words concerning Naruto. They were not wrong. His favorite student would be rookie of the year instead of dead last had he applied himself on the right things. In his opinion, Naruto wasn't ready to become a shinobi. He was too immature. Too much of a child still. Yet He hoped that this Friday he would finally pass the academy exam and become a genin. A jounin-sensei would do the sun kissed blond a lot of good and give him the almost undivided attention that he needed. Something that Iruka couldn't do with twenty eight students.

He did wonder how two young kids, treated the same by the village, could become so different. Sure they didn't share the same burden but the similarities between the two were uncanny. How they didn't become the best of friends, bonding over their unfortunate lives was beyond him.

Chapter 02: Team selection

Sarutobi Hiruzen, sandaime Hokage, was silently smoking his pipe sitting at his desk. At his side was Iruka with the file of every graduating student in his hands. Among them was the file of one Uzumaki Naruto who after the events of two days ago had been promoted to genin despite having failed the ninjutsu portion of the academy final exam which was an instant disqualification.

By a chain of fortunate and unfortunate circumstances, Naruto had been tricked by Iruka's assistant instructor, Mizuki, into stealing the Scroll of seals. A scroll that listed a fairly good amount of jutsu considered forbidden because too dangerous. From raising the dead to the summoning of the Shinigami itself, that was not the kind of knowledge that should be let out in the open.

Mizuki, who turned out to be a traitor working for Orochimaru (Hiruzen's greatest failure), had been defeated by Naruto and his use of Kage Bunshin. Solid chakra constructs which chakra's requirement was so big that it was usually only taught to Jonin if they asked for it. Naruto had not only learned the jutsu in an hour by reading the scroll of seals (a miracle considering he failed to make a single normal clone during his test), but also made a hundred of them when the average Jonin could only make half a dozen at best before chakra exhaustion.

That was mind boggling to everyone in the know but not much of a surprise. Naruto, being an Uzumaki, had massive chakra reserves to begin with. Adding to them, the

Kyubi's chakra dripping into the boy's reserves and expanding them from the day the Yondaime had sealed the nine-tailed fox into the new born Naruto and you got a chakra monster that the king of pranks of Konoha was.

Such a feat, along with the success of making at least one clone (one of the higher tier at that) and defeating Mizuki made Iruka pass Naruto as a genin of the leaf. A decision that had been accepted by Hiruzen without a second thought.

While the old shinobi leader was proud of the achievement of his surrogate grandson, it brought up a problem. Twenty eight students had graduated and only twenty seven of them could be placed in a team with a Jonin sensei. Teams were made of three members. Not two nor four. That meant that one student would be left out and sent to the genin corps. The place where freshly promoted academy students went if they were good enough to be a genin but not good enough for the Jonin sensei they have been assigned to. There was the possibility of a Jonin taking an apprentice which would mean that two of the graduates would in theory be left to rot in the genin corps where they would have to fend for themselves.

Unfortunately an apprenticeship was rare. Very, very rare. A student must be really exceptional in the particular ninja arts that a Jonin wanted to transmit, to be picked as an apprentice. And so far, from what Iruka had told him of the graduating class and from his reports, Hiruzen saw only two that would fit the bill.

The first one was Warudo Riku. An exceptional student from a mix of shinobi and civilian background. Real rookie of the year for four consecutive years and with talent and potential that Hiruzen had only seen four times in his life. One was Orochimaru, one was his own successor, Namikaze Minato and Yondaime Hokage. The third had been Hatake Kakashi, the Yondaime's own prized student and the fourth had been Uchiha Itachi, heir of the Uchiha Clan and elder brother of Sasuke.

Out of the four, only Minato had amounted to anything. Orochimaru was a traitor, Kakashi was a mentally cripple individual because of his past, despite being his best jonin and the best candidate so far to replace him as Hokage and Itachi had slaughtered his whole clan leaving behind only his little brother. While he had made peace with his student's betrayal, Itachi's fate still left a bitter taste in his mouth and he couldn't help himself but curse Danzo for being the reason for said fate.

Warudo Riku could have graduated years ago if not for the simple bias of his instructors refusing to let him take the test. When Iruka showed him both his file, Naruto's and Sasuke's, eight months prior, he immediately sacked the three chunin of the previous years, put a black mark on their file and assigned them administrative tasks, usually done by genins, for the next two years as punishment. There was no place for bias in a military institution. Inflating the already big ego of Sasuke because of his clan's name and putting down brilliant students because of what they contained or the crime of their parents was unacceptable when the students were way too young to understand or be part of any of it.

It could be acceptable however when it was about taking an apprentice. Because of his mother, no jonin in their right mind would offer an apprenticeship to Riku. Not because they believe he's guilty by association but because he's a career and political landmine. Had Riku been part of a clan no one would have looked too closely and the stigma would have not been as harsh. Unfortunately he wasn't.

Sasuke on the other hand was, except the reports from Iruka had been worrying. The 'Last Uchiha' as people called him, had no ties whatsoever to anyone in the village. No ties usually meant no loyalty. And considering the young genin's unhealthy obsession in killing his brother to avenge his clan, Uchiha Sasuke was currently the biggest flight risk in the whole village. Giving him an apprenticeship would simply push him to learn everything he needed then desert Konoha to reach his goal once he thought he was strong enough. That wouldn't do, especially when he was the last surviving member of one of the founding clans. His family name alone carried power and Konoha couldn't waste it. The loss of the Senju was enough, the village didn't need to lose the Uchiha too.

The few politically clueless jonin that wanted to take the boy as an apprentice were not ordered but strongly dissuaded to give up on the idea once the situation was explained to them. Uchiha Sasuke needed to make bonds, to have ties with the village and to do that he needed to be put on a genin team.

As a result, the two students who should be eligible for an apprenticeship were not. Which still left him with the one odd student. Looking at the gathering of Jonin in his office, Hiruzen waited for them to make a choice. All were reading, passing around one or two copies of the students file, that would be destroyed once the teams were set. It has been going for three hours. The future teachers, speaking and arguing between each other about a potential composition for a team or another or about the students themselves. It all came to a stop when a familiar shinobi with silver gravity defying hair, a baklava and his head protector covering his left eye, entered his office with a shushin. An orange book for adults in hand, he lazily went to Hiruzen.

"Good to see you join us, Kakashi." Hiruzen greeted, not even bothering anymore with noting aloud his three hours lateness. "Have you made a decision?"

"I'll go with tradition, Hokage-sama. The rookie of the year, the kunoichi of the year and the dead last." he announced with an eye-smile.

"I would have thought you would have taken Sasuke in your team." answered Hiruzen knowing perfectly well that Riku was the rookie. He just wanted to pay back a bit at Kakashi for his tardiness. It was petty but he was old and he didn't care.

"... Sasuke isn't the rookie of the year?" he said in a contained surprise.

"No. Warudo Riku is. In fact he's been it for their whole time at the academy. Some idiots thought it wise to falsify some reports to show otherwise."

“Then I’ll break tradition, and take the dead last, the kunoichi of the year and Sasuke.”

The simple and obvious tone the man used, disappointed the Hokage a bit. The latter could not however begrudge the former. He knew that Kakashi wanted to recreate his own team and this time make it successful. He understood that but nonetheless he had hoped that Kakashi would take Riku in his team. From what Iruka had reported, Naruto and Sasuke absolutely couldn't stand each other though the latter hated Riku.

Naruto and Riku’s relationship on the other hand was one sided. Naruto couldn’t stand Riku out of understandable jealousy. Despite the same circumstances, Naruto was dead last while Riku was at the top. Riku just didn’t care about Naruto but wouldn’t mind helping him if the sun kissed blond would simply change his attitude for the better.

In the end Kakashi chose Sasuke. Some would argue that it was better that way because Kakashi would be able to teach him how to use his sharingan, the Uchiha’s kekkei genkai, yet there was no sharingan in sight. Not only that but not all Uchiha ever activated it and while Sasuke had both parents and his older brother who had unlocked it, it wasn’t a sure thing for him even if the odds were high.

“Very well, your choice is noted.” announced Hiruzen, taking a puff of his pipe.

Kakashi nodded and went to the side, to lean against a wall while reading his porn. The only reason he didn’t leave was because someone else may ask for one or more of the students he had selected and he would defend his position.

One by one, the Jonin came forward with their desire after agreeing between each other. Hiruzen held another sigh of disappointment when he saw some of the team and by which jonin they were made. He cursed himself that at that moment, the law forbade him to assign the team himself. To his side Iruka was frowning more than slightly.

“I’m surprised none of you are taking the Rookie of the Year. Since I know better, I won’t entertain the idea that it’s because of his mother’s doing. You’re all jonin, such a reason is beneath you. That leaves me clueless, I admit, as to why then.” said the Hokage.

His gaze swiped over the entirety of jonin present in the room. None dared to speak until Shiranui Gemma, senbon in mouth, spoke up.

“Out of the 28, only ten will make it to genin at best, Hokage-sama. Two third of them left would be sent back to the academy because they’re not good enough and the last third sent to the genin corps. While I will give my team a fair shot, like everyone here I believe...” he announced and the others jonin nodded in agreement. “I expect them to fail. The only ones who will probably make it are the nine those three chose.” he added pointing at Kakashi, Yuhi Kurenai and Sarutobi Asuma, the Sandaime's own son. “That leaves Warudo on his lonesome. Even if I switch him with a member of my team it wouldn’t change a thing and he would still end up in the corps. Taking him as an apprentice is just asking for trouble.”

Hiruzen sighed at that and dismissed his subordinate with a sign of the hand. "Not the three of you."

Knowing perfectly well their military chief was addressing them, the three that had been singled out by Genma, stayed behind.

"What about you? What's your reasons?" the Hokage asked.

"The Ino-Shika-Cho combo needs to continue. It's too good to break it." Asuma replied.

"He's unsuited in the tracker team that I envision." Kurenai answered for her part.

Both Hiruzen and Iruka knew it was bullshit but they waited for Kakashi's answer.

"He's probably never going to amount much of anything. His father was a civilian, his mother an average chunin. Statistics show that in cases like those more often than not it's stagnation at chunin. I believe the students I chose **will** reach a higher rank than that and be more useful for the village."

That was a well structured answer that couldn't be denied. At least easily. Looking at Iruka, Hiruzen invited him to offer a counter argument.

"Permission to speak freely despite the rank, Hokage-sama?" requested the chunin.

"Granted."

"Thank you. Yuhi-san, I will start with you. The only reason you're making this team is because it's the only combination that would allow you to have Hinata under your care without disrupting the two other teams that your colleagues want to make. That you want to make a tracking team when not being a tracking expert yourself is... Astonishing."

He was about to say more when Asuma rudely interrupted him.

"Now, wait a damn minute! You're just a chunin, what would you know about the intricacies of being a jonin sensei?"

"I will take care of you in a moment Sarutobi-san, no need to skip in line." was the harsh answer delivered by the Academy instructor, not even bothering to look at his superior.

That answer nearly made Hiruzen choke on the puff of smoke he was drawing from his pipe. Even Kakashi lowered his book to look at Iruka in surprise and that was a big deal for the people who were familiar with the man. Iruka wasn't done with Kurenai however.

"Added to that is the fact that you're one with the most if not the most expertise in genjutsu in the whole village. An art that neither Hinata, Kiba or Shino will ever delve

into or have an ounce of talent in. What you can teach them is fairly standard and limited, which is not the role of a jonin sensei at all. While I do not doubt your competence to teach them properly, and your dedication, unlike others..." he looked at Kakashi as he said the last part then at Asuma. "You are unfortunately not a best fit for them. A team composed of either Ino or Shikamaru or Sakura as support, Choji, Naruto or Riku as a front liner and either Naruto or Sasuke or Riku as a ninjutsu or genjutsu specialist would have suited you better. The team would have been balanced and two of your charges would have benefited from your mastery of the mind arts."

He stopped there to take a big breath then turned to Asuma.

"First off, let's get this out of the way and make things clear: I'm **just** a chunin because of a debilitating injury that forbids me to go further as a shinobi. You can ask Kakashi-san, we were on the same team during a mission when it happened." at that, the silver-haired pervert nodded. "Furthermore, being a chunin or even a genin doesn't mean that one is less knowledgeable than a jonin. You only need to look at Kosuke Moruboshi to verify what I'm saying is true."

Hiruzen nodded in agreement when he heard the name, knowing the man very well. Kosuke was known by all veterans as the strongest genin that ever lived for a reason. Reason being, he refused all promotions after the death of his teammates. He had been leading the team and a grave error left him as the only survivor. The overwhelming guilt he felt was too strong for him to go past it and move up the rank, not trusting himself to make another mistake just as costly. Regarding Iruka's take on himself, the Hokage agreed too. The man may have had too much compassion in his heart; he did have the potential to reach the rank of Jonin.

"Second, I would appreciate it if you didn't try to demean me because of my rank. When it was clear that I became unable to fulfill the expectations the village had of me, I went to help prepare the next generations by becoming an instructor, making sure I would still be pulling my weight as per the Will of Fire dictates. When you couldn't meet yours, you ran away to play bodyguard in the capital for years."

Hiruzen's pipe nearly dropped from his mouth, with how open it found itself, at the verbal explosive tag the size of the moon that Iruka had thrown at his son. It was all true in Hiruzen's opinion but he wasn't about to say it openly when their relationship was more than strained. Next to Asuma both Kurenai and Kakashi shared the same expression. Incredulity. That was one hell of a tongue lashing delivered with the precision of a medic-nin using chakra scalpel. For his part Asuma's expression was murderous. Unfortunately for the youngest Sarutobi in the room, it wasn't over.

"The Ino-Shika-Cho combo is just a way for you to not take your job seriously. Their fathers will train them to be even better than they are and you will have very little to train them in. What would happen when one of them finds themselves in another team without the two others? How will they learn teamwork with shinobi that are neither a Yamanaka, a Nara or an Akimichi? You're just taking the easy way out. Again. If anything, you'd be

more suited to teach Riku or Naruto as both have wind for an affinity. Sasuke is also an excellent candidate to which you could impart your knowledge of fire ninjutsu and bukijutsu. With your friendly attitude, Shino would be able to develop more socially and make bonds more easily. Your competence with wind chakra and his kikaichu could be deadly and very useful. Lastly, she may have been recently promoted but Yuhi-san is a full-fledged jonin, she's perfectly capable of handling any criticism made toward herself without any one interjecting on her behalf. While well intentioned, that you did so could be interpreted wrongly in another setting by people who aren't aware of her skills or doubt them. Be mindful of that."

That last part almost made Kurenai nod in agreement. She appreciated Asuma coming to her rescue but she was a big girl and could handle anything going her way. That he unnecessarily defended her would reflect badly on her competence as a kunoichi and a jonin. Done with the man, Iruka turned to his final target, Kakashi.

"Kakashi-san. While your reason is good, do I really need to say what both you and Hokage-sama already know about it?"

"Mah... That won't be necessary." the man in question said, waving a hand negatively.

"Thank you, I would have hated to say it. Regarding your team... I'm not going to sugar coat it. It's the most dysfunctional that I have ever seen. Sakura only passed because of the written exam. She has an impressive memory but no creativity at all. She's just text book and nothing else. Her chakra control is nearly perfect only because her reserves are so small. The smallest I have ever seen in a student in fact. She does the bare minimum on everything physical, just enough to be passable. Her fan girl attitude and being hung-ho on Sasuke instead of training seriously..." He turned towards Hiruzen and voiced his verdict on the young graduate. "She, like most girls in her class, should never have graduated or at least not as kunoichi of the year."

"Aren't you a bit harsh on your student?" asked Kakashi.

"I am. For good reasons. Sakura, the way she is now, is going to be either raped, killed or get one of her teammate killed at the first mission gone wrong outside the village. She has talent, don't misunderstand but she's wasting it because she prefers to find a husband than be a proper kunoichi. Next is Sasuke. A superiority complex based on his family name combined, an inferiority complex because of his brother and a very, very fragile ego. I'll be upfront, he's nothing like you were in your youth. The only thing that interests him is power and believes that everyone else is beneath him, making him think that teammates will do nothing but hold him back. His condescending attitude, without much basis to stand on, will create more discord than anything with Naruto on the team. The only way he has to validate himself is to put down others. Speaking of Naruto, while he would prove, with time, to be a good rival to Sasuke pushing him further, he needs a lot of work to get there. And I mean. **A.Lot.** He has the most potential of his graduating class, his well thought pranks and learning the kage bunshin in an hour prove that. Unfortunately he's wasting it because of his misplaced pride. He's also a fan boy

towards Sakura, not recognizing that his attitude is identical to hers. I'll give him credit, he is a hard worker. Only second to Riku. It's too bad that he only works hard on what he thinks he needs to become Hokage and not what he actually needs. Having Riku instead of Sasuke on your team would be better for the three of them. Many problems would be avoided. Riku would lighten your burden of getting both Sakura and Naruto to the proper standard of a genin as he is willing to help others if needed or asked. Something that Sasuke would not do, at least not with those teammates and if he does, it would be very very reluctantly. It's up to you to find a way should you go with this team. Finally, Riku having a civilian father and an average chunin for a mother is still better than Sakura whose parents are both civilians. In my opinion he has more potential than she does. By far. Unfortunately, putting Riku, Naruto and Sasuke on the same team is an even worse recipe for disaster than the team's current line-up."

Looking at Hiruzen, Iruka signaled that he was done reprimanding the jonins and pointing out what was wrong with their team and subtly telling them why they should take Riku on their team.

"I won't order you to take Riku in your team. You know I don't have the power to do so but Iruka made valid arguments. Unlike you. I will however accept your decision if you do not wish to change it."

And with that said, the fate of an ostracized orphan was sealed.

Chapter 03: Taking another path

Riku had to commend Umino Iruka, he knew how to have tact. Instead of announcing in front of the whole class that he was sent to the genin corps, he did it in private after saying 'special circumstances' to placate any nay-sayer. Riku couldn't help but thank the man for sparing him the public humiliation. The revelation that nobody wanted him had stung. It had been a while since he got such a harsh reminder of his situation in the village. Thankfully Iruka had been nothing but supportive and explained to him that while he was sent in the genin corps, the Hokage had arranged some help for him. That was something a bit under the table and it would be in his best interest to not say anything about it.

"I'm sorry I couldn't do more for you, Riku." the chunin said in a regretful tone.

"It's alright, sensei. You did more than enough by talking to Hokage-sama because I doubt he would have helped me without you slipping him a word or two."

"That's where you're wrong. Hokage-sama had tried himself to make the jonin change their mind from just a look at your academy file."

"Thank you nonetheless."

"Are you going to be alright?"

"I... will be. I'll be honest, sensei, I'm absolutely livid. I busted my ass more than anyone. I earned the right to be on a team more than any other and yet..." he stopped his rant because he knew that it was pointless. Nothing would change for him by doing so. Instead he sighed tiredly. "It's not alright but it's fine. I came so far out of pure spite already, I'll just go further until I become Hokage."

"I admire your determination but... Spite?" inquired Iruka with an eyebrow raised in curiosity.

"Spite, yes." Riku nodded. "Ever since I... ended up at the orphanage and was treated like shit, spite has been my main motivator until I entered the academy. To prove to everyone that I'm not my mother. That I'm not a traitor and that I'm not better off dead. I was hoping that I would make friends at the academy but the only ones who took the courses seriously were Sasuke, whom we won't talk about and Shino who was not interested in friendship. At least not with me. My next hope of friendship was to be in a genin team. It's dashed now. So I'm left with myself and my desire to prove everyone wrong. In one word: spite."

"..."

Iruka was a bit speechless at the confession he had just heard. This was not really the Will of Fire in the narrow sense but again, Riku did wish for friends and comrades. He also understood completely where his former student was coming from. He had something to prove and, yes, spite was an excellent motivator. He couldn't begrudge him that. Once more, he was surprised by the stark contrast between Riku and Naruto.

"Anyway, what do I have to do?"

"Tomorrow, you are to present yourself at training ground eleven at 9:00 AM. There, you will meet two people, Kamizuki Izumo and Hagane Kotetsu. They're both experienced chunin that will evaluate you and your skills properly and in depth, unlike the academy. You better not hold back this time." Iruka warned.

"I wasn't holding back, sensei." Riku denied. Under an 'I don't believe you' look that Iruka gave him, he stood his ground. "The skills I'm proficient in are not evaluated at all! It's not my fault I couldn't display them."

"What are they? Out of curiosity."

"I'm alright with Iryō ninjutsu, especially the chakra scalpel, otherwise it's just pure knowledge about the human body, herbs and poisons. I'm pretty sure I can use the mystic palm but not safely, so I refrain from using it with proper guidance first. Beyond the academy ninjutsu, I know the **Wind Release: Gale Palm** and that's about it. Where I excel the most is fuinjutsu."

"Fuinjutsu?" the Chunin repeated in surprise. "Of all the shinobi arts..."

“It makes sense to me.” replied the recently promoted genin with a shrug. “So far I can make my own storage scrolls, my own explosive tags, some variants and I know a few small barriers offensive or defensive. Genjutsu wise I know the **Hell Viewing Technique** and the **Sly Mind Affect Technique**.”

“That’s not bad, really good even, considering you’re just out of the academy. Be careful of not branching out too much. It wouldn’t be good for you to be a jack of all trades and a master of none.”

“Yes, sensei. It’s not my objective though. It’s just mastering all the basics. When it’s time to choose a specialty, I will focus on being a medic-nin and a seal master. I don’t really like the idea of hurting people in the first place. With my chakra reserves, I’m not fit to be a ninjutsu specialist though it could be argued that with my control I could be pretty decent I think. Genjutsu is... more suited for torture in my opinion and there is no way I’m getting into that.”

The grunt of disgust Riku let out when he talked about Genjutsu was a clear indication about what he felt about the art. He wasn’t wrong in a way, though that wasn’t the only use for it. Iruka was quite pleased to hear that while spite was Riku’s main motivator he was more interested in caring for others than hurting them. And that was knowing that he didn’t have any friends at all in the first place.

Riku thanked Iruka again for his help and left the Academy. The young graduate was under no illusion that the help he was just given had nothing to do with the Hokage and all from his former sensei. After all, why would the Hokage care for an academy graduate with a background like his? Sure, he believed the chunin when he said that the old man had tried to change the jonin’s mind about not taking him in their team but going so far as having two chunin to help him when they probably had better things to do? That, was unlikely.

And Riku wasn’t wrong, Iruka did lie about the Hokage’s involvement. He couldn’t do otherwise. The knowledge that your superior, the highest one at that, didn’t fight too much for you and simply gave up wouldn’t do any good for a kid who had no ties to the village and who wasn’t **that** important in the first place, regardless of his prowess during his time at the academy. Kakashi’s excuse had been bullshit in the context but not untrue. Besides, Hiruzen had better things to do than help an orphan kid. That was understandable but it left a bitter taste in the mouth.

Riku went back to his house. Yes, house. Not home. That place was no home to him. Not after the only clear memory he had of it was his father kicking down the stool he was standing on to hang himself. That memory would be stuck forever with him, eclipsing all others. It wasn’t like he had many, he had been only four when that happened and he was sent to the orphanage.

So no, it wasn’t his home and the only reason he lived there was because he wanted out of the orphanage. Thankfully when he entered the academy at eight he was able to

inherit his parents' possession. He wasn't a proper adult at the time so he couldn't use all the money however he wished but he could use the house and so did. Truth to be told, he hated it but it was better than the alternatives so he simply sucked it up. He was also lucky that his mother had left a few jutsu scrolls behind. That's how he learned the Gale Palm and the two genjutsu he knew. She also left behind her shuriken and kunai. About a hundred of the first and half that of the second. They were not the best in the market but not the worst either. They did the job well so he didn't have to worry about buying more at a weapon store. God knows what prices the clerks or owner would give him. The food he bought was already overpriced and that was cheap. Shinobi tools? He didn't dare to think about it.

He barely put down his bag in his living room when he saw the book of medicinal herbs he had finished the previous night. He had forgotten to take it with him in the morning to return it to the library. Sighing, he picked it up and went back outside.

Now that he was a genin he had access to the first level of the restricted area. He could now study up to C-rank jutsu without other restrictions than to study on site. He couldn't take the book or scroll away but he was allowed to make a copy of it. The jutsu themselves were not that important if they were leaked, the scrolls and books themselves however, were old and had value.

What was great about this was they were free. Any B-rank or higher needed to be paid for and no copy or note about a jutsu could be made. He was never able to confirm it but A-rank jutsu were supposed to be accessible only if you were given authorization to look at them from the Hokage. S-rank, Riku had never heard of them being in the library. If anything, they were probably under key. Hidden somewhere by the Hokage himself. None of that mattered to Riku anyway. He didn't have the chakra reserve to pull A-rank and S-rank jutsu nor the skills. Not yet at least. One B-rank jutsu may be possible but it would deplete most of his chakra so it was useless. No, Riku was perfectly content with D and C-rank jutsu.

Arriving at his destination, he greeted the librarian and gave back the book he had borrowed.

"Could you please tell me how I can access the first restricted area?"

The middle aged woman looked at him for a moment and noticed the leaf head protector that he was wearing around his neck and gave him an answer.

"Third floor. You need your shinobi ID to be let in."

He thanked the woman and left for the stairs. He didn't like her much but at least she treated him like she treated everyone else so she was alright in his book. Reaching the third floor was a new experience. For the last six years he had spent plenty of time on the first floor and went up to the second a handful of times. Never having the need to go higher he didn't know what awaited him.

What did was in fact an old man behind a desk near a wooden double door. The man was a veteran shinobi, that Riku could tell thanks to the chunin vest. That, and the notable facial scar and burns on one side of his face. Greeting his elder and showing his ID, the old man nodded. He then reached under his desk with his hands and activated a seal and the door opened.

Not wasting any time, Riku went for what interested him the most first. Earth release. Anyone knowing the fresh genin had a wind affinity would question why but to Riku it was obvious. Earth was the most defensive element of the five and while he knew some protective barriers, they couldn't be deployed at the snap of his fingers. Perusing the shelves for a few minutes, taking notes of interesting jutsu for another time, he found what he was looking for.

"Earth Release: Earth Shore Return. Hmm.. Not quite what I was looking for but it's a start."

This particular jutsu ripped a chunk of the ground to make a relatively thin wall of earth in front of the shinobi using it. It could block, kunai and shuriken without any problem and obstruct the view. The latter part was a double edge sword. The enemy may not see what Riku was doing behind the wall but so did Riku. Not the greatest defensive jutsu there was but Riku speculated that it would give him enough time to deploy a defensive barrier. His idea of a dome of earth would have been better but that was probably a B-rank or above.

Instead of going to a table and immediately copying the jutsu and its notes he went to another section of books. His first stop was the wind section where he found **Wind Release: Great breakthrough.** It was more of a support jutsu to put distance between him and the enemy but it could do some damage if used smartly. Lastly, he picked up a book on intermediary fuinjutsu. Since it wasn't a scroll but a book he could borrow it for a small period of time.

Quickly making duplicates of the two jutsu he took, he put back the original in their proper place and exited the floor. Checking the book with the old chunin, he left the library to training ground eleven.

Training grounds from 1 to 10 were private training grounds, reserved for genin teams and from 11 to 20 they were opened to all shinobi without restriction. The particularity of those training areas was that they were inside the village. From 21 to 50 everything was outside the village and needed a proper authorization to use them. The most famous of them was training ground 44, better known as the forest of death. From what Riku heard here and there the name had been aptly chosen. Hostile fauna, hostile flora. Check. Cherry on the cake? Everything was gigantified. One of the rumors he came across was of a giant man-eating centipede and of leeches bigger than a brown bear. Speaking of brown bears, the ones in that place were supposed to be at least twice as big and thrice as bloodthirsty.

He put any thought of this blasted place aside when he arrived at his destination. A few shinobi were there already. Some were sparring in taijutsu, others practicing throwing kunai or shuriken. At the very end of the area he saw a shinobi and a kunoichi, twenty feet apart, training lightning and water ninjutsu respectively.

Giving a nod of greeting to any comrade he came across he joined the small zone reserved for ninjutsu practice, far enough from the other two ninja present, and sat down.

He looked at the notes of the Great Breakthrough first and started with practicing the chain of hand seals.

“Tiger, Ox, Dog, Rabbit, Snake.” he muttered.

Over and over he made the five seals in the correct order. After half an hour, estimating that he got them, he switched from molding his chakra to actually using the jutsu. With his chakra ready to be used he took a big breath of air making his chest swell then blew everything he had. The resulting wind that came from his mouth was simply perfect. Powerful, fast and hitting a relatively good area width wise. More importantly, the amount of chakra spent for the jutsu was not a lot.

‘Thank Kami for chakra control.’

From there he used the jutsu two more times normally then tried to create variants. Modifying how much he opened his mouth and how he opened it in the first place allowed him to come with very nifty things. By having his mouth as close as possible, he could laser focus the wind he blew, making it stronger and increasing drastically the damage the jutsu would normally do. Positioning his tongue in a way to obstruct the middle of his mouth, he created two different air currents. It wasn’t as powerful as a single stream but more powerful than the original wide area effect.

Practicing for another hour, then taking a break to replenish his chakra, he stopped practicing the jutsu to learn the other.

This time it took him all afternoon to only raise a plate of earth the height of his knees. He was doing everything correctly but he failed to catch the right feeling to make the jutsu work properly. That was something that couldn’t be worked around. Only hours of practice would do.

When the sun began to set, he took his belongings and went back home. After a quick but healthy dinner, he picked the book on fuinjutsu and began reading it.

Chapter 04: Help required

Riku arrived at training ground 11 at 7:30 AM. Since he was to be evaluated, being there early to stretch and warm up was not a bad idea. It didn’t surprise him that no one

was there. From what he had seen yesterday only genin and chunin use those kinds of public training ground and he doubted that those in the genin corps would come that early to train. As for the chunin? He had no idea. Maybe because it was Saturday?

Regardless he was alone and had an hour and a half to do what he wanted. So he simply practiced the academy katas (not yet having decided in what style of taijutsu he wanted but that was a thought for later). After half a dozen sets he went to the side and took out from one of his pouches on his lower back, a book. It was rather thin, a hundred pages at most and had no title. In truth it was simply a journal where the owner simply wrote whatever he wanted in it. Riku however, wrote seals on every two pages. On the page on the left was a storage seal and on the page on the right was listed what was inside.

The journal was Riku's creation for the simple reason that scrolls were too expensive for him. Chakra paper for fuinjutsu was rather cheap in comparison to the point that hundred of them cost half the price he had to pay for a single standard scroll. Using his creativity and pondering if it was really worth the cost in ryo, Riku bought them and made the journal he currently has in hand. A hundred pages wasn't much compared to a scroll but the advantage was that he could get access to the right storage seal really quickly. Besides, he doubted that there was any shinobi out there with a single scroll full of seals from one end to the other. It was a waste of money, a waste of time and a waste of space (scrolls having a cylindrical shape).

Sitting down he put his book on the ground and activated the very first storage seal. Out of it came a small coffee table with on top of it a box containing a brush, chakra paper, ink and an inkstone.

Setting himself down, he began working on tags he had thought about. He already had a good number of explosive tags ranging from small explosions to open a lock to big enough to destroy everything in a 5 feet radius. He also had a flash seal, creating a blinding light to disorient the enemy and create openings and finally smoke tags which as the name suggests create smoke. He had others under his belt but they were of the defensive kind and were not what he was working on right now.

What he **was** working on right now was three different types of tags. The first one was what he decided to name a 'flashbang' tag. Not only would it blind the enemy but also impair their hearing greatly. Any good shinobi could use another sense to fight if their sight was compromised. It was either their hearing or their sense of smell. A tag that fucked with the three of them was in mind but it was easier to create a tag negated two senses than three so that specific tag would come later.

The second type of tags was a more deadly version of the explosive one. With one of those only the explosion was truly dangerous in itself and that wasn't enough for Riku. No, what he wanted was the possibility to still inflict lethal damage even if the enemy wasn't caught in the explosion. Shrapnels were the way. That was a difficult seal to make. Unlike the smoke which was a gas, shrapnels are solid and needed to be stored

and released a fraction of a second before the tag could explode to be effective. It was quite a bit of a step up from his 'flashbang' idea.

The third and last type was a trap. His idea was to detonate a tag when someone with a chakra signature not registered in the tag was in proximity. That was the hardest of his ideas to realize and why it would be the last to be worked on.

The first tag wasn't difficult to make, sound was just vibrating air and air he knew well after studying it since he discovered his affinity was wind. As he was using his brush to write the final character on his last prototype of the second type of tags, he felt a change in his chakra he wasn't responsible for. Immediately he let the brush go and released himself with a chakra spike from the genjutsu he had just been subjected to.

Once done, he pulled away from the coffee table with a backward jump and pulled a kunai out. His senses were on an all time high alert to try to locate his enemy or enemies.

"Not bad. The genjutsu didn't even have time to take effect." came a voice from behind him in the trees. On the spot, Riku jumped forward and spun in the air to face his opponents.

"Iruka said he was good. I guess his title of Rookie of the year is not just for show." another voice answered the first.

"To be fair, I was so fast because your timing was awful." Riku explained.

"Oh Oh Oh. A wee little genin just dissed your competence in genjutsu, Izumo."

A brown haired man, with a bandage crossing his face above his nose, appeared from behind a trunk and got down to the ground. He walked leisurely towards Riku and was soon followed by another, wearing a bandana style head protector and his right eye covered by his brown hair. Riku, still in a defensive stance, spoke up.

"Not really. I was referring to the lack of knowledge about fuinjutsu more than a lack of skill in genjutsu. When one writes a seal, they're hyper aware of their chakra since they need to be focused on it to make sure the seal is not a failure. Casting a genjutsu at that particular moment is a sure way to fail 10 out of 10. Since no one but a seal master is insane enough to write a seal during a fight, that's a fact that isn't well known."

"And there aren't many seal masters around to begin with. Good to know though." replied the one that Riku identified as Izumo.

Taking a few steps back, Riku sheathed his kunai back to his holster on his right leg and introduced himself.

"I suppose proper introductions are in order. My name is Warudo Riku, freshly minted genin. Please call me Riku." he greeted with a short bow.

"Kamizuki Izumo, nice to meet you and Izumo is fine." said the chunin that Riku rightly identified a few seconds ago.

"And I'm Hogane Kotetsu. Likewise, Kotetsu is fine." The second chunin greeted then went straight. "Iruka cashed in the favor we owed him. Asked that we help you a bit."

"Providing we find you good enough to use our time on you." Izumo added.

"What's the test then?" inquired Rick.

"First, an all out spar with one of us. If what we see is satisfying then we'll see what to help you with."

Riku nodded at that and went to seal his coffee table and his fuinjutsu tools, back into his book.

"A book? Why not a scroll?"

"Where did you find a book like that anyway?"

"A book gives access to seals faster and better and I made it myself." Rick replied to the Chunin.

"May I take a look later?" asked Izumo.

Riku nodded and walked away a dozen feet from his two senpai. He didn't know which would be his opponent so he was attentive as to which would move. He kept in mind the possibility that the spar would turn into a 2 vs 1. They were shinobi after all and shinobi don't fight fair.

Kotetsu was the one who charged forward, kunai in one hand and a few shuriken in the other. He threw shuriken first and in two strides he was on Riku. The dirty blond immediately moved his feet the instant he saw the ninja stars leaving Kotetsu's hands. Moving to position himself out of the path of the projectiles he began at the same time to weave hand seals for the **Wind Release: Great Breakthrough**. This choice instead of the more familiar Gale Palm was to surprise his opponent. Iruka may have babbled and updated the chunin about his skills thus Riku chose a jutsu he was almost certain Kotetsu didn't know he knew.

Another advantage was that unlike Gale Palm he didn't need his hands to perform the jutsu. When his adversary came into striking range, a big burst of wind came from Riku's mouth. With Kotetsu so close and the jutsu's area of effect so wide, dodging was impossible. Being pushed backward a dozen feet, the chunin caught his bearing and

landed on his feet and was dragged a few more paces. When he heard multiple 'thud' sounds coming from the ground he noticed three shuriken at his feet.

"MOVE!!"

Mentally about to ask himself how could the genin have missed his throw that badly, Riku's yell put an end to any thought on the spot and his body reacted just in time. Just as the shuriken started to shine, he kawaremi with a log. In his new position, he heard, saw and felt three big explosions that would have probably severely injured him if he had been lucky. The total shock on his face had been interrupted when Riku suddenly appeared to his side out of nowhere and landed a palm strike right onto his left ear.

Reflexively he threw a kick to force Riku to retreat. It was a mistake however. The palm strike while not really painful had hit a point of the body important for balance. Kotetsu's kick was way off target and his entire body faltered, giving Riku a big opening.

Easily dodging the kick by crouching down, Riku went for another palm strike but this time to the knee of the leg supporting his opponent. With his other hand he threw two more kunais with tags on them, tracing a square pattern on the ground with the two others he had placed while he did the first palm strike.

When his left palm was about to reach the knee a kick from the side came into his peripheral vision. Clenching the muscles in his forearm to take the blow he was sent flying back half a dozen feet away. As he looked up he made the Rat, Ox, Dog, hand seals and raised his head to watch the situation.

Kotetsu was holding his left ear in his left hand while Izumo was in a defensive stance in front of him. Both were under a white squared barrier. The new opponent used a kunai to test the chakra cage he was trapped in then sighed, seeing the results. Signaling to Riku that the test was over, the young genin deactivated the barrier.

"Is everything alright?" he asked as he walked forward.

"Is everything alright?" he said. Got my ass handed to me by a fresh graduate but yeah everything is peachy."

"To be fair, Kotetsu-san, you were not fighting me seriously. The fight would have gone way differently had you been."

"True." agreed Izumo.

The chunin sat down cross legged, followed by his friend, and signaled Riku to do the same. Once everyone was comfortable, he began giving the result of the evaluation but not without asking questions.

"Iruka informed us yesterday that you knew the Gale Palm."

“That’s why I charged head on with a bit of a distraction. We wanted to see how proficient you were in it. Yet surprise, surprise you used another wind jutsu. Great Breakthrough?”

“Yes. I learned it yesterday morning from the library and practiced until noon.”

“That... was a good showing after only half a day of practice, kid.”

“Thank you. I believe it’s because wind is my affinity and I spent the last seven years practicing my chakra control tirelessly so I got the hang of it rather fast.”

“Why did you use this jutsu and not the Gale palm? Like Kotetsu said, it was a good showing but from what we understood you’re more familiar with the other.” inquired Izumo.

“I updated Iruka-sensei the day before with what I could do. That makes it a whole day to warn you about it so just in case I went with it. Even if it wasn’t perfect, Kotetsu-san was so close that it would have had an effect regardless. Also because Great Breakthrough, once the hand seals are done, do not require the use of my hands anymore. That allowed me to chain the jutsu with my explosive shuriken. That way I took advantage of Kotetsu-san’s relative and fleeting weakness and didn’t break my offensive momentum, giving him no time to recover.”

Kotetsu and Izumo looked at Riku for a moment, then at each other to have a silent conversation with their eyes then back to Riku.

“That was very clever. No. More than that, it was well thought out. Good tactic.”

“Excuuuuuse me for a moment, Izumo but... Explosive shuriken? What the hell, you maniac!? Who does that?”

“I do!” Riku replied with a proud smile and a giggle. “Predictability is the death of a shinobi. When people think of explosive tags, they either have the image of the tag itself attached to a surface or a kunai. Nobody ever thinks about a shuriken.”

“Because shurikens spin and would cut the cord of the tag attached to it. Since there wasn’t any tag, I assume you use fuinjutsu?” wondered Izumo. He wanted confirmation because the concept was completely whack. Kunais were most of the time dodged whereas shurikens, because of how lightweight they were, were more often than not parried, or blocked when not dodged. An explosive shuriken would work wonders in surprising the enemy and injuring if not outright killing them.

“Yes. It’s a bit of work really. I have to first carve the seal on them then write the seal with my brush.” he replied as he picked two explosive shuriken from his right pouch and handed one each to the chunins. They looked closely at the projectiles from all angles and gave them back, Kotetsu letting out a whistle, clearly impressed.

“Okay, that explains it. We may want to make an order to you for a few but that’s a discussion for later.” Izumo announced then went back on track. “Now let’s talk about the second part of the fight. First off... How did you kawarimi right next to Kotetsu? There was nothing in this location for you to substitute with.”

“Wait, that was a kawarimi?!”

“It was. And there wasn’t nothing, there was plenty of air, Izumo-san.”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

““WHAT?!””

“Yes?” asked Riku in confusion.

“You. Kawarimi. With air?!” nearly shouted Kotetsu, his mind completely blown by what he just heard.

“Yeah. The jutsu is about hurling yourself towards something while pulling that something towards you at very fast speed to make it look like you switch places instantly. Here the ‘something’ can be anything. A solid object, a liquid or a gas. Like air. It’s a bit difficult at first because air is invisible but if you train by using smoke or a visible gas, sooner or later you’d get the gist of it. It asks for a lot of focus though.”

““ ... ””

“Okay, whatever... Definitely going to train for that later.” muttered Kotetsu.

It wasn’t low enough for Riku to not hear him however and he simply picked his journal of seals from his left pouch and opened it page 31. Activating the storage seal, a pack of thirty tags appeared.

“Here.” the dirty blonde said, handing the pack to the chunin. “The tags when activated release an inoffensive pink gas. Don’t breathe it though, you never know. Oh, and to activate it a simple ram seal is needed.”

Taking the tags and thanking him for them, Kotetsu let Izumo continue his review.

“You did two things when you arrived near Kotetsu, with your right hand you made a palm strike and with your left you threw two kunais. Let’s talk about the palm strike first. Why a palm strike? Why not a piercing shot with a kunai?”

“Because the palm strike was optimal and the use of a kunai wasn’t. In the unlikely chance that I’d surprise Kotetsu-san and hit him properly with a kunai that may have

been lethal, if I just hurt him because he dodged, the wound would not have been much debilitating making my attempt useless. On the other hand, the palm strike hitting the ear would have disrupted his balance if it connected properly or if missed, would have shaken his brain a bit. Both were a better option and it was proven true when Kotetsu-san's riposte was... er... not really precise and off target a lot. With his balance out of whack the amount of time and opportunities for me to pursue my assault was both greater and better. My second palm strike was aimed at the knee to dislocate it and practically win the exchange. You can walk out of a fight with a disabled arm but not a disabled leg."

"Too true." Kotetsu commented. "You really got me good. I'm still hearing a bit of whistling in my ear."

"Sorry." apologised Riku with a sheepish face.

"Meh it's fine."

"Now back to the kunais." the other chunin inquired.

"I knew that my chances of defeating Kotetsu-san were very low from the start and basically zero if he got serious. Thus my objective was to win the fight quickly. The best method at my disposal was to trap him inside a barrier. Blows to the head are instinctively the focus of our mind when we're attacked at this spot. Playing on the shock of the explosive shurikens and my sudden appearance by his side the focus was 100% on my right hand. Once misdirected, Kotetsu-san never noticed my left hand position in the first half of the barrier. When I went for his knee afterward he was already caught in my attack pattern. The first palm strike had hit hard and shot his balance, so Kotetsu-san was even more alert for a second strike instinctively not wanting a repeat."

"Reinforcing my focus on your left hand and the misdirection, making even more sure that I wouldn't pay your attention to your other hand who threw two more kunai and completed the square for the barrier."

"Hmm."

"The last question I have is, how did you react in time to my attack?" Izumo asked. That was actually the question he wanted to answer the most.

"Before Kotetsu-san walked forward to start the spar. I didn't know who would be my opponent and I kept in mind that the possibility of you joining was there because Shinobi don't fight fair. Hence I was always alert of any intervention from your part."

Izumo nodded at that, a small smile on his lips. He looked at his friend next to him and got a nod. Turning back to Riku he gave him their verdict.

"Alright, kid. We're satisfied."

“Not gonna lie, that was damn impressive.” added Kotetsu.

“We’ll teach you the advanced basics skills for a shinobi. Trap making, trap detection, tracking, spying, everything you already think you know.” “In other words, what you learned at the academy but on a higher level and we will let you get some real experience. Of course we will also teach you teamwork, that’s the most important thing in a team. More than any jutsu.”

“Speaking of jutsu, we will not teach you any. Maybe help with your taijutsu by sparring but otherwise you’re on your own. However if you have any questions about the jutsus you’re practicing we will give you a few tips or advice if we can.”

“Thank you.” politely replied Riku with a short bow.

“Since there is no time like the present, let’s start with tree walking, unless you already know it?”

“I do. I’m currently on water walking. So far I can walk and jump but running is still a bit beyond my reach.”

“Then go practice until you get it down. Meanwhile, we’ll think of a training schedule for you. I’m not going to lie kid, most of the time we will give you instructions, make a demonstration and it will be up to you to work on your own. Missions and gate duty limit our free time a lot, so we can’t always be behind you or hold your hand.”

“I understand. Honestly it’s more than what I expected a day ago.”

With that, Riku got up and gave them another short bow, before he went to the river side of the training ground to practice what he had been told. As he did so, he never noticed the two chunins looking at him with seriousness in their eyes.

“You’re thinking what I’m thinking?” Izumo asked his friend.

“That the jonins were high as hell when they declined to have him on their team?”

“Yes, but no.”

“That the kid will go far and if we help him properly we’d be praised for training him when the almighty jonins didn’t want him?”

“Yeah.”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“We’re so going to rub their face about this.”

“You betcha your ass. Iruka really threw gold our way.”

And with those less than selfless ideas, both chunin began to plan Riku’s training.

Chapter 05: Outside the Village

Three months had passed since Riku’s very first meeting with who he now called his senpais. Kotetsu and Izumo were there two hours in the morning every three days (when they were not on a mission) to check on his progress with the materials they gave him the previous meeting and to give him new things to learn. When he wasn’t practicing he was doing D-rank missions in the village. More often than not he had to do them solo. The older genin were not really interested in a fresh one like him or if they did, it was to let him do the work and scam him of his money afterwards. Or tried. The first and last two 15 year olds that tried to bully him for his money ended up in the hospital with a few broken bones and cut ligaments (courtesy of a chakra scalpel’s well placed hit). That gave him a bad reputation among the genin corps and a review of his actions in front of the Hokage for wounding teammates out of spar. Riku defended his actions masterfully.

“Teammates are not supposed to let others do the job for them, take their own cuts of the reward and force their hardworking teammate to give them their cut either. Yet I don’t see my accusers here being reprimanded for their unlawful actions while mine were lawful, sir. And if I may, if two shinobi that have been in the profession for three years got their ass handed to them by a genin barely out of the academy, maybe they deserved the beating they got, regardless if they’re in the wrong or not.”

Considering Riku’s character, the two others’ from their profile and the righteous fury on the face of the boy in front of him, Hiruzen knew who was telling the truth and who was lying. He almost let out a chuckle with how right Riku’s little speech has been. Both sides were punished. A black mark on their file with additional punishment from the two bullies.

As a result, his actions didn’t endear him towards the rest of the corps as the incident spread like wildfire. It would have been problematic if luck had not come knocking on Riku’s door.

The usual third member of the Chunin team that partnered up with Izumo and Kotetsu had been injured in a mission and was out of commission for a few weeks. Wanting to make quick money with a simple escort mission, the two chunins thought of Riku for a replacement.

Making their way to training ground eleven in the morning, they found him practicing the **Earth Release: Earth Shore Return** jutsu. That was a jutsu that Riku had been struggling with since forever, not being of his elemental affinity. At first when he showed

the jutsu to them he barely made a foot tall obstacle. A brittle one at that which wouldn't have stopped a shuriken at all. After all the bullshit he had displayed, both Izumo and Kotetsu were relieved that Riku wasn't that big of a monster. He was just a kid with a keen mind, a lot of drive and knew how to use it properly. He wasn't anything like the famous genius of the village, like Hatake Kakashi and Uchiha Itachi but more like Maito Gai without the exuberance and the 'youth'. They were more than glad for that.

Thankfully for Riku, Kotetsu's natural affinity was earth, so he could help Riku with his problem. It turned out it wasn't an issue with his chakra control but with how he perceived in his mind the earth element. To Riku, the earth was solid, extremely durable and unmovable, like a stone. The truth was that the last part wasn't really true. Earth was the most malleable element, second only to Water.

With that difference put forward and misconception cleared, it didn't take long for Riku to present astonishing progress. Proof of that was the 10' tall wall that he just raised from the ground. Instead of being a straight wall this one was bent vertically in a half circle, now protecting also his sides and not just his front.

"How the fuck did he do that?" asked Kotetsu in surprise and interest.

"I don't know. Let's find out."

They walked toward Riku after calling him out. His attention caught, the genin destroyed the wall and met his senpai halfway.

"Good morning, senpais."

"Morning, kid." Izumo greeted back.

"Morning. Say how did you... curve the wall?"

"Oh, that? Well... A couple weeks ago when I used the jutsu I was disturbed while the wall was being raised by an explosion to the side and the wall fell apart. I wondered why since it should be completely solid. It turns out that the hardening part of the earth happens just at the end of the jutsu, once the wall is up. So I tried to see if it was possible to slightly alter its shape in the short time between the wall's down position to standing position. Turns out it is. It took me a while to figure out how to make that shape. When the wall rises, you need to move your hands on the ground in half a circle. Your right does a quarter circle right and the left a quarter circle left." was the explanation that Kotetsu got.

Walking to the side and turning away from the others, the chunin made the proper hand seals for the jutsu and followed the instructions he just heard. On the spot a curved wall was up. It wasn't perfect but for a first try and with a matching elemental affinity the result was more than fairly decent.

"This is neat. Did you try any other shape?"

"Sorry, Kotetsu-senpai. I only had time to practice this one."

"Meh, it's fine. I'll find out on my own. Good thinking though." the man replied not at all disappointed.

"You'll sure have an easier time than I did." Riku commented then abruptly changed subject. "Are you going on a mission? Is that why you're here today instead of tomorrow?"

"Correct. However, that's not all." Izumo answered.

"Nope. Our usual teammate is recuperating from an injury and since it's a simple C-Rank, we thought it was time for you to gain some experience outside the village."

Hearing that, Riku was more attentive than ever. While he had tried to find a way to train himself doing D-Rank, like practicing his tree walking abilities to paint walls he was more than fed up with them. He had hoped to find a team for a C-rank. Either a genin team or a chunin team with a missing member but to no avail. His dealing with the two bullies squashed that opportunity.

"I won't disappoint!" the dirty blonde exclaimed in joy before switching to a more serious mood. "What type of mission is it? Delivery or escort?" He knew it was one of the two. There was no way he was ready to make his first kill yet by subjugating bandits and the chunins knew that too.

"Escort. We're to protect a merchant and his goods from Himasu to Hiwara."

"That's like a fifty mile journey... So three days from point A to point B. A day to get to point A from the village and a day from point B to the village. All in optimal settings so... A week of supplies?" he asked Izumo after thinking out loud to himself.

"Pretty much."

"And don't worry, kid. The road is pretty safe with the towns being so close to each other." Kotetsu commented.

"But I must stay alert because there might still be some bandits wanting to take advantage of the proximity. There wouldn't be escort missions otherwise."

"Correct. We're leaving for Himasu from the East gate in one hour. I think that's more than enough time for you to prepare."

"Oh! I already have everything I need on me, senpai."

Rick picked up his seal journal from his pouch and waved it for Izumo and Kotetsu to see.

“Of course you do.” remarked Kotetsu with a deadpan face.

If they knew one thing about Riku, it was that he was always prepared. Need a kunai? A shuriken? A Soldier pill? Food? Anything a shinobi would need? Riku had it stored in one of his seals.

“Then we can leave now.”

Riku nodded and walked with his new teammate towards the East Gate. After showing their ID and registering their departure into the log at the guard station, they exited Konoha and immediately took to the trees.

If there was one thing that Riku loved about being a ninja, it was tree hopping. He loved feeling the cool breeze on his face, the effort of jumping from branch to branch, the height and speed at which he moved. Ever since his unofficial teachers taught him that method of traveling he practiced it any time he could to relax and empty his head for a bit.

When they arrived at Himasu the sun was setting. Kotetsu and Izumo were glad that they had left immediately in the morning instead of waiting one hour or they would have had to travel a bit at night. They forgot to take into consideration that Riku was still twelve and had not as much chakra and stamina as the two of them. Sure he was above the norm for a genin but such a trip had been a bit too much for him since they went at their usual speed. They had to slow down a bit which resulted in them reaching the town later than estimated. That wasn't much of a problem, the meeting with the client was happening the day after in the morning and they didn't lose much time. An hour or two at worst. Beside, the constant use of chakra was good for expanding Riku's reserve. So everything was good.

The town was smaller than Konoha with only a few thousands inhabitants. A number more than sufficient to have multiple inns around. The inn they chose was called the 'Tasty Pony'. A weird name by all accounts but one Riku didn't pay much attention to. What mattered to him was the inn itself. Two stories high, small windows and ten rooms at best. Perfect for defense if the team were attacked from the outside. Paying for a room with two beds for the night in advance, the genin joined his senpais outside to find a small restaurant. It took them only five minutes to choose to eat at a small open one and ten more to be served. Riku completely devoured his katsudon, then ordered for a second, third and fourth serving, to the astonishment of his teammates.

“What the hell, kid? Never ate katsudon in your life or what?” Kotetsu inquired at the sight. They had lunch a few times on location after their morning training and Riku had never displayed such an appetite.

“Not since I was four. I’m not really welcome in restaurants back in the village and it takes way too much time for me to cook some myself.” the genin replied, filling his mouth with another piece of fried pork.

The two chunins looked at each other and let it go. Both had forgotten that because of his mother, Riku was not well thought of or regarded back home. Personally, they didn’t care. They had teamed up a few times with Mitarashi Anko for a mission or two and they had no problem with her either, despite being the former apprentice of Orochimaru. One’s crimes and sins were theirs and no one else’s. They never saw either the way the villagers treated Riku. They only met with him at training ground 11 and nowhere else.

When the third and fourth serving were brought to him, Riku took his journal from his pouch and sealed both plates inside a storage seal.

“For back home.” he simply answered the question they thought but never voiced.

They paid for their food and went back to the inn. Both men were floored when there were only two beds in the room.

“You’re sleeping on the...”

Kotetsu turned around to look at Riku to tell him he wouldn’t not be sleeping on a bed because there was no way he or Izumo would share one with another dude. He stopped mid-sentence however, when he saw Riku putting up a hammock.

‘Of fucking course, he has a hammock.’

“Should I put seals on the door and the window?”

“What kind of seals? What do they do?” asked a curious Izumo.

“Block them from opening. Nothing goes through, not even air. I also put a gravity trap. If someone touched the area where the rapped is laid on, the gravity in that particular area increases five times. Chances are, they will be crushed to the ground under their own weight. Unless they are taijutsu monsters like Maito-san. Honestly it’s enough for almost all chunin level shinobi and perhaps some jonin. If someone springs the trap an alarm seal is activated and lets out a sound loud enough to wake us.”

“I doubt we need them.”

“But better safe than sorry. You can block the door, Riku. The window, however, put the gravity trap instead.”

The window was a smaller entrance into the room than the door and as such any shinobi that would try to enter through it would have to put their foot on the ground which would trigger the trap.

With the alarm seal in place and how 'safe' the town was, they didn't bother for a watch. That allowed them all to have a good and resting eight hours of sleep.

"You don't have a portative shower in that book of yours? I'm shocked!" teased Kotetsu with an amused grin.

"Does a barrel with a heat tag under it to keep the water hot, counts?"

The chunin's grin turned into one of annoyance while Izumo snorted.

"Only, you kid, only you." the bandaged man worded aloud while shaking his head.

A bit after dawn and after a healthy breakfast, they met with their client at the entrance of the village. They had been waiting less than a quarter when a rather short middle-aged man with brown hair and hints of gray at his temples accosted them. He sported a very round belly indicating that he was not in need money-wise and could eat to his heart's content. His clothes were not the finest around however, making Riku think that he either didn't care about such luxuries or while wealthy wasn't **that** wealthy. The wrinkles around his eyes and mouth were clear signs of a lot of laughter and probably a happy life.

With him was a big covered cart pulled by a single muddy brown horse. The beast was old and had clearly seen better days but appeared robust and healthy enough to make the journey without any difficulty.

'It's not like we'd have to travel through the mountains anyway. It's all flat land on the way.'

"Munehisa-san?" Izumo asked the man.

"Yes, that is me and you must be the shinobi of the leaf that I hired for my protection, hm?"

"We are. I'm Kamizuki Izumo and those are my teammates Hogane Kotetsu and Warudo Riku."

Kotetsu smiled and waved while Riku gave a short bow when their names were called.

"Ah! Perfect, perfect."

"Do you have everything you need for the journey?"

"I do and if you're ready to, then let's go. The faster we're there, the better."

Izumo nodded and signaled the others to enter defensive formation. He and Kotetsu would flank each side of the cart while Riku would watch the rear. When Riku asked if

he could put barriers tag on the cart to protect it and Munehisa just in case of an attack, none refused. The latter especially was understably quite willing.

The first day of travel had been boring. Absolutely nothing happened, beyond idly chatter between the client and the chunins. None of them were interested but Konoha had a friendly image to maintain and so they partook in the task. Riku was exempt from that during the walk since he was in the rear, however during a break for lunch Munehisa seemed to want to make up for the missed opportunity. At only thirteen, Riku fascinated the man who asked all kinds of questions regarding his choice of becoming a shinobi. Of course he couldn't outright say that was because he didn't want to starve on the streets since it was the only job available for him. Again, Konoha had a friendly image that needed protection. Instead he regurgitated what the propaganda he had been subjected to at the academy taught him. 'Protect the people', 'Will of fire' and all other non-sense that Riku mostly didn't believe in one bit.

When night fell they had stopped and made camp at the edge of a forest a hundred feet away from a river. Not too deep into the woods but not deep enough that they could be seen from the road.

"So, kid... Anything fancy in that book of yours for camping?" Kotetsu asked.

"In terms of security, plenty of traps. Lethal and non-lethal. In terms of accommodations... Well, I have the barrel I spoke to you about this morning paired with a shower pommel, so we can all get cleaned up. Otherwise a big tent for six people." replied Riku as he fed the horse with an apple.

"What kinds of traps?" Izumo asked.

"Oh, you know, the basics. Explosive, flashbangs..."

"Flashbangs only and turned..."

"Towards the outside of our camp. I know Izumo-senpai."

Riku nodded and went to the task. The client particularly loved being able to take a hot shower and the shinobis knew that if they didn't get a fat bonus at the end of the mission they were sure the man would ask for them again or at the very least would contract Konoha again.

Taking the first three hour watch, Riku's mind was wandering towards his training. He had been lucky to find the two genjutsu he had mastered before graduating the academy (idiots genin forgetting scrolls behind) but had not improved much on this particular branch of the shinobi arts. Not like he was interested much in it, especially after learning the **Hell Viewing** jutsu but he had to admit, messing with the senses of an opponent was very helpful.

'Perhaps there are more genjutsu related to misdirection. The one I know is good but fairly limited. I'll have to check the library upon my return.'

The next thing he thought about was his fuinjutsu. Out of the twenty chapters of the intermediary book he had only mastered 5 in three months. He understood the concepts presented to him but there were so few details to help actually realizing the concept that he had to try and failed to progress. It took time and more importantly: money.

The latter, if he made a good impression with clients, would solve itself. While his reputation among the genin corps was utterly awful, Chunins and up were alright regarding him from what Izumo and Kotetsu told him. In his mind it meant that he needed to get promoted to chunin and fast. That meant, participating in the next chunin exam happening in Konoha in four months. That also meant he needed to find two genin that could pull their own weight for the said exam. He hoped that his senpais could help with that.

Time, however, he couldn't get more of it. That was impossible, unless he could learn how to time travel. An improbability in his opinion. There was also the fact that **his** time wouldn't be rewind like the world's. That was another can of complicated problems he didn't want to think about. Not when the point was moot since he couldn't time travel.

Getting back on topic about his training he thought about his iryo ninjutsu. He had started practicing the **Mystical Palm jutsu** on fish or other small animals when he went to look for food. The results had not been too shabby but he didn't think he was ready to use it on a human being. Namely himself. There was no way anyone would let themselves be guinea pigs so with no other choice it only left him for practice and he wasn't going to do that any time soon.

Finally the last point of his training was what he was currently the most interested in. Ninjutsu. And only because of his wind element. Maybe if he had water but otherwise he couldn't care less. Because wind fascinated him. The amount of things he thought he could do with that element was staggering. Yet after three months he had only learned one jutsu to focus on his fuinjutsu and the basics that his senpais taught him. The first thing he needed to do was train his elemental manipulation. Jutsu were nice but Riku was pretty sure that a kunai coated in wind chakra would be more useful than the **Gale Palm** or the **Great breakthrough**.

Deciding with what to begin, and having read what was the training for wind manipulation, Riku leaned down from the log he was sitting on and picked a leaf.