

The Damaged Dream the Dead Don't

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I lost my teammates much too early, but with their words, I try my best to live up to their expectations: to hope, to dream, and to set goals. However achieving any of them are impossibilities I face. After being reassigned to Team Guy, they are pushing me in a direction where I have no choice but to tell the one person I have been hiding from just how deeply I feel for him.

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The Damaged Dream the Dead Don't

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Chapter 1

Hilo. I decided to rewrite one of my old fan fictions, "The First Time" from scratch because I wasn't at all too happy with it. It's the same characters, same pairings and same basic plot, just rewritten. So far, it's turning out so much better than before. There will most likely be some fluff, some perverted situations (maybe), definitely some violence, mentions of murder and suicide, and maybe more stuff, but there won't be anything graphic. Also, mainly for the spelling of names, places, rank, etc, I'm referencing the information on the website .com. Some people prefer Might Guy, and some prefer Maito Gai, and even though I prefer the latter, this is just to keep everything consistent so I don't have to edit everything everywhere I publish this story. Other than that, the chapter length will vary, and just pay a bit of attention. One chapter will be told in Yukiko's, my OC, point of view, and another chapter could be in Neji's point of view. If there isn't a name at the top, it means that it's still the previous chapter person's point of view. I also wrote this story in present tense for a reason. Anyways, I hope the characters turn out in character, and I hope you enjoy it.

Well in this life you must find something to live for

'Cause when the darkness comes a calling

You go back to the way you were before.

'Cause this life is as fragile as a dream

And nothing's ever really as it seems.

- "As it Seems" by Lily Kershaw

Yukiko

I don't know when or why it started, but it doesn't seem to matter because I know it will never happen. Or at least not everything I dream of wanting to happen. We talk and train together when he has time, but that's rare now that he's a Jounin, and we're always with our teammates when he does have time. Just sitting together alone, or holding hands, even those little acts that even just as friends do, are practically impossible. Whenever he offers to walk me home, when we would be alone together, I always tell him an excuse, or say I have other plans when I don't. I can't risk it. So, because of all the impossibilities, I gave it up a long time ago, but just because I tell myself to give up, it doesn't mean my heart will let go. And it hurts. It still hurts. My heart always hurts when I think of letting go. Because while I'm standing here telling myself the list of reasons why I should stop dreaming about it, yearning for approval or praise from him, or even worse, just wanting him, once I look at him-it's even worse when I see him with a smile, a rarity-the list stops and I end up hoping that there's a chance. But then when I walk through the door to my home, the darkness enshrouds my heart again, and I know that there isn't one, a chance, I mean. So I go through this cycle of hoping and dreaming, and then collapsing onto my knees trying not to cry because I realize that it won't happen. And I don't know which end of the cycle is worse. The hoping part, when I'm around him, pretending that he really cares for me, even just as a teammate, at least being content with being in his presence, or the other stage when I pound myself with the truth, that I should be just happy that he's finally found his own happiness, even without me in it, at least then I'm not filling my mind with illusions. Because that's all my hopes and dreams are. Illusions. They'll never be real.

My team-my first team, always used to ask what it was that I wanted, but I didn't know. At the time, just breathing seemed to be enough, and that I didn't have a right to ask for more. Sensei told me that I have to have a purpose, a goal, a dream, in order to really live, because if I kept going at the rate I was going, every breath I took would be a waste. He was right because after they sacrificed themselves for the mission, and for my sake, and after I was reassigned to Team Guy, after Neji became a Chunin, I realized I

wasted two years not sharing a purpose with them. Not breathing with them. Not really living with them. They didn't get a chance to see the real me, and I never got the chance to know if they would fully accept the real me. Me, that was always scared but wanted to have sacrificed my own life to protect them, but didn't. Now that I vowed to never let my team down again, and now know what I wanted more than anything, I have to tell myself I can't have it because I'm not strong enough. Well, I've wanted it before they died; I just didn't fully realize it at the time, but still. I'm just not strong enough yet. I wonder, if my team knew what I wanted was an illusion, would they have still supported it? It's not fair. I'm living a lie, and their lives of living truthful are over. They have been over for a full two years.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. Incense smoke flutters and a few lost petals scatters in the wind. I could have gone to the memorial stone where the names of the ninja who were killed in action were etched, but this is more personal. Besides, Kai's mother was there already, and I can't stand her tears or her angry bellows. I blame myself enough as it is and I don't need to hear it from her. That's why I made my own graves for them. There aren't any bodies or ashes, none of them could be recovered; it was just a small tribute in front of a tree. The tree was over thousands of years old with gnarled roots tangling over each other before sinking into the soil and the lowest branches were fifty feet up. I remember when we all sat on the highest branches we all vowed to protect our home and each other no matter what, but more importantly, it was the tree where we all met. Here was my first memory, impression, fight, my first everything of them. Everything but their deaths happened right here. None of the other parents were angry at me, nor was Lady Tsunade blaming me, but I deserved Kai's mother's shrieks of "Where were you" or "Why wasn't it you!" The fact is I was there and there was nothing I could have done, and that's why it wasn't me. But it doesn't mean I don't sometimes wish it was me instead of them. Still, there isn't anything I can do now to change it, so I have no choice but to move on. It also doesn't mean that it's still hard.

"There you are Yukiko-chan!" Rock Lee enthusiastically greets with a wave. "I thought you might be here. Have you told your teammates?"

I nod my head and force a smile. "Yes." Even though they're dead, they would always be my teammates.

"I know your team would be very proud." It's a corny thing to say, but it still makes me feel better, and my smile doesn't feel as forced.

"Guy-sensei, Tenten, and I wanted to congratulate you on becoming a Chuunin, but you disappeared so fast."

Yes, I became a Chuunin on the second anniversary of their deaths. It was too uncannily ironic. A person living a lie moves up in the world, and those who actually deserve it are forever stuck in the hands of the shinigami.

"We're all proud of you! And even Neji says that he will be here later after his training session with his uncle to celebrate your promotion."

At the sound of Neji's name, my heart stops, and I feel a chill. "I'm sorry, I can't. My father will be home tonight and I've been slacking off on my chores. I have so much to do." I'm telling the truth this time, but I would have made an excuse. If I don't finish my chores, I'll get a lecture of the lifetime, promotion or not.

Lee's face fills with disappointment.

"Besides, finally earning Chuunin at age sixteen isn't exactly something to write home to, so it's fine, really." It's far too late in my father's eyes at least. "I don't need a celebration or anything."

"Earning a rank should always be celebrated no matter at what age. It shows that you have improved, and you have, Yukiko-chan! That vest you are wearing is just physical proof."

I chuckle as I say, "You're too much, Lee." I take one last look at the grave and leave. I'm really sorry you guys couldn't be Chuunin too. "I'll say hi to everyone else and then go, so how about that?"

Lee's still not happy with the arrangement, but agrees. It's better to agree with something than nothing at all.

It was easy finding Guy-sensei, and I'm glad it was him first to get the sparkling-sunset-of-youthfulness over with. Even after two years, I still can't understand what all that is about. Then we found Tenten who had been looking for Rock Lee and me. She forgot about the anniversary, and ended up just apologizing next to congratulating me. She was just as disappointed about the celebratory rain check as Lee was, but was busy later anyway, so was partly glad for the reschedule. On our way to the Hyuuga compound, we see Neji walking toward us and wave him over.

"Congratulations on making Chuunin, Yukiko-chan," Neji says. "So where are we going to celebrate?"

Lee exhales. "You won't believe this. Yukiko-chan says she has to do her chores, so we're not going anywhere to celebrate. It's like she doesn't want to be around us!"

I exhale back, audibly annoyed by his exaggerated complaint.

"I'm sure that's not true, Lee," Neji pointedly replies.

"How was your training?" I ask. Anything to get past me finally becoming a Chuunin.

"It was fine, but, you seriously have chores to do? Couldn't you at least just have lunch with us?" Why does he have to keep it on subject? Why can't he be someone like Naruto and get sidetracked every once in a while?

"That's what I asked, and she wouldn't budge!" Lee replies for me.

"I have a mountain of chores to do, but thank you both for the thought." I waved goodbye to them and headed home before they could convince me otherwise. If I go out to eat with them, I'll be the

one getting distracted and end up giving myself a panic attack trying to get my chores done.

A few minutes later, I hear, "Hey, wait up!" From Neji. I turn around to him taking long strides towards me without Lee. When he arrives at my side: "I'm walking you home."

"It's fine, I can-"

"I know you can walk yourself home, but I'm going with you whether you like it or not," he says in a nonchalant manner.

How can I argue with that?

After only a few steps, he asks, just like he did last year, and a few months after the date the year before, "How's your team?"

Still dead. "They're fine, I guess."

"They would be proud."

"Lee said that as well."

"I think you're missing his point as well as mine then." He stops walking, and then I stop walking too. "They're dead, it's a sad thing, and I'm sorry you had to lose great friends like them, and a great sensei, but when we say 'They would be proud of you' what we really mean is-"

"To start living again? Smile more? Celebrate the good things like it's the last day of my life? I get it. Honestly, I do. I got it the first time Lee and Guy and Tenten ever said it. I got it when you said it. Thank you, for the thought, but I am living. You have no idea how I'm living, but I am. Just quietly. I have a dream, and even if it never comes true, at least I'm still dreaming. That's what my sensei taught me: that only the living can dream." I smile, but I'm not sure if it's at all convincing to Neji. "So, if that's all you wanted to say to me, I need to be hurrying home now."

"Would you at least tell me when it's OK for you to celebrate with us? The team, Lee especially, won't just let you becoming a Chuunin and an opportunity to eat out go."

I laugh. For real this time. It's true they wouldn't let an opportunity to party go. "Maybe a few days from now. It depends on my father. I really have to go now, but thank you for walking me this far. Also, tell Lee I can see him and to stop hiding behind the bush."

Chapter 2

It don't do me any good.

It's just a waste of time.

What use is it to you

What's on my mind?

If it ain't coming out,

We're not going anywhere,

So why can't I just tell you that I care?

"Things I'll Never Say" by Avril Lavigne

Neji

"What? How did she know I was here?" Lee asks, standing from behind the bush.

"Because you probably stepped on one of her wires." I look under Lee's feet, and sure enough there's a wire lying beneath them.

Besides her father, Yukiko is a topnotch trap setter, and soon to be a top expert in explosives. That's how she passed the exams: subtle lying of her invisible web, patience, and resourcefulness when things go wrong. I had promised my uncle that I would train with him, so I couldn't watch, but I got plenty of information from Lee, and I've watched her battle before, so I know her flow of fighting. I still wish I could have seen it though. It must have been something if it amazed the proctors so much. It isn't every day that someone who a practically only set traps to do her fighting passes.

"So now that Yukiko is not going to join us, what do you want to do, Neji?"

"I told Lady Tsunade that I would report in today. She probably has a mission waiting."

"All right, then I will see you later, my friend." Lee gives off a wide toothy grin like always and rushes off.

I start walking in the opposite direction as Lee, towards the Hokage's tower. At least I got her to laugh before she had to go home today. Her smile seemed too sad for her to actually seem happy about her accomplishments. I don't know what exactly happened to her teammates, but it seems to be a rather distasteful subject to just ask about, and whenever I ask Guy, Tsunade, or just about any Jounin involved in the rescue, they always tell me the same thing: it's not my file to look through. Whatever it is, it still heavily affects Yukiko.

When I reach the tower, Shizune greets me and escorts me to the Hokage's office. The paperwork is neck-high and Tsunade's sorely irritated to the point she doesn't bother with a greeting. "Sit down." After she finishes signing one packet of hundreds, she sighs and decides to take a small break. "Hey, Neji. I want you, Tenten, Lee, and Yukiko to hand deliver a message for me tomorrow and assist in however you can in Kusa."

"You want three Chuunins and a Jounin just to send a message? And assist in what, exactly?"

"The Hidden Grass isn't exactly in a friendly mood since they're dealing with some nin from the Hidden Rock village, so expect some reluctance from them. They may not need you to fight the Hidden Rock nin, but be prepared anyway. Also prepare for an interception team on the way there, that's why I'm sending you instead of using a bird. It should take between a few days to a week."

"I see." The conversation comes to a short pause. I understood the mission perfectly, but something still concerned me. "Are you sure

Yukiko is ready? She just passed the Chuunin exams today."

"Are you saying you don't have any faith in her abilities?" She smiles, already knowing my answer.

"No, her technique is just what we need."

"Then there shouldn't be a problem."

I hesitate. "She was in a mission similar to this one, wasn't she? With her first team?"

Her smile turns to a small frown, and she doesn't answer at first. "It was the last mission she and her team were in. Yes, it's a similar mission, but this time, you're all prepared, and there won't be any misinformation," she says harshly. The most I knew of the mission was that it was supposed to be a simple C rank, deliver a message, mission, but the person who asked to deliver said message had left out important information that ended up killing two Genins, and a Jounin sensei, only leaving one survivor still with the message at hand, which was Yukiko.

"I know I've asked before-"

"I can't tell you about it, Neji. Even if I gave you the file, it won't be nearly enough information you're asking for. They're just words on paper typed by someone who wasn't there. If you want the real information, if you really want to know how Yukiko's feeling, ask her. There's nothing wrong with asking her what happened. You've given her more than enough space to at least heal a little, so she may actually want to talk with someone she trusts."

Too bad Yukiko's still too distant. "I'll tell everyone now, and we'll be ready by seven tomorrow morning." I stand up and reach the door.

"Neji. Tell Yukiko-chan she'll make a fine Chuunin for me."

I nod and leave. Tenten was helping out at the weapons shop, and Lee was at the usual training grounds, so it was easy to tell them about tomorrow's mission. All that is left is Yukiko, and she's at home. I wonder if it's too soon for Yukiko to receive such a similar mission, but Tsunade seems so sure it will still go well. Yukiko can definitely stand on her own in a fight, but I still worry about her. There had been times when she froze, or called out her old teammate's name by mistake. My father worried about Yukiko too when her mother died, but it's not that surprising. My father, uncle and Yukiko's mother were all teammates back in the day. I guess I worry about Yukiko mainly because my father worried. My uncle watches out for Yukiko too, but his kind of caring is completely different.

My father used to take me to the public park instead of the one on the Hyuuga compound because he knew Yukiko would be there and then tell me to play with her. He would talk to her too; ask her if she and her father were doing alright. He did that right up until a week before the peace treaty with Kumo, the week he died. My uncle didn't start to visibly have concerns about Yukiko until some years after my father died. When Yukiko's father was on a long mission, he asked her if she would like to stay with them, or have dinner when he coincidentally saw her-a more impersonal way of watching out for someone. Uncle still invites her from time to time, sometimes using me or Hinata to ask, and Yukiko gradually accepts more invitations rather than politely declining them, but Uncle doesn't speak to her otherwise.

I try and show her that I care for her, too, but I wasn't able to before. After what I said to her on the day of my father's funeral, it just would seem two-faced. I was practically a different person back then. I was angered that my father had to take the place of my uncle, and when she told me she was sorry, and gave me a daisy, I snapped. That was when I started judging other people's destiny, too, and told Yukiko that she wouldn't amount to anything no matter how hard she tried. After Naruto literally knocked some sense into me at the Chuunin exams, and after Uncle apologized and gave me my father's scroll... I realized a lot that day. During the attack from

Sound and Sand, she even came to the resting area I was in and escorted me to the Hokage's mountain because we both knew I didn't have enough chakra to defend myself, even though I desperately wanted to go out to fight. While we were hiding with the women and children, sitting near the door with Iruka-sensei in case we were about to be found out, in the dark, I apologized for what I said all those years before and every awful thing I said after.

She apologized too, but for the stupidest thing. "When my mom died, and all those people were saying how sorry they were for my loss, it felt like they didn't care, that they were just saying it because someone else said it. In the end, I ended up saying the same thing to you when your father died. I was sorry that he died, he was really nice to me, but I wish I could have said something else besides 'I'm sorry,'" she said.

I knew she was genuine at my father's funeral, but I was angry at everything else, not her. That day, with those words, it was a truce which later turned into the friendship I had previously thrown away. It didn't mean everything changed though. Not immediately anyway. Her father was still mad at us Hyuugas, for one reason or another- Yukiko says she doesn't know why and neither could Uncle answer- so we couldn't grab lunch or train or just talk to each other until he was on a mission, but he was practically always getting ready for a mission. He was outraged when he heard that Yukiko was reassigned to Team Guy, with me in it, but Tsunade wouldn't hear any of it. I'm glad. Yukiko and I wouldn't have the bond we do now. It was a kind of bond that I know I could trust her with my life. I only hope she knows that she can trust me just as much.

Her house is at the far edge of Konoha, on the very edge of the forest, and practically isolated, but it was a nice two story house to live in. The lights were on with music playing, something with a steady rhythm of drums and an eerie chime of a xylophone among some of the instruments I recognized. I wonder if she finished her chores, and I wonder if her father is home. I hope he's not home.

"Neji-kun?" I look up to see Yukiko at a window on the second floor with a bucket and a rag. "Hold on a second, I'll be right down." She puts the bucket on the sill and disappears into the house. A few seconds later she opens the door. Her sleeves and pants are rolled up, and she's not wearing any socks. There are clips into her short dark red hair to keep it out of her eyes since it's too short to do anything else to it, but I get an easier view of her light gray eyes, which are usually obstructed by her bangs. "What's up?"

"Your father's not home yet?"

"No, not yet. I'm still doing my chores, so I'm glad for that."

"Do you want some help?"

She winces. "I don't think that would be a good idea, but thank you for the offer. I'm almost done anyways. Just the windows and dinner are left."

"OK, well, I just came back from Lady Tsunade's office, and we have a mission tomorrow. It's basically just giving the message to the daimyo in Kusa, assist if they need it, and come back."

She nods. "OK. How long should I pack for, and is there anyone else coming along?"

"Rock Lee and Tenten are coming too, and pack for about a week. We'll meet up at the Northern gates at seven."

"I won't be late."

"I'm sure you won't," I scoff. "You'll probably be the first one there like always."

She smiles. It wasn't a sad smile either. "There are times when I'm late."

"That only happened about three times at most out of the two years we've been teammates. I'd consider that a near perfect punctual

attendance record."

She gives a slight bow, and says, "Thank you for telling me. I need to get back to my chores and start packing. I'll see you tomorrow."

I nod. "Yeah, see you tomorrow." When her door closes, I start walking home, making a mental list of what to pack for the mission tomorrow.

Chapter 3

Remember, this is still in Neji's P.O.V..

The beginning and the end

Much closer than they seem

Death is but a dream, I know

Dolls are meant to grow away

All broken and bent from petty pay

My friend in this world

Is a bottle of nothing

Still I fly

Still I fall

"Mad Girl" by Emilie Autumn

With the message at hand, I walk from the Hokage's tower toward the gate. Like I had predicted yesterday, Yukiko is the first one there, sitting down with her backpack next to her. "Morning, Yukiko-chan," I greet her, but it looks like she doesn't hear me. Her breathing's deep, so I figure she's asleep. I had gotten to the gates early, but only five minutes early, so I decide to wake her up. With only a graze of her shoulder she bolts up, colliding with me. The top of her head to my jaw. She hits me so hard my teeth clack. We both yelp out in pain and I'm hoping I didn't bite my tongue off.

"Neji-kun! What... ? Ow." She leans forward, rubbing her head and groaning.

I clutch my jaw and feel around my mouth with my tongue. There's no taste of blood, and when I look at my hands, I don't see blood, but there would definitely be a bruise later.

"Are you OK?" She asks.

I look at her still rubbing the top of her head, but facing in my direction. Her bangs are in the way of her eyes. "Yeah, I'm fine," I reply. "When did you get here?" It was at least long enough for her to fall asleep so deeply on the ground.

She looks up at the sky, orange from the oncoming sunrise. She shakes her head to shift her bangs out of her eyes so she doesn't have to let go of her head. "I don't know what time I left the house, but I know it was still as dark as night."

My eyes widen. "So you've been here for at least two hours? Why?" I ask in shock. Even I was still asleep at that time! Here I thought I was the early bird. We all know that she likes being early; it was rare that she wasn't the first one at the meeting place, but two hours?

"I wanted to make sure I had enough time just in case I needed to go back and get whatever it is I forgot."

That's a somewhat reasonable answer. " *Did* you forget anything?"

"Yes, but I remembered half way over, so I already got it. I also double-checked my list when I got here, so I don't think I'm forgetting anything else. Unless it's not on my list."

"Do you always arrive two hours early whenever we meet anywhere?"

She giggles with hands lowered to her mouth. "My teammates and sensei used to ask me that every time we met somewhere. They would always ask how long I had been waiting." She smiles, remembering them. "But, no, not always. I usually try and arrive at the latest a half hour early. Not two hours."

"That's still too early in my opinion, but whatever."

"Do you want me to get you some ice? I'm sure there's a store opened somewhere nearby."

After she asks, I take my hand away from my jaw. "No, it'll be fine." Lee will be joking about this for sure though. I scowl at the thought. "Is your head OK?"

"Yeah. It's stopped pulsing," she chuckles, gingerly rubbing the spot on top of her head before lowering her hand away to grab a hair clip to move her bangs. Lucky her. My jaw still stings.

"Hey you two!" TenTen waves as she jogs toward us. Lee's right next to her waving also. "No surprise that you two are first here."

"Yukiko-chan was here first."

TenTen giggles. "That's also not a surprise."

"What happened to your jaw, Neji? That bruise looks fresh." Lee asks. Crap. I was hoping it wouldn't be so noticeable so soon. He jokes, placing a hand on Yukiko's shoulder, "Did you get Yukiko-chan mad at you or something?"

Yukiko turns her head with a blush, also trying to hide her smile behind her hand. "Or something," she mutters, which Lee hears all too well.

I exhale. "She can tell you on the way to Kusa," I state, already annoyed. Lee would definitely not let this go.

... .

I was right. As soon as Yukiko told the story of how she head butted me out of fright after I tried to wake her up, Lee roars in laughter. "Wow, you only just reached Chuunin level and managed to already get a hit on Neji, a Jounin. You need to train more, Neji if she managed to hit you so hard." My eye twitches.

"It was an accident, and dumb luck. I wasn't even conscious. It's not as if we were in a real fight. I wouldn't stand a chance." Yukiko tries to fix the situation, but it doesn't get through to Lee.

TenTen, on the other hand, tries to divert the conversation, "Hey, where's your jacket?"

At first, Yukiko's confused because she is wearing a jacket, but not the Chuunin jacket. "My...? Oh, I left it," she says, as if it was common sense.

Lee's eyes widen. "What? I was eager to see you wear it, Yukiko-chan." Mission complete: Lee's attention is officially diverted. Thank you, TenTen. "You have at least tried it on, right?"

"Yes, but it felt weird, and I need to make a few adjustments to it. Besides, I don't need to wear it, do I? Neji-kun doesn't wear his jacket either."

"Point taken." Lee offers to race, saying that we could probably make it to Kusa before nightfall. We probably could, it's not a far journey, but it wouldn't be wise.

I shake my head. "Lady Tsunade says to prepare for any intercepting ninja. It's better to take it easy in case we do have to fight. We have plenty of time."

Lee deflates, and we continue our way at a steady pace, while I tell them more about the mission and the situation Kusa is in. After, I'm glad the traveling gets quieter. Lee and TenTen chat animatedly, and Yukiko is content listening while in front of them, and to the side with a couple steps behind me. When the sun starts to set, we decide to make camp, and since the weather's clear, we don't need the tent. We are already a little more than three quarters of the way to Kusa, so it's about time to start anticipating some enemies from the Hidden Rock ninja. Lee immediately volunteers for the first shift, and Yukiko volunteers for the last shift, saying she's already used to waking up early. Obviously. I offer to take the shift after Lee, but TenTen insists

that she and Lee can handle the late night shift, so that leaves me with the third shift. I don't mind, but I've noticed that Lee and TenTen have been acting slightly different. I can't quite explain it, but Lee and TenTen have been together more lately.

With the shift schedule settled, we prepare for the night: Lee and Yukiko walk around to get firewood, catch a few fish from a nearby river, and study the terrain, while TenTen and I set up camp, watching all four bags, and setting up a small fire area for the fish.

"Hey, Neji-kun. Do you think Yukiko-chan's really alright with this mission?" Tenten asks. "It's just she doesn't talk about it, you know?" 'It' meaning the mission her teammates died in.

I remember her smiling when she mentioned her teammates this morning. It wasn't a sad smile, but she definitely still misses them dearly. "Yes, I know what you mean, but I'm sure she'll be OK. She'll talk to one of us when she feels she's ready." I remember what Lady Tsunade told me yesterday.

TenTen nods as she sets up her sleeping bag. "You know what I think? That Yukiko-chan will talk to you first." The tone of her voice suggests she's smiling coyly.

"I don't know about that. She likes Lee, so she'll probably feel more comfortable talking to him." Lee was the first person to make her laugh while she was our newest teammate, all from a stupid joke. He made her laugh to the point she started crying and couldn't breathe. Lee is less rigid than I am, and definitely gives off a more approachable and accepting energy.

"Maybe. I guess that is a tough call, but you and Yukiko-chan have been friends longer than she and Lee-kun have, so she could also talk to you. We all know you've also been trying to get answers on what exactly happened on that mission, so she knows that you care, and she knows that you want to know. Basically, you're already there to listen."

"Sure, but it just means that she knows that she can talk to either me or Lee. And you too, TenTen. Yukiko has a great amount of respect for you. You also seem to understand her on a certain level Lee and I can't." I say this because Yukiko and TenTen do happen to enjoy girl talks from time to time. "She knows she has support from all of us, so it's just up to her when she's ready. Anyway, we shouldn't force it, or worry about what happened for now. It doesn't matter who she talks to first." The fire pit is ready so I set up my own sleeping bag while waiting for the other two.

It doesn't take long, because they returned just as I set my bag on my sleeping bag.

"We have returned," Lee saluted, walking with an armful of wood. Yukiko follows close behind him with a large hook of four fish.

"The area will get pretty rocky, and the trees become less dense," Yukiko states as she's spearing the already gutted fish. "After a couple of hours tomorrow, we should reach the bamboo forest at its thickest." She hands each of us our fish skewered on a stick.

"Well that's good. That means we're definitely almost there." TenTen's obviously relieved. Delivering messages aren't what she would call an ideal mission. Especially when there's a chance that we may not face any enemies at all.

"I can hardly wait to get there," Lee cheers.

Even I have to admit that I'm glad we're almost half way over with the mission. Although I did say not to worry, I can't help it. Yukiko is a good friend, but I don't know of what kind of trauma she might of suffered through, so for all I know she could be a defective member. I have to keep a close watch over her.

Chapter 4

Why can we never go back to bed?

Whose is the voice ringing in my head?

Where is the sense in these desperate dreams?

Why should I wake when I'm half past dead?

"4 O'clock" by Emilie Autumn

Yukiko

They're worried. As hard as I try, they still are, not that I blame them. I wonder how I looked after that mission, having just lost my dearest friends alongside my sensei whom I had practically venerated, and then being immediately reassigned to another team just because they were one member short for the Chuunin exams due to Neji being promoted, and was, at the time, being recommended to a Jounin rank. Of course being in the same kind of mission would have some sort of affect on me, but this time there are no more surprises or left out information. I'm preparing as best I can, and just hoping that I don't let Neji, TenTen, or Lee down like I did my last team. I don't think I would be able to handle it if the same fate happened to them, or even if I'm faced with the same choice.

Anxiousness overtakes me in my sleep to the point I wake up a half hour early. My heart beats so hard when I remember, and my mind keeps thinking up of worst case scenarios that I'm afraid if I go back to sleep I'll just end up screaming myself awake later. That will definitely worry them even more. I wonder, if Kai or Unkei are where I am now, in my shoes so to speak, how would they act? What would they be doing now? Would they have been able to sleep through the entire night without tossing or turning? Knowing that it's too late to go

back to sleep, and knowing that I would never know the answer, I decide it would be better to just get up and start my shift early. That means that Neji gets about a half hour of extra sleep if I could coax him into it, but knowing him, and how seriously he takes being Jounin, probably not.

I sit up and look around, to see Neji standing on a lower branch with his back leaning against the tree. The moonlight's so bright, almost everything is illuminated so clearly. I can even tell he's activated his byakugan. As quietly as I can, I slide out of my sleeping bag and roll it up, preparing for the day ahead.

"It's not your shift yet," Neji states. "Do you naturally wake up this early or can you not sleep?" He's not too worried about waking up the others. Lee's snoring is so loud I wonder how I slept through it, and wonder how TenTen's still sleeping so soundly.

I walk up to Neji's tree so I can talk without worrying about waking anybody up. "Both. I would have actually slept in if I had woken up properly in time for my shift." I had been kind of looking forward to sleeping in more.

"Really? You wake up at four every morning?" He steps down from the tree and leans on it, deactivating his byakugan.

I follow suit and lean against the tree next to him. "Mmm, more like three-thirty, but what's the difference?" I look down slightly to hide my smile.

Neji doesn't say anything at first, but I can imagine his reaction. "Are you serious? Why?" He exclaims vocally, but his face stays as cool as ever. It's the same questions my sensei, and just about anybody I told had asked, but, really, the only people I've ever told were my teammates.

It makes me smile wider remembering. I shrug. "Just because." I don't know why in particular, or at least have a reason that would be more acceptable to other people, but all I know is that I enjoy waking

up early, for only one reason. "I like to because it's so quiet." Of course Lee's snoring isn't really helping my point. "Usually, anyway. The cold air also refreshes my lungs."

"I'll have to try it some time when I'm not already on shift," he mutters sarcastically. I don't think he'll actually try it, or at least not anytime soon. "Did you finish your chores in time? I wanted to ask yesterday, but it slipped my mind."

"After I smacked your jaw?" I can't help but laugh. It was funny, even though remembering it makes me reach for the top of my head.

"Drop it," he grunts, crossing his arms.

His reaction makes me laugh more, but I try and keep it quiet. I take a deep breath to calm myself down enough to answer his question. "Considering I wasn't rudely awakened, I'm pretty sure I did complete my chores in time."

"He wasn't home by the time you went to bed?"

"He hardly even ate the dinner I made. I woke up to find a note saying he went on another mission, not telling me where he's going or when he's coming back."

"That's, what, the eighth mission this month?" He sounds peeved.

"Yeah, more or less. But I guess it's fine. I don't have to hear 'Stay away from that Hyuuga' everyday or any of his other rants." It's not that I still don't worry about him when he's gone-he is an ANBU, and he currently holds the record having completed the most S-ranked missions ever-but whenever he's home, I end up wishing he wasn't. "Besides, dinners at your uncle's home are really something too. It's so much better than my own cooking. And I don't have to worry about shopping so much."

"You make it sound like the free food's the only reason you accept my uncle's invitations. You don't even eat much when you're over

anyway." I don't eat much because I get too nervous. Neji, Hinata, and even Hanabi chat with me, and I gladly return the conversation, but besides that, it's so tense. Hizashi-dono, the one who usually invites me, doesn't speak to me, and neither of the Hyuuga wives even looks at me. I realize that the Hyuuga family is prestigious, but that's some way to treat a guest they invited.

Wanting to tease him again, I look up at him and ask, "There's another reason for going besides the free food?"

The look on his face is priceless.

I can't keep up my poker face for more than a second after seeing his reaction. "I'm just teasing, stop being so serious. I go to see you and your cousins too." Invitations from the Hyuuga main house are a big deal, so I usually cook something as a thank you gift in return. I also go, not just to seem polite, but to mainly see Neji. He's often busy being Jounin, so I don't see him as often as I would like, even with the dinners at the Hyuuga's. "Your family's very considerate, I wouldn't take advantage of that for some free food, especially with the way my father talks about you all. I'm surprised I'm not banned from the compound." That could be a reason for all the tenseness.

"My uncle wouldn't do that. He knows you're not like your father."

I turn my face toward the horizon in front of me, not feeling up to keeping up with the eye-contact. "I know your uncle wouldn't, just like I know your father wouldn't have either. It's just, sometimes I can't believe what comes out of my father's mouth, and I'm just glad that lately he's only been mouthing off when he's at home, but he's still so open about his anger towards you, your father and uncle. He even sneers at Hinata-chan."

"And you still don't know why?"

I shake my head. "I only know it got worse around the time my mother died. When I had just turned four."

"You're almost seventeen; you could always just move out, you know."

"I had been considering that, but he's gone so often now that it just doesn't seem worth it. Plus, I have a feeling that if I do move out immediately, his attitude will just get worse. I'll move out when I turn eighteen." I smile, to assure Neji that I'm fine with the situation, and I really am, for the most part, but I can't tell if he believes me or not. Neither of us talks for a while. Talking about my father brings the mood down. "You're shift's over, you know. You can go back to sleep." I'm hoping he takes my suggestion so I can take some time to think alone.

"I know, but what are a couple more hours?" He mocks, using a variation of my words.

"You've only had four hours of sleep. That's definitely not long enough."

"I can live with that for today at least. Three-thirty, though? Really?" He changes the subject, which I'm glad for. "What time do you usually go to bed? Seven?"

I chuckle. "I go to bed at nine thirty at the earliest!" It never gets old. "I wonder how Lee and TenTen will react if they ever find out."

We spend the time quietly talking about how he has been being a Jounin, some of our missions, what we've been learning and improving. It's a nice feeling just relaxing, even during a mission, knowing that I'm not as boring as I think I am. There have been some people who kept asking me if I did anything interesting at all, but to them books, making trap diagrams, testing them out, or doing chores weren't interesting enough. Maybe Neji isn't interested in the things I liked to do, but he never makes me feel like I'm boring. He knows when to be serious, but he doesn't act strict all the time, as some people are lead to believe. I'm glad of all the teams I could have been reassigned to, it was Team Guy.

It wasn't long before we reached the bamboo forest, and by the time we reach Kusa, it was barely the afternoon. Neji had been right about Kusa being wary about everyone, including towards their allies, but after a checking our headbands and our ID numbers, we are allowed in with hesitantly opened arms. We were escorted to the daimyo's office, in which expressed his gratitude for us and Lady Tsunade, and request only that we send the reply message for Lady Tsunade tomorrow. In the mean time we were allowed to split up in pairs-I with TenTen, and Lee with Neji-to see if anyone needed a hand with border patrols or any odd-jobs.

We were on our way to the North-West side of the border, when we heard someone ask, "Is that you, Yukiko-chan?"

I turn around and take a few seconds to look analyze a Kusa Jounin's face. Slowly, the pieces start to fit. Hesitantly, I take a guess, "Takeuchi-san?"

"Aha! So you do remember. That's good. The last time you were here you weren't in too good of shape, but you look so much better now," he said, casually scratching behind his ears with a light smirk. He looks only a few years older than me, fairly tall and slightly muscular, has short unruly dark brown hair, dark eyes, fair skin, smooth nose, and an angular jaw. From the last time I saw him, he looks like he's matured, but from his speech pattern, he sounds quite the same. He looks at TenTen, and says, "The name's Takeuchi Yoshi, captain of the border patrol," formerly introducing himself, and then turns back to me. "When you left here, I was only a border patrol lackey." His manners have gotten better though.

"We just came by to see if anyone would like some assistance while we're here," I tell him.

"You know, I wouldn't mind the company while patrolling around the area. Some of the terrain is riddled with places the Rock nin could hide in or set up traps."

"Sounds like a plan," TenTen agreed.

