

The Death of Leaf Village

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Whose idea was it, anyway? That there would be nine rookies at a time? Why did it have to be an odd number, so everyone could pair themselves up, but someone would be left alone? And why is that someone Ino? HEAVY YAOI/YURI

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1. Ino

I do not own Naruto or characters.

I do not really know where this came from. It was going to be Ino/shikamaru, but...it changed...sighs...

Yuri is a strange thing. You notice it, and then it slips in, and then it decides to take the wheel and your main pairing went from straight to yuri, and then you're writing this whole big long story based on yuri... :shakes head: Chances are, nobody's going to like this, because the few yuri fans out there want Ino with Sakura or something. Too bad. I think Ino/Sakura seems a little...obvious, I guess. Too likely, too happy. Furthermore, Ino has more in common with other characters...

And not all of the couples implied by the clouds or whatever come out in the end. Yes, I continued it. Unfortunately.

Shutting up.

~1~

Ino sighed sadly to herself as she lay on a bench in the park, staring at the sky. A normal day, not many clouds, but enough that she could stare at them and think of images that might raise her from her depression.

But, alas, if anything, they reminded her of her sorrows, they unforgivingly wouldn't change shape from what Ino saw, they wouldn't stop looking like a boy with lightweight, feathery hair whose lips touched those of a girl with long hair held back by a ribbon.

'Why does Sasuke only notice Sakura, anyway?' Ino thought miserably. 'Why is it that he seems to be in love with her, but he just seems to ignore me? Why Sakura, what's so much better about her than me? Is it something about pink hair? It's not fair that she should be getting him, I've known him longer&'

The blonde closed her pure blue eyes to stop from looking at the taunting clouds. 'I'm all alone. I mean, Hinata doesn't really have anyone, but she can at least chase after Naruto--he doesn't ignore her, he doesn't hate her, if he only notices that she loves him, he'd probably love her back. He might already, but it's not like how Sasuke is with me--he actually hates me, he actually doesn't want me there. He actually has a commitment, to Sakura, that he's not going to break over some plain blondie like me. I'm worthless--nobody's going to stop for me, I'm all alone&'

She sighed again, opening her eyes halfway tiredly. 'Maybe I should just end it all. Maybe I should stop fooling myself about all this--I'm not a particularly good ninja, I'm no good with boys--the only thing I'm good at is flower arrangements, and if I'm getting allergies, I can't really do

that, can I?' Ino closed her eyes again and sighed once more.

Her eyes flew open again when she realized the shape of the clouds. The boy's hair had changed--it was now sitting in a high ponytail, and the hair-like pieces of cloud were going up the top of the girl's head, too, putting her hair into a longer ponytail.

Ino smiled slightly. It looked like herself and Shikamaru.

But that would never be--she had tried once, but he really didn't seem to like her. Or any other girls, for that matter--he always brushed them off, saying that they were troublesome. Ino knew, better than anyone else perhaps, that he was either interested only in boys or he wasn't interested in anyone at all. Which was just as well--Chouji got along with him well, Ino could hardly not see the two of them getting together like that. Some people planted rumors about him and a girl from Sand Village, but really, how plausible was that? Not at all. If Ino was troublesome, a spunky girl from across cities and towns and countries and biomes would probably convince him for good that he liked Chouji better than any woman capable of existing in this crazy world.

Who else could she possibly live with? She didn't really know a lot of people--her obsession with Sasuke had kept her isolated from the rest of the male population, so the only other boys she knew were the other two from the rookie year.

And, frankly, she somehow doubted that Kiba was straight. He almost definitely liked boys better than girls. Ino saw him having dinner alone with Shino, and she distinctly remembered seeing that neither of them were at all awkward--they seemed to be meant for each other.

Ino sighed tiredly. 'Why is it that out of six boys, only two of them are straight? Although, I guess I don't really have any proof about Naruto--or Sasuke, I guess, either. If those two aren't straight they're bisexual though, confirmably. Naruto has a thing for Sakura and Sasuke...well, you know, maybe that would explain why all these years of following and he's done everything he can to avoid us rather than just go out with someone&'

Another sigh. Those seemed far too very unfortunately fitting at this second. One more, maybe even ten more in this minute alone, would probably not be enough to express her grief.

"Excuse me," a cheerful female voice asked, "could you please move your legs so I can sit here?"

Ino looked up at her unwelcome visitor. She was a girl about a year older than Ino, with brown hair pulled into two panda-like buns. Her smile somehow reassured the blonde, perhaps more so than most people would consider it, and thus Ino found herself wanting so very greatly that the girl would stay longer.

"Huh? Yeah, okay," Ino agreed. She turned to sit up straight, thus taking up only half of the bench rather than all of it, and the brunette sat down next to her.

The first girl at the bench turned her gaze back up to the skies, where the cloud that once looked like Sakura and Sasuke seemed to have broken up into some unrecognizable mass. The newly arrived girl followed suit, and something she saw made her gaze turn distant and she

sighed.

"Do you know what it's like," the brunette asked, "to feel like you're entirely ignored? I mean, that nobody at all pays any attention to you? That there's nobody who'll notice you at all, no matter what you do, and you're destined or something to be alone forever?"

Ino turned her unembellished blue eyes, now wide with surprise that her mind seemed to have been read, to the panda-like girl. "Y-yes, I have," Ino responded. "That was almost exactly what I was thinking when you came!"

The smiling newcomer swiveled her head to meet Ino's bright blue gaze with her own chocolate-colored stare that mirrored the knowing smile on her lips.

Ino felt a hand holding hers, and she knew that the dark-haired girl had taken her hand, perhaps more than friendly...

"My name's TenTen," the questionably telepathic newcomer introduced. "What's yours?"

"I-Ino," Ino replied. "And...well, how did you know that..."

TenTen shrugged, still smiling. "I get ignored a lot, too. I'm on the same team as a genius who doesn't seem particularly fond of anyone and a..." Her brow wrinkled as she tried to think of words to describe her other teammate. "Um...well, he only cares about training and getting better, he doesn't pay any attention to girls--I mean, I'm not sure what he thinks about guys, but he sure does seem too distracted by training to look at anyone at all, and if he's thinking of anyone, he's thinking of this one Sakura girl." She rolled her eyes, her expression clear again of uncertainty.

Ino smiled. "Mine's not much better. Another genius who dismisses every girl he lays eyes on as 'troublesome,' and this other guy...well, let's just say that I'll probably have some part in planning their wedding. They're pretty much made for each other--the only thing that might get in their way would be the fact that they're both boys."

TenTen sighed, staring at the sky again but still holding Ino's hand. "Yeah...don't you wish there was someone there for you, someone that you loved so much that you just knew it the first time you looked at them, and that loved you so much that it didn't even matter if you were both the same sex, you still wanted to get married?"

Ino blinked. 'Those buns must be, like, antennae or something to pick up thoughts,' Ino thought in awe, shortly before she smiled again, closed her eyes, and leaned her head on TenTen's shoulder. "Not quite...I never thought of it that way. But, now that you have me thinking of it...I wonder if I even need to, now that I've met you."

TenTen smiled as well, and leaned her head in to rest on Ino's. "No, I guess you don't...and I don't think I need to wish any longer, either."

~fin~

2. Hinata

I guess it's AU now...I don't think ninjas have malls. Sorry if that's an issue.

I don't own Naruto. Yeah.

Uhh...yeah. Maybe I should explain the title...nah, that seems kind of...boring or something. Next chapter, maybe, yeah.

~2~

Sakura sat on a bench outside a dressing room, waiting for Hinata to get on the outfit that she wanted to see on her body. There wasn't a doubt in Sakura's mind that Hinata would be absolutely stunning in those selected clothes, and that those were exactly the right sizes for her, but she had still insisted on playing runway, putting on the outfit and displaying it to make sure Sakura agreed that she wore it well. After all, Sakura was the fashion expert, after maybe possibly Ino, but Ino was busy at the time, something about the mall&

Funny that Ino would say she couldn't go with Hinata to the mall because she was going to the mall. However, Hinata and Sakura both had figured it out Ino probably wasn't just going on a shopping spree, she was most likely coming to the mall with someone, as in a boyfriend, and neither of them would possibly have allowed their own uncertainty about fashion stop Ino on a date, especially seeing how depressed Ino had seemed lately, seemingly about how there was nobody for her to go out with. It was exactly what Ino needed, and Hinata and Sakura both saw that, so neither of them questioned Ino's reluctance to meet up with them.

There was something to be missed, though. Sakura was happy that Ino wasn't going to be depressed anymore, but if she had a boyfriend, that would mean less time between herself and the blonde. She had been thinking things about Ino lately, and&she'd almost been thinking about being more than just Ino's friend. Sometimes she hated herself for thinking it, but there was something about Ino that made Sakura think about her in ways that almost seemed similar to how she occasionally thought of Sasuke beautiful Sasuke, whom she loved more than anyone&well, more than any male, she supposed, but probably not anyone in general, because of Ino&

The dressing room door opened, and Hinata walked out, sporting a black pleated short skirt, not quite a miniskirt as it reached halfway up her thigh, the seams popping out in a pale lavender thread, and a shirt the same color as the threads with a low neckline shaped by corners. So? she asked quietly. How do I look?

You look fabulous! Sakura encouraged. Naruto will be swooning over you the moment he sees you in that!

Hinata felt her hopes fall a little. I wasn't really thinking of Naruto when I picked this out& Truth be told, Hinata was actually glad that Ino couldn't come. It meant that Sakura would take

her stead, and that meant Hinata and Sakura would be alone. U-um, I m still not sure if it ll really get the effect I want, she stammered honestly; after all, Sakura seemed pretty casual about it&

Sakura smiled, stood up, and took Hinata into a friendly hug. Hinata, you are a beautiful girl, and you don t need these clothes to prove that but that doesn t mean that you shouldn t grace the world with the stunning image of yourself in this perfect outfit for you.

Hinata blushed slightly and smiled a little, her eyes closing to savor the moment of Sakura s embrace. She paused, unwilling to say anything, for words would break the magic that made the moment worth prolonging. The seconds passed, Hinata doing everything she could to burn this minute into her best memories forever, procrastinating the end of this feeling of love, of warmth, of feeling the arms of the person she loved most around her. Almost a full minute passed before Sakura ruined the magic herself, asking, Well? Are you going to get it or not? She released the Hyuuga and stepped back slightly, looking at Hinata questioningly and almost suspiciously.

O-oh, um, Hinata stammered, sadly taken aback by the end of the moment, y-yes, I think I will get it&I mean, if it really looks that great&

Sakura smiled again. Good! I think you ll be a lot happier with the results you get from that outfit, Hinata! Now, I guess you shoud go change so we can pay for that.

Hinata wasn t quite sure. She really liked that hug that Sakura gave her the longer she wore those clothes, the more hugs she got from Sakura dear Sakura who helped Hinata pick the best clothes, lovely Sakura who set Hinata s heart fluttering just thinking about her, sweet Sakura who gave Hinata hugs that she wished would last forever, and ever, and never end, when she wore these clothes that Sakura wanted her to change out of.

But, it couldn t be helped, could it? Sakura had a point in that they couldn t very well pay for the clothes while Hinata still wore them, so Hinata sighed and nodded before turning back to the dressing room and changing back into her normal clothes. She looked in the mirror and frowned at her plain clothes, at her faded hoodie and well-used capri pants. Her new outfit was more interesting, more coordinated, and more&open, perhaps? Maybe it was the low cut of the shirt, the shortness of the skirt, that made Sakura give her that hug. Maybe&

Hinata unzipped her hoodie, wearing it open to show her plain white tank underneath. It wasn t much prettier than before, but&anything to increase her chances, anything that might make Sakura like her more, anything that had a chance of making Sakura want to hug her again, even slightly.

As she emerged from the room, Hinata noticed Sakura staring into space, looking almost sad. Hinata frowned, worried, and sat down next to her secret crush. S-Sakura? Is something wrong?

Sakura turned to face Hinata, her normally sparkling emerald eyes unusually dull. I-I don t know Hinata, I m just&I don t know, I guess I m just a little& She took another deep breath and turned her troubled face toward the floor, staring determinedly at a spot on the floor. I guess&well, Hinata&I kind of&well, what do you think about&what would

you say if I told you that&well&if&the boy that I most want is Sasuke, but&if I m not sure that he s the person I most want? Sakura finally asked uncertainly, fearing Hinata s scorn.

Hinata s heart skipped a beat what if Sakura was talking about Hinata? It would be so perfect&Hinata smiled and answered, Sakura, I d say&I d say that& She took a deep breath, thinking it over. I d say that&I kind of agree, Hinata finished with an air of pride. I mean not Sasuke, Naruto s my favorite boy, but, there are other people that I want&just a little bit more than him.

Sakura s eyes immediately brightened as she turned them to face Hinata. So, you don t have a problem with me not being straight?

Hinata smiled. Of course I don t, Sakura.

Sakura sighed in relief. Thank you, Hinata. Thank you so much for letting me confess to you. I love you so much I mean, she ammended, ruining Hinata s split second of true pure untarnished glorious happiness as soon as it came with those two words. I mean, no, not quite like that, it s not like&I don t&well, no, I guess what I should say is that there are people that I like more&

Hinata s hopes rose and fell as Sakura s words tumbled out, but they ultimately fell when she said that there was someone else maybe even more than one person. W-who is it?

Sakura sighed again, wistful and perhaps a little heartbroken this time, as her gaze returned to the spot on the floor. Well&what I meant to say at first is that&Ino, well, her boyfriend&I m really kind of&okay, forget the kind of I m really jealous of Ino s boyfriend. Lately I ve been thinking&maybe Ino and I should be more than just friends I seriously want us to be so much more than friends, I want us to be& She sighed. I know it sounds silly, coming from someone my age, but I wish I could marry her. If two girls could have children, I d want to bear hers. It might sound like it s just lust but&I want us to be together, forever, always, unseperable by any family, any girl, any boy, any distance&

Hinata sighed as well. I know that feeling&that exact same feeling, I swear&

You mean, Sakura asked, looking at Hinata with her eyes wide with surprise, do you mean that you like Ino too? Her stare turned into something of a glare. Well, too bad, you can t have her I saw her first, I m going to make sure that if Ino goes out with any girl it s going to be

N-no, not q-quite, Hinata ammended. I mean&I have that same feeling, b-but&for&well, s-s-someone else& She blushed and looked away, looked at the same spot Sakura stared at earlier.

Sakura s gaze softened, and she almost seemed to smile. Oh. Okay. She turned to face the spot on the floor again. Well&that was interesting, she realized, smiling quite widely now. I mean, we come here for an outfit, and in the end I confess to being in love with Ino, and you confess to&well, I guess you said you re not straight, but not really much more. So, come on, let s go pay for that cute outfit. I think we ve spent enough time here if we re coming out of the closet for no particular reason.

Hinata smiled, her cheeks only barely colored now, picked up her clothes and followed Sakura to the cashier to pay for their clothes. As she picked up the bag, Hinata turned to Sakura and asked, Um, Sakura? Do you think we could&l don t know, maybe we could get some ice cream? It s in the food court, if Ino s anywhere in the mall she s there, and you can see how tough your competition is.

Sakura looked at Hinata, surprised at the shy Hyuuga for at least the third time in the past ten minutes or so, before her stare softened again and she nodded. Yeah, that sounds like a great idea! Let s go and see how hard we have to work to rescue our Ino from the clutches of straight coupling!

Hinata blushed slightly, being reminded of the energy and the determination that made her love this girl so much, even if Sakura never learned of Hinata s little crush.

~fin~

3. Hinata cont'd

Yeah. So, it goes pretty much directly from the last one. They may as well have been the same chapters, but then they'd be out of proportion. And I really have issues with things that are out of proportion. Because I'm weird that way.

I don't own Naruto or the characters. Yeah.

~3~

Sakura marched down to the food court, Hinata quietly following and maybe a bit pinker than normal&oh well. Hinata was always pink for some reason or another. She burned so easily, whenever she forgot to put on sunscreen before training, she'd have a pinkish hue before lunch on a fairly cloudy day. Between that and her being easily embarrassed, her skin was always pink or red or something along those lines.

Admittedly, that constant little blush might have been what made her so cute, but Sakura didn't much care about how cute Hinata was--after all, she had the great and incomparable beauty of Ino to quest for. It was in this quest that Sakura was now tramped through the mall, and it was Hinata who suggested this adventure, this venture for the sake of reminding Ino that Sakura wanted some of her love too.

The duo arrived at the ice cream stand in the food court, and Sakura started looking around for her beloved Ino while Hinata pondered what kind of ice cream she wanted to buy. It was in vain, though--Ino's bright blonde hair was nowhere to be found in the food court. Sakura huffed, irritated at Ino's hiding.

Sakura jumped back to reality at the sound of Hinata's meek voice asking, "Um, Sakura? I...well, because I bought that outfit, I only have enough money for one cone...so, um...I guess we have to share...what kind do you want?"

"Huh?" Sakura asked, caught off-guard. "Oh...um, well...I don't know what kind of ice cream I like that you like too...it's okay Hinata, I'll just buy my own," she improvised, fishing in her purse for her wallet.

Hinata stammered for a moment before she said, "U-um, Sakura, I'd rather pay for you--I don't mind, I'm not really hungry anyway, I could just get the one for you--"

"No, no!" Sakura insisted. "I couldn't let you pay for me and go hungry yourself! It's just not--"

"B-but Sakura," Hinata protested. "I-I-I'm lactose int-intolerant, I-I just re-remembered th-that I forgot my pill th-this morning, s-so I c-c-can't eat i-ice cream--I-I mean I can, I just sh-shouldn't, or, y-you know..."

Hinata always stuttered when she lied, so Sakura knew instantly that the short-haired Hyuuga wasn't telling the truth. She felt anger rising within her, sparked by Ino's disappearance and fueled by Hinata lying for no reason. "No, you're not, you're lying, and I'm paying for myself, thank you very much," she snapped, whipping out a five-dollar bill and addressing the man behind the counter. "One small strawberry ice cream in a sugar cone, please," she ordered huffily.

Sakura was too busy taking her ice cream from the employee to notice Hinata stammer that she was going to the bathroom before running off in that general direction. Sakura grinned triumphantly. 'Good riddance, liar,' she thought unforgivingly as Hinata cut through the crowd, unaware of the tears that she wiped away from her eyes.

As Hinata ran through the throng, she almost ran into two girls who were holding hands. She avoided crashing into them when they separated, and came back together as soon as she was past, looking over their shoulders at the blindly sprinting girl, her unzipped hoodie flapping behind her. One of the girls, blonde with clear blue eyes, squinted after Hinata. "Was that...?" she wondered.

"Hm?" her friend, a brunette who put her hair into two buns resembling panda ears, asked. "Do you know her?"

"Yeah..." the blonde answered quietly. "TenTen, I think that was Hinata..."

"Hinata?" TenTen asked. "That sounds familiar...oh, yeah, she's Neji's cousin! But, Ino, how do you know Hinata?"

"Well, she graduated from the same class as I did," Ino explained. "We both passed all the exams--Hinata, Sakura, and myself are the only girls from this year's Rookie Nine."

"Oh," TenTen responded. "So...why's she crying?"

"I don't know," Ino admitted. "Maybe we should follow her and find out..."

"Yeah, okay," TenTen agreed, following her new girlfriend into the girls' bathroom.

At their destination, Hinata was already curled up in a corner of the largest stall, tears running down her face as she sobbed lightly. 'Sakura,' she thought sadly, 'what did I do wrong? Do you hate people who aren't straight? But--that doesn't make sense, you like Ino, doesn't that mean that you hate yourself, too? You don't hate yourself, do you? You're so cheerful, how could you be so cheerful if you hate yourself? What is it about me that you hate so much?'

Hinata heard the bathroom door open and tried to stop sobbing until they left. They didn't, though; she saw two pairs of feet head toward her stall, and then stop just outside the stall door, a second before she heard a familiar voice ask softly, "Hinata? Are you okay? Why are you crying?"

'Ino,' Hinata thought, recognizing her voice. 'Maybe...would Sakura have been so mean if she wasn't in love with you?'

"Hinata? What happened?" Ino tried again.

Hinata sobbed harder. "I-I-I-I, I c-can't s-s-say..."

"Why not?" Ino asked. She gasped. "You're not pregnant or anything, are you?"

A single bark of a laugh came instead of a sob, a laugh at Ino's misunderstanding that cleared the clouds of depression for a split second before the clouds converged and rained even harder than before. "N-n-n-no, I-I-I'm n-not, I-I-I..."

Ino sighed and thought for a second. "Um...did you see Naruto eating ice cream with Sakura or something?"

Hinata pictured that image and felt herself gasping for air, she thought she was drowning--both of the people she loved the most abandoned her, turned their backs on her, ignored her, left her to be alone forever--

She shook her head vigorously, half trying to clear the image and half saying no, before she remembered that Ino was on the other side of the door. "N-n-n, n, n-n, n--"

"No? Okay," Ino finished for her. "Then what is it?"

"S-s-s, s-s, Sa--s-s-s," Hinata tried to stammer, but stopped herself when she thought of what Ino might say if she knew Hinata was in love with Sakura. "U-u-uh, I-I, I, I mean..."

Ino sighed and waited patiently. "Just say it. If you don't want to say who, speak in generalities--like, my crush, or my brother, or my friend. Okay?"

Hinata tried again. "M-m-my, my crush," she wimpered, swallowed, and tried to go on, "h-h, h-hates me..."

"Who, Naruto?" Ino asked, surprised. She always thought that Naruto liked Hinata, if anything, or he would if he knew what she thought of him.

"N-n-n-n, n-n-no," Hinata stumbled.

"Really?" Ino was even more surprised by this. "Are you crushing on Sasuke or something?"

"N-n-n--"

"Okay, not Sasuke..."

Hinata took a deep, shuddering breath, and released it unevenly. How was she going to tell Ino that she loved Sakura, how would Ino react to Hinata's love for people of the same gender?

"Hmmm..." Ino muttered, thinking. "Well, Hinata, maybe if you come out, it would be a little easier for us to talk? You know, at least you could shake your head instead of trying to say no. I mean, no offense, but it's really pathetic, hearing you stumble so badly over that one syllable..."

"N-n-none, t-t-t, t-taken," Hinata spluttered, slightly hesitant to open the door, partially because she was shaking badly and didn't want to fall and hurt herself on the tile. She managed to crawl close enough to the door to reach up and open it, and it swung open, reminding Hinata that Ino hadn't come into the bathroom alone.

Standing in the doorway was Ino, as expected, with her face halfway between worried and comforting, but standing to one side and a bit behind the blonde was another girl, with brown hair held in a style that made Hinata think of a panda, her face only worry about something or another, her chocolate-brown eyes holding no comfort, just a wish that she could.

"Hinata," Ino addressed, smiling softly and understandingly, "this is TenTen. TenTen, this is Hinata, although she doesn't usually look this bad."

TenTen smiled uncertainly. "Nice to meet you, I guess, even if circumstances are a little...odd."

Hinata looked at TenTen uncertainly, then looked to Ino with a questioning look. "Y-you came h-h-here w-with...t-t-Tent-Ten?" she asked.

"Yup," Ino answered, still smiling comfortingly. "I know that when I said I couldn't come with you and Sakura, it sounded like I have a new boyfriend, but I don't--well, not quite. I have TenTen instead. You get it?"

"S-so, yo-you're..."

"You know, I guess so," Ino admitted. "I guess I'm lesbian now--and I'm happy that way, really. TenTen and I have a lot in common, she's really nice, and--"

Hinata made a little squeaking laugh. "Aha...you m-mean...s-s-seriously..."

"Yup!" Ino repeated. "So, I guess it's needless to say that I have no negative comments whatsoever about who your crush is--well, as far as gender goes, anyway, right?"

Hinata smiled, relieved, and tried to stand. Ino realized how shakey her friend was and came forward to support her while she stood. "W-well, th-then, I g-guess I should t-tell you...m-my crush? Sh-she's..." Hinata blushed. A lot. "Sh-sh-she's..."

"Hmmm..." Ino mumbled. "Let's see...who could it be...?" She frowned. "You know, why is it that you're in here, crying your eyes out, and Sakura seems to have entirely ditched you?"

Hinata's eyes filled with tears again and she looked down. "Sh-sh-sh-she....I-I think...sh-she h-h-h, h-h-h, h-ha-hates me..."

Ino grimaced. "So it's Sakura, then? Why does she hate you? Does she have a problem with your crush on her?"

"I-I...I-I-I-I...I-I-I'm n-n-not..."

"You're not sure?" Ino finished. "Well...where is she? I'm going to go knock some sense--"

"No!" Hinata protested. "Sh-sh-she...p-pl-please, n-n-no..."

Ino smiled again, her eyes mirroring sadness rather than happiness. "Yeah, okay. But I still need to talk to her about all this. It's just not right--Sakura isn't that homophobic, if she is at all, it's got to be something else!" She turned to leave, but stopped and looked over her shoulder. "Um, TenTen, could you stay here and make sure Hinata's okay? You know, just comfort her, and don't let anything happen to her--she's like a sister to me."

"A-are you sure?" TenTen asked, uncertain what she could do for the trembling Hyuuga. "M-maybe I should go get Saku--"

"No, I should do it," Ino told her stubbornly. "I'm sorry if you don't think you can take care of the situation very well, but you're my only option, and whatever you think, I know you can take care of Hinata well enough." With that, Ino walked out of the bathroom, leaving Hinata and TenTen alone.

"L-let's stay in this stall," TenTen decided, guiding Hinata back into the handicapped stall. "We'll just stay here and wait for Ino to come back..."

~fin~

4. Hinata cont'd...cont'd.

Naruto does not belong to me.

This is the last thing I'll be able to post for at least a week or so, due to school and conventions and shoot I HAVE A LOT OF WORK TO DO ON THAT COSTUME...so, yeah. That's about it.

And, the title? Bout time I explained that...yeah. Notice how the only straight girls from the first chapter just got paired together, pretty much? Yeah. That leaves only guys...who, it seems obvious will be paired with each other...meaning that there won't be any straight couples, and thus no two people who will reproduce, and thus Leaf Village will die because nobody's having kids. It was based off a conversation with a friend.

~4~

TenTen sighed awkwardly as Ino left her to find Sakura. This normally wouldn't have been an issue, but Hinata still had tears pouring down her face, and TenTen didn't know what to do with people when they cried. She usually wanted to be alone, and she wanted to give Hinata some space, but Ino said that she had to make sure nothing happened to Hinata, and she also knew that when she got depressed like that, she personally had a tendency to want to hurt something usually herself, for whatever reason, and TenTen feared what Ino would do to her if Hinata were to hurt herself.

TenTen sat on the floor of the handicapped stall in the girls' bathroom with Hinata, each of them in different corners. They had been sitting there for five minutes, when they heard the door open. However, it didn't sound like Ino, and sure enough, the person walked into a random stall, followed half a minute or so later by the flush of a toilet, then the sink water running and the hand-dryer blowing. The door to the bathroom opened and closed, and the visitor was gone.

Meanwhile, Ino looked through the food court for Sakura, and found her not too far from the ice cream stand, eating cone of strawberry ice cream slowly and hesitantly. Ino marched up to the pink-haired girl, whose eyes brightened when they saw Ino coming forward. Ino! There you are! I've been looking for

Do you know how upset Hinata is? Ino demanded.

Huh? Sakura asked, caught off-guard. Hinata? Oh, yeah, I guess she did kind of run off&

Didn't you see that she was crying? Ino asked sharply. Didn't you see her sprinting to the bathroom with her hand to her face to wipe her tears away?

Um&no, I didn't, Sakura admitted, suddenly feeling a lot of emotions surprise, sorrow,

worry, guilt, regret but, really, mostly surprise and worry. I-I m sorry, I didn t see that she was&oh, shoot, I m so sorry&

Say that to her face then, Ino snapped. Come on, she s in the bathroom. I m sure nothing would make your appology more obvious than trying to help her get her eyes back in after she s cried them out.

Sakura nodded vigorously and guiltily. Y-yes, I think I will& She smiled sadly, guiltily, pleadingly. A-and, have I ever said&I mean, I don t mean to change the subject or anything, but, it just struck me&you re especially beautiful when you re angry, she told Ino, regret in her face and her voice that she had to change the subject like that.

Ino huffed, then her eyes snapped open a little wider. Wait&do you mean&seriously? You seriously think that of me?

U-um, Sakura stalled, well&you are really beautiful&and&well, I m glad that your boyfriend helped you to cheer up, but&I kind of wish that&you know&you were still single&then I would&um&yeah&

Ino sighed, rubbing her forehead. Okay, I think I see a lot more of what happened. She sighed again. Yeah, okay. Great. Um&well, that s awkward, she admitted, almost smiling painfully. Great. Perfect. Well& She took a deep breath. I never said I have a boyfriend, I d like to point out&

Sakura s eyes lit up. Th-then, maybe&will you&?

No, I m taken, Ino said reproachfully. Um&yeah&

Sakura s eyes fell, but it took her a moment, then they snapped back up, a bit angrily. You mean you have a girlfriend?

Um&yeah, I do, Ino admitted. So&hey, what do you think of Hinata? she asked, half changing the subject and half trying to make up to Hinata.

Sakura looked away a little. Oh&well, Hinata s&yeah, she s kind of cute, but she s not as

I m not asking like that, I m asking because&oh, just come on, let s go talk to Hinata, Ino reminded, pulling Sakura up by the arm. She s waiting for you and, wait till you meet my girlfriend, she s great, I know you ll just love her&

Sakura sighed wistfully, barely being brought to a standing height, and obviously a lot more lifeless than Ino had hoped.

Umm& Ino thought for a second. Look, come on! Talk to Hinata she s a great girl, you two should really talk more! Hinata s wonderful, she s beautiful really, I don t see where you got this idea that I m pretty, Hinata s just gorgeous! And really, just, come, and see her, she wants to see you, she wants to talk to you, she wants to&she wants to help me make it up to you that I m going out with TenTen instead, Ino mumbled the last part, not really sure how else to phrase it.

What? Sakura asked dully. I'm sorry, I didn't hear that last part&

Come on Sakura, Ino insisted, starting to get a little angry at her friend. You made Hinata cry go and apologize to her!

Sakura sighed again, her eyes closed, but opened them again with a certain unwilling determination in them, an emotion of duty no matter how reluctant she was to do it. She nodded, and started to walk toward the bathroom of her own will. Ino smiled after her friend before she followed.

When they arrived in the bathroom, Ino recognized it to be TenTen's voice insisting, Come on, this is really cute! And, and putting it on that'll help cheer you up, and you won't look as much like you'd just been crying when she comes!

Ino cleared her throat. When who comes?

Huh? Oh! Ino! TenTen exclaimed, slightly surprised. Um, Hinata? A brief silence, then, Okay, I'll go for a moment um, yeah&come out when you're done, she told over her shoulder as she came out from the handicapped stall. She looked up and smiled awkwardly, then her expression cleared as she examined Sakura. When she'd looked at the pink-haired girl head-to-toe, she smiled. Well, I most certainly can see why she likes you so much&

Who? Ino? Sakura asked hopefully.

No, someone else, TenTen answered vaguely. Not myself, and not Ino. Someone else.

Who? Sakura asked again, sounding more surprised or anxious.

TenTen grinned mischievously. That's for me to know and you to&well, yeah, she'll probably tell you, sooner or later, so, yeah that's for me to know and you to find out!

The door to the stall TenTen came out of opened, and Hinata came partially out, hiding about half of her body behind the stall wall, wearing the clothes that Sakura had helped her pick out. U-um&s-s-s-Sakura? she started, blushing pretty hard and looking like she was about to start crying again.

Sakura felt extreme pangs of pity, sorrow, regret, and maybe something else in her heart. She felt her eyes start to sting with tears shed for her friend, tears to show her friend that she could cry for her, tears to show Hinata that she didn't have to cry anymore because Sakura was there to cry them for her. The tears ran down her face while Sakura nearly ran to envelope Hinata in a great hug, sobbing all the while, I'm sorry, I didn't know that I&I'm so sorry, I'm sorry, I really am&

Hinata didn't say anything, because she was waiting, either for Sakura to stop talking so she could be heard or for her own tears to subside and for herself to calm down more. Finally, when Sakura stopped talking, some five minutes later, she took a deep breath and said, S-Sakura, I, well&I guess it's my fault, I shouldn't have&insisted o-on buying you ice cream, wh-when you were so upset about I-Ino&I-I should have realized that you weren't

going to be reasonable, and I shouldn't have reacted like that when

H-Hinata, Sakura interrupted, please stop. It's okay. It's not your fault you can't help the way you react, and, of course you wanted to buy me ice cream, I, I, well I don't know, I just should have known that you would have been so insistent, and I should have. She stopped abruptly in a sudden laugh. Is all this seriously only over an ice cream cone? Wow, we're so strange.

Hinata took a deep breath and said, S-s-Saku-s-Sakura-I-I-I should have said it sooner-I-I should have said it, instead of trying to buy you ice cream-but-I-s-Sakura-I-I-I, I-I-

She loves you, TenTen finished for Hinata, earning a hard glare and a pinch from Ino. Ow!

Sakura smiled. Hinata-I should have realized it when we were talking earlier-so, it's my fault, and I don't want you to think otherwise. And, Hinata?

Y-y-yes? Hinata asked.

Sakura sighed. I love you too.

~fin~

5. Naruto

Naruto and Sasuke and Sakura and Kakashi and I think those are the only guys who show up, yeah. They're all property of Masashi Kishimoto. Wait, does that mean they're his slaves? O.o o.O (considers starting a campaign to free the characters)

Oneshot again! YES! The intention of this story returns!

And, yeah, it goes into the YAOI bits of this concept. So...SASUNARU FUN! And then, it goes into all these other pairings...:shutting up:

ZOMG a LOTR reference! (Oliphants, man, Oliphants!)

~5~

Naruto cursed under his breath. He was running late. At this rate, Kakashi would be at the training grounds before him. Kakashi would be there before all of his students had gathered. Kakashi. As in Hatake Kakashi. At the training grounds before Uzumaki Naruto, his most enthusiastic student. What is wrong with this picture?

What was wrong was that Sasuke had woken Naruto up in the middle of the night. If it hadn't been for that Uchiha knocking at his door for no particular reason at two in the morning in his pajamas with a pillow and a blanket, Naruto wouldn't have been so tired, wouldn't have slept in, wouldn't be late. More late than his teacher. His teacher Kakashi. His teacher Hatake Kakashi. Before him. Nobody would see this coming.

Why was Sasuke at Naruto's door, anyway? 'Who knows?' Naruto thought frustratedly as he sprinted for the training ground. 'Something about the air conditioning being out or something, I think...'

Yes, that was Sasuke's excuse. Whether or not it was the real reason, maybe not even Sasuke knew. But Naruto wouldn't know that. Sasuke might know, Sasuke might not know, it didn't matter. It happened, Sasuke slept at Naruto's house, in Naruto's bed, in Naruto's arms, last night, in the middle of the night, and thus Naruto could barely sleep (even though he was the one with his arms wrapped tightly around the Uchiha), and thus Naruto slept in, and thus Naruto was going to be late. After Hatake Kakashi. Hatake Kakashi. Sakura would never let him live this down. If it was at all possible, she'd make sure it got on his tombstone. "Here lies Uzumaki Naruto: idiot baka ramen otaku who showed up later to training than Hatake Kakashi." That's what Sakura would put on it.

And on Kakashi's: "Here lies Hatake Kakashi: finally, absent rather than tardy." Something like that. "Hatake Kakashi: AKA Late to Dinner," "Hatake Kakashi: pranked to death by his students who were fed up with his constantly being late. Unfortunately, Uzumaki Naruto was too late to be there and see them do it. Naruto the idiot baka ramen otaku who showed up later to training

than Hatake Kakashi. The only person capable of proving that he could have been later."

And why hadn't Sasuke woken him up, anyway? Why couldn't that bloody Uchiha have nudged him awake--or stabbed a kunai in his hand--or started to make a cup of ramen--any of those things and more would have woken Naruto up, and he didn't doubt that Sasuke would have very much have wanted to do the second, but he didn't. Why? Why?

Naruto finally arrived at the training grounds, panting, and collapsed promptly. A shadow came over his face, and he looked up to see Sakura, glaring down at him and looking ready to kill. "Na...ru...to..." she hissed. "Why...are you...this...late...?"

"I-I-I swear, it wasn't me, Sakura!" Naruto protested between gasps for breath. "I-it was, Sasuke's, fault! H-he showed up, in the middle, of the night, and he, he, he slept, at my house, with me!"

This seemed to anger Sakura even more. "You slept with Sasuke?!" she exclaimed angrily.

"I-i-i-i-it w-was h-h-his, h-his idea!" Naruto blamed, shielding his face with his arms, and personally amazed that Sasuke hadn't come close to killing him yet.

"Sakura," Naruto heard his teacher scold. "Don't kill Naruto for saying something that makes sense."

"B-but, Sensei--"

"No buts," Kakashi stopped Sakura. "Seeing as Sasuke hasn't shown up yet either, his story isn't entirely unfounded, and it seems a bit...unwise, to me, to kill someone even though they're telling the truth."

Sakura almost stammered for a moment, before she sighed, pouted, and walked away from Naruto. "Fine. But if Sasuke denies Naruto's story..."

"No killing Naruto," Kakashi ordered. "He's your teammate after all. If nothing else, you won't be able to apply for Chuunin exams if you kill him."

Sakura didn't say anything more, she just pouted from a little ways away from Naruto. Naruto rolled over, so his stomach was exposed to the sun, and sighed, reasonably content. He had turned up later than his teacher, but Sakura was a bit too distracted to remember that, it seemed.

"Hey," Sakura interrupted his thoughts suddenly. "Naruto, you're...you came later than even Sensei...oh my god, Naruto...I'm never letting you live this down."

Okay, scratch that. But, still...it took her a while to realize that, which meant something, right? And, anyway, Sasuke still hadn't shown up yet--that meant that Naruto was later than his teacher, later than Kakashi, later than the Hatake Kakashi, but Sasuke was even later than Naruto! Oh, Naruto would never...ever...forget this...he would make sure that it was referenced on Sasuke's headstone when he died, if it was the last thing he did.

He sighed blissfully, because he wasn't going to be the last one there, his humiliation, no matter how extreme, would be second to Sasuke's. That made everything better, and he dozed off for the next fifteen minutes, until he heard Sakura scream.

"Sasuke!" she exclaimed, and Naruto felt her thunderous run through the ground. 'Some ninja she is,' he thought, almost bitterly. 'And they think that a ninja wearing orange is bad. She has pink hair, and that stupid dress skirt thing, and she runs like an elephant--like an Oliphant, I'd even say! It's a wonder she survived that A-ranked mission that we fluked into getting!'

"Hn," Sasuke answered Sakura. "Sorry I'm late. A certain someone forgot to wake me up."

Naruto sat bolt upright. "What? I don't remember--"

"You should be punished," Sasuke told him with a grimace on his face--it would have been a normal smile, but perhaps partially from lack of sleep but mostly from Sasuke being, well, Sasuke, his eyes remained cold, and it looked too grim, perhaps evil, to be a normal smile. "Come to my house after training. This punishment will be very...fun," he said coolly, his grin widening. "Yes...so very fun..."

"Uhhhh, Sasuke?" Naruto asked. "Y-you're kind of...s-scaring me..."

Sakura seemed to be hiding giggles.

"What?" Naruto asked. "He's talking about punishment--and it being fun, what's that supposed to mean anyway?--and you're just giggling? Sakura, what's wrong with you?"

"O-oh, noothing," Sakura answered untruthfully, still giggling. "Ohhhh, Naruto...boy, are you in for it, if he means what I think he means...I hope you...like boys," she giggled.

Kakashi dropped his book and looked up, his one normally visible eyebrow hidden due to his raising it so high that his forehead protector got in the way. "What was that?" he asked incredulously.

Sasuke shook his head, still smiling. "Yes, I agree with Sakura...I most certainly do hope you like boys..."

~fin~

6. Kiba

I don't own Naruto or characters.

And that's all today. Except that the lady who shakes her head at Kiba and considers him lucky that he can at least claim to be talking to Akumaru? Yeah. That seems to be me. I talk to my dog when I take her for walks, but it's really directed at myself...

~6~

Kiba grinned widely. 'Today's the day,' he thought. 'It's today...' All across the Gennin level, thoughts were racing to that same conclusion: 'Today's the day, it's today&'

Multi-Squad Training Day.

A day when all the levels of shinobi teams doubled up, paired into two teams to make one, occasionally a new team being made from three, so that they'd be prepared with another team if the situation arose that they'd need two teams for one mission. Kiba had looked forward to this day; as much as he liked Shino, there was something about this Naruto guy that Hinata used to talk about that he really wanted to know. He wanted to meet the guy, to know him, to make sure he wasn't the one, before he really, truly, honestly, eternally settled with Shino. Chances were, he'd go back to Shino in the end, one way or another--but if he didn't take Naruto for a test drive first, he'd always be unsure if Shino was the right one.

"You ready, Akumaru?" Kiba asked his pet and sidekick dog.

"Arf!" Akumaru yapped, wagging his tail as Kiba raised him up to his chest and zipped the dog into his fur-lined hoodie with him.

"Okay, let's go!" he exclaimed as he set off running to the mutual training grounds.

A nearby housedweller, a neighbor of Kiba's, sighed as she sipped her tea on her front porch. "Uses that dog as an excuse, that one. He's really just like I am, talking to myself or to no one in particular. He's just lucky that he can blame the dog. No such luck for me, no sirree..."

Kiba arrived at the training grounds and met with his team. "Hey Shino!" He greeted, skidding to a halt before his current best-choice boyfriend. He turned his head to nod to Hinata. "You too Hinata. Oh, and, Sensei!" he added, nodding with a wide smile at his teacher.

Hinata stood there, her fingers poking together. "Oh, hi, Kiba..."

"Hey, is something wrong?" Kiba asked, wondering what his teammate was fretting about. Supposedly, Hinata got a boyfriend or something, and it wasn't Naruto. Maybe she was nervous that she'd try to cheat on that boyfriend?

"O-oh, n-nothing, not really," Hinata answered uncertainly.

"Her boyfriend is probably on our assigned squad," Shino suggested monotonously.

Nobody really knew Hinata's boyfriend--for all they knew, he was a girl, or he didn't exist at all, so Shino was only speculating, even if he was pretty much right. However, Kiba didn't know this, and he said, "Ohhh, that would make sense...but, wait, isn't the only other guy on that team Sasuke or something? Hinata, are you going out with Sasuke?"

"No," Hinata told her team honestly. "A-although...Shino is...basically, I guess...r-right..." She looked away, toward the floor, and blushed brightly.

"Huh?" Kiba asked. He mentally went over the list that they'd received, explaining which team was paired with which other team. The team they were paired with was team seven, consisting of Naruto, Sasuke, Sakura, and their teacher Kakashi. So, if Hinata wasn't going out with Naruto or Sasuke, and yet her boyfriend was on team seven...Kiba suddenly got an image that he wasn't sure he wanted to see, and he scrunched his face up as he asked, "Ugh, Hinata, you're not going out with their teacher, are you?!"

"Wha--no!" Hinata answered almost immediately. "Th-th-the only th-thing that sh-Shino has w-wr-wrong is...u-um...w-well, I n-never said I have a b-boyfriend..."

"Ohhh, you mean that you're crushing severely on someone from team seven?" Kiba asked.

"N-no, sh-sh-she loves me b-back," Hinata stammered, poking her fingers together as she looked at her own feet, her blush visible even with so much of her face pointed down.

"Um...then, doesn't that mean you're his girlfriend?" Kiba wondered, confused because of his own ignorance. "And that means that he's your boyfriend, so...you entirely contradicted yourself, you said you don't have a boyfriend and then you said you have a boyfriend! Hinata, could you try to make sense?"

"She is making sense, you dolt," Shino told Kiba, slightly snappish because of irritation at his boyfriend's stupidity. "Listen to gender--she said that--"

"Yeah, both times she said that her boyfriend is a boy...friend," Kiba responded pointedly, entirely convinced that he was right.

Shino shook his head. "I give up. Hinata, you should give up too. He needs to figure things out on his own."

"I'm the one who needs to figure things out? Kiba demanded. "You two are the ones who need to figure out that you're not making sense! Who could Hinata's boyfriend possibly be if he's on team seven, but he's not Naruto, or Sasuke, or Kakashi? The only person left is Sakura, and she's a girl!"

"Listen to gender, Kiba," Shino muttered, so quietly that nobody else heard. "Listen to gender."

A rustle was heard in the bushes and Kiba called a welcome. "Hey, you guys finally came!"

What took you so long?"

Naruto was the first to appear, dark circles under his eyes and a grouchy expression on his face. "Go ask Sensei--he'll tell you all about his cute little misadventures that got him 'lost on the road of life' or whatever he says..." Naruto proceeded to sit at Kiba's feet, lay down, and promptly fell asleep.

Sasuke came out next. "Yeah, Sensei kept us waiting too long. And don't mind Naruto's rudeness, it's his own fault. If he'd just woken me up, I wouldn't have had to keep him up all night for punishment." He grinned slightly, none too pleasantly.

Kiba watched Naruto and Sasuke closely. 'Hinata was probably just lying when she said that it wasn't Naruto. Or Sasuke. One or the other. But which one&? Hmm...I'll have to watch them...'

He was so very preoccupied watching Naruto and Sasuke with such close attention that he didn't notice the entrance of Sakura, the pink-haired ninja whose appearance in the clearing had Hinata blushing. "H-hi, Sakura," Hinata greeted, smiling slightly.

Sakura smiled back, wider. "Hey there, Hinata...man, what great luck it was that our teams got paired up."

"Yes, well, Ino and TenTen's teams got paired up too," Hinata pointed out. "I think someone's been watching us--they noticed where everyone's interests are in other teams, and I think they based our partnering off of that..."

"Now, don't you think you're thinking just a little too hard?" Kakashi asked, having only just come into the clearing.

Kiba, already bored with watching Naruto and Sasuke, eyed the white-haired teacher suspiciously. 'I suppose, maybe she was really lying when she said he's not Kakashi...'

Kakashi looked back at Kiba, slightly confused. "Um...did I do something wrong? Is it some holiday that I forgot about that doesn't allow us to wear anything over our faces or something?"

Kiba didn't ease his gaze, and only pointed two fingers to his eyes, swivelling his hand on his wrist to point them to the teacher, the "I'm watching you" sign.

"Um..." Kakashi stalled, apparently uncertain. "Okay. Anyway," he went on, addressing Kurenai, "I guess you got the instructions, not me, so you get to read them to our students."

Kurenai nodded and started to read off the sheet of paper in her hand. " 'As you should already know, today we will be training as one team even though we are two. The point is not competition, nor is it the previously published concept of already having a good pair of teams set up for when a mission calls for two teams. It is an exercise in adaptability, a way to train for when you have to take another ninja with you.

" 'But that technically doesn't matter because you're training together anyway'," Kurenai kept on reading, frowning now. " 'The first exercise is as follows:

" 'Everyone is to be paired with someone from the other team--someone of the same gender whenever possible, to avoid the unhealthy development of romantic relationships!.' "

Hinata thought about this for a second and burst into giggles. After all, she and Sakura were going out, and she knew quite well that Kiba was eyeing Naruto. She found it amusing that their attempts to prevent relationships would most likely develop more.

"Hinata?" Kurenai asked. "What's so funny?"

"O-oh, n-nothing, Sensei," Hinata responded, still blushing slightly. "N-nothing at all..."

Kurenai looked at Hinata suspiciously for a second before she shrugged and went on. "Well, then I suppose we should decide our teams. Hinata and Sakura, obviously. Then...Naruto and Kiba, and Shino and Sasuke. No major disagreements, right?"

Sasuke looked slightly disgruntled, but he kept his mouth shut as Kiba's grin grew; Hinata and Sakura just shared a knowing glance, while Shino remained ever-silent and Naruto started to snore slightly. Seeing nobody respond openly negatively, Kurenai went on. " 'The first exercise is as follows:

" 'Each of the new three teams will receive a scroll. They may hide it wherever they want, in the town or in the forest, even though this is probably against my better judgement, as long as it is within Fire Country. There are three kinds of scrolls, each with a different color on the outside and a different location written inside. There are other things inside the scroll as well, but these do not concern you, and we advise that you do not open the scroll any more than is necessary to know where to take it.

" 'The goal is to get other teams' scrolls to their locations before they get yours to its location. At every location, someone will be waiting, and they will take the scroll and use it to log who took whose scroll. And yes, each scroll can identify who it originally belonged to.

" 'Once someone turns in your scroll, you will know immediately. And you will be forcibly 'out' of the exercise. The training session will not end until every single scroll has been turned in except one, the winning scroll, or if a state of emergency presents itself. We are aware that this could mean that this 'mission' will take a while. As in a really long while, maybe even over a week. Be prepared, train well, and have fun!' " Kurenai finished, frowning slightly. "Well, I'm not sure that's how I'd word it, but...I'm not Hokage, so it doesn't much matter. So, Kakashi, could you please pass out the scrolls?"

Hinata, Kiba, and Shino already held three differently colored scrolls.

Kurenai shrugged. "Well, any questions?"

"Yeah," Sasuke answered. "Can we take other teams scrolls--as in the scrolls from other teams doing this exercise. It's from the Hokage, so it's most likely the same for everyone, and I don't think it would take us over a week to get two scrolls from one team to another place within the village."

Kurenai scanned the page. "Yeah, you guys are supposed to take as many scrolls as you can, from any Gennin pair, which is anyone because the other levels don't have their multi-team training until you guys are done. Any other questions?"

The five conscious students shook their heads; Sasuke prodded Naruto with his foot and he jerked awake, yelping, "No! I-I have to train tomorrow, a-and you do too, please just let me sleep!"

Kiba crouched to reach his current partner's level. "I'm sorry, but we have to go and start training now, and that means you'll have to get up," he apologized, his voice uncharacteristically soft.

Shino looked on, his face lowered slightly to hide more behind the collar; Sasuke glowered at Kiba as the dog-ninja assisted Naruto to his feet.

Kurenai waited for Naruto to nod in agreement before declaring, "The exercise begins at noon--you have until then to prepare. Go!"

~fin~