

Out For Karma: Naruto

Chapter 06: First Blood

After a peaceful night and a healthy breakfast, the small group took the road again early in the morning. Everything went as well as the previous day, right up until almost noon. Riku felt something he knew well. The sensation of being watched. Immediately he warned his teammates without making unusual moves to alert the observer that he had been found out.

“Senpais.”

“Be prepared to use the barrier on the cart. Munehisa-san...”

“I’ll hide inside the cart.”

“Thank you. Don’t worry, we got this.”

Ten minutes later they entered a small grove they needed to go through. Once deep enough where going back was impossible, an arrow pierced the air towards the client. Kotetsu was fast to react and knock the projectile away just as Riku activated the barrier less than a second later. A translucent white-ish box surrounded the entirety of the cart, including the horse in a flash. With their charge protected, Riku drew a kunai in his dominant hand and shurikens in his off one. A dozen bandits came from behind the trees from each side of the road.

‘That’s a lot.’

Getting to his feet, Riku took position in the middle of the roof of the cart to act as support to the two chunins. He switched the kunais in his hand for his journal after throwing the shurikens which hit three bandits and exploded into a small deflagration taking their head and them out for good. Quickly, opening the journal with the thumb of the hand holding it he released the storage seal with his left, making two dozen

shurikens appear. Not wasting any time and with Izumo having to deal with three less enemies, Riku turned to Kotetsu's side.

"One Flash in one!" he yelled.

(Translation: Kotetsu, Flashbang in one second)

Throwing five shuriken at the more dense group (a group of 5). The chunin jumped a few feet backward and closed his eyes for a second right when the shurikens hit. The flash of light resulting from the activation of tags on the ninja star, blinded the whole group of five and distracted the rest with the loud bang. The moment the bang was heard, Kotetsu opened his eyes and pounced, two kunai in hands. In less than ten seconds four of the distracted bandits out of seven were killed, while Riku threw two kunais that ended up in the end of two of them. Feeling like his teammate could take care of the five blinded and the one not, by himself, Riku turned to the other side to help Izumo again.

"Two, Wind in two!" he yelled differently this time.

(Translation: Izumo, Great Breakthrough in two seconds)

Doing the hand seals for the great breakthrough, Riku took a big inspiration while Izumo crouched down and used chakra on his feet to stick to the ground. The bandits were sent flying by the powerful gust of wind and most fell on their ass or were completely laid on her back. Riku threw two more kunais which found two other forehead and were picked up by Izumo from the bodies as the chunin had used his and it was faster to use Riku's than to retrieve some from his push.

In less than a minute, the battle was over.

"Got one alive!" Kotetsu shouted from his side.

Riku immediately got down the roof and went to check on Munehisa.

"We think we got them all, sir but just in case please stay inside for a bit more."

The man nodded frantically and Riku turned around to see Izumo coming his way, tossing him two kunais that he caught.

"Good job." he heard Kotetsu say from behind him, pulling a restrained bandit.

"Are you going to be alright?" the calmest and more level headed of his senpais asked with a bit of worry.

"I..."

With the adrenaline in his body running low, Riku began to breathe harshly. Raising a finger as if to say 'wait a moment.' He hopped among the nearby trees out of sight and vomited. Once his stomach was empty and he was done heaving, he picked up his journal, pulled out his toothbrush and some toothpaste. After removing the taste of the bile from his mouth he packed everything back and went back to the cart.

"I'm sorry."

"That's alright, kid. Everyone reacts like that the first time they take a life. No need to apologize or feel ashamed."

"That's not... It's not that I took a life that... I accepted the need for it. It's... the gore. I mean... I blew up their head with a shuriken, there is blood, bones and brain matter everywhere! That's just... Nasty! I mean... a kunai to the neck with a fountain of blood... I think I could handle it but **that**... Ugh..." He replied and felt the bile rising again when he thought about the three headless bandits.

"... Well... You are handling it better than most." Izumo noted warily.

"I've been hunting for a couple years for food now. I'm no stranger to the act of killing but I do it cleanly."

"Aaah, so that's why." Kotetsu exclaimed, nodding.

"That explains why you didn't hesitate one bit. I feel a bit relieved."

"That I'm not a psycho?"

"“Yeah.”"

"You don't have to worry about that. I aim to be a medic too, remember? That doesn't mix well with a bloodthirsty psychopath."

"No, but we've seen stranger things, so we wouldn't discount it."

Riku nodded and went to offer some comfort and support to their client, activating a mute seal on the cart. That way Munehisa wouldn't hear the potential scream of the survivor that Kotetsu and Izumo would question.

The 'interview' lasted five minutes at best before the chunins were done. To avoid their client seeing the bloodbath, Riku took control of the cart until they were out of the grove and gave back the reins before going back to his original position at the back of the cart's roof.

From what the interrogation had revealed, there weren't any more bandits in the area. In fact the reason they were here in the first place is because it was a stop for them. They

intended to go two hundred miles east, where towns were not as close and the road more difficult to travel.

Yet since the area wasn't really guarded because of the proximity of Himasu from Hiwara, they thought they could restock in supplies to continue their journey. Unfortunately for them they stumbled on the one merchant who had hired ninjas just in case.

'Such bad luck.' thought Riku leaf in hand trying to cut it in half. *'Let's hope that guy was telling the truth because I don't feel like fighting anymore during this mission and using more of my shurikens.'*

Kami may have heard him because the rest of the day and the day after that was a smooth journey. Munehisa was grateful to bring him, his horse and his cargo in one piece back home and praised their skills and professionalism. He didn't give them a bonus but offered them dinner and a room in his home for the night, while swearing that if he needed to travel again he would contact Konoha.

When they got back to the village the day after in the evening, his senpais told him to be present at the Hokage's tower at 8 the next morning, to write the report of the mission, because it was something he needed to learn, and to make a verbal report to the sandaime.

"You did really well, Kid. Honest."

"Go back home, take a good hot bath and rest. Tomorrow is training day."

Riku nodded and wished them a good night. When he made it home it was a bit past 7pm. He didn't bother with cooking dinner and instead brought out one of the katsudon he had bought while in Himasu. Once done eating, he took a quick hot shower and trained a bit his wind manipulation (recreating his used shurikens was too long and boring). So far he could cut a third of a leaf with concentration and a bit of time. Knowing that cutting the leaf completely was a futile effort with the small amount of time he had before going to bed, he trained in increasing the speed and decreased the focus needed to cut the third he had achieved. He also believed that instead of forcing the whole thing, it was better to focus on his strength: his chakra control.

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"You really have a neat writing." commented Izumo when he read the report that Riku made.

"Hours spent on it." the young genin replied with a shrug.

"Why?"

“That’s because, Kotetsu-senpai, when you make a seal, calligraphy is really important, otherwise at best the tag doesn’t work at worst...”

“At worst?” the bandaged chunin asked, curious about that part that Riku was hesitant to say.

“It either explodes in your face, that’s the most common effect or depending on the seal you’re working on and how much bad luck you have, you either end up in another dimension or your body explodes from the inside.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Nope. I... A squirrel got all his internal organs stuck in a defective storage seal when he landed on it as I was writing it.”

“...”

“You asked, Kotetsu-senpai!” defended Riku as he saw the green face his interlocutor had.

“Next time, don’t answer that!”

“Fine! Fine! Kami, you’re reacting like you’re the one that had to witness and clean up the mess!”

“Wait, is that why you were all squishy with the bandits?!” Izumo realized and inquired.

“Yes! At least that time I didn’t have to spend an hour cleaning the blood and... You know what? Let’s stop talking about this.”

“Agreed!”

From Izumo words, Riku’s first try at a written report was more than good enough to be given like that and so was. The scowl Riku got from the chunin at the Mission Assignment Desk was brushed off, a force of habit at this point but knew that he had to be vigilant. Kotetsu and Izumo received their pay amounting to 27 500 ryo each without even looking at it. That represented almost 40% of the total amount for the mission each which left Riku with the last 20% or 15 000 ryo. That was an equitable division of the money since Riku was only a genin and not a small sum for him. When he got his envelope with the bills inside however, Riku followed his hunch and did something really disrespectful. He opened it and counted the money, right in front of the Chunin who gae it to him.

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Hiruzen had, as per usual, his pipe in his mouth. Taking a puff without really thinking about it, he looked at the scene in front of him with perplexity. Like everyone that has been with him in the room before at least a minute ago, he was silent and tried to understand what he was seeing.

'Izumo and Kotetsu reporting on their mission. Check. Warudo Riku standing in line beside them - probably because he was on the mission too but that's a thought for later. Check. So far that's fairly standard. Riku holding by their scalp a crying chunin, with a bloody broken nose, a broken hand and what looked like a paralysis tag on their forehead... Check but it shouldn't. I don't compute. What the hell happened?'

Giving a look which meant 'Explain. Now' at the two peas in the pods, he waited for his answer. It was Izumo who gave it to him.

"Dorobou-san... withheld..."

"**Stole.**" interjected Riku in a murdering tone prompting the chunin to correct his words.

"Stole part of Riku's pay and got caught red-handed. Riku was ready to let it go provided he got the full amount of his money but..."

"The likes of me don't deserve to be paid and that I should be grateful to even get what I was given in the first place. Quote, unquote." Riku interjected again.

"Yeah... That's about it." commented Kotetsu right before his best friend continued with his explanation. The bandaged man was doing his very best to not crack up and laugh at the situation.

"Riku gave him an ultimatum. His money or... well, you can see for yourself, Hokage-sama."

At that point Hiruzen's eyes focus on Riku for a deeper explanation.

"Or I would break his nose against the desk counter, break his hand for thievery, put a paralysis tag on him and drag him before you so he could answer for his breaking of the law **and** breaking the trust of any active shinobi towards the Mission Assignment Desk. If he's stealing money from me for something my mother did, I can't even begin to imagine what he would do to other comrades he simply doesn't like for what **they** did."

Riku was playing with words and everyone in the room knew it. The chance that Doborou was stealing from more than just Riku (the possibility of Uzumaki Naruto aside) was low. He wouldn't dare do that to a jonin or another chunin because he'd be found out sooner rather than later. A genin? It would take a bit of time. Riku? Nobody would probably care despite his complaints. However Riku put the possibility out there. Right in the open, that he may not be the only one. The MAD was the section of the village shinobis had trust in the most. It was there that they earned their livelihood. From taking

a mission to getting payment. If shinobis couldn't trust the people behind the desk giving them missions where most of the time they would risk their lives but also giving them their hard earned money... They may not want to do missions anymore, find other sources, legal or not, of income or simply defect for greener pastures. After all, why risk your life for a village that fucks you over? The propaganda can only do so much, especially once the shinobi have experienced the cruelty of the world and realized that the idyllic lifestyle they were told about at the academy was bullshit.

By casting doubt on the MAD with proof and witnesses backing it up, Riku not only just exonerated himself of any wrongdoing but he presented himself as a victim and someone loyal to the village by upholding the law.

Hiruzen's answer was swift. He made a few hand signs and an Anbu appeared out of nowhere near Doborou and Riku. It took everything for the latter to not react to the sudden appearance of the kunoichi with long purple hair and a neko mask. Like drawing a kunai and attacking on pure reflex.

"Bring him to T&I. I want to know if it's an isolated incident or not."

"Yes, Hokage-sama." replied the kunoichi and dragged the paralyzed man outside the room.

"You'll get your full pay Riku and a bit more from Dorobo's own pocket."

"Thank you, Hokage-sama." the addressed genin replied with a polite short bow.

"Now, let's get back to proper business. I'd like to know why you came to make a verbal report for a C-rank ... Then why a genin promoted three months ago is already doing the missions of this difficulty."

Izumo and Kotetsu looked at each other to have a silent conversation but before they could decide on something Riku spoke.

"It was discovered after the interrogation of a survivor from a bandit group that attacked us, that there is movement towards the east for a more lucrative business for outlaws. The area between Himasu and Hiwara is a perfect spot to take a break before crossing the mountains. Not heavily guarded or protected making it an easy area to target in the short term. Since our client, Munehisa Hideki, was very pleased by our team's performance and the current or future change in safety in the area, he spoke about making more requests to the village of the escort kind and spreading the word to other merchants in both towns. We believed those three facts were important enough for a verbal report."

"Hmm... It is." Hiruzen nodded, drawing a puff of his pipe, then looked at the two chunins. "Excellent report, Riku. You can go."

Once again Riku gave Hiruzen a short but respectful bow and left the room. With the genin gone, a more detailed report about the mission itself and not its results was forwarded by Riku's teammates leaving Hiruzen pensive.

"That is a great deal of information you just told me about him. I'd like to know how you got acquainted in the first place."

"Well... Three months ago, Iruka came to us to cash in the favor we owed him, Hokage-sama." began Izumo.

"I'll take a chance; to train Riku?"

"Not exactly."

"No?" That surprised Hiruzen a bit.

"No, sir. He just asked that we test the kid and if we think he was good enough, to help him a bit here and there." said Kotetsu.

"Beyond the basic knowledge that every genin should know, it was more about giving him a few tips and a few spars to practice."

"Obviously, he passed the test since you brought him on a C-rank."

"Passed? He completely trashed Kotetsu, Hokage-sama."

"Hey!" the called out man protested.

That piece of information surprised Hiruzen so much that he choked on the smoke he was inhaling. Izumo and Kotetsu were not the best ninja around. By far. They were a bit above average for chunins but that was it. Nonetheless that Riku 'trashed' one of them was quite the shock. That should not be possible.

"To be fair, I wasn't taking him seriously, he had just graduated two days before our meeting."

"Let that be a lesson to you, be always on your guard. Now please explain to me how that happened?"

"Well... We were supposed to meet at 9 or 9:30 am at training ground 11. He was already there, making some seals..."

Hearing that Riku, a genin, was making seals was both a surprise and a worry. Fuinjutsu was a very dangerous art. However, Hiruzen said nothing and simply nodded, listening to the rest of the story.

"I casted a genjutsu on him, to test his surrounding awareness. He dispelled it before the jutsu could even work."

"Oh? How so?"

"Apparently, when someone makes a seal they are hyper focused on their chakra. As such in that moment, any intrusion of foreign chakra..."

"Is as subtle as an elephant in a tiny porcelain shop, sir." Kotetsu joked, making Hiruzen smile.

"Fuinjutsu requires precise chakra control though I never thought about the utility of using a genjutsu when one drew a seal."

"The worst moment to use one, sir. Or so Riku said. Anyway, Kotetsu was the one to test him with a spar..."

From there, what Hiruzen heard was both pleasing and terrifying. Riku seemed to be a prodigy in his own right which was good for the village but at the same time it worried him. Riku had no ties to the village so to speak. No family, no friends and cherry on the cake the villagers and some shinobi blamed him for his mother's actions. With the young teen's mind and thirst for knowledge, Hiruzen saw the possibility of having another Orochimaru on his hands and one in a life was more than enough. Danzo would have either eliminated the boy or recruited him in his Root. Thankfully Hiruzen was not Danzo and the Hokage. He will have to find a way to make sure Riku would not turn out like his traitorous student and be loyal to the village.

'Or perhaps I am biased. Maybe he is more like Kakashi or Itachi or Minato. Come on, Hiruzen, if you start looking at people with tinted glasses you have for Orochimaru, you'd only make it a self fulfilling prophecy. And that's not the Will of Fire.' the Hokage chastised himself mentally and instead asked the question on his lips.

"A kawarimi using air?"

"Had I not seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed it either." replied Izumo, while Kotetsu picked a tag from his back pouch.

"He gave me a few of those for training in that. They released a pink gas making it easier to practice. The amount of chakra is greater but I think it's because I compensate for the lack of chakra control needed to pull it off."

"Mind doing a demonstration?"

Kotetsu nodded and made the hands seals from the kawarimi. He found himself on the other side of the room and nothing was found in his previous location.

“That’s brilliant. This, those explosive shurikens, those new kinds of explosive tags, his ‘book of seals’.”

“If you can forgive me for my bluntness, Hokage-sama, I believe Warudo Riku is a prodigy in his own right. A real one. Like Kakashi and Uchiha Itachi. How no jonin wished to take him in their team is beyond us.”

“Our theory is that they were either high as hell or are complete morons, sir.”

‘You have no idea how close you are to the truth, Kotetsu.’ thought Hiruzen, cursing inwardly three particular shinobis. “And he is self-taught at that...”

“He is Hogake-sama.”

“... Do you know the extent of his skills?”

“Not really, sir. He’s good at fuinjutsu, is interested in iryojutsu, works on his wind affinity and has an insane chakra control. Beyond that...”

“It’s a secret.” Commented Hiruzen but was contradicted by Izumo.

“Not exactly. He’s... private, mostly. He won’t tell you by himself what he’s capable of but if you ask he answers truthfully. If it’s something he started working on, he dismisses it as unimportant but if he’s close to completing his project, you’ll get a genuine answer. He’s not shy at all in the latter case and is even eager to share a summary if not a detailed explanation if you’re interested in the subject beyond simple curiosity.”

“We took him for the mission because we believed he was ready for it and to give him some real experience. At the rate is progressing, the kid will do more than well at the coming chunin exam.”

“Kotetsu and I planned to take him on more C-rank and perhaps find him a slot in a team for it.”

“You believe he will be ready for a promotion in three months?”

“Yes. Honestly, the only thing we’ve yet to see is his leadership skills.”

“And C-ranks will tell you about that.”

“Yes, Hokage-sama.”

That information interested Hiruzen greatly. If Riku, a fresh genin, could reach the third stage of the chunin exam and do well, it would reflect positively on Konoha as a whole.

'Maybe it's time I integrate myself in his life. Creating ties and making sure he stays loyal. Hmm... Perhaps an informal meeting? Some questions about his 'book of seals'? Yes, that will do. It's inconspicuous enough.'

Dismissing the two chunins and getting back to work, Sarutobi Hiruzen began to plan in detail how to cement a young prodigy's undying loyalty to the village.

Chapter 07: Lovely morning

Up in the trees surrounding training ground 11, Hiruzen observed with fascination his target. It didn't take long for one of his most trusted Anbu to find out their schedules and habits. Up with the sun around 6:00 am, present at the training ground at 6:30 am. Thirty minutes of stretching and light physical activity which included the taijutsu katas of the Academy. At 7:00, the target pulled out a black book from his back pouch, summoned from a storage seal, fuinjutsu tools, a small coffee table and began to draw seals. The Hokage had to admit, his target had a very neat handwriting, perfect for the art. After a few tags were created, he used his book to summon shurikens and began to carve them meticulously. At first he recognized the seal, one of the few used interchangeably for explosive tags but then the next ones, he had absolutely no clue. When the time approached 8:00am, Hiruzen signaled his presence. He had wanted at first to test the knowledge Izumo had given him about the timing of a genjutsu and fuinjutsu but decided otherwise. That wasn't a good approach to get acquainted with someone you wanted to build ties with. Instead, Hiruzen acted like a normal person and not a shinobi. He dropped off the tree and simply walked towards his target to greet him.

"Hello, Riku."

The simple but out of nowhere greeting had made Riku tense on the spot, Hiruzen didn't miss that, especially Riku's hand tightening around the brush he was using and ready to be thrown like a senbon.

"Good morning, Hoka..."

"Stay seated, stay seated." the sandaime said, waving his hand to dismiss Riku, standing up to give him the proper respect for his rank. Riku obeyed and opened his book which was lying on the side of the coffee table. In a matter of seconds, a pillow to sit on instead of the ground was summoned and given to Hiruzen who gladly accepted it.

"What can I do for you, Hokage-sama?"

"Many things. Mostly satisfy my curiosity."

"Your... I'm just a genin, Hokage-sama. I'm confused as to why you came yourself instead of sending someone to ask your questions. I'm sure there are more important

matters for you to take care of... Not like you can't do what you want or anything..." The last part was said in such a panic and rush that Hiruzen almost laughed.

"I'm not technically here though. I'm just a kage bunshin, a shadow clone. The real Hiruzen is unfortunately behind his desk doing paperwork." The look of shock and Riku's face was priceless for the old man. That was a new facial expression that didn't fit what he knew and saw of the young man so far. He liked it. "That's a kinjutsu created by my sensei for recon usage. Very useful."

"..."

Hiruzen began to worry a bit when Riku was still frozen in shock, his mouth gaping. When a few seconds passed without change, he was ready to poke the young man to bring him back to reality but it proved to be unnecessary.

"He created the greatest cheat in shinobi history and he only used it for recon?! Recon?! Was he insane?! Konoha would have probably completely dominated in each shinobi war with that jutsu!"

That reaction took Hiruzen back for a moment. Senju Tobirama, Niidaime Hokage, Hiruzen's own sensei and greatest jutsu inventor of the history of the village had just been called insane. Hiruzen could have chastised the genin but he was a prodigy so maybe he had thought of something that nobody else did. He decided to let the insult slide for now.

"How so?"

"That's because..." Riku began but stopped. A calculating look passed in his eyes for a moment. "How about you teach me that jutsu and I demonstrate to you how completely overpowered it is?"

"...No." replied a baffled Hiruzen after a moment.

"Even when that information is in Konoha's best interest?"

"If it was, you'd tell me without trying to make any kind of deal."

"Hokage-sama. I'm an orphan badly looked upon by most people in his village. The knowledge I have access to, not counting the fact that I am a genin, is greatly limited. I'll get what I can get."

The sandaime thought about it for a moment. On one hand, the shadow clone was a kinjutsu because it needed good chakra reserves to use. And while Riku had enough to make at least one without dying from what Hiruzen could tell, it was still dangerous. On the other hand the information may really be relevant no matter how unlikely it was but then again...

'Geniuses see things that normal people miss.' "...Alright. However, you must know that..."

"It's probably really chakra intensive." Riku interrupted.

"That... yes. It is." replied Hiruzen, a bit shocked at the discovery.

"You're using it so it must not be that dangerous for you to use. Yet it's a kinjutsu, the only explanation I have is the amount of chakra needed, which also explains why... Well.. It's part of the answer you want so I'll keep quiet for now."

"... The kage bunshin also divides your chakra equally between you and your clone." continued Hiruzen and didn't stop when he heard a 'perfect' whispered by the young boy. "The hand seal is a half rat seal modified to make a cross, like this." he explained further with a demonstration of said seal without molding the chakra.

"Okay..."

Riku immediately imitated the seal and felt his chakra molded in a way that he hadn't known was possible. Filling this information for later. He still took a long moment to feel how his chakra behaved. When he felt like it was enough he actually used the jutsu. A sudden exhaustion fell on him for using that much chakra in one go but it was fine and so was the clone who had popped right next to him. Poking the clone with his finger to check if it was a success, Riku was very satisfied when it was proven correct.

"Go pick a leaf and practice wind manipulation for two hours then dispel." the dirty blonde said nonchalantly to his clone and looked at Hiruzen with an amused smile.

Hiruzen for his part was not amused. He was shocked from hell and back.

'Holy fucking shit, Sensei! You were a dumbass!'

The old Hokage had understood from Riku's display the implication of the real use of the shadow clone and was now beginning to think how he could use it properly and most importantly how it could strengthen the village. People with enough chakra would be able to train faster than anyone. The more chakra they had, the better.

'Naruto must never know about this! Not until he is mature enough! He's too naive and childish to responsibly handle the power that would result in a massive use of this. It would be a disaster more than anything. Kami helps us if our enemies ever think about it in case they know how to use the Kage Bunshin. I should probably share that information with Jira... no, he's going to train Naruto and he may tell him. Kakashi maybe? No, too lazy. That's a thought for later.'

"Riku what you just thought of... It could be a game changer for the village. However, it's a kinjutsu for a reason and should our enemies learn of this, we would lose a

considerable advantage. Keep that knowledge to yourself and do not teach the jutsu to anyone. That's an order and a S-rank secret."

"Yes, Hokage-sama." replied the genin with his usual respectful but short bow.

"Good."

"Er? If I may ask..."

"Yes?"

"That type of clone is... a complete cheat but would it be possible to... apply it on objects? In theory it would be simpler since an object doesn't have chakra nor memories to deal with."

'I like where this is going' thought Hiruzen. "What are you thinking of?"

Riku wryly smiled and picked up a few of the shurikens he had been working on from the table and showed them to Hiruzen.

"Ah! I see. There is in fact such a jutsu. I created it myself based on the Kage Bunshin. It is also extensive in chakra use, but not nearly as much. However it is more difficult to do because the target cloned is an inanimate object. The chakra control needed is tremendous."

"Hokage-sama, I suppose I can't swindle that jutsu out of you to test if the seals are duplicated too, huh?" Riku stated rather than asked, already knowing the answer. That made Hiruzen snort.

"No, no. You can't but nice try. If you provide me with some of those shurikens however, I will test that myself and report the results."

"Here!"

In a flash, Riku pulled shurikens from his book and handed them to Hiruzen. The latter noticed that each one of them had a different seal.

"I'm going to need information on each of those seals. And If you don't mind, could you tell me about... this 'book of seals' of yours?"

"Of course!" the genin replied with enthusiasm. "I'm using a book because... well, for one the scrolls are expensive... Especially for me." he added the last part in a mutter. "Second, scrolls are cumbersome, a book isn't. Third, if you want to use a specific seal in your scroll you have to unroll it and know exactly where it is. During combat it's impractical. A book of seals answers all those problems but the drawback is two fold. One for a really big seal, one needs to learn how to write really really small or give up

on those kinds. Two, the number of pages you can write is rather limited compared to a scroll. To overcome those cons I'm thinking of..."

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In the Hokage office, the real Hiruzen was doing paperwork. Stamping and signing document after document with no end in sight. His monotonous torture took a break when he received the memory of the shadow clone he had created in the morning to make contact with a potential flight risk that Konoha couldn't afford to lose. Reviewing the memories, his jaw slacked down so low that his pipe fell out of his mouth on the table, spilling its content on the papers right under it. With the window opened to let a small breeze cool down the office and push away the smoke of his pipe, it was enough for the burning ember of his tobacco to be fanned. The papers began to burn and a small fire started that spread quickly to the multiple stack of documents on his desk.

Hiruzen would have noticed if not for his mind focused on the absurd knowledge that he had just received. Thankfully, his Anbu guard sprung into action and got him out of his desk. One of them began to stamp out the fire but Hiruzen who had come back to his senses with his sudden displacement ordered his subordinate to not bother.

*'I just learned perhaps the best thing ever for the village and my paperwork is burning to ash. Granted, I dreamed of doing it myself for years but it won't diminish my satisfaction in any way. It might be the best morning I ever had since I took back the hat.'*

"Thank you, Boar, Neko."

"Is everything alright Hokage-sama?" asked the latter. She was the one that pulled him out of his chair.

"Yes, Neko. I just... Received some outrageous information from a shadow clone I made this morning."

"Should we investigate?"

"There is no need, it's no threat to the village, quite the contrary. Still, I have a short mission for you. I want you to go to training ground 11, find genin Warudo Riku and ask him for the shurikens."

"Hokage-sma?" she asked, confused.

"He'll understand. Oh! And Neko, please be less... ruthless and professional Anbu and more... nice when you ask for them."

"Yes, Hokage-sama."



After a bow, Neko disappeared in a swirl of leaves to do the tasks she's been assigned. Hiruzen was looking at the ashes and what was left of his paperwork when his secretary entered the office with a new stack in hand. She stopped in her tracks when confronted with the scene.

"I'm afraid a small accident happened. I'm going to need a copy of all the documents that were lost."

"Of course Hokage-sama. Though is it really necessary? Most of them were demands from the civilian representatives that you probably turned down. Aren't they unimportant?"

Hiruzen looked at her and blinked.

*'That is true.'* he realized "And that's **why** you're my secretary Hisho-san. Good work." he praised the woman who smiled.

"Should we prepare for other accidents of this kind, Hokage-sama?" Boar asked. "I mean it's still summer, small fires starting is not rare during this time."

Now, anyone else would have thought that Boar was talking about preventing other accidents from happening but Hiruzen knew the man well after years of service. He knew that what Boar meant was 'should we make preparations so that kind of incident happens again?' That was tempting for Hiruzen.

"Hmm... Do so."

"Hokage-sama!" Hisho protested having known Boar for years too (she was married to him after all) and the old Hokage quickly defended his words.

"Only for the worst of days!"

"... I suppose... accidents do happen from time to time. That's why they are accidents." she relented which drew a smile on the Hokage's lips.

Neko chose that moment to come back, kneeling in front of her superior and looking down. Her hands were raised above her head in offering and were holding a small bag that Hiruzen took and opened. He noticed the Shurikens but also a paper with them. Pulling it out he saw that it was the instructions and details for each seals.

"Good job, Neko. Now since my desk was damaged and the paperwork lost, I suppose I can change my schedule a bit and go to the training ground. Hisho-san..."

"Short of the elders, you're unavailable, Hokage-sama."

"Thank you."



In a swirl of leaves identical to the one Neko produced when she left and came back, Hiruzen shushined out of his office through the open window, in the direction of the Hokages' training ground. He had some testing to do.

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Back at training ground eleven, Riku dismissed his kage bunshin. Sparring a thought to the purple hair Anbu that visited him for his special Shurikens (that he was tempted to call Shurifuin), the memories and knowledge and experience of his doppelganger filled his mind. It seems that he could now cut half a leaf ten out of ten tries. It still took too much time in his opinion but there had been progress in that regard.

Picking as many leaves as he could, he stored them in his book and went home. He wanted to practice with his clone but with people coming to the training ground that became impossible without revealing the trick of the kage bunshin. Home was a safer place to train. On his way, he wondered at the sudden visit and interest the Hokage had in him. It didn't take long for him to understand that after his dismissal the other day, the sandaime had interrogated Kotetsu and Izumo about his skills. After all, Chunins taking a genin from the corps for a C-tank was unheard of when said genin became one three months prior.

'He worries that I might be a flight risk and become missing nin or worse ... follow in mom's footsteps.'

Nobody needed to spell it out to him as to why Hiruzen was worried.

'Joke's on him! I have no intention of doing either. Besides, I'm not friendless. Izumo and Kotetsu are... friendly acquaintances but that's because we've known each other for a short time. They're my tickets to meet other people. I'm going to need to thank Iruka big time for his help.'

Chapter 08: B-Rank

With the help of his one and only shadow clone, it took Riku only two weeks to completely master the first stage of wind manipulation. Right now, he could imbue wind chakra into objects, most notably kunais and shurikens. It wasn't perfect, especially since what he had had a very poor chakra conductivity but the kunais which did had too high a price attached to them as for shuriken, since they were disposable tools no one in their right mind would make something like that. So Riku was stuck or rather was faced with a new difficult challenge. Work out his wind manipulation to the point that he wouldn't need those highly chakra conductive weapons and would do just fine with what he had. It was some kind of really harsh control exercise. Like trying water walking before tree walking. If he succeeded in the former, the latter would just be a piece of cake. In the longer term, Riku believed it was a better way than the alternative.

On another note, the Hokage had pulled through with him. The results he got from the old man test of his shurifuins were mixed. On one hand, yes, the shadow clones of the shurifuin worked, all types of them. On the other hand the cost of chakra was drastically raised as the clones copied the tag too, which had chakra in them.

At least for the first test. Sarutobi Hiruzen had proven that he wasn't called the 'professor' and the 'god of shinobi' for nothing when he tweaked his jutsu to make it more like the actual kage bunshin. The chakra contained in the shurifuin clones, from the original's seal, was equally divided. That made them less powerful, of course but that wasn't much of a problem in the end if you had the wit to use them properly. The original seal would just have to be pumped with a tremendous amount of chakra before duplication and since the seals were applied in the village and not in the field or in the middle of battle, that was easily done.

Hiruzen had debated for time if he should incorporate those shurifuins into his armed forces or not but decided against it. The shurifuin were elements of surprise and ace in a sleeve, should they become a commodity the other villages would quickly catch on and make their own. The seals themselves however were fine. He was really impressed with the flashbangs and the shrapnel tags. Especially the latter, he would have lost an eye with this one if not for Nelo's kawarimi with him to a safe location. Boar had not been that fortunate and ended up with plenty of rusty nails in his torso. They didn't go deep as he has been rather far from the explosion's origin, but it will leave some small scars. Regardless, the potential of destruction was great and Hiruzen couldn't pass on them, though they would only be used in last resort or during a war. It was after all a double sword, so to speak.

The old Hokage also liked the smoke shurifuin because instead of a shinobi creating a smoke screen around them, it created a smoke screen around its target. A distraction far better in his opinion. The enemy had his own field of vision restricted and not the shinobi using the distraction.

When he used another shadow clone to visit Riku and give his reports and thoughts on the shurifuin, Riku told him that while the shrapnell type was very dangerous on a shuriken, he had created a tag that could detonate in one specific direction making the type less dangerous for the user and even more deadly for the target. When he did an actual demonstration with leaves instead of shrapnel, Hiruzen was more than sold. The only problem with those seals was that they were pretty advanced and couldn't be made by any fuinjutsu practitioner like the simple explosive tag and most of them belonged in the Barrier team. They didn't have the time to do some research to reverse engineer the seals so Hiruzen proposed a deal: Should Riku give his notes about them he would be credited for the seals' creation and be paid a dividend for every seal created. Even more if sold to regular shinobi in the village. An agreement was reached when Hiruzen accepted that those dividends kept being paid to Riku's family as a whole if he ever had children or other descendants down the line and that he was dead.

Another thing that the Hokage had asked of the genin was the creation of a few 'book of seals' for a test run with Anbu. Riku agreed on the condition that he'd be provided with the materials to make them, the tools that Anbu used during their mission to be sealed in storage seals and also a list of furniture. When Hiruzen saw the said list he was perplexed but agreed. What Riku was asking was rather cheap and in a low quantity. It took two weeks to complete the order and so far Riku got no review about it. In the end he let it go, his training was more important and should the need arise the Hokage knew where to find him.

When he wasn't working on his seals for the Hokage or training. Riku went on regular C-rank missions with Izumo, Kotetsu and their third teammates who turned out to be a Tokubetsu jonin. Gekko Hayate specialized in kenjutsu and from the few spars Riku had with him to get to know each other, it was very well deserved. The man was very skilled with a blade and it showed. His particularity was a chronic cough. A result of a mission turned wrong and where his lungs had been badly damaged for good. That made it impossible for him to reach the rank of Jonin and go on specific missions like infiltration, assassination and spying. That was how he ended up teaming up with Izumo and Kotetsu in the first place.

The team of four did at least one C-rank of every type and Riku's performance had been nothing short of exemplary. His seals, tags or shurikens, his chakra control and most importantly his decision making made Hayate understand why his teammates took in a genin from the pool under their wings. He believed them when they told him that Riku was above the mark for a genin but they had been purposely vague about what it actually meant. He had nothing bad to say, he liked Riku's attitude and personality and liked working with him.

Nothing was perfect of course, the first mission where Riku had the lead so to speak, ended with a knife to his shoulder. Nothing life threatening and from no real fault of his own beyond the fact that his mistake came from a lack of experience and not from bad planning. At least now Riku knew that you didn't 'forget' about the enemy you put down to take on others because the down enemy may in fact play dead and take you by surprise. That was alright with him however. He took the painful lesson in stride and made a suture practice out of it. A proud reminder of what he learned, something he was quite happy about.

"I'm no masochist, I won't go get myself hurt on purpose but it's proof that I made a mistake and lived another day to not make it again. Others are not so fortunate." he had said when Izumo and Kotetsu found out he was happy about the scar. They were baffled by such an outlook and maturity from him but put it on the 'It's because he's a prodigy' list.

Into the second half of the second month since his first C-rank, his senpais, after discussing it with Hayate, decided it was time to try a B-rank. What made a star contrast between C-rank and B-rank was that the latter involved enemy shinobi. If they were to be honest, it was a bit much for Riku and they agreed, however they wanted to test him

in a real situation against ninja. While they were willing to wait a bit more the 'perfect' B-rank appeared at the MAD. Such an opportunity couldn't be passed up as it was rare.

"So, we're in for a bandit extermination mission with three missing nin, two genins level and one chunin level, who originated from Tanigakure? How many bandits are there with the nukenins?" he asked his senpais.

"Twenty if the intel is correct." Izumo replied.

"Anything else? Prisoners, hostages, slaves?"

"Not that we know of."

"Location?"

"At the border between the Land of Fire and the Land of Rivers. A bit North of the sea."

"Right at the border? That's...Brilliant. They cross to Fire country if Tanigakure is pursuing them and cross to Rivers if we're the one pursuing them. They're lucky Rivers is neutral and not an ally despite being neighbors and much smaller."

"Yes. "

The journey to the Western border of their homeland was a short one. Travelling by tree hopping considerably shortened the time spent on the road which would have amounted to weeks. Instead it took them five days to reach the border. From that point it took them three more days to find the bandits camp. Hiding among the tree leaves and at a good distance Riku's shadow clone did his very best to memorize the terrain, and the number of enemies through every angle, by simply circling the camp. Once he believed he had enough information, the bunshin dispelled.

"Oh!" Riku exclaimed just as he lifted his arm, spoon in hand, to his mouth.

"Your clone is done with recon?" Kotetsu asked. He was currently guzzling down dry meat.

"Yeah and it's not good but manageable."

"More enemies than expected?" inquired Hayate.

"Yes. Twice as much. I saw a shinobi, he wore a headband from a village I didn't recognize."

"What did the symbol look like?" a pensive Izumo wondered aloud.

"A music note. His headband wasn't sliced, so I think they're on a mission to create trouble from both Konoha and Suna. Or at least one of them."

"I don't remember a village whose symbol was a music note... A new village maybe?" Hayated commented, coughing a bit in the middle of his sentence.

"At least we know there are more shinobi than our intel said. Twice the amount of bandits though... It won't be easy."

"We can always wait for the cover of the night." Riku proposed and pulled a block note from his back pouch along with a pen. He began to draw a rough map of the camp but was still paying attention to the accuracy of the information, most notably the distance. "I couldn't confirm it but I'm pretty sure, because of the disposition of the tents, that the nukenins are in the central area. Everything else around is for the regular bandits. I didn't find any prisoners, which I'm not surprised with how organized they are. I don't think they're a regular bandits group but one with a specific purpose because of that."

"Organized? How?" questioned the Tokebutsu Jonin.

"They're patrolling the camps. Seriously I mean. I felt an air of discipline from them. Not common for bandits."

The three veteran shinobi looked at each other and wondered for a moment if that mission wasn't completely fucked up and far more difficult than the B-rank it was. Or supposed to be.

"What do we do? 40 bandits plus at least four shinobis? It's a bit much." Kotetsu said.

"The problem is not so much the bandits. I can block them by putting a barrier around each tent, provided I have enough tags and we're not found out under our henge. The problem..."

"Are the nukenins." Izumo cut in.

"I mean... I could probably put a barrier around their tents too but that'd be difficult without getting caught. If that is successful, I can use a type of seal to incapacitate them all."

"What does it do?"

"It releases a sleeping gas."

"Since when do you have that?" inquired Kotetsu. So far, to everyone's knowledge, Riku didn't use poisons of any kind. They knew he was very knowledgeable but that was it.

"A week before we left? Some plants bloomed a bit early and I got a good deal for the chemistry equipment."

"Any information about that gas?" Hayate asked.

"It's relatively fast active. Less than a minute for a single breath and if the target is around 70 kg. The gas is invisible but sadly not odorless, I didn't quite manage that yet. Good news is, I did manage to cover its smell with the smell of burning walnuts."

His teammates nodded, pleased to hear that. Nuts were common in the land of Fire, with all the forests and trees. One just had to lean forward to pick some, so the odor of burning walnut wouldn't be so much out of place than another scent. It wasn't a perfect solution by any means but it was better than nothing considering.

"I only have enough for one tent though. Theirs."

"It's more than enough."

"The question is..."

"What do we do with the Shinobi?" Kotetsu finished Izumo's start of a question.

"Wouldn't capture be preferable? They're from a village we don't know and are acting in Konoha's territory. It will be troublesome to bring them back home though." Riku commented.

"Capturing the genins is not necessary but the chunin or higher, is."

Everyone nodded in agreement and understanding at Hayate's words. Genins were genins, the lowest rank. Chances are, they didn't know anything about anything, perhaps not even the purpose of their mission beyond 'do this' and 'do that'. The chunin on the other hand should know more as the leader of the mission. Or so they hoped, because if a jonin was present, things would get a whole lot more complicated and fast.

From there, they began to detail the plan. To make sure that everything would go smoothly as long as possible before everything went to shit. Because it will. They had no doubt about it. Some would call it superstition, some would call it experience but the point was, since the intel and the parameters of the mission was all wrong, the universe won't suddenly make everything go right. With the three and half men present, they knew that it could only go worse.

Once the plan and the multiple contingencies were decided, Riku began writing seals. He had enough for himself, but he couldn't be everywhere at the same time, even with one shadow clone. So he gave spares to his teammates so they could act at the same time or if he could not.

When night fell, they found themselves lucky. Clouds were covering the stars and more importantly the moon. The full moon was only a week away but its glow would have been enough to provide enough light and make their infiltration more difficult. With a night wind that had risen when the sun set, they decided to infiltrate the camp earlier than expected for fear of the clouds moving too fast and revealing the moon. It also forced them to change their point of infiltration from West to East so their scent would not be carried to their target.

When everyone was ready, Izumo and Kotetsu took care of the first patrol of bandits. The pair of outlaws were ambushed from behind and had their neck broken. The snap of the bones had not been loud and was much better than a kunai to the throat. Even though they were against the wind, they didn't know if it would last and didn't want to take the risk of their kills' blood's scent being caught by the shinobi. That was taking into consideration that one of them may have a very sharp nose (which was unlikely) but refuse to leave a potential indirect threat hanging in the air.

Riku moved quickly to seal the two bodies inside his book. He didn't like doing it but it was the best and fastest way to hide them. At the same time his chunin friends hanged into the two men they killed, gave a salute to Hayate (who was already placing seals at the back of the nearest tent) and Riku, then got back to making the rounds.

With the evidence sealed, Riku signaled to the Tokujo that he was ready to use the barrier. The latter used a kunai to silently make a cut in the tent for him to go and nodded at the dirty blonde then went inside. Immediately Riku activated the barrier, closing the area from the rest of the world. No one could go in or out and the same for sound. After twenty seconds, Hayate showed his face through the hole he created and Riku deactivated the barrier, freeing the man.

The swordsman was very happy with the barrier, not only did it allow him to silently kill 8 bandits but it also allowed him to cough without being heard. He had been restraining himself for fifteen minutes already and he was reaching his limits.

When light came from the corner of the next tent, Riku pushed Hayate back the one he came from and picked a kunai in each hand, following him. They waited a minute in silence but with tension for the guard to pass. When it happened, just like Izumo and Kotetsu, they snapped the enemies' neck and brought them inside the tent where Riku took the opportunity to release the dead bandits he had sealed.

Once done, they made their way to the next tent and reiterated their modus operandi. 8 more hostiles were dead, bringing the total to twenty at the very least, not knowing how well their friends were doing on their side. There were five more tents to deal with and when they secretly took a look at them they saw their hanged teammates getting out of one. From their impostor friends' position, Riku and Hayate believed that it was also their second tent they visited. Taping the genin shoulder with his hand, the Tokujo signaled with the other the central tent. Nodding in understanding, Riku made a shadow clone and handed him two seals. The clone took them and made his way discreetly to

the other side of the camp by taking the long way. Once his job was done, without being seen, he dispelled, letting Riku know that he could act. Hayate drew his sword, just in case things would go wrong and was on the lookout. From his position, he saw Izumo and Kotetsu deal with the last patrol that came their way to ask if they saw the third patrolling team that he and Riku took care of.

Riku put the two seals completing the barrier in place and a third containing the sleeping gas inside the tent by delicately making it go under the tent's cloth. Once everything was ready he made the hands seals to activate the barrier then the ones for the sleeping gas tag. He held the barrier for five minutes, just in case, then turned to his teammates and gave them a look. The chunins dispelled their henge and took their weapons out. Hayate took a stance, ready to strike, then gave Riku a nod.

The dirty blonde acknowledged the meaning behind the nod and released the barrier.

The chunins got inside stealthily, and took a look around. Everything was in order but in the case of one of their enemies feigning sleep they didn't drop their guard.

Riku quickly summoned ninja wire and tied one shinobi up and tossed his surplus to Izumo who tied another. In less than a minute the six enemy shinobi (and that had been a surprise) had been neutralized.

"The bandits?" asked Hayate.

"All dealt with on our side. You?"

"Same." the Tokebutsu jonin answered Izumo.

"Now we just need to..."

"Wait."

Everyone turned to Riku who had interrupted Kotetsu, and who rushed toward a wooden crate. He emptied its contents quickly and put one of the genin, a teenager inside it before closing it.

"What are you doing?" the hot head of the group inquired.

"I'm testing something."

Riku put tags on the eight corners of the crate and activated a barrier. Then he picked a page from his book of seals and ripped one out. He put it on the ground and put the crate on top. After a few hand seals, the crate was stored inside the seals on the page.

"Testing what?" Kotetsu insisted ,not understanding what Riku had just done.

“Seals can’t store breathing... beings. When they are summoned back, they are dead. That implies that... well... the dimension where everything is stored is not... live-able for whatever reason. Probably because that dimension’s laws of nature are different like... time doesn’t pass there because when you summon food that you store hot, the food is still hot. I mean...” tried to explain Riku but he was getting lost in his explanation.

“By putting that guy inside a crate and putting a barrier round it, you hope to have found a way to keep him alive.” Izumo said in a more understandable way, making Riku smile because he got it.

“Yes! If it works we may be able to bring them back for T&I and have a better than expected journey back.”

“Huh... Clever. Regardless of if it works or not.”

Riku believed that a ten minute wait would suffice so in the meantime, everyone looted everything in the camp to be stored in his book. It was free resources after all. When the allocated time was over, the dirty blonde summoned back the crate, removed the barrier and checked the status of the prisoner inside.

His grin told everything his teammate needed to know.

Chapter 09: Discovery

Hiruzen didn’t know what to think as he silently smoked his pipe while looking at the team of four in front of him. They were reporting matters that were worrying. The ‘simple’ B-rank they had gone to, turned out to not be so simple after all if what he was hearing was true. Oh, he didn’t doubt his shinobis, far from it. Missions turning out not to be what they were thought to be was current. There was always something a bit outside the parameters in such cases but nothing that disparate. In fact he wondered if this mission was in a way not worse than the one Team 7 got in Wave. Their simple C-rank turned out to be A-rank. While Kakashi and his genins fought the Demon of the mist, Zabuza momochi, and his apprentice, it was just them. The situation had been dire, yes, but Sasuke awakening his sharingan and Naruto subconsciously using the Kyubi’s chakra helped them survive and complete the mission. In comparison this mission he was hearing the report of, was no less than twice the numbers of bandits and more shinobi than expected.

“...You’re all unharmed.” he finally said after Hayate was done with the information report. The Tokujo didn’t yet have the chance to tell how everything went.

“We are.”

Hiruzen’s head didn’t move but his eyes sure did. They slowly moved to the right where Warudo Riku was.

“Forty bandits, six shinobi and... you’re unharmed. All of you. If I were a betting man I would bet that seals were involved. Am I wrong?”

“No, Hokage-sama. We struck during the night. Riku provided us with barrier tags. The plan was to put a sound proof barrier around each tent with one of us inside to take care of the bandits. We broke into two teams for that. Izumo and Kotetsu hinged into a pair of guards patrolling and reached the other end of the camp. Riku and I stayed at our point of infiltration to deal with our side. Finally, Riku put a barrier around the main tent where the shinobi were and released a knocked out gas. That did the trick and we captured the six shinobi and looted all resources in the camp. Everything was sealed inside Riku’s book.”

“Everything?” Hiruzen asked with a frown. “You created a seal that can store living people?” he asked the genin with an eyebrow raised. In his mind, if that was true, Riku had done something that was borderline miraculous.

“I didn’t, Hokage-sama. I think it’s possible but I’m not at that level of fuinjutsu yet. I simply found a way to get around it.”

Now Hiruzen was **very** interested in that. Especially for his Anbu. Many times they had to interrogate on site and while they were taught how to do it they were not experts like T&I. Unfortunately they couldn’t make the way back to the village with prisoners so their interrogations weren’t as fruitful as it could be. Now, finding a way to seal people inside a storage seal to bring them back for T&I without deep knowledge about seals... **THAT**... Hiruzen wanted to know. Signaling with his hand, he prompted Riku to continue.

“I simply put one of them in a wooden crate, sealed the crate within a barrier and stored the crate.”

“And they lived?”

“As of this morning, yes.”

The old Hokage wanted to bash his head onto his desk. The young genin before him had thought outside the box and came up with such a simple solution that Hiruzen felt dumb for not having thought of it. Then again, he was feeling quite dumb everytime the dirty blond presented him something. His book of seals, his shurifuins... Once again he cursed the leaders of Team 7, 8 and 10 for not taking him in their team.

“I... I’d like to know how that is possible. Not now.” he quickly said, seeing as Riku was about to, he was sure, give a very long and very technical explanation. “I’ll send a clone tomorrow. Anyway, what you found out is revolutionary, especially for Anbu, so I’m ordering all of you to not say a word about it to anyone.”

““““Yes, Hokage-sama.””””

“Now, anything else?”

“Yes. The six shinobi, which among them had our targets, were wearing a head protector with a musical note on it.” Hayate revealed.

“A musical note?” he repeated, trying to remember a village for such a symbol but failed. “A new enemy, then... Hm. Tora.”

At the call of his codename, an Anbu appeared kneeling in front of the Hokage.

“Riku, give Tora the... pages with the prisoners and Tora bring them to Ibiki.”

Riku did as instructed and Tora quickly disappeared to fulfill his orders.

“This mission is way above B-rank and you will all be compensated accordingly. Good work. Dismissed.”

They all bowed and left. Once outside the Hokage Tower, Izumo and Kotetsu grabbed Riku by his shoulders just as he quickly said everyone goodbye. They were all grinning from ear to ear, Hayate included. The young genin was confused at their expression.

“Senpais?”

“Did you really think we would let you go like that?”

“...Yes?”

“Nu-huh. No way kid!”

“We’re celebrating your first successful A-rank!”

“That means you’re not getting home without being drunk to the point you can’t walk straight!”

“... I’m thirteen!”

““So?””

Turning to Hayate for help, he found none.

“Don’t look at me, I’m with them. It’s tradition.”

“Tradition is just peer pressure from the dead!” Riku tried to reason with them and win the argument.

““Don’t care!””

“I... I need an adult.”

“““You are an adult.”””

“Ever since you received your head protector.” added the swordsman.

Looking at the face of his teammates and understanding his situation, Riku raised his hands to do the seals for a kawarimi but was quickly stopped by the chunins shushing away with him and followed by Hayate. They arrived at a bar who only accepted shinobis for customers. That wasn't something rare in the village. It was done to avoid a drunk civilian picking a fight against a drunk shinobi. In the early days of the villages, incidents happened enough times that an unofficial law separating the two saw the light of day. Of course, since it was unofficial, civilian and shinobi mingle but it was strongly suggested for the civilians and the shinobi they came to drink with, to drink in moderation.

The team found a free table against the side of the wall and sat there. Riku didn't know where to look. He felt so out of place. Everyone around him was well into their late teens at the very least and he was just a child that reached teenagehood a few weeks prior. From the counter of the bar, he saw Kotetsu with four drinks in hand, talking with an older shinobi. The man was wearing a bandana backward and a senbon in his mouth. When the two men looked in his direction for a moment, Riku knew they were talking about him. After a nod of agreement, Kotetsu left the bandana shinobi at the counter and came back to the table. He put the drinks down and took a seat.

“Come on, kid. Bottom's up.”

“Wha-”

Riku didn't even finish talking when Izumo, who was sitting next to him, grabbed his face by the jaw and pushed his head back. Kotetsu was as fast as lightning and put the entirety of the content of the small glass inside Riku's open mouth. The reaction was immediate and the poor genin began to cough because of the taste and how hot the liquid had been. The heat burned his stomach and his oesophagus but also reached his face which turned a bit red. That made his teammates laugh heartily.

“What the hell?!” the dirty blonde exclaimed once he got his cough under control and the fire subsided. He didn't know what he was forced to drink but he didn't like it one bit. “I'm not paying for this!”

“Nah, it's fine. This round is on me.” The chunin dismissed and pushed another glass in front of Riku. “This time we toast! To Riku's first A-rank and to the easiest A-rank ever!” he called out, raising his own glass in the air pointing at the middle of the table.

Seeing Hayate and Izumo do the same, Riku grumbled but followed suit. Four glasses bumped each other and everyone finished their drink in one go on the spot. Once again Riku coughed but only once. He had been ready this time.

“Now, we just need to find you a nice girl to pop your-”

“To pop his what?”

The feminine voice made Kotetsu pale on the spot. Turning his head, Riku saw a woman with long purple hair, a hand on her hips. The slight frown on her face didn't smear her beauty one bit in Riku's opinion. He didn't know if this was because of the two shots of strong alcohol he had that were taking effect but in the young thirteen years old's eyes she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Especially her hair. He really liked the color. He had always loved purple, it reminded him of the sash his mother used to wear. It always calmed him down and soothed him. Thinking of it, it was perhaps the reason why he had been interested in Yamanaka Ino at the Academy. The Yamanaka clan's main color was a deep purple and they wore it with pride and elegance with their cloth. Despite his mother's fate, the harsh rejection of his friendship from Ino and the years of berating him for kicking Sasuke's ass at every turn, Riku's love for purple never wavered. His love for blondes on the other hand...

“Y-Yugao! How lovely to see you!” a nervous Kotetsu greeted her.

“Cut the crap, Kotetsu. What do you need a nice girl for?”

“N-Nothing!”

“Probably to pop my cherry.” said Riku, wanting to stick it to his bullying senpai. “I mean, I killed, I drank, that's only leaving sex on the list. Hard pass, though, too young for that and even if I were not, I doubt you'd find someone willing to do it without a big load of cash involved.”

“Kid!”

“He has a point.” the woman said, pulling an empty chair from nearby and sitting next to Hayate. She gave him a peck on the lips and turned towards Riku to introduce herself.

“Hi. I'm Uzuki Yugao and this one's fiancée.” she pointed at Hayate with a jerk of her head to the side.

“Warudo Riku, nice to meet you.”

Yugao nodded and turned towards her man. “So, what are you guys celebrating?”

“Riku's first A-rank.”

“A-rank?!” she exclaimed in surprise. “Aren’t you a genin fresh from the Academy? Did these idiots somehow convince mine that taking you on one was a good idea?”

“What?!”

“Nothing like that, Yugao.” Izumo denied on the spot. “It was a simple B-rank that was bumped up.”

“Still. A B-rank for...”

“He is that good.” defended Hayate. “In fact, the mission was so successful thanks to him.”

“Really?” the purple haired woman asked, a bit doubtful.

“Really. Speaking of being good. Riku, in a month it’s the Chunin exam.” announced Izumo.

“I am aware, what about it?”

“Kotetsu and I-”

“And I.” interrupted Hayate but Izumo continued.

“...Think you are ready to take it. Especially when this time the exam is in Konoha.”

Riku controlled his surprise as best as he could. The prospect of being promoted to chunin was appealing. He wanted to climb the ranks fast, that was what he was training hard for after all. Except that since he ended up in the genin corps that prospect died quickly. He knew that he would have to make friends with other genin and formed a team but that was years away. To hear that he was ready made him feel proud about himself however the feeling went away quickly when he remembered that problem about not being in a team.

“We’ve been trying to search for a team that would participate in the exam but with a missing member for a few weeks now.”

“And?” Riku asked, trying not to hope.

“We found you one. Friday morning, training ground 15.” Kotetsu finished what Izumo began.

“You’re... kidding? You really found a team?”

“Yep.” the bandaged chunin, simply replied taking another shot of whatever they were drinking.

“...Thank you.” the genin replied in a soft voice.

From there, Riku didn't drink much, pretending that he had obligations the day after from the Hokage and simply listened to the conversation going around the table. Kotetsu tried to chat up a kunoichi when he went for more drinks but ended up with a knee to the balls, to everyone's hilarity. Because it was late and because Izumo dragged his completely drunk and suffering best friend home, Riku wished Hayate and Yugao a good night and left too. He didn't much like the loudness of the bar or the atmosphere but he did like having people around to talk to and that would listen to him. The last thought Riku had before falling asleep would have been quite sad for anyone who would have heard it.

'Is that what it's like to have friends?'

Riku was woken up by a knock at the door. Opening an eye, and nursing a bit of a headache, he looked at his alarm clock.

'9:00am. Ugh, crap, I'm late for training.'

Getting up from the bed, he went to his front door when the person on the other side knocked again.

“H-Hokage-sama?”

The sight of the leader of the village standing in front of him surprised him greatly.

“Good morning, Riku.” the old man greeter with a shameless smirk.

“Wh-... Oh, yes you wanted to know more about... And I'm fashionably late hence why you're here and not at training ground 11.”

“That you are.”

“Somehow, I don't believe it but okay.” Riku added and let Hiruzen in.

“You don't?”

“No. I think you knew what would happen once my team was out and you purposely schedule our meeting to... have fun at my expense.” the young man said, and invited the his guest to take a seat. He made a clone and sent him to make some tea, all the while seating himself in front of Hiruzen while still wearing his night wear.

“Guilty as charged.”

The clone came back with two teacups and coasters in one hand and a full teapot in the other. Once he put everything on the table, the clone pulled a tag from his pocket (taken from one of the drawers in the kitchen) and put it on the pot. In a few seconds steam was visible and the clone put the tea in it. Stirring the pot a bit, he served Hiruzen and his boss.

"Hmm Jasmine..." the old man said, taking a whiff of the flower's scent with his eyes closed. "Good choice."

"Thank you. Now that I think about it... Do shadow clones eat and drink?"

"That's... an excellent question." Hiruzen replied after taking a good sip of the hot beverage and blinked at the sudden inquiry.

"I mean, could clones pop if the food is too hot or too cold? Can a clone pop from a brain freeze? Would the food it ingested fall to the ground?"

Riku was more talking to himself than anything, Hiruzen realized and let him do his things. Anyone would say that those questions were stupid but the old Hokage did not. Knowing what a clone could and couldn't do, especially a shadow one, was extremely important. Suddenly he saw Riku reach from some paper on the side of the table and give it to his clone.

"Eat."

The clone deadpanned at his creator but took the paper and made a ball out of it before eating it. When it dispelled, the ball appeared in mid air and fell to the ground.

"It's not wet." Riku said, after picking it up. "Meaning, the shadow clone doesn't imitate saliva and probably other fluids... A flaw of the jutsu perhaps. It also means that we can put as many tags as we want inside a shadow clone and activate it when it pops."

"Hm, true. An explosive tag would be less chakra intensive than an explosive clone."

That comment from Hiruzen surprised Riku a bit. He never thought that clones could explode. He needed to explore that at a later time.

"It also means, you're the real one, isn't it?"

"I am." Hiruzen replied with an amused smile, drinking his tea.

"Ha, so the clone is working instead of you. Clever."

"... Thank you." then Hokage nodded sagely but his thoughts were anything but. *'Why didn't I think of that?! I've been using a kage bunshin to meet with him while working! How stupid can I be?!'*

Hiruzen had **not**

used a clone to work in his stead. He had just taken a break from the news he got from Ibiki. No one would fault him for that, after all, from the preliminary interrogation of the six shinobi Riku's team brought back, they discovered that Otogakure, the sound village, was created and led by Orochimaru.

"You wanted to know more about my... get around the sealing of living beings? Are the prisoners still alive?"

"Yes and yes. All of them were perfectly fine and asleep when they were brought from their crate. I'm really curious about how that is possible."

"I'm not entirely sure, it was more of a passing thought than anything."

"Please, humor me."

"When you seal something into something else it creates some kind of... artificial or another dimension? I mean, when I store hot food in a storage seal and bring it out days later it's still pristine. If it was hot before the sealing, it is hot after the unsealing as if no time passed at all. From that I deduced that in this other dimension-."

"Time doesn't pass. The food would be cold otherwise."

"I think it's more than that."

"What do you mean?"

"I think Time simply doesn't exist in that dimension."

That idea gave Hiruzen a stop to his thoughts. Time not existing was inconceivable, way more than time stopping.

"How could that be? Why do you think so?"

"Because if Time was just stopped, people would be stopped in consequence and so wouldn't die. Yet that's not the case. They **do** die. How the food stays hot but the person ends up dying is yet beyond me. Perhaps it's because the lack of Time has an effect on living organisms but not on the rest. Anyway, that's not really the heart of the matter, what I meant by that is that with a storage seal we create another dimension but so do we when we create a barrier. The space inside one is disconnected from the rest of the world. Unlike the storage seal's dimension which may very well be infinite, the dimension inside a barrier is finite and determined by the area of the barrier. The tags are simply the anchors to our own dimension. From studying under every angle the storage seal, it's impossible to seal something into a storage seal then seal that storage

seal into another. Why? Because when we write a storage seal the anchors are set for our own dimension.”

“If I’m following, when we put the first storage seal into another, it isn’t anchored anymore and something bad happens.”

“Yes. However when I put a barrier on the crates, the anchors were the tags themselves. Since the tags went with the crates inside the storage seal, there was no anchoring problem. I had hoped that the barrier would protect the prisoner from the lack of Time.”

“I... don’t understand how?”

“When I created the barrier, it took in the laws of our world, for exemple gravity and time, and disconnected them from their... source. Which means that inside the barrier they still existed, protected from everything exterior in a certain measure.”

“Wouldn’t the prisoner have died of thirst then?”

“No, because Time in the storage seal doesn’t exist!” Riku replied with excitement to a completely confused Hiruzen.

After a long moment of thinking, the Hokage spoke.

“I don’t get it.”

“There is no Time in the storage seal except inside the barrier put on the crate. The prisoner is still under the influence of Time, our Time. But this Time, that is locked inside the barrier, is affected by the lack of Time in the seal’s dimension. It’s like...A bubble if you will. The lack of Time of the storage seal kind of froze the time inside the barrier which in turn froze the prisoner who survived because he was still subjected to Time even if it was frozen.”

“Ooh. I think I understand. Since the body is still under the influence of an existing Time, passing or not, it continues to live. Regardless of the lack of Time beyond the dimension the body is in.”

“Yes!”

“Fascinating.”

“But headache inducing. In theory it would be possible to seal whole troops and have an infiltration expert unseal them anywhere. The troops would be as fresh as a daisy ready to act. Though it’s only a theory and I wouldn’t test it on anyone. Animals maybe? That also leaves the problem of the storage seal. If it’s destroyed or lost, the people sealed

inside may very well be lost forever. Personally I wouldn't test it or use it like that unless it is an absolute necessity."

"That's an avenue I didn't think about." said Hiruzen after downing another cup of tea.
"Riku what you discovered-"

"S-rank secret, yes, I know. At this point Hokage-sama, I think that any discovery I make should be considered a S-rank secret by default even if it isn't. There is no need to tell me everytime."

"Huh...That's not a bad idea." considered the old man. "If you come up with anything, regardless if you think it's ground breaking or not."

"I'll come to you to make sure it's S-rank or not."

"Good. Of course you'd be credited for it and the knowledge would belong to you and thus private."

"Speaking of private, any news from the books of seals from the Anbu?"

"Out of the two teams having them, one had not yet had the opportunity to use them, the other... Let's just say it saved their lives and leave it at that."

"If more are needed-"

"I will let you know though I believe it would be an order more about your shurifuin than the books themselves. The latter, Anbu, can make them on their own. It's simple storage seals after all."

Riku nodded and rose from his seat a moment after Hiruzen. The old Hokage made his way toward the door, wished Riku a good day and left to get back to work. He still had to deal with his wayward student and his new village. When he went back into his office, he groaned at the sight of two small mountains of paperwork. He sat behind his desk, picked his pipe up and lit it.

"Neko, Boar," he called out and his two usual guards appeared in a kneeling position in front of him. "You will speak of no one of what you heard."

""Yes, Hokage-sama.""

"At least the more technical part. When you go back to headquarters, share the fact that prisoners survive if put inside an object and sealed by a barrier to Team Ro and Alpha. Anything else is forbidden and they too are forbidden to speak about it."

""Yes, Hokage-sama.""

“... A lack of Time... Thirteen and he’s already theorizing what not even Orochimaru or Minato ever thought of **and** found a way to get around the obvious problem...” he said more to himself than his bodyguards. “Neko, keep your eyes and ears open when you’re in position to do so. No need for intensive surveillance but simply observe.”

“Yes, Hokage-sama.” the woman replied. “If I may?” she asked and he allowed it. “With how... talented he seems to be with seals, perhaps providing him with advanced material on the subject would be wise? From what I heard, he’s halfway done with the first intermediary book on fuinjutsu but once he finished it, he won’t have access to anything more with his rank.”

“Hmm... Not a bad idea. See it done.”

The neko gave her usual answer when the Hokage gave her an order and went back to her hiding place in the ceiling, along with Boar.

Chapter 10: A proper Team

Riku arrived at training ground 15 a good thirty minutes early. He was excited to be in a proper genin team. *‘Finally’* he had thought. However, he was under no illusion that it was permanent. From what Izumo told him, their third member had made chunin in the last exam five months ago and while he stayed in the team to support his friends, waiting for them to be promoted too, he couldn’t participate in this exam, hence the free spot Riku could fill. Nonetheless, the young dirty blond was thrilled to be around people his age and while his temporary teammates may not be actual friends they may become friendly acquaintances.

‘Baby steps, Riku. Baby steps.’ he kept telling himself.

Ten minutes before the meeting time. A kunoichi with standard chunin vest and regular combat black pants, shushined in at the entrance of the training ground. With her head protector on her forehead, her long black hair reaching the middle of her back and, more importantly, her pupil-less white eyes, Riku knew that the woman in her late twenties, early thirties was from the Hyuuga clan. He also knew that she was the sensei of the team he would now be part of; Izumo having given him her name. Riku found her pretty but nothing like Yugao who still ranked number one as prettiest woman he had ever seen. As he kept looking at her, the jonin made her way towards him and introduced herself.

“Hello, I’m Hyuuga Hinae. You’re Warudo Riku I presume?”

“I am. Nice to meet you Hyuuga-san.” he greeted back with a short respectful bow.

“Hinae is fine.” she quickly said. “Izumo and Kotetsu told me lots of things about you.”

"If it's bad, it's probably a lie." he quickly defended himself which made her laugh. He had to give her credit, it was a nice laugh. Very soft.

"Yes, knowing those two, especially Kotetsu, it probably is. They did nothing of the sort though. At worst they just said that you were a bit obsessed with fuinjutsu."

"I...May be a little bit."

"All they told me was that you were more than ready for the exam. That you had very good chakra control and that you pulled your weight with them on mission. A Jack of all trades were the words they used."

"I wouldn't say a Jack of all trades but I think they're not far off with their assessment. I have yet to find a taijutsu style that suits me and my genjutsu is very limited but otherwise I believe to be more than decent in all conventional shinobi arts. I'm more of a... support type than a heavy hitter though."

"I see. Well, that's perfect for the team."

As she talked about it, two figures came into the training grounds. One male and one female. The boy was rather tall, almost a foot and half taller than Riku. he had short brown hair and eyes and he was jacked. Riku found him... plain. If he had to pick him from inside a crowd he would have some difficulties doing so since his defining physical features were shared by the majority of the population in the Land of Fire.

The girl wasn't nearly as tall as her teammate but had a good head on Riku. Her hair was raven black but her eyes were a light green. In Riku's eyes, she was cute, not a beauty like Hinae, let alone Yugao, but she was pretty. He would have an easier time finding her in a crowd than the boy.

It was obvious that they were older than him by at least a couple years. Maybe three. That made him wonder why they were still genin and in a genin team after so long. When they joined him and Hinae, they greeted her then him.

"Hello, I'm Tanaka Yuuna. Welcome to the team." the girl cheerfully introduced herself.

"Akiyama Gou." was the simple but short and curt introduction the boy gave.

"Mah~ Don't mind Gou. Despite his big man attitude, he's a big softy on the inside."

"Yuuna!"

"What?! It's true!"

“Perhaps you could not start bickering and let our newest team member introduce himself?” ventured Hinae gently but the fake sweet smile she gave her students was anything but. Clearly they either shut up or would suffer the consequences.

““Sorry, sensei!””

“I’m... Warudo Riku, nice to meet you.” Once again he gave his name and a short bow.

“Hey! I know you! You’re the guy that beat up Tenchi and Isobe!”

The cheerfulness Yuuna had displayed earlier was now gone. She was pointing accusingly at Riku with a mighty frown on her face. Riku was confused by this drastic change in attitude and her words.

“Who?”

“Tenchi and Isobe! You sent them to the hospital a few months back!”

“A few... Oh!” he exclaimed suddenly, remembering the two genins she was talking about. “Those jerks did squat shit during our mission together and let me do all the work. Then they took their share of the money and tried to forcefully take mine. As far as I’m concerned, they deserved the ass kicking I gave them.” was the calm answer he gave to his new teammate.

“That... sounds like them, yeah.” Yuuna admitted, her attitude changing again while Gou nodded in agreement.

“Alright!” Hinae said loudly as she clapped her hands in front of her. “Now that we’re done with the introduction, let’s move on to what each one of you can do. Then we’ll brainstorm on how we can make you work together. We have a month of teamwork ahead of us, let’s not waste time!”

All genin agreed with enthusiasm with her plan.

Riku had to admit, his teammates were good. They were no Izumo, Kotetsu or Hayate but they were relatively strong ninja for their age and the few years of training they had. If he had to gauge them by the standard of his class, Gou and Yuuna were well above them, however maybe not Sasuke. It didn’t really mean anything though as they have been trained by a jonin for two years now. It was expected that they were stronger than academy students. They were way better than the genin in the genin corps though and that made Riku realize how advantageous a jonin sensei was for the development of genin. That also made him bitter to no end.

They were shocked to learn that he had been the rookie of the year and yet ended up in the genin corps from the get go. Especially after the weeks they trained together and Riku giving them a run for their money despite the two years gap of experience. Gou had simply frowned but Yuuna had been pretty vocal. They understood that no matter how good a shinobi was, if his teammates were pants then it was back to the academy or the genin corps if the genin test went wrong. Friends of theirs ended like that. But ending in the genin corps right out of the bat, that was something that had infuriated her to no end. Even the always smiling Hinae had difficulty keeping her smile up when she learned about it. In her eyes, Riku was clearly a prodigy that should have been nurtured and not discarded. Had she not been sure that this time her students would make it, she would have invited Riku into the team permanently. Her third student was already chunin and free to find a temporary other team, Riku's potential in comparison to their original team's bond was more important and couldn't be wasted anymore.

Though she thought 'wasted' but her youngest team member was already good enough to be promoted in her opinion. When she went to see Izumo and Kotetsu for more information about Riku, her misconception that they had done a few missions with him and trained him had been blown away when she learned that he was mostly self-taught. The tale of their B-tank turned A-rank had been quite surprising. She honestly wished she had had him as a student and wondered what was going through the mind of her colleagues at the time of team selection. Sure, she was aware of his mother's deed but she didn't care and couldn't understand why it mattered to other people in the first place. Had his skill set match hers she would have taken him as an apprentice, regardless of the stigma. Hiashi, the Hyuuga clan head may have been against it but she was sure that she could convince him by pointing out that Riku was a complete genius and that it would present their clan in a good light to the shinobi population to not care about the actions of a parent and put an emphasis in raising the next generation of shinobi regardless. She may have had some problem with the elders and suffered a bit but she knew she would have had her way and it would have been worth it. Unfortunately she was ill suited to take him as an apprentice. But then again the team worked well together and she had no doubt that it would reach the final stage of the exam and that each member would be promoted.

"You didn't forget anything?" she asked her genin. "Gou, chakra pills, soldier pills?"

"Got thirty of each, sensei. I'm good."

"Yuuna? Enough kunais and shurikens? I don't want a repeat of ..."

"It happened ONE TIME! And it was our first C-rank!" yelled the offended Kunoichi to the snickers of everyone else.

Riku had learned that story from Gou and found it quite amusing. During their first C-rank Yuuna had to sacrifice space for cosmetics in her pouch and decided that the best way to do that was to decrease the number of her kunais and shurikens she was carrying. Suffice to say when she was all out of weapons during a bandit assault, she

felt quite dumb. The tongue lashing she got from Hinae had been legendary if Gou was to be believed.

“Perfect! You’re ready to go then! Good Luck!”

“Hey! What about Riku?! Aren’t you going to nag at him too?”

The stupidity of her statement made everyone pause. Then Gou snorted and Hinae began to laugh. Riku’s reaction was a single eyebrow raised displaying his incredulity.

“Yeah, okay, I realized how dumb it sounded as soon as I said it.” the teenage girl confessed with a sigh.

Riku had been nothing but exemplary during their month together. Polite, helpful and mindful. The only ‘bad’ thing they had to say about him was his tendency to work on things alone during training. Otherwise he demonstrated that he was a sure guy, very level headed and that you could always count on him. To Yuuna and Gou, they were sure that this time they would make chunin. Their first exams had been a total bust, not reaching beyond the first stage. Despite being genin for a year, they still lacked a bit of experience and their participation was a way for them to be faced with what they were lacking. Their second exam went way better but bad luck struck. Gou fought a genin that would end up winning the final stage, without being able to display his skills and Yuuna fought and lost against their third teammate Hitoshi in the preliminaries.

Hinae wished them good luck again and shushined away. The team then entered the building where the exam took place and made their way towards the room allocated to them.

“What the hell are they doing here?” Riku whispered. Something that was not missed by his friends.

“Who?” asked Yuuna, curious.

“Those two genins that you see blocking people?” he pointed out.

“Yeah, what about them?”

“They’re not genin at all, they’re chunins.”

“How do you know that?” inquired Gou.

“Because they’re the senpais I went on missions with.”

“Izumo and Kotetsu, right?”

“Yes. Kotetsu is the one with the bandage on his face, Izumo the other.”

"I think they're here to weed the idiots out." Yunna finally said as they walked closer. "Look, they put a genjutsu on the room's number." she added in a whisper so she wouldn't be heard by everyone around her.

Both boys looked up and saw the number 301 displayed above the door. That didn't make any sense since they were on the second floor. The number should be 201

"Good job, Yuuna-san." praised Riku, making her beam with happiness.

That was a simple but clever way his senpais had come up with to fail the ones not ready. Riku supposed that it was a form of mercy. Death wasn't uncommon during a chunin exam after all. If genins couldn't even notice a simple genjutsu like that they were not ready to advance further. They would probably die. Gou and Riku had been focused on the chunins so they didn't really pay attention to anything else but they would have noticed quickly in the end had Yuuna not pointed it out.

When the team reached the crowd, they simply stuck to the wall and made their way to the stairs, Riku grinning at his senpais when he caught their attention briefly. They reached room 301 and after taking a good look at the other contestant, joined the side where most konoha-nin gathered near the entrance. They waited fifteen minutes when he saw familiar faces coming in.

'Shino, Hinata, Akamaru and his pet Inuzuka Kiba. Their jonin sensei is either completely insane or really competent to let them take the exam. I mean, Shino is good, so is Hinata if she finds the confidence but Kiba? There is no way that mutt could be ready for the exam. He's the weak link of the team and if each of their progress is on par with the one of the academy he will drag them down big time.'

He caught Hinata's eye and greeted her with a nod and a smile that she gave back but she never separated from her team who went to find their own space to wait. Five minutes later more familiar faces came through the door and this time frowned at who it was.

*'The lazy ass, the fatty and the **bitch***

.'

Nara Shikamaru, Akimichi Choji and Yamanaka Ino, respectively.

'Why the hell are they here? Shikamaru has his brain but he's physically weak as hell, perhaps even more than Ino! And Choji is way too passive and scared of hurting people. No matter how good their sensei is, there is no way those three would be ready after six months of training for the exam.'

"They're from your class?" Yuuna asked at his side and explained herself when he looked at her. "Them and the previous team, it's obvious you know them from the way you look at them. Anything we should know?"

"They're from my graduating class, yes. Pineapple head is a Nara so be careful of shadows. Very, very smart but lazy as hell and weak. He probably thinks that his intellect will carry him but do something outside his calculation and he's a headless chicken. The guy with him is his best friend. Akimichi Choji, unless you call him fat he's mostly harmless. You could try bribing him with food to get your way, maybe. Blondie is Yamanaka Ino. Since she's a Yamanaka-

"Don't stand in her line of sight like an idiot." Gou commented.

"Yeah. Otherwise, she's just a joke of a kunoichi. She's fangirling for the Uchiha."

The sound of Yuuna retching grabbed both boys' attention.

"Fan girls. They're just.. Ugh. I feel disgraced by.. Ugh."

"You're preaching to a convert." answered Riku with Gou agreeing from the side with a nod. "From the previous team, the glasses guy is Aburame Shino. He's... good. Very analytic and doesn't make unnecessary moves. His bugs should be annoying but you probably could counter him easily if you don't let him sneak up on you, Yuuna-san. The girl is Hinata. Strong taijutsu obviously, since she's a Hyuga but she's very shy and insecure. Massively insecure. Attacking her verbally would yeild better results than a physical confrontation. I advise against it though, she's... really nice and kind."

"Is that a crush that I hear?" teased his teammate. "Gou, do you hea-"

"It's not, way too shy and young."

"Young?"

That was Gou who spoke up in surprise this time.

"Aww, our little Riku likes older girls. That's cute. You don't have a crush on me though? Do you?" Yuuna teased again.

"What if I do? What are you going to do about it?" he replied looking at her while making his eyebrow go up and down suggestively. Her answer was to chuckle and wacked his arm affectionately. "The last one is Inuzuka Kiba. He's a moron of the highest order. With him it's act first, never think later. He has some endurance and is relatively good at taijutsu but otherwise he's a weakling. Or at least he was six months ago. They all were and I doubt they're good enough to challenge you. Maybe Shikamaru if you give him time to plan."

“Alright. And those three?”

“Who are you-”

Looking back at the entrance, Riku saw the last team of his class enter the room. Side by side were Uchiha Sasuke, Uzumaki Naruto and Haruno Sakura.

“I can’t believe they’re here too.” he said with a deadpan expression.

“Why?” Yuuna asked.

“They’re weak too?” Gou added his own question.

“The Uchiha is good. He was second only to me in class and is probably already stronger now, he trains seriously. The blonde loudmouth is a bit like Kiba, act first, never think later most of the time. He does however think fast and when he does it’s on the fly and is very good with traps. He’s also a chakra monster. His reserves were bigger than the whole class combined and that includes our instructor.”

“You’re kidding?!” exclaimed Yuuna in shock.

“I wish but no.” Riku replied, shaking his head. “Fortunately his taijutsu is shit, his ninjutsu is shit, his kunai and shuriken jutsu are shit and his genjutsu is worse than shit. He failed the academy exam three times, though to be fair because of his chakra reserve he couldn’t make the regular bunshin. That also means his chakra control is shit. How he became a genin is a mystery to me but regardless he’s here and could pose a problem if a fight lasts. If we can’t deal with him quickly the best option is to retreat. We won’t win a fight of attrition, his stamina is way too off the charts for that. Otherwise he’s shit and we should just ignore him or since he’s loud as hell use him as bait if the opportunity presents itself. Lastly, Haruno Sakura. She’s... a fan girl too. She has a very good memory and is more than decently smart but her chakra reserves are pitiful which may mean nearly perfect chakra control. Ninjutsu is out for her and so is genjutsu since she has no sense of creativity. Still she may know a few. Her physical prowess are only worth talking about to have a good laugh. I mean.. She’s dieting.” The gasp that and retch sound that Yuuna let out was ignored. “She’s more interested in becoming the next Uchiha matriarch than anything.”

Both of his teammates nodded in acknowledgement. They knew Riku’s statement was probably accurate but it was about his classmates from six months ago. While progress was expected they doubted they would have become stronger by leaps and bounds. They would not lower their guard and underestimate them however.