I remember the looks on their faces (through the sycamore trees)

by blackkat

Summary

Kiba swallows and reminds himself that he’s an S-rank criminal, that he’s a traitor and a killer and there's nothing he won't do if it means preserving his cover. Even if he has to kill a whole family.

*If they didn’t come to us, it would just be someone else who got the job,* he tells himself, and it’s cold comfort, but it will have to be enough. He has to do this; if he backs out now, Konan and Kakuzu will get suspicious. Kiba can't risk it.
Given that Kiba has been around Kakuzu for more than a handful of seconds, it’s a little astonishing to find out that Akatsuki charges about half as much for missions as the Hidden Villages do.

Asking Kakuzu about it gets him an aggrieved and aggravated mutter about underselling valuable skillsets and criminal wastes of talent—no indication of whether it’s the criminals who are the wastes or if it’s the waste that’s criminal—and Kiba isn’t brave enough to follow through on that particular conversation when Kakuzu’s looking that offended. Hidan just shrugs, uncaring, and Deidara’s shut up in his room with smoke coming from under the door, so Kiba doesn’t even try to get his opinion on it. The others are out on missions or getting supplies, so that just leaves one source of information.

“Mission costs?” Konan repeats when he brings it up. She lowers the book she was reading, giving Kiba a considering look, and then asks, “Do you need money for supplies?”

Nerves are curling through Kiba’s stomach like they always do when he asks questions, and he wonders if he’ll someday manage to bring up simple things without feeling like SPY is written out across his face in red marker. He forces himself to shrug, dropping down to sit on the floor with his back braced against the bookshelf, and pretends interest in the titles to his left.

“Just curious,” he admits, reaching up to tip a book on the history of Earth Country out of the line. The cover alone looks dry enough to put him to sleep, and he grimaces a little, pushing it back into place. “I mean, we’re all S-rank, and I know a lot of missing-nin charge more than the villages do when people want to hire them, so I thought it was kind of weird.”

Konan slides a piece of her origami paper between the pages to mark her place, then closes her book. “Nagato's trying to make sure we’re competitive,” she says after a moment. “Because we’re S-rank, we tend to finish missions more quickly than a chuunin or a tokubetsu jounin would, so we can take almost as many jobs as a small village. The overhead costs even out quickly, since we have far fewer people.”

Kiba was mildly terrible at math, back at the Academy, but that makes sense. It doesn’t quite feel like the full truth, but the reasoning is easy enough to accept, laid out like that. “I’m surprised you got Kakuzu to agree to that,” he says after a moment.

Konan smiles, just faintly. “Kakuzu is one of the reasons it works. He’s good at budgeting.”

Remembering how he had to haggle with the bastard to get even as much as Konoha would pay for a C-rank mission after bringing in the last bounty, Kiba makes a face, though he doesn’t argue. “Are we allowed to take solo missions?”

“Well, that isn’t exactly what Kiba was hoping for—” When Kiba groans in exasperated agreement, Konan snorts softly and sets her book completely aside, rising to her feet. “No solo missions, since it makes us targets as missing-nin, but I wouldn’t mind something to do, if you want company.”

Well, that isn’t exactly what Kiba was hoping for—he has a bunch of messages he needs to send Genma, and it will be ten times harder doing that with Konan around—but he really does want to get out of the base. He’s not used to being lonely, or having nothing to do; it’s one of the perks of growing up in a large clan, and even more so growing up with a nin-dog partner. Kiba's never been one for extra work when it’s avoidable, but it’s so hard to be alone with his thoughts that he’s
already taken more missions in the past few months than he did in all of his time on Team 8.

“You sure?” he asks, because Konan is still head bitch and he doesn’t want to annoy her. “I can get Deidara or something.”

Konan pats him on the head, just briefly, and the curl of her mouth is amused. “I wouldn’t offer if I wasn’t,” she says. “You’re not the only one who likes to stay sharp.”

It takes effort not to grimace. In his case, it’s less staying sharp and far more getting competent, and Kiba definitely hasn’t forgotten that he is for all intents and purposes a genin, and not even an incredibly skilled one at that. He might have killed Danzō, but that was more a fluke than anything. He’s not like Itachi or Deidara, or even Hidan. Not a genius in any way. He’s just—

Just Kiba. And not even fully himself, without Akamaru at his side.

_Fake it ’til you make it_ is taking on a whole new level of meaning, Kiba thinks wryly, levering himself to his feet and trotting a few steps to catch up with Konan as she leaves the library. They head for the office where Kakuzu is holed up, and Kiba pulls up a mental tally of what he has packed and ready to go; Konan hates to be kept waiting, so there generally isn’t a lot of time to prep when he’s working with her. He’s gotten used to refilling his pack the second he gets back from a mission, and it’s a bittersweet feeling, because Kurenai had tried to drill that same habit into him, but…

Well. Being a shinobi always seemed like it was just a thing to do, what was expected of him, the easiest path to take. Before he’d overheard Tsunade and Jiraiya discussing their lack of spies and the danger it put Naruto in, he’d just…never thought about it. Never put much effort into it. Coasting, pretty much, and he’d done fine, because he had the Inuzuka Clan at his back and a mother and sister who were never afraid to rough him up in the name of motivating him. Shino and Hinata were solid teammates, Kurenai was a good sensei, and the most effort Kiba put into anything was avoiding extra work whenever possible.

He knew the minute he made his choice that that would have to change, though. His training with Genma only emphasized that—he’s pretty sure he learned more in those seven days than he did in a full year at the Academy, given how fervently he had applied himself.

There was a big difference between being _told_ that the information he was learning was important, could probably save his life, and actually _knowing_ that in a week he’d have to take what he knew and survive without help against first an honored war veteran and then the world at large.

Kiba's never going to be the most motivated guy, and he knows that. His biggest want is peace and safety for his family, his village, and himself, in that order. There are no grand dreams driving him, no massive injustices, no dark secrets. He’s just…a shinobi.

_Someone has to._

The rap of Konan's knuckles against the doorframe is loud enough to startle Kiba out of his thoughts, and he glances up as she steps into Kakuzu’s office.

“Again?” Kakuzu asks, before either of them can open their mouths, and when Kiba leans around the door he’s leveling a dark look at Konan. “Look, I don’t care if you're second in command, there are only so many industrial-sized shipments of high-grade paper I can order before _someone_ notices.”

Konan raises one cool brow, meeting the look without so much as blinking. “I’m not here about my
paper. Have any missions come in?’”

Giving her one last suspicious glance, Kakuzu turns away from the account books spread out across the desk and riffles through a stack of letters. “Taking the puppy out for a walk?” he asks snidely, and Kiba bristles, growling low in his throat.

“We’re bored,” Konan says blandly, and Kiba definitely isn’t imagining the faint expression of alarm that flashes across Kakuzu’s face. An instant later, he snatches up a sheet covered in fancy handwriting and waves it at them.

“Take it and go.” That tone is very close to pleading, even if it does bristle with sharp edges. “We don’t have the damned funds to rebuild the base again if you get testy.”

Kiba snickers, because Konan is totally alpha bitch around here, and Konan casts him a faint smirk before she takes the letter and checks it over. Both brows rise, and she says, “I’m not familiar with Fire Country. This is…?”

Kiba’s heart trips, but he tries not to let it show on his face, stretching up to see what’s caught Konan’s attention. Obligingly, she tilts the letter so he can read it, and Kiba skims the first paragraph. To his surprise, he knows the town that’s mentioned.

“That’s eastern Fire Country,” he says, “by the border with Rice Paddy Country. It’s right next to where the Azuma and Sakyō Rivers meet.” He’d had a courier mission there with Team 8, right before the Chuunin Exams, and it had been one of the most boring road trips he’d ever been on. Nothing had gone wrong, and the only moment of excitement was when they helped a merchant repair the wheel of his wagon.

Konan nods, satisfied, and studies the rest of the request. “A clan elimination mission? The two of us can manage that.”

Elimination. Kiba’s heart sinks somewhere down into his stomach. That’s one of the missions usually reserved for ANBU, and it carries an appropriate price tag in the Hidden Villages. Mass slaughter isn’t something the villages like to advertise that they do, even if it’s one of those things the Daimyo uses them for in order to keep his power secure. It makes sense that someone looking to appear uninvolved, or looking to go against a superior, would contract out to missing-nin, and Kiba understands that this is just like assassination, which is pretty common. But…

He swallows and reminds himself that he’s an S-rank criminal, that he’s a traitor and a killer and there’s nothing he won’t do if it means preserving his cover. Even if he has to kill a whole family.

If they didn’t come to us, it would just be someone else who got the job, he tells himself, and it’s cold comfort, but it will have to be enough. He has to do this; if he backs out now, Konan and Kakuzu will get suspicious. Kiba can’t risk it.

It’s just like in the tunnels last week, thinking there were prisoners in need of rescue and knowing he couldn’t act even if he found them. Some things are worth more than one person’s morals, and Konoha—and Naruto—definitely is.

You’re going to have to make some of the hardest choices in the world, he remembers Genma saying. Eventually it’s going to come down to what’s more important, your values or the village. Making a decision like that—it might break you. But then again, it might not.

Hopefully, this is the might not part.

“I’m going to need to grab a few more gas bombs,” he says, remembers Genma’s words about
taking things a piece at a time, looking at the logistics instead of the reality, and just manages to keep his voice from cracking.

Konan doesn’t so much as glance at him, so his tone must have been convincing. “All right. Kakuzu, plan for us being gone a month. If anything changes I’ll send a message.”

With a grunt, Kakuzu turns away to make a note in a ledger. “Pein—”

“Will accept that I can take as many missions as I want,” Konan finishes for him, and smiles thinly. It’s beautiful, but not particularly kind. “He’ll understand.”

Kakuzu doesn’t look like he entirely agrees, but he doesn’t argue, and Konan steps out of the office and gently closes the door after herself. “You have everything prepared?” she asks.

Kiba nods, rocking forward on the balls of his feet. He wishes, futilely but desperately, that they’d gotten any other mission, that he’d contented himself with boredom, but. But better to remove all traces of doubt that he’s loyal to the organization. This is the first big mission he’s been on, beyond looking for information on the Rokubi’s jinchuuriki—without success, thankfully—and a few bounty collections.

“Just need to beef up my supplies a bit,” he says, and when he feels Konan's eyes fall to rest on him, he reaches down deep, summons up that thread of anger he’s been nursing like the coals in a fire. *Torune*, he thinks, *Shino losing his cousin because of Danzō, Naruto beating me like I'm an idiot. No one ever sees me but I'm better than that, better than them, I'll show them all.*

His smile, when it comes, is full of teeth and half-buried fury. It’s just luck that Konan can't smell the desperation and grief that come along with the anger. That would give the game away.

Konan studies him for a long moment, and then her lips tip into an answering smirk. Kiba's never been great at sensing chakra, but he doesn’t need to be to feel hers, as cold as a winter night with rain on the edge of becoming snow. She pats him on the head, then turns towards her rooms, and says over her shoulder, “Don’t forget your cloak.”

He wonders whether she means because it’s going to be raining, or because they need to make a statement when they kill the family.

Honestly, Kiba would rather not know.

Tracking and scouting, at least, are things Kiba's confident he can do. The Inuzuka are bred for it, after all, and Kiba's earliest memories are of playing seek-and-find games with his mother and Kuromaru in the training grounds. Team 8 was meant to be a tracking team, and he, Hinata, and Shino were all head and shoulders better at it than the rest of their class. For all his loudness and brashness—hardly helped by having to be louder and brasher than ever to sell his cover, to act angry and reckless and murderous—he’s good at stealth, at ferreting out all the little details of movements and routines and habits. It’s easier with Akamaru next to him, but—

Well. Isn’t everything?

Konan looks up from the paper shuriken she’s folding as Kiba eels between a gap in the bushes, hardly rustling them as he passes. He drops down into the tiny hollow between a fallen tree and a small gully, landing in a crouch, and says, “Their security is pathetic.”
“Don’t complain,” Konan tells him, mildly amused. “It’s always better for us when the targets are stupid. How many guards?”

That’s exactly what Kurenai always said, and it twinges deep inside Kiba’s chest like a pulled muscle. He scoffs to cover it, sinking down on his haunches and picking up a stick to sketch out a rough map of the compound. This is familiar too, because Kurenai drilled them on mission reports until Kiba at least could do them in his sleep, and probably had more than once. Kurenai might not have been a tracker herself, but she had the caution and precision down pat.

“Basic wooden wall, a meter and a half high, with a garden on the eastern side but no other cover,” he reports, laying out the six walls with quick strokes. Just like any other mission, he tells himself, it’s an assassination, that’s all. Just several in a row. This is fine. “Twelve guards, including two who are probably older than dirt and one who’s so young his helmet keeps slipping down over his eyes. The one who usually patrols near the front has some kind of infection in his foot, and sits down a lot. Three have some military training, but I can’t tell in what. Six stationed guards, three pairs patrolling. Fifteen minutes between patrols at least, and it smelled like they usually take twice as long as that.”

Konan hums, short and pleased. “Your nose is useful for more than hunting bounties,” she says, and checks the diagram. “Did anyone leave or enter while you were watching?”

Kiba shakes his head. “Doesn’t smell like anyone’s left recently, unless they’re better at covering their scent than I am at finding it. ‘S not likely.”

Her mouth tightens faintly. “We don’t know if the whole family is there. Can you tell how many people are inside?”

Kiba considers for a moment. He’s got a good nose, and his hearing is nothing to sneeze at, but even his mother probably wouldn’t be able to pick out individual scents from a hundred meters away and through several walls. “Not unless I’m in there, too. But if we go hopping over the wall every few hours to check—”

“Even the most unobservant guards might notice,” Konan finishes for him, though she doesn’t look discouraged, just thoughtful. “You said three of them have military training. Shinobi?”

“I doubt it.” When Konan raises a brow at him, Kiba just shrugs. “I was hiding in a tree. Shinobi tend to know how to look up. But they were carrying swords, so…maybe samurai?”

That, at least, makes Konan’s mouth tighten. “Rōnin would be the best option, for us. If they know how to sense chakra, this will take longer than I’d prefer. Or we’ll have to be flashy, and that gives Nagato ulcers.”

Kiba snorts, because he’s yet to see Pein make so much as a single expression beyond longsuffering aggravation in the face of the other Akatsuki members’ madness. “We could sneak in and find a hiding spot?” he suggests, because he’s seen the camouflage Konan can manage with her paper, and it’s impressive enough to fool anyone without an Inuzuka’s senses.

“Too risky,” Konan decides after a moment. “If they found us, or any trace of us, they’d knowing something was happening.” She eyes Kiba thoughtfully, then looks down at her hands. “In the village—there were rosebushes, weren’t there?”

Kiba wrinkles his nose, because he remembers. Flowers are fine, for the most part, but those roses in particular were too strong for comfort. He didn’t even have to get within six blocks of them to wish desperately for a regular sense of smell. “Yeah, why?”
Konan smiles. “Because we’re going to sell flowers to the guards and get them talking. I hope you’re up for playing an innocent child again.”

“We should henge and trade jobs,” Kiba complains. “You can be the dumb kid asking questions and I can play the flirty adult.”

The curve of Konan’s mouth is incredibly amused, though it doesn’t otherwise show on her face. “Maybe next time,” she says, and tugs the paper flower and tie from her hair, letting it flutter down around her shoulders. Her piercing is next to go, and she pulls out the scroll with their changes of civilian clothes, adding, “When there aren’t samurai capable of sensing active chakra use.”

Kiba concedes the point, if reluctantly. He unties his hitai-ate, shoving it into his weapons pouch, and vigorously ruffles his hair. With it down, he can pass as a solid three years younger than he actually is, especially if he plays up the wide-eyed kid routine. It’s aggravating, but he’s interacted with enough civilians to be able to pull it off. Not in Konoha so much, because shinobi children are discouraged from hanging around with civilians in case their behavior and views interfere with ninja training, but on missions he’s encountered plenty.

A firm hand tips his head to the side, and Konan brushes concealer across his clan markings, fingers lingering for just a moment on the still-pink scar that cuts through the one on his right cheek. Kiba grimaces, if not quite at her, but allows it, because yeah, those are a dead giveaway that he’s a shinobi. The scar less so than the markings, but the former was Danzō’s last gift to him and he’s glad to cover it whenever possible.

The fact that killing Danzō destroyed one of his marks like that, in the very moment Kiba betrayed Konoha in the name of helping it, feels like the greatest sort of irony, and Kiba hates it in a low-level, distant sort of way.

“Your hair’s getting long,” Konan says, moving to his other cheek. She tugs gently on a lock that hangs over his eyes and adds, amused, “You look like a sheepdog.”

Kiba stiffens faintly, can’t manage to hide his reaction. Hana was always the one to cut his hair, usually with a pair of shears and an air of cheerful menace. And—it’s stupid to let it bother him, it’s so stupid and selfish and dumb, but Kiba just spent his first birthday without either of his family members, without Akamaru, and it was just about the loneliest he can ever remember being. His birthday’s always been a day to celebrate the fact that he was alive, that he existed, and...

He’d spent the whole day wondering about Hana, about his mother, imagining their reactions to Tsunade telling them what he did.

Has his existence become something they regret now?

Konan ruffles his hair lightly, pulling his eyes back to her, and smiles, just a little. She looks strange with her hair in her face, her piercing gone. Not softer, not quite, but...different. “A few more months and you could put it in a bun,” she offers, and the humor is sympathetic more than anything, but Kiba is grateful for it.

“We could match,” he jokes, and pretends it doesn’t crack in his mouth.

Even if Konan hears the waver, her smile widens. “You’d be cute,” is her verdict, and when Kiba splutters in offense she laughs softly, pulling back to drop a worn set of clothes in his lap. “Get changed. We need to go steal some flowers.”

“I know we’re missing-nin and all, but isn’t that a new low, even for people like us?” Kiba asks,
and then promptly squeaks and jerks around when Konan drops her Akatsuki robe and looks about to drop her shirt as well.

The tone of Konan's voice says she’s definitely laughing at him, but Kiba's hardly about to turn around and check. “They're flowers, they'll grow back. Will you be all right if I'm the one carrying them?”

“I'll stay upwind,” Kiba says with a shrug, pulling on the patched tunic and discarding his sandals entirely. “Inuzuka learn how to work around that kind of thing. Perfume and cologne are even worse, but we still manage seduction missions and stuff.”

Konan hums thoughtfully. “Ame has never had a lot of clans,” she says. “Especially after Hanzō, and then the war. They all left to escape the fighting or were killed during it. I suppose I'm still not used to clan shinobi being so different.”

In the Academy, Iruka had mentioned that Konoha had an unusually high number of clans, mostly because of the Shodaime and his efforts to recruit them. Kiba thinks of that one Sound ninja Shino faced off with in the Exams, the look on his face when Shino's kikaichū came out, and can't help but grin. “A good nose is nothing compared to some of the freaks in Konoha, you know.”

“Useful for a missing-nin, though.” Konan leans over him, raising a brow, and says dryly, “You can turn around now. I'm decent.”

Konan in civilian clothes, trying not to look dangerous, is weird. Konan in a dress and succeeding is even weirder, Kiba decides, but he’s not dumb enough to say that to her face. Instead, he grins up at her, all teeth, and retorts, “We’re not talking morally, right?”

That makes her laugh, startled and warm, and she offers him a hand up. “Stop yapping and find me some flowers, puppy.”
“I—I’ll take three of the red ones?” the youngest of the guards stutters, helmet almost slipping down over his wide eyes as he stares at Konan.

Konan gives him her sweetest smile, which would be a hell of a lot more convincing if Kiba hadn’t seen her wearing it when she last gutted a man. “A romantic?” she says, looking up at him through her lashes. “Your girlfriend must be very lucky.”

There’s red creeping down the man’s face from his hairline. “I don’t—don’t have one, but, uh—”

“You don’t?” Konan widens her eyes, feigning surprise as she glances up. “Really? But you’re—well.” Another dropped glance, demure and sweet, and yeah, that’s not something Kiba ever wants to see again. Ever. “You must be very popular, being brave enough to have a job like this.”

_Gag me_, Kiba thinks, rolling his eyes, and slides sideways to get a look around the edge of the gate instead of watching his partner wring information from the idiot.

The older guard, seated on a low stool and smelling vaguely of infection, chuckles quietly and offers Kiba a conspiratorial wink. “Not much fun watching your sister flirt, is it?”

“Gross,” Kiba tells him, pulling an exaggerated face, but gladly takes the excuse to move closer. He can’t see much of the house beyond the main courtyard, but this isn’t an angle he was able to check before. “Is that a sword? Do you fight a lot? Are you protecting a princess? Or a lot of treasures?” he demands, not pausing to take a breath as he bounces on his toes, all wide eyes and enthusiasm.

The guard blinks, clearly sorting through his questions, and then chuckles. “No princess here,” he confides, and pats the sheath fondly. “Just a lord and his sons, but they’re good men. These blades are to protect them. Are you interested in swords, my boy?”

“My sister won’t let me have one,” Kiba tells him, ignoring the weapons pouch hidden away in his small satchel, full of more weapons than this man has probably seen in a year. “But I want to protect people like that too! Can I see the armory? Can I see the lord?”

_Gods, how do civilian children even talk? _Kiba remembers a lot of begging for candy from the handful of brats they had to escort between towns, a level of endurance that would have been shamed by a first-year Academy student, and a preoccupation with asking Kiba how many weapons he was carrying at any given time. (He’d stopped telling them the truth after that one time when he said _forty, probably_ and one lady had almost fainted. Kiba hadn’t had the heart to tell her afterwards that he was likely lowballing it.)

Thankfully, the man doesn’t seem to notice anything off. He smiles indulgently, glancing over at Konan before pulling his sword partway out of its sheath to show Kiba surreptitiously. “Sorry, my boy, but my boss would have my head if I took you into the armory. And the lord’s gone right now—he and his sons travel for business. I’ve seen them maybe twice in the last month myself, here for a night and then gone again in the morning.”

_Fuck_, Kiba thinks, and can smell the sudden surge of annoyance from Konan, clearly listening in, like acrid smoke in the air. He sneezes despite himself, but he can’t blame her; their employer didn’t mention anything about that in her letter, and it blows pretty much all of their plans to hell.

“Aw, that sucks,” Kiba complains, injecting as much whine into the tone as he can in order to
cover up the irritation. He waves, making it as cheerful as possible, and says, “Thanks, sir!” before he turns and throws himself at Konan. “Aneki, I'm hungry!”

“Then we’ll go get something to eat,” Konan answers, ruffling his hair. She smiles at the younger guard again, takes his money with a murmured thank you, and then guides Kiba away with a hand between his shoulder blades. The roses are making Kiba want to sneeze again, so he tries his best to breathe through his mouth until they’ve crossed the river and turned into the woods again.

“Damn,” Konan says quietly, but vehemently. She sets her bundle of roses down, precise and contained, and Kiba recognizes a building explosion when he sees one. He’s not worried Konan will take it out on him—she’s not that kind of person—but if things get messy Pein probably won’t let them take many more missions, and Kiba needs these missions if he wants to earn their trust.

“If they never stay long, maybe we don’t even have to break into the compound,” he suggests. “We could take them out on the road.”

Konan pauses, takes a breath and shakes herself. “You're right,” she agrees, and in an instant all the emotion is wiped off of her face. It’s a little eerie; Kiba is used to the Inuzuka, who are loud and obvious about their emotions. Someone as self-contained as Konan is pretty rare, and even Shino didn’t have her control. She doesn’t waver, just turns towards their campsite and starts walking briskly. “If we can kill any messengers headed to the house, no one there will even know people are going missing, or at least not where. We wait for one of them to arrive, then follow when they leave and ambush them once they're a safe distance away.”

She’s the boss, so Kiba just trots a few steps to keep up, minding a patch of brambles that almost dare to catch the hem of her dress. “Does this mean we can go find a bathhouse? We’re both starting to smell.”

Konan blinks, looking back at him with faint surprise, and she smirks a little. “I hadn’t considered that aspect of camping with a nose like yours.”

“It sucks,” Kiba agrees. “Shino always wore that fucking coat, even in the middle of summer, and the Aburame can bullshit all they want, but they still sweat like anyone else. It reeked.”

There’s a pause, touched with something between surprise and caution, and Konan asks slowly, “Your genin teammate?”

Shit, Kiba thinks, snapping his mouth shut. Shit shit shit. The problem is he likes Konan—she might be a missing-nin, but she’s friendly and funny and easy to think of as pack, especially since she easily falls into the alpha bitch role. It’s easy to think things are even a little normal around her, to fall back into happier memories instead of focusing on his anger. He ducks his head and looks away, trying to ignore the curl of unease, the surge of panic on its heels. He hadn’t meant to say that.

“Yeah,” he manages, and can’t quite bring himself to look at her.

Thankfully, Konan just hums in quiet acknowledgement and lets the subject drop. “We’ll find a place to bathe in the river. Too many trips back to the village could looks suspicious, and I don’t want to leave the area for that long in case one of the targets returns. We can’t risk missing them.”

Yeah, Kiba hadn’t really had high hopes of that actually happening, but it was a thought. He grimaces, already anticipating his dip in the snow melt of the river, but it’s a lot better than stewing in his own juices. “Fine. We watching the compound in shifts?”
Konan's raised brow says *of course, what did you expect?* more clearly than any words could, and Kiba doesn’t bother to strangle a groan. He *hates* sentry duty.

“Fucking *finally,*” Kiba grouses, watching a trio of carriages and several riders make their way through the gates of the compound.

One branch above him, Konan makes a quite noise that’s mostly agreement. “It’s the oldest son,” she says, eyes fixed on the group. “They don’t look like they're unpacking anything, so they probably won't be staying long.”

At this point, after a full week of watching the place pretty much every minute, Kiba can't bring himself to care. Patience isn’t something he’ll ever be good at, and there's only so many times he can scout the surrounding area before he drives himself insane wandering over the same territory again and again, hoping for a change.

“No,” Konan decides after a moment. “If he leaves unexpectedly, we’ll have to move quickly.” A pause as she looks Kiba over, and then she says, “Put on your cloak.”

Kiba shrugs like it doesn’t matter, like he doesn’t care. Like it doesn’t make his heart beat a little bit faster with something akin to panic, wearing Akatsuki’s symbol like that. Bad enough to always carry the ring with the character for *sky* and *void* stamped into the metal, meant for a man’s pinky but big enough that Kiba has to wear it on his index finger. The ring feels heavy, but the cloak feels absolutely stifling.

He’ll adjust, though. Of course he will.

“You think he’s going to leave that soon?” Kiba asks, even as he drags the tightly-folded cloak out of his pack. “Or are we just terrifying the villagers?”

Konan's lips curl, almost a smile and almost a smirk. She drags her own cloak around her shoulders and fastens it, then smooths it out. “Why can't it be both?” she asks mildly, and when Kiba rolls his eyes she chuckles. “This is how Akatsuki gets its reputation. If people don’t know we were involved, they won't know to come to us.”

That makes sense, especially if people are too scared afterwards to talk to anyone about what they saw in more than whispers. Jiraiya’s probably been chasing rumors about Akatsuki for as long as they’ve been in operation, but it’s not the sort of thing people would discuss with strangers.

Pulling his cloak on, Kiba leaves it open; it’s a little too big, falling around his shins and getting in
the way if he closes it. This way, too, he can reach his knives if he needs them, and since they're planning an assassination he definitely will. He checks the drape, that he can reach his soldier pills and his poison bombs and his explosive tags, and then reaches up to brush his thumb across the slash in his hitai-ate. A reminder, a promise, a goal.

_Someone has to._

Konan looks him over again, then nods and heads for the southern road. Once the compound is out of sight, she doesn’t bother staying hidden anymore, but steps out onto the dirt track where it runs along the river, sharp eyes scanning the edges of the road. It’s only because he helped plant them that Kiba sees the traps, subtle and covered with Konan's paper until they look like rocks or stumps or mounds of grass. His nose lets him pick them out, but he’d helped Konan hide that part as best he could. Even knowing what to look for, it’s easier to miss them than to spot them.

“It’s bright,” Konan says quietly, almost a complaint as she studies their surroundings, one eye on the water. Kiba’s been picking up that habit, too, even if he hasn’t been around Kisame more than a handful of times. They sparred once, and even for someone like Kiba, a near-drowning only needs to happen one time to serve as a lesson.

Raising his face to the wind, Kiba takes a breath. “It’ll probably rain tomorrow,” he offers. “And the cloud should move in before tonight.”

He means it as a comfort, because Konan always gets a little terse when she’s been away from Ame for too long, but instead her mouth pulls down a bit. Not quite a frown, but definitely not happy, either.

“I guess it rains everywhere,” she murmurs, mostly to herself.

Kiba watches her for a moment, fidgeting with the urge to say something, but—he can't _not_. Not when she smells like old sadness, buried but unfaded. “If you don’t want rain, maybe move to Suna,” he suggests, and grins when she glances over at him. “Though the murderous jinchuuriki kid might be a turn-off.”

With a quiet snort, Konan tucks her hands into her sleeves, turning to survey the road again. “Too hot during the day,” she dismisses. “And too cold at night. I like my weather constant.”

“Like constant _rain_?” Kiba makes a face, wrinkling his nose. “Ugh. Everything ends up smelling like wet—” _Dog_, he almost says, except it _doesn’t_ if there's no dog to get all wet, happily splashing through puddles and making sure to shake as close to Kiba as possible. He swallows, snaps his mouth shut, and leaves the statement hanging.

Konan doesn’t say anything either, and her eyes drift back to the scattered clouds above them before she resolutely turns away. “Everything’s still in place. If they come this way, we’ll be ready for them.”

It honestly seems like overkill to send two S-rank missing nin—even if one of them is just Kiba—against a civilian family, but Kiba doesn’t try to point that out. Konan will probably talk about needing to take as many missions as possible to cover costs, and Kiba's gotten that lecture once already. Well. Not quite a lecture, not from _Konan_, but a handful of pointed phrases. _Very_ pointed, if she gets annoyed. Like, pointed in the way of paper shuriken.

Kiba's not talking from first-hand experience, but he’s seen her get sharp with Deidara and Sasori during one of their more destructive arguments before, and he’s got enough pack-sense not to test the alpha bitch. It’s just too bad for them that they don’t, not that Kiba minds—laughing at them is
always a great way to pass the time and piss them off.

A twist of breeze slides past them, and Kiba takes a breath automatically, because if one of his mother’s lessons stuck it’s that an Inuzuka should never, ever forget to pay attention to their nose. Kiba does mess up, occasionally—like that humiliating fight against Naruto, not that he’s thinking about that—but it’s becoming a habit more than anything. An inhale, testing for familiar scents (not green and growing things, not dusty streets and pack and home, not anymore), and—

“Horses,” he says, turning to look behind them. No dust, but then, it’s humid enough that a handful of people probably wouldn’t raise much. “Probably four of them.”

Konan makes a quiet sound of satisfaction, stopping in the center of the road and settling herself, hands in her sleeves and chin lifted. Her amber eyes are dark, hooded, and Kiba feels a shiver slide down his spine. She’s dangerous, and he never quite forgets, but…maybe he doesn’t always remember the way he should. Steeling himself, he drops down to sit on his heels by her feet, subtly digging his sandals into the dirt to give himself leverage if he needs to move quickly and unexpectedly.

“Trigger the fifth trap once they’re past the seventh,” Konan tells him, cool and steady, and it takes Kiba a moment to figure out why, but—blocking the way back is a smart move, and one he probably wouldn’t have thought of. The poison gas won’t leave a trace, after all, and if one of the riders does escape and try to turn back they’ll ride right into it.

“Right,” Kiba says, and takes another deep breath, trying to judge distances even as he twists his fingers into the bird seal. Genma had been very thorough about teaching him distance techniques, since until he’s a teenager at least Kiba’s going to be outclassed by pretty much everyone in regards to size, and even now it feels familiar, like muscle memory.

Kiba tries not to think about how the Inuzuka clan techniques took him ten times as long to learn from sheer lack of effort on his part. Tries not to think about all the classes he skipped, and where he could be now if he’d just tried a little more. Never a genius, because he’s not Neji—and that flickers somewhere in his chest, sharp like a knife, because unrequited crushes are one thing but now Neji definitely thinks Kiba is a traitor and a murderer and would probably try to kill him on sight—but…better. Stronger. Maybe slightly more capable, instead of just being Kiba.

The horses pass the seventh trap, Konan’s paper-scent mixing with fur and sweat and a trace of dust, and Kiba lifts his head. “Almost here,” he warns Konan, and twists his hands from bird to boar, feeling his chakra spike for an instant. There’s no indication that the bombs released, and Kiba can only hope that they did, because otherwise Konan will probably kill him.

There’s no real time to worry about it, though; the four horses are rounding the curve of the road, moving fast and clearly in a hurry to get somewhere. Kiba has a split second to wonder if someone tipped off the family when Konan steps forward and spreads her hands, chakra cresting like a wave about to break. Paper shuriken slide out of her sleeves, her robe, from under her hair, whirling like leaves caught in a dust devil, and then sweep forward in a blur of razor edges to take out the horses.

With a wince, Kiba tunes out the animal screams, launching himself sideways out of the chaos of rearing, falling horses and shouting men. He’s fine with killing people—shinobi and all that—but killing animals has always seemed like an unnecessary cruelty to him. Or maybe that’s just the Inuzuka part of him talking. He’s not about to deny that Konan’s methods work, though; the two guards are thoroughly distracted, the mousy-looking man who’s probably an assistant has been thrown clear, and the son is under the horses’ feet, scrambling to get away.
Kiba's fingers close around the hilt of his knife, and he rolls underneath flashing hooves to grab the man, hauling him up and out. Not like dodging kunai in a training ground, not quite, but close enough to count, and with a heave and bit of reinforcing his muscles with chakra, Kiba throws the lord's son free, then leaps after him. Konan has the one guard who's managed to dismount, and it's easy enough to face the man with a grin that's all teeth as he hits the ground on all fours, then flips to his feet and tosses his knife from left to right.

"Hey there!" he says, all the bravado he can muster and a good amount of threat. "You gonna just lie there and make this easy for me?"

Indignation flashes across the man's face, and he struggles upright, reaching for the sword at his hip. "They would send a child after me?" he demands.

Sometimes Kiba forgets just how much he hates civilians and their mindsets. "Sure," he says, baring his teeth. This time, it's very much not a smile. "A child who can kick your ass."

That brings indignation straight to anger, but the man wavers, and when he does step forward it's to face Kiba with the flat of his sword. A common reaction, a common mistake—he doesn't want to hurt a kid, and Kiba gets it, but—

*If you can't make yourself kill someone, turn them into someone you can kill.*

Genma again, voice quiet, edged with a self-deprecating amusement only a shinobi would understand. Kiba had gotten it, though only after Danzō. Simple enough to think of the man right now, of Shino's cousin, of the way a dark eye lingered on Kiba when he'd knocked on the advisor's door. There had been greed in that gaze, deeply buried but thick on his skin, and Kiba had never really felt predator quite as sharply before as he did when he met Danzō's narrow stare. He'd been scared, shaken, ready to run, but in the end, he'd killed him.

Easy enough to layer Danzō's face over this man's, to duck under the sweep of a sword that's slow slow slow. Kiba rolls, doesn't bother to rise as he twists round, kicking out a kneecap and then slamming his shoulder into the backs of the man's thighs. He goes down with a shout, and Kiba focuses on danger, on the memory of Danzō turning, miraculously un-dead even after a knife in the back. The lord's son isn't nearly so quick, and Kiba kicks off the ground, flips over his head as the man spins, and lands lightly on the balls of his feet. His knife comes up, dark-edged blade flashing out—

In the same moment that it strikes flesh, Kiba catches the faint sound of a buzz, and whirls. Konan is just turning to meet him, expression set in satisfied lines, but Kiba can't focus on that, or on the way his target is falling, convulsing. The man will be dead before Kiba even removes the knife, anyway, and this is a hell of a lot more important. There's a hum in his ears, no scent that Kiba bothered to notice, and he can't tell if that's because it's so familiar or because of the way it blends in to their surroundings.

"Kiba?" Konan asks, sharp and on the edge of a warning, but there's no time. Kiba leaves his knife where it is and lunges, even as his eyes finally pick out what his nose and ears have already managed to catch.

There's a bug, small and black, hovering by Konan's shoulder, and Kiba knows without a shadow of a doubt that it's not anything native to this area. He grabs Konan by the arm, hauls her towards the river with a bark of, "Quick!" and blesses every ounce of common sense that she possesses that she doesn't even hesitate, doesn't try to ask a single question. She takes two swift steps to catch up, and by that time the buzzing is loud enough that she must hear it too, because she casts one quick look over her shoulder as they hit the bank and then throws herself forward into a graceful swan-
dive.

Kiba looks as well, spares half a second to glance behind himself, and catches a group of figures approaching at shinobi speeds, a black cloud of insects already rising. No faces to make out, and the wind must have changed because he can't smell them, but—

Kikaichū mean an Aburame, and Kiba's willing to bet his luck is bad enough that it means Shino in particular.

He hits the water with less grace than Konan, dives down towards the bottom and lets the current sweep him away. The blurry shape of Konan is ahead of him, and Kiba keeps half his attention on her even as he fights the urge to resurface, to check that it is what he thought. There's no need, though, even if he wants to.

That was definitely a Konoha squad, absolutely a complication, and by the sick knot of horror and tension in the bottom of Kiba's stomach, he can already tell there's no way this is going to end so simply.
With a gasped curse, Kiba surfaces, grabbing onto the rocks near the bank that leads up to their campsite. The water is freezing, and the air feels blistering in comparison, but he still shivers as he hauls himself out. Konan is already halfway up the bank, using a Suiton jutsu to pull the water from her clothes, and as Kiba clears the river she lets it envelop him as well. Kiba makes a grateful noise as the excess liquid drop back into the river, then shakes himself anyway, more for the feel of it than anything.

When he staggers up the last few steps to the top of the incline, Konan is still standing there, gaze turned towards the compound. Her mouth is pulled into a tight, dissatisfied line, and the look in her eyes is enough to make Kiba be very, very quiet instead of voicing his displeasure with the situation.

After a long moment, Konan turns, sweeping her hair back up into its usual half-bun, and then asks, “I take it they were Konoha nin?”

Saying yes feels far too much like another betrayal, but Kiba forces himself to nod. Tsunade had warned him that he’d have to give up whatever he knew about Konoha’s clans, about Konoha’s defenses, and he’s already provided some of it, but it never stops feeling wrong. Hopefully, it never will.

“An Aburame, at least,” he says, checks what managed to survive their swim, and grimaces when he realizes his knife is back at the site of the ambush. He likes that knife; Genma gave it to him, something passed down through his clan and carefully maintained over generations of assassins. He’ll definitely have to get it back. “You know ‘em?”

Konan shakes her head, ducking around the stand of brush that leads down to their little hollow. “Dangerous?”

Kiba huffs, because his pride and the remnants of his rivalry with Shino make him want to say no, but he shoves the instinct down. “Yeah. Trackers and scouts, and their bugs can eat chakra.”

She makes a sound that’s equal parts acknowledgement and dissatisfaction. “Five people,” she murmurs, almost to herself. “That’s a large squad.”

It takes a second to realize she’s right; Kiba thinks back to that brief glimpse of approaching shinobi and tries to call up the silhouettes clearly. “Maybe a genin squad with an extra jounin,” he suggests, because he’s vaguely sort of sure that at least two of the silhouettes were bigger than the others. “They do that sometimes, on B-rank missions.”

Inclining her head in agreement, Konan stoops, gathering up her pack and sending a Doton jutsu out with a flick of her fingers to bury their firepit. “Protection missions are usually B-rank. Someone must have warned the family,” she says, more dissatisfied than grim. “Will that bug report our cloaks to the Aburame?”

Kiba hesitates, trying to remember what Shino said about the kikaichū and their abilities. “They sense chakra, they don’t really see,” he offers, and is pretty sure it’s true. “Not in a way that translates. They might tell their host that you have a lot of chakra, but nothing more detailed.”

Konan nods, then straightens. “We’re going back to the town,” she orders. “If they’re trying to track us, we can at least confuse them with other scents.”
The majority of Kiba's brain is screeching at him not to give away his allies' weaknesses, to keep his mouth shut and let Konan keep her assumptions, but—that’s not an option anymore. Not really. If there's even the smallest hint that he isn’t completely loyal to the Akatsuki, it will ruin everything.

“That won't work,” he says, and it takes effort to get the words out but he still manages it. “It’ll be easier for the kikaichū to find us in the middle of a bunch of civilians. If we really want to hide, we need to get somewhere with a lot of natural chakra, or find a way to block our chakra from sight completely. I can take care of covering our scent, but—that part’s a lot harder.”

Konan stares at him for a long moment, then smiles faintly. “We can work with that,” she allows. “We’re going to have to move faster than we planned, though. The family will either barricade themselves in the compound or try to leave, and we need to be ready.”

Kiba nods grimly, riffling through his pack to find what he needs to lay a false trail. This is just a training exercise, he tells himself. I've done this before with Kurenai-sensei. We're just evading trackers. It's fine. This is easy. “Back to town’s a good idea for a distraction,” he says, pulling out the shirt he hadn’t managed to wash yet and wrinkling his nose at the smell of it. “’S what most people would do to get away if they didn’t know better. Got any old laundry? I’ll head out that way and leave a path for them to follow in case they try things the normal way.”

Lips tilting in a faint smirk, Konan digs into her pack for a moment, then pulls out something pale and tosses it to him.

Kiba knows that expression, though—between his mother and his sister he’s had a hell of a lot of experience with it. He also grew up in a family with two women, and no men after his mom ran his father off. Even if he’s not entirely comfortable with Konan undressing right in front of him—because looking is rude and she’s alpha bitch—this is far from the first bra he’s had tossed in his face.

“You like torturing me,” he complains, catching it before it can hit him in the nose.

Konan doesn’t deny it, just brings her hands together as she raises a brow at him. When she spreads them, there's an origami butterfly resting in the cup of her palms, and chakra sparks as it takes off, fluttering up to land on Kiba's shoulder.

“To help you find me when you're done,” she says in explanation. “I think I can come up with a way to cover our chakra.”

If anyone can, he’s pretty sure it’s Konan, given that she’s likely been a missing-nin longer than he’s been alive. Kiba nods, then strips off his cloak and tosses it to her. “We don’t want them to know we’re here until we let them know, right?” he asks, because that seems to be Akatsuki’s way of operating where the shinobi villages are concerned.

Konan's smile is just a little too sharp for humor. “Stay out of sight, puppy.”

Kiba makes a face at the nickname, but he’s hardly about to argue. Not with Konan, at least—anyone else and he wouldn’t have any compunctions chucking an exploding tag right into their face. Turning away, he bundles the clothes up under his arm, then takes off at a loping run, heading for the main road back towards the town.
“We’re too late,” Kakashi says grimly, leaning down to check the pulse of the man collapsed in the middle of the road. He doesn’t need to, though; there's white foam on his lips, and his eyes are open and glassy. Kakashi’s seen enough nasty poisons over the years to recognize that this one is definitely not something survivable.

“Damn it,” Kurenai says, but it's tired more than it is angry. She shakes her head, stepping away, and turns to offer her genin a faintly strained smile. “Shino, Hinata, can you double back and check for traps along the road? Don’t trigger them if you can help it, but make sure you mark them.”

“Naruto, go with them,” Kakashi adds, because Naruto's usually happy expression is shading into something dark and uncertain as he looks at the bodies in the road. No human survivors, Kakashi can tell at a glance, though two of the horses are missing and probably fled.

“Of course, Kakashi-sensei,” Naruto says, and that tone is light but there's an expression on his face like Kakashi remembers from Wave, from the bridge, from Zabuza.

Not comfortable thoughts, really.

Seeing the boy start to open his mouth, and more than able to guess what's on his mind, Kakashi offers him a smile that’s entirely bullshit. “Once Sasuke and Sakura get back from alerting the family I’ll have them join you.”

Apparently appeased by this, Naruto nods, offers his current teammates a grin, and says, “Come on, I bet we can finish before Sakura and the bastard even get here!”

“We should go slowly,” Shino says, clearly unimpressed by the enthusiasm. “Why, you ask? Because these traps are clearly dangerous and we don’t want to activate them accidentally.”

Hinata manages a tremulous smile, even though she quickly drops her eyes to her hands and pokes her fingers together. “I-it will be fine, won't it? No matter what speed we go.”

Naruto huffs, already turning like he’s going to bolt down the road. “Not if we just stand here. Come on!”

Kakashi sinks back on his heels, watching the little group straggle away with Naruto practically dragging Shino and Hinata, and waits until they're out of earshot before he glances over at Kurenai.

“Are you all right?” he asks quietly, because Kurenai is a quiet, steady woman, but she’s been taciturn even for her these last few days.

Not that Kakashi can blame her, given the circumstances and all the whispers they left behind in the village.

Kurenai smiles wryly, crouching down on the other side of the nobleman’s body. She studies the protruding hilt of the knife, but doesn’t try to pull it out—lots of shinobi have kekkei genkai that give them immunity to poisons, or have built up a tolerance that other people don’t have, and this would hardly be the first poisoned knife either Kakashi or Kurenai have come across.

“Did you get a look at them?” she asks instead of answering.

Kakashi hums, allowing the change of subject mostly because she’s never pushed him when he’s avoiding something. She’s a good friend that way. “Two people, one short, one tall. The short one noticed us first.”

“It’s strange.” Kurenai frowns a little, rising and turning in the same motion to study the other dead.
“I’ve never seen anyone notice kikaichū right away like that.”

Someone good, then, Kakashi thinks, and tips his head in agreement, following Kurenai up. This whole ambush was carefully planned, from the poison gas they had to disperse to get here to the fact that the attackers even knew the lord’s son had arrived ahead of the rest of their party. Apparently the lord himself was right that there was a threat. Kakashi just wishes they’d been fast enough to stop it.

“The Aburame might keep their abilities quiet, but they're hardly unknown,” he points out. “Maybe it’s someone with experience fighting them.”

“Just what we need,” Kurenai says, a little too harsh for composure, but she pointedly turns away from Kakashi’s stare. “Can you follow them?”

“Not in the river.” Kakashi allows that avoidance, too, casting a glance at the swift current that flows past the road. No trace of the attackers, though that’s likely to be expected; most shinobi know how to disappear, regardless of their other skills. “They might have been watching the estate, though. I’ll try to pick up a trail there.”

“Akamaru can—” Kurenai starts, only to stop short, rubbing a hand over her face with a sigh. “Akamaru can help you,” she finishes wearily. “You know enough about dogs that you can at least tell what he’s trying to say.”

Kakashi doesn’t react, just nods, keeping his eyes on her, but Kurenai isn’t looking up. Her shoulders dip, her spine curves, and it’s like she’s weighed down, all but crushed under the weight of what she’s spent the last few months carrying. One genin gone, a village elder dead, hushed rumors of abuse and a little boy who snapped rather than bear it any longer. Kurenai might not be Kiba’s mother, but she gets just as much scrutiny, just as many whispers of how could she not know, why didn’t she realize as Inuzuka Tsume does.

All the terrible things that have come to light with Danzō’s death just make the whole situation worse.

“We’ll have to decide whether we want to move the family or tell them to stay in their compound,” he points out, watching Kurenai grab for the change of subject with relief. She tips her head, looking back towards the estate, and frowns thoughtfully.

“I think that will be up to them,” she says. “Though with one dead I can’t see them wanting to leave before the funeral.”

Another downside to working with civilians, Kakashi acknowledges, even if he doesn’t say as much. Just hums, calculating possible approaches for a pair of assassins to take, and says, “Divide our teams into groups, maybe. Some kind of tracker in each group, with one of the others for backup, and then one to be a runner. They can keep watch, at least.”

Kurenai’s expression says she’s thinking about why they can’t have three teams, why one of her genin is gone so completely that not even Jiraiya has been able to find him since he fled. Not that Kakashi thinks it will do much good to locate him; for Kiba to have abandoned to village, for an Inuzuka to have abandoned their ninken, it means Kiba has cut ties completely. And whatever reasons were behind him killing Danzō, Danzō was still one of the village’s most honored elders. Utatane and Homura, as well as several other members of the old guard, don’t believe the rumors, and they’re clamoring for Kiba to be hunted down and brought to justice for his actions.

Kakashi doesn’t have any idea what the truth is, but sometimes he looks at Tsume walking through...
the village, hearing the rumors, the whispers, the blame but still keeping her head high, and wonders if Kiba is going to be the only Inuzuka who snaps and kills off a few elders.

“Sakura and Hinata should be able to work well together,” Kurenai offers. “Or Sasuke and Hinata.”

Because, of course, it would be bad to put Hinata with Naruto or Sakura with Sasuke. Or Naruto with Sasuke, though for slightly different reasons. Well, maybe; Kakashi won't be able to say that with any certainty until they’re at least past puberty. It does make him grimace, because feelings, and if he’s ever needed proof that they're messy and unnecessary this is it.

“Sakura and Hinata,” he decides, because that seems like the lesser of two evils when it comes to inflicting one of his genin on Hinata. At least Sakura knows how to be friendly. And maybe with her influence, augmented as it is by Tsunade's training and forceful personality, Hinata will realize that she won't melt if she meets another person’s eyes. “Sasuke is the fastest, so we should use him as runner. Naruto and Shino can be the other team.”

“Maybe Naruto can be good for Shino,” Kurenai says, mostly to herself. She drags a hand over her hair, pushing it back from her face, and says, “The approaches to the estate are mostly open, from what I saw. The forest is far enough away that it won't be a risk, even if it does block line of sight to the town.”

There weren’t any reports of strange shinobi in the village, and while it’s not small enough for any travelers at all to be remarkable, the owner of the inn seemed positive that his only guests were a few familiar merchants and couriers. Kakashi is willing to believe him, if only because the mere idea of shinobi made him twitchy and nervous. If he’d been hiding the fact that another set of ninjas were staying there, he’d have been even more anxious.

“The Byakugan’s range will cover that,” he says, though Kurenai likely knows better than he does. “Shino and Naruto can watch the other side of the estate while we look for a trail.”

Kurenai nods, even as she digs through her weapons pouch to retrieve a sealing scroll. “We’ll have to take the body back with us,” she says. “I don’t want to risk any of the guards leaving to come get it.”

Fair, Kakashi thinks, and pulls a length of bandages out of one of his pockets, wrapping it around his hand several times before he joins her. “If you’ve got the body I’ve got the knife,” he says lightly, and pretends not to see the sharp look Kurenai shoots him.

“Just be careful,” she warns. “If something happens to you, I think your genin will gut me.”

It’s a nice thought, though Kakashi finds himself rather skeptical of the accuracy of the statement. He’s spent a good amount of time wondering if he should be on the lookout for assassination attempts from his students, after all; they’d probably celebrate his death at this point, rather than avenge it, if only because it would mean a new jounin instructor. Kakashi hasn’t had the heart to tell them that he’s hardly the only jounin with a colorful personality, though one would think they would realize that, given that they’ve met Gai.

“I'm always careful,” he tells Kurenai solemnly, just for the look she gives him, which says bullshit louder than she ever could. Pointedly, he ignores her, reaching down to carefully pull the knife out. It looks well-cared for, beautiful and polished with a dark edge to its shine and settings of carved bone. Kakashi checks it over carefully, because if they're dealing with a contracted clan there's usually an indication somewhere. For all that shinobi are mostly silent killers, they don’t often care to work entirely anonymously. It’s not good for business.
It doesn’t help that there's a faint, nagging suspicion in the back of Kakashi’s head, telling him that he’s seen this knife before. With a frown, Kakashi turns it in his grip, studying the carvings. Trees leaning together, a path between them, and in the air above the road an inset chip of some white gem, catching the light and flashing with a multitude of color as it moves. The guard has been made to look like tangled branches, and just below it, carved into the blade, are two characters half-obscured by blood. Kakashi squints at them, using an edge of cloth to carefully wipe the red away.

His breath catches hard in his throat, his grip slips just a little, and the knife tumbles from his fingertips to imbed itself in the ground, the will-o’-wisp on the handle shining in the sun.

“Kakashi!” Kurenai sounds alarmed, and she catches him by the elbow, pulls him around. “Did you cut yourself—”

“No,” Kakashi says, and it feels like he’s speaking from a great distance even as he leans down to pick up the knife again. “On the blade.”

A little warily, Kurenai leans over his hands, scanning the knife. “That sheen means poison,” she says, “but we knew that al—” She breaks off sharply, breath hitching, and Kakashi smiles grimly, tilting the blade until the etching under the hilt catches the light. Unknown fire, it says—Shiranui, and not a mark that should ever turn up on an enemy’s blade.

There's a long moment of silence before Kurenai rocks back on her heels. “We’re not playing both sides here,” she says quietly. “The Hokage would have warned us, and this family isn’t powerful enough.”

Kakashi hums in agreement. It wouldn’t be the first time shinobi staged a threat and then a rescue—they need the Daimyo to see the village as invaluable, after all, and that’s a quick and easy way of doing it, and putting his favorite courtiers in Konoha’s debt. But genin teams don’t get assigned those missions, not ever; it’s left for ANBU to take care of, given the risks involved. And both teams are always aware of it, without exception. Kakashi’s done it with Genma more than once, but —

That isn’t what this is, and there's absolutely no reason for a Shiranui Clan knife to be out here, in the body of the nobleman they were trying to save. Genma is the last of his clan, so it’s not a rogue member, either.

“Maybe someone took the knife off a Shiranui, and has been using it since?” Kurenai suggests, though she’s frowning deeply. “What else could it be?”

Nothing that Kakashi can think of, at least, and the Shiranui are famous enough for their poisons that it’s not inconceivable that someone might covet one of their knives. He rubs a hand over his hair, still staring at the dagger, and then makes himself wrap it heavily in bandages and settle it in a pocket of his flak jacket.

“Well, either way, Genma will be happy to have it back,” he says lightly. “What do you think, will he give me a kiss for it?”

Kurenai snorts. “I think Aoba might use some of his favorite torture techniques on you if you try,” she says dryly, but she pulls out a sealing scroll and drapes it over the body, then activates the seals with a gesture.

“Aoba?” Kakashi asks in surprise, because that’s not a bit of gossip he’s heard before. “They're together?”
“Aoba's been trying to work up the nerve for the last four months,” Kurenai informs him. “Most people have odds on the end of this month.”

She makes a good attempt at a poker face, but Kakashi can see the faintly sly slant to her mouth, and it’s more than enough to rouse a flicker of suspicion. Kurenai is crafty, and Kakashi pities anyone who forgets it. “And what do you have odds on?”

Kurenai smiles. “Aoba's a romantic. Genma loves spider lilies, so Aoba's going to take him to the Spider Lily Festival in the capital and ask him there.”

It sounds like exactly the sort of plan that Aoba wouldn’t have come up with on his own, Kakashi thinks with amusement. He picks up the scroll with the target’s body and slips it away, considering Kurenai carefully. Aoba is half Nara, and while most of the time it’s not apparent, he works himself up into a frenzy of nerves over things and then procrastinates until he’s lost all opportunity. Never mission things—on the job he’s steady and ruthless—but personal issues? Kakashi can’t believe he would have been able to go to all that trouble without ending up as drunk as a skunk in a bar somewhere.

“The Spider Lily Festival,” Kakashi says mildly, and when Kurenai arches a brow at him he just smiles blandly. “Would that be the one Asuma was talking about taking you to a few weeks ago?”

There's a flicker of humor in Kurenai’s red eyes. “It might be, but I have a training trip scheduled with my team and Gai's for that week. His reservations were going to go to waste, so I found a use for them.”

Cunning, Kakashi thinks with amusement, and wonders just how much money she put on mid-September being when Aoba finally makes his move. “You know, I should seduce Genma right now and ruin all of your planning,” he tells her. “Just because.”

Kurenai rolls her eyes at him. “You say that like you and Tenzō haven’t been dancing around each other for years,” she says dismissively. “Are you really going to break his heart like that?”

“He’s more likely to break me,” Kakashi mutters, because Tenzō has everyone fooled into thinking he’s sweet and adorable and shy, and maybe it’s true, but he’s also a terror.

Kurenai pats his shoulder sympathetically, then breezes past him, headed back towards the estate. “We should go rescue Sasuke from the daughter,” she reminds him.

Kakashi chuckles, tucking his hands into his pockets as he follows her. “I think Sasuke is just happy to be away from Anko for a few weeks.” And really, the expression on his face alone when he met his new part-time teacher would have been worth all the headaches since, even if Anko hadn’t promptly decided to practically attach herself to him. It’s worked out, though; Sasuke gets help from someone who knows firsthand what the Cursed Seal does and has spent years learning to control it, and Anko has someone to take out her cheerfully murderous glee on. Everyone wins, except for maybe Sasuke's sanity.

Inwardly, Kakashi pats himself on the back for a brilliant plan that both tortures and improves his genin. Look at him, acting like a real teacher and everything.
“I haven’t seen Anko this happy in years,” Kurenai says, a little wistfully. “It’s nice.”

Kakashi very carefully keeps his opinions to himself. Sasuke is now permanently too tired to even contemplate leaving the village, though, and that’s good enough to start with. “I saw you nudging Asuma’s genin girl that way,” is all he says. “Do you really think it’s a good idea to add a fangirl to the mix?”

The look Kurenai shoots him is equal parts pitying and disbelieving. “Believe me, Kakashi, Ino is a hell of a lot more likely to fangirl over Anko than she is Sasuke. Or did you not see her fight with Sakura in the Exams?”

This is one of the reasons Kakashi hates emotions. He hesitates, mentally reviewing their match, and then gives Kurenai a blank look. “They're...rivals?”

“Yes,” Kurenai says dryly. “But Ino's pretending to have a crush on Sasuke so that Sakura will pay attention to her. Because Ino has a crush on Sakura.”

Kakashi hates emotions, and he hates puberty, and he hates children. How did he even get stuck in this situation.

Something must be showing around the edges of his mask, because it makes Kurenai laugh. It’s been a while since Kakashi heard her do that, and he’s glad, even if he wishes it wasn’t at his expense.

Still, Kurenai takes pity on him. “I think Ino could do with a strong female role model,” she says in explanation. “She’s a fiercely competitive person, and if she sees Sasuke outdoing her, it won't be long before she drops the crush and decides she’d rather beat him than fawn over him. And that’s good for Sasuke, to match himself against someone who beat out his score in the Academy and is from a powerful clan. Neji was the other option, but...”

But even Kakashi can see that that particular blending of issues would have been a total disaster. He winces a little, because in light of that option Ino is definitely the better choice. “What would I do without you,” he says lightly, but it’s possible that he means it a little more than he intends to.

A flicker of sadness slides under the humor in Kurenai’s face. “I'm trying to be more observant,” she says quietly, and her smile turns a little strained. “I should have put the effort into it before, but —maybe better late than never.”

Kakashi has his own litany of laments that start like that, so he doesn’t try to tell Kurenai it wasn’t her fault, or that she couldn’t have known. Everyone else has already tried, and sometimes silent sympathy feels a hell of a lot better than denial.

“Kakashi-sensei! Kakashi-sensei! I think we found all of them!”

Jerked out of his thoughts of Minato, Rin, and Obito, Kakashi looks up to find Minato’s bright grin bouncing towards him, attached to the man’s son. Hinata and Shino are several yards behind, and Kakashi wonders if it’s just his imagination or if they look even more tired already. Sometimes he despairs of his team, but he’s come to the reluctant realization that any other combination of genin might not have the willpower to survive Naruto’s energy levels.

“All of them?” he asks mildly. “Well, that’s productive.”
Naruto grins at him, careening up to his side to practically bounce at his elbow. “There’s something over the traps so Hinata can’t see them,” he says, blithely unaware of the way Hinata flinches at the words—and that, Kakashi thinks unhappily, is going to become a problem unless it’s dealt with. “But Shino’s bugs can find them.”

Given that even Kakashi couldn’t smell the poison gas trap until it went off practically in their faces, the Byakugan’s inability to find anything isn’t a surprise. It is surprising that the kikaichū are able to pick up what Hinata can’t, though—Kakashi would have thought that even trace amounts of chakra would register to both of them equally.

Shino falls into step with them, nudging his dark glasses up his nose with a finger. “My kikaichū have located the traps. Why, you ask? There is a small difference between the surrounding natural chakra and whatever technique is being used for concealment. It is not natural.”

Well, at least they know that their opponent isn’t a Sage of some sort, Kakashi thinks a little wryly. If that’s the extent of the good news, though, he’s going to have to have a very strongly worded talk with whatever higher power looks after genin missions, because a C-rank turning into an A-rank and then a B-rank following suit just for giggles is not his idea of a good time.

“Given that we’ve been up and down this road, I don’t think they’re going to trigger without the enemy activating them,” Kurenai says, though she casts a faintly wary look at the dark patches where kikaichū are swarming. “Shino, are you able to drain the chakra from them?”

Shino shakes his head. “No. Why, you ask? Because the traps are currently inert. Whatever seals are on them lack chakra at this moment.”

Remote detonation traps, Kakashi thinks with an inward grimace. Always his favorite. They’re going to have to be careful not to engage the enemy on this road again, or they’ll end up at a distinct disadvantage.

“We should get back to the estate,” Kurenai says, trading a look with him and clearly having the same misgivings. The pair of strange shinobi ran the first time, but there’s no guarantee they’ll do the same next time, and Kakashi isn’t overly eager to find out.

Hinata bobs her head, fidgeting with her fingers as she looks down. “The road is clear,” she reports. “At least as far as I can see?”

Maybe Hinata needs some exposure to Anko, too, honestly. Except Hiashi would probably have an aneurism at the very thought, and Hanabi is too young to be Clan Head yet. Kakashi tucks his hands in his pockets, content to let Kurenai and her genin take the lead as he contemplates the problem. A little reluctantly, admittedly, but…if Kiba’s desertion had any positives at all, it’s that it served as a wake-up call for most of the jounin instructors. Not Gai, maybe, and Asuma already had a pretty good handle on his team, but—

But Kakashi hadn’t looked closely, before that. Not until a loyal Inuzuka boy snapped so thoroughly that he killed a war hero and disappeared with an S-rank bounty on his head, and Kakashi had abruptly been forced to look at his genin through a lens of what is going to go wrong here, rather than just assuming that it wouldn’t. And he can’t help but wonder, just a little, what would have happened if he hadn’t bribed Anko into looking in on Sasuke, or asked Tsunade if she’d coach Sakura. Or even if he hadn’t stepped in with Naruto, taking over for Jiraiya.

He thinks about his team, torn apart instead of just separately busy. Thinks of what Sasuke might have done, as a flight risk, if he didn’t have first-hand proof of what Orochimaru did to those under his power. Thinks of an empty training ground, instead of the scene he wandered into the other
morning, with Naruto practicing taijutsu against a clone as Sakura read a medical textbook and Sasuke slept, exhausted and slightly scorched, under a tree.

Maybe it’s not quite the team he wanted—maybe he didn’t want to have a team at all—but…things could be a hell of a lot worse, and Kakashi is trying to come to terms with that knowledge. It’s not as easy as he would have thought, acknowledging all the things that could have gone wrong, all the mistakes he could have made. Kurenai is absolutely correct; they all needed to be more observant, and they're getting the chance now. Too late to save Kiba, maybe, but hopefully not too late to save the rest of their genin.

“Are you okay, Kakashi-sensei?” Naruto asks, leaning in to peer up at his face.

Kushina used to do that exact thing, Kakashi thinks suddenly, and for the first time in a very long while it doesn’t hurt like a punch in the gut to consider.

“I'm fine, Naruto,” Kakashi says lightly, and doesn’t let himself look away before he smiles. “We need to work on ninjutsu soon.”

Naruto pulls a face. “I'm so bad at ninjutsu, though,” he complains.

*Your mother always said the same thing, Kakashi wants to tell him. And then she became famous for her ninjutsu, because she worked harder at it than anyone else.*

He doesn’t, though. The admission that he not only knew Naruto's parents but was practically family to them will come with plenty of emotional upheaval and probably accusations, and Kakashi doesn’t want to deal with that while they're on a mission. Doesn’t want to deal with it at all, really, but he recognizes that at some point he’ll have to. There's no way that big a secret will stay buried forever.

“I think you'll be able to figure it out with some practice,” is all Kakashi says. “You can't just rely on the Rasengan for everything, you know.”

From the grin Naruto flashes him, one would think Kakashi called him a transcendental genius instead of giving him the bare minimum of praise, and Kakashi forces himself to smile back even as he thinks *I'm so sorry, Minato. I failed you.*

Hard enough to face it when he had a team he didn’t want and didn’t put much effort into; even harder now, with far too many visions of disaster hovering on either side of this narrow path, waiting to pull them under. The odds are stacked against them, but maybe this time Team 7 can pull off a miracle and survive. Kakashi can only hope that’s the case, because he doesn’t know if he can bear another tragedy like his team.

Thankfully, Naruto looks away before Kakashi can be dragged down any more dark paths, and his expression lights up. He leaps away from Kakashi’s side, covering the remaining distance to the gates of the estate in a few long bounds. Sakura, Sasuke, and Akamaru are waiting, and Sakura at least smiles in welcome as Naruto starts telling her about the mission. Sasuke much catch an interesting word, because he turns as well, not quite allowing his body language to read like he’s paying attention but definitely not ignoring his teammates.

Then again, after Anko in maniacal mode, Kakashi can imagine that even Naruto at his worst is entirely tolerable.

A hand touches his elbow, and when he glances over at Kurenai she gives him a grim smile. “You should take Akamaru and check the forest before the rain starts. I’ll break the kids into teams and
talk to the household.”

Not about to argue, Kakashi hands over the sealing scroll with the son’s body, then steps back and whistles. Akamaru pricks his ears up, and when Kakashi tips his head the dog scrambles down from the stool he’s perched on and bounds across the road. Kakashi catches him, picking him up with one hand and tucking him down the front of his flak jacket. It’s not something he’s done with his own dogs since Bull was the size of a hamster, but it’s still familiar, and the feel of the small body tucked close is something nostalgic. Scratching behind the puppy’s ears, Kakashi tips a lazy salute at Kurenai and offers, “I’ll send a message back if I need you.”

“Please do,” Kurenai says, and it’s meant to be light but the set of her mouth is tired and unhappy as she looks at Akamaru. Akamaru whines, so quietly that Kakashi can hardly hear it, and hunkers down, and Kakashi smooths a hand over his head and turns away, taking three long bounds and then leaping up into the first tree across the road. They aren’t quite at the edge of the forest here; the trees are sparse and scattered for another few hundred yards before they start to grow thicker and closer, but it’s a decent enough vantage point.

“Think you can help me with some tracking?” Kakashi asks Akamaru, perching on a wide bough as he scans the area. Nothing is jumping out at him as a sign of enemy surveillance, but then the pair he saw were probably smart enough not to come this close. Their traps certainly spoke of plenty of cunning, as well as advanced planning.

Really, Kakashi wishes that all enemy shinobi could be stupid. It always makes his life a lot easier.

Akamaru yips in agreement, already starting to wriggle like he’s going to leap out of Kakashi’s vest, and Kakashi has to put a hand up to hold him back. “Easy,” he warns, directs a touch of chakra to his feet, and easily makes the leap across to the next tree, and then the next beyond it. There’s a larger gap after that, though, and Kakashi drops back to the ground, automatically scanning for—

Not a track, but a rose petal, entirely out of place when there are no rose bushes that Kakashi’s seen outside of the town. He takes a careful breath, testing the air, and the scene of the attack was a mass of confusion, terror-scents and horse-scents and blood and poison, but...maybe this is the same. It’s faded enough that Kakashi can’t quite tell, but he thinks it is. Roses aren’t exactly an inconspicuous thing to carry, but they’re definitely nonthreatening, so there’s every chance the pair of shinobi were doing reconnaissance, passing the estate in disguise as they marked guard rotations and points of entry. That means Kakashi and his team need to be alert for an attack on the estate itself, which Kakashi had thought the size of their team would prevent. He frowns a little, sinking back on his heels, and considers.

With another quiet bark, Akamaru squirms free, dropping to the ground and shaking himself out. He sniffs the dropped petal, sneezes, and then puts his nose to the ground, circling out in a widening spiral. At the very edge of the road, he barks, and Kakashi chuckles a little.

“I should never underestimate an Inuzuka,” he tells the puppy. “They went that way?”

Akamaru makes a sound of approval, heading down the road at a deceptively quick lope, and Kakashi follows agreeably, half of his attention on the forest as they approach. It’s possible that this is a false lead, but part of tracking well is a willingness to try all paths, even if the first few don’t pan out.

Surprisingly, though, Akamaru doesn’t lose the scent even as they pass out of sight of the estate. He keeps going, following the road back towards the town until they reach a wide bend in the road. The river is ahead of them, the forest growing thick on one side, and Kakashi is calculating the
odds that this is where the pair of shinobi pulled themselves out of the water. It’s a good spot, and one he might choose himself in those circumstances; there's no line of sight from the road to the river unless you're standing directly on the bridge, and the wood is full of dips and hills here that make it hard to judge distances or see straight through the trees. It’s—

Akamaru yips, high-pitched and alarmed, and scrambles backwards to collide bodily with Kakashi’s leg.

Instantly, Kakashi leans down and scoops the puppy up, visions of poisons foremost in his mind, traps to catch a tracker and hurt them, or some kind of noise only a dog can hear, or anything. Swiftly he runs his fingers over Akamaru's legs, his paws, his nose, checking for residue—

Akamaru whines, high and sharp and pained, and slumps in Kakashi’s hold, miserable and trembling faintly.

“What's wrong?” Kakashi asks, because that’s definitely emotional, not physical. He carefully shifts Akamaru out of the way, then crouches down, running a hand a few centimeters off the ground as he tries to figure out what upset him.

Akamaru whimpers, sneezes, and offers the short, quick bark that Kakashi has only ever heard him use to refer to one person.

Going still, Kakashi looks at the dog, then casts another look at the river, feeling his heart sinking down towards his stomach. He thinks of the Shiranui Clan knife, the way one of their enemies recognized kikaichū when most people even in Konoha wouldn’t. Thinks of stolen clan secrets, taken as Kiba fled Konoha, like he was taking recompense for their blindness.

Kakashi breathes in, breathes out, and looks down at Akamaru. “Is it Kiba?” he asks quietly.

Akamaru whines, desperate and torn, but nods, and Kakashi’s heart sinks right down to the ground.

But—

But Kiba is a traitor, like Itachi was. They don’t have a choice but to hunt him down if he really is here, and Kakashi is confident that he can take a mediocre genin, even if Kiba's gotten himself a partner. It’s been less than four months since the Chuunin Exams, after all, and *Naruto* beat Kiba. This—this is Kiba trying to be dangerous, but he hasn’t quite succeeded yet.

Hells, but this is going to destroy Kurenai.

Kakashi closes his eye, shakes his head, rubs a hand over his face. He thinks of the Uchiha Massacre, being called to the Hokage's office and hearing what Itachi had done. Done for power, and to prove he was stronger, and probably from some sick need to be the pinnacle of shinobi prowess like Fugaku always pushed for. And then he thinks of the Hokage assembling the jounin sensei, a grim sort of grief on her face, and telling them that Danzō was dead, killed by Kiba who had then fled the village. Mixed in with those two images are memories of Orochimaru, of Mizuki. Of Tsunade herself, years before, fled in the middle of the night with a genin girl.

Konoha has its share of missing-nin, and that’s one of the risks of being a shinobi village. But…

How long can Kakashi’s faith hold, when he’s seen it fractured so many times?

It’s not something he can afford to dwell on right now, though. Kiba and his partner were the ones hired to kill the lord’s family, and Kakashi won't let them succeed.
Carefully, he tucks Akamaru back into his vest, then draws a kunai and slashes it down across the pad of his thumb. As soon as blood wells up, he presses his palm to the ground, channeling just a touch of chakra into the motion, and with a loud pop and a puff of smoke Pakkun appears.

“Boss?” the pug asks curiously, looking at Kakashi and then at Akamaru. “You want me to play translator?”

“At some point,” Kakashi confirms. “Right now I need you to follow a scent.”

Pakkun huffs like it’s a vast amount of trouble—Kakashi is fairly certain he was a Nara in another life—but puts his nose to the ground and wanders in a wide circle. Kakashi can see the moment he catches the scent, because his eyes widen, and he jerks back so hard he almost sits down.

“Boss?” he says, alarmed.

Kakashi doesn’t let anything show on his face. “Can you track it?”

Pakkun glances at Akamaru, brow wrinkling further, but after a moment he nods. “Sure. Ready to go?”

“Whenever you are,” Kakashi agrees with a lightness he isn’t even close to feeling, and pushes back to his feet. With one more glance at Akamaru, Pakkun sets off at a deceptively quick trot, heading back towards town. A genin mistake, to hide there, but it’s not as though Kakashi expected anything different. He breathes, and focuses, and tells himself that he won’t let this end in disaster. Even if that means he has to bring back Kiba's body, rather than dragging him home alive.

He failed to catch Orochimaru, and he couldn’t stop Itachi. But Kiba is a traitor he can deal with, and he will.

Kiba's second swim is just as unpleasant as the first, and he’s not good enough with Suiton jutsus to actually get himself dry afterwards. Damp and cold and unhappy about it, he follows Konan's paper butterfly up the bank, trying not to grumble the way he would have before. No space for that here and now, and he knows it, but it’s still a reflex.

Stifling a sneeze, he picks up a trot, winding his way deeper into the trees. It’s easy enough to watch his step, keeping to patches of stone and the branches wherever possible so that his scent is harder to track. An Aburame might be able to pick up his chakra with a lot of time and effort, but backtracking to the town will throw them off for long enough for Kiba's chakra to fade, and by then Kiba's confident that Konan will have come up with a solution, if she hasn’t already.

All of this turned out to be a bit of good luck, though, and Kiba isn’t going to forget that. Lesson learned for next time: even when things are going to shit, there are always opportunities. This one gave him more than enough time to leave Konan’s butterfly on the outskirts, slip back into town under a henge, and send off a message to Genma with all the information he’s collected so far. A risk, definitely, but—

Even if he’s caught now, that’s leagues more information than Konoha had before, as much as he could find about fighting styles and backstories and a full accounting of the members and their goals. Akatsuki reduced to a few dozen pages of coded paper tucked into Kiba's dirty laundry. He’d laugh, but he thinks that if he started he just wouldn’t stop, and that's no way to keep a low profile. Right up until he gets caught he’s going to keep working, keep spying.
This is everything that gives his life meaning, now. This is what he is and why he’s here, and the flickering flame of terror in his chest isn’t going to hold him back.

Ahead of him, the origami butterfly flutters in a circle around a massive tree growing right up against a small cliff. Kiba comes to a stop a short distance away, eyeing it warily; he can’t see any trace of Konan, but if the butterfly has stopped—

He catches a hint of dry paper and cold rain, and flips off the branch to land in a crouch as Konan drops down right where he was a moment before. She makes a sound of quiet amusement, catching herself on the trunk, and straightens. “What gave me away? I thought I kept downwind.”

Kiba huffs, giving her a dark look, and doesn’t let himself think about the report that’s on its way to Konoha by now, carried by a well-paid courier who thinks he’s bringing documents from the nobleman—Kiba's been trying to think like a spy, and surely, if the man’s already hired Konoha nin, one more message to the village won't be suspicious.

“The trees and the cliff trap the air currents, make ‘em move in strange ways,” he answers. “That might have worked in an open area, but in here it doesn’t matter nearly as much where you're standing when you're that close.”

“Noted.” Konan drops to the ground, cloak billowing around her, and then heads deeper into the woods. “I found a base for us. You're the Aburame expert, though, so you can tell me if it will work.”

“Not an expert,” Kiba protests, but he follows her at a trot.

“You know more than I do.” Konan says frankly. “That makes you the expert here.”

Kiba concedes that with a huff. “I hung out in the inn for a bit,” he tells her. “And I stashed our stuff in one of the empty rooms. Hopefully they’ll figure we’re staying there.”

“Good.” Konan ducks under a low-hanging branch, turns left, and—

Vanishes into a tree.
Kiba stops short, blinking, and then takes a cautious breath. Paper-scent, but it’s faint; if he didn’t know Konan as well as he does he’d miss it entirely. Holding out a hand, he steps forward, feels moss and bark and then the stiffness of hardened paper, even if his eyes are telling him there’s no difference between the two surfaces. It’s not a henge, he can tell that much, and he can’t sense any chakra even standing right in front of it.

“Impressive,” he says, and takes a step to the side to follow Konan’s exact path. From this angle, he can make out a narrow gap, concealed by shadows, and catch the earth-and-wood scent of the interior. He slips in, careful not to brush up against anything, and pauses to let his eyes adjust to the dark.

“It’s actually a simple camouflage,” Konan says. She’s seated on the ground with her legs crossed under her, and there’s not much more room in here than a small tent, but Kiba supposes it will do. “Once the paper hardens I call my chakra back, and a seal keeps anyone from noticing our chakra when we’re in here.” She tips her head at the carving set into the tree trunk, where time and weather have worn it out into a natural cavern that makes up half of the hideout. Kiba can just make out the deeply engraved lines if he squints.

“Oh,” he allows, dropping down next to her. “That’s a handy seal. No chakra gets out?”

Konan inclines her head. “It wouldn’t work with someone more powerful, like Nagato or even Kakuzu,” she allows, and gives him a faintly sly smile. “We’re both strong in other ways, though.”

Kiba blinks, because he honestly had thought Konan had massive reserves. But…it makes sense that she doesn’t, really. Her paper can’t take much chakra to animate, since it’s so light, and she’s cunning about how she uses it. It makes something in Kiba settle, just a little, because he’s relatively weak, has to rely on the crutch of Genma’s poisons to manage anything, but—

When Konan uses her paper, it’s a tool, not a crutch. And maybe Kiba can be the same, cunning instead of strong. Not something the Konoha genin he used to be would have ever considered, but Kiba wants to think he’s at least a little smarter than he used to be. It’s an acceptable way to be dangerous, he’s coming to realize now, and not one he can object to. Especially if he has a role model like Konan for it.

Wrapping his arms around his legs, Kiba leans forward, dropping his chin on his knees. “We’re going to need to scout again,” he says, and grimaces a little, because they already did that so freaking many times and he’s tired of it. “If the lord hired Konoha shinobi, though, they’re going to stick close.”

Konan makes a quiet sound of acknowledgement, leaning back against the tree. In the gloom, Kiba can just make out the movement of her hands, can just barely hear the crinkle of paper folding. “It will be too difficult to deal with the squad while we’re trying to take out the family. We’re going to need some sort of distraction.”

Kiba doesn’t want to help with this. He doesn’t want to offer ideas, or help Konan kill people for Akatsuki. He doesn’t want to be here at all, but he is and that’s not changing. If he doesn’t help, at the very best Konan won’t want to take any more missions with him. At worst she’ll start to suspect him. There’s no other choice. This mission needs to end in a victory for them, or everything Kiba's done so far has might as well be worthless.
He thinks of Tsunade's face as she weighed Danzō’s life against the advantage of a spy in Akatsuki. Remembers the set of her mouth and *I’ll make that sacrifice*, and how he’d been so glad, in that moment, that he wasn’t Hokage.

It seems like he’ll be making a similar choice regardless. Kiba's starting to suspect that that’s part of being a shinobi.

Still, the lives of a civilian family he doesn’t know against the good he can do if he stays with Akatsuki—it should probably be a hard choice, but for all that he’s barely a genin Kiba is from a shinobi family. Clan and village first, and everyone else distant second if they matter at all. He can do this.

“What if we’re the distraction?” he asks, and Konan raises her head, looking over at him. Kiba holds her eyes and doesn’t let himself waver. “They’re going to suspect a trap if they see us, right? Maybe we can pretend like we want to pick them off before we go after the nobleman. If we prove that we’re actually a threat, they’ll try to take us out, leave the compound unguarded. A clone can carry a poison bomb, and the compound’s small enough that we’ll only need five or six to flood it.”

Konan's brows rise, but her lips tilt into a faint smile. “Bait the trap with ourselves when they're expecting clones, but the clones do the killing instead? I like it. You have enough supplies?”

Kiba nods. “I packed extra. All they need to detonate is a bit of heat, and if we set a fire, too—”

“All the clones will need to do is toss a few bombs.” Konan sounds pleased. “You were making a mixture that burned faster when people used water on it. Have any of that?”

Kiba bares his teeth, tries for a grin that probably comes off as more of a snarl. Hopefully she won't take offense. “Course I do. Mix that in and they're done for.”

“Seal the gates, burn the compound, poison everyone inside.” Konan spreads her fingers, showing the perfect lotus cupped in her palms. “Thorough and deadly. It’s perfect.”

*Perfect* isn’t the word Kiba would use, but he grins, tries to make it more genuine, focuses on the little flicker of satisfaction and pride until it weighs out the churning in his stomach. He’s a missing-nin, this is his job, and Konan is the boss. All he has to do is please her and finish the mission. Thinking about anything else can wait until he’s locked himself in his room back at the base.

Into the stretching silence, Konan lets out a breath that’s a little too light to be a sigh. Setting the lotus down on her knee, she summons another sheet of paper, and then says quietly, “You aren't used to assassination missions.”

For a second Kiba thinks about protesting, about telling her he’s taken plenty and is the best in his year at killing and is totally used to it, of course, why the hell would she think otherwise—

“Not yet,” Kiba admits, keeps his voice light because if he doesn’t joke about it he’s going to do something he’ll regret. “I never even made chuunin, and assassination missions are usually at least an A-rank. We hunted bounties, an’ I went after some on my own and killed ‘em, but not like this. Clan eliminations are ANBU territory.”

In this light, Kiba can't tell if the set of Konan's mouth is rueful or sad, but she doesn’t lift her gaze from her origami. “Akatsuki gets a lot of them,” she says, uninflected.

Kiba's been getting that impression. He closes his eyes, turning his head to lay his cheek against his knees, and isn’t quite sure what makes him say it, but he tells her, “Danzō was my first kill.”
Konan’s fingers pause for a long moment before they resume their deft motion. “Mine was a Konoha shinobi,” she says, equally soft. “During the war. I was twelve, and we had one tiny bag of rice between the three of us. He wanted to take it, so I stopped him. We hadn’t even had any training yet, but he didn’t expect a child to fight back.” Her expression twists a little. “It’s always self-defense, right up until it isn’t.”

“The Third War?” Kiba asks, a little surprised. Konan looks a lot younger than his mother, though he supposes some people just age well.

Konan tips her head in confirmation. “Konoha crossed into Ame to fight Iwa at the border. It destroyed Ame. By the time we were trained, there was practically nothing left beyond what Hanzō had hidden away.”

Kiba’s mother has never mentioned anything like that in her stories, and it makes something inside of Kiba cold to hear it, to know that Konan's first kill was a Konoha shinobi trying to steal food. To steal from children, without any training, in a country not even theirs.

Always, always, Kiba's seen Konoha as the hero, presented against the savagery of the Bloody Mist and the desperation of Suna, the power-hungry might of Kumo and the revenge-driven ruthlessness of Iwa. Konoha doesn’t have allies, not really. Not since Uzushio’s fall. But...Kiba hadn’t quite thought of that as a symptom of there being something wrong with Konoha.

He wants to apologize, a little, for what his village did. Wants to protest that most Konoha nin aren’t like that, but—

But Kiba wasn’t there during the war, and Konan was. She’d know far better than he would, and she has no reason to lie. They’re just talking about first kills, not village politics, and besides, she probably assumes that Kiba doesn’t feel any loyalty towards Konoha anymore.

Konan sets a paper frog next to the lotus, then stares at it for a long moment before she closes her eyes. “It gets easier,” she says, like it’s supposed to be a comfort. “With this last one, you’re at...”

“Seven,” Kiba says, and wonders if he’ll ever lose count. Probably; he knows his mother has, in the thirty years she’s been a shinobi. Part of the life, really, and Kiba knows he will get used to it, that he has to, but he’s not there yet. Soon, probably, because he has no other choice like this. He’s Akatsuki. They’ll be going after the bijuu at some point, and some of the jinchuuriki are alone but most of them aren’t. Whoever’s nearby is going to be collateral damage, and Kiba can’t afford to hold back.

“I’ll be fine,” he says, and hopes it sounds more convincing to Konan that it does to him.

She gives him a look for a long moment, then smiles a little. “You will,” she agrees, and flicks the frog with her finger. It leaps as if it’s alive, not propelled by chakra but by a clever fold like a spring, and Kiba yelps as it bounces off his face. He catches it before it can hit the ground and glares at it, miffed.

“What the hell?” he complains, but carefully sets it down, spends half a second figuring out how it works, and then sends it leaping back at Konan. “Are you trading shuriken in for frogs now?”

Konan plucks it out of the air with two fingers, eyes amused. “It’s a toad,” she corrects, holding it up to eye-level to look it over. Then, decisively, she sets it down on top of the lotus so it’s perched among the petals. “A toad in a well.”

Kiba tilts his head, confused. “A well?” he repeats, and Konan is normally blunt even if she’s
quiet; this kind of roundabout half-talking stuff isn’t what he’s used to with her.

“A toad in his well knows nothing of the ocean,” Konan recites, touching a fingertip to the toad’s back. It’s a proverb Kiba’s heard before, but he isn’t certain what she means by it.

Apparently reading that on his face, Konan snorts, then conjures three more sheets of paper and starts folding. “Some people are content in their ignorance. Some have no idea that there’s a world beyond what they see.”

“I’m thirteen, not dumb. I know what it means.” Kiba rolls his eyes, but tracks the movements of her fingers. Birds, he’s pretty sure she’s making. Easy enough to guess what she wants them for. “Kikaichū need to be directed. If the Aburame doesn’t tell them to go high, they’ll stick close to the ground and the trees, even if they’re out of their host.”

Konan smiles. “Good. The Konoha squad likely escorted the rest of the family home, but I want to make sure. This way we’ll be prepared when we make a move against them.”

They’re going to need to stage more than one attack to show they’re serious, Kiba thinks, and tries to ignore the knots of tension in his stomach. Multiple fights against Konoha shinobi. Fantastic. Just what he was hoping for.

“I think we have a problem.”

Kurenai almost startles out of her skin, whirling around to see Kakashi drop from a tree next to the wall. He smirks cheerfully at her, unrepentant, and she rolls her eyes and tries to stop the racing of her heart.

“A problem? Beyond you being a bastard, I assume?” she asks dryly, folding her arms across her chest. Out of the corner of her eye she can see a shape flash past across the top of the wall, a shinobi’s ability to balance keeping Sasuke steady as he runs down the narrow fence, turns, and leaps lightly across the roofs before disappearing on the far side. Checking in on Naruto’s team, she thinks, and lets her attention slide back to Kakashi. He looks tense despite the lightness of his words, and that’s honestly more than enough to make her nervous.

“Maa, Kurenai,” Kakashi protests, though he doesn’t seem overly insulted as he crouches down to set Akamaru on his feet. “We picked up the scent near the road and tracked them back to the inn. I’m not sure if they’ve been staying there, but it smells like they at least spent some time in one of the rooms. The owner wouldn’t open any up for me, though. Something about paying customers.”

Civilians, Kurenai thinks with a grimace, and she should be used to it by now—most of the world is civilian, after all—but it’s always a little aggravating when their morals interfere with shinobi work.

“There’s a problem beyond that?” she asks, kneeling down to stroke Akamaru’s ears. He leans into the touch, whining softly the way he did right after Kiba deserted. It’s a heartbreaking sound, and Kurenai winces, petting him gently to try and soothe him.

There’s a long pause, then a sigh, and Kakashi sinks down to sit on his heels beside her. “Yes,” he says quietly. “Akamaru recognized one of the scents.”

Kurenai stares at the white fur under her fingers, feeling something cold slide through her veins. Of
course, she thinks bleakly, and wonders why she can't even begin to feel surprised. Somehow, in some way, she’s been waiting for this moment since the minute Tsunade called her into her office and told her that her loudmouthed showoff of a genin had somehow become an S-rank missing-nin.

“Kiba,” she says, and the sound of it barely stirs the air. It occurs to her, suddenly, that she hasn’t so much as said his name in weeks. For all that she can never quite escape the thought of it, she can't bring herself to talk about him. Not with Asuma, not with Tsune, not with her team. Anko is the only one she’s ever come close to talking about it with, and that’s largely because Anko doesn’t expect it of her.

Kakashi makes a sound of confirmation, not looking at her. “And a stranger.”

It’s hard to think which is the better option, that Kiba joined another village or that he teamed up with another missing-nin. Kurenai tries to picture Kiba as a freelance mercenary, taking jobs from anyone with the money to hire him, doing things even the Hidden Villages won't, and it’s practically impossible. Kiba isn’t like that. He’s loyal and brash and buries his big heart under ten layers of bravado. He isn’t that kind of person.

Then again, the Kiba she knew wouldn’t have killed Danzō, abandoned Akamaru and his team to flee the village. Maybe Kurenai can't say she ever knew him at all.

“We have to warn the children,” she whispers, and can’t imagine how that conversation will go. Hinata flinches at even roundabout mentions of Kiba, and Shino has always been taciturn, but bring up his absent teammate and he becomes so withdrawn that it takes days to get even a handful of words out of him.

Kakashi is silent for a long moment, clearly weighing the choices. “They’re already going to be at a disadvantage against a former teammate,” he says finally. “It will only be worse if we don’t mention it and he surprises them.” A quiet breath, almost a sigh, and he runs a hand over his flyaway hair. “Naruto is going to take this really hard.”

Kurenai wants to get angry with him, wants to snap that clearly her team is going to take it hardest, but—he’s right. Naruto, out of all the village, has been outspoken and adamant in his belief that Kiba was framed for killing a village elder, that Kiba couldn’t have done anything of the sort. It hasn’t helped much—most of the village still sees Naruto as little more than a corrupted container for the Kyuubi, and the Hokage herself has said that Kiba is to blame—but Naruto keeps saying it. Kurenai doesn’t know whether to be glad that someone still has such belief in Kiba or bitter that Naruto keeps rubbing salt in open wounds.

“He was always going to have to face the truth at some point,” she says, and can't manage to make the sentiment any kinder than that. Naruto was Kiba's friend and opponent, but Shino and Hinata? They were his teammates. They practically lived together, and given the closeness of their parents, former genin teammates themselves, they also grew up together. Whatever claim Naruto has to his grief—and he does have one, because he’s a bright, kind boy who’s fiercely protective of his friends—Kurenai thinks Hinata and Shino have far more.

The look Kakashi gives her is mild, but he definitely knows what she’s thinking. Still, he doesn’t say anything about it, just tips his head in agreement. “They were all going to.”

Also true, as much as Kurenai would wish otherwise. In the back of her mind, there was some desperate, secret hope that Naruto was right, or that Kiba had disappeared because he took up a life of farming somewhere peaceful. Anything but seeing her former genin as an enemy, as a missing-nin. Kurenai has been a shinobi long enough to know that missing-nin have as many reasons behind their desertions as there are shinobi to desert, but—
It’s an ugly thing, to give your loyalty to a place and then betray it, to go the rest of your life wearing the symbol of that betrayal. Shinobi bind themselves by their word, and they have little else; without the guarantee that they won't betray their employers they wouldn’t survive. A missing-nin’s existence is built on that treachery, and the only people who will hire them are the worst sorts of criminals, unafraid to turn on them. It’s not a life that Kurenai would wish on anyone.

Kiba killed Danzō, though. Killed him no matter his motivation. He could have come to her, told her what was happening if the rumors really are true, but he didn’t. Instead he killed a war hero who turned out to be something less than that, an elder who had served for years, and that wasn’t something that could be allowed to pass no matter the circumstances.

As shinobi, their loyalty to their village is the only thing keeping them from sliding back into the Clan Wars. There's no room for mercy there.

Kurenai breathes in, holds it. Breaths out for a count of three. “Lord Hachiuma refused to leave before funerary proceedings were observed. We’ll have to guard the estate until the family is ready to leave for the capital.”

It's not the best situation for two genin teams, and judging by the grimace Kakashi is wearing he sees that too. Kiba and his partner might wait to hit them on the road, if they're patient, and there are too many places for an ambush nearby. Even if Kiba is just a genin, and Kurenai knows precisely how he fights—

The thoughts connect, and she has to restrain a wince. “The knife,” she says grimly, and Kakashi nods, touching the pocket where he must have stashed it.

“Genma told us someone raided his house the night before Danzō was killed,” he reminds her. “We assumed it was Kiba. This is just proof.”

Kurenai swallows, tries to keep her hands from tightening into fists. Kiba always seemed vaguely scornful of using poisons, when she trained him, and she knew that Danzō died from a paralytic poison, the kind that froze even the chakra system and left the victim to suffocate from the inside out. It’s another thing entirely to realize that Kiba has changed his way of fighting, though, changed it enough that he’s using poisoned knives and fighting hand to hand instead of overwhelming an opponent with Inuzuka Clan techniques. Though, she supposes, they're far harder to manage without a partner.

“How would he have known?” she asks helplessly, pressing her knuckles against her forehead and trying to make her mind connect the pieces. “I didn’t—I never mentioned Shiranui Clan specialties, and I know Tsume only worked with Genma a handful of times. How did he know that Genma, of all people, was a poison expert?”

Even more baffling because Genma keeps an extremely low profile. He’s quiet and easygoing and never advertises his skills, has never tried to make anything more than tokubetsu jounin. Tsunade pulled him back into the Guard Platoon, but beyond that he’s never been well-known among the lower ranks except as a friendly, dedicated shinobi who takes a lot of missions and is rarely in the village.

“It’s not impossible for him to have overheard something,” Kakashi points out, not quite gently but on the edge of it. “Genma proctored the last part of the Exams. Maybe Kiba noticed something then.”

Kurenai smiles humorlessly, rubbing a hand over her eyes. “You’re right,” she admits. “I'm trying to see conspiracies where there aren’t any. Maybe Naruto isn’t the only one who wants it to have
been a setup.”

Because Kakashi is a good friend, he doesn’t tell her that all the evidence indicates otherwise. Just hums, light and easy, and says, “Understandable, given what Danzō’s death turned up.”

That’s true, Kurenai allows. All of Danzō’s supposedly decommissioned Root agents, recorded as killed when he ended Root five years ago, had reappeared out of the woodwork with his death, confused and looking for their next orders. Kurenai has never seen Shibi cry before, but he did when Torune stumbled into the Hokage’s office, half-supporting a Yamanaka boy. Alive, when by all reports Danzō had had him put down like a feral dog after Itachi’s desertion. If anything good has come of Kiba’s actions, it’s that, and Kurenai will never be able to think differently.

“I think it’s one of the reasons Shino is so conflicted,” she says quietly, with a rueful smile. “He got his adopted brother back, only to lose his teammate.”

Kakashi is quiet for a moment, and Kurenai wonders if he’s thinking of his own lost teammates. It’s been years, but—well. Kurenai remembers Rin clearly, if largely for the stuttering mess her crush made her into around the other girl. Obito is a slightly more faded memory, lost to time, but he had a sweet smile and a strong will. The loss of them, one after another, was like an open wound even for her, and it must have been far, far worse for Kakashi.

At length, Kakashi tips his head. “This might make him less so,” he says, makes the words light even though there’s nothing about this situation that warrants it. “We should report to Lord Hachiuma. He needs to be aware that we can’t guard him and his family well if they don’t take precautions.”

“After the death of his son, I can’t imagine he won’t realize the threat,” Kurenai says, though she winces a little, imagining the man’s reaction to learning that it was a former Konoha nin who killed his eldest son.

Kakashi makes a face that’s probably intended as agreement. “I think we can keep Kiba’s identity to ourselves. It won’t help anything to tell him.”

Exactly the opposite, really, Kurenai would assume. She sighs, brushing off the sleeve of her dress, and nods. “It would be best—”

An explosion thunders through the estate, almost knocking her from her feet.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

A lot of people have asked me about Itachi's role in this and whether he's still a spy (and geez, people, he isn't even in this fic, calm down), and if he and Kiba will learn the truth about each other. So far I've deliberately left it open, because I am of the opinion that having Itachi as a spy was just about the dumbest retcon Kishimoto could have pulled, seeing as he did fuck all in Konoha's favor the whole time. Fandom's favorite explanation is that he was passing info to Danzo who never shared it, but there are massive holes in that theory (in the shape of: Danzo wanted more power, not less; Akatsuki was trying to reduce Konoha's power by invading it and/or taking its jinchuuriki, Danzo definitely would have done something to prepare if he knew) and I'm not a fan.

So. It's pretty much up to your interpretation whether Itachi is a spy, because as far as I can tell he never did an actual spying in canon and therefore won't do any here. He's just...there. Betraying Konoha and being a murderous asshole who tortures his little brother for selfish reasons. I'll try my best to write him neutrally/corresponding to the views of the POV character, but I'm not going to go out of my way to fix his storyline.

Sorry to any hardcore Itachi fans, but if that's not to your tastes there are a plethora of fics where Itachi is a saintly hero, and one of those might suit you better.

Kurenai twists hard, using the momentum of the blast to launch herself up onto the wall with Kakashi a pace behind her. There's a cloud of smoke rising from the far side, a lick of flames, the sound of Naruto crying out, and she throws herself forward into a shunshin without waiting to assess the situation.

The air blurs, shimmers, settles in a whirl of leaves, and Kurenai catches a flash of movement just in time to knock a shuriken out of the air with a kunai. Sloppily aimed, she thinks, and very distantly she can hear her heart pounding hard in her chest, but it’s all but drowned out by the ringing in her ears. Then again, Kiba was never very good with distance weapons.

“Sasuke,” Kakashi says from her left. “Tell Sakura and Hinata to fall back and guard the family. Stay and help them.”

There's a long hesitation and then a huff, unhappy but obedient, and the sound of rapidly retreating footsteps. Kurenai can't look back, though, can't drag her eyes away from the figures standing in front of her. Shino is on the edge of the wall, deathly silent, and Kurenai feels like Shino must, frozen to the core with something very like horror coiling in her chest.

The tall, blue-haired woman looks from Kurenai to Kakashi and back again, and her lips tilt just a little. Kurenai can't tell if it’s supposed to be a smile or a grimace. “Friends of yours, puppy?” she asks, and there’s no scratched hitai-ate, no sign of affiliation, but Kurenai can read something close to malice in her gaze.

Crouched at her feet, low down to give himself leverage to spring, Kiba grins, all teeth. There's a long, crooked scar that slants through one of his clan markings, skewing it, and it turns his face
into something strange, painful to look at. Or maybe that’s the long, deep gouge that slices through his hitai-ate, clear and obvious, worn for all the world to see. He rocks to his feet, and there’s a light in his eyes that’s almost manic as he stares at them.

“You could say that,” Kiba says, something close to laughter in the words. “Kurenai-sensei, you're looking good. I don’t see Hinata, though. Lost any more students lately?”

It takes effort not to recoil, not to give ground to those three simple sentences, said like they’re friends meeting in the street. A joke, only it’s not, because she did lose a student, lost him so thoroughly that he’s now an enemy of Konoha, and it hurts.

“You teacher?” The woman folds her hands into her sleeves, hiding them from view, and Kurenai can feel Kakashi tense at her elbow, ready to move. She can't make herself react, though; the ice creeping into her veins has frozen her feet to the ground, locked her in place under Kiba's sharp grin.

“Yeah,” Kiba says carelessly. “Genjutsu specialist, so watch yourself. And that’s Copy-Nin Kakashi, with one Sharingan eye. The Aburame is up on the wall.”

Kurenai’s breath catches hard, jagged and aching through her chest. Treason, she thinks, and it is, revealing clan secrets and shinobi specialties is a betrayal of the village. Kurenai saw Danzō’s body, saw the marks of a fight and all the signs of Kiba's presence there, but somehow this feels even worse, something dark and insidious, almost casual in its malice. Kiba didn’t even hesitate to give her abilities away, never thought twice about it, and it brings the reality of the whole situation into sharp focus.

Kiba isn’t a Konoha shinobi anymore. He’s a traitor. He’s their enemy.

“Noted,” the woman says mildly, and tilts her head, eyes focusing on Kurenai. “Are you an Uchiha?” she asks, and it sounds almost amused.

It’s hardly the first time someone has made that assumption about Kurenai, given her eyes and her coloring, and she lifts her chin, shifting her weight forward on the balls of her feet. “I don’t need the Sharingan to be dangerous,” she says flatly.

It makes the woman smile, thin and threatening. She drops her hands from her sleeves, reaching down to rest one hand lightly on Kiba’s head. He doesn’t shake her off, just tips his head back to look up at her, and Kurenai’s heart turns over in her chest at the familiarity in the gesture.

“You're the expert here,” she says, and it clearly means something to Kiba, because he barks out a rough laugh that echoes like shattering glass in Kurenai’s ears.

“I guess I am,” he agrees, and that’s the grin that means he’s spoiling for a fight, ready to pick it with anyone and everyone. “You sure?”

The woman raises a cool brow, then lifts her hands. Her skin starts to fracture and split, and paper peels off, rising around her in a flurry. Each piece folds itself, shaping shuriken and kunai, while still more of it condenses into a humanlike shape, taking on the features of the woman next to it. The missing-nin and her clone smile in unison, small and deadly, and her hands drop. That cloud of projectiles whirls forward, and under the cover of it Kurenai can see Kiba move. She lunges to stop him, because the very last thing Shino needs is to face his former best friend in a fight as serious as this, but she barely takes a step before the other woman is in front of her. Kurenai flips over her head, tries to dodge, but paper kunai hit the ground right in front of her. One slices across her arm, as sharp as if it were really made of metal, and she recoils.
“You’ve already lost,” the woman says, quiet but intent, and her gaze is so cold it’s arctic. From inside her sleeve, she pulls a handful of narrow papers, and Kurenai only needs one glance to recognize them. Exploding tags, which will make this fight a hell of a lot harder.

“I haven’t even started fighting yet,” she retorts, and folds her hands together. Across from her, amber eyes narrow, and the missing-nin vanishes in a whirl of paper just as Kurenai throws up a genjutsu. Coiling vines snatch outwards, grabbing for flesh, and Kurenai sinks down into the center of them. A breath to center herself, to steady her chakra and reinforce the illusion, and she lets it spread.

It doesn’t matter who she’s fighting, or why. It doesn’t matter what the circumstances are. This is an opponent she’s going to beat, and hesitation won’t help her now.

Kiba curses under his breath, dodging Kurenai’s attempt to lunge after him, and ducks into the smoke as Konan intercepts his teacher. Former teacher, now, Kiba supposes, and of course it couldn’t just be Konoha nin, couldn’t just be an Aburame. It had to be his old team, his old teacher, and Naruto’s teacher on top of that. No matter how many clones she makes, Konan is going to need help to handle both Kakashi and Kurenai, which means Kiba’s going to have to beat Shino quickly.

Of course, if Kiba can’t manage to take out a genin with relative ease, there’s no possible way he’s going to be able to take out Copy-Nin Kakashi, either.

It’s fine, he tells himself. He’s managed to change a lot about how he fights through sheer necessity, since he’s not working with Akamaru anymore, but Shino can’t have changed all that much. He hasn’t had cause to, after all. Even if he planned for this encounter—and Shino is such a crafty bastard that Kiba wouldn’t put it past him—there’s no way he could have factored in Kiba’s new mindset, or how far five months of actually applying himself to training could take him.

“You in here, bug boy?” he calls, knowing Shino hates that nickname. Makes it loud and brash and unafraid, because that’s what Shino expects of him, but minds his steps the way sparring with Sasori has taught him. Sasori’s got better ears than just about anyone Kiba has met, and someday Kiba is definitely going to manage to sneak up on him. Just practicing for it has helped, though; he knows how to pay attention to the sounds of his clothes, each footfall, his breathing. There’s no visibility in this smoke, but the scorched smell is easy enough to filter out with a bit of exposure, and Kiba breathes carefully, testing for other scents.

He catches the rattle of kikaichū wings, faint but familiar, just in time to whirl to the side, then leap. A touch of chakra sticks his hands and feet to the wall, and he launches himself up, flips over as he clears the smoke and lands in a crouch on top of the wall. Shino takes a surprised step back, head whipping around, but Kiba is already moving, going low. He grabs Shino’s ankle, careful not to touch skin, then throws his weight behind a body-blow and sends the other boy tumbling right off the narrow wall.

“Geez,” he mocks, leaning over the edge to watch Shino hit the ground hard, flat on his back. “I knew you had no personality, but you lost your fighting ability too? Now you’ve got nothing going for you.”

It hurts, trying to get those words out. Kiba knows precisely where Shino’s insecurities lie, knows all of the weak points in his defense, physical and otherwise. And—if he could avoid using them he would, but an enemy wouldn’t hesitate. An enemy would go for the throat. Kiba can’t afford to
do anything less.

If someone else figures out that he’s anything less than a complete traitor, there's no guarantee that Pein won't find out, too. And if he does, all of this is for nothing.

Kiba can't risk it, no matter what he has to do in the meantime.

Slowly, deliberately, Shino pulls himself back to his feet, then carefully pushes his glasses up his nose. “Kiba,” he says after a long pause, and it wavers a little, even if it doesn’t crack.

Kiba pretends he can't feel his heart turn over in his chest at that. He grins to cover it, more bared teeth than any sort of humor, but he hopes it’s enough to pass. “What, you sound surprised to see me. Did you think I fucked off to play civilian or some shit?” He leaps lightly off the wall, landing in front of his teammate, and pulls his remaining dagger out of its sheath on his thigh. “Nah. You know, I managed to crawl out of that hellhole, so now I'm going to enjoy it.”

There's another lengthy pause, and then Shino takes a breath. “Hellhole. I assume you're referring to Konoha.”

It takes effort to laugh, but hopefully not enough that it sounds completely fake. “Course. What the hell else could I mean? I'm out of there, and now that I don’t have a bunch of dead weight dragging me down I can actually have a bit of fun.”

“That man you killed on the road. Was that fun?” Shino asks tightly, and Kiba knows him well enough to recognize the way his shoulders are bunching, muscles tightening. Shino doesn’t get mad easily, but apparently this is enough to push him to it. Kiba can't help but wonder if it’s his betrayal or his complete dismissal that’s doing the honors. There's a streak of loyalty and kindness in Shino that most people miss, but it runs deep.

Still, mad means sloppy, and Kiba needs that if he’s going to win quickly. It’s like claws raking under his skin to even think the words, but he borrows one of Genma's favorite tricks, flips his knife from his right hand to his left and back again, and puts on a grin that’s as vicious as he can make it.

“That waste of space?” he asks dismissively. “Fuck no. He didn’t even fight back. That was a job. But this, facing you?” He laughs, rocking forward on his toes and digging his sandals in for leverage. “Oh, this is the fun part.”

In a blur, he launches himself forward, low and fast, hears the hum of kikaichū above him and dodges left as the swarm sweeps down. Shino's rattled—he's not thinking tactics right now, just reacting, and it’s enough of an opening for Kiba to slam through his guard. Kiba flips the knife around, slashes down, and doesn’t pause to watch it open a long, bloody line down Shino's bicep. There's no time; Shino is already twisting, going for a knife-hand blow that Kiba knows from experience will hurt like a bitch and infect him with kikaichū at the same time. He throws himself up and over, lands on one hand and springboards back to his feet, then lashes out and kicks Shino hard in the side as the other boy turns. Shino goes flying, even as more kikaichū rise, but Kiba's planned for this, even if he never expected to have to use it so soon.

Dodging back into the estate, he grabs one of the smoke bombs he prepared out of his jacket pocket, tosses it right into the middle of the swarm as it comes at him, and sends a flare of fire after it. He’s not the best at Katon jutsus, but like this, he doesn’t have to be. The heat cracks the glass, the flame hits the powder inside—

Detonation.
Kiba doesn’t bother getting out of the way of the deep grey smoke as it billows outward. One of Shino's female beetles, the ones he uses to track an enemy, is trying to burrow into his jacket, and Kiba isn’t about to fall for one of Shino's most basic tricks. He holds his breath, waiting for a count to twenty, and the faint buzz from the insects shifts down a level, turns lazy and unfocused. The faint smell of the beetle on his coat falls away, and Kiba grins, then leaps up and out of the cloud to land on top of the wall. Shino is at the base of it, only now staggering back to his feet, and even from where he is Kiba can see the thin sheen of sweat that’s starting to bead on his face.

“That knife—” he manages. “The bomb—”

Kiba laughs, makes it mocking as he leans over to grin at his teammate. “I've been expanding my skillset,” he says. “Like I said, no more dead weight to hold me back. You're looking at the all-new and totally improved Inuzuka Kiba right here. Those bugs of yours are going to high as creepy little kites for the next few hours. Not that you’ll be around to see it, since you'll be goin’ night-night real shortly here.”

Shino's fingers dig into the wood of the wall, and he takes a labored breath. “I have—fought poison users before,” he manages.

With a snort, Kiba rocks back on his heels. “Well, yeah,” he says. “Kankuro, right? But you knew he was a poison user going in. Me? You're still stuck thinking I'm a useless sack of crap who can only fight using a dog as a crutch.”

Shino’s next breath is hard, angry, and he pulls himself fully upright with an effort. “You were not useless,” he says, low and sharp, and Kiba tenses, ready to move. “You were my teammate.”

The wind shifts, just enough. There's a ghost of a scent that makes Kiba's hackles rise, puts every nerve on edge. He's moving before he even hears the first footfall, leaping up and over and away as an orange-and-blue blur passes right beneath him.

Fuck, Kiba thinks with feeling, landing on his feet and immediately bringing his knife up again. Not a genin team with two jounin, but two genin teams. Not just his old team, but Naruto.

Naruto is the reason he’s doing all of this. The threat to Naruto, the way Kisame and Itachi were so casually ready to mutilate him so they could capture him. The plans Akatsuki has for all the jinchuuriki, and that fact that they’re all going to die if someone doesn’t do something. Naruto is Kiba's friend, one of his best friends, and there's no way in hell Kiba is going to let someone else hurt him.

But, of course, that means Kiba's going to have to be the one to hurt him.

“Well, look at that,” he says, keeps his voice bright and friendly with a cutting edge underneath—all that practice sniping with Deidara and Hidan is good for something. “If it isn’t my favorite monster.”

Blue eyes go wide, and Naruto almost falters. “Kiba,” he says, and it’s bewildered, hurt in a way that makes Kiba feel small and dirty inside. “Kiba, what are you doing? I told the old hag someone framed you, and if you come back and tell her why we can fix this!”

Fuck. Of course that would be Naruto's first reaction to the news. He would never believe a friend could do something like kill an elder and desert the village. It should feel like a victory, that Naruto has such faith in him, but instead it just makes Kiba sick, because he’s going to have to break that thread of belief completely.
“Fix this?” he demands, and if his voice is rough hopefully it will come off as derision rather than pain. “Oh, believe me, I already have. I fixed it when I stabbed Danzō in the stomach and watched him die.”

Naruto takes a step back, as if Kiba hit him bodily. “What?” he asks, and it wobbles.

Kiba laughs, ragged and angry. Angry at himself, at this situation, at the fact that he has to be cruel to Naruto, who’s never truly been mean to anyone a single day in his life. “Oh, grow up, Naruto. What did you expect? That bastard needed to die. I got the hell out while I had the chance, and my new friends? They’re actually interested in you.”

Konoha knows nothing about Akatsuki beyond the fact that Itachi and Kisame are members, and that they wanted Naruto, so it’s no surprise to see the confusion that flickers across Naruto’s face. “What?” he asks again. “Kiba, come on, you need to come back—”

“Back?” Kiba snarls, full of every ounce of his frustration. “Back to Konoha, where I can be the loser who was beaten by you? So everyone can laugh at the idiot dog boy who couldn’t even win a fight against the dead last student? So I can keep living with the fact that a monster like you pretends to be human all the time?” He watches Naruto’s face lose three shades of color and grins humorlessly. “Oh yeah, I know all about your angry little problem. You’re the Kyuubi jinchuuriki, and I have to ask, where’s the line? Where does the Kyuubi turn into Naruto? You’re just like a kitsune, aren’t you, and you’ve never even tried to hide it. Only reason I didn’t see it before was because I was an idiot. So stupid, to make friends with a beast.”

Naruto flinches, takes three steps back, and the victory of it is utterly, horrifyingly hollow in Kiba’s stomach.

But then Naruto’s expression firms, and he stops moving. “Kiba, you’re my friend,” he insists. “I’m not going to let you do this!”

“Let me?” Kiba scoffs. “You can't fucking stop me.”

He catches the shift behind him just in time, flips backwards over Shino’s reaching hands as he lunges up the wall. It’s messy, uncoordinated; Shino’s already feeling the heavy sedative on Kiba’s second knife. The more he moves the faster it’ll work its way into his system, too, so Kiba won’t have to worry about him for much longer.

Naruto, though. Naruto’s going to be a problem. A jinchuuriki’s healing rate means he’ll shake off pretty much anything nonlethal that Kiba tries, and Kiba feels nauseous even thinking about trying a serious poison on his friend, but he doesn’t have a choice. He needs to get back to Konan. This is only their first attack. They have more planned, enough to batter the Konoha teams’ defenses and leave them twitching at shadows. Given the odds, that plan is their best way to win. Maybe their only way to win, if Naruto’s learned pretty much anything about using the Kyuubi’s power.

Cursing the loss of his best knife, coated with enough poison to kill an elephant in one blow, Kiba grabs for a backup, flips it up to catch it showily.

“I’ve never tried to poison a jinchuuriki before;” he says, bares his teeth in a challenge. “What do you think it’ll do to you, being a monster an’ all?”

Naruto’s face twists, somewhere between pain and determination, and he brings his hands up into a familiar seal. There’s a whirl of smoke, and four shadow clones pop into existence behind him. “This time, I’ll be the one to beat you in a single blow!” he cries. “And then I’ll drag you back to Konoha!”
If Naruto thinks this is going to go anything like their last fight, he’s sorely mistaken. Naruto might be fighting to bring Kiba home, but Kiba is fighting so he can save Naruto's life. He can't let himself lose. Not for anything.

There's no time for grandstanding. Kiba grabs a trio of smoke bombs out of his pocket—just cover, this time, not laced with poison—and tosses them down hard. Instantly, the choking-thick smoke explodes out around them, and Kiba drops low and lunges. A flash of orange through the smoke is all he needs, and he slams into the clone with his elbow leading, feels it pop under the blow, then ducks under the punch of the second and doesn’t let himself contemplate the movement as he stabs up hard.

For half an instant, there's pressure, resistance. Then it gives way, and Kiba can feel his knife sliding into flesh for another moment before the clone bursts.

He wants to gag, wants to stagger back and wipe his hands off, check for blood even though he knows clones don’t bleed. But he doesn’t have the time, has to throw himself into a flip above the head of the next clone as he lets two kunai fly. There's a yelp, another pop, and Kiba lands, lashes out, pictures Danzō coming at him in the smoke and puts the full force of his rage behind the blow —

The real Naruto shouts as Kiba's knife slams hilt-deep into his shoulder. Not about to repeat his mistake, Kiba wrenches it out, trying not to be sick, then leaps back as Naruto staggers. He throws an elbow behind himself, putting his full weight behind it, and feels the last clone burst even as it tries to grab him.

“You're not trying to hurt me,” he says, and it’s a horrifying kind of realization, even though he manages to keep his voice light. “That’s your first mistake, because I sure as hell am going to hurt you.”

He doesn’t wait for an answer, doesn’t think he could stand to hear one. Leaping clear of the smoke, he takes half a second to check the battlefield and changes direction, flipping over to land right behind Kakashi as he swings a kunai at Konan's throat. This, at least, is easy enough; Kiba hardly knows Kakashi, and by now he thinks he can say he knows Konan well. She would be something like a friend, in other circumstances, and seeing someone trying to kill her is more than enough to make Kiba snarl. He kicks Kakashi hard in the back of the knees, dodges sideways as the man goes down, and watches Konan's paper weapons slam hard into —

A log. Of course.
Please keep your opinion on Itachi to yourself and leave off trying to convert me. I don't like him, obviously, but I am entitled to my own opinions and that is my business. I don't want to be bombarded with headcanons about my least favorite character in someone's misguided attempt to make me like him. It is my opinion and not about to change, thanks.

The earth under his feet shudders, and Kiba tosses another smoke bomb even as he leaps. He knows Kakashi’s nose is at least as good as his, but Kakashi uses his skills to track, not fight—the Sharingan’s his weapon of choice, not his sense of smell, and Kiba might not have had nearly as much practice but he is trained to fight, to use smell to replace sight whenever needed.

Kiba breathes in, testing, trying to find the scent, and catches the faintest edge of a shifting air current. With a curse, he ducks the swipe of a kunai, vaults over a kick to slam a blow at Kakashi’s kidney, and feels a fist catch his chest hard enough to make his ribs ache before he’s knocked away. A glint of white through the smoke is enough to make him retreat in a hurry, and a second later one of Konan's exploding tags detonates with a bone-rattling bang.

Clear of the obscuring smoke, Kiba looks for his partner, finds her struggling against invisible bonds as Kurenai faces her. He hesitates for half a second, then growls at himself in irritation and leaps for the wall, hitting it on all fours. Three long strides to get up speed and he launches himself off, slams bodily into Kurenai and breaks her concentration. She rolls with the momentum, comes up in a ready crouch but falters when she sees him, and Kiba doesn’t let himself. He makes himself think of Danzō again, cold and avaricious eyes as he let Kiba into his house, the weight of his hand on Kiba's shoulder, trying to be fatherly as Kiba said they're holding me back, I can't be strong like this.

Simple, then, to fling one of his poison bombs at her and detonate it with a spark.

Green-grey smoke washes out, and he hauls Konan back as she coughs, one hand pressed against her throat. An illusion of strangling vines, probably—Kurenai has always been fond of that one.

“The Aburame?” Konan rasps, and she wraps them in a shield of paper as one of Kakashi’s Katon jutsus roars at them.

“Down,” Kiba answers, and there's enough adrenaline racing through him that it’s easy to shape a grin. “Not dead, but only ‘cause I lost my good knife. The jinchuuriki got a dose of my backup, though.”


“He’s still a brat,” Kiba says, and it’s strange to actually mean it, to think of Naruto, only three months younger, and have he’s a kid as the first thing that comes to mind. Naïve would be a better word, really, but Naruto isn’t. Just...too good to be facing down a traitor.

With a hum that says she understands, Konan drops her shield, then immediately sends a flurry of
shuriken spinning at Kurenai as she races at them. Kurenai dodges, but she’s not quite steady, must have inhaled at least a bit of the poison. Determinedly Kiba blocks out the surge of worry that rises, shoves it down deep in his chest and goes the other way, to where Kakashi is dropping towards Konan’s back. Kiba gets there first, gets three poisoned kunai in the air only to have one of Kakashi’s knock the first two away. The Copy-Nin ducks under the third, catches Kiba’s elbow before it can hit his ribs, then blocks a fourth kunai with his own blade as Kiba jerks around to stab him.

Gritting his teeth, Kiba flips up off the ground, twists in Kakashi’s grip despite the kunai that slashes down his arm and drops right over his back, slamming a knee in between Kakashi’s shoulder blades with all of his weight behind it. The air punches out of Kakashi’s lungs and he staggering a step, grip loosening enough for Kiba to pull free. He drops down behind him, throws himself against the backs of Kakashi’s legs and knocks him down, then goes for a stab in the back of the neck. The puff of smoke as the clone vanishes is pretty much expected at this point, and Kiba throws himself sideways, out of the range of the hands that burst up through the soil.

Another smoke bomb detonates as Kakashi rises from the ground, and Kiba doesn’t waste time, smells Konan or her clone pass him and falls back, rolling out of the smoke and—

“Kiba!” Hinata cries, wounded and bewildered, and Kiba pulls up short, frozen for just a moment. There's a kunai in his hand, coated in one of Genma’s neurotoxins that will kill almost instantly, but it’s Hinata standing bare centimeters from the blade, and clutched in her arms is Akamaru.

Kiba stares at his partner, at his best friend. Akamaru stares back, looking like Kiba really did stab him, and barks once. It takes all of Kiba's effort not to flinch back from the accusation in the sound, and he can't speak, can't move, can't do anything but stand there—

Behind him, there's a sound of fury, and Kakashi comes flying past him, propelled by a hard kick. Kurenai is closing in, fingers rising to shape the seals for another genjutsu, and behind Hinata there's movement on the wall—Sasuke, not Shino or Naruto, but Sakura is a step behind him and they’re coming in fast. Kakashi is off balance as he grapples with the clone, and Kiba has a direct shot at his back, but he’ll have to go through Hinata to get to it and he can't.

Ten seconds of complete, frozen stillness feels like an eternity.

A hand grabs his collar, and with a snarl of effort and a whirl of paper, wings explode into the air. Konan pulls him right up off his feet, sends them soaring up, and the kunai drops from Kiba's nerveless fingers as he yelps and grabs for her arms. He’s seen her do this before, coming back from a trip to Ame, but he’s never experienced it before and it’s fucking high.

Past the forest, over the river, skirting the town in a blur, and then Konan brings them down, aiming for a stretch of barren road between two rice paddies. Unexpectedly, her hold disappears, and Kiba hits the ground hard, rolling several yards before he manages to catch himself and stagger to his feet. There's gravel imbedded in patches of his skin, stinging painfully, and the fall didn’t help all the bruises Kakashi and Naruto gave him or the long cut on his arm.

Even as he opens his mouth to protest, Konan settles on the road, wings shattering. The paper whirls around them like a tornado, sharp-edged and threatening, and Kiba's eyes widen. He takes three steps back as Konan stalks towards him, and he’s never seen her angry before, but right now she’s furious. Amber eyes burn, and her expression is flat but full of threat as she grabs him by the collar of his jacket.

“You hesitated,” she snaps. “I gave you an opening for you to kill the Copy-Nin, and you didn’t even try.”
“I—” Kiba starts, but his lips feel numb and his heart is pounding with what’s definitely terror. He doesn’t try to get away, just stumbles with the motion as Konan drags him forward.

“This isn’t a game, Inuzuka,” she says, not loud but cold. Dark and drowning and freezing, sharp enough to cut to the bone. “You’re Akatsuki, and they’re our enemy. I don’t care what ties you had to them, you broke those bonds. If Akatsuki doesn’t have your loyalty, you’re worthless to us.”

She opens her hand, letting go, and Kiba hadn’t realized he was leaning back, pulling away from her, but as soon as she releases him he sits down hard in the dirt, staring up at Konan and not quite able to breathe.

Konan looks back at him, eyes cold, and then takes a breath and steps back. “Next time you hesitate,” she says quietly, “I’ll kill you myself.”

She turns on her heel and walks away, paper whirling back around her to fall into place against her skin, and Kiba can’t even bring himself to watch her go. He leans forward, pressing his forehead against his knees, and closes his eyes. They’re burning, hot like he wants to cry, and there’s still adrenaline pounding through him, still nausea twisting his stomach into knots.

He needs to get up, to go. Sitting in the middle of an open road is the best way to get caught, but—

He thinks of cutting Shino, putting that sedative in his blood and watching him stagger, pale and sweating as he fought it. Thinks of stabbing Naruto, the feel as his knife laced with a lethal poison punched through skin and muscle. Thinks the of horror on Kurenai’s face when he told Konan her specialty. Thinks of Kakashi, aiming to kill, because Kiba is an enemy now.

Thinks of Akamaru's expression, so deeply hurt and betrayed, and Hinata's bewilderment.

Choking on a sob, Kiba wraps his arms over his head, strangles any further sound before it can escape. Konan's right. Konan's right, he hesitated, there was an opening but he didn’t take it. He was caught by Akamaru, by his first sight of his partner since he slipped out of his room in Konoha that night to kill Danzō.

Konan is fiercely loyal to Pein, to Akatsuki. She means every word of it when she says she’ll kill Kiba for hesitating, and he can’t allow himself to forget that again. Maybe she’s something like a friend, but she’s also the enemy, and Kiba can't lose sight of what he’s trying to do here. Someone else would be able to do it, and probably better than him, but Kiba's the one in Akatsuki. He’s the one who earned a place by killing Danzō. He’s the one, here and now, who has to prove his loyalty to Akatsuki no matter what it takes.

“Someone has to,” he whispers to himself, threading his fingers through his hair. “Someone has to. Someone has to.”

It helps, a little. Those words remind him of his mother, his sister. Hana has done undercover work before, and she always smiled at him when she got home, hugged him tightly and ruffled his hair. Kiba thinks of that, of finishing his mission and going home, sinking into her arms and just—staying there. Hugging Akamaru, and his mother, and falling into his team’s arms to stay. Thinks of finally hearing welcome home and being able to say I'm back.

He’s never wanted anything more than he wants that.

I will go home again, he tells himself, even if he doesn’t quite dare say it out loud. I’ll go home, and everything will go back to normal. When I know everything about Akatsuki, I’ll go back to Konoha. I’ll go home, and I won’t leave it again.
That helps more, makes his breathing even out, brings his heart rate down a little. Kiba's not smart, not like Shikamaru or Neji or Shino. He needs some sort of goal to focus on, a symbol to cling to. Even with the scratch cutting through it, there's still a leaf on his headband. He's still a Konoha shinobi. As long as Kiba knows it, as long as Tsunade and Genma both know it, that's all he needs to keep going.

Kiba opens his eyes, raises his head. He shuts away the image of Akamaru, of Naruto, of Shino and Hinata and Kurenai. Ignores the ache in his chest, the sting of his bruises, the stiffness of his limbs. He forces himself to his feet, because moving forward is all he can do right now. He needs some sort of peace offering to bring Konan, to show that he's still loyal. Information will work, and they need to know more about the operation of the compound anyway.

There's no time for sitting around feeling sorry for himself. Kiba takes a breath and doesn't let it shake, forces himself forward, one foot before the other, until he's moving steadily.

He has people to save, and a mission to finish, and maybe Kiba isn't the best for the job but he's here and he's doing it, so he'll have to keep at it.

Someone has to.

There's a ringing, invasive sort of silence in the room, and Kakashi’s been through the aftermath of too many missions gone sideways to think that it bodes well.

Naruto is still unconscious, practically in a coma. Whatever Kiba hit him with would have been enough to kill anyone else ten times over, and the fact that he didn’t use the same thing on Shino pretty much only comes down to luck. He probably could have, if he hadn’t wasted so much time taunting his former teammate, and Kakashi supposes they should be grateful Kiba hasn’t changed completely, no matter what shifts he’s made in fighting style.

It would be nice if Kurenai was around to help do emotional damage control, because Kakashi is thoroughly shitty at it, and right now there are four genin drifting around the room like the walking dead. She’s with Lord Hachiuma, though, taking the first shift as his guard, and that leaves things to someone far less qualified. Kakashi watches them over the top of his book, as covertly as possible, and tries to figure out which one is in the most dire need of help.

Unfortunately, he can't pick one over the other. Hinata has tucked herself down into a tiny little lump in the corner, Akamaru clutched to her chest and eyes lowered, and doesn’t look to be moving any time soon. Shino, awake and mostly alert, is sitting against the wall, brooding in a way that’s distinctly familiar, even if Kakashi is more used to seeing it on Sasuke. They're probably the most at risk, Kakashi reflects, though at risk of what he can't quite say. he hasn’t had enough exposure to Team 8 to know where their fault lines are, which way they’ll break when pressure is applied.

With his own team it’s easy enough to tell. They come together under duress, show hints of flawless teamwork that’s normally buried under the bickering, and each time they face a threat they get stronger. It’s almost made Kakashi want to put them down for back to back B-ranks just to iron out all their sharp edges under the duress of real danger, though he doubts the Hokage would approve. Sarutobi had certainly seemed unsupportive when he brought up the idea.

A body drops down to sit next to him, and Kakashi raises a curious brow at Sasuke as the boy leans back against the wall. Dark eyes linger for a long moment on Naruto before they slide back to
Kakashi, and there's something like fury written into the pales lines of Sasuke's face, something helpless and angry and ever so faintly panicked.

“The idiot’s been asleep for a while,” Sasuke says, low enough not to attract Sakura's attention where she’s determinedly sorting through their supplies.

Kakashi hums lightly and doesn’t lower his book. “It was a lot of poison,” he says, not bothering to lower his voice, and sees Hinata flinch, Shino tense.

Sasuke grunts, but his eyes are back on Naruto's still form, and his hands clench into fists. “I could have helped,” he says abruptly.

He could have, Kakashi acknowledges. Sasuke is quick, and even though they're still working on mastering the Sharingan, he's progressing quickly. Anko has been teaching him kenjutsu, too, and she’s terrifying enough with a sword that there's no way Sasuke can come out anything less than brilliant. Kakashi had looked at Kiba, though, and—well. Not quite written him off, maybe, but he hadn’t accounted for anything more than a twelve year old genin who couldn’t even pass the Chuunin Exams. Naruto and Shino, he had thought, would be more than enough to deal with Kiba, since they both knew his fighting style.

Kakashi’s mistake, to think that five months as missing-nin wouldn’t have had much of an effect on Kiba's skills. To think that Danzō’s death was an aberration and not a hint at depths of talent no one had thought to touch.

The bruise between his shoulder blades aches, bone-deep and still setting in. Kakashi had thought he had Kiba, was ready to subdue him, and the Inuzuka as a clan have always been decent at misdirection and smokescreens—both figuratively and literally—but that was still surprising. Kiba managed to get himself out of Kakashi’s hold and put him right in his partner’s line of fire without even looking at the woman. Instinctive awareness of her movements, Kakashi thinks, and it’s not happy. The Inuzuka are good at teamwork, of course, but Kakashi’s only ever seen that level of it applied to their ninken.

Kiba changed his fighting style in a way Kakashi has never seen, adjusted and made allowances for fighting with someone who doesn’t have the single-minded intensity of an Inuzuka-bred nin-dog. He learned how to use his smaller size against older opponents, how to go for the legs and the knees, how to augment his speed with poisons that mean he doesn’t have to try for more than a glancing blow.

Dedication, Kakashi thinks tiredly. That’s what dedication looks like. Kiba is making himself stronger, carefully, methodically. He’s picking out his weaknesses—size, reach, inexperience—and countering by putting all of his effort into expanding what he’s already good at—that ruthless sort of Inuzuka-specific brawling, full contact and unhesitating, his speed, his nose, his misdirection. Even his ability to fight in tandem has been refined, filtered down until it can be applied to human partners as well.

Maybe he got training from somewhere, but Kakashi doesn’t think so. That sort of thing comes from inside, from a person who looks at themselves and thinks I need to change. I need to be better. Training might have started Kiba on that path, but he kept going down it by himself, and it honestly worries Kakashi what might come of it. An enemy who knows that much about Konoha, about the clans and the politics and the friendships and enmities between its leaders—that’s dangerous. Kiba is dangerous, and the fact that he was able to put down a jinchuuriki in less than ten minutes proves that.

The woman was a threat, too, but Kakashi more or less expected that of her. An adult kunoichi,
wearing no signs of affiliation with any village or clan, with hard eyes—she had experience.

Kiba doesn’t. And Kakashi worries, deeply, about what he’ll become when he does.

For the first time, he considers that Tsunade may have known what she was doing when she marked Kiba as an S-rank threat.

“Next time,” he tells Sasuke lightly, and Sasuke glances over at him, eyes narrowing.

“You think they’re going to attack us again,” he says, testing.

Kakashi hums, tapping a finger against the spine of his book. “They came after the lord twice already. There’s no reason to assume they’ll stop before they finish their mission. We need to be ready.”

Sasuke flicks a glance from Hinata to Shino to Naruto, mouth tightening into an unhappy grimace. He grunts, as much of an answer as he’ll give about emotional things, but Kakashi can see him thinking, considering, planning. Sasuke is good at strategy, to the point where Kakashi is almost ready to recommend lessons on it with Shikaku; he plays the long game, and it’s the perfect counterpoint to Naruto’s ability to create, discard, and change tactics on the fly. Together they're going to make a formidable team if they can just survive puberty.

“Who would you position, and where?” he asks casually, keeping his gaze on his book, but Sasuke is sitting on his right side, and Kakashi can see the look his student shoots him out of the corner of that eye.

Still, Sasuke considers it for a long moment, curling his fingers around the hilt of the sword he usually carries across his back. Another look at the room’s other occupants, and he hesitates, then says, “That woman—you couldn’t copy her ability.”

Kakashi hums in confirmation, turning a page. “Either a kekkei genkai or something that doesn’t need hand seals to activate,” he agrees. “The paper didn’t burn, either.”

Which is patently not fair, Kakashi would like to point out. Paper is supposed to burn. But the woman used her ability to block more than one Katon jutsu, so clearly the lack of ignition wasn’t a fluke.

Sasuke grunts, still thinking. “Team 8 is emotionally compromised,” he says, quietly enough that Shino and Hinata won’t hear it unless they’re trying to listen in.

Unfortunately true, so Kakashi tips his head in a brief nod. “Kiba was their teammate,” he returns, just as soft.

“Naruto is too,” Sasuke murmurs, eyes flickering back to the futon again. His grip on his sword tightens, the only readily visible sign of distress, and after a moment he forces himself to look away. “Kiba was his friend.”

Past tense. Clearly Sasuke has no problem considering Kiba an enemy, but then, with Naruto so pale and still on the mattress, Kakashi supposes he doesn’t either. He doesn’t answer, just watches Sasuke out of the corner of his eye as the boy weighs his options.

Finally, Sasuke shifts, pulling his legs up under him and sitting upright. “You need to be the one to take Kiba out,” he says softly. “Kurenai and Shino can face the woman. Our team as backup.”

It’s the same solution Kakashi came up with, and he hums in approval. “That will work,” he
agrees, then glances over at the clock. It’s almost time for Sakura and Hinata to take over guarding
the family. Leaving the two of them on their own doesn’t sit overly well with Kakashi, but he plans
to leave his pack scattered around the estate, which will hopefully serve as enough of an early
warning that nothing will take them by surprise.

A whole week of this, Kakashi thinks a little ruefully. And that’s if they can convince Lord
Hachiuma to keep things short. Then another week to the capital if they move fast, with far too
many possibilities for an ambush along the route. Kakashi almost wants to send for backup, or
maybe a tokujo squad to take over the mission for them, but two genin teams are, theoretically,
more than enough for a protection mission.

It’s just their bad luck that these particular teams would get these particular opponents.

“You should get some sleep,” he tells Sasuke. “You and Shino have the dawn shift.”

Sasuke grimaces, though whether because of the Shino part or the dawn part Kakashi can’t quite
tell. Still, he pushes to his feet, then heads for one of the bedrolls laid out beside Naruto’s. He
collapses into it, still holding his sword, and Kakashi can’t fight a small smile. Apparently Sasuke
is picking up Anko’s habit of using weapons as a security blanket, which is both amusing and
beneficial. It’s not exactly a bad habit for a shinobi to have.
By all rights Kakashi should take his own advice and get some rest—he’ll have the shift right after Hinata and Sakura, after all. He’s too restless, though, still wired from the fight even if it was several hours ago already, so he gets his feet under him and rises, then heads for the door, waving a hand at Sakura in reassurance as he goes. She subsides, sinking back onto her heels, and swallows as she looks down. Care for her team is a good thing, Kakashi thinks, not quite able to fight a small, tired smile. Sasuke is going to be a good strategist, but Sakura is the one who will turn out to be a good leader once she has the opportunity to grow up a bit. She’s started keeping track of all of them, accounting for supplies and days of travel and whatever they could encounter, and just being around Tsunade as she works as Hokage is helping to hone those skills.

It’s odd and startling and a little painful to see all the echoes of Kakashi’s own team coming out in his genin. There were superficial resemblances right from the beginning, but Kakashi had written them off after a few days. Rin was never obvious about her crush the way Sakura was, and Obito was highly skilled in taijutsu and a far better student than Naruto, and Kakashi himself had respected rules and regulations far more than Sasuke cared to. Now, though, the true similarities are coming clear, and it’s not what Kakashi expected at all.

Sasuke isn’t some halfhearted copy of Kakashi himself; he’s like Obito was, full of drive and determination that’s slowly being shaped into something useful. For all her growing skill with medical ninjutsu, Sakura takes after Kakashi the most, technically minded and still learning when it’s best to abandon the rules. And Naruto is like Rin, fiercely kind and strong, the heart of the team in every way that matters, with a will that doesn’t waver no matter the odds.

It’s easier, like this, to look at them. The sideways shadows of other people are distorted enough that Kakashi doesn’t see ghosts every time he turns his head, and he wonders, just a little, what he could have changed if he’d paid attention sooner. Not Kiba, maybe, but his own team might not be quite so fractured, might be further along in learning how all their edges fit together.

Well. Better to have happened late than not at all, he reminds himself, stepping out into the low light of dusk. The narrow door in the wall beside the gate is standing open, the light of a lantern casting a golden glow against the lengthening shadows, and Kakashi can just see the oldest of the guards through the opening, seated on a stool with a pike resting against the wall beside him. Not overly secure, but then again, that’s what Kakashi’s team is for.

He slips through the gap, offering a nod to the guard, who smiles wryly in return.

“Good evening,” the man says quietly, though his eyes go back to scanning the road.

“Well. Better to have happened late than not at all, he reminds himself, stepping out into the low light of dusk. The narrow door in the wall beside the gate is standing open, the light of a lantern casting a golden glow against the lengthening shadows, and Kakashi can just see the oldest of the guards through the opening, seated on a stool with a pike resting against the wall beside him. Not overly secure, but then again, that’s what Kakashi’s team is for.

They snort, leaning back against the wall. He shifts his leg with a grimace and a stiffness that speaks of injury, and instead of answering he says, “Those two. The ones who attacked us. They passed by two days ago. The woman was selling flowers, and the kid…” He trails off, but his eyes are dark.

Civilians don’t like genin, Kakashi knows. Don’t like any shinobi at the age of what they would consider a child. Kakashi has always wondered where the lines falls, why one day someone is old enough to fight and kill and the day before they’re too young. Wondered what it must be like, to live like the civilian children he’s encountered. Bewildering, surely. He doesn’t have the first idea how to be anything but a shinobi.
“The kid is a missing-nin,” Kakashi says, not about to give out the whole story, but wanting to keep someone else from underestimating Kiba and ending up dead. “He killed a very strong, very influential councilor and stole another clan’s secret techniques.”

The guard rubs a hand over his face, shoulders rounding. “He can’t be more than ten,” he says, somewhere between angry and bewildered.

“Twelve or thirteen,” Kakashi corrects, but the guard just shakes his head and doesn’t respond.

Since clearly that avenue of conversation is a dead end, Kakashi glances down the road and then asks, “Waiting for something?”

“Just the delivery of supplies Lord Hachiuma ordered,” the man answers. “The estate wasn’t prepared to feed so many people, so the kitchen’s almost out of food. They should be here soon.”

A bad feeling pricks down Kakashi’s spine, and he straightens, debating lifting his hitai-ate for half an instant. His range isn’t that good, though, and from here it’s just a waste of chakra. He’ll need to—

“Kakashi-sensei?” Sakura asks from behind him, and Kakashi tips his head even if he doesn’t quite look around.

“You need to be guarding the inner house in ten minutes, Sakura,” he reminds her.

The girl slides up to stand at his side, eyes flickering out to scan the road before they dart back to Kakashi. “Kurenai said she had things she wanted to discuss with Lord Hachiuma, and that I didn’t need to take this shift.”

Kurenai is going to run herself ragged, Kakashi thinks, though he supposes he can understand the impulse. He nods, not bothering to argue, and takes a step outside the pool of lantern-light, turning in the direction of the town. Sakura shadows him without hesitation, and Kakashi glances at her but doesn’t argue about that, either.

“There's a delivery coming,” he tells her. “We should escort it in.”

Sakura gets it immediately, and nods tightly as she tugs her fingerless gloves up a bit more securely. Resupplying leaves gaps in their defenses, whether the missing-nin infiltrate the delivery to sneak in unobserved or attack it and leave them low on food. Shinobi generally carry as much food as they’ll use on a mission, but Kakashi supposes most civilians don’t have such easy access to sealing scrolls. It’s certainly inconvenient, though.

“Should we use the trees?” Sakura suggests quietly, barely a step behind Kakashi as they head down the road towards the town.

Kakashi was debating it, but… “Too many opportunities for them,” he says. “We don’t know the terrain in there. Stick to the road.”

She nods tightly, and it’s too dark to see more than a pale slash of her expression, but Kakashi has to wonder how much is the lighting and how much is fear. If it’s the latter, though, it’s not enough to stop her from asking quietly, “Do you really think Kiba would attack us again?”

If Kakashi thought he could call off this mission, trade off with anyone else at all, he would do it in a heartbeat. Emotional involvement has never been grounds for abandoning a mission, though, and most people would just laugh in Kakashi’s face for even suggesting it.
“He did once before,” he makes himself say, tries to keep his tone light. “I don’t think you should consider him the same person you went to the Academy with. Not anymore.”

“It’s easy to say that,” Sakura tells him, on the edge of sharp, and it’s enough of a surprise that Kakashi blinks and looks down at her. She has her face turned away, though, a distinct tightness to the set of her mouth. and—it’s easy for Kakashi to consider someone like Itachi his enemy after having seen the aftermath of the massacre, after years to adjust to the betrayal. But for Sakura, for Naruto and Sasuke, Kiba was their classmate not even a year ago. This is their first encounter with the idea that traitors can come from anywhere.

With a faint sigh, Kakashi tucks his hands into his pockets, lifting his gaze to scan the road ahead of them. “No,” he says, feeling the bruise between his shoulder blades throb. Thinking of Kurenai, cold and grim and working herself into exhaustion just so she can get even a few hours of sleep each night. “It’s really not.”

Sakura doesn’t answer, but she ducks her head a little and Kakashi assumes she gets the point.

“I forgot to account for supply trips,” she says quietly, like it’s a confession.

Kakashi hums. “That’s why you’re still a genin,” he tells her, because Sakura has a perfectionist streak to her and Kakashi knows that feeling all too well. “If you were perfect and knew everything I’d be out of a job.”

That, at least, gets a quick flash of a smile from her. “Then you’d just read that book of yours all day,” she accuses, and Kakashi tips his nose up.

“It’s fine literature,” he retorts. “You’ll appreciate it when you’re older.”

Sakura gives him a look that wholly doubtful, but before she can answer Kakashi catches a glimpse of lights through the trees and raises a hand for silence. Naruto would loudly demand to know why, but thankfully Sakura immediately goes quiet, turning to check the road behind them and then hurrying a few steps to keep up with Kakashi as they head around the corner. The trees are thick enough here to entirely block line of sight, and that uncomfortable prickling slides down the back of Kakashi’s neck again. There’s no shouting, though, no overt signs of danger, just—quiet.

A lantern hanging from one post of the cart provides just enough light for Kakashi to make out the first hint that something really is wrong. The ox is standing in the middle of the road, still in his traces, but he’s not going anywhere. The reins are slack, and the seat is empty. There’s a strange, sharp smell hanging in the air that makes Kakashi bristle, every instinct singing a loud warning, and he draws a kunai, steps forward just enough to put himself in front of Sakura.

“Poison again?” he asks mildly, eyes on the shifting shadows. “I guess the rumors that Inuzuka can’t diversify are true. You just traded your nin-dog for a few bombs.”

There’s a low, rough laugh, and a shape drops from the branches of the tree that leans out over the road. Kiba lands lightly on a railing of the cart, easily balanced on the balls of his feet, and grins at them. “Technically it was a lot of bombs,” he says, and flips the glass orb he’s holding up into the air. It’s filled with something dark that Kakashi can’t quite make out in the low light—a powder, maybe, that swirls innocuously as Kiba catches it again. Dark eyes slide past Kakashi, focusing on Sakura, and Kiba tilts his head like a curious dog. “Heeeey, Sakura, I didn’t see you before. Still panting after Sasuke like a—”

“Finish that sentence, Inuzuka,” Sakura says quietly, tightly. Her hands are clenching into fists, and her eyes are fixed on Kiba. “I dare you.”
Kiba just laughs, his smile unwavering. “Look at that, ‘s like the fight with Ino reminded you that you could be top bitch if you tried.”

Kakashi can feel Sakura bristle, lack of exposure to the way the Inuzuka use the term making her write it off as an insult when it’s actually anything but. He puts a hand out before she can respond, halting her, and asks, “Where is the delivery crew?”

“Dead,” Kiba answers carelessly, so offhand that Kakashi would think his kill-count was already in the hundreds, instead of barely five months in progress. “If you want to salvage the supplies, though, go ahead.”

There are enough teeth in that smile that Kakashi is willing to bet every ounce of food on the cart has been thoroughly soaked in poison. And, given that Kiba stole Genma's clan secrets, Kakashi likely wouldn’t trust anything even if Kiba hadn’t as much as said so; he’s seen what those formulas can do, and he remembers at least three that are entirely undetectable. It’s not worth the risk.

“There’s going to take you back to Konoha,” he says evenly. “You need to answer for what you’ve done.”

Kiba scoffs loudly, folding his arms over his chest. “What, murdering that old bastard? I did the world a favor. You should be giving me a damn medal for that, not assigning me a prison cell.”

Kakashi has heard the rumors, was never quite able to decide if he thought they were true. Looking at Kiba now, he can see the curl of rage beneath his features, the stiffness of his body. Discomfort, Kakashi thinks, and doesn’t let himself close his eye. He shouldn’t be surprised, and he mostly isn’t; Academy students take classes in seduction techniques for a reason. Still, for something like that to happen inside Konoha's walls, done by one of Konoha's heroes regardless of how tarnished —

Kakashi wishes he could feel sick, but all he can manage right now is numb.

“Your mother is cracking around the edges,” he says quietly. “Your sister cried, when they told her you were a missing-nin.”

Kiba doesn’t flinch, doesn’t so much as twitch. Just tips his chin up, a faint smirk tugging at one corner of his mouth. “Right. Because that’s going to make me walk right into a death sentence. Nice try.”

Kakashi raises a brow right back. “You murdered an elder and stole clan secrets. Were you really expecting something different?”

With a snort, Kiba rocks back, shifting his weight like he’s about to leap backwards into the trees. “Does it even count as a clan when there's only one member left?” he asks, and that almost makes Kakashi flinch. Cold and cruel and offhand, but he thinks of his father curled around his sword, Genma's mother and sister dead in the Kyuubi attack. Konoha was started by dozens of clans, but they’re dwindling these days. The Senju and Uchiha and Uzumaki are all but gone, and many of the smaller families are dying out.

“Yes,” Kakashi says quietly, sharply. “It does. Genma will want his other knife back, too. If you don’t want to hand it over, I’m happy to take it.”

Kiba's eyes narrow, and he looks Kakashi over, gaze coming to rest on the covered knife still in the pocket of Kakashi’s flak jacket. “So that’s where that got to,” he says, and grins, all teeth.
“Awesome. Now I don’t have to waste time looking for it.”

The bravado, at least, hasn’t changed, though it has a sharper edge now, something jagged and angry enough to draw blood. Kakashi’s felt it himself, that desperate, tearing ache like everything is lost, like everything that matters has been torn away. With time and Gai’s effort, Kakashi got better, but... Kiba won't. Not like this, divorced from the village and everyone he could possibly love. He opens his mouth, not entirely sure how to put that into words but knowing he has to, and—

“You poisoned Naruto,” Sakura says, and her voice wavers on the first word but then steadies, grows stronger. “He’s unconscious and he’s not waking up and it’s because of you. I thought you were supposed to be friends.”

Kiba flinches. He takes a step back, not quite unbalanced but close to it, and even if he doesn’t look away there’s a flicker to his eyes like he wants to. “He got in my way,” he says, almost a growl. “And fucking good, anyway. A monster like him, making me look like an idiot? He got what he deserved.”

Sakura's breath catches, shudders out hard. She lets her gaze track past Kiba down to the cart, and her eyes fix on a patch of shadow. A hand, Kakashi thinks, limp and motionless, falling through the slats in a boneless arc that only comes in death. One of the villagers who tried to make a late-night delivery to his lord, unaware of what was waiting for him.

“From here,” Sakura says quietly, “I can only see one monster, and it’s not Naruto.”

Rage flashes across Kiba's face, and he drops to all fours, launching himself off the railing. Sakura jerks back, but Kakashi is already moving, lunging to intercept. He brings his kunai slashing around, but Kiba's just a touch faster than he expects and ducks low, sliding in right underneath Kakashi’s guard. In any other situation Kakashi would get out of the way, leap over his head and go for a jutsu, but Sakura is right behind him, still in the line of fire, and Kakashi isn’t about to let her get poisoned. He braces himself, twists around the kick Kiba aims at his kneecap and stabs down—

The clone pops just as a smoke bomb detonates, and Kakashi curses inwardly, holding his breath even as he leaps back, snatching Sakura right off the ground and dragging them both clear. No way to tell if it’s more poison, but Kakashi isn’t about to take that risk.

From the branches above, there's a laugh. Kakashi spins, shoving his hitai-ate straight, and it’s his greatest advantage fighting in the dark. Little tells can mean the difference between winning and being beaten by a genin, and if Kakashi gets his ass kicked like this Tenzō will keep bringing it up until Kakashi wants to cut his own head off to escape the mockery.

Another rough laugh, and Kiba drops down, landing in a crouch in the middle of the road. There's a knife in his hand, twin to the one Kakashi recovered but with a black hilt instead of white, and Kakashi hasn’t ever seen Genma use these knives, can't even recall him mentioning them except when he reported his clan’s heirlooms stolen. There's no way to know precisely what they do, but Kakashi isn’t willing to risk a cut to find out.

“You caught me by surprise before,” Kiba says, eyes narrowing in concentration, and he twists one hand into a seal. “Made me hesitate. Like fuck that’s going to happen again.” Glancing up, he bares his teeth, focusing on Sakura. “You, Naruto, Hinata, Kurenai—it doesn’t matter who gets in my way next time. I’ll kill them.”

He means it, Kakashi thinks, and he should probably be surprised by that too, but it just brings a flicker of grim resignation. Kiba isn’t going to pull any more punches, and maybe that will change
if they put Akamaru in front of him again, but for now, he’s made up his mind. That much is clear, and maybe Naruto could convince him to waver, but right now Naruto is half-dead from Kiba’s poison.

It’s making Kakashi feel a lot less sympathetic than he might otherwise.

There’s a hissing, rumbling rush deeper in the trees, and Kakashi doesn’t know what it is but he also isn’t going to wait to be surprised by it. Lunging forward, he slashes out, misses Kiba by a hair’s breadth as the boy ducks and leaps aside. A foot catches him in the side of the kneecap, making him stagger, and without hesitating Kiba throws himself bodily into Kakashi, knocks him sideways and down as he tries to get his feet under him. A hand at the pocket of his flak jacket makes him growl, slamming an elbow into Kiba’s sternum, and he can hear all the air leave Kiba’s lungs with a grunt.

Kiba gets his breath back on a laugh, even as he rolls back to his feet and catches himself on the edge of the cart. He flexes his fingers, eyes still fixed on Kakashi, and then reaches into his pocket and pulls out a handful of smoke bombs. He’s grinning like this is all a game, even as he tosses them lightly in the air.

“Kurenai-sensei told us a hell of a lot about your nose,” he says lightly, and in the flickering lantern-light, even with the Sharingan, it’s almost impossible for Kakashi to make out anything on his face beyond the obvious. Kakashi can see his shoulders tense, his weight shift, a spark of chakra rising, but nothing in Kiba’s eyes beyond determination. “So what do you say we put it to the test, yeah?”

The smoke bombs drop, and that spark of chakra leaps after them. Kakashi grabs for Sakura, pushing her back hard, and orders, “Go alert Kurenai!”

Sakura takes one stumbling step back, gets her balance and turns with a sharp, “Yes, sensei!” and—

A shuriken just misses her.

Kakashi doesn’t waste time staring at the line the blade opened in her dress, doesn’t try to calculate how close to skin that was. He lunges for the source even as he summons a clone, catches movement in the smoke and flips over Kiba’s head as the boy tries to stab him. Kiba snarls, spins and lashes out with his black-hilted knife, but Kakashi blocks it with a kunai, knocks it away and kicks Kiba back hard with a foot to the stomach. He falls, rolls, and comes right back to his feet, and if Kakashi were willing to feel anything for an enemy he might call the curl in his chest reluctant admiration. Kiba’s gotten tougher, without a doubt.

With a low growl, Kiba lunges, lets Kakashi leap over him as he flings a handful of shuriken after him, and at this range it doesn’t matter if his aim is less than perfect. Kakashi curses, twists hard and launches himself out of the way, landing on top of the cart with slightly less than his normal grace. He wavers, almost falling onto the bodies below—

The gleam of glass catches his eye.

There’s half a heartbeat to register the source, another to twist. Kakashi gets his feet under him as he gathers his chakra, but Kiba already has his hands twisted together in a familiar seal, and the lantern flares. The flame leaps out, drops down onto the orbs full of dark powder nestled all around the cart, and Kakashi leaps as hard as he can for the safety of the trees.

Right at his heels, there’s a crack, a muffled *whumph*, a surge of light and heat. The cart practically
explodes into flame, and Kakashi hits the ground and rolls, feeling his clone pop where it was standing too close to the blast. He pulls himself upright, catches the barest flicker of movement from his Sharingan, and ducks as three kunai imbed themselves in the tree behind him. Summoning a Doton jutsu, he lets it pull him under, focuses on the flicker of chakra above and rises, grabbing for Kiba's legs.

With a snarl, Kiba kicks him in the face, leaps up into the branches of the tree, and tosses another glass ball. Not about to stick around and find out whether it’s poison or accelerant, Kakashi ducks back under the ground, letting it seal over him, and only just feels the impact in the soil as Kiba lands. No way of telling if it’s a clone, and Kiba's an Inuzuka, so he’s definitely proficient in them.

The rumble of an explosion passes over Kakashi’s head, and he curses to himself. Every second he waits gives Kiba the chance to change the battlefield in his own favor, and it’s not something Kakashi would usually mark as a concern with a genin, or even with most chuunin, but it’s a definite threat here.

Fuck but Kakashi hates fighting poison users.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Happy holidays! Here's to a beautiful, bright, joyful day for everyone.

Gritting his teeth, Kakashi lets his jutsu drag him away, out of the way of whatever poison bomb just went off, and surfaces back among the trees. A clone splits off, heading back towards the road, and Kakashi takes to the trees, slipping along the branches as he waits for Kiba to reveal himself. The only sound below is the crackling fire, and Kakashi has to wrinkle his nose at the smell of burning flesh, only partly from the poisoned ox slumped in its traces. Not unfamiliar, but always unpleasant, especially in these circumstances.

There's a thick cloud of green-black smoke wafting out from the bomb’s point of impact, spreading through the trees and across the road, and Kakashi hopes Kurenai is smart enough not to walk right into it when she gets here. Though, of course, she could always choose to send a shadow clone instead of leaving the lord unprotected.

“You're going all out just for a supply cart?” Kakashi’s clone asks, dropping down to land in a clear patch a distance from the cart. “I guess genin are bad at thinking big.”

Kiba scoffs, though Kakashi can't quite pinpoint his location. “Yeah,” he snaps. “They are. Too bad for you I'm not just a genin anymore.”

Kakashi’s clone hums in lazy agreement. “Right. Now you're a traitor and a murderer, too. Moving up in the world.”

In the shadows on the far side of the road, there's a flicker of movement. Kakashi tracks it, Sharingan letting him pick out the tiny tells in the darkness. “Funny how it’s only murder when it happens to a Konoha shinobi. Otherwise it’s just a job.”

“And now everything for you is just a job,” the clone points out, dry as dust. “Clearly you're standing by your morals.”

“Morals are for people who can afford ‘em,” Kiba retorts, far too close. Kakashi leaps before he can even think about it, flips over in the air and lands on the end of the branch as Kiba jumps from the trunk to the bough. He’s grinning, all teeth as he looks at Kakashi, and Kakashi flicks a glance over him, takes in the bunching of his shoulders, the tension in his legs. When Kiba lunges Kakashi is already moving, and—

Something crashes into him from behind, and Kakashi grabs for a substitution jutsu, trades places with a log just as a kunai stabs down, and Kiba laughs. The pair of them drop into a crouch on the branch, and Kiba waves one hand, dismissing the clone. Lightly, he tosses up the white-hilted knife, catches it again, and grins at Kakashi.

“I’ll be taking this back now, thanks,” he says tauntingly. “Spoils of war an’ shit, right?”

The thought of that knife, belonging to one of the most loyal men Kakashi’s ever met, ending up in the hands of a traitor, makes Kakashi’s stomach turn. He grits his teeth, but doesn’t reach for one
of his kunai. Instead, he curls a hand around his wrist, calls up a flare of lightning-sharp chakra that sings in the darkness. It doubles and redoubles, like birds chirping madly, and Kiba's eyes go wide. He leaps back, flipping off the branch, but Kakashi follows, tracks him down the tree as he retreats and shadows him from above, following his bolt deeper into the trees.

There's something numb and cold in the pit of Kakashi’s stomach, something that remembers full red moons and the feel of Rin's blood on his hands, but he pushes it down, shuts it out. Kiba is a threat that needs to be ended, and Kurenai will destroy herself if she’s the one to deliver the blow. Kakashi, though—

Kakashi is already shattered somewhere deep inside, so what does it matter?

The forest opens out, not quite a clearing but close enough, and Kakashi triggers a shunshin to get ahead of Kiba and drops, raising his hand. The Chidori is fully formed, sparking and crackling around his hand, and—

Kakashi’s sandals hit water.

For half a breathless instant, Kakashi’s mind is entirely blank. He’s up to his calves in water, and in the center of the clearing Kiba is just coming to a stop, face alight with vicious victory. He laughs, rough and mocking, and shapes a jutsu with quick, deft signs. Kakashi’s Sharingan copies the motions, stores them away, but he doesn’t need to. This is a jutsu he’s more than familiar with.

It makes him remember, though, the single hand sign Kiba used earlier, the concentration. They're not far from the river; Kiba must have planned this, must have pulled water up to flood this small dip in the forest floor just in case of this happening. It doesn’t take great skill with Suiton jutsus just to move water, not nearly as much as shaping it would require.

Clever, Kakashi thinks, in the fractured heartbeat between realization and movement. Really clever. Damn it.

He leaps even as Kiba drops a ball of electricity from his fingers, not even bothering to move. A clone, then, and Kakashi isn’t sure how he missed the switch, but he must have. There's a loud, crackling snap, and Kakashi is only barely moving, too late, too slow. It feels like being hit by a giant summons, massive and merciless. Kakashi’s thrown straight into a tree, not able to catch himself as every limb seizes. He’s been hit by Raiton before, both his own and other people’s, but this is amplified, undirected, and all the worse for it.

The world spins as he drops, unable to control his limbs, but he lands on solid ground with a groan. Another shudder races through him, involuntary and convulsive, and he grits his teeth and rides it out, trying to focus, trying to get himself together. So fucking stupid, underestimating an opponent like that, but Kiba never showed any signs of being able to plan like he has been in this fight. If he had, he’s definitely have won his fight with Naruto in the Exams, probably been promoted like Shikamaru. Kakashi couldn’t have known, but—that doesn’t mean anything when he feels like he should have.

The world is fading into red and black ripples at the edges of his vision as he tries to force himself up one more time, but he’s still conscious enough to make out the sound of steps coming closer. He growls, low and sharp in his throat, and tries to go for a kunai, but a hand catches his wrist before he can make it.

“I really am moving up in the world,” Kiba says, all sharp edges of amusement ready to draw blood. “How much do you think they’ll up my bounty when I kill Copy-Nin Kakashi?”
Kakashi bares his teeth at the vague shape above him, grabs for his chakra in a last, desperate attempt—

There’s a whirl of movement above him, Kiba leaping away with a sound of frustration, pink hair, dark hair, a sword. Sakura cries out, not fear but fury, and the earth shakes with the force of a blow that’s not Tsunade-strength but certainly respectable. Hands grab Kakashi’s shoulders, hauling him up, and Sasuke braces him as his legs give way. Being dragged is demeaning, but it’s far better than being killed by a genin, so Kakashi lets Sasuke haul him back towards the road like a mostly-cooperative sack of rice.

“Help—” Kakashi manages to get out.

Sasuke makes a rude sound, dumping him into the dirt beside a tree. “She doesn’t need help,” he says pointedly, drawing his sword again. “Hinata’s there, too.”

Which could be good or bad, Kakashi thinks, gritting his teeth and trying not to let another muscle spasm show. Kiba might stop if he sees her, but Hinata might stop, too. and if Kiba really did mean what he said about killing anyone who tried to stop him—well. Clearly he did, since Kakashi almost ended up that way.

“Kurenai?” he rasps.

Sasuke has his eyes trained on the forest, but he’s not moving from Kakashi’s side. “With the family. Sakura said it was only Kiba out here, without his partner.”

Which is frankly one of the only reasons Kakashi is still breathing. Fighting against Kiba with that level of planning and his partner? That would have ended badly. Or, well, worse. Kurenai was right to stay, on the better-than-decent chance that this was a distraction so the partner could get at the family.

Closing his eyes, Kakashi tips his head back, leaning into the firmness of the tree at his back. A moment later, there's a small hand touching his hitai-ate, tugging it down, and Kakashi tries not to feel too relieved when the drag of draining chakra cuts off. He makes a sound of vague gratitude, not able to manage more than that, and hopes beyond hope that Kiba won't have had time to plan for a Sakura trained by Tsunade.

About this, at least, there’s no need to worry. Barely a minute later there are two sets of footsteps, and Sakura asks, “Sasuke?”

“He’s alive,” Sasuke says, blandly enough to make Kakashi want to protest. “Inuzuka?”

There’s a quiet indrawn breath from Hinata, but Sakura answers, “He said he got what he came for and retreated. I—I didn’t think it was a good idea to follow him in the dark.”

Smart, Kakashi wants to tell her. Of course, being smart has never been Sakura's problem—sometimes, Kakashi thinks, she could do with a little less brilliance and a little more boldness, but they’re getting there.

“So all he wanted was to almost kill our teacher?” Sasuke sounds testy, and Kakashi makes a sound of indignant protest as he forces his eye open.

Sakura gives him an apologetic smile, crouching down beside him. Her brow knits in concentration, and she lays a green-glowing hand against his chest as he eyes slip out of focus.

“Your heart’s okay,” she reports. “The spasms should go away soon, too.”
“Fantastic,” Kakashi says from between gritted teeth as another one ripples through him. Maybe he’ll lay off using Raiton jutsus for a while. The memory of being outsmarted by Inuzuka Kiba is going to stick with him, and he’d prefer to avoid any direct reminders. “He wanted the knife, not me.”

There’s a startled pause, and then Hinata asks quietly, “Th-the knife he took when he stole those clan secrets?”

Kakashi manages a nod, even if he moves his head as little as possible. “Shiranui Clan. They’re all—ah, assassins.” He eases his hands out of their cramping clench, tries to breathe around the awful feeling of his muscles twitching against his will. “They use poisons.”

Hinata looks down at her tangled fingers, face pale. “That’s where K-Kiba got them,” she says, and pale eyes flicker back up to the road, to where the cart is still burning.

Weary but determined, Kakashi pushes to his feet, though he doesn’t protest when Sakura wraps an arm around his waist to brace him. “We should get back,” he says, casting another look at the cart, then resolutely turning away. There wasn’t anything that could have been done to get here in time, and Kakashi hardly needs more deaths on his conscience. These ones he’ll leave with Kiba. “If the partner hasn’t hit the estate already, she might attack soon.”

“As soon as we relax,” Sasuke says, disgusted, and Kakashi acknowledges that with a hum. Dangerous for the missing-nin to hit them one at a time, but it also means they can sleep in shifts and be relatively well-rested, while Kakashi and Kurenai and their teams have to alert for every attack given the strength of their opponents.

“We’ll be fine. This is just like any other mission,” he tells the genin, and doesn’t mean a word of it.

Given that Sakura can now apparently punch trees in half, Kiba’s really freaking glad she didn’t dare follow him more than a few hundred feet from the road. He couldn’t have known to account for that.

Of course, what he did manage to account for paid off in a big way.

A little shaky, Kiba sinks down against the bole of a tree, letting his legs dangle on either side of the branch. His chest aches like he got kicked by a horse, and he reopened the cut Kakashi gave him earlier, but that hardly feels like it matters at all. He managed to fight Kakashi and survived. Only because he had things planned out, because he tried to think of every worst-case scenario and how to fix it, but gods, that has to count.

Genma had told him that learning how to plan and think ahead would let him defeat a jounin, but Kiba hadn’t really believed him. Not in any way that mattered. But then Kakashi had come after him, ready to kill, and Kiba had not only lived through it, he’d gotten the upper hand.

Scrubbing his hands over his face, Kiba takes a careful breath, not entirely sure how to check for broken ribs but making a halfhearted attempt nevertheless. His mother always insisted that that was one of the most dangerous injuries for a shinobi, given the twisting and jumping they do, and her horror stories had been more than enough to terrify Kiba.

He’s probably fine. Kakashi didn’t kick him that hard, and Kiba’s done a lot of moving since then
and still isn’t coughing up blood. He does need to get moving, though; Konan will want to know that he took out a load of supplies, and maybe even Kakashi depending on how much electricity hit him. At the very least it will make things easier next time they attack.

Moving is an effort, especially when Kiba's still shaking with the comedown of an adrenaline high, but he gets his feet under him and leaps lightly to the next tree, careful not to augment the movement with more than a scrap of chakra. Hinata's not great with her Byakugan, thankfully, and probably won't be able to follow if he puts some distance between them now. Neji would be another story entirely, but thankfully he's not here.

It feels a little like a betrayal to say that, especially after Neji almost killed Hinata in the Exams and Kiba got a firsthand look and just how much of a murderer his first crush could be. But it’s a fact, and Kiba has to look at it like that; if he ever faces Neji, he’s going to have to put a hell of a lot more planning into it than he would a confrontation with Hinata.

Hopefully that won't happen any time soon, Kiba tells himself, judging the distance to the next tree and deciding not to risk it. He drops down the trunk instead, steps right into the shallow creek that winds past the roots, and follows it towards the cliff where their camp is set up. He doesn’t have all that much hope of it not happening in general, because Neji's a pretty asshole but he’s also a genius, and he’ll probably be promoted soon. If Kiba stays active with Akatsuki—and there’s no other option he can possibly accept—they're going to cross paths at some point.

Not that it matters, he thinks grimly. Kiba's a missing-nin and that’s all he can see himself as right now. If he lets himself think about any other option, he’s going to start wanting that, and he needs to stay on mission. This is to save Naruto, to keep Akatsuki from cutting off his legs and tearing the bijuu out of him, something even Naruto likely wouldn’t survive. This is to protect Konoha, because Akatsuki is powerful and if they hit Konoha with a surprise attack, trying to get to Naruto, the village will be at a major disadvantage. Kiba's doing this so he can save everything he cares about.

*Someone has to.*

It makes it easier to stomach, that threat to Kakashi. That threat to Sakura, even; they might not know that Kiba doesn’t mean it when he says he wants to kill them, but Kiba knows it, and that’s all that matters. Someday he’ll be able to apologize, look them in the eye and say he was just acting, just trying to save them all, and that’s going to be just about the sweetest moment Kiba can imagine.

For now, though, he shuts that thought away, stepping out of the creek and shaking his sandals off as best he can. That’s more than enough to hide his scent, though Kakashi’s probably not going to be out hunting them until at least morning.

“Is that smoke I'm smelling?” an amused voice asks, and Kiba twitches, jerking around. Only now does he manage to register the scent of paper and rain, and he scowls at Konan, who looks entirely pleased with herself.

“They were trying to make a delivery,” he says. “Food an’ shit. I figured I’d grab us some good stuff and see if we can't make the lord uncomfortable at the same time.”

One of Konan’s eyebrows goes up, but she catches the sealing scroll Kiba tosses her without hesitating. “The Konoha nin didn’t try to stop you?”

Kiba shows his teeth. “Of course they did.”
Konan's gaze sweeps from his head to his toes, then back up, and she nods once. “You're bleeding through your jacket,” she says. “Come.”

As she vanishes back into the tree, Kiba hesitates. This feels way too easy, as far as forgiveness goes. He’d expected Konan to be cold and furious still, unwavering in her anger. But…that was definitely her version of a smile just now, and not because Kiba snagged them something besides dry shinobi rations.

“Puppy,” Konan prompts from inside the tree, just shy of a warning, and Kiba finds his feet moving before he even has to think about it. He ducks through the opening, already shrugging his jacket off to drop on top of his pack, and Konan gestures him over with a flick of her fingers.

“I can do it myself, you know,” Kiba tells her, though he settles in front of her anyway and offers his arm.

Konan flicks a glance at him, then drops her gaze to the long slice down his arm. Like the one he put on Shino, Kiba thinks, and the irony makes his stomach knot.

“Of course you can,” she says, “but it’s easier with two hands.”

Well, apparently this isn’t the part where she kills him, Kiba thinks, though he’s still a little wary. He watches as best he can without seeming like he’s staring, because he needs to know if Konan suspects anything. Not that there’s a lot he can do if she does, but—

“There used to be three of us,” Konan says quietly, but it’s sudden enough to make Kiba jerk and look at her. She keeps her eyes on her hands, though, winding a bandage around Kiba’s bicep with quick, clinical movements.

“Three?” Kiba asks, confused by what she means when she says of us. “Like, in Akatsuki?”

The twist of Konan’s lips definitely isn’t a smile. “That too. But…Nagato and I. There used to be three of us together, not two.”

It’s enough to make Kiba remember her words, back when he told her Danzō was his first kill. Mine was a Konoha shinobi, during the war. I was twelve, and we had one tiny bag of rice between the three of us. And—that must have been a while ago, but Kiba would have to be a complete idiot not to see the grim bleakness in her face even now. He pauses, trying to think what to say, but there’s no sort of comfort that will ever be enough.

“What happened?” he asks instead.

Konan ties off the bandage, then looks up, catching his gaze and holding it. Her amber eyes are burning like someone lit a fire behind them, some toxic mix of old grief and anger and hatred that isn’t entirely directed outward. “I hesitated,” she says simply.

Kiba's kneejerk response is that he can't imagine her ever wavering. Can't see it, here and now, but—she was a kid once. She wasn’t always a terrifying S-rank kunoichi with a style of jutsu Kiba has never seen before. At one point, she must have had to learn to be like she is now.

There's a quiet breath, too soft to be a sigh, and Konan sinks back, tilting her chin up and letting her head fall against the curve of the trunk. She doesn’t close her eyes, just keeps staring up towards the glimmer of moonlight that’s managing to beat out their fire for brilliance, even as it’s half-strangled by swiftly moving clouds. The play of shadows across her face makes it something strange, otherworldly, but so terribly grim that Kiba doesn’t know what to do.
“We were trying to stop the fighting,” Konan says, almost to herself. “In Ame and everywhere else. Hanzō said he wanted a peace treaty, negotiations, and I…” She trails off, and her mouth takes on a rueful tilt again. “For the first time, I thought I could stop killing. I didn’t want to live the rest of my life that way. And when Hanzō grabbed me, I hesitated. I didn’t kill him then, and he used me to destroy everything we’d worked to build, and the man I loved.”

Horrified sympathy streaks through Kiba's chest like a blow, and he tries to restrain a wince. In light of that kind of history, Konan's reaction on the road is a hell of a lot more understandable, less you must be a spy and more I made this mistake once, so don’t. He curls his hand into a fist, feeling the pull of torn skin on his arm, but can't quite bring himself to meet Konan's eyes again right now.

If someone had been close enough to grab him, that would have been a neat way to end the fight. Maybe the Konoha squad wouldn’t have, but if they had, threatening him would probably seem like a good way to get to Konan. Kiba's aware enough to know it wouldn’t actually stop her, but—given the opportunity, someone would probably try, and that’s bad enough. Kiba was too shocked to fight back, if they had, and that’s, well. A big problem, to say the least.

“They're not going to take me by surprise again,” he tells Konan, and means it as a promise to both her and himself. “I was stupid. It won't happen a second time.”

Konan weighs that for a long moment, gaze sharp, then inclines her head, likely seeing that he understands what she was trying to say. “Was it the girl?” she asks, tone trying for light and amused, though it falls a little short. “A crush?”

Kiba huffs. “Only on her cousin,” he retorts, and twists his fingers together, looking down to inspect his knuckles. They're fine, because he never actually punched Kakashi—probably a good thing, really, since being tricky was the only reason he survived that fight. “But, uh. That was Akamaru. My nin-ken. And Hinata was my teammate. Akamaru just—he looked like he was hurting, ‘cause of me, and—”

He breaks off, not knowing how to finish, and tries to shut away the memory again. It’s too close to the surface, though, too fresh, and it throbs like an open wound.

A hand ghosts over his hair once, then again, more firmly. Kiba glances up as Konan runs her fingers through his hair, to find that rueful tilt back in the curve of her mouth. There's more humor in it this time, though, something wry and almost kind, and she withdraws her hand but a moment later Kiba's cloud-patterned cloak is settling over him like a blanket. It’s light but warm, and Kiba tugs it up a little, glad for the heat.

“Get some sleep,” Konan tells him, sinking back down. “The rain will be here soon.”

She says it like it has a meaning Kiba can't comprehend, and he thinks of the road before all of this started, Konan's quiet I guess it rains everywhere as she stared up at the clouds. Not something happy, he thinks, but she doesn’t quite look sad, either, and that’s enough for now. Hunkering down in his cloak, he settles against the inside of the tree and closes his eyes.

“What was his name?” he asks, the thought suddenly occurring to him. “The guy you loved.”

There's a long, long pause, and then Konan breathes out a sound that’s almost a laugh. “Yahiko,” she says. “His name was Yahiko.”

Kiba repeats it to himself as he evens out his breathing, fixing it in his memory. Not because it’s something vital to pass on to Konoha, but because it’s clearly vital to Konan. And—he’s a spy, but
she cares. She wouldn’t have gotten mad if she didn’t. Kiba can’t do anything but care for her in return, even if it’s something as simple as not forgetting a name.
Chapter 10

Being a chuunin is a pain in the ass, but of all the troublesome aspects of it, gate duty is probably the worst. Of course, his father has absolutely no sympathy for his situation, and is more likely to laugh than change things if Shikamaru complains to him again.

Too tired to even groan, Shikamaru slumps back in his seat and wonders how much his mother will yell at him if she finds out that he took a nap while on duty.

“It’s not that bad,” Kotetsu tells him, though he hasn’t even bothered to look up from the scroll with the day’s scheduled arrivals. “Today’s going to be pretty busy, so that will keep you occupied.”

The only thing more tiresome than gate duty is busy gate duty, though Shikamaru doesn’t bother saying as much. Kotetsu is mostly easygoing and laidback, but he has moments of devotion to his job when he’ll talk Shikamaru's ear off about the security of Konoha and why it’s vital they inspect every person who tries to enter for the good of the village. Shikamaru's already gotten that lecture twice and he’d rather not be treated to an encore.

“It’s not even dawn yet,” is all he says, sliding down a little further in his seat.

Kotetsu laughs at him, leaning out of their box to point at a thin sliver of gold edging the horizon. “Sure it is. And it's going to be a beautiful sunrise, just look at those clouds.”

There is nothing on earth that’s more terrible than a morning person, Shikamaru thinks, weary right down to his bones.

Apparently able to read that on his face—not that Shikamaru’s trying very hard to keep it hidden—Kotetsu snorts, dropping back into his seat and kicking him lightly in the ankle. “Don’t make that face, you’re not actually dying. And at least you're not out here with Izumo, okay? He likes to do calisthenics while we’re waiting for the first arrivals.”

Shikamaru pales, sliding his chair back a little on the off chance that that’s something contagious and Kotetsu is a carrier. “Not on your life,” he says determinedly, the first thing he’s put effort into since his mother tipped him out of bed with entirely unnecessary glee this morning.

Kotetsu just grins, rubbing a finger along the bandage that crosses his nose. “Yeah, I'm not a fan either. Exercise is better left to the afternoon.” Dark eyes flicker out to scan the road, then narrow faintly, and Kotetsu shifts his weight forward in a subtle movement, bringing one foot back underneath him so that he can be ready to move.

Despite the strong urge to groan, Shikamaru drags his attention away from his current partner to check the approach to the gate. One person, he thinks, strangling a sigh. A young woman, dressed like a civilian, with a bag slung over her shoulder and her hair up in two buns. No sign of affiliation, no sense of chakra, and she’s carrying herself just a little off-balance, her posture not quite right for her build. Probably not a threat, Shikamaru decides, unless she’s an exceptionally talented actor.

“Morning!” Kotetsu calls cheerfully, as soon as she’s close enough to respond.

“Good morning,” she answers, a little quieter, and her eyes flicker nervously from his hitai-ate to his clan markings to the three kunai on the desk in front of him. Definitely a civilian, Shikamaru confirms, strangling another sigh, and one from a small village at that. She’s likely only seen one
or two shinobi in her life.

“State your name and business in Konoha,” he says, and the girl startles and turns to him where he’s halfway in the shadows. Shikamaru gives her a halfhearted nod, reaching for the clipboard with their visitor log and then waiting expectantly.

“I was paid to deliver a message,” she says, a little uncertainly. Carefully, she unslings her bag, then pulls out four scrolls tied together with string. “To, uh, a shinobi?”

Kotetsu doesn’t quite roll his eyes, which is better than Shikamaru would manage if that statement was directed at him. Instead, he smiles, polite and patient, and says, “Well, there are a lot of shinobi here. Is there anyone in particular we can help you find?”

A little sheepishly, the girl offers up a scrap of paper with a messy scrawl of characters across it. “Genma is the only name I have, I'm sorry.”

Since he’s closer, Shikamaru takes the paper, glancing at it, and—

His eyes catch on the strokes of the name, less messy than he had originally thought. Just—jagged. Rushed. Like the writer was too impatient to take the time and make things neat, even though the knowledge of how to do it was there.

Shikamaru knows he's seen that handwriting before, and he’s good at remembering little things like that.

“That must be Shiranui Genma,” Kotetsu says cheerfully. “He’s one of our tokubetsu jounin, and—”

“I’ll take it to him,” Shikamaru interrupts, and when Kotetsu blinks and raises an eyebrow at him, he curses inwardly but still gets to his feet. “You're senior,” he says with a shrug, which doesn’t exactly explain but is close enough to count.

Kotetsu eyes him for a second longer, but finally nods, and turns to the girl with a smile. “You don’t mind, do you? You can still enter the village if you need supplies or anything.”

“No, that’s fine, thank you.” If anything, the girl looks relieved. “I was planning to go back to Tanzaku Gai to sleep, and then catch a boat up the Sakyō River.” She takes a quick step forward to set the scrolls on the desk, then three back like she doesn’t dare stay too close to them, and Shikamaru has to strangle a sigh. Civilians.

“All right. Have a safe trip, then.” Kotetsu offers her another smile and a small wave, and the girl bows and turns, picking up a trot as she heads back up the road. He watches her go, and tells Shikamaru, “Genma was saying he was going to be doing some gardening today, so he’s probably at home.”

Shikamaru remembers where that is, if only vaguely—his father stopped there once on the way back from the training grounds with him, to leave some papers on Genma's doorstep. It had been late, but Shikamaru is fairly certain he recalls enough landmarks to find the house again.

“Thanks,” he says, picking up the bundle of scrolls and tucking it under his arm. Some vague sense of duty and his mother’s nagging voice in his head makes him ask, “You’ll be okay until I get back?”

That makes Kotetsu laugh, and the older chuunin waves him off. “Unless we get an unexpected flood of S-rank missing-nin, I’ll be fine,” he says. “And even then, I can hold out long enough to
It should be a ridiculous statement, because Kotetsu is thin and wiry and almost always sporting a smile, uniform not quite regulation tidy, but—well. It’s a good reminder, Shikamaru thinks, even as he nods and steps back into the village, that rank doesn’t always mean much where shinobi are concerned. Kotetsu and Izumo are gate guards for a reason, chuunin or not, and they managed to survive the invasion even though the were in the thick of the fighting. Shikamaru should probably remember not to underestimate them.

That realization is one of the reasons he waits until he’s on the very outskirts of the village, near where most of the smaller clans have their lands, to even glance down at the note in his hand again. He keeps up his lazy amble, keeps his face as unconcerned as possible as he wanders down the road, but—

That handwriting is definitely the same as he remembers, a straight line down the paper but with the characters slightly off-center. The first two are impeccably neat, but they slant more as they continue, and it’s one of the things that caught Shikamaru's eye in the first place, a hint at distraction but with skill behind it. Not too surprising, really—Shikamaru's heard that Inuzuka Hana practices calligraphy, and if she were the one to teach her brother to write, she probably passed on a few other skills as well.

It doesn’t make any other sense at all, though. There's no reason a traitor like Kiba would be writing to a Konoha shinobi. And of all the shinobi to write to, their Exam proctor?

The road is empty, with no sounds of people approaching, but Shikamaru still steps sideways into a stand of trees, crouching down so that the bushes block line of sight from the path. With a deepening frown, he sets the note down on the dry leaves in front of him and rocks back to sit on his heels, staring at it. His heartbeat is strangely distracting, like it is during particularly tense shogi games with Asuma, but Shikamaru brushes the awareness of it to the back of his mind with a flicker of annoyance.

There's no signature on the note or on the scrolls, though Shikamaru doesn’t quite dare untie them and check the contents. Traps are common on messages between shinobi, and Shikamaru's not great at disarming them yet. The note, though—that’s easy enough to study, as long as Shikamaru doesn’t think about the way his stomach is twisting.

Asuma had been the one to tell them what had happened. Shikamaru had gotten up for training and found a grimly silent village, his father gone, his mother uncharacteristically subdued as she cooked breakfast. She hadn’t said anything, and Shikamaru hadn’t known what to ask, and he’d left the house with a curl of paranoia starting to tighten in his chest. The rest of his team had already been assembled at their usual spot, but there was a pile of butts next to Asuma that spoke of him going through twice as many cigarettes as normal, and Ino was pale in a way Shikamaru couldn’t remember seeing before.

I don’t know if you heard, Asuma had said bluntly, but Shimura Danzō is dead, and Inuzuka Kiba killed him.

It was a little, Shikamaru thinks, like being told that Naruto had turned traitor, or Iruka-sensei had. Something entirely ridiculous that they were expected to believe without question, because there was none to be asked. Just the facts: Kiba had murdered a village elder with poison, one of the Hokage's councilors, had stolen secrets from a small clan and fled the village with a new classification as S-rank and a massive bounty on his head.

The funeral was certainly proof enough, if nothing else. And the look on Inuzuka Hana’s face,
afterwards, the way she stood on the hill overlooking the Academy and stared down at the doors, expression twisted with an emotion Shikamaru couldn’t pinpoint. He had wondered, when he saw her, if she was remembering all the times she would pick Kiba up after class, her three nin-ken bouncing around her feet and a smile on her face as she scrubbed a hand through her brother’s hair. She hadn’t noticed Shikamaru staring, then, and he’d ducked into the Administration Building before she could, but—seeing her like that has managed to stay with him

And now he has Kiba's handwriting in front of him, almost six months after the other boy’s desertion, with no explanation and no reason for Kiba to be writing to a Konoha shinobi.

Shiranui Genma is easy enough to remember as well. He proctored Shikamaru's last match, after all, and he was the one to protect Sasuke from Baki when the Suna jounin intervened in Gaara's match. Shikamaru has never otherwise encountered him, but he's heard his father talking, and Genma's one of the Hokage's bodyguards, likely to be the next commander of the Hokage Guard Platoon. If he wasn’t trusted beyond a shadow of a doubt, he wouldn’t have that position, and Shikamaru is absolutely certain of that. But—

It doesn’t make sense, he thinks, a little frustrated, and presses his thumb over the first character of Genma's name. Blackmail? A threat? But that’s a lot of scrolls for some kind of extortion. Kiba definitely killed Danzō, too, there's no doubt about that—Shikamaru saw the autopsy files his father brought home, and the exam was performed by Shizune herself. They had witnesses that put Kiba in front of Danzō’s house barely twenty minutes before his death, and a patrol that caught him slipping over the wall four hours later but wasn’t able to stop him. There couldn’t have been a mistake. All the pieces line up too perfectly for doubt.

It’s possible Shikamaru is wrong, or that he’s misremembering something. Possible that mistook someone else’s handwriting for Kiba's, but—

Maybe it’s that Shikamaru relies too much on his brain, and always has, but he’s very close to certain that he’s right.

Rising to his feet with a faint sigh, Shikamaru dusts off his pants, then scoops up the note and
tucks the scrolls back under his arm. He steps back out onto the path like he has every right to have been skulking in the bushes, not wanting anyone to question him, but there's still no one on the road.

Everyone is probably still sleeping, Shikamaru reminds himself, a little grumpily, and directs a dark look at the scrolls. If he had stayed in bed instead of getting up for gate duty, he’d have no idea about any of this, and right now that definitely seems preferable.

Shiranui Clan lands start a few hundred meters down, and a small path meanders past a stand of cherry trees and then across a wooden bridge over a small stream. There's a wall, but the gate stands open, and when Shikamaru passes through he’s hit with the smell of flowers and growing things. Green marches along the walls, plants thick and verdant at the base, and ivy and wisteria vines climb the walls and the house.

The main house is dark, and Shikamaru gives it a glance but can't sense any chakra within it. Genma probably isn’t sleeping, then, but Kotetsu said he would be here, so Shikamaru just needs to keep looking.

With a sigh and a muttered troublesome, Shikamaru heads around the side of the house, keeping an eye on his surroundings in case he stumbles into a trap. Shinobi tend to be a paranoid bunch, if for logical reasons.

Thankfully, he doesn’t trigger anything, and as soon as he edges around the back of the house he can hear light humming coming from the depths of the jungle-like garden in front of him. Catching a flash of movement through the branches of a tall shrub, he finds the narrow footpath and starts down it, calling, “Shiranui?”

There's a pause, and then Genma calls, “Hang on, one second.”

Shikamaru gladly stops moving, letting Genma push through the foliage and step out onto the path, carrying a basket full of plant pieces. At a glance, Shikamaru can see flowers and berries and roots, nothing that looks edible or like it needed pruning, but he’s hardly about to tell someone else how to garden; he generally feels like it’s torture whenever his mother or Ino make him help with their plants, and if he’s wrong Genma might try to teach him something. That’s a fate worse than death, honestly.

“Shikamaru,” Genma says with some surprise, but he’s smiling around the senbon tucked between his teeth. Shikamaru glances at it for half a moment, incongruous against the ratty, hole-filled shirt and dirt-stained civilian pants Genma is wearing, but it’s hardly unusual for a shinobi to want to be armed at all times. Professional caution isn’t the same as being wary of attack.

“Message for you,” Shikamaru says as he offers the scrolls, trying not to be too obvious about it how he’s watching Genma's response. “A civilian girl brought it. If you want to write a response I can probably catch up to her again.”

It’s a statement crafted to make Genma check the contents, and he doesn’t hesitate to, undoing the string and tucking three of them under one arm. The last he cracks the seal on, then pulls open, and it’s light enough now for Shikamaru to catch plant and chemical names, marked alongside strings of numbers and amounts.

Hazel eyes go wide, and Genma's head comes up. “Was there anything else?” he asks, and the words are mild but there's a buried sharpness in his eyes.

Shikamaru blinks, a little startled by the change, but agreeably hands over the note. “Just this,” he
says, watching Genma's eyes slide over his name and drop to study the flower name in the corner. Almost imperceptibly, his shoulders relax, and only then does Shikamaru register that he'd tensed at all. Subtle and quiet tells, and if Shikamaru wasn't specifically looking for them he'd miss them entirely.

“Thanks,” Genma says with a friendly smile, rolling the scroll back up. “You don't need to catch the messenger. It's just recipes for a few new poisons I've been wanting to try.”

Poisons, Shikamaru thinks, and it feels a little like a sharp static shock. Genma brews poisons. The plants around them, and what he picked—those must be ingredients. And Kiba killed Danzō with poisons he stole from a small clan.

“Kiba,” he says, before he can think to stop himself. “Kiba stole your clan techniques.”

Something dark flickers in Genma's eyes, and he looks down at the scrolls, a wry smile crossing his face. “Yeah,” he confirms. “Bit of a kick in the balls, frankly. Shiranui Clan doesn't have much left beyond those formulas.” He snorts softly, self-deprecating, and tips a hand like he's inviting Shikamaru to laugh at him. “There's not a lot of use in me coming up with new formulas, since I don't exactly have anyone to pass them on to and I'm already getting up there for a shinobi, but I can't just let it go.”

Does he not realize? Shikamaru wonders, hesitating over saying something. What if Genma doesn't have any idea who's writing him, and Kiba's doing it to get more poisons out of him than what he grabbed? It seems too complicated a plan for the Kiba that Shikamaru used to skip class with, but then again, so does killing Danzō with stolen clan secrets. It's possible.

If things aren't so simple, though, if this is some sort of plot and Genma is a traitor against all odds and expectations, Shikamaru letting on that he knows could tip him off.

Another moment of hesitation, and Shikamaru wavers, but...better to see Genma's reaction than to just keep guessing. “That handwriting looks familiar,” he says, pretending to glance down at it. He doesn't have to fake a frown, though he lets a little extra confusion slide into his face. “I don’t remember where, though.”

No reaction at all from Genma, no shift beyond a faint, confused arch of one brow. “Really?” he asks, tipping the note up to look at it again. “It's an old contact. Maybe they've written your dad before. I'm not the only Konoha shinobi they do business with.”

“That's probably it,” Shikamaru agrees, even though he knows it isn't. Stepping back, he nods to Genma, then asks, “No message?”

“No, but thanks.” Genma offers him another smile, scoops up his basket, and asks, “Want some tea? It will only take a minute or two.”

Shikamaru shakes his head. “I'm on duty at the gate, but thanks for the offer.”

“Good luck, then.” Genma waves an absent hand, already pulling the scroll open again as he heads towards the back porch, and he doesn't look up as he vanishes through the door.

Shikamaru doesn't linger, a little wary now that the poison connection has been made. There's nothing overtly unnerving about the garden, which is pretty and lush and full of flowers, but Shikamaru's been friends with Ino more than long enough to know that the prettiest flowers are often the most deadly. He beats a quick retreat to the main road, and manages not to look over his shoulder just in case Genma is watching him go.
Something is *definitely* strange, he decides uneasily, even as he lets his feet carry him back towards the gate. Whether Genma knows or not, that was Kiba's handwriting. Kiba was the one who stole Genma's clan secrets, something Genma is clearly unhappy about, and used them to kill an old war hero. Genma might not be incredibly well-known, but he’s a high-ranking, influential shinobi positioned very close to the Hokage, and the fact that Kiba is contacting him, with his knowledge or not, is both suspicious and dangerous.

There’s no proof of anything. Not yet. Not beyond Shikamaru's certainty. But…he’s definitely going to keep an eye on things, even if that means he has to follow his dad to work the way he’s been urging. Shikamaru's a twelve-year-old chuunin, but he has a good head for tactics when he applies himself, and this is about a traitor from his own class. Shikamaru never caught any hints that Kiba was anything but what he seemed, and that offends some part of him that has always believed it when people call him a genius. It’s not right that he missed something so big, and he’s not fond of the idea that he could. It’s dangerous, for a shinobi who fights like he does, all assessment and calculation.

This, Shikamaru decides with an aggrieved sigh, is definitely his mother’s blood coming out in him, and he’s pretty sure he doesn’t like it at all.
There's a sharp, burning pain radiating outward from his shoulder, seeping through his veins until Naruto wants to dig his nails into his own skin and tear them out, just to make the hurt go away. He clutches at the wound, trying to make himself breathe as he curls in on himself, on his knees in dark, shallow water. The air is heavy, which doesn't help, musty like it hasn't moved in a very long time and humid on top of that. It's not cold, but Naruto is cold regardless, shivers running through him as he grits his teeth against the pain.

Something deep within the shadows stirs, massive but sleek. It moves with strange grace, rising and pushing close to the heavy bars, and one burning red eye slides open.

“What a friend,” the fox growls, and the cruel humor in its voice vibrates right through Naruto's bones. “He saw right through you, didn’t he?”

Naruto has been trying his hardest not to think about the words Kiba spat at him, the way he carved right through Naruto's clones without hesitation. Trying not to think of beast and monster spat at him by one of the few people who never seemed to care what the adults in the village said about him.

“Shut up,” he whispers, but the sound barely makes it past the cage of his arms.

The Kyuubi laughs, low and mocking, and bares massive white teeth in what's likely meant to be a smile. “Why? The truth hurts, doesn’t it? I felt how he hated you, all the rage inside of him. He liked hurting you, didn’t you notice?”

“Shut up,” Naruto breathes, twisting his fingers into his hair. It can't be true, and he won't believe it. Kiba used to ditch class with him, sit on the hill behind the Academy to watch the clouds and talk, Akamaru bouncing around them chasing butterflies. Naruto can count his close friends on one hand, and Kiba's one of them. Kiba didn’t mean it, or he was forced, or—or something. Their fight in the Chuunin Exams wasn’t that bad. It was fine. Naruto won, and Kiba lost, but it was fine.

There's another shift, the Kyuubi moving closer, its nose almost through the bars but not quite. “I love the taste of hatred, and that boy was swimming in it. He loathes you, brat. You disgust him. Just like everyone else, isn’t he—”

“Shut up!” Naruto screams, and it cracks his throat, makes his chest ache. Blue chakra whirls out around him, slams headlong into the cage and drives the Kyuubi back as it snarls, and Naruto falls forward with a gasp, hands splashing down into the water as he pants for breath.

The ringing silence lasts for a long, tense minute, and then the Kyuubi pulls itself back to its feet with a noise that’s somewhere between satisfaction and disgust. “You're just like her,” it growls, then bares its teeth again. “But I’ll get you in the end, just like I got her.”

Naruto stares down at the murky water, at the pale shadows of his fingers beneath the surface. There's stone underneath the water, worn smooth, but it’s not cold. Instead, it’s warm, and there’s a pulse of chakra deep beneath the surface that throbs like a vast heartbeat. Too fast, some distant part of him thinks, and he closes his eyes against the answering pulse of pain through his body.

Kiba poisoned him. Kiba stabbed him with a kunai and poisoned him and called him a monster and a beast, Kiba betrayed Konoha and killed someone and there's nothing Naruto can do.

“Like who?” he asks, challenges, as he lifts his head. Meets the cold, assessing stare that’s trained
on him, full of resentment and hatred in equal measure, but Naruto's lived his whole life under the
weight of such things and he doesn’t care anymore. He’s stuck down here until the poison is gone
from his system, stranded here in pain and teetering on the edge of losing every last ounce of his
patience. One of his friends tried to kill him, and Naruto doesn’t know how to fix it.

“Who am I like?” he demands, shoving to his feet. He wavers a step, then steadies. Faces the
Kyuubi as squarely as he can and clenches his hands into fists. “Tell me who the hell you're talking
about!”

For a moment, the Kyuubi doesn’t answer, just stares at him. Then, slowly, its lips pull back,
showing teeth again in a terrifying grin. “You don’t know,” it says, close to gleeful. “That idiot old
man never told you. Oh, that’s perfect.”

All Naruto can hear is that heartbeat under his bare feet, or maybe it’s his own. It thunders in his
ears, makes him screw his face up and clamp his hands over his ears, but it won't go away. All he
can hear is the pulsing, thundering beat, vibrating through him. “Who!?”

The Kyuubi laughs at him like this is all some vastly amusing joke, lowers his head and grins
hungrily. “The bitch who kept me trapped for nearly twenty years,” he growls. “The same one who
whelped you.”

Naruto can't breathe, and this time it’s not because of the poison unspooling through his veins. He
takes a step back before he can stop himself, rocks on the balls of his feet as he pulls himself up
short. There's no possible way to tear his eyes away from the Kyuubi, though, no force in the world
that could make him move any further.

“What?” he manages.

“You heard me, brat,” the Kyuubi retorts, practically gleeful. It rises to its full height, looming over
Naruto, and the feel of it is terrible and crawling and overwhelming, like the very worst kind of
anger. “She thought she was strong, thought she could use her chakra to chain me down, to hurt
me, but I killed her.” Long, sword-sharp teeth flash, and claws as long as Naruto's whole body dig
into the stone. “I still remember the taste of her blood,” the Kyuubi tells him, eyes blazing with
malicious pleasure.

Naruto's chest aches like it’s been hollowed out, like there's nothing left inside of him but fire and
hurt. His fingernails are digging into his palms, and each breath scorches his throat as he drags it
in.

“No,” he says, more plea than anything. This, on top of Kiba trying to kill him—he can’t. “You're
lying. You're lying, you bastard, take it back!”

The Kyuubi laughs, rumbling through the air like the sound of a distant avalanche. “Why would I
do that?” it taunts. “You're getting angry, aren’t you? Good.”

He is, Naruto realizes with a jolt. There's anger crawling up through his chest, swirling in his
stomach. He’s furious, wants to rip and tear and hurt, wants to drive the Kyuubi back and forget
what it said, wants to curse and snarl and rage, because all of this is the Kyuubi's fault. This is all
because of the monster inside of him. That’s why the people in Konoha hate him, that’s why Kiba
hates him and tried to kill him, that’s why his mother is dead and the Kyuubi killed her and he
can’t—

Chakra erupts in a blue blaze around him, slices out like blades to slam into the Kyuubi and drive it
back as it howls in rage. There's something strangely solid about the power, ghostly but there, and
Naruto stares at it, breathing hard. Harder than he should from only using that much chakra, but—

But he’s never made the Kyuubi recoil from him before.

“I hate you,” he gets out, and the words rip at the inside of his throat. “I hate you, I hate you, I hate you—”

But the fox is laughing, laughing at him like this is a victory. “Yes,” it snarls. “Hate me. Hate me more. Let it fester and grow and consume you, brat, and one day I’ll eat you just like I did your worthless mother.”

Another explosion of blue chakra, and Naruto can feel himself screaming, can feel it break somewhere deep inside him, staggers as the stone cracks and the water writhes, screams and screams and screams—

“Naruto! Naruto! Dobe, wake up!”

Naruto jolts awake with something that might be a strangled sob, reaching for something, anything solid. He latches on to soft cloth and clings, trying to shake the horror and terror and fury still coursing through him. The gouge in his shoulder is burning like someone set a fire inside of it, but he’s so relieved to be somewhere other than that cell in his own mind that he can’t even bring himself to care. Taking a shuddering breath, he leans forward, barely aware of the movement, and lets his head fall against dark blue cloth. Vaguely, distantly, he can hear the slow, steady beat of another heart, and focusing on it makes the rage start to recede.

There’s a startled pause and then, slowly, a hand settles on Naruto’s shoulder. “Dobe?” Sasuke asks, not quite uncertain but nowhere near as dismissive as he normally is.

Naruto shudders, still not quite out of the clutches of that dream-that-wasn’t. “It killed her,” he whispers, feels Sasuke stiffen but can’t make himself stop talking. “It’s the reason I don’t have a mom and why people hate me and why Kiba hates me and it’s going to kill me—”

“What?” Sasuke demands, closer to alarmed now.

It feels like the fox is still laughing at him, rumbling through his bones. Naruto shudders, breath stuttering in his lungs, and closes his eyes again. He takes one breath, then another, and forces his face into something brighter, makes himself let go of Sasuke’s shirt and pull back and smile, even though it feels like the effort is enough to crack him in two.

“Sorry,” he says, makes it cheerful, makes it silly. “Sorry, Sasuke, it was just a dream! I didn’t mean to wake you up.”

Another pause, careful and assessing, and then Sasuke says quietly, “You didn’t. It’s almost noon, idiot.” When Naruto blinks, startled, and glances at him, Sasuke catches his gaze and says, low but pointed, “And stop lying, Naruto.”

Naruto feels his smile falter, his eyes start to burn. He ducks his head, trying desperately to hide it, because it’s one thing to cry in public when it’s happy, but if he cries when he’s sad people look at him and whisper pathetic and waste of space and he can’t—even—

“Inuzuka hates you because he’s a moron,” Sasuke tells him bluntly. “He’s jealous that you beat him, but that’s his fault.”

Sasuke doesn’t actually know. No one on his team does, except maybe Kakashi. They don’t get why people hate Naruto, or why Kiba is so angry that Naruto beat him. Naruto sniffs, rubs his
hands over his eyes and doesn’t even try to look at Sasuke, not wanting to see whatever is on his face.

“It’s mine, too,” he says, equal parts miserable and mulish. “I—you know how everybody hates me? It’s because of the Kyuubi. It’s because it’s inside of me, and it keeps talking to me, and every time I get really mad I think it tries to take over.”

“The Kyuubi?” There's a strange lilt to Sasuke's words, realization and sudden understanding and something that’s a little like relief. “That’s—you have it inside of you?”

Naruto still can't look at him, just nods. “I'm a jinchuuriki,” he says, and then, as understanding hits him, “My—my mom must have been too.”

“…Oh,” Sasuke says finally, if a little faintly. Since he hasn’t started yelling or anything, Naruto risks a glance up, to find Sasuke staring at the far wall, thoughts racing across his face. He doesn’t seem angry, though—or worse, afraid—so that’s a good sign.

“Sasuke?” he asks, still a touch wary, but—there's hope, too, somewhere deep down. Naruto just can't help it.

Sasuke blinks, glancing at him, and then immediately looks away. “Hn. That’s why you get stronger sometimes,” he says, not a question despite the phrasing.

“And ‘cause I'm just better than you at being a shinobi,” Naruto shoots back, though his heart isn’t entirely in it.

Startlingly, Sasuke smirks, just faintly. “That’s why you beat Inuzuka,” he says. “Not because you're a jinchuuriki. Because he’s an idiot.”

Hearing it like that doesn’t actually help all that much. Naruto’s shoulder still hurts, and beast rings faintly in his ears. But—

He’s thought about having a mother so many times. Thought about family, and why people whisper about him in the village. No one’s ever told him anything about his father or his mother, and—

She thought she was strong, thought she could use her chakra to chain me down, to hurt me, but I killed her.

“I don’t even know her name,” Naruto whispers, scrubbing his hands over his eyes.

A long pause, heavy and still, and then Sasuke lets out a breath. “Family doesn’t always make you happy,” he says, and it’s probably meant to be dismissive but ends up closer to grim resignation than anything. Even so, he looks at Naruto for a moment, then away. “If she was a jinchuuriki, someone must have known her. There have to be records somewhere.”

Naruto has spent years believing that his parents were some civilian couple, or maybe travelers, or even bad people that no one cared about. The idea that his mother was someone people knew, a powerful shinobi—he doesn’t know how to feel about that. He takes a breath, another. Holds it for a moment, then lets it out, looks up, and smiles. This time, it’s not forced.

“I'm gonna find her,” he says fiercely. “I'm going to find out who my mom was, believe it!”

“We are,” Sasuke corrects, folding his arms over his chest. “Can you even read, dobe?”
Naruto bristles. “Of course I can! Can you, bastard?”

“I’m not the one who almost failed the graduation test, idiot.”

“Yeah, well, you’re stupid anyways!”

“Shut up, dobe!”

“Make me, teme!”

“That’s pretty,” Konan says mildly, inspecting the flower Kiba is crouched over.

Kiba huffs, touching the pale blue petals lightly before he pushes back to his feet. “It’s a windflower,” he says. “They’re poisonous. Not anything really dangerous, but they can still hurt you if you eat ‘em.”

Konan lifts a brow at him, looking amused. “Most people don’t eat wildflowers, puppy,” she tells him. “Are you done?”

“Are you?” Kiba retorts, though he doesn’t mean it as anything more than teasing. He takes three short bounds and lands on the hilltop beside her, scanning the expanse of meadow that runs up to the walls of the compound. A different approach than they’ve tried before, but the trees on the other side will give the clones cover for their attack, and with Kakashi hurt the Konoha squad is going to need everyone out fighting if they want any chance of winning. The field is open enough to make it seem like they have the advantage, too, given their numbers, as long as they don’t look closely.

Reaching out, Konan tugs Kiba’s cloak straight, then tucks her hands into her sleeves, waiting. There’s a decent breeze picking up, and Kiba raises his face to it, breathing in the smell of what used to be his team. He closes his eyes, marking their positions on his mental map, and says, “Aburame and Hyuuga on the wall, Kurenai’s moving between them. I think Sakura’s on the ground behind them, but I can’t tell how fresh the scent is.”

Konan tips her head in acknowledgement, eyes on the compound. “How far can the Hyuuga girl see?”

It’s probably a bad sign that Kiba’s getting used to pushing down the twist of nausea that comes with each small betrayal, every moment he falls back on casual cruelty. “Not far. She’s pretty crappy at using it. Her Gentle Fist is bad too—she’s not good at pinpoint attacks, still uses fists instead of fingertips an’ shit. A bit further than normal vision, unless she’s improved a hell of a lot in five months.”

“An edge for us,” Konan says mildly, because of course she wouldn’t be aware of how much Hinata has always agonized over being weaker than her cousin and her younger sister, over being rejected as heir in favor of Hanabi and the constant source of her father’s disappointment. Very carefully, Kiba packs all of that knowledge up, shuts it away. He can’t hesitate again. He can’t.

Konan gave him a pass once, as a kindness and out of nostalgia more than anything, and Kiba can’t afford to waste that.

“Yeah,” he agrees, makes himself grin as he crouches down, dragging his fingers through the dirt and taking another breath. He can’t smell the clones, which means Kakashi won’t be able to, either
—Konan's paper is good at blocking scent, when she puts some extra effort into it. Too much to justify using the technique all the time, but against trackers it’s a handy thing.

A whisper of new scent sweeps past, and Kiba tilts his head, taking it in. “Horses,” he reports, eyes narrowing. “Out of their stable. At least a couple of them.”

Konan hums. “Horses are about the only way civilians can keep up with shinobi on the move,” she says. “They might be getting ready to make a run for the capital.”

“Not that they’ll get far,” Kiba says cheerfully, and brushes his fingers off on his pants. A check of the sky shows that the heavy drizzle isn’t about to let up any time soon, which is a plus; wet conditions will take Kakashi’s Raiton jutsus out of play unless he wants to do just as much damage to himself as to them. Things really are lining up in their favor, and Kiba’s trying his damnedest to believe that it’s a good thing.

“Easy,” Konan says quietly, though when Kiba glances up at her she still has her eyes fixed on the compound. “We made all the preparations we’ll need.”

Kiba really freaking hopes so. His midnight stealth run to scout the borders of the estate and lay traps was stressful enough, and having it amount to nothing will just make that worse. Besides, if the family really is leaving, this is their last big chance unless they want to try for an ambush on the road. Doable, probably—two shinobi traveling alone will get a hell of a lot further than shinobi guarding civilians—but a big risk.

Forcing the coil of tension in his chest down a notch, Kiba takes a breath. He shifts his weight, balancing himself, and does another quick check of the terrain. Hinata might not be able to sense them until they're close, and Shino's kikaichū won't be fond of this weather, but Sasuke and Kakashi both have the Sharingan, and Kiba knows next to nothing about its range. Itachi hasn’t shared much information with Konan, either, so she’s also at a loss.

“Ready?” he asks, more than a little eager to get this over with.

Konan tips her head. The black cloak with its red clouds swirls around her, and then papers start to peel off of her form, whirling through the air in the opposite direction of the wind. More and more fill the space around them, as thick as snow, and Kiba's seen some cool techniques before but this one is just about the most beautiful. He’d been under the impression that nothing could beat Neji’s Gentle Fist style, but—Konan easily passes that mark.

“Ready,” Konan tells him, and there's something vicious in her amber eyes, something that makes Kiba wonder whether she’s so ready to fight all the time, or if facing Konoha shinobi makes her particularly cruel. There's no chance to ask, though—not that Kiba thinks he would, because he’s smarter than that. Even as he rises, Konan's form shatters completely, and the papers stream forward to engulf the entire field.

It’s not like there's any need for a signal, given that. Kiba launches himself forward into a run, digging his sandals in hard as he leans into the movement. It’s a good distance to the wall, and their attack isn’t exactly going to be subtle, but they still need to find a balance, get as close as possible to draw the others out. Too close and the Konoha nin might notice the clones slipping in to kill the family; too far and they’ll hang back, safe in the compound.

With the direction of the wind, Kiba doesn’t need line of sight to know they’ve been spotted. There’s a flicker of panic, something sharp and acrid, and then a shout. Konan's paper whirls in front of Kiba, blinding, but he can smell when Sasuke crosses the wall, Kurenai beside him. Shino, Sakura, Kakashi, and Hinata are a beat behind, and Kiba draws his knives, shifts his weight back
It’s easy to laugh at that, the memory of Sasuke's cool dismissals in the Academy so close. Kiba hurls himself upright, slamming his shoulder into Sasuke's chest and bowling him over completely, then turns sharply and ducks to let Sakura's fist fly over his head. Team 7’s not used to working with Team 8, though, and Hinata appears out of the whirling paper right in the path of Sakura's punch. Sakura pulls up with a horrified cry, Hinata yelps, and the two girls crash into each other, tumbling head over heels and landing in a tangle.

“Catfight!” Kiba calls with wicked cheer, darts back and out of range of Sasuke's next swing. It’s vicious and unhesitating, and Kiba reminds himself that Sasuke is and always has been a bastard. Out of the five genin, Sasuke's the one to worry about; he won't hesitate to cut Kiba down.

“Stop laughing,” Sasuke growls at him as Kiba slides past his left side. A lightning-fast reversal forces Kiba to duck again, misses him by a hair and makes him bounce back further away from the wall. “You're a damned traitor.”

“You’d know all about that, would you, Uchiha?” Kiba taunts. “Lots of experience, given who your brother is, yeah?”

Incandescent fury flashes across Sasuke's face, and he doesn’t waste his breath on words, just swings like he’s trying to behead Kiba. It’s a sloppy movement, less precise than his other blows, and Kiba leaps over it, lands in a slide, and then throws himself to his feet and spins. His white knife flickers out, meeting a kunai with a sharp clang, and Kiba knocks the weapon to the side.

“Hey, hey, you're awake!” he says, grinning at Shino. “I thought you’d be out for a couple of days with the stuff I gave you.”

“Clearly you were mistaken,” Shino says, voice tight. “Why, you ask? Because I am awake and fully prepared to drag you back to Konoha.”
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year to everyone! I figured a new chapter was a good way to kick things off for 2018. Here's to a productive and entertaining year!

Kiba scoffs, flipping one knife up into a tight spin and catching it again. “You? Really? You think you’re going to be able to take me out after I kicked your ass last time? Fucking think again, bug boy.”

A familiar flash of scent behind him makes him slam chakra into his feet and leap, even as a blur of silver and dark blue flashes past. Flipping over, Kiba drops down to land, spins to the side, and kicks Sasuke hard between the shoulder blades as the boy tries to pull up. Shino sidesteps him as well, the buzz of waking kikaichū filling the air around them, and Kiba hops back to keep from getting surrounded. Sakura and Hinata are up and moving, though he can't see them yet, and with Shino in front of him and Sasuke behind him, he's on the verge of being penned in.

“This is not you, Kiba,” Shino says, quiet but firm. “Why am I certain? Because you are my teammate, and a good person.”

It takes effort for Kiba not to let it show on his face, the impact of those words. Maybe they're right, maybe he is a good person, but there's no space for that part of him right now. No space for kindness or mercy or old friendships, and he snarls, teeth bared, knives raised.

“You're fucking forgetting something, don’t you think?” he spits, and it’s only partly an act. “If I go back to Konoha, at best they’ll stick me in a cell for the rest of my life. I killed that bastard Danzō, remember? The entire fucking council is out for my blood.”

“But you saved Torune,” Shino tells him.

For an instant Kiba is absolutely certain he heard that wrong. He stares at Shino, grasping for words, but can't find any. Torune? As in Shino's adopted older brother, killed by Danzō when Root disbanded five years ago?

“What?” he manages, and it’s only luck that his voice doesn’t crack.

They’ve known each other practically since they were born, with how close their parents are; maybe someone else would miss the flicker of Shino's expression, like deep-seated relief, but Kiba doesn’t. “The Root shinobi,” he says. “Danzō only said he killed them, and the Sandaime didn’t check. Torune is alive.”

*Oh, thank fuck*, Kiba thinks, wants to close his eyes in relief but doesn’t dare. He never expected news like that, never hoped for it—killing Danzō was only ever a play to end up an S-rank criminal—but gods, he’s so fucking glad. Torune was everything to Shino, and to think that he can have that back is just—good. *So* good.

“You have not stopped caring, Kiba,” Shino says quietly. “Come home.”

Of course Kiba hasn’t stopped caring. He’s *never* stopped caring. It’s the sole reason he’s doing
this: care for Naruto, care for his friends, care for Konoha as a whole. The thought is jarring, rocks Kiba back to reality and makes him tighten his grip on his knives, sucking in a sharp breath.

“Caring?” he gets out, feels movement behind him and channels just a touch of chakra down into his feet. “Yeah, sorry, I don’t play that game anymore. You’re on your own, and I’m out.”

A blur of movement hurtles straight at him, pink hair, fist leading, but Kiba leaps up, flips over. He brings his hands together, shaping one quick sign, then twists hard to change direction as the ground under the three genin explodes into pale smoke. Tuning out the cries, he lets himself drop, flips a knife up to be ready even as he hits the ground and rolls. There’s a sound above him, startled and dismayed, but Kiba ignores it as he lunges, going low.

He misses Kurenai’s hamstrings by a centimeter, slides under her kick, and rams his shoulder into her thigh as he rises. She stumbles enough to break her concentration, and Konan erupts out of the tangle of illusions holding her, dodging Kakashi’s blows and sending a hail of paper weaponry spinning right at his face. Kiba vaults straight up, foot sweeping down, and feels a hand catch it, enough force behind the movement to flip him right over Konan’s shoulder. He hits Kakashi in the chest feet-first, hears him lose all the air in his lungs on a wheeze, but doesn’t linger. Hinata’s right behind the Copy-Nin, Byakugan active, expression set even though it’s full of pain.

There’s no time for kindness or even going easy on her. Kiba lands lightly, ducks to avoid a punch, and whirls around, knife flashing out. Hinata blocks it, hands blazing with chakra, and cries, “Kiba, don’t do this!”

“This?” Kiba taunts, drives an elbow at her face before he slashes out again, blade just missing her skin as it slices through her jacket. “You mean kicking your ass, Hinata? I’ve wanted to do this since the Chuunin Exams, believe me.”

Hinata falters, confusion flickering across her features, and Kiba takes the opening. He slides around her guard, slams an elbow into her side, then flips his dagger around and stabs for her throat.

It almost connects, and that’s the most horrifying second of Kiba’s life.

Bare inches from her jugular, a kunai catches the blade, throws it off course. Kakashi pulls Hinata behind him, watching Kiba with narrowed eyes. “You’ve been planning this since the Exams?” he asks coolly.

Kiba scoffs loudly, takes half a second to check that Konan is more than holding her own against Kurenai before he turns his full attention back to Kakashi. “Planning it? No. But guess who was so selfish and enough of a complete ass that she cared more about her crush than her own teammates in the matches?”

He can see when Hinata makes the connection, how she blanches, taking an aborted step back. “K-Kiba, that wasn’t—” she starts.

Kiba growls, doesn’t have to pretend—one of Genma’s lessons, to turn little offenses, small hurts, into much larger ones and play off of those. It had been like a kick to the gut, in the arena, to glance at the stands and realize Hinata couldn’t even be bothered to cheer for him. Easy enough to use that now. “Wasn’t what, Hinata? Wasn’t because Naruto was your crush? Bullshit. But you know what? I cheered for you when you were up against my crush. I remembered that we were teammates. I put you over a boy who’s never even fucking bothered to look at me. But you couldn’t.”
Hinata flinches, looking down, and Kiba makes a noise of disgust that hurts deep in his throat.

“Naruto's never going to care about you,” he says mercilessly, doesn’t let himself falter. “You're just his weird stalker who can't even look at him. And you know what? At least *Naruto* was a good friend. You didn’t care enough about your own team to even *try*. Really, is it any sort of surprise that I wanted to get the fuck out of Konoha?”

Hinata jerks back like he hit her, but Kiba is already moving. His smoke bomb hits the ground in an eruption of dark grey, and he slips to the side, takes a breath. Kakashi is close, tense, and Kiba lunges, poisoned knife leading—

He hits a log as Kakashi triggers a kawarimi, snarls in frustration, and can't spin in time to block the kunai that slams into the meat of his shoulder. It *hurts*, but Kiba keeps moving, shoving backwards and dropping down. Kakashi flips over the swipe that almost gets his ankles, lands lightly and turns, bracing himself for Kiba's next blow—

And gets Konan instead, fierce and determined, a dozen paper bombs whirling out from her fingertips and aiming right at him. Mismatched eyes go wide, and he snatches Hinata by the back of her jacket and leaps hard.

Kiba can't help but laugh, rolling to his feet with a grin as he faces his old teacher. She’s breathing hard, her nose bloody, but she wipes it away without pausing and says, “Kiba.”

“Sensei,” Kiba returns, and makes it mocking.

Kurenai’s eyes flicker over him, even as her mouth tightens faintly. “Those cloaks,” she says.

Deliberately, Kiba brushes the dark cloth back, lets it hang behind him. Too long, because he hasn’t hit his growth spurt yet and Pein hadn’t deigned to have one tailored for him, but still unmistakable. “Well,” he says, grinning. “I’d say it isn’t what it looks like, except it really is. New life, new team, new ability to kick your ass—”

“Don’t,” Kurenai says quietly, “get ahead of yourself.”

That tone means *business* in a way no other quite manages. Kiba snarls a warning even as he launches himself to the side, but the earth is trembling under his feet and a tree is bursting up, branches grabbing for him, and he can't tell if it was there all along and he just never saw it or—

*Or* that’s Kurenai’s skill, making the mind doubt. The branches holding Kiba are real because he thinks they are and nothing will change that, despite *knowing* Kurenai is the undisputed master of genjutsu in Konoha. That doesn’t mean Kiba has to stop fighting, though.

He struggles just hard enough to keep his hands free of grasping limbs, flips one knife up to catch the hilt between his teeth as he concentrates. There's nothing under Kurenai’s feet like there was with the other genin, but that’s fine; Kiba just needs to make her break her concentration. It’s a risk, because what if she *dies*, but Kiba can't hold back. He’ll just have to trust that Kurenai is good enough to keep herself alive.

“Puppy,” Konan says, somewhere behind him, and Kurenai makes a noise that’s almost a *snarl*.

Rather than try to talk with a knife between his teeth, Kiba just flips his hands, flashing through the seals. Ram to bird to boar, and the moment he breaks the seal there's a sharp crack. Dark lines spread out across the ground, connecting five points in one of Konan's seals, and one side cuts right across Kurenai’s path.
Kakashi shouts something—a warning—but Kurenai is already moving, leaping to the side even as purple light shimmers up behind her. The tree vanishes, and Kiba flips over in the air, lands with a grunt, and spins, three kunai with exploding tags flashing out right at Kakashi as Konan sweeps down in a whirlwind of paper shuriken to intercept Kurenai.

With a huff of laughter, Kiba lets his knife drop from his teeth, catches it in his free hand and brings both blades up in front of him. “Looks like it’s me an’ you again,” he tells Kakashi, and makes sure his grin shows plenty of teeth. “S it just me, or is your hair fluffier than last time?”

Kakashi looks entirely unimpressed. He flips his kunai up, catches it, and drops into a ready stance without another word.

Kiba rolls his eyes. “What, is this you breaking our friendship already?” he taunts. “Come on, I thought we had something.”

Kakashi’s face may as well be stone. “Those who break the rules are trash,” he says, and Kiba growls, thinking of Danzō. Thinking of Torune, alive all this time when no one even knew. Before he can spit that at Kakashi, though the man catches his gaze, holds it, and finishes quietly, “But those who abandon their friends are worse than trash.”

“Does it offend you, the way I talk to him?” Konan asks with amusement, watching the Konoha kunoichi bristle like a cat.

The woman glares, all hard red eyes and shallowly-buried edges of razor anger. Konan hasn’t seen that much hatred in a face in a very long time, regardless of Akatsuki’s actions. “Offend me?” she snaps. “Why would it?”

Konan thinks of Kiba's face the day Nagato had dragged him back to their base. Thinks of his expression that night in the kitchen, when she raised the rumors about Danzō like dangling bait in front of a fish. Trapped, she thinks, and it’s as cold as a whisper of frost down her spine. Trapped and furious in a way that grew from roots of sheer terror. Yuuhi was his jounin sensei. she spent every day with him, trained him, looked after him. And yet she missed something as terrible as that happening right under her nose.

She doesn’t let herself waver, doesn’t let the thin threads of molten anger show. Breathes through them as they crawl white-hot up her throat, because this is why she hates the Five Great Nations as she does. At some point, people stopped mattering to them. Only power counts now.

Nagato has the right idea of it. Akatsuki is going to take that power for themselves, and then turn around and strangle them with it. And when the ashes settle, the strength to fight wars will be in their hands.

Maybe it isn’t fair, but nothing has been fair since Yahiko killed himself on Nagato's blade and bled out in the rain. Konan isn’t particularly inclined to set the scales back as they were, either; this is Akatsuki’s world now, and the Hidden Villages don’t even know it yet.

She takes a breath, evens her voice. Says, because there’s a dull, distant roaring under the calm of her thoughts, “Because you lost him, and I found him.”

“He’s not a thing that you can just pick and claim,” Yuuhi snaps, and Konan smiles, just faintly. Clearly, clearly, Yuuhi has been raised on the same idiocy as Jiraiya tried to feed the three of them.
so many years ago. It’s pointless, though; the villages have blinded shinobi to the truth of the matter. Konan would feel guilty about pulling the blinders off, but—

She lost her ability to believe the lies when Yahiko bled out, when Nagato screamed and screamed, impaled on the ground by chakra rods. When the Root shinobi Konoha sent slid back into the shadows, their mission done.

Akatsuki lost the fight for peace, and Konan lost *everything*.

“All of us are things,” she says, and lifts a hand. The thick screen of papers around them shudders, ripples, and pieces drop to twist around her outstretched fingers. “As this world stands, shinobi are weapons. You just happened to drop one, inattentive and unwary. I decided it could be put to better use.”

Yuuhi’s next word catches in her throat, dies on her tongue. Red eyes widen, and realization flickers across her features, twisted through with something like horror. Her gaze drops to Konan’s cloak, flickers back to her face, and she takes an aborted step back. “You,” she says like it’s a revelation. “You’re saying you pulled him into your group?”

Konan smiles. She’d wondered how long it would take for that phrasing to settle. “He’s sweet,” she says instead of answering. “Eager to please. Worth far, far more than the life your village would have given him.”

Yuuhi is trembling, just faintly, and Konan knows full well that it’s not fear but rage. “The life of a missing-nin,” she says, and the words tear in her mouth. “Always hunted, on the run—”

Konan wills the papers around her to fold, lets those just behind Yuuhi start to shift as well. There’s no doubt Yuuhi is dangerous, but she’s a genjutsu user, trained for ambushes and stealth and working undercover; she’s at a disadvantage in open combat. There’s no true threat here. It’s a bit of a shame, because the last decent match Konan had was against Sasori when she recruited him. Too much time off and she might get rusty.

“I think you’re forgetting,” she says with amusement, “just who here is the hunter and who is the prey.”

Her weapons launch themselves forward, sweeping at Yuuhi from the front, even as the exploding tags behind her detonate. Yuuhi cries out, knocked right off her feet by the blast, but she twists, dives low to avoid the shuriken, and comes up with her hands twisting into seals. Konan is braced for an attack like before, vines to catch and strangle, but instead the earth beneath her shimmers. Poppies surge up out of the ground, spreading out like a spill of blood around her feet, and the blossoms open. Something gold whirls out from inside, thick enough to tint the air, and Konan curses. It’s caught her attention, caught her chakra—she can break it, but it will take time that leaves her open to more physical attacks.

“Poppies are the flower of sleep,” Yuuhi says, eyes narrowed in concentration as she rises to her feet. “You’ve always known that, haven’t you? A dreamer’s flower, but they’re so lovely.”

It feels like Konan can’t quite breathe through the dust in the air, like it’s gathering on her lashes and weighing heavily there. She needs—something. Pain. But the air is shimmering gold like the most perfect sunset and all her bones feel heavy—

“Konan!”

The snarl breaks through the snowfall-silence around her, and Kiba barrels into his former teacher,
knives slashing. Yuuhi recoils, flipping a kunai out to block the closest blow, but it’s enough. The flowers shatter, the dust is gone, and Konan feels the sleep suggestion cave in on itself as her chakra comes flooding back. She shakes herself hard, throwing off the last of that treacherous weight, and grits her teeth. It’s been a while since she last faced someone so skilled in genjutsu, and Yuuhi doesn’t even have the Sharingan to make controlling her simpler. This is all her own skill, and if they weren’t enemies Konan might spare a moment to feel impressed.

As it is, there’s no time for anything but recalculating her strategy, planning a new method of attack. The Copy-Nin won’t be able to mimic her abilities and throw them back at her, but Kiba’s already doing well against him; if he switches over to facing his former teacher they might have problems.

He doesn’t seem to be having them right now, though. Konan spares a glance at him even as she flicks a hand out, shuriken forming and sweeping out to distract Hatake. Kiba has his teacher on the defensive, eyes closed, expression twisted in concentration as he drives her back. Yuuhi is fast and flexible, but she’s giving ground, and for all that Kiba isn’t quite as smooth without his sight, she can see he’s using his nose and it’s not a setback. Something to work on, smooth out later, but— he’s decent.

She’s known that from the beginning. Anyone able to kill Shimura Danzō had to have at least some true potential, and Konan has never minded the work that comes with turning a rough stone into a gem. Akatsuki will be better for having him, and—Konan hasn’t liked many people, over the years. But Kiba, he’s—

Well. A reminder, just a little, of an orange-haired boy with a bright laugh and big dreams. Kiba just had his dreams crushed before they could start to form. Konan will never be glad for that, or the events that led to it, but she’s grateful it didn’t happen later, wasn’t worse.

If she’s learned one thing, it’s that everything can always be worse.

The sound of an incautious step is enough to make her turn, one arm sweeping out, and it’s the genin girl coming at her with determination carved into her features, hands glowing faintly. Hyuuga, she thinks critically, slides sideways around a palm-blow. She hasn’t fought many before, has never faced the Byakugan like this. Seen it, heard stories, but never witnessed it in person. Kiba said the girl was sloppy, though, unskilled, and after three passes Konan can see it.

Kiba has a drive to him that caught her eye from the beginning; she’s seen him spend hours each day in the training hall, working himself into a bruised, bloody, panting mess. He advances quickly, almost desperately, to the point where Konan surreptitiously asked one of Sasori’s spies for information. Yakushi Kabuto had seemed startled, though, at the implication that Kiba might be anything close to a genius. Chuunin material, he had said, before he knew why she was asking. Nothing special, except—

Except for that one flash of genius when he killed Danzō.

It had taken effort not to scoff, when she heard that.

Konan has met geniuses. Orochimaru, Itachi—she’s never cared for them. Some bit of unease, some flicker of contempt has always turned her away. She, Yahiko, and Nagato weren’t geniuses. Even with the Rinnegan, Nagato struggled and strained himself again and again, tried so hard but failed so often. And it hurt them all, but it made them stronger, too. Like Deidara, like Hidan, like Kakuzu, Kiba doesn’t have genius to rely on. Just himself. And he knows it, so he works hard to be better, to be the best.
She wonders, a little amused, where this little girl would be if she applied herself the way Kiba does.

Sweeping a hand out, she wills the paper away from her skin, lets it peel away from her fingers to swirl through the air and twist into shape. Movement behind her in the same moment, but she pulls her paper out of the air, wraps it into a shield to block the surge of fire that comes roaring at her. One half step back, a hand up, and Kiba hits her shoulder, perfectly balanced. He flings himself forward, over the top of her shield and right at the Copy-Nin, and Konan can't fight a smirk. She sidesteps the Hyuuga, turns and kicks out, and whatever the Byakugan’s range of vision the girl isn’t fast enough to dodge or block. She yelps, lifted off her feet by the force only to crash into the ground and roll.

“Hinata!” Yuuhi cries, alarmed, and swift steps head right for them.

Konan has had more than enough of genjutsus for this fight, though. She snaps a hand out, a wave of paper slamming right into the kunoichi. It carries her backwards, skidding through the mud, but even as she comes to a stop a flicker of motion has Konan leaping back. A swarm of black bugs just misses her, and she straightens, raising a mildly surprised brow at the dark-haired boy standing there.

“The Aburame?” she asks coolly. A glance across the battlefield shows two more genin, the pink-haired girl supporting the Uchiha boy as they slowly stagger for the meager shelter of the wall. One of Kiba's poisons, she assumes, though she can't tell which one.

“Correct,” the boy tells her, and there are more insects crawling up from under his jacket, swarming thick and inky black across his skin. “You are a missing-nin.”

Konan inclines her head, even though it’s not technically true; she and Nagato would have to have been Ame nin in the first place to become missing-nin, and now that the village is theirs it’s a moot point. Still. Whatever is known about Akatsuki, its roster of purely missing-nin is one of the most widespread bits of information, and Konan isn’t about to cast doubt on that.

“Correct,” she confirms, keeps it mild enough that the child won’t know whether she’s mocking him or not. There are bugs crawling on the backs of her papers, though, carefully keeping out of her line of sight, and she buries a flicker of derisive amusement. There's no way for the boy to know that the papers are practically a part of her for as long as the jutsu is active.

“You are Kiba's partner.” His eyes are covered, but Konan thinks she can feel his stare, sharp and angry, on her skin nevertheless.

Konan hums, makes it light and lingering. He’s trying to buy time, and the strategy is obvious when she can feel his bugs inching closer, always out of sight. “I am, though I can't see why it matters to you, child.”

“It matters greatly,” the Aburame says, voice tight. “Why, you ask? Because if I defeat you there will be one less obstacle to bringing Kiba back to the village.”
Chapter 13

That flicker of sliding frost is back, creeping out beneath Konan's skin. She smiles, thin and threatening, and something like hatred curls in her stomach.

“Back?” she asks softly. “So that he can be killed for protecting himself? How noble of you.”

Narrow shoulders go tight as the boy stiffens. “They will not kill Kiba,” he says, insists, but there's something desperate in his tone that wants to believe the words more than he actually does.

Konan laughs, because how naïve. Has he ever suffered from the strangling grip of those in power, unwilling to change, to do anything that could possibly upset their seats? “He killed an elder,” she says, curls her fingers in. The papers stop swirling and go still, held perfectly frozen in place, and Aburame stiffens faintly. “Your village will cut his throat for that, no matter the reasons. I've seen it more times than you could possibly count.”

Not again, she doesn't say, but it’s a thought that hovers all too close, just like the weight of Yahiko’s body and the sound of Nagato's screams.

Blue chakra flickers in her peripheral, just enough of a giveaway. Konan sidesteps the Hyuuga girl’s first blow, shifts back and to the side and changes the flow, makes the girl follow her instead of just retreating. She’s so obviously a genin, so unpolished and so little of a threat that Konan is almost bored. A sweep of her foot knocks the girl off balance, makes her stumble, and Konan watches her stagger and turn around again, falling into a taijutsu stance beside her teammate.

It’s a shame to have to kill children. Konan never enjoys it. It will hardly stop her, though; they're shinobi, just as she is.

The papers fold, the black lines of the kanji on them coming clear. Meters away, the kunoichi shouts a warning, but Konan flicks her fingers, gives the explosive tags just one more spark of chakra. The boy lunges, knocking his teammate back, but it won't be enough to save them.

Detonation.

A rain of splinters hits the ground.

Konan stills, eyes narrowing. She sweeps her gaze over the muddy earth as the smoke clears, watches the chips of wood fall. Turns, already knowing what she’ll see, and watches the Copy-Nin stagger as he comes to a halt, a long gash down his back bleeding even through his flak jacket. He drops the two genin, then trips, and it's only Yuuhi catching him with an arm around his waist that keeps him on his feet.

There's a low growl as Kiba lands next to her, watching the four Konoha shinobi with narrowed eyes. “Missed,” he says with clear disgust.

Konan casts a look at his knives. The white one is clean, but the black one is wet with blood, and her lips tip into a smile. “Not entirely,” she offers.

Kiba scoffs disgustedly. “Yeah, well, he’ll sleep it off and wake up alive. I was going for something a little more permanent.”

It would be quite a blow for Konoha to lose one of its top jounin, Konan reflects. Even worse to lose him at the hands of a traitor they thought hadn’t even made it to chuunin.
“We still have time,” she says mildly. The rain is getting heavier as her papers get thinner, which is a stroke of luck. There's the small matter of the other two genin, though, because they're dangerously close to the compound. She casts a glance back towards them, then raises a pointed brow at her partner.

Kiba rolls his eyes at her. “Hit them with bomb full of a plant concentrate. Causes hallucinations when it burns,” he informs her, sounding like he’s offended by her lack of faith in him. “I guess Shino got out of the way, but Sakura and Sasuke must be havin’ a fun time right about now.”

Being devious shouldn’t be cute, but Konan puts it down to the fact that he’s barely thirteen and looks like a shaggy puppy. She smiles a little, and says lightly, “I didn’t realize you carried hallucinogens.”

“Experimental. I like tryin’ new things,” he tells her, and his grin is all sharp canines and sharper humor. He glances back, looking towards where the two genin are likely still slumped, and—

“Konan!”

Konan turns, too, alarmed by the warning in his voice. For a second there's nothing to see, but even as she opens her mouth to ask what he smells, a sharp, heavy creak sounds. The gate swings open, and a single horse and rider burst out of the estate in a billow of grey-green smoke. Poison, Konan knows. The clones must have already dropped the bombs, but—

Kiba curses, and Konan catches it as well. A small blur of orange bounding at the horse’s side, topped with a mop of blond hair and running flat-out as they head towards the town. Konan's willing to bet their entire paycheck for this mission that it’s the lord making his escape, and the jinchuuriki boy is helping him.

“Go,” she says sharply, and Kiba doesn’t hesitate. He leaps forward in a ground-eating run, trailing the horse and jinchuuriki to the curve of the road. Instead of keeping to the path, though, he leaps into the trees, and Konan doesn’t bother watching further. After all the time they spent scouting, Kiba knows the woods. He’ll cut off their target before the man even reaches the river.

Which, of course, leaves her to keep the rest of the nobleman’s guards thoroughly occupied.

It won’t be hard. The Hyuuga girl is staring at the billows of smoke escaping the compound with horrified eyes, and the Aburame takes a step forward like he wants to dive in and help. Really, Konan isn’t about to say anything to stop him from trying; it’s an easy way to get rid of a potential threat.

“Did you really think we didn’t have a plan beyond confronting you head-on?” she asks, amused, and Yuuhi is in the middle of trying to balance the Copy-Nin, herd her genin back, and watch Konan for attacks all at the same time. For the moment, at least, Konan doesn’t have to worry about another genjutsu ensnaring her.

Yuuhi’s mouth tightens into an angry slash, her gaze hardening. Carefully, she sets Hatake down on the ground, ignores the vague, uncoordinated attempt he makes to grab her and pull her back, and instead steps past him to face Konan squarely.

“Our mistake,” she says evenly, bringing her hands up. “Let me make up for that. I'm sure your bounty will more than compensate us for a failed mission.”

Konan smiles, closes her eyes. The paper in the air around them shivers, whirls, condenses and
sweeps down to spin around her like a whirlwind, and she can hear the Hyuuga’s gasp when the burning compound comes clear, no longer obscured by her jutsu.

“I told you, didn’t I?” she murmurs, and opens her eyes, face still turned towards the heavy clouds. It’s raining.

It’s always raining.

“You're forgetting,” she says, and lets her gaze slowly fall to the other woman, “just who here is the hunter and who is the prey.”

A spark of chakra. A touch of will.

The world goes white.

Damn it.

There's nothing else in Kiba’s head as he hurls himself through the branches, letting memory guide him more than sight. Naruto is awake, must have realized the compound was burning and decided to play hero. Kiba hadn’t even thought about his absence in the fight, just assuming he was still unconscious from the poison and grateful not to have to face him again.

But of course Naruto has to save the day. Like he could do anything else.

Gritting his teeth, he tries to think, tries to plan. The barriers he and Konan set to trap Naruto are all back on the battlefield, and he doesn’t exactly carry barrier seals with him. He’s got his knives and his poisons, but most of his bombs are used up and there are only a couple of smoke pellets left. Not exactly good odds for taking on a jinchuuriki.

Even worse for taking on Naruto, of all people.

Something grim and almost sick twists his stomach as he thinks of killing the nobleman in front of Naruto. Thinks of showing Naruto, beyond all reasonable doubt, what he’s turned himself into. But he has to, has to. This mission needs to be a success.

He can smell horse and human on the wind, clearer now as the road comes in to view. Close, but Kiba still beat them, and he launches himself out of the trees, lands lightly in the middle of the path. Checks his pockets for the case of soldier pills he always carries—habit, now, more than anything, because he no longer needs them to boost his and Akamaru's fighting style—and then almost fumbles the box when a trace of a new smell reaches him.

Familiar as home, warm fur and leaves and clean shampoo, traced with turned earth. Only Akamaru has ever smelled that way to Kiba's nose.

Naruto and Akamaru. Fuck it all, but Kiba's luck is the actual worst.

Gritting his teeth, he dumps three soldier pills into his hand and stows the case. Not something he’s been using much, since the poisons are enough of an edge against most people, but he heard one of Sasori’s infrequent tirades about jinchuuriki immune systems and their ability to adapt to practically anything, and he doesn’t have a single clue how to handle this if Naruto really is impervious to his poisons after one hit. More chakra can only help at this point. He’ll
never actually be able to rival a jinchuuriki, but for shinobi cheating might as well be a fair fight.

Hooves on packed earth, footsteps fast enough to match them, and Kiba tosses the pills back, closes his eyes against the shivering, icy burn of foreign chakra flooding his system. It’s a rush, makes him shake himself hard even as he curls forward, fighting the world’s biggest adrenaline rush. It takes practice to breathe through the feeling, to push it back until he’s not just overwhelmed, but he’s been using soldier pills since he first started training. The Inuzuka as a whole use more than the rest of the shinobi ranks combined; it’s a part of their technique, a way to be unpredictable. Kiba's going to need that right now.

“Kiba!” an angry voice shouts, and Kiba rides the wave of chakra crashing through him, looks up and grins with all his teeth showing.

“Naruto,” he returns, and digs his sandals into the dirt, one hand raking up a fistful of mud. Naruto's come to a stop, the nobleman behind him doubled over on his horse and trying to stifle a cough. Kiba eyes the distance, looks at Naruto. Feels something flicker in his chest, an emotion he can't put a name to and wants with everything to ignore. Doubt, maybe, or shame. Things that can't have any sort of place here, not now.

Blue eyes stare at him, full of anger and hurt and something close to rage. “Kiba, we don’t have to fight,” Naruto says, and it should be a plea but it’s not. An offering, and tendrils of pain slide through Kiba's chest to anchor in his lungs. “We’re friends.”

Kiba breathes in, doesn’t let himself close his eyes. Thinks of the last time he and Naruto were together, on the hill behind the Academy a few months before graduation. Naruto said every cloud looked like the Hokage's hat from different angles, and Kiba laughed at him for it, warm and lazy as they sprawled out in the grass. The memory is so close he can smell it, feel it, the tickle of the grass and the warmth of the sun and the way Akamaru barked and chased his tail and then flopped down against Kiba's side to sleep.

So different from now, standing across from Naruto in the cold rain, ready to hurt him to keep him safe.

He’s heard the odds, though. Jinchuuriki don’t survive having their bijuu extracted—Pein has checked. It’s never happened before, and as much as Kiba believes Naruto will always be able to beat the odds, this time he doesn’t want Naruto to have to. If there's any way at all that Kiba can keep him from ever ending up in Akatsuki’s hands, he’ll take it without hesitation.

After the first time Naruto took the graduation test and failed so miserably, Kiba was cruel to him. He was a fucking awful friend. And maybe he’s being a worse one now, putting Naruto through this, but in some small way it has to make up for how he acted. That’s all Kiba can hope for.

He doesn’t let himself look at Akamaru, tucked into the front of Naruto's jumpsuit. Another friend he’s hurt, even closer than Naruto, but—

He’s trying to save them. That has to count for something.

“Try again. I wouldn’t be friends with a monster.” Kiba forces the words out of his mouth, makes them pass his lips even though they leave him feeling numb. Like that time when he accidentally wiped his mouth when Genma was showing him how to mix poisons, and the numbness hurt, something so wrong and awful he’d almost been sick.

Naruto's mouth takes on a mulish slant, eyes hardening. “You were,” he says, as stubborn as a pig, and the urge to smile helplessly is so close to the surface Kiba almost can't resist. “You were one
of my only friends, Kiba! You were—"

“A fucking idiot,” Kiba interrupts, because if Naruto keeps going he’s going to break. He takes a
breath, steels himself. Says, sharp and as angry as he can make it, “I was a fucking idiot if I ever
thought you were my friend. Our fight—”

“It wasn’t my fault!” Naruto bursts out, loud and sudden, like he’s been saving up the words. “It
wasn’t my fault you lost! That was—you thought you could beat me, you thought I was weak, but
I'm not! I'm gonna be the Hokage someday, and it doesn’t matter that I'm a jinchuuriki!”

All Kiba wants is to agree. Naruto beat him, and it was a ridiculous trick but it worked, and that
really is all that matters. But—

He can't. He can't.

Baring his teeth, he growls, refuses to acknowledge the way Akamaru flinches and whines at the
sound. Hate, he thinks. Hate, hate, hate. That's all I'm feeling. “It might not matter to you,” he
spits, focuses his memories on the laughter and whispers that followed their match. Son of the
Inuzuka Clan Head, defeated by the dead last student in the Academy. Defeated by a fart, not good
enough to advance past the first round of fights.

It irked him, then. Now he pulls up his rage, twists it around those memories. Uses it the way
Genma taught him, and snarls.

“Don’t get used to winning against me, monster,” he says sharply, venomously. “It’s never going to
happen again.”

The stubbornness gives way to something like anger, and Naruto opens his mouth. Kiba can't take
any more, though, can't stand here and look at Naruto with Akamaru in his jacket. He slams chakra
down into his feet, leaps high and twists as he sails over Naruto's head. There's a shout, a puff of
smoke behind him, but Kiba doesn't look back. The horse startles, shying hard to the left, and he
misses his jump, lands and immediately lashes out with a kunai to pop the nearest clone, then
lunges in the same movement.

The lord shouts, trying to rein his mount in, trying to turn it towards the town, but Kiba is faster.
He slices through a rein, the taut leather snapping easily, then grabs the man’s leg as the horse
wrenches around, all the man’s strength suddenly pulling on one side of the bridle. With a cry, the
man overbalances, and Kiba dumps him on the ground and ducks out of the way of the horse as it
spins and bolts into the trees. No time to pause, or even try an attack; Naruto grabs him by the
collar of his cloak, hauls him sideways into a punch, and Kiba snarls, slamming forward with his
elbow leading. He catches Naruto in the stomach, knocking him back, then grabs for his black-
hilted knife and flips it up just as a clone grabs at him. It catches the construct in the throat,
vanishing it with a sharp pop, and Kiba catches the knife and spins, warding off a kunai aimed at
his ribs.

“I,” Naruto yells, right in his face as he barrels into Kiba, “am not a monster!”

He’s too close, too quick. Sloppy at taijutsu but still good enough to land glancing blows,
especially when there are three of him. Kiba darts back, leaps up over a kick, and flips in the air to
land on one hand. Springboarding back to his feet gives him some distance, and he grabs for a
smoke bomb and detonates it as soon as it leaves his hand, letting it wash over Naruto. Instead of
diving back in, he darts around the edge of the cloud, flips his white-hilted knife out of its sheath
and throws it hard.
A clone intercepts it, inches from the nobleman, and disappears into smoke as the knife clatters to the ground.

Cursing, Kiba brings his hands up, automatically calling up the jutsu that’s been drilled into him since the first time his chakra settled. A hard leap, carrying him right into the center of the smoke, and he slams into Naruto with a half-power Fang Passing Fang, feeling the other boy cry out, and—

A dog’s yelp, high and pained and startled, and Kiba's heart fractures in his chest, and awful sideways wrench that leaves him breathless in the worst way. Akamaru, he thinks, dizzy with panic, recoils hard and slides to a stop as the smoke shreds around them. Naruto crashes to the ground, rolling, and only barely manages to stop before he crashes into a tree.

With a pained sound, he pulls himself up onto his knees, one hand clutching at the front of his jacket. The small white shape there slides out, dropping to the ground, and Akamaru sways on his paws, staggers sideways—

Collapses without a sound.

Nausea turns Kiba's stomach, and he almost collapses too. Wants to throw himself to his knees and grab for Akamaru, scoop him up in his arms and apologize and say he didn’t mean to do it, that he’d thought it was like fighting another Inuzuka, like going against someone who could move in tandem with their nin-ken, who knew to protect them.

His fault. Gods, entirely his fault. How could he even—Akamaru is his partner—

“Akamaru!”

Not his cry. Naruto's. Naruto who picks Akamaru up, cradling the puppy in his arms and looking horrified. Anger flashes over his face, and he rounds on Kiba—

Kiba turns, forces his feet into motion. Keeps going, because if Naruto sees his face right now it’s going to give everything away. He snatches up his poisoned knife as he passes, and the nobleman is recoiling, tripping over his robes. There's grief and rage on his face, and as Kiba leaps at him he cries, “Why—you killed my family—”

And attacked his own. Hurt Akamaru, like a damned traitor, and Kiba ignores the shout from behind him, the sound of more clones. Catches paper and cold rain on the breeze as he brings his knife up, and meets terrified brown eyes as he slams the man down into the mud.

“Someone has to,” he says, and drives the knife home.

Above him, paper wings flare out, and Konan holds out a hand. Kiba puts chakra into his jump, leaps to catch her fingers and pull himself up, and Konan wraps her arms around his waist. Amber eyes drop, taking in the signs of the fight, and then slide over to fix squarely on Naruto.

“Uzumaki Naruto,” she says, mild and easy as if they're meeting each other on the road as acquaintances. “I believe we’ll be seeing each other again soon.”

Naruto isn’t looking at Konan, though. He’s staring at Kiba like he’s never seen him before, face pale, and Kiba remembers what he heard about Team 7’s mission in Wave Country. Wonders if Naruto's seen someone he was charged to protect killed like that, right in front of him.

If they didn’t come to us, it would just be someone else who got the job, he tells himself again, and it’s still cold comfort. Looking at Naruto now, Kiba really does feel like the monster Sakura called him, and it curls hot and shameful through his veins.
Maybe it’s a sign of how terrible a person he is, but he can’t even bring himself to fully regret it. Especially not in light of Konan’s thinly veiled threat.

Akamaru isn’t showing any sign of stirring in Naruto's grasp, but Kiba still makes himself lift a hand, offer Naruto a lazy salute and a grin full of teeth. “Guess this makes it one in my favor now,” he taunts, then forces himself to look away like he’s lost interest. “All set?” he asks Konan.

Her smile is faintly smug and entirely satisfied. “They're tending to their wounded and trying to put out the fires. No survivors in the compound.”

You killed my family, the man spat at him. Kiba tries not to let it stick in his mind. “Awesome,” he says, and Konan hums. Her wings sweep down, carrying them up and over the forest, chased by Naruto's angry shout. No way for him to follow, though, and Kiba is sickly glad of it. He turns his face into the wind and the lash of the rain, takes deep breaths, promising himself that he won't fall apart.

Konan carries them all the way to the border of Fire Country, within sight of Rice Paddy Country, before she carefully lets Kiba down. He lands and rolls forward, spending momentum, and then comes back to his feet as the wings whirl apart and fall away.

“Mission accomplished,” Konan says, folding her hands into her sleeves. She look faintly worn, though Kiba isn’t about to say as much.

It takes a lot of effort to grin back, rocking onto his heels and stretching out his arms. “Hell yeah. And we got to kick the asses of two whole Konoha squads.”

“Well. Maybe not quite two whole,” Konan murmurs, though her eyes are amused. “One and three quarters, I think.”

Kiba laughs like it’s funny, even if there's a lump in his throat that aches like a fist. “Close enough to count,” he retorts.

Kiba wants to crawl into bed, pull the blankets over him, and not come out for a year. Swallowing, he nods, lets a little of the fervency he feels lip out into his voice when he answers, “Thank fuck. Yes please.”

With a faint chuckle, Konan turns and starts walking. There's a guard post at one end of the bridge, marking the border, but it’s abandoned and she simply strides past. Kiba trots a few steps to keep up, and doesn’t let himself think about anything but the possibility of a warm meal and a hot bath waiting for them up ahead.

“You did well,” Konan says quietly, before he can quite get lost in his thoughts. When Kiba flicks a glance at her, her eyes are still trained ahead, but there's a faint smile tipping one corner of her mouth.

The wash of relief that floods through Kiba is something he doesn’t even try to hide. Grins,
instead, wide and pleased, and looks away.

“That mean we can do more missions?” he asks.

Konan inclines her head. “I think your skills would help the others, as well,” she says, and Kiba shoots her a wary look, because that expression is mischief.

“Really,” he says flatly.

Konan just raises an unperturbed brow and keeps walking.

For a moment Kiba stares after her, wondering whether he should protest more. But—Konan is Pein’s right hand. Working with her means that if he slips up it’s the end of everything. The others—well. Worst case scenario Kiba could kill one of them if they found him out, and he’d hardly be the first Akatsuki member to do get rid another. Kakuzu went through five or six before he found Hidan.

It’ll make it easier to pass on messages, too. Konan cares what he does, where he goes. The others won’t give a damn.

Well. Apparently this mission really was a success.

He jogs to catch up with Konan and falls into step with her, crossing his arms behind his head. “If I get stuck with Hidan and Deidara, I want my own room,” he informs her pointedly.

Konan blinks, raising a questioning brow. Then it connects, and she snorts quietly, but inclines her head. “I’ll tell Kakuzu to factor it into the budget.”

“You’d better,” Kiba says, though the words don’t have even a trace of bite to them.

He wants to look back at the road behind them, but forces his eyes forward, doesn’t let himself waver. One foot in front of the other, one step at a time.

One step forward, and that’s enough to make everything worthwhile.
Chapter 14

This, Shikamaru thinks, is not worth it.

It’s not quite as early as gate duty, maybe, but still a good six hours before he’d normally get up if he had any choice in the matter. And his father keeps casting him amused glances, like he knows what Shikamaru is thinking and is enjoying his suffering, which is both unhelpful and unappreciated.

“Indoctrinating him young?” Tsunade asks when Shikaku all but drags Shikamaru through the door. She’s at her desk, cup of tea at her elbow, and looking far more rested than Shikamaru feels, which is unfair. He’d thought old people needed more sleep than kids, or at the very least had less energy.

Not that he’s stupid enough to say any of that to her face.

Shikaku chuckles, steering Shikamaru over to one of the chairs next to the door. Shikamaru makes a vaguely grateful noise as he collapses into it, and Shikaku snorts but turns to set a pile of paperwork on the Hokage’s desk.

“He expressed interest in what I did all day,” he says, and Shikamaru knows him well enough to catch the flicker of vindictive amusement that other people might miss.

“I regret it,” Shikamaru mutters, and gives half a thought to making a face at his father but then decides that it’s too much effort.

Tsunade makes a low sound of amusement, pausing in the middle of signing something to study Shikamaru. “The last…four jounin commanders have been Nara?” she says thoughtfully.

With a sound of agreement, Shikaku folds his arms over his chest. “He’s good at shogi,” he says.

Shikamaru manages to crack an eye open enough to glare at both of them. “If this is how early you always go to work,” he says grumpily, “I’m staying a chūnin for the rest of my life.”

Tsunade snorts, but doesn’t press the matter. Instead, she shifts papers around, coming up with a short stack of scrolls and passing them over. “The A-rank missions that have come in,” she says in explanation. “I also wanted to discuss setting up a different system for rotating out ANBU teams so all of them get more time in the village than out on missions.”

Raising a brow, Shikaku takes the scrolls. “We certainly have enough bodies,” he says, calculating. “ANBU has never been this well-staffed before. It should work. It would mean a lot closer observation of all the members, though. I’m going to be hard-pressed to find the time.”

“Then we’ll split the job,” Tsunade says dismissively. “ANBU commander can be a separate title from jounin commander, even if they still answer directly to you.”

Shikaku makes a sound of droll amusement. And I suppose you want me to find an appropriate candidate?”

“Your idea, not mine,” Tsunade tells him sweetly, then looks up at the sound of a knock on the door. “Enter.”

The door eases open, and Shizune sticks her head in, looking worried. “Hokage-sama, genin teams
7 and 8 have returned from their mission and are waiting to report.”

Something Shikamaru can’t read flickers across Tsunade’s face, but it’s something bright, rather than the darkness a lot of people get when they talk about Naruto. She smiles and she’s always beautiful, but happiness makes her something else entirely. “Send them in, Shizune, thank you.”

Shizune smiles wanly back, then steps aside, pulling the door with her, and—

Something freezes in Shikamaru's chest, solid and icy, when Kurenai limps through the door, leaning heavily on Kakashi’s shoulder.

Instantly, Tsunade is on her feet, hurrying to meet them. She helps Kakashi the last few feet to the chairs in front of the desk, then crouches down to check Kurenai’s foot as the woman collapses into the seat.

“I’m fine, Hokage-sama,” Kurenai says, managing a smile, though her face is bruised and she looks exhausted. “It’s a wrenched knee, that’s all. Kakashi keeps reopening the wound on his back, though.”

“Maa,” Kakashi protests, holding up his hands like he’s going to ward the Hokage off. “At least I can walk.”

Tsunade gives him a narrow look, but turns to watch the five genin follow their teachers in with sharp brown eyes. Shikamaru does, too, scanning them carefully. Everyone looks tired, and even Naruto is drooping. Akamaru in particular has his head down, ears drooping, tail dragging. It’s such a stark contrast from the cheerful, rambunctious puppy who used to stay glued to Kiba's side that it’s a little shocking.

“Who’s hurt?” Tsunade asks, though her eyes linger on Naruto the longest. He looks like he’s been trying not to cry, eyes red and face the closest to grim Naruto ever gets, and it’s enough to make something hard knot in Shikamaru's throat. Naruto isn’t supposed to look like that. Not ever.

“Bumps and bruises,” Kurenai says wearily. “A few knife wounds, and some exposure to toxins. We’re all in one piece, though, even if the mission was a failure. And given that it was Akatsuki again, I’m willing to count that as a win.”

“Akatsuki?” Tsunade demands sharply, and she takes an aborted step towards Naruto, like she’s going to make sure he’s real. “Were they after—”

“Kiba,” Naruto says, looking up for the first time, and his expression is hurt and tired and bewildered. “Baa-chan, it was Kiba.”

Tellingly, Tsunade is too startled to even protest the nickname. She rocks back on her heels, gripping the edge of her desk so hard the wood creaks, and her gaze flickers from Naruto to Shino and Hinata where they’re pressed close to Akamaru, and then on to Kurenai, who smiles weakly.

“Inuzuka?” Tsunade repeats. “In Akatsuki?” Her mouth tightens, and she rubs a hand over her face. “Was it Itachi again?” she asks, looking at Sasuke.

Sasuke shakes his head, eyes flinty. “A woman,” he corrects. “No hitai-ate. She used paper as a weapon.”

Paper? Shikamaru raises one brow, wondering how that even works. Then again, it’s hardly the strangest shinobi talent out there.
Tsunade takes a breath, drops her hand. “I’ll assume the toxins were from Kiba,” she says bleakly, glancing at Sakura, who nods. “All right. Get to the hospital, I want all of you thoroughly checked. You too, Naruto. Hand in your written reports by end of day tomorrow.”

Naruto doesn’t even try to protest the paperwork, and Shikamaru feels a flicker of worry, deep-seated and sharp. Before he can get to his feet, though, Sasuke falls into step with his teammate, bumping his shoulder in a way that could be entirely accidental. When Naruto glances up, though, he smiles, and its tired and sad and grateful. Sasuke looks away with an irritated huff, but he doesn’t leave, just accompanies Naruto out of the office and down the stairs. Hinata and Shino are a minute behind, Hinata only pausing to scoop Akamaru up into her arms before they make for the doorway.

“D-do you want—” the girl starts, but her voice wavers and dies halfway through.

Shino seems to understand what she’s trying to ask anyway. “You should take him,” he says, almost gently. “Why, you ask? Because the peace of the Hyuuga compound will be good for him.”

A companion will probably also be good for Hinata, Shikamaru thinks critically, eyeing the way she clutches the puppy to her chest with downcast eyes. Seeing Kiba like that—he can’t even imagine it. It would be like Ino going rogue. Incomprehensible and wrong.

As they pass, Shino glances up, catching Shikamaru's gaze through his dark glasses. There's a hesitation, like Shino is thinking of stopping, saying something, and Shikamaru raises a brow, questioning what it’s about. After a heartbeat Shino just shakes his head and keeps walking, guiding Hinata down the steps and disappearing from view.

“Should I assume this woman is just as powerful as the last Akatsuki members you encountered?” Tsunade asks, pulling Shikamaru's attention back to her. She's leaning back against the edge of her desk, and if she didn’t look tired ten minutes ago, she certainly does now.

In the shadows behind her, long in the slant of the morning sun, a body shifts. Shikamaru doesn’t quite tense as a masked ANBU slips out of a chameleon jutsu and into full visibility, but he can feel his heartbeat trips into a slightly faster pace, the way his muscles wind just a little tighter. The mask is plain, streaks of dark red like old blood traced across white porcelain in a pattern vaguely reminiscent of a cat’s snarl, and though it shows nothing of the shinobi’s face Shikamaru recognizes the hair color. Dark brown with a hint of red, pulled back in a short tail instead of loose the way Shikamaru last saw it, but it’s still definitely Genma.

He doesn’t move, crouching against the wall, and Tsunade glances over and nods once, then looks back at the jounin sensei. It makes sense, because Genma is one of the main guards and Shikamaru knows he should have all the information about a threat to Konoha, but he thinks of that message, the scrolls, the note in Kiba's handwriting. Tenses, just a little, even though there’s no direct threat, and wonders a little grimly just what he’s getting into. His father, Kakashi, and Kurenai are all closer to the Hokage if anything happens, but—

But Shikamaru still glances at the shadows around his feet, assessing, calculating. Weighing just what he can manage with them if he has to move quickly.

Damn it, but being responsible is too much work, and Shikamaru hates it.

“At least as powerful,” Kurenai tells Tsunade, pulling an unhappy face. “She was holding back for most of our last fight—it was a distraction so they could attack the estate with clones, and we didn’t notice until too late.”
“Once they’d done it, she stopped holding back,” Kakashi adds. “She buried us with paper and…” He trails off, then smiles without humor, eye crinkling. “Well. I want to say got away, but that would imply we had the ability to stop her.”

Tsunade’s nails tap against the desk as she frowns. “I don’t like the fact that Akatsuki keeps beating my jounin,” she says coolly, but the slant of her mouth is angry, grim. “Uchiha and Hoshigaki were one thing. This new pair—” She shakes her head, then glances up at Shikaku.

Shikaku folds his arms across his chest, expression going distant the way it does when he’s playing shogi. Shikamaru watches him closely, because Genma is entirely unreadable in his armor and mask, but there doesn’t seem to be any hesitation when he offers, “I think it’s accurate to say we’ve gotten lucky both times so far. It might not happen again.”

It’s only because Shikamaru is looking so closely that he catches something as it flickers over Tsunade’s face—not dark, but still bright. Something victorious, sharply relieved, but it’s gone again in an instant to be buried beneath a cool calm. “Agreed. Flee on sight orders might not be a bad idea for any group smaller than a five-man squad. Especially if Naruto is involved. He isn’t anywhere near trained enough to face them.”

“Kiba got him,” Kakashi says quietly, not quite looking at the Hokage. “He had poisoned kunai. It took Naruto almost thirty-six hours to shake it off.”

“Fighting old friends is hard,” Tsunade offers wryly, and—she looks like she’s the same age as Shikamaru’s mom. He keeps forgetting that she was on Orochimaru’s team before he betrayed Konoha. But she knows exactly what she’s talking about, doesn’t she? “Naruto will make his own decisions there. All we can do is help him get as strong as possible.”

“We need to reinforce the idea that Kiba is S-rank now,” Kurenai says. Her hands curl into fists in her lap, and she takes a shaky breath. “I don’t—it’s a hard thing to believe, but he put Kakashi down twice, and anyone less skilled is going to have trouble. He didn’t hesitate to kill, either, and the poisons—they make it easier for him to kill than not.”

Kiba beat Kakashi? Shikamaru forces himself to close his mouth, to not demand proof of such a ridiculous idea. Judging by the way his father’s brows are almost at his hairline, though, he’s hardly the only one who feels that way.

“Kakashi?” Shikaku prompts.

Kakashi huffs, somewhere between aggrieved and embarrassed. “He’s clever,” he allows. “I think in a straight-on fight he’s tokujo level, given his poisons, but—twice he planned ways to take me out. Traps and tricks. He’s good at thinking ahead.”

Genma shifts. Just a little, just the faintest tip of his head, but Shikamaru catches it. Maybe it’s assessment, or confusion, or concern for a fellow shinobi, but it’s still there and Shikamaru marks it carefully, files it away. It’s something to think about, at the very least.

There’s a moment of hesitation before Tsunade inclines her head. “I’ve kept knowledge of Akatsuki to the tokubetsu jounin and above,” she says, “but I’ll leave this mission as general knowledge and put out an alert. Squads not led by at least a tokujo should know not to engage at any cost. I don’t want to lose any more shinobi to these bastards.”

“I’ll make sure it’s done, Hokage-sama,” Shikaku says, bowing and stepping back. He turns away from the desk, tipping his head at Shikamaru pointedly, and Shikamaru strangles a reflexive groan but gets to his feet anyway. Trailing his father out of the office, he glances back, but Shizune is
already swinging the door shut. His last glimpse is of Kurenai leaning forward, covering her face with her hands, and Kakashi touching her shoulder, before the office is out of sight.

“Traitors are a terrifying thing,” Shikaku says, pulling Shikamaru's attention back to him. The words are mild, but his eyes are hard, his shoulders squared as he makes his way down the steps. “I’d been hoping you wouldn’t have to deal with one from your generation. Or that if it happened, it would come later.”

Shikamaru knows the statistics. At least one shinobi from every class deserts or defects, generally violently. Not genin, at least usually. Kiba's fairly unique in that regard.

“I don’t know how Kiba managed to beat Kakashi,” he confesses, because the logistics of it just don’t make sense. Logically he knows that planning can make up for a lot, but—Kakashi is a jounin with twenty years’ experience. Kiba is—he's the boy Shikamaru used to skip class with to laze around in the grass. He’s the one who lost to Naruto in the first round of the Chuunin Exams. It just doesn’t fit.

His father is quiet for a long moment, then sighs faintly. “Motivation can make people into a lot more than what they used to be. That motivation doesn’t always have to be something positive. Kiba likely found a reason to push himself in a way he never had to in Konoha. He’s not the same person you knew.”

That’s obvious, Shikamaru thinks unhappily. He drags a hand over his tightly bound hair and mutters, “Troublesome.”

It’s a good word, but somehow it doesn’t feel like enough in this situation.

“Very,” his father agrees, putting a hand between his shoulder blades and steering him towards the administration department. Shikamaru groans but goes with it, at this point entirely resigned to his fate.

They blow in with the evening breeze, on the edge of another storm system. Kiba is still mostly dry, which is something of a miracle, and his feet don’t hurt as much as they could; Konan was telling the truth about making it an easy trip, and they hardly pushed themselves at all on their way back to the base.

“Home sweet cave,” Kiba says, wrinkling his nose at the musty smell of the entrance room, but he helps Konan slide the massive, heavy stone door back across the tunnel without protest. Going by the look of the clouds, there’s a hell of a lot of rain coming, and Kiba’s seen what happens when any of the doors to this place get left open in a storm. Hidan was mopping up water for days.

Konan snorts, pulling her cloak off and folding it over one arm. “Hot food and a roof,” she counters, which Kiba concedes to with a huff. It’s been a long few days traveling.

“You're back, un!” Stalking out of the tunnel that leads deeper into the base, Deidara looks both of them over with narrowed eyes. Then, apparently satisfied that all limbs are still attached, he says, “Fucking finally, un. Pein's been moping for two weeks straight. It’s been fucking unbearable.”

One perfect brow arches. “Has he,” Konan says mildly, not even close to a question. She fishes the completed mission scroll from the pocket of her pack, then steps neatly around Deidara and sails up the passage like the world’s loveliest battleship.
Kiba still has absolutely no idea what her relationship with Pein is beyond close friends, but either way, he really wouldn’t want to be in the leader’s shoes right now.

“Sometimes I’m like ninety percent sure you have a death wish,” he tells Deidara, stripping out of his own cloak and stuffing it under one of the straps of his pack.

Deidara scoffs loudly. “I’m the one with the death wish, un? You volunteered for a mission with her, not me.”

“Konan’s strong,” Kiba protests, a knee-jerk reaction at this point.

It gets him a pointed roll of Deidara’s eyes. “Yeah, but I’d be more worried about her killing me for getting in her way than I would be with Kakuzu, un.” Then, apparently losing interest in that line of questioning, he asks, “What mission did you take?”

“Clan elimination,” Kiba says, and doesn’t let himself think of anything but the fact that it was a success. “There were two Konoha squads guarding them or we’d have been done a week ago.”

“Konoha’s a fucking shithole, un,” Deidara says, wrinkling his nose. Then, like it’s a habit, “No offense intended.” And then, hard on the heels of that, “But you probably know it is even better than I do, so all offense intended, actually.”

It’s amusing enough that Kiba can laugh without feeling guilty about doing so. “Yeah,” he agrees, starting up the corridor. Deidara falls into step with him, which means he’s probably massively bored right now—that’s likely why he was coming down to check the doors in the first place. Then, because he’s morbidly curious and Deidara was definitely vocal in his threats before they left, he asks, “Hidan still in one piece?”

Deidara grimaces. “Unfortunately. Kakuzu needed him for a mission, un. Sasori thinks he has a lead on the Yonbi and they went to check.”

A shiver traces its way down Kiba’s spine. “Only the Yonbi? Don’t we need the other three first?”

“Good to know where they are even if we’re not grabbing them immediately, un,” Deidara says with a shrug. “Pein wants them all accounted for before we move. Otherwise we’ll give the villages too much warning, un.”

That’s—good, actually. If Kiba can figure out the locations as well, and pass them on to Tsunade, maybe Konoha can get the jinchuuriki to a safe place before Akatsuki starts taking them.

“Fuck,” he says, instead of letting his relief show. “More recon missions. My favorite.”

“Yeah,” Deidara agrees disgustedly, then lifts his head. He hooks an arm around Kiba’s neck and hauls him forward in a motion so sudden that Kiba yelps, then says over top of him, “Look what I found! An ugly stray puppy wandered in, un!”

“Get the fuck off me!” Kiba protests, pulling at his arm, but Deidara is a hell of a lot more muscular than he looks from a distance and just snickers at his attempts.

At the table, Kisame looks up, grin widening. “Hey,” he says cheerfully. “Konan didn’t eat you. Had me worried there for a second.”

“Konan’s not going to eat me,” Kiba snaps. “She’s not fucking Zetsu.”

The plant-man, lurking in one of the corners with a stack of files, snickers loudly. “That’s true,” he
says without a hint of shame. “You're lucky it wasn’t a mission for us. Cute little puppies always look like they’d leave tasty corpses.”

Deidara pulls a disgusted face. “You’re a freak, un,” he complains. When Kisame snickers, too, Deidara gives him a dark look and huffs. “You can laugh all you want, un, but when Pein realizes the puppy’s got a crush on Konan we’re going to have to break in another missing-nin.”

Kiba splutters, feeling heat flood his face as he redoubles his efforts to pry Deidara off of him. At the same moment, both Kisame and Zetsu break down into loud, raucous laughter, and a deep, unimpressed voice from the doorway says, “What?”

_Fuck._

Closing his eyes, Kiba wracks his brain for any Doton jutsus that will let him sink right through the floor. It’s no use, though; Pein is in the doorway, one eyebrow raised in bemusement, with Konan right behind him. She’s hiding a smirk that’s mostly visible in the corners of her mouth, eyes dancing, and it’s probably the most amused he’s ever seen her. Good, but also fucking _terrible_, because Kiba wants more than a little to just die here and now.

“I _don’t_ have a crush on Konan!” he snarls, sinking his nails into Deidara’s skin and wondering how many diseases he’ll get if he goes for a bite. “She’s alpha bitch, I _wouldn’t_!”

Dead silence.

“Oh fuck,” Kisame says, hushed. “He’s _dead_.

Judging by Deidara’s eyes, wide as saucers, he agrees. Even Pein looks like Kiba just declared himself loyal to Konoha and actually a geisha too boot.

In the horrified hush, Konan moves. She steps gracefully around Pein, crossing the floor with even steps to come to a halt right in front of Kiba. Without so much as a word, Deidara lets him go, skittering back like he expects Konan’s skin to start shedding paper right then and there, but Konan ignores him completely. She stoops, looking Kiba squarely in the eyes as he blinks at her in confusion, and then smiles.

“Thank you,” she says, ruffling his hair lightly. “I'm flattered.”

Kiba grins back, because she gets it. “I mean, who else would it be?” he asks.

Silently, Konan arches a brow and casts a glance back at Pein.

Kiba gives her a disbelieving look. “_Really_?”

She actually laughs at that, low and warm. Pushing back to her feet, she turns and glides out of the room, vanishing towards her quarters. With a faint sigh, Pein shakes his head, clearly dismissing the matter and the rest of them with it, and follows her out of sight.

There's another moment of silence.

“What,” Deidara says, “_the actual fuck_.” Spinning, he rounds on Kisame, then Zetsu, and demands, “You saw that too, un? He just—she just—” He waves an arm expressively, apparently at a loss for words.

“She should be picking pieces of you out of her teeth right now,” Kisame tells Kiba.

Kiba just rolls his eyes. “You're all idiots,” he says disgustedly. “I'm leaving before I catch any of the stupid in here.”

Deidara doesn’t even wait for him to start moving before he pounces, grabbing Kiba around the neck again and dragging him deeper into the room. “I don’t think so, un. You’ve got something on Konan, don’t you? Blackmail or leverage or bribery. Tell us, un!”

Kisame laughs. “Yeah,” he agrees, grinning, and pushes himself up like he’s going to add his strength to Deidara’s. “Teammates don’t keep secrets from each other. Spill, Inuzuka.”

Kiba squawks in offence, jerks both legs up to put his full weight on Deidara, and kicks the bomber hard in the kneecaps. With a shriek that’s equal parts pain and rage, Deidara goes down, and Kiba wastes no time at all launching himself free.

“Fuck you!” he snarls, then yelps and ducks Kisame's grab. The big man laughs again, like this is the most entertaining game he’s played in years, and wipes out again, but Kiba is faster. He throws himself forward, ducking right in between Kisame's legs, then leaps as soon as he’s clear, adding chakra for extra propulsion. Hitting the ceiling, he bounces off of it, drops down behind Itachi as the Uchiha steps in to the room, and bolts. Behind him, there’s a cry from Kisame, a noise of deeply offended surprise from Itachi, and a thud.

Kiba doesn’t look back to check whether they collided or whether Kisame ran into the wall trying to avoid his partner. He just runs, aiming for freedom, and refuses to think of anything but here and now.

This is what he has, and he’ll make do.

Someone has to, and for all the pain and terror and horror, despite the cruelty and hurting his friends and acting the traitor—

In spite of all of that, there's a place for Kiba here, and one he’s earned. There's information in Konoha's hands, one step closer to keeping Naruto safe, and a plan to help the rest of the jinchuuriki and the villages with them.

This is enough. It's worth it.

Works inspired by this one: [remember the looks on their faces (through the sycamore trees) [PODFIC] by Opalsong](https://www.fanfiction.net/s/19873534/1/)

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