

Out For Karma: Naruto

#Chapter 71: Team meeting - Read Out For Karma: Naruto Chapter 71: Team meeting

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“Kurenai-sensei!” Hinata hurriedly came to hug the genjutsu mistress who answered in kind.

“It’s been way too long, Hinata.”

“Yes. You know you can visit anytime with Mirai.”

“I know. Time has just been lacking.”

While they quickly caught up with each other, Riku led the rest of the team to the patio where he served tea. It didn’t take long for Kurenai to join them and sit down on one of the pillows next to Yugao. Kakashi made the effort to put away his icha icha and spoke up.

“Alright. Our team is unusual. Five Jonins gathered together. I suggest we start by deciding who will be the leader and the second in command.”

“How did Team Yukari work until now?” Kurenai wondered aloud. She had heard bits and pieces from Hinata about the team of three Jonins but in the end knew very little about it.

Yugao answered her. “Usually, Hokage-sama designates a leader for each mission. More often than not it’s Kakashi-Taicho because of his experience but recently...”

“Riku was the one to lead.” Kakashi cut in. “I believe it’s because she’s preparing you to succeed her?” He looked at Riku who nodded under Kurenai’s mild surprise.

Riku had been acting Hokage for a month and led Konoha to victory when Akatsuki, Iwa and Kumo attacked, so it wasn’t much of a shock but at the same time she believed he was just a candidate. Jiraiya, Kushina and Kakashi himself were way more experienced Shinobis.

“Yes. Before the gathering, she summoned me. I am to become the Rokudaime should she fall. Although don’t think that because of this you’re not going to lead this team.

Leading as a Hokage and leading as a Jonin are two different things and you are way more experienced in the latter than I am.”

“Everyone agrees, then? Kakashi leads?” Asked Gai and everyone nodded.

“I’ll do my best.” the cyclops announced. “Let’s continue with our strengths and weaknesses then we’ll come up with formations. I’m a ninjutsu specialist. Contrary to popular belief I do not know a thousand jutsus. A bit more than a hundred at most. The sharingan is constantly draining my chakra and its use even more. I’m not too bad with genjutsu with it but I’d rather not waste my chakra like this. Thanks to it I can also make things disappear. It’s an ocular space-time ninjutsu, however it’s a heavy toll on my chakra reserves. It’s a last resort. I have mastered the five affinities, my natural one being lightning and can summon dogs. They’re mainly used for tracking. My weaknesses are Taijutsu and fight of attrition, my chakra reserves being relatively small for a jonin and constantly drained by the sharingan.”

With Kakashi’s presentation done, Gai followed his example. “No surprise here, I specialize in Taijutsu. Goken to be more specific. What’s less known is that I’m also a bujutsu specialist. Nunchaku to be exact. My elemental affinity is Fire but I also mastered lightning. I also know the eight gates but it’s a last resort. I have a summon contract with the turtle clan. My weaknesses are everything that is not Taijutsu although I’m really good at detecting and breaking out of a genjutsu.”

The next one to go was Kurenai. “I specialize in Genjutsu. I have a natural fire affinity and mastered Earth and also a predilection to yin release which makes ninjutsu difficult for me. My greatest weakness is Taijutsu.”

Riku said nothing but inwardly wondered how good she was at genjutsu to have made Jonin. Then again the requirements for becoming Jonin were simple. Strong enough, specialized and with two mastered affinity. She was strong in her own right but would never surpass other Jonins which was fine. Not everyone could be monsters like Gai, Kakashi and Himself and not all jonins were of equal strength.

“I specialize in Kenjutsu. I’m an all rounder. Very good at everything but not the best. I know a bit of iryo-ninjutsu. I’m also a moderate sensor. My main affinity is water and I also mastered fire and earth. My weaknesses is... fuinjutsu.”

That revelation took Gai and Kurenai aback. “Fuinjutsu?”

Kurenai asked with curiosity and surprise. As far as she knew, fuinjutsu was a shinobi art used outside of battle. A support art, nothing more. Gai thought the same. Their experience of fuinjutsu in battle was limited to exploding tags or the Hiraishin.

“Fuinjutsu is a very difficult art, few understand it and fewer use it but in combat it is devastating.” Yugao glanced at Riku at the corner of her eyes.

Riku took the look she was giving him as a cue to make his introduction. "I specialize in Taijutsu, iryo-ninjutsu and fuinjutsu. I practice both the goken and the iryoken."

"Healing fist?" Kurenai wondered, tilted her head to the side.

"It's a mix of the Goken and Jyuken. By hitting someone with my medical chakra I can heal them or make them explode. I basically accelerate their cell division to a point they multiply so fast the body can't handle it. It's a Jyuken move with Goken results." Kurenai winced at the image. "I also know my mother's explosive strength in case the iryoken doesn't work. I'm a full fledged medic. Everything I can't heal with the iryoken or a healing tag, I can deal with in an operating room. Wounds or poisons. Regarding fuinjutsu, I'm a master at it. My speciality is space-time. My main affinity is wind but I mastered them all. Through fuinjutsu I also mastered scorch release and have a good handle of Mokuton."

"What?!"

Both Gai and Kurenai were dumbfounded by what they heard. They couldn't be blamed, Riku had just announced he could use two elemental kekkei genkai as if it was nothing.

"Scorch release?" Kakashi was surprised. He hadn't known about that.

"Elemental kekkei genkai do not exist." Riku began to explain to his new teammates. "It's just the ratio of each element combined is so precise that it's almost impossible to recreate it. Kekkei genkai users just naturally know the ratio. Fuinjutsu takes care of that problem." He turned to Kakashi then. "Yes. It's a recent thing that I wasn't able to test yet in combat."

"But why scorch release out of all the elemental kekkei genkai?" Yugao wondered.

"Less lethal than the iryo-ken. The target is mummified but not necessarily dead. Most of all it's not a mess of blood and gore." Riku's shoulders sagged. "I can summon slugs and I'm a sage."

"Hold on!" Gai interrupted. "Are you saying that anyone could use an elemental kekkei genkai? Any and all of them?"

"Yes. By applying the correct and proper seals on one's body, it's possible. More than that, if you practice enough it will come to a point where you instinctively know how much to mix and won't use the seals anymore. Mom can now use mokuton without them."

"It's an S-rank secret." Kakashi chimed. "Not like that feat can be easily reproduced, so far only this fuinjutsu nerd," he looked at Riku. "Succeeded in doing it. Still that knowledge could be disastrous if out in the open."

Yugao added her own piece. "At this point, anything that Riku says is probably an S-rank secret. Keep that in mind."

"Are you two done trying to embarrass me or can I finish my introduction?" He sent them both a glare.

"Mah, Mah, we're just telling it how it is." Kakshi waved his hand lazily at him. "Go on."

"Because I'm a sage, I'm a really good sensor and my range is around 5 miles at best. My weaknesses are bukijutsu and genjutsu and in some measure, ninjutsu."

"With our personal introduction done, it's time to introduce you to Team Yukari's special base and gear." Kakashi gave a look at Riku who took out the Botib on the patio and invited everyone inside.

The experience of the botib had been quite mind blowing to Gai and Kurenai. The latter had known from Hinata but couldn't really imagine what she had under her very eyes.

"That's my personal base. A military one would be vastly different and less.... Spacious." Riku told them and gave them a tour of the first floor.

He showed them the training room first and warned of what would happen if a wall was damaged.

"I'm thinking of putting a barrier on them to make them sturdier which would allow a more destructive training."

Then he showed them the infirmary and the armory.

"Every Botib has the same configuration. Kitchen at the back, Infirmary on the right, Training room on the left and Armory in the corner."

"That reminds me of the bunker under the village." Gai pointed out.

"I created it with uniformity in mind. Anbu are already familiar with the layout of a regular botib and I wanted them to be able to easily find their way and herd the people in case of the bunker being needed."

"What do those seals do?" Kurenai pointed at two huge seals on opposite walls. Both were so complex and extensive. One could only see here and there the brown color of the wood they were written on.

"The one on the left is the hiraishin seal. That makes me think..."

Riku pulled out his book of seals and took out two bracelets. Gai and Kurenai received one each.

"It's your escape strategy. You put a drop of chakra in it and you're teleported back here in front of the seal. You need a drop of blood to key the bracelet to you and another to key yourself to the seal on the wall."

"Neat." Gai bit his thumb and let some blood drop on the bracelet which was absorbed and disappeared from sight. Riku put his hand next to a circle on the wall and Gai added his blood there too. Kurenai followed suit.

"Now the other seal is a time seal. It controls the speed of the time in the whole botib. It can either accelerate or decelerate time. One year here could be one second outside. Inversely, one year outside could be one second here."

That revelation shocked them to the core.

"Keep in mind that you're aging. While that seal allows you to heal quickly and go back to the field in a blink of an eye for the people outside, you still go through the natural healing period."

"If I spend a decade here but only a second passes outside..." Kurenai began understanding what Kakashi was saying.

"Yes. It's not to be abused." He looked at Riku who frowned.

"I'm not using it that much. Every time was for a good reason."

"It's a slippery slope." Kakashi reminded him.

"How much did you use it?" Gai wondered.

"I'm supposed to be twenty in two months but I'm closer to twenty one."

"I see."

"Now that we're done with the tour, here's the fun part." Kakashi invited his new teammates to the armory. "Everything here is the best of the best. From armors, to Kunai, to tags. Everything that comes from here ends in the Anbu."

"You're sound so proud it almost sounds like it's because of you." Riku deadpanned.

"Mah, Mah, we're teammates, we share the credit." Yugao had to restrain Riku from pummeling Kakashi when he gave everyone his eye smile.

Bit by bit, Riku introduced everything to Gai and Kurenai. What the armors could do, what they couldn't, same for the weapons. Tags were a whole other thing.

“When did you have the time to... Nevermind.” Yugao shook her head when Riku pulled out a book listing every tag in the armory, what they could do, their utilisations instructions and the warnings coming with them.

From the simple flashband tag to the EMS one Gai and Kurenai were baffled. They understood now, partially how fuinjutsu could be devastating during a battle.

“I can really channel any elements in this kunai through the seal?” Kurenai wondered, turning a kunai she had in hand.

“Depending on which part of the seal you channel chakra into, yes.”

“What could be the utility of channeling water or earth?” Gai wondered.

“Water? For cutting. High pressure water cuts better than wind actually. Earth makes the kunai sturdier. Of course it can simply be for the element advantage.”

Riku handed an empty book of seal to Gai and Kurenai so they could pick whatever they needed and prepare themselves at home. Once they made their choices, the team left the botib. Yugao reminded everyone they were supposed to leave the following morning at dawn.

Riku invited her to stay the night as she didn’t have a family to spend her last night in the village with but she declined.

“I’m hanging with Anko and Hana. I’m not that alone, Riku.” She smiled teasingly.

“Excuse me if I want my big-sister figure always by my side.” he huffed and got a kiss on the cheek before she shushined away.

Getting back inside Senju Manor he went to help Hinata with lunch in the kitchen. She politely declined, having fun by herself and when Riku embraced her from behind, she turned her head for a loving kiss before threatening him with a well placed Juken strike if he didn’t let her cook alone.

“Why don’t you spend some time with the girls? Hanabi could use some help with them.”

“Fine but we’re spending time together, just the two of us, later.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Hinata began to rub her ass against Riku’s groin to tease him. “Now go.”

“It’s not what I had in mind.” he replied, grabbing her covered breasts and began to play with them. “I was more thinking of spending time together normally but if that’s what my moon princess wishes, who am I to deny her?”

He kissed her neck and released her. His daughters and Hanabi were in the play room. The Hyuga heiress was making faces at her nieces. Riku found it hilarious. While Hanabi was quite the firecracker she was first and foremost a Hyuga with a noble attitude. Seeing her childish like that amused him greatly.

"Practicing for the time you and Konohamaru have some of your own?" He teased, making his presence known.

Hanabi frowned. "I'm not interested in that stupid monkey-boy."

"I never talk about being interested. Arranged marriages still happen," he smirked. "Interesting that it was the first thing that came to mind." He laid down on his side next to Hitomi and Toka who were apparently having a conversation in baby talk.

"How Hinata-nee-sama could fall in love with you is a mystery to me."

"You could really work on your deflecting skills. And she fell in love with me because I always believed in her and did my very best to support her in everything she needed and wanted." That made Hanabi frown more. "Come on. Konohamaru is just immature. He'll grow out of it with time and experience in life. Like most boys do when they become men. When that happens, you will regret it if you didn't give him a chance before. Another girl is going to snatch him away."

"I don't like him." Hanabi persisted.

"You don't like him now. But in a few years?" She felt silent and pondered the question. "Look at Ino and I. I despised her immensely when we were kids. She was an Uchiha fangirl and didn't take her training as a kunoichi seriously. Even the look of her... I couldn't stand it. And now? She's-"

"A strong kunoichi in her own right." Both Riku and Hanabi turned their heads to look at Ino leaning against the door frame. "Obsessed with only her very handsome and sexy husband while being very sexy herself."

She gave Riku a meaningful smile and walked to him, settling down to his right and facing Hanabi.

"Puberty is the time when people change the most. I'm sure you've already noticed Konohamaru being different from your time at the academy."

"Why does everyone want me to date him?!"

"We don't. We're just teasing." Riku replied.

"Everyone can see you like him a bit. Nothing wrong with that. Life is short for a shinobi, Hanabi. Now that we're at war it's even shorter." Ino added.

“But he’s so childish! He’s so infuriating!” cracks began to appear in the Hyuga’s denial.

“Boys and men alike tend to do that.”

“I didn’t.”

“Riku, you’re the worst of them all.” Ino gave him a deadpan look. “I spent years trying to get you. Every refusal, every rejection when you kept on undressing me with your eyes nearly drove me mad.”

“I…” He didn’t know what to say. He ended up saying nothing because Ino put her lips on his.

“It’s fine. That just made me want you even more.” She turned to Hanabi. “It’s fine if you don’t go after Konohamru, Hanabi. Just don’t live with regrets.”

The girl nodded and picked up Hitomi in her arms. The toddler had raised her tiny hands to her aunt for a pick up while Toka simply fell asleep on the tatami.

Hinata called for lunch and Riku put his daughters in their crib.

“I thought you would already be gone.” Ino commented, chewing on some tuna.

“Tomorrow at dawn. I’m leaving to deal with Iwa.” Riku answered. “Did you receive your orders?” He looked at everyone.

“Not yet but I will probably be sent West too. The Jyuken is useless against undead,” Hanabi replied.

“Team 10 is on standby. We’re experts in capturing targets.” was Ino’s answer.

“So paralysis tags could be applied on them. Good strategy. I would have seen you in the comm department though.”

“If you hadn’t revolutionized communication with your seals I may have been sent to work there.”

Ino’s tone wasn’t reproachful. If anything she was glad because now she would fight with Choji and Shikamaru.

“I’m working at the hospital for triage. With the Jyuken I can help greatly in decreasing the mortality rate. I suppose all members of my clans in the program would do the same.” Hinata revealed as she entered the room.

“What about Karin?” Ino inquired.

“I suppose, fuinjutsu duties. With me out of the village, that leaves only her and Kushina as seal mistresses. Someone has to keep the barrier up and intervene if there is a seal problem. She’s also a jinchuriki so a target. Had she been a fighter, mom may have let her go but I’m not sure about that.”

Anything related to the war stopped being discussed here and there. When lunch was over, Hanabi left for the Hyuga compound. Riku took Ino and Hinata to the botib and armed them as much as he could. Original content can be found at NovelFire.net

“I’d rather you have anything to protect yourself than not. Just in case.” he argued when Hinata assured him she didn’t need anything as she worked at the hospital. Ino, for her part, had her gear ready. Both relented when riku made his argument. If only to give him some peace of mind.

After spending the afternoon, simply cuddling in the garden, Riku made dinner. Tsunade had come home cooing at Kamiko in her arms, Karin looking exhausted at her side. When it was time for bed, Riku made nine shadow clones. Nobody knew who was the real one and didn’t care. Hinata picked one and went to her room hand in hand with her husband. Ino, greedy as always, took the most. Seven in total. Everyone present shook their heads at the lustful grin the blond had on her face.

“That girl... I swear she has lust in her veins, not blood.” Tsunade commented as one Riku dragged her away to her room while the last one of him carried a dead on her feet Karin.

The moment they were alone, Riku pressed her back against the wall, his hands already tugging open the front of her robe. Her massive breasts spilled free, creamy skin gleaming in the warm light. She cupped them in her hands, smirking down at him. “You want these, don’t you?”

Her robe fell completely away, the heavy fabric pooling at her feet. The sheer size and weight of her breasts made her chest sway slightly with each breath, the skin taut and smooth, flushed faintly with heat. Riku’s gaze was locked on them, his cock thick and hard enough that the flushed crown glistened already with a bead of precum. She stepped close enough for the heat of him to radiate against her belly, then knelt slowly, deliberately, her thighs brushing the backs of his legs as she descended.

The moment her hands wrapped around him, he felt the contrast—her palms warm but slightly firmer, her breasts impossibly soft, their heavy weight yielding and closing around his length. She pressed them together, creating a hot, silky channel that hugged him from base to tip. The movement was slow at first, her chest sliding upward to expose the head before gliding back down until his entire shaft was buried between the pillowy swells.

She leaned forward, lips sealing around the crown, tongue swirling over the sensitive ridge. The suction was perfect—wet, hot, and relentless—while the firm pressure of her

breasts milked the rest of his length. Every time she lifted, the slick warmth of her mouth chased upward; every time she pressed down, her tits squeezed him until his knees went taut.

“Mmmhh... ffuuhh... ahnnn,” she breathed around him, her moans vibrating along his cock and making the veins throb. The heat of her saliva mixed with the creamy pressure of her breasts until the sensation blurred into one overwhelming rush. His hips flexed instinctively, pushing deeper into the tunnel of soft skin and wet mouth until the pressure inside him snapped.

He groaned, spilling hot, thick streams over her tongue. She swallowed greedily, throat working in quick gulps, the muscles fluttering around him until the last drop was gone. She licked the head clean, sucking gently one last time before letting him slip free with a lewd pop.

Riku hauled her upright, guiding her toward the bed. The bedding was still faintly warm from earlier in the night, the smooth cotton whispering under her skin as she sat back. He slid between her knees, bent to taste her—but she caught his hair in one firm hand, nails grazing his scalp.

“Not tonight,” she murmured, her eyes half-lidded with hunger. “I want to feel you.”

She climbed over him, the muscles in her thighs flexing as she lowered herself. The fat head of his cock parted her folds, the heat inside her like molten silk as she sank down slowly, stretching to take every inch. The tight grip of her walls molded around him until she was seated fully on his hips, both of them breathing harder from the pressure and the sheer heat of it.

Leaning forward, she pressed her heavy breasts to his face. “Suck,” she whispered, and he latched onto one nipple instantly. The skin was soft and warm, the areola thick between his lips. A faint ripple of chakra moved through her, and suddenly sweet, warm milk spilled into his mouth. He groaned, drinking in long pulls, the flavor rich and almost intoxicating.

Her hips began to move, a slow, deliberate grind that made her inner walls massage him while her breasts bounced gently against his face. Each downward roll pressed him deep, making the thick length rub over that spot inside her that sent tingles racing up her spine. His hands gripped her hips, feeling the tautness of her muscles as she rose and fell, and then one hand slid lower, cupping her ass. The slap he gave her was sharp and ringing, the sting blooming hot against her skin before his palm rubbed over the curve.

Another slap followed, harder this time, and she clenched around him with a startled gasp. The sensations piled up—his mouth tugging at her nipple, the sweet rush of milk leaving her, the steady filling stretch of his cock inside her—until she slammed herself down hard on his thighs, grinding in tight circles as her orgasm broke. She shuddered,

nails digging into his shoulders, moaning low and throaty while her body clenched around him in rhythmic waves.

Riku shifted them without pulling out, rolling until she lay on her side and he was spooned against her back. His thrusts were slower now, long and deep, each one drawing a low moan from her throat. His mouth traced her shoulder, the scrape of teeth followed by soft kisses along the slope of her neck. She turned her head, meeting him in a deep, wet kiss, their tongues sliding together in slow, deliberate strokes.

When they parted, his hand came up to cup her breast, squeezing until milk welled up at the nipple. He leaned forward to drink again, the warm trickle coating his tongue before he pulled back and offered it to her. Tsunade bent her head, closing her lips over herself, sucking until her cheeks hollowed, then Riku joined her, both of them drinking before their mouths met again. This time, the kiss was milk-sweet and messy, tongues tangling until their breaths grew ragged.

When she broke away, her smile was faint but hungry. "Faster. And I want you behind me."

She moved onto her hands and knees, her breasts swaying with the shift. The wet heat of her core clenched as he slid into her from behind, his hips pressing hard to hers. His hands explored the curve of her ass before delivering a sharp, echoing smack that made her yelp and then moan.

"Harder!" she demanded, voice breaking on a gasp. He reached forward, undoing her twin pigtails, letting her hair spill loose before gathering it into one thick ponytail. Wrapping it tight around his fist, he used it to pull her back into each pounding thrust. Her breasts swung wildly beneath her, heavy and leaking, droplets spattering the sheets as his cock drove into her over and over, the sound of their bodies meeting loud and wet in the air.

The angle hit deep, grinding against her inner walls until she clenched around him again, a cry tearing from her throat as she came. His own release followed hard, a hot flood spilling deep inside her in pulsing bursts.

She collapsed forward onto the bed, her skin damp with sweat and her hair sticking in strands to her cheeks. He leaned over her, their chests pressed together lightly. When she turned her head, eyes soft and lips parted, he kissed her—slow, tender, their breaths mingling.

After, she pushed him back for a moment to breathe, then rolled onto her back, spreading her legs wide. The invitation was clear.

Riku's chakra flared faintly, and his cock surged back to full hardness in seconds. He sank into her slowly, the hot clutch of her folds wrapping tight around him, the slickness drawing a groan from his throat. He lowered his mouth to her breasts, kissing and

nipping along the curve, tasting the faint salt of sweat before she locked her legs around his waist.

Her hands cradled his head, pulling him up until their eyes locked. "I love you," she said, voice rich and sure.

"I love you too," he murmured, holding her gaze.

And then he began to move again, slow and deep, each stroke deliberate, the sensation of her tight, wet heat and the closeness of their bodies making every second stretch long and full, as if the rest of the night could be held there forever.

Chapter 72: Deployment

Despite the night of passion he had with his mother, Riku wasn't able to sleep. He had cuddled her all the way but his mind had refused to rest. A bit before sunrise, he deftly extricated himself from Tsunade's embrace. His gear was ready but there was one more thing he needed to do.

Silently, he went to his mother's desk. He pulled a blank paper from a stack, laying neatly in the corner and began to write. Everything he thought and felt for Tsunade was put onto the white page. From the day they met, to this very moment. He wrote as small as possible to be sure that everything he had to say could fit on the recto. Once done, he let the ink dry then folded the letter in two. After adding her name on the recto he let it rest against the stack of paper.

"What is it?" Two slender arms circle his torso, right under his armpits. Tsunade's head rested on his shoulder, partially burying itself into his hair.

Riku leaned back against the chair and turned his head to leave a peck on her lips. "A letter for you."

"I can see that but what is it about?"

"What you mean to me. It's really embarrassing so... Wait for me to leave before you read it? Please."

"You're driving a hard bargain but fine," she feigned a magnanimous sigh.

"And it's for your eyes only."

Tsunade nodded and pulled back from the embrace, letting him go. "I... have something for you."

Riku turned around to look at her and saw her hands going to her necklace. The one she had inherited from the Shodai. When he saw her hesitate, he put his hands on hers.

"If you want to give it to me then do it after the war. An incentive for me to come back." He was well aware of her thoughts about the heirloom. Her fiancé Dan and her little brother, his uncle, Nawaki, had died with it around their neck. From her point of view, it only brought luck to her and bad luck to others but Riku had survived ordeals that would have killed stronger men. His luck was good so he understood why the idea of giving it to him crossed her mind despite her reticence. "Besides... It won't look nearly as gorgeous on my chest like it does on yours."

He gave her an amused smile, then kissed her nose.

"...You spend way too much time with Ino." The flat tone reply he got widened his smile.

"Perhaps."

Riku stood up and hugged her one last time. Before she could say anything he flashed away in a forest green light. Sighing deeply, Tsunade's eyes landed on the letter. She wanted nothing more than to read the letter now. Knowing her son's feelings for her was something she wanted above everything. She knew he loved her. He had said so many times before and the previous night they shared proved it. Words could convey so much more however. More than a simple 'I love you'. More than any kiss, any caress. In the end she averted her eyes, deciding she would read everything when she came back tonight after what she knew would be a very long day.

Riku arrived at the rendezvous point and noticed he was not the first person to do so, despite how early it was. He wasn't surprised however. With Gai in the team, there was no way anyone would. The green beast of Konoha was currently doing simple push-ups, waiting for his teammate.

After exchanging greetings, Riku let him finish his set and stood to the side. He pulled up his notebook and began to read his diverse ideas about how to use nature chakra in ways that haven't been done before. That was something he wanted to expand and explore upon and had taken a backseat with his fuinjutsu and medical work. It didn't help that the subject didn't interest him as much. It didn't help either that his mind constantly wandered back to fuinjutsu. His shifting focus landed on creating barriers that would restrain anyone undead in it. It would be much easier to stop an edo tensei zombie by simply luring him inside a zone than getting close and putting a tag on it. The prospect of having to brave the distance to reach his great grandfather or great uncle wasn't something he liked. Of course, with the hiraishin it may be easier for him than for other shinobis. Even that wasn't a sure thing however. Senju Tobirama was the first to come up with the technique, and may have ways to counter it. Hashirama may very well know how too by simple association or, since he was the very first 'God of Shinobi', pull something out of his ass. From the tales of his mother and the Sandaime, the Shodai was quite the eccentric man. The stories reminded Riku of Naruto a bit and he hoped the man didn't have an 'on the fly' thinking as maddening as his half brother's. That would be quite a disaster.

“Good morning.”

Kurenai's voice broke him out of his thoughts and he looked up from his notebook to see her accompanied by Yugao. He greeted them back and felt the air shift slightly behind him. He didn't need to turn to know Kakashi had arrived with a shushin.

“Let's go.”

That was all the fake cyclops said. As one, they walked inside the building to get their orders. After going up two floors they arrived in a large room where shinobis, mostly jonins and chunins, were receiving their assignments from a group of shinobis sitting behind tables with loads of scrolls on it or behind them. At their sight, Shikaku rose from his chair in the middle of the main table and signaled them to follow them to another room. Once inside Riku pulled up a security barrier to completely cut the place from the rest of the world. The Jonin commander said nothing, as if it was expected.

“I'm sure you've already figured out that your team is not the run out of the mill team.” he began right off the bat.

Kakashi voiced what he had in mind. “From the composition I believe we're expected to undergo the most dangerous covert mission. Strike deep and hard into enemy territory.”

“Correct.” Shikaku nodded at his jonin's reply. “You have a special status. Your team only takes orders from me or Hokage-sama. You can disregard anyone else's. Your primary objective is to infiltrate behind enemy lines and kill as many officers as you can, disrupting Iwa's chain of command, and without getting caught.”

“Secondary objectives?” Kakashi asked.

“None.” The answer Shikaku gave puzzled the team as if there was a primary objective it was implied there was at least a secondary one. He explained himself quickly enough. “You have more or less free rein to act as you wish.”

“What are our limitations?”

“First, run by me your plans of action. It wouldn't do well for Konoha if you stumble onto another team's mission or them onto yours. I will tell you if you can or not go with what you intend to do. Second, you need to call in central and await for authorization to use one of the many Botib scattered around if you need too. It's a question of order and management. Same for your movement from base to base. Shinobis in charge of camps need to know of your arrival.”

The jonin marked a pause and the team of five gave him a nod of understanding.

“Anything you need, just say so and you'll probably get it. Now...” He pulled a small scroll from one of his vest's pockets and tossed it at Kakashi. “You're to go to underpost

LoE-27. From there you're to go as far deep as possible inside the Land of Earth and create your own base. Riku-san's own Botib would do. If you can, connect it to central directly or indirectly."

"Anything else, sir?"

"No. At least not regarding the team. Riku-san, Hokage-sama has specific orders for you. You are to work on seals to deal properly with the undead. The paralysis seals you came up with are great but..."

"I know of their flaws, sir. I was already thinking of other means to make the ordeal easier."

"Good. Also, if you come up with new... technologies even if it's just ideas, pass them along. You're also to craft more of... well... everything you can create."

Riku nodded and knew he would find very little sleep from now on. Maybe he could teach a thing or two to his team to help.

Shikaku dismissed the team which left the building in the direction of the main intelligence building. Kakashi opened the scroll, read it and pulled up from a storage seal a note which he gave to the chunin working at the reception desk. They were led to a hidden elevator which brought them down a few floors underground. Following the instructions they were given they arrived at the end of a corridor, heavily guarded and monitored. Riku could recognize the work of Kushina on the many seals around.

After giving identification to the guard guarding the gate they were allowed to enter. There they found a big room with many seals written on the ground. Twenty seven in all.

A genin kunoichi who Riku swore was one of Ino's clansmen walked towards the team. "Destination?"

"LoE-27."

At Kakashi's reply, the woman winced but quickly got her facial features under control. "Follow me."

She led them to the back of the room and stopped in front of a seal matrix one.

"That's the seal that will teleport you to LoE-27. Please, get inside the matrix."

Without hesitation, the members of team Yukari walked inside, followed by Gai and a somewhat hesitant Kurenai. The genin seemed to have noticed the woman's discomfort and reassured her.

“Don’t worry, you don’t feel anything.” She leaned forward and put her hand on a smaller seal linked to the matrix. “Good luck.”

With those final words, she activated the seal and all Kurenai saw was a bright light. It wasn’t strong enough to hurt her eyes and impaired her vision but the sudden change of environment that resulted in the teleportation disoriented her a little for a second or so.

“That’s it?” She looked around to see they weren’t in the room anymore but inside what she knew was a Botib. A downgrade from the one Riku had her visit the previous day.

“That’s it.” Kakshi nodded while Yugao and Riku went to the main table and began using the reconnaissance system.

“I wonder how the hiraishin can be so effective when there is a small second of disorientation.” She wondered aloud.

“In battle, Riku sees where he’s going so it’s not that disorienting and so not really a problem. But yes, long distance, beyond line of sight, it can be a problem, that’s why it’s usually not done.” Kakashi explained as he looked at the displays his teammates were looking at.

Gai was more practical and focused however. “Where are we exactly? I understand that LoE means Land of Earth, but twenty seven?”

Kakashi didn’t wait to give him an answer. “27 is the foremost area we were able to map in the country. Iwa is only a week away if we’re running at full speed.”

“Huh... So we’re really deep, *deep*.”

“Taicho the area is clear.” Yugao called out.

Riku added a bit more information “It’s raining heavily though.”

“Not ideal.”

The land of stone, as its name suggested, was full of rock and dirt. Very few trees. As such with the rain, the ground was mudding and moving without leaving tracks in the directions opposite of Iwa shinobis would be difficult.

“We’re camping out for a few days, until the rain stops and the ground is mostly dry. If the rain persists, then we will have to move regardless. Riku, send a message to Central of our arrival and our situation. Everyone, keep notes of what resources you’re using so it can be replaced if another team comes here. Yugao, instruct Gai and Kurenai on how to use the recon system. Riku, how long to add it to your own Botib?”

“Half a day? Placing tags outside would take way longer though.”

“We’ll see about that once we find a good place to burrow. No Time Seal.”

With his orders given, Kakashi went to make the inventory of the armory, the kitchen and the infirmary. Riku pulled out his Botib and went inside to begin installing the recon system.

“So how does that work?” Gai asked Yugao as he and Kurenai got closer to the table in the center of the room.

“Special tags had been hidden every fifty meters in all directions for a 1km radius.” Yugao began to explain. “Each tag emits a sound wave around it. The wave is... formless but is still subjected to anything physical and so the tag transmits what the waves picks up.”

When she saw Gai not understanding she went to use imagery. “A bit like a bat. When the wave hits something physical it’s bounced back. That bouncing allows us to determine the distance of the physical object from the tag but also its form and size. As you can see,” she pointed at the display to show black and white shapes that defined the side of a mountain. “It’s also not subjected to chakra since it’s pure sound. Meaning no genjutsu would be picked up. What we see is the truth of what’s out there.”

“That’s... smart.” the green beast commented.

“Don’t tell that to Riku, his head is already big as it is.”

“I HEARD THAT!”

Ignoring the yell from her teammate while suppressing a smile, she caught the attention of her two students to the controls.

“The controls are easy. You put your hands here and move it accordingly to get what you want. Your left hand controls the view. Turn your hand to the left and the view turns left. To the right it turns right. Slide it up and the view will look down, slide it down and the view will look up. You need to have a better view of something? Center it on the display and turn right with your right hand to zoom in and left to zoom out. To switch from one tag to another, these seals do it. The one on the right switches to the next tag in the list, the one on the left switches to the previous one.”

As she explained how the controls work, she also did a demonstration.

“The controls are easy to use but need a bit of adjustment and practice for precision. The faster you turn your hand, the faster the view will turn. Now go ahead.”

Gai and Kurenai exchanged a glance and the former politely invited the latter to go first.

“What’s that thing?” The genjutsu mistress pointed to the small square box on the side.

"A direct line to central.. You pick up the... It's called a hand set. You put the brown port over your ear and the blue part near your mouth. You want to call central? Push the green button. If Central calls, the thing just rings. It uses the hiraishin seals in the Botib to transmit instantly sounds to the other side. Faster and more reliable than radio."

"Long distance too." Gai noted.

"Yes and no." Yugao replied. "It reaches Konoha but not in one go. Your voice is relayed through many, many special hiraishin tags between our location and the village. A direct line is possible but Riku said that the amount of chakra needed for that is astronomical. Relays are way more cost efficient. Less than half a percent of the direct way's cost."

Gai nodded and looked at Kurenai who was familiarizing herself with the recon system's controls. Yugao went to join Kakashi in inventorying everything.

It took less than a day for every member of the team to be up to speed with their situation. Everything was in order inside their base. All they had to do was occupy themselves. Something that Riku took advantage of. He gathered everyone to teach them the basics of fuinjutsu beyond the storage seals. Mostly the tags for his shurifuins in case something went wrong and someone found themselves separated from the team and alone. The hiraishin bracelet wasn't indestructible after all. Riku remembered too well his foray into Amegakure and the results of his bracelet being destroyed.

"Now, you just have to practice to be able to make your own. It's boring, I know, but not that difficult and could save your life." He said as he watched his teammates with a brush in hand writing seals on chakra paper.

None had any protest and diligently practiced their calligraphy. Surprisingly Gai was the one who picked it up the quickest. Kakashi didn't count, he had a few years of basic fuinjutsu under his belt and the sharingan to help which was a bit of a cheat.

For his part Riku was working on eyepatches for Yugao. No matter how much he tried she refused to have her eye fixed. Something he didn't understand but ended up accepting. When he was done he presented them to her.

"What does the seal do?" She asked as she let her thumb brush against the fabric of one of the eyepatch in her hand.

"Seals. Plural. There is the one outside and the one inside." Riku corrected and turned the eyepatch to show her the second seal. "The one outside is a one directional senbon launcher. You channel a bit of chakra into it and a dozen metal senbon coated in lightning are shot at your target."

Kakashi whistled when he heard that, clearly impressed.

Gai was more curt. "Nasty."

"Yes." Riku nodded. "The second seal is... well a prototype. By channeling chakra into it you can basically 'see'. Like the recon system. Well defined shapes. Useful if your vision is impaired for whatever reason. If it works and is useful I was thinking of sending it to R&D."

Yugao immediately put the small eye accessory on and tested that particular seal. She had to close her good eye after a few seconds.

"It's... working. I can't make out the features of everyone's face clearly but the broad strokes allow me to recognize everyone. It's very confusing with my left eye open. If both eyes see the same way however I don't see any problem."

"Some kind of goggles, then... Or... Simply on the backside of the head protector?"

Riku was scratching his cheek, thinking and everyone let him. They knew better than to bother him when his mind was lost like that.

Back in Konoha, Tsunade had finished her day. It wasn't quite past midnight but close. She was exhausted and couldn't wait to get into her bed so she could rest. She was grateful for the sharingans she had implanted. They allowed her to deal with a bit more efficiently the mountain of information that kept coming her way.

As she disrobed to start her night, she remembered the letter Riku had left for her. Turning around she went to her desk and picked it up then went to read it in bed. Once comfortably settled she opened it.

Hey, mom,

Given that in a few moments I'll leave the village for war, I thought of... Everything I wanted to say to you. Things that...I don't think I would have the courage to say aloud. Face to face or not. Way too embarrassing.

It's... a bit of a confession. Of sorts. You probably already know what I'm putting down on paper but I wanted you to have physical proof, a reminder if you will, which you can always go back to if you feel down.

First, I'd like to start with... the day we met. I don't know if you remember properly but I was shocked beyond belief when I saw you. Considering you shut me up with your hand, I believe you thought that I recognized you. Well, confession time: I didn't. Not at first. I was just... shocked. Shocked because you were the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. Not even Yugao-nee blanked my mind like you did at that moment. I think... (It's silly really and very embarrassing but that's why I'm writing it) I think it was love at first sight. I was an angry, spiteful teen with hormones messing around back then so I

don't think I properly realized it. Thinking back on it years later and I'm almost certain it was. (I only knew who you were when you let me talk again).

I'd like to apologize too for my words. I...I don't think I will ever forgive myself for them. Not because I said them but why I said them. I... It was a spur of a moment idea. A stupid, stupid, very stupid idea.

I said what I said to manipulate you. To get you back to the village and hopefully raise my standing. I knew the Sandaime was soft on you and from what I knew of the pervert... I knew I'd have to hurt you to shock you out of your depression. I didn't expect to almost die but I kind of deserved it. I'm sure had you not been a bit drunk, you would have realized how weird my change of topic and attitude was. Too aggressive when a moment earlier I was well... fan boying like mad.

I'd like to say I'm sorry. But I'm not. Not truly, because it led to where we are today. How can I be sorry when it led to me being happy? How can I be sorry when it led to US?

Perhaps you knew. You're smart, mom. Scarily so. In fact I always believed you did. Maybe I was wrong but it doesn't matter. What matters is that you did more than take me as your apprentice. You took me in. You gave me a home to live, not a house. You gave me a family, not colleagues. You gave me attention, you gave me care. You gave me love. Everything that I didn't know. Everything that I wasn't aware I wanted or needed. You gave it to me. You made me a better shinobi but before that, you made me a better boy, then a better man. A better person.

Without you I'd probably be this starved for friendship and spiteful idiot. Without you I wouldn't be able to look in the mirror and see someone I can be proud of. Without you I would probably have snapped and pulled an Orochimaru. I'm very glad I didn't.

I'm thankful to Kami for the day we met. I'm grateful to you for everything you did.

That's why I'm putting this here:

I love you.

More than you can imagine. More than Ino or Hinata or Karin. More than my children.

There is one person, and one person only, I would burn the world down if I lost her and that person is you.

I tried. Kami knows I tried to put a label on my feelings for you. One more precise than 'love.' I couldn't. Be it as a sensei. Be it as a friend. Be it as a chosen family. Be it as a lover. Be it as a mother. I wasn't able to determine what my love for you was. Until tonight.

It seems that no matter what hat you're wearing, I love you regardless.

You're the sensei I love the most. You're the friend I love the most. You're my family member I love the most. You're the lover I love the most. You're the mother I love the most.

Mom, if I could, I would pester you to marry me until you finally accept. You think the pervert was persistent? Ha! You've seen nothing!

Unfortunately for me (at least in that regard), I can't.

Perhaps in another life if Kami is willing?

I hope so, because a life without you and without your love is not a life I want to live.

Never doubt. Never forget.

I love you.

Riku

Tsunade was one of the most experienced kunoichi in the world. Control of her feelings was something she could do easily. She was more than used to it. Yet as she read more and more the content of the letter, she couldn't help herself. She cried.

From the happiness the knowledge of her son loving her more than anything gave her and from the fear of losing him in this war.

She read the letter a few more times, focusing on her son's declaration of love. As she folded the letter and put it under her pillow, she closed her eyes. Her heart getting to one conclusion.

If her son died, she too would burn the whole world down.

Chapter 73: A dream come true

The rain stopped during the night and Kakashi chose to wait for another one for the land to dry a bit before moving. That was fine with everyone. Except maybe Kakashi himself. Seeing Gai doing more than well in fuinjutsu, more than Kakashi ever did, was a bit demoralizing. However, all wasn't negative. He was happy for his rival to have something more than taijutsu in his arsenal.

That extra day in base allowed Riku to perfect the vision seal he had made inside Yugao's eyepatch and adapted it for everyone's head protector. He put one inside each of each team member's one. Adapting to the new sight had not been much of a challenge. It was just the colors which changed. It was all black and with many, many shades of grey. Of course the vision was limited by the distance the sound waves

emitted by the seal travelled. Beyond the limits, it was just a void, so it wasn't a perfect tool.

He made a sixth head protector and sent it with the instructions for the seals through the Hiraishin back to the village. To his mother who would decide if or not it would be sent to R&D. He also added a message about Gai's talent in fuinjutsu.

When the team left their base, they travelled slowly but with stealth. Yugao took point and scouted. If she felt anything out of the ordinary then it was Riku's turn. He would enter sage mode scout further and with more precision the surroundings. They had avoided an Iwa shinobi troop going to the front line that way. Laying low inside his buried Botib.

It took them three days to arrive at their destination. Another rocky valley and a narrow one at that. Riku and Kakashi used doton jutsus to create a small cave and buried six feet deep in the former's own Botib.

After contacting the HQ to report they were in position, they began to receive direct intel from Shikaku himself. Soon enough, the team was waltzing like professional dancers behind the enemy's lines. Every small camp or base was hit brutally during the night. Kakashi and Yugao were experts in assassination so they infiltrated the deepest parts to kill the commanders. Gai, Kurenai and Riku were charged to deal with the guards, patrols or stealing resources. One of them was always in the Botib, watching the area like a hawk and communicating with the rest on the team.

Food and weapons were sent back to the nearest fortified castle to be distributed towards the bases which needed it the most, intel was sent back to Konoha for decryption and analysis.

There hadn't been great battles yet but many skirmishes had happened. So far, Konoha had been ready, thanks to the hidden bases and the losses had been minimal contrary to Iwa.

A month into their deployment, the team received excellent news from Shikaku. For Kakashi at least. From one of the scrolls they stole during one of their night raids, the Intelligence division discovered that Iwa's exploding corps had been deployed for a massive attack towards a small fortress near Ame. The enemy was supposed to completely annihilate the place and create a breach into Konoha's line of defense. The team's mission was to intercept the corps and dealt with as many numbers as they could before retreating.

Riku was the first to say something. "How do we proceed?"

Unrolling a map on the table, Kakashi put his finger on it and circled an area. "From the intel they will be around here within a day or two. We need to wait for information from LoE 13 through 17 to know exactly where. Once we know we're going to prepare a

surprise for them. Yugao and I are Team A,” he tapped at an area deeper into Iwa’s territory. “We’re going to put in place a minefield forbidding them to retreat.” He moved his finger on the other side, near Konoha’s line. “Kurenai, Gai, you guys are Team B. You’ll do the same there. Riku you’ll be the bait. First you need to infiltrate the camp and create chaos, then lure them towards Team B. You better have your head protector on your eyes or be in sage mode to be sure to not activate one of the mines and blow yourself up.”

Riku nodded and Gai spoke up. “You’re going for total annihilation.”

“Yes. The exploding corps had always been a headache and a dangerous entity. The more we take out the better. Furthermore if we completely destroy them Iwa will think the area is heavily guarded and trapped, they will have to change their strategy and find another location to breach.”

“Do we have enough tags for the operation?” Kurenai didn’t know how much they had at the moment and Kakashi looked up at Riku.

Bitting the inside of his cheek, Riku made calculations. “For one side only.”

“How many tags does that make and how long does it take to make the same number?”

“Nine to ten thousand.” Kurenai took a deep breath when she heard that. Riku continued. “I can use an auto-seal to make them and have shadow clones writing some at the same time. The problem will be the chakra needed for both. I’d say... Five days plus one day to recuperate?”

“We’re to act in two days, so we will be using the Time Seal.” Kakashi ordered.

Riku nodded and immediately went to work. He didn’t do anything himself and let his clones do the work. Instead he worked on making more Shurifuin with the hirahishin on it. Since he would be at the heart of the action he needed as much as he could.

“You be careful?” Turning his head to the side he saw Yugao taking a seat to his right. She hid it well but he knew she was worried.

“Of course. I’m surprised you’re telling me that. It’s new.”

“Usually, I’m not too worried because Taicho or I are there for back up but you’ll be alone this time. I don’t want... I don’t want to relieve what happened after Ame. Even if you can probably heal from that easily now.”

“I won’t be alone for long. If anything, I’m worried about you and Kakashi. Hiraishin or not, you’re deeper into enemy territory than I am.”

“I’m with Taicho, he would die before I do.”

“I know but still.”

He said nothing else and let his head rest on Yugao’s shoulder for comfort.

“If you die...”

“I won’t.”

“If you do... I’m bridging you back and I’ll make you a stay at home mom.” The threat was ridiculous to the point that the always composed Yugao snorted.

“Definitely not dying then. I’ll use Taicho as a meat shield if I have to.”

“I HEARD THAT!”

Kakashi’s shout from the other side of the room made them laugh.

The camp was nestled in a wide depression between jagged ridges, well-hidden from direct sight but not from the scanning pulse of Riku’s senses. With his headband drawn down over his eyes, the world appeared in stark contrasts of shape and sound, a living map of thudding hearts, shifting feet, hushed voices and the soft flutter of canvas. He could feel the weight of every step, hear the smallest draw of breath. There were at least a hundred shinobi down there, some eating, some sleeping, some standing guard but most of them relaxed, lulled by the false security of the basin's concealment.

He waited only long enough to confirm their numbers.

Then he dropped.

The moment his feet hit the packed earth of the main thoroughfare, a concussive crack echoed through the camp, followed immediately by the tremble of ground collapsing in a wide circle around him. Several tents buckled from the shock, carts toppled, and at least a dozen shinobi were thrown from their seats by the sheer force of impact. Before the dust even began to settle, Riku was moving, a blur of momentum and strength enhanced to terrifying levels. He slammed a fist into the nearest support post, sending the entire medical station caving in on itself in a rain of splinters and screams, then spun and drove his heel into the ground, creating another shockwave that upended a cooking pit and sent a cauldron sailing end over end into a pair of panicked shinobi.

Shadow clones flickered to life around him—five, then ten, then more—each rushing off to separate targets without a word or signal. One went for the weapons tent, another for the scroll depot, and the rest scattered among the chaos, punching through wagons, kicking down crates, and scattering supplies across the broken earth. A few enemies tried to regroup, forming hand signs or barking orders, but Riku was faster, cutting through them with sweeping arcs of raw, unrelenting force, each strike sending bodies flying like rag dolls caught in a gale.

He didn't waste time burning the place. That wasn't the mission.

It was noise he needed. Confusion. Rage. Panic. Everything that would draw them toward the exit.

And it worked.

A sharp voice rose above the others, shouting commands through the dust. "They're escaping toward the eastern ridge! Don't let them get away!"

He didn't glance back to see how many followed. He already knew.

Riku tore through the outer perimeter, leaping from shattered barricades into the trees beyond, his chakra flaring just enough to remain visible to the trained senses behind him. He kept his pace fast but not unreachable, letting the enemy believe they had a chance to catch him, to strike back, to win. They surged after him like a tide, more than he expected, possibly close to sixty, and their eagerness told him everything. There was no formation, no care in their pursuit. They weren't tracking. They were chasing.

He reached the preset boundary marked by LoE signals. The chakra mines were live.

Riku whispered a brief command to a passing clone, then vanished into the brush.

A second later, the forest behind him erupted. Roaring explosions shook the trees. Plumes of fire and smoke curled into the night. Screams were muffled by crashing limbs and flying shrapnel. Trees splintered. Rocks shattered. Then came the silence. The kind that only follows absolute destruction.

He waited until the echoes faded, then circled wide back toward the fallback point where Gai and the others had regrouped. A few birds called in the distance. No enemy sounds.

Mission success.

But something felt wrong.

Later, after they had returned to the Botib and Kurenai delivered the preliminary casualty estimates, Riku was unloading his gear in the armory, his cloak streaked with dirt and the smell of burned canvas still clinging to his hands.

"Clean sweep," Yugao said, dropping beside him. "Twenty-six confirmed dead, the rest are presumed gone. Taicho' and I swept the perimeter twice. No survivors on our side. That makes a total of eighty seven."

He didn't respond right away. Instead, he stared at the floor.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

“I’m thinking,” he murmured.

“About?”

He raised his hand and tapped his knuckles against his temple. “None of the shinobi I fought used explosives. No jutsu. No tags. Nothing.”

She blinked. “Maybe they didn’t get the chance?”

“No. It wasn’t just that. Their reactions were slow. They didn’t move like a proper demolition unit. Too messy. No coordination. Some of them barely used chakra.”

Kakashi voiced his concern. “You think they were decoys?”

“...Yes. It was too easy for my taste. I think... We were baited and that the exploding corps is elsewhere. Either they confirmed we had access to their intel or they launched an attack knowing we’d be busy. It’s possible an Iwa shinobi recognized us while we did our night raids on their bases.”

“It’s possible, yes.” the fake cyclops replied while scratching his chin. “I’ll call Central and report. Good work, everyone. Take some rest.”

Riku went to the kitchen and brought out a tea pot. He filled it with water and added green leaves in it. Channeling chakra into the tag at the bottom he put it to the side and pulled from the fridge some sushi and maki he had made for everyone. Making a shadow clone he made it pick up tea cups. When he came back to the main room, he set everything on the table.

Yugao sat next to him and stole one of the sushi he had on his plate with a small but unrepentant smile. They were joined by Gai and Kurenai who had apparently taken a quick shower as she was drying her hair with a towel. Kakashi finished his call and sat at the head of the table.

“What did Shikaku-san say?” Riku was trying to stop Yugao from pilfering his plate more than she already did.

“No areas reported the exploding corps or even an attack. Until further notice, it is considered we dealt with them. However, your observations have been taken seriously and the outposts will be even more vigilant just in case.” Kakashi explained. He picked up a roll with his chopsticks and put it in his mouth. “I think you’re right, though. It’s really fishy.”

The conversation stopped there, Riku switching for a more intriguing subject: if all tags had been used or not. It turned out that on his, Gai and Kurenai’s side, the answer was

yes. On Team A's side the answer was no. They had recovered all the tags that had not detonated and brought them back. Yugao put them in the armory while Riku was making tea and bringing out food.

For dessert, Riku brought out cinnamon rolls that Hinata had made and sent him via Hirahishin.

"Hinata-san sure knows how to make them." Gai was happily chewing on a roll.

"That she does." Riku agreed, eating his own.

Kurenai was in a playful mood for her part. "It's a miracle she didn't eat them."

"She probably made thrice as many and once her stomach was full sent us a tenth of what was left." Riku knew perfectly well his wife's love for the pastry.

"Sweet Hinata-chan? I doubt it."

"You don't know my wife as I do, Kakashi. Cinnamon roll is to Hinata what Ramen is to an Uzumaki."

"Damn!" Gai exclaimed in surprise. He had once seen Kushina, Karin and Naruto visiting a small ramen stand and he prayed for the well being of the chief and his daughter. They looked exhausted and were still working whereas each Uzumaki had a pile of at least twenty bowls and didn't look like they were done anytime soon.

Kurenai confirmed Riku's words. "It's true though. When she was still a genin I had to bribe her a few times with some."

"Speaking of, how are Shino and Kiba? Neji often visits the manor so I'm aware of what's going on with your team, Gai, but Team 8? Hinata doesn't have a good schedule to meet with them."

"Before we left, Shino was trying to incorporate his doton affinity to his insects. From what I understood he was rather close to being successful. Kiba was-"

The sound of the phone ringing cut Kurenai short. The silence between them, only broken by the sound of the phone, was heavy. At this time of the night it meant only one thing. An emergency.

Kakashi put his chopstick down and stood up, finishing chewing the food in his mouth. He picked up the phone, confirmed it was him with code and listened to, to anyone's guess, Nara Shikaku.

"Hmm. We're moving out immediately."

“ ... ”

“Understood, sir.” Kakashi hung up and turned around, giving orders on the spot. “We’re being called back to Konoha immediately. Everyone, pack your things and use the Hiraishin to get back to the village. Riku, seal the Botib and use your own hiraishin to travel.”

As everyone, walked to the armory, minus Riku. Gai asked his rival a few questions.

“Any idea why we’re going back? Was Riku’s hunch correct?”

“I don’t know. Shikaku-san didn’t say anything more than the need for the team to return. He was... very stressed however.”

“Whatever happened must be bad.” Yugao shared her thoughts while tying her sword onto her back. “They would have sent us elsewhere otherwise, not the village.”

Kakashi put an end to the conversation quickly. “No need to speculate, we’ll know soon enough.” He had a very bad feeling about this and saw only one explanation.

Once ready, they touched the huge hiraishin seal on the wall and they found themselves in a room similar to the one they visited to get to LoE-27. The main difference was the size of it. It was quite small. Another difference but minor was the fact there was only one single seal array.

“Welcome home Team Kakashi.” A voice echoed in the room and the jonins pinpointed it coming from a speaker up in a corner. “One moment, we’re checking your chakra signature.”

In the meantime, Riku arrived behind them.

“Sorry, I’m late. I had to find you inside the village to teleport here.”

“Welcome home, Senju-sama.” the voice said and the door of the room opened. “By order of the Jonin Commander you are to present yourself to the Hokage’s office immediately.”

“Thank you.” was all Kakashi said, taking the lead and walking out of the place. Once outside they travelled on the rooftops to avoid being hindered by the population and shortened the time to get to their destination. Each step was like a rock falling into his stomach.

It didn’t take long to get to the Hokage Tower and everyone gave them a wide breadth at the sight of the team. It wasn’t rocks falling inside Kakashi’s stomach anymore, it was balls of lead.

When they reached the office, the secretary stopped the team.

"I'm sorry, only Senju-sama and Hatake-san are allowed inside."

Gai nodded and went to sit in one of the waiting chairs against a wall a few feet away. Yugao and Kurenai joined as Kakashi and Riku entered the office.

Inside the room, Shikaku and the elders were present on each side of the Hokage's desk. Behind it was Hiruzen, sitting in the chair. Kakashi and Riku presented themselves, saluting but nobody spoke beyond that. It was obvious however that the conversation wasn't going to be pleasant. The silence was so loud that Kakashi could hear Riku's heartbeat being quite fast. He too had understood why they were there.

Without a word, Hiruzen stood up and went around the desk. He picked the Hokage hat in one hand and stood in front of Riku. His next words were blunt but heavy as he put the hat on Riku's head.

"Jonin Senju Riku, you are, from this moment forth, the Rokudaime Hokage of Konohagakure no sato."

Chapter 74: First decision

Riku looked at Hiruzen straight into his eyes. A second passed, then another. He did his best to calm himself. To calm his heart when he wanted nothing more to lash out. To use the hiraishin and go back to the front line and slaughter every single Iwa Shinobi until there was none then leave for Iwagakure and kill everyone there putting an end to the shinobi village.

However, he couldn't. He knew. He was the Hokage now and he needed to be calm and collected to lead his village to victory. Closing his eyes for a brief second, he opened them again and began to give orders.

"Kakashi, tell the team to go home then reach for all the Uzumaki and Namikaze Minato. I want them here within fifteen minutes."

"Aye, Hokage-sama."

Saying nothing else, the fake cyclops exited the office on the spot and for once through the actual door.

"Shikaku-san, I need to know everything there is to know about our situation and our enemies'. I want every report, every map. Everything."

“You’ll have everything soon, Hokage-sama.” And like Kakashi, Shikaku left quickly.

“Did my... predecessor leave anything? Any orders?”

Hiruzen was the one who gave him an answer. “None.”

“Any Hokage secret that I should be aware of?”

“A few but they do not concern the war.” the former Hokage answered.

“Alright. Koharu-san, Homura-san, please prepare the announcement of the succession and a meeting with the clans for tomorrow morning.”

Both elders spoke as one. ““Aye, Hokage-sama,”” then left.

Alone with Hiruzen, Riku silently went around the desk. After a moment of hesitation he sat down in his mother’s seat.

“... What happened?”

“Jiraiya reported movement in the East and North-East. Around the land of Hot Water, Sound and Iron. The undead kind. Tsunade and the Mizukage agreed to move troops to a fortified base: Sekigara castle, and make it the joint Headquarters for the war. The attack from the exploding corps came from underground and while everyone was busy dealing with it, Onoki attacked from the sky. Tsunade ordered a retreat and with the Mizukage, faced him. Things became complicated then turned for the worse when undead appeared.” Hiruzen marked a pause here to let Riku digest the information. “Since the Mizukage had not yet a successor in case of her death, Tsunade chose to stay behind while the Mizukage would lead the retreat.”

Riku wanted to shout in rage. His mother had a hiraishin bracelet, she could have bailed out without any problem. Except that would have left everyone else defenseless. The retreat would have been a disaster. And that wasn’t even touching on the moral plummeting from a kage running away while leaving her troops and allies to die.

“Tsunade’s last stand was impressive. She gave them hell. From the Mizukage’s report, she took down Onoki and kept fighting against Obito’s and Orochimaru’s troops.”

“Where are the troops now? And the Mizukage?”

“They reached another fortified base in the south: Hataro. They took a defensive position there. The Mizukage ordered a counter attack against their pursuers. The Exploding corps took quite the hit and many undead were captured. Enough that they retreated.”

“Probably not keen on losing their puppets so easily when they don’t have a counter to the seals.”

“I believe so, yes.” Hiruzen nodded. “During the defense, the Mizukage was badly injured and evacuated back here with her close guard. She’s in the hospital recuperating. Aburame Shibi is in command of the base with Noki Tatsuda, a Kiri Jonin, as a second in command.”

“How long before she’s ready to go back to the field?”

“A day. Now with you here and the Time seal in your Botib, I’d say a lot less.”

“I’ll deal with her soon enough.”

Riku bit his thumb and summoned a small Katsuyu. He hadn’t said a word that the little slug spoke.

“I’m sorry, Ri-kun. Tsunade-sama is gone.” Her tone was mournful.

“Thank you, Katusyu-chan. I’m sorry to have summoned you like this but I needed to be sure.”

“I understand.” After giving a nod of greeting to Hiruzen, she reverse summoned herself.

“Take a moment to grieve, Riku.”

“I’ll grieve when I’m dead.” Not snarling had been a tall order for Riku but he succeeded in keeping a neutral face. “I can still bring her back if I get her body back. Heck I can still get her back by creating a clone from her cells.”

“Riku…”

“I did it for Kushina and Minato. I can do it for my own mother. But it’s neither the place nor the time. Iwa lost their Kage. We need to strike now. We can’t miss the opportunity to end them for good. They’re weakened and dealing with them will deprive Obito and Orochimaru of help. It may also get us some time. For the troops to heal, train and relocate. For me to come up with better methods to seal the undead for good without needing to create a new contract with the Shinigami.”

Now, Hiruzen was intrigued. “A contract?”

“Yes. The shiki fujin is a shitty contract between the summoner and the Shinigami. You offer your soul and the shinigami take another of your choice. Not really ideal. To bring back Kushina and Minato, Karin created a new contract through a seal. You offer a soul and the Shinigami does something for you. In Minato’s case she offered a part of Orochimaru’s and Minato was released. When she sealed the Kyubi inside herself she

had paid in advance with two other parts of Orochimaru's soul. Honestly the shinigami is rather easy to deal with if you're okay with soul bargaining."

"This is... good news and terrifying at the same time." Hiruzen commented.

"I'd rather say 'Uzumaki' instead. It's more than enough to convey everything. Seriously, those people were completely insane." Riku shook his head.

"I won't disagree with you on that."

The door to the office opened and Kakashi entered, leading the people he wanted to see. When their eyes landed on Riku sitting behind the Hokage's desk and wearing the hat, they knew it was serious.

"Riku, you're..."

"The Rokudaime Hokage as of ten minutes ago." Riku answered his father.

"Congrats."

Everyone turned to Naruto and gave him a dumbfounded look.

"Naruto-"

Riku cut Kushina off, he had better things to do than entertain an awkward moment with his half-brother. "I summoned you because I have a task. You will go inside my own botib and train like mad using the time seal. Kakashi, Minato, I'm counting on you to train Naruto in everything. Increase his proficiency in what he's good and what he's bad at. Especially in how to break genjutsu in a lightning fast manner. Kushina I want you to train Karin as best you can with the adamantines chains. I also want you to teach her and Naruto how to get help from the Kyubi. I will find any scrolls my great-grandmother left about the biju and passed them over. I also want you and Karin to work on multiple methods to seal the undeads. In case Obito or Orochimaru finds a way to nullify one method. Any questions?"

"How long do we have to stay there?" Minato asked.

"As long as Naruto and Karin are not Kage level shinobi at the very least. If you have to spend ten years in there, you'll spend ten years in there." Then Riku turned to Kakashi. "You're in charge of the Time seal. One day here is one year inside." He toss his BoS at him.

"Aye." the man caught the book, nodding.

"You'll have the Mizukage and her bodyguards join you soon, she needs to heal. If she wants to stay and train she's free to do so. You're dismissed."

“Why not faster?” Kushina interjected.

“The Time dilation? Because it would need way too much chakra to sustain. The ratio I gave would at best last for three days before recharging it is needed.”

Having the answer to her question, Kushina turned around and left with the others. Hiruzen stayed silent, waiting for Riku to do something or even say something. So far he was impressed with the young man. Like he always was. He had been in his shoes before. The night of the Kyubi attack. The night he lost his wife and his successor and had to take back the hat because there was no one else to pick it up. Save for Danzo. It had been a less than favorable situation and he soldiered on and shouldered it all. Not like he used to in his first term. He had made mistakes and his heart wasn't quite as into leading the village but he understood.

Regardless, Hiruzen was proud to see that the young man was as he imagined him to be as Hokage. Swift, decisive, practical and pragmatic. There was no place for sentimentality. Not right now. Not when the whole village and perhaps the world if what was written on the Uchiha tablet was true.

Riku took a deep breath and exhaled deeply through his mouth. Multiple times. A breathing exercise to calm oneself down that Hiruzen was very familiar with.

“I might need some help with my speech for tomorrow.”

Of all the things that was on Hiruzen's list of things Riku might say *that* wasn't on it. Arching an eyebrow in disbelieving expression, Sandaime spoke.

“I will gladly. Although I'm surprised you need it in the first place.”

That was a fair comment. Riku had always been good at anything he set himself into. Because of his talent but also because of his hard work. Anything shinobi related. Killing, healing, politics, business. The one thing that Hiruzen had never thought of was *people*.

Riku was very eloquent to make a point across. He was also very good at manipulating people to do what he wanted, albeit he never displayed that much to the old man's relief. However, Riku was first and foremost deficient in the way to rouse people. Especially after such a great loss for the village.

“I don't. I'm just making sure you think you're still relevant, you old monkey.”

After years of knowing the young man in front of him, Hiruzen knew that it wasn't really an insult. It was the way Riku dealt with his grief and rage. Insults and jokes mixed as one. Not for the first time he saw Tsunade's character in her son.

'The apple really didn't fall far from the tree. Minato most of the time but under stress he is his mother. Minus the destruction and yelling.'

"Not Hokage for an hour and you already cross lines."

"Well, you're free to fling shit at me once we've won the war."

They sat down at the desk, Riku providing a chair for Hiruzen. From a drawer, the newly appointed Rikudaimé retrieved a pen and a few blank papers. He began writing something and Hiruzen let him. It didn't take long. Riku had something in mind already. It was short but concise. The only problem was that it was generic. Something that Hiruzen pointed out after praising him for making something actually good for a first try. It lacked warmth, however.

Riku gave him a long deadpan stare, then sighed. Realizing that a speech needed not only to rally people to a cause but also make their will of fire burn brighter, he didn't voice the words of rebuttal he had for Hiruzen. Riku understood and knew the man was more experienced and shouldn't dismiss him because he didn't see the point or agreed with the words, first thing first.

By the time Shikaku came back with stacks of thick files and huge scrolls, the speech was done. Everything was laid down on the desk and just when the head of the Nara clan was about to begin, Riku raised his hand to stop him from doing so.

Ten shadow clones were created. They immediately began to scour everything to the side. Riku asked it directly from his Jonin commander.

"How bad are we?"

"Overall? We're on the backfoot. Sekigara was a huge blow and we lost a lot of shinobis." Including Tsunade but Shikaku knew better to say it out loud. "It wasn't critical however. Everywhere else we're either holding the line or actually moving inward Iwa's territory. Most notably the west. The East's hold is more tenuous because our forces are between Iwa and the undead. The latter are not active but their presence alone is a threat which can't be ignored and dismissed."

Riku nodded in understanding. "What about the undead? I learned that some were captured. Any one we know? Anyone that can be turned to our side?"

Both Hiruzen and Shikaku were taken aback by Riku's last question. They manifested it differently. The former by a sideways but calculated glance. The latter by his eyes widening for a moment before narrowing, plans already forming in his mind.

"Zabusa Momochi and his apprentice. A ice user by the name of Haku. Finally Uchiha Itachi."

Riku blinked. The last name was heavy with implications. He did his very best to not react and turned to Hiruzen and instead focused on Shikaku.

"I'm not even going to ask about the how of it. Where are they?"

"Sealed and stored with the others." replied the Jonin Commander.

For a few seconds Riku stayed silent. If a shinobi of Itachi's talent could be used then they would gain a powerful but also skillful soldier. Combined with that, Itachi was undead, meaning he couldn't be killed and had infinite chakra. That was nothing but a boon.

Standing up, Riku gave an order.

"Have the three of them brought to the Senju Compound asap. Tell Kakashi about Zabusha. From what I heard from him, he was there during the man's last moment. I'm fetching the Mizukage, perhaps she can help."

"Four, Hokage -sama. Uchiha Sasuke was captured too." Shikaku added before Riku could leave.

That brought the Rokudaime to a stop. Not that he cared about Sasuke but the young man was volatile, hateful and overall... Not meant to be a shinobi of the leaf. What was problematic was Naruto's reaction to seeing his dead friend. His half-brother needed to have his head in the game.

"Noted." Riku turned to Hiruzen. "I'll spend time making sure everything in the Botib is ready. No longer than an hour in here."

"I will hold the fort."

With a green flash, Riku teleported to the hospital. There he asked a nurse to be brought to the Mizukage's room. When he stepped in, he recognized the blue-eyed youth he had met when Mei Terumi had been here the last time. There was also another man with him. Taller than Riku, which was a feat in itself, with a seal tag on his eye.

'Ao something. Known to have stolen a Byakugan from a Main Branch of the Hyuga after defeating one in combat during the previous war.'

Riku raised his hands in peace and while it did little to relax the bodyguard's stance, he did calm down the Mizukage who was laying down on a bed. She was a mess. Bandage everywhere from head to toe. A missing arm and a missing breast. He wondered how that could have happened. The worst was her face. Where once a very beautiful face was now replaced by third degree burned skin. It was healed.

“Mizukage-dono.”

“Hokage-dono.” The woman answered with a clear but tired voice. The hat on Riku’s head confirmed what she already knew. He was Tsunade’s successor and Tsunade died under her very eyes.

“Let’s cut to the chase and be done with formality. I can heal your wounds and I mean everything.”

“Everything?” She was suddenly interested.

“Yes.” Riku’s tone was matter of factly. “Once you’re healed, you and your men can start training.”

Mei got confused and it showed on her lone remaining eye. “Providing you can actually do what you say. I’ll need weeks if not months of rehabilitation. We don’t have-”

“We have the time.” Riku interjected. “I’m a space-time fuinjutsu master. Time is my bitch.” He revealed and Mei’s confusion began to fade away, replaced by disbelief. “Yes. I can do what you’re thinking. You don’t know how smart it was of you to ally with Konoha. Well, more than you thought at least. So I’m taking you and your body guards to a special place where one day here is a year there.”

“That’s impossible!” Ao interjected but Riku paid him no mind. His eyes focused on Mei’s.

“What are you waiting for?! Let’s go!”

The auburn woman was now frantic. Was it because she could recover fully, including but not limited to her beauty, or because she wanted to see for herself if it was possible? Riku didn’t know. He just signaled Ao to carry the Mizukage in his arm while he grabbed him and the other bodyguard.

In a flash of green light, they were inside the Senju Compound. There, his own Botib was in the living room, opened.

Chapter 75: Return of the demon

Riku was satisfied with the result of Mei’s treatment. Karin’s healing tag powered by her own chakra and Riku’s had worked wonders on the woman. Thankfully her wounds were not quite healed fully and she was able to recover completely. Her arm and leg had regrown and she wasn’t disfigured anymore either.

To say that the Mizukage was dumbstruck was an understatement. She couldn't believe how far Konoha's healing went. Already, they had a considerable advantage with Tsunade. The deceased Godaime Hokage was a pioneer and leading expert in the field of medicine and all villages had been doing their very best for the past thirty years to catch up. Now? It seemed like a pipe dream.

A severe limb? A simple tag could regrow it. How were you supposed to win against an adversary who could come back from that kind of injury like it was nothing? As long as a shinobi had a breath in them they could just come back to full health ready to fight. It wasn't quite like the undead, nothing nearly as powerful, but it was demoralizing nonetheless.

That wasn't all. The worst was the Time Seal. When Mei and her bodyguards saw for themselves that time was sped up in the area they were in, they admitted that Konoha was way beyond any other shinobi village in the Elemental Nation. It was a good thing Kiri was allied with them, although there was caution to be had. The ally of today could be the enemy of tomorrow.

It was, however, an opportunity they wouldn't miss.

After being quite clear what they could do and what they couldn't, being very explicit about what would happen if they did, Riku had shown them their guest room. It wasn't something luxurious but for shinobis inside another ninja's home, it almost was with a bath, hot water and queen size beds.

Riku left a clone to give them a tour while he talked with Kakashi. Minato had been training with Naruto for days in taijutsu. A Father passing down his fighting style to his youngest son.

"I have news. I might need your advice." Riku said as he sat down, handing a beer to his friend.

Kakashi closed his Icha Icha and looked up at his Hokage. "Good or bad?"

"If I knew, I wouldn't be asking you." Riku gave him a flat stare.

"Fair enough. Go on, shoot."

Taking a deep breath, Riku shared the information about the four shinobis in Konoha's possession. That greatly disturbed Kakashi. To know that not only his former subordinate but also former student had been reanimated for the undead parade.

"I don't know about Itachi or Sasuke. About Zabuza and Haku... I think there is a chance. A good one." He slightly turned his head to look at his sensei and student training. "Naruto is the one who connected with them both the most. Especially Haku. You'd have even better odds with him present."

Riku nodded in understanding. "I'll have him present, then. What about Sasuke?"

Kakashi blinked once with his lone eye. A long pause was marked between the two. His wayward student wasn't a subject he particularly liked talking about and certainly not with the man who had put him down. Yet the man in question was his Hokage and asked him a question.

"I don't know." He shook his head. "I truly don't. The only thing in his mind was his revenge against his brother. If he cared about something, he discarded it when he left the village for Orochimaru."

Unblinking, Riku stared at Kakashi, pondering something. It lasted a while, before he pulled out a tag from his back pouch and activated it, creating a small barrier isolating them from everything. No sounds could be heard, nor lips read as the barrier made them look fuzzy from the outside. Ao may have tried with his Byakugan to spy but he would see nothing but chakra.

"Oh, it turned into one of those conversations then."

"Yes." Riku sighed with fatigue. "What I'm about to tell you... I found out by myself. The old monkey never explicitly answered but he was severely toeing the line." He took a deep breath and shared the secret. "Konoha did away with the Uchiha."

Kakashi's only visible eye widened in absolute shock. The hand that was still holding his porn book went slack. His prize possession would have fallen to the ground if not for Riku's quick reflex.

"That can't be." Kakashi whispered. "The Sandaime would never have sanctioned this. Danzo couldn't have gotten away with it had it tried."

"They did, although it's more complicated than that." Riku revealed. "Many blamed the Kyubi's attack on the Uchiha. Not far-fetched when it is reported that its eyes had the tomoes of the sharingan in them. Danzo seized the opportunity. Pushing for the Uchiha to move at the edge of the village. In the end, those arrogant assholes felt it was the one slight too many and began to plot. I don't know all the details but I know Itachi reported to the Sandaime and the elders. I also know that he was supposed to kill the leaders of the coup and that Danzo intervened."

"Ordering Itachi to kill everyone. Sasuke was spared because..." Kakashi didn't voice the reason why an older brother kept his little brother alive. "It kept Danzo in check for one. Should something happen to Sasuke, Itachi would have come back with a vengeance but also expose Konoha."

"Yes. Point is, Danzo orchestrated the fall of the Uchiha, so now that he's gone, do you think that Sasuke might be a bit less unhinged? Not regarding me," Riku literally waved that thought away. "But Konoha as a whole."

"I..." Kakashi hesitated for a moment. Carefully, he chose and measured his words. "Possibly, yes. And if Itachi acted under orders then perhaps him being a member of the Akatsuki was a mission too. In that case, he might still be a leaf-nin."

"I have a feeling that Sasuke's participation will be a condition to Itachi's help."

"But Sasuke's dead." Kakashi pointed out.

Riku's retort was immediate. "So was Minato and Kushina."

"Ah. You think you can bring them both back in exchange for their help?"

"It's a small price to pay to get their help. Especially Itachi's." The Rokudaime shrugged his shoulders. "I'll also add the clearance of their names. Blame Danzo, you know? Kami that asshole did so much shit that now he's dead we can use him as a scapegoat whenever we feel like it." A chuckle escaped his lips. "Still, if they take the deal, you'd be in charge of them."

Kakashi nodded. "That still leaves one problem."

Riku knew what he was talking about as he looked at his brother. "He is still...?"

"He always will. It's in his nature to always believe in the best in people. While he realized and accepted that what he had with Sasuke was not a friendship but a rivalry, he still hoped that it had been."

A sigh escaped Riku's lips. His pragmatism told him it was foolishness. Mainly. It also recognized a possible pattern. Konoha saw the light of day because of thinking like that. Hashirama was able to achieve peace with the Uchiha because he reached Madara.

"I just hope his mind won't waver like during the last invasion."

Kakashi shook his head. "You don't have to worry about that. Minato-sensei, Jiraiya-sama and myself pounded him into his thick skull that his duty towards the village came first before any personal agenda. It hadn't be easy as you can imagine but with lot of patience and-

"Kushina did it." Riku interjected with a flat tone. He knew Kakashi was about to serve him some bullshit so it nipped it in the bud.

"Kushina-nee did it, yes." The cyclops nodded with an eye smile. "Naruto is listening to her. Not surprising, she is his mother and their personalities are quite similar."

The conversation was cut short when Riku felt an unknown chakra cross the boundaries of the Botib's entrance. Ending the privacy barrier, he left the training room for the main Hall. There he saw Shikaku with a scroll in hand, waiting by the door.

“Hokage-sama.” The man greeted and presented the scroll.

Riku took it. “Thank you, Shikaku-san. I wasn’t expecting you to make the delivery, though. I wasn’t specific when...” He paused for a moment and looked at the man in the eye. “You hoped to use the time seal to get some rest away from your wife.”

Shikaku’s stone cold face betrayed nothing. “I don’t know what you’re talking about Hokage-sama.”

“Too bad. I would have told you that the room on the right at the end of the second floor was free and that you could use it.” The smirk on Riku’s face was all knowing. “Go on. You need rest. Just this time. And don’t tell Shikamaru about it. He will bother Ino who will bother me and I will give him access to it because I’m whipped.”

“Wives.” was all Shikaku said, clearly understanding. With a nod, he walked past Riku in the direction of the stairs.

The man really deserves a good rest. He’s been coordinating everything for a month now with very little down time. Not that Riku was charitable. A rested Jonin Commander was a more efficient Jonin Commander. It was as simple as that.

Riku went to the kitchen where he found Mei and her subordinates finishing their lunch. The woman had trained her kekkei genkais the whole morning, trying to find ways to better use it. She was rewarding herself with pork ribs and absolutely loved it. Kiri was a huge island and its main food was fish. There was very little cattle there. They had the land but the fog and the humidity made having pigs or beef difficult and a luxury. Now that she had access to meat, the woman wasn’t saying no to it.

After exchanging greetings, he told her about the scroll. She immediately finished what was left of her ice cream and stood up. They both went to the training room as he intended to summon their captives there. Riku signaled for Naruto and Minato to stop what they were doing.

“What’s happening?” The young blonde asked in curiosity.

“Among the people raised from the dead, a few were captured.” Riku replied. “I hope we can free them from Orochimaru’s compulsion seal and beyond that, have them join our cause.”

“Oh!” Naruto exclaimed in excitement. “That’s neat.”

“An excellent idea, yes.” Minato’s answer was more subdued. Already he was seeing the different possibilities it could go. “But what if they don’t want to fight once they are free?”

“Then I will teach them the hand seals to end the Edo Tensei. I do not condone slavery.” Riku replied as he crouched down and opened the scroll. A few names were written under each seal.

“Should we be here? It’s a diplomatic thing and like... Not our business?” Naruto asked in confusion, displaying a new maturity that Riku had no knowledge of but was glad to see.

“You’re needed for those two.”

Naruto got confused even more and Riku pointed at the name on the scroll. He frowned when he recognized them.

“That bast-” The jinchuriki stopped himself from cursing completely.

“I hope that if Mei doesn't succeed in convincing them, you will.” With that said, Riku activated the seal. A puff of smoke was released from the scroll and two figures appeared out of it.

The first was a broad shouldered swordsman wrapped in damp bandages from nose to collarbone. Ash toned skin showed through the gaps, marked by hairline cracks where sealing ink pulsed like a slow heartbeat. His forehead protector of the Hidden Mist sat scarred and slashed, the metal dulled and pitted as if it had slept at the bottom of a bay. Cold mist gathered around him and beaded along the corded lines of his arms. He carried a massive cleaver of a blade that hummed with a dull hunger, the moon shaped hole near its spine seeming to drink the light. When his eyes lifted they were the flat color of deep water, unreadable and patient, the eyes of a man who had killed in silence and expected to do so again. Zabuza Momochi stood as if the grave had been an inconvenient pause rather than an ending.

Beside him a slender figure took shape, long dark hair tied back with a simple ribbon. Her face had the fragile beauty of porcelain left in winter air, serene and unblinking, yet traced with faint spiderweb lines where the jutsu had stitched soul to vessel. A hunter mask hung at her hip, its red markings dulled by age, and a thin fan of senbon glinted between pale fingers. The air around her cooled until breath fogged, frost dusting his lashes and the edges of his sleeves. Haku’s gaze was soft and distant, the melancholy calm of falling snow, but the chakra at her core felt cutting as glass.

They stood there. Completely frozen, courtesy of the multiple sealing tags on their bodies.

“Eeeh... Are they supposed to... stay still like this?” Naruto wondered.

“It’s the tags.” Minato said and walked forward to have a better look. “Paralysis ones, acting on the nerves and muscles. They’re conscious but just can’t move.”

“Correct.” Riku replied and walked to the dead Kiri-nin. Reaching with one hand he removed the one tag on their forehead. The effect was immediate.

“Kakashi.” Zabuza growled. “I never thought I’d see you again. Not in the impure world.”

“Chakra is bullshit.” the man called out shrugged his shoulders, not caring.

“That it is. Brat.” the former swordsman of the mist greeted Naruto whose eyes were fixed on Haku. Then shifted to his countrymen. “Terumi Mei. Long time no see. Ran away to Konoha for help?” He taunted.

“Watch your tongue Momochi! You’re speaking to the Godaime Mizukage.” Ao spoke up.

The auburn woman fixed him with a cold glare. “I didn’t need Konoha’s help to defeat Yagura. Kiri has been free for the past four years. Almost five. Not thanks to you dying a dog’s death in Nami.”

“A dog’s death?” Zabuza scoffed. “I died as a human and that was more than I could hope for. Now...” He looked down at his undead body then back at her. “I’m back to being a tool for a bastard.” He gritted his teeth.

Riku decided it was the best moment to join the conversation. “We can help with that.”

Zabuza was suddenly all ears but still skeptical. “Oh yeah?”

“I can tell you the handseals so you can be released and go back to the pure lands or-”

“No matter what you say next, it won’t be as good.” The Demon of Kiri cut in.

“No? We can give you the opportunity to fight back against the one who brought the two of you back. Remove the strings he has on you so you can move on your own free will.”

“Tempting but no.”

Mei spoke up again. “This isn’t a war against villages, Zabuza. It’s a war for the fate of the world. Our enemy-”

“I know what it’s all about. Our actions are controlled, yes but our mouth can still run. I heard all about that Eternal Tsukuyomi plan from others brought back.”

“Then, you should have even more reason to fight on our side instead of going back directly.” Riku argued.

That didn’t convince the man one bit. Naruto decided to speak up then.

"You and Haku fighting could diminish the loss of life on our side, ya know? You spent your life being a tool of death. Now you have the opportunity to fight as a human for something greater than just money. For the future of everyone."

A giggle escaped Haku then and Zabuza turned his head towards her. "I'm glad to see you didn't change, Naruto." She gave him a beautiful smile.

"A shinobi is at his strongest when he has something to protect." Naruto grinned proudly. "I never forgot your words. I live by them."

"Zabuza-sama." Haku said in a pleading but dignified tone towards the swordsman.

He sighed, clearly exhausted and knowing his resistance was futile. "Fine. We will fight for you. But the first asshole who gives me a stupid order is getting cut in half."

"Good think it will be Kakashi." Riku said as he retrieved a brush and an ink pot from his book of seals. "Just so you know. There is the possibility to revive you completely. You could be truly alive again."

"Is that so?" Haku seemed really interested.

"Yes. It's not a guarantee. Just a possibility." Riku replied as he began writing a seal on her face.

"We will make it a reality." Mei interjected. "Kiri needs more expert shinobis like the two of you. It also needs its seven swordsmen."

"Eh. If that happens then I'm warning you, Mei. I and Haku won't be tools for war and murder anymore."

"I don't expect you to. Riku and I discussed the direction of the Shinobi world once the war is over. With Kumo gone and soon Iwa, the greatest opponents to proper peace, we can make some important changes." She revealed.

This was a conversation she and Riku had in private. The future of the shinobi world and how to avoid another global war. It was the latter that brought up the subject first and Mei agreed with his view. Not necessarily on the details but on the principle. The great villages must be united to preserve the peace but not just as allies and neighbors. As partners and friends.

"Let's say that instead of just being paid for our work while being a-political, shinobi will secretly get involved in the shadows. There will be no repeat of Suna and the Wind Daimyo." Riku explained further vaguely.

"So we won't just kill some random dunce because we're paid for it?" Zabuza asked.

“No. Well, yes because we do need money but we won’t just do that. Some missions would be for the sake of peace. It’s just the beginning of an idea.” Mei shared, smiling a bit.

Minato was finally done listening. “You mean you want to turn shinobis into shadow guardians of peace and not just a kunai to strike at the enemy?”

“Yes,” both Kage answered in unison.

“There will always be conflict. It’s in human nature to disagree.” Mei said.

“But we can also understand each other if we try.” Riku nuanced. “By sharing information, acting in concert and creating a basis and standard for everything from laws to politics we hope to blur the differences between us and maintain the peace we all want. We’re in a very particular position to be able to do so. Opportunities like that... The last time was when Hashirama-ji and Madara founded Konoha.”

“It created the village systems, but not for peace as they wanted. For power. That led to four Shinobi wars. Clearly the system doesn’t work but not everything is wrong with it.” the Mizukage argued.

“Huh.” Zabuza said nothing more, choosing to stay silent and wonder about this plan. In the meantime, Riku finished drawing the seal on both of the undead. “What’s that supposed to do?”

“Break the seal that’s controlling you.”

“Oh! I recognize this one! It’s the one you use to break that barrier during the Gaara rescue mission.” Naruto pointed with his finger.

Riku smiled in amusement. “Yes, it’s the same base. A bit more complicated though.”

Making a few hand seals, Riku concentrated his chakra into activating the seals he drew on the two undeads. The black ink drawn on their rotten skin began to glow then shone brightly. As if it were alive it moved up to their head and disappeared inside their skull.

“KAI!” Riku shouted while doing a ram seal. Without missing a beat, the paralysis seals burst in flame and turned to ash.

A shift in Zabuza and Haku’s bodies was noticeable but only for a train shinobi. They still stood ram rod straight but their muscles relaxed. The former raised his hand in front of his face and flexed his fingers.

“Finally.”

Riku gave a nod of satisfaction. "You and your daughter are free now and it will last until someone deals with my seal. Not going to happen soon."

"Haku is a guy." Naruto said out of the blue, correcting his brother.

With a knowing and amused smile, Riku replied. "Hips don't lie, Naruto." That confused the blonde jinchuriki for a moment. "I have duties to attend to. Kakashi."

"I'll take care of them."

With a short nod to Mei, Riku left the room and the Botib to go back to the Hokage's office. His office now. He needed to talk with Hiruzen about how to deal with Itachi, Sasuke and the Uchiha massacre. It was a delicate subject and he needed a bit more detail to be sure to get the help he needed.