To fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting.  
**-Sun Tzu**

Chapter Three: The Demon

“**It** is going to be within a two mile radius. Spread out and cover as much ground as possible. Send out a signal flare when you sight it.” Shikamaru murmured through the brush. “Shimizu-san, take left. Naruto, take right. I’ll go straight.” His companions nodded solemnly before dispersing to the sides.

Shikamaru ran through the trees before the familiar sound of an explosion came. His eyes shot to the sky to see the dying red flame of Naruto’s flare. “Shimizu-san! We have to go provide backup! Quickly!” Shikamaru swerved towards the flare and made a panicked dash along through the trees. He knew his teammate wouldn’t be able to defeat **it**. **It** was just too powerful for any one of them to handle alone. The dastardly thing always managed to evade his **Kagemane no Jutsu** no matter how many traps they set.

It was five in the afternoon now and they had been following **that thing’s** trail for the past two hours. A piercing scream only aided his fear as he ran. He let out subtle pulses of chakra to hurry himself into the clearing. He landed inside the small opening and stopped. Kei landed behind him and gasped softly. “How awful.”

Naruto was curled up weakly on the ground with dozens of marks layered upon his body. He quivered weakly in fear and flinched away from Kei’s hand. “**It’s** too powerful... I’m not sure how much longer I can take this..”

“We’ll take out **the demon**, Uzumaki-san. But we need your help. We’ll stick together for now since we obviously can’t take it out alone. Which way did the escapee go?” Naruto forced himself up from the ground and swayed to and fro for a moment. He shook himself clear and placed a determined look on his face. He pointed westward and began running in said direction.

Kei groaned before taking off behind him, albeit at a much slower pace. “Uzumaki-san!” Naruto skidded to a stop and looked inquisitively at Shikamaru. “We travel together. Don’t run off ahead.” Shikamaru was rather glad Kei was in the group. This way he didn’t have to run like a madman.

“Ehh? But we’ll lose the trail! You know how hard it is to find **it**!”

“Is that?” Kei pointed off towards the trees. The grass swayed, but with no breeze to guide it. The trio quieted before getting down into battle stances.

“Shimizu-san, try and guide it in our direction. Uzumaki-san and I will attempt the capture.” Kei nodded. Shikamaru had become the trio’s makeshift leader over the past few days. Both Kei and Naruto were quite content with being the tools for the plans he set up. They respected each other’s skills and knew they could never fill the leading role as well as Shikamaru could.

Kei clung to the side of the trees as she quietly crept towards the clump of grass. Stealth had come to her easily over the past few days. It was something she was glad to attribute to herself. She was never one to barge out and wildly swing kunai at people. Hiding in the corner was ever so much simpler.

She saw a flicker of brown before she sprung onto the brush. The target squealed as it flew away from her and towards her waiting companions. Naruto flicked a kunai towards the creature and grunted as the monster dodged. The demon gave a satisfied sniff as it continued to dodge the oncoming projectiles. Little did it know that it was being herded into a trap. “Now, Shikamaru!”

“**Kagemane no Jutsu**.” The black mass flew across the ground and linked to the target’s shadow. “Completed.” A cruel smirk lit Shikamaru’s face. “We have you now, **Tora**.”

-TSUME-

There was absolutely no purpose for them in D rank missions. Unless they were training pain tolerance, that would make sense. Naruto had the cat in a choke hold. The trio stood in the Hokage office with little more than dull scowls plastered across their faces. This was not the first, but the fifth time they had been sent out to retrieve Tora in the past week. They were not amused.

The Third chuckled uneasily at his desk as he felt the killer intent being sent at him. “Madame is in the library waiting for the return of Tora. She really appreciates your consistent and prompt response. You are much faster than most of the other genin teams we send out.” He leaned closer towards the genin with a guilty look on his face. “I’m sorry, but she asks for you all each time Tora goes missing. You do retrieve the cat twice as fast as the other teams.”

Naruto twitched slightly at the Hokage’s words. No one wanted to be asked for when it came to Tora. The cat was a demon incarnate. Not only would Tora aim for the eyes of its assailants, but it had an uncanny sense of where the pressure points were. On first instinct one would think a cat would just wildly swipe its claws at you. However, Tora was a domesticated cat with clipped claws. The beast was smart enough to know it had a disability when it came to the sharpness section. So it aimed for the sensitive spots.

Naruto knew firsthand the awful feeling of being knocked unconscious by a cat no taller than his knee. It wasn’t even a nincat! His arm closed in tighter on the monster as he turned jerkily towards the library. It was strange to think about heading into the library. He still felt the guilt weigh in his heart when it came to stealing the forbidden scroll.

The scroll had been recovered and all, but he had still **stolen** it. Winning his headband off criminal activities made him feel worthless at times. That he didn’t really deserve the headband since he had metso-stole it from Mizuki. Though he did admit that Mizuki wasn’t worthy of holding the headband anyways and the headband was looking for an owner.

They hadn’t done much with the information they had gleaned from the scroll over the past two weeks. The trio had congregated with each other a few times in Naruto’s apartment to discuss the information, but they hadn’t taken any action yet. Kei worried that their chakra stores wouldn’t be large enough to take the burden of a majority of the jutsu within the scroll. She had been diving into medical ninjutsu to find a way of measuring chakra stores, but she hadn’t perfected the jutsu yet.

Papers had been passed out to all of them containing the information about the jutsu she had thought would be good for them. Of course she handily left out the hand sign instructions in case they had any wild ideas about practicing. She didn’t worry as much about Shikamaru as she did about Naruto. The boy had proclaimed that he had gigantic chakra stores and that she didn’t have to worry, but Kei had her doubts. No genin should have chakra stores large enough for a forbidden jutsu, much less four of them.

Naruto stepped into the library to see the bulky form of the daimyo’s wife. The corpulent woman squealed with happiness as she saw the brown cat come into view. With faster speed than Naruto thought was possible for such a round lady, the woman grabbed Tora into her arms and squeezed the poor cat tight. Naruto watched with grim satisfaction as the beast slashed at the lady helplessly. The fur coat the woman wore only added to the irony as no one could tell any longer what was the coat and what was Tora.

“Thank you, children! You dears are always so quick! I knew I was right with entrusting you with my dear little Tora. Tora says thank you for finding him! He has always had such an awful sense of direction. Mummy missed you too, precious.” She laughed merrily as she rocked the poor creature back and forth in her arms. “I do hope Tora precious didn’t give you any trouble. Did he?”

Shikamaru gritted his teeth and forced out, “No Madame, he didn’t. He was a very good cat, but directionally challenged.” He was lying between his teeth and he knew it. However, it would be a good idea not to anger the daimyo’s wife no matter how much he hated that blasted creature. Perhaps the next strategy would be to wait for six or so hours before chasing the cat so they could be late. The woman wouldn’t ask for them if they turned out late, right?

“Oh, good. You’re such delightful children. Most of the other children that I’ve seen over the years have been rather persnickety with my poor Tora. Can you imagine my little baby every deserving such cruel treatment?” She tightened her hold on the cat for emphasis. If Tora was able to turn blue, Naruto was sure he would have.

“Hopefully I won’t have to see you all again, but dearest does get lost an awful lot. I’ll be sure to ask for you three! Tata~” Madame waved merrily before waddling out the door.

“I’m not sure how much more of this I can take.” Kei rubbed her forehead wearily. The thought of waking up every day only to be assigned weed whacking and dog walking made everything seem gloomy. The pay was dismal as well. Thankfully, Tora’s capture was worth twice as much as the other D ranks, but it didn’t mean they got much in the way of money. Allowances had been cut when they became ninja since they were technically earning their own money.

However, the money they were earning now couldn’t even buy a set of proper kunai much less defensive gear. Inoichi had cut them loose for the past few days to take on D ranks while he caught up with some of the T&I department. The man had promised that he’d make it up to them when he returned, but nothing would be worth five Tora missions.

She eyed the wall covered in scrolls with a calculating glance, but turned away sharply towards her companions. “We should go.” It would be best to stay out of this room as much as they possibly could. Anyways, she had to go back to her scrolls.

She dragged her companions out the of the Hokage tower and back towards Naruto’s apartment. The complex had been the easiest place to store all of their miscellaneous scrolls and weapons. No one ventured into his apartment or even went within ten feet of the doorway. It was the perfect place to hide something. People didn’t even seem to care when they accidentally set off chemical explosions.

They had all sat down awhile ago and had the ‘teammate talk’. Since they were officially a team everyone would have to pull their own weight. They had all decided to take different roles and try and specialize in certain fields. Everyone was good in something different, but their team had to be well rounded. If they were missing an important aspect of the team they would have to assign someone to learn that particular trait.

There were generally four types of missions: information gathering, kidnapping, guarding, and fighting missions. Each type of mission required different traits of its members to make the mission a success.

For example, information gathering missions typically required one infiltrator to go directly into the heard of the organization to pick up hearsay from the enemy. They also needed one stealth master to sneak into the offices of the higher ups to copy documents and plant bugs. Lastly, they would also need someone that could blend in to the surrounding populace. What people thought about the organization would be just as important as what the members were actually doing themselves. Allies could appear in any way, shape, or form and a ninja had to always be prepared.

Kei had been an easy choice for becoming the spy to sneak inside, but Shikamaru had been harder to place. He tended towards mental work instead of being physically strong. It was in no way average and it would easily make anyone suspicious as to his loyalty. Geniuses didn’t just walk about village streets after all. After some debate, Shikamaru was to being the ear of the townspeople. It was much less dangerous for him if he got caught by some baker rather than a yakuza boss. Though admittedly they would have to give him supplementary lessons on how to act relatively normal and not so smart. That left Naruto with infiltration. The blonde did that well enough anyways considering his nature. There was just something about him that made him naturally calming. That added with how well he imitated Asuma considering a few hours head start made him a strong candidate for the position.

Kidnapping missions were fairly easy to sort out. The missions weren’t particularly common as they had poor name recognitions, but it was good to be prepared for them all the same. They were conventionally ordered by countries to try and capture rogue ninja when hunter nin were off chasing the bigger fry. That and the hunter nin typically refused to capture the rogues alive instead of dead.

For these missions they would need an information gatherer, a combatant, and a support soldier. Needless to say, Kei took information, Naruto, combatant, and Shikamaru, support. The logic was easy enough to follow. Shikamaru’s **Kagemane no Jutsu** was a strong support jutsu, but it had little offensive potential. If the person he was controlling got damaged it would translate back to him and it immediately made the jutsu much more risky than before. Naruto on the other hand appeared to be a natural fighter. He wasn’t at all good at ninjutsu or genjutsu, but he had a knack for taijutsu that left him better off than his partners.

Guarding missions were slightly more annoying. Mainly because you had to sit around like a sitting duck until someone attacked you. Your enemy immediately starts out with the advantage because they will know the ground better than you. If you are protecting a moving target then your enemy can even choose the battleground and prepare it for an ambush. The risks ran higher than even assault missions and it quite irritated the trio.

The missions would conventionally need two combatants and a defender. Naruto was an easy pick for a combatant as per usual, but the second combatant... Kei and Shikamaru got into a heated debate about why the other was more suited for the job than the other. Shikamaru eventually won much to Kei’s displeasure. He had developed a tactic with the **Kagemane no Jutsu** to create a ring about a meter thick with a radius of about five meters. If anyone stepped onto the ring they would be ensared in his jutsu. So far he had managed to take control of about three people before reaching his limit, but he promised to work on it.

This left Kei in the unfortunate position of finding some way to become a combatant. They had done some group brain storming without much success in that department. They had all decided to talk about the matter later much to her chagrin.

Lastly there were fighting missions. The typical set up Kei found was of a combatant, a support, and a medic in case of injuries. Naruto of course took the first role. Shikamaru was a painfully obvious second leaving Kei once again with a field she knew absolutely nothing about. She almost felt as if the two boys were conspiring against her.

She stormed into the shabby apartment and plopped down on her companion’s bed. The pile of scrolls beside her had slowly grown over the past few days as she had absconded with nearly half of the library. Neither boy could really blame the girl, but they didn’t really understand it either. They had never learned well from scrolls and it was like reading a page full of nonsense and expecting to find the answer to the meaning of life in it. It just wasn’t going to happen.

The two boys huddled in the corner of the room whispering to each other. If they could be called whispers that is. “Shikamaru-san! I’m telling you, this is a killer way to work out! You’re going to melt into goosh unless you work out more! Kei-chan even told me that exercise helps build chakra stores so come on already!”

“Yes, Nara-san.” A malicious glint entered Kei’s eyes. “Why don’t you go run a few dozen laps around Konoha? I’m sure it would be extremely beneficial for you. Uzumaki-san will keep you company.” Shikamaru paled. He had just finished traipsing all through the forests to find Tora. Surely they wouldn’t really make him run laps around Konoha?

“Of course, Kei-chan! Let’s go, Shikamaru-san!” Naruto jumped up from the ground and grabbed Shikamaru by the wrist and tugged him out the door.

Kei blinked slowly as she stared at the open door and smiled. She still held a grudge over the combatant deal and revenge was sweet.

-TSUME-

Shikamaru stumbled towards the door wearily. He tumbled to the ground and leaned against the apartment. The sound of his own wheezing was a sort of song that lulled him gently to rest. It was now eight in the evening and they had run for the past few hours. Some people were not naturally built for endurance and some people were. Naruto plopped down on the ground beside Shikamaru with an inquisitive look on his face.

“What’s wrong, Shikamaru-san? You that tired? I mean I’m a bit tired, but you must really be out of shape! We have to do this more often.” Shikamaru froze in horror. He coughed into his hand and stood up jerkily from the ground. He twisted the door open and headed into the room.

His eyes widened for a moment as he realized the lights were off. He stepped farther into the room when he was knocked onto the floor. He grunted as he was tossed against the wall. The boy looked to find his assaulter only to see a flash of green before a hand covered his face. Shikamaru struggled weakly against the attacker only to pause for a moment. He felt a foreign chakra inside of his system, but it didn’t seem to be aggressive.

“390.” The hand pulled away from his face to reveal the shadowed form of Kei. “Before you ask, I didn’t think you’d be willing to let me smother your face so I did it while you were weakened.” Shikamaru narrowed his eyes at the blase girl as she turned back to her notebook.

“What was that blasted maneuver for anyways?” The normally lazy boy leaned back against the concrete wall with an irritated expression. It would be hard to find someone who actually enjoyed being suffocated.

“Your chakra levels. Chakra has a base to which it refills as you rest or eat. After exercising enough you can broaden the base and increase your levels. However, you can calculate the chakra levels by people by assigning numbers. Numbers are assigned to the durability of the chakra, resistance to foreign invasion, coloration of your chakra, and the speed of circulation throughout your entire system. “

“You were mediocre at best when it came to durability, resistance, and speed of circulation, meaning that you only had good coloration. The coloration reflects the potency of the chakra when you let out chakra bursts. Durability is generally how easy it is to break when another chakra comes in contact with it like an enemy ninjutsu. Resistance would be to techniques such as the Yamanaka mind technique. Most people have low resistance, but that doesn’t mean we don’t have to work on it.” A edge entered her voice before she continued on.

“Lastly, the speed of circulation tells how fast your chakra system will rebuild. When you run out of chakra you wont get it back for at least two days. In layman’s terms, it’s absolutely pathetic. We’ll work on that, but you are prepared for some lower level jutsu. The forbidden jutsu will take you a few months or years before you learn any good ones. There are a few junky ones that were tossed in there for meager reasons like personal vendettas. I have one in mind. Now where is the idiot?”

Kei searched the room before seeing a shadow creep across the doorway. She meandered towards the door and poked her head out. The maroon hair covered Naruto’s face as the boy squawked in surprise. “Kei-chan! What was that for! Mou...”

“I need you to hold still for a moment, Uzumaki-san.” Without waiting for a reply she whacked him soundly on the face with a flash of medical chakra. She hummed for a moment before drawing back her hand. She stared at the appendage curiously before smacking him a few more times against the face. “How....”

Kei turned away from the complaining youth and snatched the scroll she had been reading from the bed. She shot furtive looks towards the blonde and then back to the scroll. “What is it, Kei-chan?” Naruto slowly approached the bed and glanced over her shoulder at the scroll.

“Your levels... 2045. They’re too high, but I retested you a few times... They have to be right.” Naruto looked to the side silently. The temperature in the room seemed to drop for a moment as a freezing look crossed the Uzumaki’s face.

“Uzumaki-san?” Kei looked nervously over towards her teammate.

“It’s nothing. Just nothing.”

**Sorry, this is not only late, but short and crappy. Forgive me. I’ll try to update sooner next time! Also I’m trying to figure out how to reply to reviews in other ways than from in the actual chapter... Anyone tell me how? I really want to reply to all of you, but I’m a disaster at the computer. My friend actually set up my fanfiction account a year or two ago... Who knows what she did to it...**

**In case none of you have noticed yet... My spelling is atrocious. Did you know I found six different ways to misspell atrocious? I wonder if I should get a beta... Following that thought, how do I get a beta? If any of you guys spot spelling mistakes please tell me and I’ll try to correct them. Thanks!**

**Ajd09: Thanks so much for the review! I love how much you read into it. I’m glad you noted the change in psyche with Naruto! I purposefully left out the dream about Hokage and made him more relationship oriented. Shikamaru wasn’t introduced to shogi until Asuma? That’s practically a crime! (weeps sadly) Poor Shikamaru...And I’m glad you like Kei. I was really worried about how she would be received since the general rule of thumb is that OCs turn out really cliche and they should be hidden away. In response to the question about her noticing Mizuki, I always pictured Mizuki as being a spy since the moment he entered the chuunin station. She wouldn’t have noticed him acting differently since he was naturally evil.**