

Out For Karma: Naruto

#Chapter 21: Child labour is a thing - Read Out For Karma: Naruto Chapter 21: Child labour is a thing Chapter 21: Child labour is a thing

Riku's recipe has been a big hit with Tsunade, especially since he had marinated the duck into some high quality sake. As such she ordered him to make it more often. Afterwards Riku began his hundred page quiz under her watchful eyes while she got a shoulder massage by one of his shadow clones. He had to admit, he didn't think there would be so many questions and it took one hour more than what he expected. That didn't put a dent in his confidence however and just as he believed, he got full marks. Tsunade was both pleased and impressed. Most people failed that first quiz, with a very few reaching the 80+ in score but never reaching 90. That Riku got a 100 without even really struggling really hit home that taking him as her apprentice was the right choice. They both went to bed afterwards.

When morning came, Riku welcomed a dead tired Shizune and a still going Karin who had followed her as the Senju Manor was closer to the hospital than her apartment. *'Uzumaki's stamina is bullshit'* he had thought but made no comment. He dragged his senpai towards the bathroom where he had started a hot bubble bath for her and offered Karin his room to take some rest. When Tsunade came out of her room, Riku did his very best to not look at her. It was the hardest part of his day. Why? Because she refused to dress appropriately for breakfast. Even with a new wardrobe who fit her new assets better, there was still a lot on display. Shizune had reprimanded her again but their sensei argued *'That's seduction training for Riku'*. Both her apprentices knew it was bullshit but couldn't really refute her argument. Tsunade just cared more about wearing anything she wanted than Riku seeing her. Thus the dirty blonde learned to not look in his sensei's direction or if he had too, to keep his eyes focused on hers. He knew she was teasing him on purpose with how amused and smug her smile was but he never said or did anything. He did think she was acting like a bitch and dreamed of retribution. The memory of a black haired Uchiha flying up with a smoking butthole was replaced by a blonde Senju from time to time.

Now that she was Hokage, Riku's practical training was supposed to start. Not only this one but also his training as a shinobi. They had discussed at length what kind of shinobi he wanted to be, what he wanted to work on and what he needed to work on. They both agreed that the first thing they needed to take care of was his Taijutsu. While not needing to be an expert he needed a style other than the Academy one. It was good for basics but beyond that he needed something that suited him. She had tested him on his chakra control and once again was impressed when she found out it was close to hers at his age. As such she decided to teach him her superstrength. Riku agreed to it because blowing shit up was something that could be very useful but against people he was leaning more toward the gentle fist style. Explosion from the inside. His **Medical**

Fist or Iryoken, formerly **Boobie Expansion Jutsu** because Tsunade refused to have an apprentice having a Jutsu with a perverted name, was the kind of Taijutsu he wanted to use and master if he could. Something based on speed more than on strength. After all, he would only need to scratch his opponent to have a devastating effect; there was no need to hit hard.

After thinking about it, Tsunade agreed with his idea. However it would need to come later. The requirements for the Iryoken were more complex than her technique and there were plenty of things to study beforehand. Determining what exactly happens to the cells, the speed of the division and turning the cell cancerous because so far it was only healing. Still, a Taijutsu style that could destroy or heal its target was something worth exploring and may allow more medic-nins in the field.

“Riku, we’re going!” she said as she sat at the manor’s entrance putting her short heels on.

“I’m coming, sensei!” came Riku’s voice from the kitchen. He was finishing making a snack for when Shizune and Karin would wake up.

Rushing out of there, he quickly reached Tsunade’s side and left with her. Instead of shushining to the hospital, they simply walked down the village’s streets. Tsunade greeted the people she met along the way with a simple ‘Hello’, ‘Good Morning’ or just a nod. All with a smile on her face. Of course once her eyes were not on an individual, that individual would give Riku the usual glare or sneer. He did notice that there were less than usual in number as some of the villagers were just confused as to why he was walking alongside Tsunade. After fifteen minutes of walking, Tsunade took a turn at the corner which would lead them away from the Hospital.

“We’re not going to the Hospital, sensei?”

“Nope. We’re going to my office.” she nonchalantly replied.

“What do you need me for, if I may ask?” was his question instead of talking about the start of his training.

“As my apprentice, you’re my assistant. In all matters including-”

“Paperwork.” he said, cutting her off, understanding where she was going with this.

“Yep.”

“If I didn’t know you any better, sensei, I’d say you just like to mess with and torture me. Fortunately I do. Wait, no, I don’t.” he joked, making her laugh.

“Me? You’re delusional.”

“Uh-huh. What are you doing in the morning but torturing me then? And don’t say training! Nobody believes it.” he added before she could feed him that excuse.

“Every single man in the world would kill for a sight like that, why are you complaining?”

“Because, hormones or not, I’m not a pervert?”

“Give it time.”

“I hope not.” he muttered, then his mind switched back to paperwork. “Is it really okay for me to assist you? Some documents may be above my clearance.”

“It’s fine, I’ll just punch you to forget.”

He simply rolled his eyes instead of answering. He knew that if he did she would just entertain herself with other statements like this one to get him to react. Finally they reached the Hokage Tower and went straight to her office. Tsunade sat at her desk and did nothing for a minute. She just sat with her hands clasped together and resting on the desk.

“Sensei?”

“Hm?” she grunted not looking at him.

“Aren’t you... Supposed to work?”

She didn’t give him an answer. Instead she looked at the clock on the adjacent wall , raised her hand and lowered a finger each second. When her hand formed a fist, the door of the office and Hisho-san walked in with a mountain of paperwork in her arms.

“Good morning, Hokage-sama!”

“Good morning to you too Hisho-san.”

Riku gave a small bow to the secretary but said nothing. She put her pile of paperwork on Tsunade’s desk and left, closing the door behind her.

“What I need you to do is organize this...” she spoke while looking at Riku but put her hand on the paperwork. “Pile of shit. What’s important and what’s not.”

“How am I supposed to know?”

“Separate them first by ninja and civilian affairs. If there is even a brief mention of anything ninja related it’s in the ninja pile, even if all the rest is civilian.”

Riku nodded “Can I organize them further?”

“As long as I can deal with what’s important first and quickly, you can do whatever you want.” she replied with a shrug leaning back against her seat.

Not wasting time. Riku created three shadow clones then picked up his book of seals. He unsealed his coffee table and put it in the corner next to his sensei’s desk while the clones took the big pile of documents and made it into a smaller pile. They all went to seat on each side of the coffee table and began organizing them. Each Riku represented a type of document. Taxes, business, correspondence and infrastructure. When one Riku got a document pertaining to a category other than his he passed it to the Riku who did. It took ten minutes but the task was quickly done. From this point, each Riku organized their stack into two piles for shinobi and civilians. That took a bit more time because they needed to read the entire documents to be sure it wasn’t for the shinobi pile. In his opinion that was the most effective way to go about it with the current system. If he had a say in it he would organize the documents differently from the start. A civilian wanted to expand his business? He would get a form that would look nothing like the other documents that are not related to business. As such from the get go the documents would already be organized **before** they land on his sensei’s desk.

Nevertheless he did what Tsunade instructed him to do. It took him nearly twenty minutes to do the job but was proud of himself when he was done. When he gathered everything in the correct order he stood up and turned around to give everything to his sensei. He nearly dropped all his hard work on the spot when he saw not one but **two** other piles as big as the one he had in hand. Tsunade had a nasty grin on her face.

“Go on, you’ve got plenty to do.”

“... You’re evil, sensei.”

“What are you complaining about? You just have to organize them, not read them all and sign them. I got it worse.”

“Well maybe the organization should be done before you get them.”

“...I’m listening.” she said seriously, leaning forward. She was very interested in the idea if the results would mean she would spend less time working.

Riku dispelled his clones and made four others to not get too many memories at the same time. Meanwhile he discussed his idea with Tsunade. The possibility of different types of forms that would fit better the request by considering what it is about. The idea of screening the forms before she received them was put forward and she liked that very much. Plenty of forms were less community related and more personnel related. Those one could wait, after all the needs of the many, of the villages came before the needs of the few, the individuals.

"Using chakra paper for the Shinobi related issue?" inquired a not totally convinced Tsunade.

"That's just an idea in passing but why not? We could identify the right document on the spot among a huge pile."

"That would be more expensive."

"If we calculate the price of the chakra paper to your time-money ratio we may actually save money in the long term. Considering that using shadow clones, which should be mandatory not only to work faster but for your safety, it's really worth considering and not such a bad idea." he finished and the clones put back their pile on the desk then took the other and went back to work.

"The less you're busy working on paper work the more time you have to deal with other things. You can also delegate some duties. Maintaining the training grounds in working condition, the streets or reforming the Konoha Military Police-

"That's a-

"A Uchiha privilege, but do you see any Uchiha left? Competent Uchiha, I mean. Even if Sasuke was, he wouldn't be interested and he's alone. Anbu can't do everything and certainly not policing the village. They could be more useful elsewhere. As for the MP, you put someone of trust in charge that would report directly to you. Fill the ranks with both ninjas from the clans and not to have some unity. The Uchiha having that much power had been a mistake."

"I always thought that was the case."

"Sensei." / "Sandaime-sama." Tsunade and Riku greeted Hiruzen who had come in at the same time as Hisho-san who was bringing another pile of documents.

"Recruiting from all horizons for a new Military Police is not a bad idea."

"Perhaps. That was not the topic at hand we were discussing though."

"No?"

"No. Riku and I were talking about a way to deal with the paperwork."

"You had my attention, now you have my interest."

"The idea is to have the documents organized before they arrive here. The Hokage should not have to deal with a task so mundane and time consuming when it's about the day to day things. I was also advising sensei to delegate some duties that others could

take upon themselves instead and simply report to her. If the Hokage spends more time behind a desk than training or knowing people that won't do."

"Hmm." Hiruzen pondered Riku's words. After being Hokage for nearly fifty years he was well used to the workload. Many times he wished he could do something else more productive but the possibility never presented itself. The main problem was the Uchiha or rather their positions they held in the village. By having total control on the Military Police, others clans were trying to further their standings. This created a very delicate balance that unfortunately forbade him to delegate duties for fear of upsetting the aforementioned balance. But with the Uchiha now gone, the opportunity to create a new balance was there. The problem was that this duty belonged solely to the Uchiha by his own sensei's laws. It was considered a clan business of sorts. Had he tried to do what Riku had suggested the others clans would have protested on the spot and vehemently but with the recent assault on Konoha, an argument could be made that a new Military Police was needed which could lead to the actual support from the major clans instead of their refusal. As such Tsunade wouldn't need to read report upon report from Anbu. And if she could delegate or redirect such an important duty to someone else, she could do so with less important ones. It was something to consider carefully. The Hokage was supposed to be the sole and ultimate authority in the village. Delegating would be sharing the power and could create some problems down the line. One thing was sure, any idea of a council should be shot down immediately. The elders were already a pain in the ass at best and a kunai in the back at worst, more would just be folly.

"Hokage-sama, they are here." Hisho said, entering the office but staying near the door."

"Perfect, let them in."

Hisho nodded and familiar faces came through the door. The sight of them made Riku smile.

"Ha! Hinae, Yuuna, Gou, you're right on time." Tsunade said.

""Hokage-sama."" they all greeted though Gou and Yuuna furtively looked at Riku and his chunin jacket.

"I won't beat around the bush. After careful evaluation, I have decided to promote you to the rank of chunin. The both of you did extremely well during the exam. You displayed skills of the body and of the mind that every chunin must possess. Congratulations." Tsunade said with a smile. She picked a scroll from the middle drawer of her desk and retrieved from a storage seal, two chunin vests which she handed to them one after the other.

"Keep working hard for the village."

"Yes, Hokage-sama." replied Gou

"We will, Hokage-sama." answered Yuuna.

"Wait! Don't put them on yet. Let me take some pictures!" Riku quickly said as he took his polaroid from his book of seals.

"Why?" inquired Yuuna.

"It's an important moment in one's career. I took one when Saidame-sama gave me mine." Riku explained, pulling his wallet from inside his jacket and opening it to show the photo he took at the time.

Both Gou and Yuuna took a look and their eyes widened in disbelief when they saw its title.

"Riku!" exclaimed uncharastically Gou.

"Please tell me you didn't and it's just a joke." Yuuna said with worry. She prayed it wasn't but after a month spent with the dirty blonde she knew how crazy he could be.

"Did wh- **You** were the one who cut sensei's arm?!" shouted Tsunade when she read *'Getting promoted for "disarming" the Hokage'* written on the white part right under the photo.

Their reaction made Hiruzen snort. "He did it to save my life. Orochimaru used a powerful poison and it was the only way for me to survive. I'm not mad one bit, in fact I found the situation quite amusing. I still do."

"Oh crap! I still have it!"

"What?" asked Tsunade.

"The arm! I sealed it for studying the poison later! Sensei, if we can extract the poison completely and heal the damage then-"

"Then we can reattach it! You cut it very cleanly for it to be possible!" she finished his reasoning out loud in excitement.

Tsunade created ten shadow clones and ordered them to do her paperwork. She then grabbed Riku by the collar and began to drag him out towards the hospital when the door to the office opened again.

"Hime! I'm baaa- HOLY KAMI! They're still growing?!"

Jiraiya, Toad sage and spymaster of Konoha had his eyes popped out of their orbits when they naturally found Tsunade's breasts. Unfortunately for him he was in the way, Tsunade was in a hurry and he made a perverted comment. To everyone's surprise but

Hiruzen's, she punched her former teammate's jaw so hard that his feet left the ground and his head went through the fake ceiling to be stuck there. As she left she heard Naruto.

"That's the new Hokage?! I thought she was an old gran-"

He never finished the word 'granny'. Tsunade, passing in front of Hisho's desk, picked up her paperweight and threw it right at Naruto's head, knocking him out without even looking. Back in her office Hinae and her newly promoted students were frozen in shock.

"... What just happened?" Yuuna asked.

"I don't know but that was weird." answered Gou.

"What was? Hokage-sama punching unconscious Jiraiya-sama to the ceiling, knocking out Naruto-san with a paperweight or Riku calling her sensei?" Noted Hinae.

"" ..."

"You know what, sensei? For my own sanity's sake, I'll pretend that I dreamed all of this after getting my vest and now I'm leaving to celebrate." Yuuna commented and took her leave, quickly followed by Gou.

Hinae looked at her departing students then shrugged. She bowed to Hiruzen and left quickly too. The former Hokage, now alone with two unconscious people, couldn't help himself and let out the laugh he had been holding.

'It's good to be retired. This is the most fun I have had in years.'

Chapter 22: Time at the hospital

Tsunade has shushined away to the hospital, Riku still in her grip. In no time she had secured a lab with all the equipment needed to work. Speaking of the dirty blonde, he was by her side, ready to unsealed and sealed again Hiruzen's arm at a moment's notice.

"You're ready?"

"Yes, sensei."

"Once I have a sample of the poison, seal the arm away immediately."

Riku nodded and waited for her signal which he got. Pumping a small amount of chakra into the storage seal, the Sandaime's left arm popped into existence. It was as Riku remembered. The skin and flesh near the cut by which the poison was inserted was

black indicating necrosis. Going up the arm the change in color wasn't as pronounced. It wasn't black but a dark purple who kept becoming lighter the further up the arm. A clear indication of the spread of the poison.

Tsunade immediately stuck a syringe on the clearest purple area. Riku knew it was because the poison had yet to destroy the cells there whereas at the point of entrance there were dead cells and tissues in abundance and that may have "corrupted" the sample. As soon as she was done, he sealed the arm away as ordered.

"It's worse than I imagined, we may not save the arm."

"The hand and wrist maybe not but the rest didn't seem that affected. And we still can regenerate dead cells with the **Mystic Palm**. The problem is if the cells could handle the healing and rapid division. Sandaime-sama is no spring chicken."

"There is only one way to find out." she replied as she emptied the syringe into a vial and put it into a centrifuge which she turned on. "You did well by the way. The tourniquet was the right thing to do, so was the amputation. I've seen doctors with years of experience not doing as good as you did."

"I practiced to hell and back my wind manipulation. Making such a cut isn't difficult normally but I was running low on chakra and were tired as hell. I'm pretty sure that with enough focus I could make microscopic cuts."

She nodded thinking about the possibilities that sharp tiny blades offered. Wind, out of the five elements, was the only element she didn't master. Her natural affinity being lightning it was especially difficult for her to get the hang of wind as it was the superior element between the two. With four elements out of five she never thought of spending a lot of time to add wind to her arsenal but now she was beginning to change her mind. With the help of shadow clones, she may drastically reduce the time needed to master the element. That was something Riku had shared when he told her that he had mastered wind completely and already mastered the first stage of Earth. The experience of clones working on an elemental affinity was transferred back to him. So was his training in chakra control which kept getting better and better.

The centrifuge beeped, indicating that it was done with its job. Tsunade opened the lid of the machine and took the vial she had put in it. Raising it under a lamp both sensei and apprentice saw the separation of the plasma, the red cells and the poison which was stuck right in the middle of the two. Turning around she put the vial on a rack and used another syringe to suck the plasma then a third one to get all the poison. Afterward she put a drop of the lethal liquid under a microscope and studied it for long minutes then added a drop of blood.

"Sensei, I'm pretty sure that's not very..."

"It's not the protocol, I know." she replied not raising her head from her observation. After a minute more she finally did so. "The poison parasitizes the red cells' membrane then eats its content giving it enough of an energy boost to reach for another cell and do it again. It's not the worst, they're attacking white cells too."

"So the body can't fight the poison and its spreading. No wonder the regular antidote didn't work. Hmm... The 'easiest' way to stop it would be to introduce a component that would act as... a decoy? Taking the place of the red and white cells then reacting with the poison, dismantling it and making it ineffective, no?"

"Yes. I see you've studied more on your own about poison." Tsunade commented with a bit of pride in her voice.

"Not really? I just mixed my already existing knowledge on poisons with the one on cells."

"That's not an usual and linear way of thinking, Riku."

Riku just shrugged at that tidbit of information. It's not like he could do anything with it. Instead he decided to watch attentively what she was doing to create an antidote to learn the process. He asked questions here and there and she answered them without hesitation and by demonstrating her answer when she could. After two hours of work she believed she had made something that could work. Replacing the drop of poison under the microscope with a fresh one, she added a drop of her concoction. She waited a bit and slowly but surely the purple liquid turned blue, the same color as the antidote.

"Success!" she exclaimed happily.

"Great work, sensei. Now all that's left is to make a bigger quantity of it and treat the whole arm and then-"

"Healing it. This will be difficult, it's not connected to a chakra network and a body. While the arm is still freshly cut from sensei, it's technically dead."

"Can't we connect it to something acting like Sandaime's body? Use a pig maybe?"

"Hmm... You mean like having the pig's organ do the job of a human one for them because their own are failing to do their job for whatever reason? That's..."

"A bit more complicated, yes, we're not just doing a dialysis of the blood and the pig's chakra won't be compatible and not enough but if we use a seal containing Sandaime's chakra..."

"You have a seal like that?!"

“Not yet. I’ve had the idea for a while now but with the chunin exam I had to focus more on my battle abilities than medical ones. I do have a rough outline of the seal already so I know where I’m going with it but it would take a lot of trial and error. I was planning on creating a tag doing the same thing as the **Mystical Palm**. An emergency first aid if you will. It would purify the chakra stored inside the seal and turn it into medical chakra which would...”

“Accelerate the cellular division. That’s brilliant! How long do you think-”

“I don’t know. A month? And that’s counting my shadow clones working on it full time too.”

“What if... you had the help of a seal master?” she asked, having an idea in mind.

“I... honestly don’t know. It may go faster?”

She nodded and exited the room, signaling him to follow her. In no time they went back to her office where she found Hiruzen talking with Jiraiya. There was no trace of Naruto anywhere.

“Hime!”

“Not a word Jiraiya! Not even a look at my chest or I swear I’m going to rip your balls and feed them to you!” she struck preventively with a lot of killing intent unleashed toward her former teammate.

The effect was immediate and the man paled on the spot at the mental image. Quickly he raised his hands in a universal surrendering gesture and took a few steps back.

“I’m just glad to see you again after so long. Nostalgia aside, I have important matters to discuss with you.” he said, his eyes landing on Riku by her side then back to hers.”

“Me too. How long do you think it would take for you to work on a chakra battery seal?”

“A chakra...” he blinked at the idea contemplating it. “A while. Though **you** are more knowledgeable about that subject than me.” he replied looking at the diamond shaped seal on her forehead.

“It was designed for me, not for a tag.”

“A tag?” he repeated instinctively, rubbing his chin. “Hmm, now that’s different, yes.”

“Here.”

Looking down, Jiraiya saw the dirty blonde who still didn’t know the identity and was handing him a few stacks of papers. The toad sage blinked again but took them.

“What’s this?”

“Notes on the seal that sensei wants.”

“Sensei, huh?” he said, casting a glance at Tsunade quickly then back on the notes. “It’s cute kid but fuinjutsu is incredibly diffi-.”

He stopped talking when his brain finally processed what he was reading. He kept reading attentively, not caring from anything else around him. Knowing that it would take time, Tsunade went to speak with Hiruzen, as did Riku.

“Good news: I created an antidote. Bad news: your hand and wrist already started a severe necrosis. Good news again, we may have found out how to reverse it. We do that, and we may reattach your arm.”

“And it would need that seal you asked Jiraiya to make? Or help making, I assume?” he replied looking down at Riku who nodded. “This is fine, I just have to be patient then.”

Tsunade went back to sit at her desk but decided to let her clones go on with **her** work. Riku for his part asked some questions to Hiruzen.

“Sandaime-sama. I have a few questions regarding the jutsu Orochimaru used. How did he control them? Is it inherent to the jutsu or did he do something else for that?”

“HOLY SHIT! This is brilliant! Tsunade! Who came up with that?!”

They all turned to Jiraiya. Everyone in the know or having an idea pointed with their fingers at Riku.

“The kid?!” A dumbfounded and disbelieving Toad sage exclaimed when his eyes landed on Riku. For the first time he had a good look at him.

“It’s just an idea and a theory I got.”

“No way! You’re way too young to-”

“Jiraiya.” Hiruzen cut in. “Everything seal related I have been discussing with you for the past hour came from his mind.”

The seal master’s jaw draped down comically, his impression frozen in shock. Done with his antics Riku turned back to Hiruzen to get back on their conversation. The old man noticed and gave him the answer he was looking for.

“No, it’s not inherent to the jutsu. Orochimaru put a kunai with a tag and a special seal written on it, inside their heads.”

"In that case, shouldn't-"

"Destroying the head didn't work."

"... I see. That means the tag was activated and..."

"What are you talking about?" asked the Toad Sage whose brain had rebooted.

"Riku, here is trying to send back my senseis to the pure lands."

"Now that I know what Orochimaru did, I may remove, stop or take control of the seal, allowing them to undo the jutsu. The Nidaime **did** make a way to undo it, right?" Riku inquired to Hiruzen.

"Of course he did. Who do you take him..." The intense look Riku was giving him, made him remember that his sensei had created the Kage Bunshin and never noticed its many advantages beyond recon. "Riiight." He begrudgingly said, elongating the word. "He did. What exactly do you have in mind?"

"Action and... obedience? Submissiveness? Nevermind... Different parts of the brain are responsible for each, if I remember correctly at the top of my head. I haven't yet read much on the brain."

"You're correct. Obedience comes from the anterior cingulate cortex, free will from the frontal and parietal areas and actions from the frontal lobes." Tsunade revealed.

"I think the seal had an effect on the obedience area. If we could remove it or contain it, they may regain the totality of their free will and undo the jutsu themselves. The only problem at hand is that I'm not well versed in dealing with existing seals. Yet."

"I am." said Jiraiya. "I would need to actually see the seal, which means..."

"Opening up their skulls." Tsunade explicitly said it with a profound distaste and a big hint of sadness.

"And we need to keep them restrained. I'm not sure the amateurish paralyzing seals I made will hold them for long. No matter how many were put on them."

"And find a way to stop their regeneration, the skull will not stay open for long." Hiruzen added.

"We can take pictures."

"Ha, yes. Good idea, Riku." noted the former Hokage.

“Riku, go to the hospital to find Shizune and ask her to prepare a room with everything we need. Which includes-”

“A small corner to work on the seals. I got it sensei.”

“I’m coming too. They are with me anyway.”

Hiruzen patted his chest and Riku briefly saw the outline of a book under his clothes. He didn’t say anything nor did he nod and simply left the office with the older man. Jiraiya shared a look with Tsunade and they followed suit a few seconds later.

“I really need to talk to you. It’s a village matter.”

“Why didn’t you speak with one of my clones?”

“They threatened to dispel themselves for interrupting their work and that you would punch me into orbit when you’d get back. Beside your... new apprentice was present. And wasn’t that a surprise. On top of you coming back willingly on your own.”

“Are you criticizing my decisions Jiraiya? My choice as an apprentice and my return both?”

“Not at all. I’m just curious.”

“I spent twenty years grieving by drowning in alcohol and gambling and the only thing it did was either make me numb or more miserable. Just in a different way. Riku... just threw that fact to my face. Of how... selfish I was towards Shizune. It hit home harder than Hanzo.”

“So he’s responsible for your return and you what? Took him as an apprentice as a thank you?”

“Not at all. I tested him, Jiraiya. On his knowledge on medical stuff. He’s really good. The most talented individual I’ve met so far in my life. And the medical field is not the only thing he’s good at as you witnessed. He’s a genius all round. A true prodigy.”

“Really? I can imagine after reading and hearing his theory on seals but a prodigy all around? You know how rare that is?”

“Yes. But sensei’s tales about him confirm it. Did sensei tell you Riku recreated his Shuriken Shadow Clone Jutsu simply from my uncle’s notes on the Kage Bunshin?”

“No, he did not.” he replied with a frown. “Nobody helped him with it?”

“No. Honestly, I was hoping you could help him with his fuinjutsu a bit. To speed along his development.”

“You know how I teach, Tsunade.” not particularly wanting to do that. He had already made plans concerning Naruto and they didn’t involve staying in the village.

“It’s fine, he’s self-taught. A hint here or there is all I’m asking.”

“... I’ll see what I can do.”

They reached the hospital while catching up with their lives. After asking a nurse working at the reception desk, they went to the room that Shizune had prepared. When they entered inside the first thing they saw was a dumbfounded Shizune and Karin then a very amused Hiruzen. Turning their head to their right, they witnessed at sight they never thought they would, at least for Tsunade. Senju Hashirama, her own grandfather, was trapped onto a table and was being all chummy with Riku who was waving a bone saw around as he talked animatedly as if he was talking to a long time friend.

“... so bad at it she got a title out of it you know?”

“Really? What is it?”

“The Legendary sucker.”

Hashirama began to laugh loudly and heartily after hearing his granddaughter’s title for her bad luck at gambling.

“I’m pretty sure that Konoha has an immediate lock down contingency if she ever won the lottery.”

The Shodaime laughed even more. Had he not been tied up tightly to the examination table he would have fallen off of it to roll on the ground laughing.

“She’s also an exhi-”

“Not. Another. Word.” Tsunade ordered or rather threatened as she grabbed Riku’s head in an iron claw. His feet were not touching the ground.

“No! No! Let him talk! An Exhi-what?! An Exhi-what?! I need to-”

“SHUT IT.”

Jiraiya wisely clamped up on the spot, reining back his eagerness and pervertedness. The murderous glare she was giving him had been the same as the one she gave him when she nearly killed him for peeping on her in the hot springs.

“Tsunade-sama? Maybe you should release Riku before you smash his skull to mush?” proposed weakly a very scared Shizune.

That earned her Tsunade's glare but only for a brief moment. Her sensei turned her head around and after a moment of consideration put down her apprentice and released his head.

"They're going to be consequ-"

"Now, now, Tsuna. This young man was just filling me in about your life. There is no need to punish him."

"Grandfather." she said softly and a bit embarrassed. "It's good to see you again, despite the circumstances."

"Yes, I share the sentiment. My, you grew up into a beautiful woman. I still remember you wearing this cute flower dress with those adorable pig-"

"**Enough!**" she quickly said, putting her hand on Hashirama's mouth to stop him from talking. Riku's snickering incensed her once more but this time he stopped himself right before she could threaten him.

She took a deep breath and wondered why Riku had brought out her grandfather instead of her uncle. Tobirama was a quiet and taciturn man and she knew he wouldn't have said a thing while everyone was working. Her grandfather on the other hand was a chatterbox. Worse, he was a charismatic and friendly chatterbox. And he didn't know how to release the Edo Tensei either since the jutsu's completion was done after his death. Still, that presented an opportunity to question him on a few things she always wondered.

"Riku, why is my grandfather out instead of my uncle?"

"Because I would have strangled Nidaime-sama for being an idiot?" her apprentice answered on the spot with confusion as if the answer had been obvious. A few feet away, they all heard Hiruzen facepalming.

"... You have one more try."

"Eh? Hum... Because of the seal?" Riku quickly replied with the first thing that crossed his mind.

"Explain."

"We don't really know what the seal does. Maybe there is a fail safe erasing the knowledge or completely shutting down free will or the ability to speak? We would be in big trouble if there is and we trigger it on Nidaime-sama since he's the only one who knows how to stop the jutsu. That left only Shodaime-sama as... well a guinea pi... I mean test subject! Test subject. No offense, Shodaime-sama." Riku quickly added and the grunt he received was acknowledged as '*No biggie, young man*' in his mind.

Tsunade looked at her student for a moment in a contemplative manner. She then decided that pursuing the matter wasn't worth the headache and took the bone saw from his hand.

"Whatever, let's get to it. Sorry, grandfather but it's the only way we have right now. The other avenues would take too much time. Not like I don't like having you back but-"

"My place is in the pure lands. Do what you must, Tsuna. I have faith in you."

The gentle smile he gave her also gave her confidence. She signaled Riku to have his polaroid ready and Shizune to help her remove her grandfather's skull top. When everyone was in position she began to saw around, unfortunately she had to quickly stop. The Edo Tensei's regenerative abilities were too fast for this method to work.

"Maybe using wind would be better and more importantly faster?"

Riku's suggestion had merit. A wind chakra blade would cut deeper, better and faster than a regular saw. The problem was she couldn't use it. Not yet at least. The only ones in the room who could was Hiruzen but he only had one hand and needed two and she wasn't sure he was competent enough with it which left only Riku. Sighing, she moved to the side and waved at Riku to take her place. He apparently knew that he was the only option. He wasn't shocked and he wasn't afraid or nervous about being the one having to do the job, she noticed.

"I'm sorry, Shodaime-sama. I have to pick your brain a bit." he joked, making the dead man chuckle.

He made some hand seals and brought out his chakra scalpels which he promptly changed the neutral nature into wind element. That surprised Tsunade a bit and it really hit home she needed to master this element asap. Under her watchful eyes, Riku placed his hands at her grandfather's forehead and in one swift move separated them. Each hand went in their own direction cutting neatly in a circle around the skull. With a vigilant Shizune, she pulled the now detached part of the bone and revealed the brain. The regenerative factor immediately kicked in and instinctively, Riku put his small hands in the skull while dispelling his chakra scalpel and grabbed the brain. He pulled it out without hesitation.

"Riku!" Tsunade exclaimed, not very happy about what he had just done but anymore reprimand died in her throat when a new brain began to be created inside the skull from what she saw before the bone reformed completely. Riku still had the original brain in his hand.

"Sorry, sensei but-"

"It's fine. I was being hasty. You did good in **this** particular situation."

“Honestly, I just panicked and didn’t really want my hands stuck. It was a gamble.”

“That paid off. Now we can study the seal better than with a quick picture.”

Riku nodded and went to delicately put the brain on the adjacent examination table when he turned around and apologized. “I said picking a bit but it turned out I picked all of it. Sorry about that.”

A new round of chuckles came from Hashirama.

Jiraiya went to take a look at the seal and Hiruzen walked closer to Tsunade and his predecessor to just talk. Shizune, believing her work was done, left the room with Karin in tow.

“That’s quite the student you have, Tsuna.” Hashirama commented honestly.

“That I do.” she said with a tired sigh but a pleased smile on her lips.

“He wasn’t always like that. He used to be a lot more reserved until I began teaching him. The change is even more pronounced since he met you, Tsunade.”

Tsunade and Hiruzen looked in silence at Riku asking questions to Jiraiya.

“... But if we supercharge, with chakra, that part of the seal, wouldn’t it collapse on itself?”

“Hmm...No. That part will collapse, yes but it won’t have a chain effect because it’s only one out of eight, the other seven will maintain the seal. We need at least...”

“I’m really glad the two of you met.”

Tsunade said nothing, she just looked at her dirty blonde student.

‘It’s been less than a month but me too, sensei. Me too.’

Chapter 23: Stubbornness

It took three days for Jiraiya to find a way to suppress Orochimaru’s seal. Not because the seal was a masterpiece of anything like that but because it was badly made and in his opinion made no sense. So did Riku who gave up on subtlety and suggested to plainly deal with it by simply putting another seal on top. One odd based to be in conflict with Orochimaru’s even based. Jiraiya had looked at him as if he had two heads then began working on it. All the while Riku observed silently from the side and took notes.

Both agreed that it was a very barbaric way to deal with a seal but they were pressed by time so went along with it.

The results were not what they had expected but it worked. The original's seal had been suppressed enough for Hashirama and Tobirama to fight against it thanks to their strong will. Tsunade had a brief but meaningful reunion with the two men after removing Riku from his uncle. He really did try to strangle the man even though he knew it was pointless as he was dead and didn't need to breathe. Riku simply said that *'It was on principle for being a moron!'* before being kicked out of the room. When Tobirama asked for an explanation and received it. He agreed with the young dirty blond. *'How could I miss this?'* he simply muttered repeatedly for his lack of cleverness about the use of the shadow clone. In the end, both former Hokages left for the pure lands happy with the knowledge that the village was strong and in good hands.

That wasn't the only thing that had happened during those three days. While Jiraiya and Riku were working on releasing the Hokages, they had a clone each working on a prototype of a chakra battery tag. The results were mixed. On one hand it worked, on the other hand the seal was badly made and necessitated a huge amount of chakra to activate and would absorb another huge amount in a blink of an eye into the seal. Should an academy succeed in activating the seal they would probably be killed by the absorption effect; completely drained of their chakra on the spot. Thankfully Sarutobi Hiruzen had not been a Hokage for 50 years for shit and giggles. He had appropriate chakra reserves and was able to use the seal without risk but was quite winded afterwards. All that was left to do was connecting his amputated limb to something to start the healing process.

Another thing happened in the village that had far reaching consequences. Uchiha Sasuke had deserted Konoha to join Orochimaru. With no Anbu, Jonins or chunin available, Tsunade had no choice but to fetch for Riku. He had to leave Jiraiya alone and dispelled his clones considering the situation because going on a dangerous retrieval mission with a quarter of his chakra would have been suicidal. With a very restricted choice of members for the teams at hand, he had to go with what he knew. Or rather who he knew. In less than half an hour he had gathered Naruto, Shikamaru, Hinata and Karin. The last one was exceptionally given permission because of her particular skills. She was a sensor, had advanced knowledge in iryo ninjutsu and had her Adamantine sealing chains which could suppress chakra and capture targets.

When Tsunade asked for this particular team composition, Riku simply answered that: each member could do multiple jobs. He could act as a front liner, medic and capture specialist. Shikamaru could act as strategist and capture specialist. Hinata as a tracker, frontliner and possible capture specialist thanks to her byakugan and her Juken. The only difference with Karin was really their fighting abilities. Finally Naruto was a chakra power house and could help greatly with his numerous shadow clones.

While the team had been hastily made, Tsunade mentally agreed with it and Riku's reasoning. They went as fast as they could and made contact with a team of Oto a few

kilometers away from the border with Rice Country. Sasuke was nowhere to be seen and neither Hinata nor Karin could tell where he was with their eyes but the fact that one of the Oto-nin carried a huge crate layered with seals and they couldn't see one way or another what was inside made Riku think that Sasuke was in it.

Riku had been able to tell that every single one of their opponents was at least chunin level. They were opponents that no one beside himself could deal with one on one. He had put his worry aside and thanked Kami for the Oto-nins' arrogance. They believed themselves so great for being members of Orochimaru's personal guard that they looked down on the team. As such only three of them left up ahead while the fourth stayed behind. A tall fatty ginger who used his teammate as a distraction to create a dome of earth entrapping everyone but Riku and Hinata. The Hyuga had been really close to the dirty blond at that moment and he had taken her with him when he had used a kawarimi to get away just in time and out of sight. Of course hiding among the leaves of a tree had been a good idea for a surprise attack. Unfortunately, a captured Naruto had opened his mouth revealing that they were not inside the dome with the others. In consequence, the Fatty started another doton jutsu, whose effect was to gather a huge amount of earth and rock and shape a giant boulder. Riku immediately understood that the rest of the team were going to get crushed. Since Fatty didn't know where Hinata and he were, he would deal with his prisoners first and quickly to not have them join the fight later against the free leaf-nins.

Riku had acted fast, rushing the enemy with wind laced kunais while ordering Hinata to get everyone out. The fight had been quick but intense. Most importantly it revealed that the Oto-nins had all a cursed mark they could activate at will making them stronger. After making a feint and a clever use of a smoke tag and a shadow clone, Riku had decapitated the Fatty and sealed his body away in a storage seal in his book. They started the chase again, Riku berated Naruto for outing him and Hinata and nearly getting himself, Shikamaru and Karin killed in consequence. The sun kissed blonde had apologized and gave his word he would keep his mouth shut from now on unless necessary.

They met the second shinobi from Oto a few minutes later. He too had stayed behind to stop them or at the very least delayed them. Shikamaru advised to split the team but Riku refused, considering it was too risky a move. With cursed marks involved, he had argued that the faster they defeated their opponent the more efficient they would be in the relative long term. As such a 5 vs 1 should in theory give better results even if they would be delayed a bit. The objective was to turn against the Oto-nin their arrogance and deal with them before they could activate their curse mark. As such the Oto-nin was promptly captured by a combination of Naruto shadow clones, henges, Karin's Adamantine chains, and Hinata's Juken, completely sealing his ability to use chakra. At best they lost two minutes.

Things became more complicated when they reached their targets. Sasuke had awoken and got out from the crate he had been in. He had ignored Naruto's shouts to come back and Riku's order for the same thing and instead left. The two Orochimaru's guards

left, silently realizing that the team was more than what they thought, used their cursed seals on the spot. With Sasuke getting away, Riku made a choice and changed his mind about splitting the team. He decided to take Naruto with him in pursuit of the defecting leaf-nin, while Shikamaru, Hinata and Karin would deal with the rest. It was a very risky move but the best available. He could have left Naruto with the three others and face Sasuke alone but with their location so close to the border, if Orochimaru had sent a welcoming party, the possibility of Sasuke sneaking away was great. It turned out to be the right call as a fifth Oto-nin stopped their pursuit and Riku could tell he was way more powerful than the other. He ordered Naruto to keep going and duelled the new opponent.

That has been the hardest fight of his life. The white haired teen he was fighting had a kekkei genkai allowing him to manipulate at will his skeletal structure. Making a bone armor, a bone sword or simply shooting finger bones at incredible speed made the fight a real nightmare but Riku held on. So well and so much that he discovered that the curse mark had a second stage. He had thrown everything he had in his arsenal at his enemy. Shurifuin, ninjutsu, genjutsu, everything but Taijutsu and his Iryoken. The first because it was clear to him that he was battling a taijutsu specialist and was far outclassed, the second because he didn't practice it at all since his near death experience with Tsunade and thus was useless. Even his speed had been a bit below his enemy and that had been costly. He piled up many laceration wounds. Some deeper than others and that would necessitate stitches if not treated by the use of the **Mystical Palm**. One of them had been very bad. His spleen had taken a piercing strike from a bone sword and he had begun losing blood fast. Just as he commented that '*Kekkei Genkai are bullshit*' he had been saved from speeding finger bones by a wall of sand.

Out of nowhere Gaara, his final opponent during the Chunin Exam, had saved his ass. For a moment he had believed that the Suna-nin wanted to kill Riku himself but the defensive posture he took in front of him changed his mind. The sand user was here to help. Feeling relieved, Riku hadn't lowered his guard one bit and had been right to do so. Even with Gaara's addition, making the fight a 2 vs 1, it was mostly not a fight in their favor. With nothing to lose, Riku had tried to use his Iryoken again, grazing the Oto-nin just under his left armpit and got impaled in the shoulder for it.

It turned out to be their salvation. The boost in cellular division spread to his opponent's whole body because of his bloodline and he lost control of it spectacularly. Bones, flesh, organs, everything began to swell disproportionately and the teenager exploded. Thankfully Gaara had been fast enough to cover him with his sand. The situation had still been bad with his bleeding and when Karin along with Shikamaru, Hinata but also Gaara's siblings arrived she tried to help him. Riku instead sent everyone to assist Naruto with Karin tending to his wounds. When he refused to bite her to heal both because the others would ask questions and because she was his friend and not a healing pack, she punched the top of his head and forced him to bite her, ranting that he was an '*idiotic moron too dumb to live*'.

The mission ended in failure. Sasuke defeated Naruto and crossed the border thus getting away. No one was badly wounded. Naruto just had chakra exhaustion while Riku, to everyone's curiosity, was brand new. While they didn't come back with Sasuke with them they brought back two living enemies to interrogate, two dead bodies and lots of organic material for study from the guy that Riku and Gaara fought. He was a bit of everywhere after all.

Tsunade had not been happy when during his report he confessed using his Iryoken but she said nothing because of the presence of others, most notably the sand siblings. With that done and out of the way Riku went back to help Jiraiya and the rest was history.

"How did you do it?"

"Did what, sensei?"

Riku was washing the dishes of the dinner they just had. For the last two days Tsunade had given him the look but had held her tongue and didn't ask what she wanted to know and that Riku didn't want to answer. Apparently her patience had worn off and she boxed him in in the kitchen with no way out.

"The others' reports said you were badly wounded when they arrived at the clearing where you fought. Gaara's was even more detailed since he saw you get badly hurt a second time. To your shoulder. Yet when everyone got back you had no wounds anymore and were perfectly fine. Soooo... How did you do it?"

Riku sighed but didn't stop doing his chore. He tried to come up with an answer that wouldn't be a lie because he didn't want to lie to her but at the same time he didn't want to reveal it was thanks to Karin. She was his first real friend of his age and he didn't want to sell her out. He was in quite the pickle so he went with declining to answer.

"I can't tell you that, sensei."

"And why not?"

"I can't tell you that either."

"**Riku.** I need to know." she said with seriousness in her voice leaving no doubt that this conversation will not end until she got the right answer.

"Why? I'm fine, isn't it enough?" he replied, swiping the last plate and putting it on the rack with the others to dry properly. He dried his hands with the same rag, then turned around to face her.

"No it isn't. I need to know for you. To determine any possible health issues that may-."

"There are none. What happened was the same thing that happened to the Sandaime." he cut her off with a frown.

"... This is not enough, Riku." she said softly and crossed the distance between the two of them. "It may shorten your lifespan or weaken a part of your biology or so many other things that would have horrific consequences in the long term." The worry in her voice was obvious.

"..."

Riku didn't know what to say anymore. He had tried and failed to end the conversation and now... Now he didn't know. He was back to his earlier choice: lie or sell Karin out. He knew he couldn't stay quiet either and take his leave, she would stop him from doing so. So he did the only thing he could think of doing. Nothing. Nothing but raise his head a bit and start a staring contest. A very long staring contest. So long in fact that Shizune came to check on them because they were taking too long to join her in the living room for their board games night.

"Tsunade-sama? Ri- Is something wrong?" she asked, seeing Master and apprentice facing each other.

She was promptly ignored if she was even acknowledged to begin with. Neither blond had moved a fraction of an inch nor blinked. They were frozen in their position, refusing to give an inch away. Refusing to give up. The one who would so much but twitch slightly would lose. And more than just the staring contest. Both were making a statement with their silence and stance. Both were too stubborn to back off. For a passing moment, Shizune wondered if the situation would devolve into a fight but after careful observation rejected the idea. The two of them were hot heads and would already have acted if becoming physical has been on the table to begin with.

"Is something wrong, sensei?" Karin whispered next to Shizune, making her jump in surprise. The black haired woman had been so focused on the two in the kitchen that she hadn't noticed her apprentice's arrival.

"Yes but I don't know what. They've been like that since even before I arrived."

"That was more than fifteen minutes ago!"

Because she really wanted to start board games night, Karin walked in the kitchen and stood next to the two of them.

"Whatever is going on can wait tomorrow. It's the one night we're all gathered under the same room and it's to have fun. You're wasting it."

"" ..."

"It's all on Riku's shoulders." Tsunade finally spoke but never broke eye contact.

"I'd say it's all on yours, sensei. You're the one blocking the way and not letting it go." he did the same.

"Argh! What is this about?"

"I'm worried about the way he healed his wounds."

"To which I told you that you shouldn't."

"To which * I * told you that I needed to know to determine if-

"I did it! I'm responsible for his recovery! Uzumaki kekkei genkai! There I said it and now you know! Now let's move on by moving to the living room and start game night!" Karin blurted out.

She grabbed a dumbfounded Riku's hand and dragged him out of the kitchen, under the own dumbfounded look of Tsunade.

'So he was protecting her. That's cute. Still an Uzumaki kekkei genkai that heals those kinds of wounds? I know they have a strong vitality and heal faster than normal because of their really dense chakra but a kekkei genkai healing others? Grandmother never told me anything about it.'

"What kekkei genkai?" she asked loudly, going after them.

"Clan business!" shouted back Karin.

"I'm a quarter Uzumaki!"

"But a three quarter Senju so a Senju! Now let's play!"

It was easy to say, Tsunade never got her answer that evening.

Chapter 24: Courage

"Ugh!"

Riku grunted as his whole body met the ground with force. He has been training with Tsunade in Taijutsu for the past hour and kept getting his ass handed to him. It was no surprise and very much expected. Tsunade was the Hokage and a Taijutsu specialist and Riku was not even an amateur. He had practiced time and time again the stance

and Katas she had taught him, using as many shadow clones as he could to ingrate the moves faster and better in his head but trying them out live with a spar was a whole other matter.

The moment he hit the ground he already put the palms of his hands against it to get up. He was sore all over and his muscles were more than aching, they were screaming their pain. Yet he didn't care; he pushed as hard as he could to get back on his feet. The traitorous thought of releasing his resistance seal popped into his mind but he dismissed it on the spot. That seal was active for a reason and it was not to deactivate it when things started to get difficult during training. His fight for his life against that white-haired kekkei genkai bullshit Oto-nin, had put in perspective how weak he truly was. Until then he never really was in a disadvantageous position. He had completely dominated everyone for four years at the academy. Then everyone during the chunin exam. Gaara only got away because of the invasion and his sensei defending him but otherwise he had been toasted. The spars with his senpais and Hiruzen didn't count. They were spars so he has never felt threatened. His fight with Tsunade when they met; the concussion disoriented him too much to properly realize his situation and feel the fear of death. But the Oto-nin gave him that. And so, he was training harder than ever to never feel like that again. To never feel powerless. Not only for himself, but for his teammates especially Karin. Had he lost the fight he had no doubt that his opponent would have joined his friends in dealing with the rest of the retrieval team. He knew they would just have gotten killed. If he, himself, had been defeated then they would surely have been defeated too. Riku had no doubt about it. That's why he got up, that's **how** he got up.

"Alright, enough." Tsunade said after intensively watching her student struggle to get to his feet and take a stance despite being completely spent. She could help herself but be proud of him for going beyond his limits out of pure sheer will. Once again she was reminded partly of why she had come back and taken the hat. Her sensei had told her that Riku had the potential to become Hokage one day. She hadn't seen it at first. Sure he was a genius and a hard worker and someone of principle standing his ground. The last one she had been reminded when he defied her that fateful game night, all so he could protect his friend. Yet she hadn't seen it. It was only when they began their taijutsu training that she understood. She had only seen a glimpse of it during their very first meeting but now she saw it fully. Warudo Riku did not give up. If he did? It was to come back harder, better, faster and stronger than ever and succeed. He retreated yes but he didn't give up. When talked about it to her sensei he was glad that she finally witnessed why he was giving her apprentice such high praise. He confessed that every time he put Riku down, no matter what he did, Riku would always pick himself up. Hiruzen believed that because no one had ever cared for him, Riku accepted that only he could take care of himself. That no one would help him get up and that it was up to him to do it. She had found that particularly sad. Orphans usually made some friends at the orphanage, banding together in their unfortunate circumstances but Riku had been unable to do so. When she learned that Riku was way more open as a person and towards others mainly thanks to her, she felt a pang of pride but mainly happiness.

"I think I can go... one more round but... it's probably better to... stop there." he admitted and agreed, bending forward and putting his hands on his knees to catch his breath.

"You did well."

"In learning how to fall without hurting myself? Sure did." he joked, making Tsunade snort.

"You almost have the katas down perfectly. After a month of training, that's amazing! So don't sell yourself short."

"You're the shorty, sensei." he teased.

"I'll have you know my height is average."

"For teenagers."

With a thick mark on her forehead, Tsunade grabbed him by the collar and tossed him into the river. 20 feet away.

"Haven't you learned yet? Your cheek gets you into trouble." she told him after shushining to the river's bank

"Only the kind that I can handle." Riku replied as he swarmed back to land.

"Oh? You think you can handle me?" she inquired with one eyebrow raised.

"Depends on the situation."

In a flash the drenched Riku hugged Tsunade, drenching her too.

"Riku!" she vociferated and tried to push him away from her without any success. When he let go he tried to run but fell flat on the ground, completely out of steam.

"Well... That wasn't quite what I wanted to do."

"Just like I told you... your cheek gets you trouble." she said, cracking her fingers while looking at him as if he was prey.

He just laughed, not caring one bit. He was proud of his little payback or prank and didn't even object when she grabbed him by the ankle and dragged him away, the training over. After exiting the Hokage's private training ground and since she was already wet, she carried him on her shoulders and shushined home.

"Sensei?"

“Yes?”

“I haven't seen Neko-chan in a while. Either with her mask or without. Is she... Alright?”

“Not remotely, no. She retired from Anbu two weeks ago.”

“Oh. What should I do, sensei?”

“If I knew I wouldn't have spent twenty years away.” she replied dumping him on the tatamis in the living room. “By the way, that makes me think, T&I keep on bugging me for more of your seal. The one which increases nerves' sensitivity.”

“I may have a dozen more but I don't really have the time to make them.”

“Are they difficult to make?”

“Hmm...No? Not if you've mastered the beginner guide and the first ten chapters of the intermediary fuinjutsu volume? Otherwise, yes. A bit. If T&I make it a mission then I'll take it.”

“And how would you rank it?”

“Depends on how many tags they want. A hundred? If I count the price of the chakra paper and the ink and the value of my time and work... A C-rank to a B-rank? I think a fair price for them would be 2500 ryo for a single tag and I'm being generous.”

“I'll tell them that.” she nodded, finding the price fair. Explosive tags' price ranged from 1000 to 1500 ryo and were relatively easy to make.

“Please, tell them to be reasonable and not ask for thousands of them in one go. Even hundreds with clones...”

“I will.”

After a quick change of clones, she left for her office to start her day. Riku was left alone and after resting for a bit, got up and went to take a shower and change his clones too. He was really bothered by Yugao's disappearance. Worried even, so he decided to visit her. Of course he couldn't do that empty handed. One reason was, he didn't know how to comfort people. Another was because a gift would help better. After thinking for a bit he decided that flowers may do the job. Which was a good idea because among many flower shops in Konoha few belong to the Yamanaka clan and not to civilians. It's been a little more than over a month since he had become Tsunade's apprentice, yet very few of the villagers had changed their attitude towards him. Or their prices. Some even scowled and sneered more than before, commenting that *'He may have tricked Hokage-sama but he won't trick them'*. As if he could trick her

in the first place and as if civilians could do better than the Hokage. He really was baffled at how far their stupidity went and blind they could be and how prejudiced.

Entering the first Yamanaka flower shop he found, he found no one inside when a quick *'I'm with you in a second!'* came from the back room behind the shop's counter. He mentally winced when he recognized the voice of the shopkeeper on the spot.

*"Of all the Yamana flower shops in the village, I **had** to enter the one she's working in. Just my luck. Rotten luck."*

A familiar teenage blond exited the back room and froze for a second on the spot at his sight then continued as if nothing happened.

"Welcome to my family shop, Riku." Ino greeted in a polite but enthusiastic tone. In a rude way. It wasn't *'Warudo-san'*, or *'Riku-san'* or *'Riku-kun'*. No it was *'Riku'* without any suffix as if they've been best chums since the cribs or as if she considered him of a lower station than herself. Which in a way was true. She was the heiress of her clan and Riku was a clanless orphan but usually clan members followed basic decorum and used the -san suffix to not reflect badly on themselves and their clan.

"Hello, Ino-san." he replied neutrally. He really hated having to deal with her.

"What can I do for you?"

'Since it's a flower shop, sell me flowers.' had been on the tip of his tongue but he refrained, opting instead for a more polite approach and more importantly going straight to the point to get the hell out as fast as possible.

"I'd like to buy flowers for a friend. To cheer her up or bring her comfort."

"'Her', hum?" she repeated with a knowing smile.

"Yes, she lost her fiance during Suna's attack and hasn't been doing well ever since. She quit her job and made no public appearances. So I thought that I could help her a little, you know?"

"Oh! I'm sorry to hear that." Her attitude did a complete 180 hearing his explanation. "That she lost her fiance I mean! Not that you want to cheer her up!" She quickly corrected her mishap. "Hmm. Is she a close friend or...?"

"Her fiance was a good friend of mine. My teammate actually."

"Engaged at twelve? I knew that such a thing existed but it's mostly outdated and really for noble-"

"24. He was twenty four and she's twenty two." he corrected her.

“24? How was he...”

“Since we were 28 students graduating, one of us had to go directly to the genin corps. That was me. Got picked under the wings of a mix of chunin and Tokubetsu jonin team. That’s how I met him and then later, her.” he explained to the confused blonde.”

“Oh! I’m sorry to hear that. How come you went to the genin pool when you were Rookie of the year?”

“If Sandaime-sama and sensei are to be believed, because the jonin-sensei are fools. Or retards, depending on which one of them you ask.”

Ino took a moment to think about that. Her own sensei was good but very laid back in their training. Or had been before the end of the chunin exam’s second phase. Two days after the preliminaries that mostly change. He focused on Choji and went a bit harder on him, Shikamaru was sent to train for a month with a Taijutsu specialist friend and was supposed to be trained by Gai a bit soon. For her part, she had been sent to train under Anko. Thinking about the snake lady gave her mixed feelings. On one hand she got completely humiliated on the other, she could now proudly say that she was a proper kunoichi. Dieting and fangirling? She was done with it.

She knew from Sakura that Team7 sensei switched gears in his training regimen for them. They went from teamwork and a few jutsu exercises to down right all jutsu. Though it was only a plan. Sakura had to content herself with books and scrolls because Kakashi focused on Sasuke who was still in the exam (*‘For all the good it did to him. He lasted not even half a minute’*). She never said to her what Naruto was doing but Ino doubted she cared to begin with. Sakura had been more worried about Sasuke than her own training so Naruto... Stopping the thought there, her mind went back to Riku’s words or rather what they implied.

“You’re familiar with Sandaime-sama?” She knew he was familiar with the Godaime because he was her apprentice but she didn’t know he was acquainted with the Sandaime too.

“He was very interested in some seals of mine and my career progress. He was the one to help me train during the month before the finals.”

“YOU TRAINED WITH THE HOKAGE?!?”

Riku recoiled a bit at the volume Ino had used in her shout. The shock and disbelief on her face was clear. If any one else would have told her that, Ino wouldn’t have believed them but if she knew one thing about Riku besides the fact that he’s very talented and hard working, it was that he was honest.

“Training is a bit of a stretch. We had some Taijutsu spars but he mostly answered any questions I had or gave me a few tips, hints really, to achieve what I wanted to do. The

Sandaime is a ninjutsu specialist and I'm not into ninjutsu so he couldn't really 'train' me. I supposed he was making sure I wasn't wasting my potential. Now, about those flowers..."

"Huh? Oh! Yes! Your flowers! Some Lady's Mantle would do the job perfectly. They are exactly what you need." she said and got out from behind the counter to go to a rack on the right of the shop. She picked a light blue flower with hints of purple and showed it to him.

"They're beautiful."

"That they are. Lady's Mantles are usually given to show comforting love at a time you want to let someone know you are there for them." Ino explained.

"I'll... take a small bouquet please."

Ino nodded and picked half a dozen more. She went back to the counter wrapped them in paper then arranged them a bit to make them presentable.

"Anything else?"

"Hm... Do you have anything in purple for appreciation and admiration?"

"I do! Excellent color choice by the way." she replied with a smile then moved to another rack of flowers. "That's Lisianthus."

"I'll take a small bouquet too. Can the stem be shortened? It's for putting on an office desk."

"Sure."

She took half a dozen of them too, went back behind the counter and cut the stem with a quick swipe of a kunai he didn't know where she got from, then wrapped them too.

"Anything else?"

"No, I'm good. Thank you."

Paying the 5000 ryo he now owed her, he thanked her again and left the shop. The experience had been weird for him as Ino had not behaved like he had expected her to.

'Perhaps...' He dismissed quickly the idea that it was because she was working. Yamanaka Ino was not the kind of girl that would change her personality depending on the situation. At least outside shinobi business and then again that wasn't always a sure thing.

Sealing the Lisianthus inside his book of seals, he shushed away to Yugao's apartment. He realized that he was not ready for this when after knocking on the door Yugao opened it and looked awful. Her hair was a complete mess, she had dark bags under her eyes and her eyes were red, probably from crying.

"Eh..Hm.. Hello?" he said timidly.

"..."

'I... shit! I should have planned this better than just comforting flowers.' he voiced his thoughts while looking at her.

"... Those are for me?" the purple haired suddenly asked, seeing the bouquet in his hands.

"Huh? Yes! I mean... yes. I... sorry, I've never.." he replied as he presented them for her to take, which she did.

After looking at them for a moment, she brought them to her nose and smelled them. She turned around and went back inside her apartment, leaving the door open.

"Are you coming in?"

"Yes, yes, I'm coming! I mean..."

He hurriedly got into the flat and closed the door behind him. This wasn't the first he'd been there and so knew the way around. He found Yugao putting the flower in a vase on the dining table and Riku took a seat.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have come."

"Why not?" she replied, sitting down too.

"I... I've never comforted someone before. Never had someone to comfort to begin with, in truth. So... I don't really know what to do? You probably don't want me here."

"...Those flowers are a good start and... I don't mind you being here. I wouldn't have invited you in otherwise."

"... Out of politeness?" he answered tentatively and a very tiny smile crept at the corner of her lips.

"That's possible but not in this case."

"I... I see. Hum... Sensei told me you quitted... your job."

"I should have known you'd notice."

"Purple hair is not that common."

"You'd be surprised. There are five others with purple hair in the group."

"As nice as yours? I doubt it." he replied with a single eyebrow raised. She did too but didn't offer a comment on his compliment. Instead she answered his statement.

"I did quit, yes. I... couldn't perform my duties adequately."

"Are you retiring from the shinobi life altogether?"

"I don't know. Anbu has been my whole career."

"..."

"..."

"I miss him." he blurted out. "Kotetsu is always calling me kid, and Izumo is always subtly teasing me but he... he always treated me like a proper adult. Not just a kid with a headband playing ninja but like a real shinobi. He's the only one who ever did that. Even sensei or the sandaime still consider me a kid underneath their interactions with me. That... that always made me feel good about myself. Like... finally someone acknowledged my efforts properly. That I worked hard not because I wanted to be awesome or a cool ninja but because I had a goal in mind and dedicated everything to it."

"Haya-... He's always been good at cheering people up, despite his calm disposition." she admitted but not without having difficulties saying Hayate's name.

"I wonder... What would he say of me being here?"

"... Probably... Probably that you're not doing half bad of a job compared to others. And that I... should get myself back together." she whispered the last part about herself.

"I confess, I... haven't had the courage to visit him since the funeral."

"Why?"

"First mission I did as a chunin? Nearly got killed by running my mouth to sensei. The second one? The first time I was acting as a leader? Ended in failure and I nearly died. I survived because I got an incredibly lucky shot. I don't think I can show myself to him after those poor performances."

"Your first mission as a chunin, you brought back the Hokage to the village. No one has ever succeeded that feat in twenty years. Your first leading mission you protected your whole team. From what I heard the enemy was far outclassing your teammates and the last one far outclassed you. Yes, you failed the mission's objective but everyone got home safe and mostly sound thanks to your leadership and decisions. You shouldn't feel ashamed. That's what he would tell you."

"You think so?"

"I know so. He always talked about you, you know? One time he told me: *'Yugao, one day he'll be at the top. Maybe as Hokage, maybe not but he'll be at the top.'*"

"...I really suck at this. I came here to comfort you and you're the one comforting me." he lamented, making her chuckle softly. He really liked that sound, he had missed it. "Do you think you could...Accompanied me there?"

"..."

She took time to answer. She wasn't sure she could. It hurt so much. Too much. But if Riku, a thirteen year old boy who had come to visit her out of concern, just found the courage to go there despite being afraid of doing so... She could too. Hayate would berate her for not helping him.

"There is only one way to find out."

She stood up and went to put a coat and a cap on. Ready for going out they both left their flat and went to the cemetery where they paid their respect to their loved one. Riku pulled out the sealed bouquet from his bouquet and placed it in front of the tombstone.

"They mean appreciation and admiration or so I've been told. They were supposed to be for sensei but... I think this is better that way."

Yugao didn't say anything and looked at her fiancé's grave in silence. It took everything she had to not break down crying. She was about to when she felt a hand grab hers softly. That was bold of Riku to do that. They didn't know each other very well. As Uzuki Yugao they had met from time to time at the bar after his team came back from a mission and as Neko, she never had real interaction with him beyond the physical reprimand she gave him for being disrespectful towards the Sandaime. Yet Yugao said nothing because she understood that it was more for his sake he did that than hers. It made sense. Riku had never lost any one he cared about before. He was too young when his parents died and the reasons behind their death had detached him from them. Especially his father who callously took his own life in front of him.

"I suddenly have a craving for dango from Dango Heaven." he said out of the blue.

“Dango? Why dango specifically? And from that place?” she asked after blinking her surprise and confusion away.

“Because I’m pretty sure Anko is there and messing with her will cheer me up.”

She let out a little snort at how serious he had said that.

“Anko, huh? Not ‘thot’?”

“No. ‘Thot’ is only to her face to annoy her.”

Yugao didn’t laugh but she had a smile on her lips, bigger than the one she briefly had back at her apartment. Giving one last look to Hayate’s grave, she turned around and left. Still holding Riku’s hand.

Chapter 25: Dodging Kunais

Senju Tsunade was in a good mood. The main reason was that her day was going great so far. She has finally been able to convince the clans that the reinstatement of the Military Police, like Riku had suggested, was a good idea and beneficial for the village. She had discussed it at length with Hiruzen then with the elders. Except Danzo, they all have been on board. With the ‘Last Uchiha’ defecting, Tsunade got some flack from the civilians (which she didn’t really give two shit about) but more importantly was able to abolish the law making the MP an Uchiha privilege without having the others clan on her back. She had argued that the Uchiha were gone and the last two of them were now missing-nin. Since the clan was unable to do its duty because it didn’t really exist anymore and that a MP was needed, taking back their privilege on it was necessary. From there, she presented her plan to reform the MP which was well received by every clan. Except one. The only clan that opposed it was the Fuma clan. They were distantly related to the Uchiha and believed it was their duty (read here: their right) to take the mantle. Thankfully the Fuma clan was small, less than half a hundred members and not all of them were shinobi. It wasn’t possible for them to be in charge alone like the Uchiha did. When the head of the Fuma clan said that he had no problem welcoming ninjas from all origins, things took a turn for the better. After some back and forth, Tsunade agreed to the Fuma clan being at the head of the MP for now but when the time would come for a change of leadership the Hokage and the elders would be the one to select the successor and would take into consideration the recommendation of the retiring MP chief. It wasn’t perfect. It wasn’t quite what she had in mind and wanted but close, so she let it go and moved on from this topic.

Something else she was happy about was Riku’s progress in his training. His Taijutsu had gotten better at a rate she had never seen before. Now he could last a ten minute spar without eating the dust and her going easy. All that meant was she could now

teach him her super strength and start on instructing him on her **Strength of a Hundred Seals**. He also increased his proficiency with the **Mystical Palm** only killing once the fish in twenty tries.

Her own training was going well too, thanks to the use of kage bunshin. She was past the first stage on wind and well into the second stage. She had received some tips from Riku about how the wind element felt and how to imagine it. For his part Riku was done with earth and had chosen lightning next. With wind he had access to fast, wide and precise attack, with earth the best defense and he went with lightning because if wind failed because of the lack of piercing power, lightning would not.

Another reason for her great mood was her experiment with purging from poison and healing of an amputated limb which had worked. Her sensei's left arm was now ready to be reattached. As such, with the meeting with the clans head done with, she went to the hospital for the scheduled procedure. She found Riku present, speaking with the Sandaime who was sitting on the operating table. Both were dressed appropriately for what was going to happen. Hiruzen was wearing a hospital gown and Riku a surgeon outfit. It was wholly unnecessary but protocol was protocol.

"Ready, sensei?"

"I am, Tsunade. I can't wait to finally have two arms again. While my life with only one has not been that difficult, sometimes it is very irritating. I can't open much of anything with a single hand. Mostly notably..."

"Your tobacco pouch?" guessed Riku.

"Yes."

"Well, that ends today. Lay down." She picked up from between her breasts her own seal book that Riku had made especially for her and unsealed the limb while Hiruzen said as instructed.

Tsunade used a jutsu to put the former Hokage unconscious while Riku injected his stump with a strong anesthetic. They waited a minute or two for the effect to take hold, then Tsunade began to slightly vertically cut the stump to reveal everything under the skin from muscle to bones after cutting the blood's flow with a tourniquet. Quickly, Riku removed the sterilizing tag on the cut off limb and connected it to the stump properly or so he thought.

"Turn it a bit more towards me. A bit more. Perfect!"

She brought out a needle and looped a sterilized thin steel wire to it. She began sewing the two parts of the arm together to set it in place because the real treatment that would need the use of the **Mystical Palm** would take a lot of time and she couldn't ask Riku to not even twitch during all of it. Before she could start, Riku interrupted her.

“Won’t it go faster with a kage bunshin?”

“Huh. Yes, actually.”

“You really need to think of ways to maximize their utility, sensei.”

“Noted.” She replied and made a bunshin that took Riku’s place near the table and began working in tandem with her original.

The first part of the healing was relatively easy, getting the two parts of the bones to fuse back together, what was harder was reconnecting the nerves, veins, arteries and blood vessels together. Some were really small and the work was really delicate, because of how thin and flimsy they were. It was what took the most time in truth. The mental focus was so great that her exhaustion quickly manifested by a pearl of sweat on her forehead. Thankfully Riku was there with a sponge to wipe everything. A brief thought crossed her mind to actually let shadow clones handle surgeries since they do not sweat and could use unlimited chakra pills if their reserve became low. She filled that idea for later and focused back on the task at hand.

After two hours the work was done.

“The wire stays to make sure the job is holding up properly, is that it?”

“Yes. That’s the inconvenience with the bones. They’re easy to heal but the new cells are weak because they don’t have enough vitamin D in them. With a good healthy diet full of it, the wire can be removed by the end of the week.” she replied.

“Now, we just have to wake him up and test the nerves or is that unnecessary?”

“You never know with nerves because there is a bit of a psychological factor involved. Sensei, could very well move his arm like he used to, struggle, or fail to because in his mind it’s not properly accepted yet that his arm is back. He may suffer from phantom pains in that case.”

“Phantom pains with reattached limbs? That wasn’t mentioned in that book about nerves, neither was the part about the possibility of moving the arm as if nothing ever happened.”

“Not surprising. It’s a very rare occurrence. More than 97% of people who got their limbs reattached take some effort to be able to use it again.”

Riku nodded and used a medical jutsu to wake Hiruzen up. In the meantime, Tsunade let her clone clean the bit of blood that had dripped during the procedure while she removed her own gloves and dumped them in the appropriate trash can.

“Hmm...” grunted a still a bit out of it Hiruzen.

“Sandaime-sama?”

“Y-yes?”

The man's eyes began to focus bit by bit until it was clear to Tsunade and Riku that he was out of the fog.

“How are you feeling, sensei?”

“A bit groggy.”

“That's normal, anything else?”

“N- oh!” he looked down at his attached arm and smiled. “It itches a bit where my stump used to be; No, it's more like... pricklings? Just like when I fall asleep on a part of my body and then I release it.”

“That's the blood rushing back in.” Riku commented. “It also means the anesthetic is or has worn off. See. Told you my calculations were right down to the minute, sensei!” he smiled cheekily, making Tsunade roll her eyes.

With a finger she channeled fire chakra to emit a bit of heat, then touched Hiruzen's arm.

“Do you feel that?”

“Yes. It's warm.”

“Alright, you felt the pressure of my finger and the higher than normal temperature. And now?” she asked, channeling water instead of fire.

“It's colder.”

“Good. Your temperature receptors are sensing hot and cold. Okay. Slowly, try to move your index.”

Looking at his hand, Hiruzen mentally commanded his finger to move but nothing happened. Focusing a bit more, his finger began to move as if it was having a seizure.

“Alright, the motor nerves are working.”

“Badly.” Hiruzen commented, not happy with the results.

“For now but it's normal. With time and practice, you should be able to recover total usage of your arm, hands and fingers.”

“Just don’t think of using it for hand seals. At least not yet. Try to will simple actions, like clenching and releasing.” added Riku.

“Since you’re already moving it so fast, therapy shouldn’t last long. Now as you’ve noticed there is still some wire in your arm. It’s to stabilize the healing done. It shouldn’t stay there for long. A week at most if you’re eating a lot of Vitamin D”

“So anything that has milk, eggs or fish.” Riku explained.

“Pretty much.” Tsunade confirmed. “Of course tobacco is off limits but you don’t care, don’t you?”

“Nope.”

He had replied with an unrepentant grin and Riku helped him sit up.

“Even though it’s not working properly for now, it feels good to be whole.”

“Good to hear, Sandaime-sama. I just hope I won’t have to disarm you again for my promotion to Jonin.”

Hiruzen snorted at the joke and began to laugh while Tsunade cuffed Riku for it though was amused herself.

“Let’s hope not.”

Riku made a bandage around the former wound and gave Hiruzen the order to not wash that part of his arm for a few days, to which Tsunade nodded in agreement. Afterward, a nurse that had been waiting outside came to take Hiruzen away.

“A shame that very few are interested in the medical field. Healing someone feels way better than taking a life.” Riku commented aloud.

“That it does.”

“Is that why you got into it?”

“Partly. I also found the human body fascinating.”

“What now, sensei?”

“Now... Back to paperwork.”

“Good Luck!” Before he could get away, she put a hand on his shoulder and stopped him on the spot.

“Now, where do you think you’re going?”

The evil smirk drawn on her lips made him realize that he was doomed. Letting out a sigh of resignation, he removed his surgeon outfit and followed her back to her office. When they got there, the elders were waiting and Riku thanked Kami for that. He had never been so glad to see the old coots. Doing his best to hide his smirk, he greeted them and said goodbye to his sensei. So fast that an observer would have believed he teleported away.

Now that he was free, he didn’t quite know what to do with himself. Karin was working at the hospital, Yugao was who knows where, his senpais were on gate duty probably sleeping the day away and Anko... He was not particularly interested in dealing with her, right now. Besides, she was probably in T&I working. Lunch was in an hour and he didn’t particularly feel hungry. Training was done by his shadow clones. One on lightning manipulation, one on fuinjutsu and one on chakra control to refine it even more.

Listing all the things he wished to do but couldn’t or wasn’t interested in, he remembered that having no friends (Karin aside) of his own age sucked. Ever since the day he unlocked his chakra at six he had never really had a day where he could relax. It was by choice, true but the unintended consequence was that now he didn’t know what to do with himself. Kami may have known however as when he turned at a small corner at the end of a narrow street he bumped into someone. Someone he didn’t want to see, possibly for the rest of his life if he could.

“Sorry, Ino-san.” he apologized.

Next to her was Hinata. ‘*That’s new*’ he mused. Both girls were not really friends during their days at the Academy. Ino has been a boisterous queen bee and a Sasuke fangirl. While Hinata has been... Hinata. Quite the wallflower. Seeing the two together, many questions went through his mind.

“That’s alright, Riku.” Once again she used no suffix and smiled at him.

“Hinata-san.” He greeted the Hyuga with a nod then went around them.

“Wait!” the blonde called out. Riku tried his best and succeeded in containing the tired sigh he wanted to let out.

“Yes?” he replied, turning around.

“Are you free? Hinata and I were on our way to grab some fertilizer and with your help we won’t have to make as many trips!”

“I...”

“Great! Let’s go!” she exclaimed without giving him the time to answer.

“W-Wha-”

She took his arm in hers and began to lead him away. Riku was completely dumbfounded and it showed on his face. He turned his head to look at Hinata for help but got none. The young bluenette had a tired and sorry smile on her face that was screaming ‘*Welcome to the club*’.

Five minutes later and they were at the market. Ino was being Ino hand talked with merchants to maintain a good relationship and to get better prices. Meanwhile Riku and Hinata looked at her in silence until he decided that it really was too awkward.

“I’m surprised you’re hanging out with her, Hinata-san. I don’t remember the two of you being close friends.”

“It’s... a recent development. After I was done convalescing during the Chunin Exam, Kurenai-sensei gave me the choice to undergo some harsh self-confidence training. I met Ino there and we got closer by suffering together. We realized that we both have a passion for flowers and we began spending time together outside training.”

“I did noticed during our mission to retrieve Sasuke that you were more sure of yourself. I’m happy for you.”

“Thank you.” she answered with a smile.

“That makes me question why Ino would need such training? The notion that she needs self-confidence is mind boggling.”

“Ah! No!” she refuted with a chuckle. “She doesn’t need it one bit. Her training was different, we just trained under the same teacher.”

“... Let me guess. Pineapple purple hair, dirty mouth, obsession and addiction to dango, violence and sex and dressing like a worker in the red light district?”

Hinata laughed at that. He had aptly described Anko to a T.

“You’re familiar with Anko-sensei?”

“Beyond being our protector for the second phase of the exam? A bit. She’s friends with my senpais and I met her a few times or ten when I was dragged by them to a bar after a mission. A bit insane but I believe she’s mostly a good... I was going to say exemple but no... Teacher? A good teacher for young kunoichis.”

“That she is if being a kunoichi is what you want. Otherwise...”

"You'll just go home, cry then drop out or retire."

"Yes. Pretty much."

"And you did none of this." remarked Riku with a smile which was answered in kind.

"And I did none of this."

"Confidence really suits you well."

"T-thank you." she blushed and stuttered a bit at the compliment.

"Ah! Not used to compliment or praise?" he inquired and he got a 'no' from Hinata shaking their head. "A shame. Especially when you were the best kunoichi in the class in my opinion."

"Really?" she asked, a bit surprised.

"Yes. You were dutiful, hard working and not a fangirl. The last one put you de facto above the rest but the first two earned you the place. Of all our classmates you and Shino were the ones I would have liked to be on a team with because I knew you would take the training seriously. By the way, how is Neji?"

"Neji-nii-san?" she asked, blinking. She didn't expect Riku to change the subject like that and to talk about Neji of all people.

"Yes. Is he still... well, him?" he added and that made her laugh.

"No. His defeat and his wounds at your hand took a huge toll on him. That prompted my father to have a talk with him about Hizashi-ojisan and that changed his outlook on life for the better. He has recovered completely and is now training harder than ever. I think he hopes for a rematch."

"I don't mind but I have a very busy schedule so he'd have to warn me at least a week in advance."

"I will tell him."

"Hey! I'm done! You're ready to carry everything?" Ino shouted from the other side of the stand.

Riku sighed and brought out his seal book from his back pouch.

"Storage seals are not that difficult." he lamented making Hinata giggle.

Both Ninja joined the extraverted blonde and Riku sealed everything.

“Storage seals are really neat.” comments Ino as Riku put the book in its usual place.
“Do you think you can teach me?”

‘Fuck no!’ “Fuinjutsu is difficult, time consuming and expensive.”

“I have plenty of the last two and I like a good challenge.”

“I also have a very busy schedule.”

“You said you were free right now.” the blonde insisted.

“Actually, you dragged me away before I could tell you that I wasn’t. It’s lunch soon and I have to make sensei’s meal. I’m already late as it is.” he lied effortlessly and ripped the page with the seal containing the many bags of fertilizer and handed it to her. “Another time, maybe?” *‘Like never.’*

“I suppose there is no other choice. I’ll hold you to that!” Ino replied with a slightly disappointed tone.

“Sure.” *‘Please forget, please forget, please forget.’* “Hinata-san. Have a nice day.” he gave them a nod and a wave of the hand (it was more for Hinata than Ino in truth) and took his leave.

‘Kunai dodged. Congrats to me. Now... what the hell should I do?!’